



# One 'L' of a good idea

In the first of a new heritage series **DEREK WIGGINS** tells the story of the master of Mamod modification – Ken Best and his still much sought-after Kenversions.

Our esteemed editor has an affection for Mamods and their variants, as have I. For the heritage display at Stoneleigh last year, I decided to feature Mamods, and a jolly good decision it turned out to be.

There were about 30 examples of the breed, from a 2-2-2 to a triple articulated (both from the imaginative mind and engineering prowess of Graham Stowell), via a Double Fairlie, and sprinkled with a few wearing revised bodywork by Kenversions. They were all so very enthusiastically received that they will definitely be part of future displays.

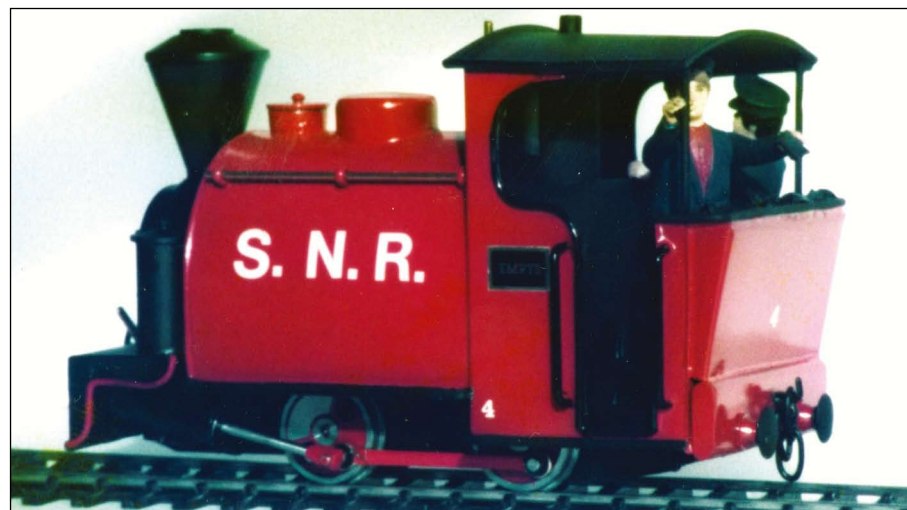
One of the motivations for pursuing the heritage theme was that so many people who have only come into the hobby in the last few years seem to think that the wheel has just been invented! I will admit to a love of the body kits produced by Simply 7/8ths for the Accucraft Edrig, both in that scale and 16mm, but respectfully this idea is nothing new.

Imagine if you will, that it is 1981. You are an avid 16mm narrow gauge modeller, with

little money or modelling ability (possibly still the case?). The range of ready to run locos were very limited then, and new you would have paid very nearly the same as you would today for an Edrig or Millie.

Then your local model shop takes delivery of a complete boxed live steam railway which can be yours for around £60, giving you a Mamod loco, two wagons and a circle of track. Forget all the shortcomings – you could be up and running, as I was, and the potential (at least in your imagination) is limitless.

Ken Best was born in Darlington, and has lived there all his life. Whilst he jokingly says that this proves he has no imagination, you only have to look at what he produced to see how wide of the mark that comment is. Model railways were in his soul from the earliest age, and although starting in 00, he was soon as a youngster into the new-fangled world of N gauge. He is still building in N, which he reserves for the winter months when he prefers to be indoors (as I write this in early January



## Mamod Competition Results

The Mamod Competition reached a climax at the May Open Day. There were finally three entries, from Ken Best, Bert Coules, and David John. When the judging started all of the models were put through their paces, all working fairly well, though Dave's loco was suffering from burner trouble and was suffering from half way round the test track! Judging proved to be so difficult that at the last minute we decided to introduce a third prize of one year's subscription to the Merioneth Rly. Soc.

In reverse order the winners were:

THIRD – Ken Best.

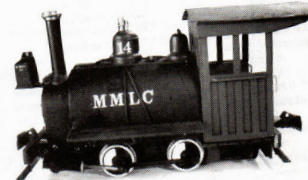
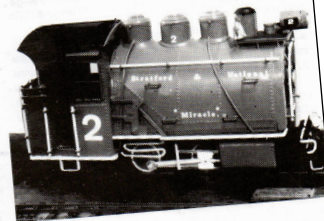
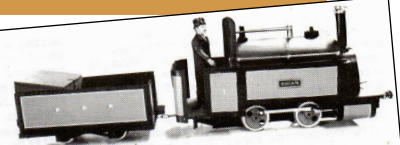
Ken's loco was based on a narrow gauged Baltimore and Ohio dock shunter. The finish was very good and the performance on the test track excellent. However, it was felt that the loco was a little too well disguised, the Mamod origin being almost invisible. Also, the model lost marks with one or two of the judges for being based on a standard gauge loco, so Ken ended up in third place.

SECOND – David John.

Dave's loco was based on a cross between a Porter and a Filer and Stau-ell oscillating cylinder logging engine. The finish was very good, though due to a problem with the burner, the loco did not perform very well. Indeed as you can see in another article in this magazine, Dave managed to catch the loco's cab alight at one point. However, due to the prototype choice, the finish and the "entertainment" value, Dave was awarded second place.

FIRST – Bert Coules.

Bert's loco was based on an early Festiniog England engine. The finish was excellent as was the running quality. Indeed Bert was the only entrant brave enough to put a train behind the loco. The tender incorporated the chassis from a Mamod wagon whilst the loco had undergone major body surgery, but without losing the model's obvious Mamod origin.



he's going to get an awful lot done...).

Nothing disturbed this tranquil life until the age of 16, when Ken became an avid scooter fan. For those of you too young to know such things, the youth culture split in this era between mods on scooters and rockers on motorbikes. Mischievously, I visualise him on a Vespa or Lambretta with about 20 lights on the front, ditto to the rear and about 10 mirrors on the handlebars...

There was one very good side to all this – Ken met his soon-to-be wife Pam through scooters, and they have been happily married for 41 years. His interests soon turned back to model railways, which until then had not exactly preoccupied Pam. Ken took an interest in the Merioneth Society and hence 16mm narrow gauge, and this awakening coincided with the Mamod railway release.

To be able to buy a set, Ken had to sell a cycle that he had been rebuilding. At that time Merioneth had just started advertising a meeting at Keen House in London, with a competition open to anyone who had modified one of these Mamods, and it was only five weeks away. Ken was less than impressed with the looks of his new loco, and had started to build a new body, based on a little American switcher which he had at the time in N gauge – it seemed an obvious choice for the competition.

Being intensely practical, instead of using brass sheet Ken made his prototype body out of steel, recycling the gallon can that all motor oils came in before the age of plastics. He says that it is a wonderfully easy material to work ►

Top of page: 'Miracle', the locomotive that started it all. At left is 'Emrys', the open-back cab version of the popular Idris.





with, though the downside was removing the paint on the outside or the coating inside before you could work with it. I hasten to add that all his production bodies were made from the correct gauge of sheet steel – it would have taken far too long otherwise.

00-gauge rail was used around the footplate, N gauge for the windows, Humbrol paint tins upside down with the rims cut off and the lids soldered on top for the domes, and Milliput for moulding the bottoms, and his loco body became reality.

The solid fuel pellets of the Mamod were also a real no-no, so Ken designed and fitted a meths burner. He was so forward-thinking that he decided to fit the loco with a filler valve. As he was into cycling he used the valve from an inner tube, which he persuaded to fit the filler nut. Sadly, when trialling it the sight glass in the boiler leaked and Ken, having no experience of such things, thought that he had ruined the boiler. So with only two weeks to go, he rushed off to buy another loco to take the body, saying that it would be a miracle if it ever got finished. Well, it did, and the loco assumed that name for ever. Miracle has been at Stoneleigh for both

**Above and right: Idris, with its overtones of Ffestiniog England tanks, was not only the basis of the Kenversions range but a very popular model in its own right. Below: One of the early rolling stock kits of card construction.**

heritage displays, and may even run in the next year or so. Make no mistake, this loco is right up there at the top in 16mm historical importance.

Ken and Pam took their proud possession to Keen House, accompanied by their dog. There were only two other competitors, a Festiniog Prince-type with a tender and a freelance model with more than a touch of Porter about it, including a wooden cab. The names of the respective builders will strike a chord with many – Bert Coules and David John. Miracle ran faultlessly, but was placed



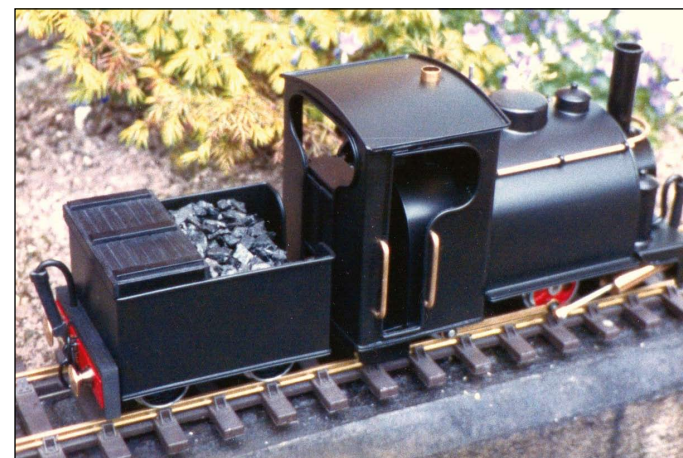
third essentially for two reasons – the body was so good that it totally disguised the Mamod origins (?) and the model it was based on was standard and not narrow gauge.

On the way home Pam, now as interested in live steam modelling as Ken, decided that she wanted her own loco. Ken had seen the possibilities of other outlines, and set about his second model. Thus emerged Idris with the closed cab, and it was only when they were proudly showing him off, that his friend's wife said; "Oh, that's another of Ken's versions" and bingo, there was the name Kenversions.

Ken had set up his own driving school by this time, almost totally working on his own with Pam's backroom help. The inevitable gaps between lessons allowed him to start building commercially to augment his income, and to suit himself. He quickly designed Emrys, with the open cab back, and Ivor with the tender body (you chose your own chassis).

You will recall with Miracle that Ken had built a meths burner. If you ordered one of his drop-on bodies, for your £75 you got that in whichever style, the burner and the front buffer beam assembly. The tender was extra. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Ken says that Pam was the test pilot for the burners. If she went out and lit one, and came back in one piece and smiling, he knew they had a good one...

If you wanted to keep the standard Mamod a different meths burner was available – it had



**Above: 'Ivor' added a tender to the basic design – this particular one is radio-controlled. Left: Ken also offered accessory packs which greatly improved the basic Mamod body. Below: Later rolling stock, such as this carriage, used ply in their construction.**



different lengths for the standard or drop-on body. Ken says his greatest claim to fame is that he sold one to a gentleman in Botswana.

You could also buy a range of accessories, they included a front cowcatcher in choice of styles; footplates, sandboxes and vacuum pipe; rear steps; coal bunker with vacuum pipe; large dome; sand domes x 2; tank filler caps; tank handrails; front handrail. Are you beginning to understand my comments about the wheel? As for the dome, Ken had tired of soldering Humbrol tins, and so he had an engineer turn domes from solid steel, with the plus that the weight increased traction.

By now you must have taken on board that Ken had a furtive mind. Perhaps he needed to divert himself from the obvious stresses of sitting beside learner drivers... It was fine having a loco, but there was also not much available at that time for it to pull. So his attention turned to rolling stock.

There was lots of Lima 0 gauge available at reasonable prices, so coach kits became the obvious next step using Lima chassis. Ken produced a boxcar and caboose to go with Miracle, but they were never going to be mass sellers, so British outline was the answer.

If you have like me been thinking that Ken was the driving force (!), we are all wrong. After the closed coach and the brake Pam stepped in, and built the prototype of the open coach. Construction was almost always the

same – metal angle and pre-formed roof, with all the body in good quality card and where appropriate plastic strip. Ken is not the only modeller who thinks that card is a much underrated material although towards the end he did use some plywood. Coaches were available ready-to-run for £40, or as kits for £25 which Ken much preferred to supply.

Pam and Ken were living in a house with a smallish garden. The only railway that would

fit had to be L-shaped, built on a brick wall 2ft 6in high, with Peco Streamline 0-gauge track which the Mamods happily ran on.

Anyone who has run Mamods knows their impressive habit of taking off at supersonic speed... Ken tired of chasing to reach the other end before the train dropped onto the path below, and so devised a radio control fitting for Idris and Emrys. He offered a coal truck kit for anyone who didn't buy the tender, in which to carry the batteries. The servo was mounted on the footplate, with a small bore tube running down the side of the body, and across the front to the Mamod speed control/reverser. From the servo, down this tube was a length of wire with a noose at the front that dropped over this control.

Despite misgivings, it worked perfectly, and Ken's party piece was to demonstrate it by running at full throttle towards the end of the track, stopping only inches away. He will happily tell you that it never failed, but occasionally scared him!

Following the coal truck came a goods van with multiple possible styles, and a brake van that again Pam built the prototype of. Every ►







train had a guard, in this case Jake the Brake. They only came as kits for £15 and happily, these early vehicles are still alive and well and are also displayed at the AGM.

Ken did offer an electric Prince and other standard and narrow gauge bodies for both 0 and 1-gauge, but they were never big sellers and are outside the scope of this article. For a year or so he even had a agent in America called Fred Torres, once an engine driver.

Ken can truthfully tell you that he has no idea how many bodies they supplied. It was hundreds, and so dominated their lives that between building and teaching driving, there was absolutely no time for their hobbies of trains or cycling. Once he had become a driving instructor, Ken had applied for and sat the exams to become an examiner, but nothing ever came of it, until 1987 when a phone call out of the blue left him instantly deciding to take the position on offer.

The job occupied five full working days and there was no longer time for Kenversions, so despite the success it slipped away. The driving school had always been the main income, and Pam had done so many little jobs

**Above: Another view of an enhanced Mamod. Right: Proving he hasn't lost his touch, this is Ken's recently-completed tram body on a IP Engineering 'Jane' loco.**

to help with the modelling side for no financial reward that the decision was easy.

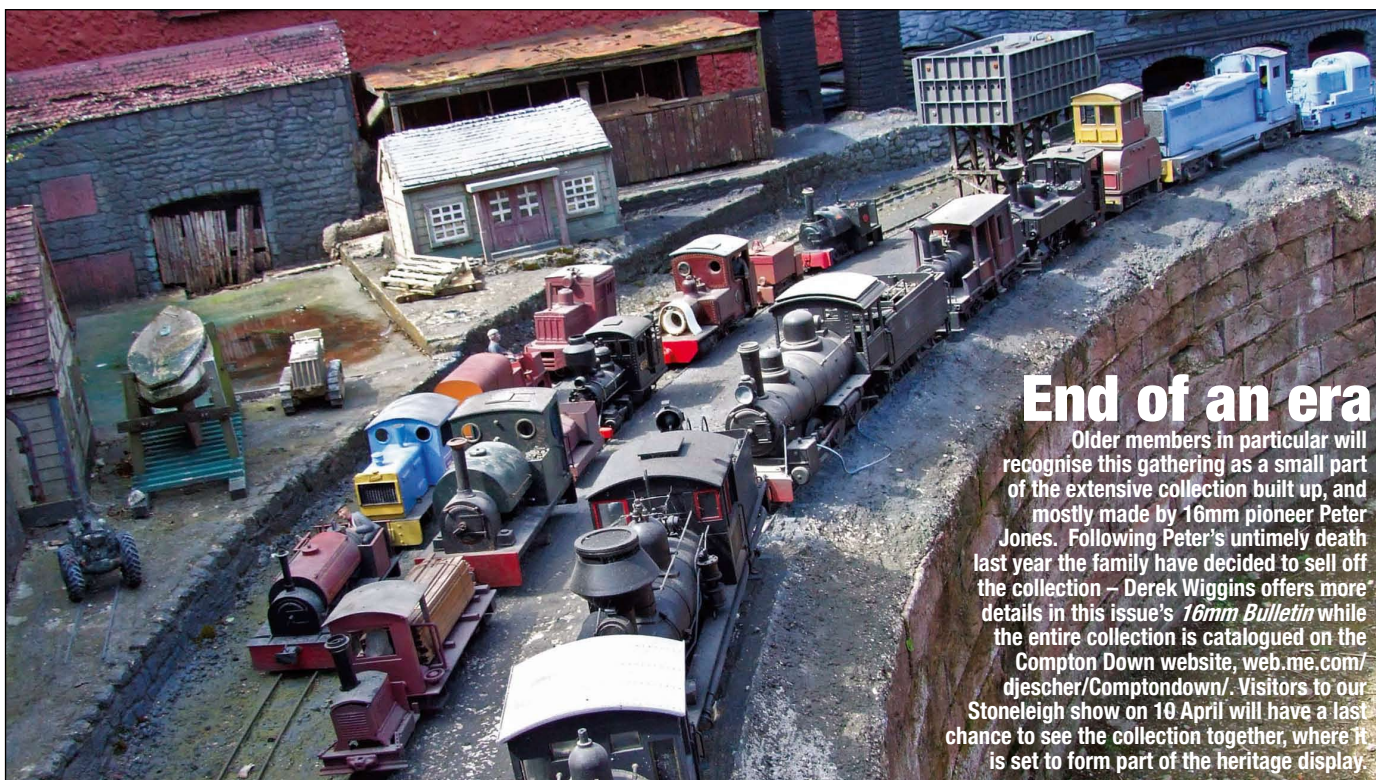
About 11 years ago Pam and Ken moved, about one mile down the road. There was a bigger garden, and the chance to build a decent railway. Ken is now retired, and extremely happy either modelling, or riding his mountain bike as Pam keeps up with him on her electric model. Last year they visited the members sales stand at Stoneleigh, and Pam came back with a big grin and a 21-year-old Roundhouse Dylan, that with a little ministering from them both is now a very resolute performer. Ken did build an exquisite tram body last year, but that is all. He wants to enjoy his life and hobby, but not let it ever again become the master. Besides which, you can't get the oil cans any more...

I work away, but left a bid of £130 on a Kenversions Mamod on eBay six months ago. I didn't win it, proving they are still highly valued and sought after. The late and great



Peter Jones had at least two of Ken's Mamods that I have seen.

Ken was over the moon to see an utterly immaculate Ivor and tender on the stand last year. He and Pam are totally approachable, lovely people who would enjoy reminiscing with you if you make yourselves known. I think that the man is a star, and am delighted that Andrew Charman agrees. To a man who gave so many of us an affordable way to live out our dreams a huge vote of thanks, and a justified place in the 16mm Hall of Fame. ●



## End of an era

Older members in particular will recognise this gathering as a small part of the extensive collection built up, and mostly made by 16mm pioneer Peter Jones. Following Peter's untimely death last year the family have decided to sell off the collection – Derek Wiggins offers more details in this issue's *16mm Bulletin* while the entire collection is catalogued on the Compton Down website, [web.me.com/djescher/Comptondown/](http://web.me.com/djescher/Comptondown/). Visitors to our Stoneleigh show on 10 April will have a last chance to see the collection together, where it is set to form part of the heritage display.