

A Meccano collection 1925-1957

Meccano was invented by Frank Hornby, of later Hornby and Hornby-Dublo trains fame, and introduced in 1901. However, many of the earlier parts were of thin, folded tinplate with sharp, square ends and were relatively expensive. Wheels were secured by means of keys onto slotted axle rods. The system familiar in later years was generally established by around 1915, featuring robust steel strips with rounded ends and brass wheels with bosses and screws. After the First World War prices fell and popularity increased, so that the period 1920-1926 is regarded as the first Meccano "heyday", the Nickel Plated era.

The earliest Meccano in our collection is from this period and is thought to have been a present to my father in late 1921, either for his birthday in October (when he was 8 years old) or at Christmas. This was probably a set "0"; he recalls an "00" being added at a cost of 5/- and further items followed. Considering all the surviving nickel era parts together the best match is to a 1926 set "2", but the number of sector plates and 1" pulleys is surprising, far exceeding the contents of any set then or since!

In September 1926 the first coloured Meccano was introduced, with parts available in either pea-pod green or bright red. This colour scheme was short-lived (until mid-1927 only) but there are a few such items in the collection. At this time all the strip parts remained nickel plated, and other parts could still be obtained in nickel to special order.

The colours used from 1927-1934 were Dark Green and Burgundy Red, and there are many parts in this scheme, dating from 1927-29. By the latter year my father had left school and moved on to many other interests, so it is likely that these items were purchased as a separate set for his brother Norman, some seven years younger. The best match for these as a group is again to a set-2 but once more there is a mystifying excess of sector plates and 1" pulleys!

In November 1934 the renowned Blue and Gold colour scheme was introduced, and this ran to the end of production due to the war, in 1941. There is but one solitary part from this period, yet another 1" pulley, by now made in steel and painted bright red (post-1937) which was probably a post-war acquisition from a dealer's old stock.

Production restarted around 1947 after the Liverpool factory had been used to produce munitions for the war effort. The colour scheme was now medium red and green, somewhat lighter than the 1927-34 shades, with the large pulley wheels in black. The next major purchases in our collection were in late 1951-1952; they included many of the new flexible plates and gear wheels, supplementing my father's and uncle's collections, which were now passed on to me at age 4-5.

At around this time my father embarked on the renovation of many of the pre-war items which had fortunately survived this far, but had deteriorated in storage. While most of the nickel parts were still in good condition, the burgundy and dark green ones were cleaned up and repainted. This was a perfectly acceptable practice, indeed Meccano sold tins of enamel paint for just this purpose! However, one or two parts from the nickel or 1926-27 colour schemes were also repainted in the 1928 style, leading to some anomalies. The painted parts were hung up to dry on paper clips suspended from a cord strung up across the living room! The last purchases were made by me in the period 1955-57, as pocket-money priced spare parts, to build up the collection into a minimum complete outfit no. 7, as per the 1955 listings.

During my early jurisdiction the collection was very heavily used and suffered a hard time. Some parts, particularly strips and flexible plates became bent and battered, eventually broken beyond repair. In subsequent years many strips and brackets were incorporated into other constructional projects (the various model railways) and many nuts, bolts and other small parts simply disappeared. A further 40 years storage

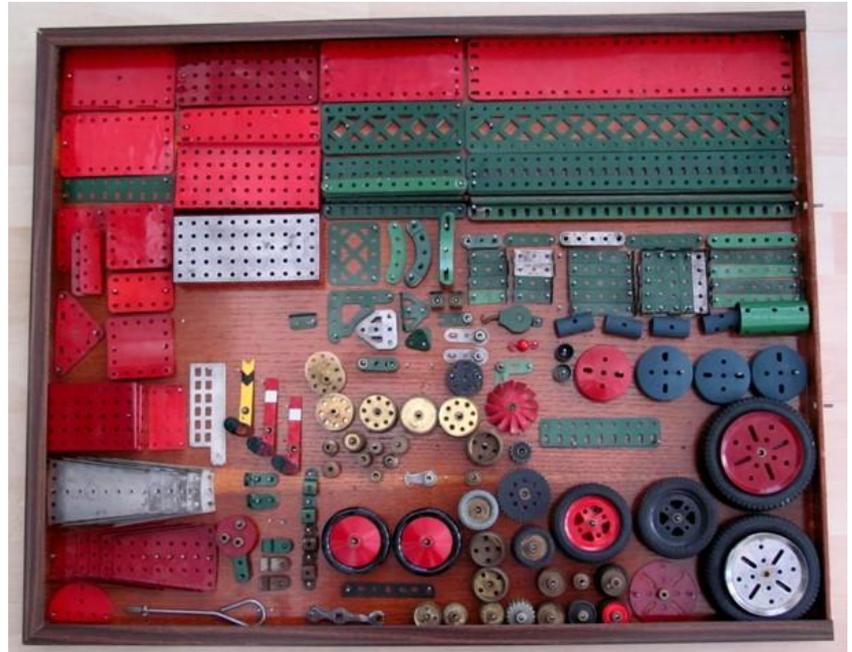


in non-ideal conditions again resulted in extensive rusting, though due to the good quality metal used this was found to be mainly superficial surface tarnishing only.

In 1996 most of the pre-war parts were again cleaned and renovated (and strung up to dry in the same way as previously!), each part into the finish in which it was found, that is identical to the 1951 repaints, thus all in the form I remember using them. Missing items were replaced, mainly with post-war parts which are still easily and cheaply obtainable, thus restoring the minimum outfit 7 content to provide a usable collection once more. The parts were organized into a new purpose-built wooden display/storage cabinet, of similar design to one my father made for me in 1951.

Most Meccano parts can be accurately dated by a combination of colour scheme, as above, markings, and design changes. Some pre-1929 parts in the collection carry a Patent No. and date, generally 1913 or 1916. Many are also marked "Fabrique en Angleterre". This was a mandatory requirement for all parts exported to France in the period 1920-1934 approx, but is also commonly found on items which were sold in the UK at this time.

A complete inventory of all the parts was compiled, with dating where possible. A list of major design changes which assisted the dating process is appended below for interest.

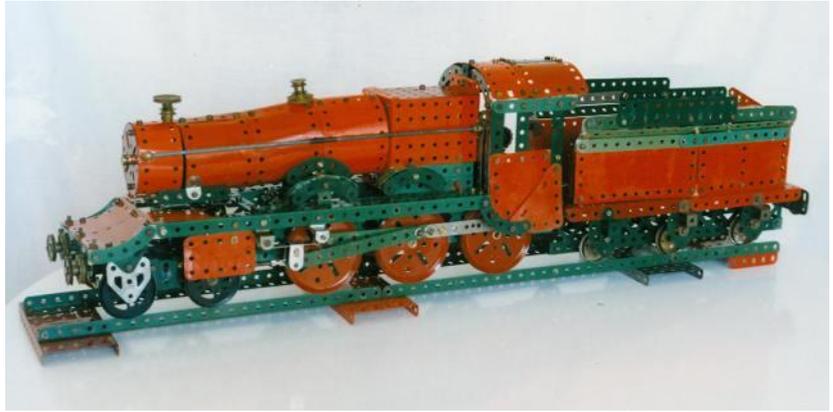


Of many models built with Meccano, several are especially recalled. Great fascination was found in constructing working mechanisms, the more complex the better! A lorry chassis complete with correct steering and differential actions was one such, also the many different types of crane derived from ideas in the Meccano manuals.



It was of course quickly discovered that it was not possible to build the magnificent models depicted on the manual covers with a size-10 outfit, never mind a size-7, so very much simplified versions were attempted, with some success. These included a Block-Setting Crane (at Walthamstow, with help from my uncles at Christmas, probably around 1952), dragline excavator and steam shovel, a railway breakdown crane, and a replica of the little electric mobile crane that then operated in Staines Central station goods yard.

A steam locomotive with working connecting rods and valve gear I claimed to be a GWR "King" class, but given the range of parts available, was probably none too realistic. I took it proudly to Wyatt Road school one day, probably in spring 1955. Here is a 1990s attempted reconstruction....



An aerial ropeway system, as found in the North Wales slate quarries, was constructed between opposite walls of my bedroom, using lots of cord; inspiration for this presumably came from the "Meccano Magazine".

Appendix: some notes on design changes etc.

1) Double Bracket, part no. 11. This part was originally 3/4" wide, but was changed in 1921 to 1/2" wide. There is just one 3/4" part in the collection, which would be from my father's original set.



2) 3" Pulley with boss, part no. 19b. This was made for a short period around 1925-26 with a 1/2" brass boss; it had the standard 3/8" boss both before and afterwards. The nickel-plated wheel in the collection has this unusual boss.



3) Pulley 1" diameter with boss, part no. 22. The standard 3/8" boss was introduced in 1913 (in place of keyways), but had only one tapped screw hole until March 1927 (this applies to all types of wheel and gears). Afterwards two tapped holes were provided, so this is a useful means of dating these items.



The 1" pulley was traditionally brass, but during 1937-41 was made of steel and painted bright red. There is one of these in the collection, which must have come from old stock when purchased in 1951. Steel was also used during 1951, painted black and there is one of these also.....

4) Spanner, part no. 34. The design was changed in the 1926-29 period; those in the collection all being the old pattern.

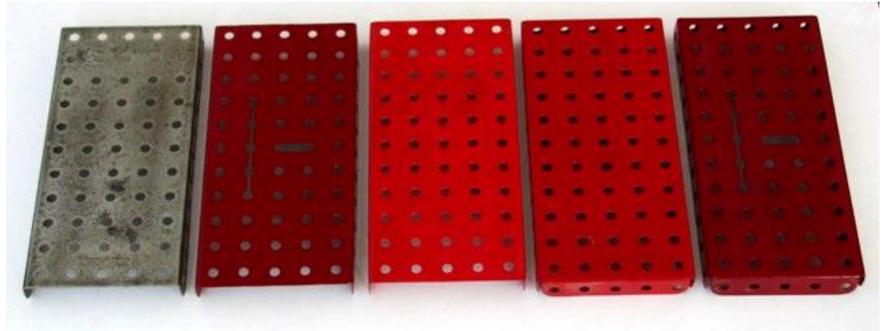
One of the three has rather wider jaws than normal, the reason for which is not clear. It is probably a counterfeit part as it is not stamped with the Meccano name like the others.



5) Bolt 7/32", part no. 37b etc. Bolts were cheese-headed up to 1928 (eg left in picture) then changed to a more rounded, almost domed head (centre). The pre-war items had no or rather poor plating and both nuts and bolts were prone to surface rusting, leading to soiled fingers during heavy construction sessions! Post-war the cheese-head pattern was re-introduced and the nickel plating was much better (right); these have kept well over forty or more years (both head type and plating apply to all the bolt types up to 3/4" long)



6) Flanged plate 5.5 x 2.5", part no. 52. This had open ends before April 1928, thereafter flanged ends. Just before this, around December 1927, slots were provided in the top surface to accommodate a circular saw blade (a lethal-sounding idea!) and saw guide. The slots were omitted after



1935 but the flanged ends remained. There are examples of all four variants in the collection; that with saw slot but no end flanges (early 1928, second left) is probably quite rare.

7) Flanged Sector plate, part no. 54. This 4" long part originally had just one row of 8 holes down the centre; 3 rows of holes were provided from 1928. There are several of each in the collection.

In 1935 new part 54a (later 54), 4.5" long with 9 holes was introduced; the 4" part was discontinued in 1936.



8) Collar with screw, part no. 59. Only 4 of these are genuine items. The other 7 were "re-manufactured" on an uncle's lathe from old 3/8" wheel bosses where the wheel part had become damaged beyond repair many years ago.



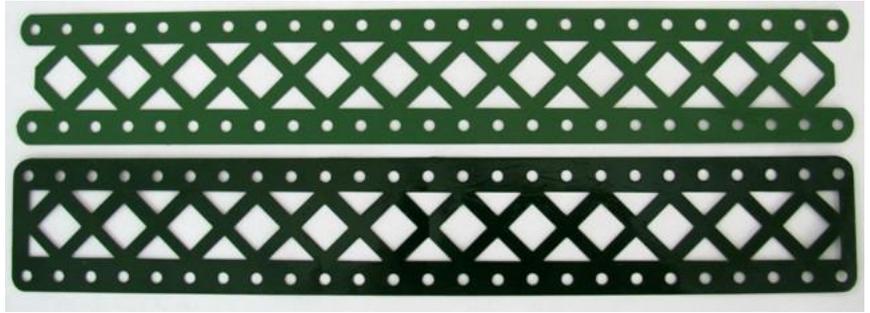
9) Windmill Sail, part no. 61. The original design had a row of dimples along the top edge; these were omitted from 1920 to produce the form of those in the collection...

From 1926, the projecting arm was shortened and the hole pattern changed. The item was deleted in 1930, but reintroduced post-war in a different form.



10) Crank, part no. 62. This originally had a wider, rounded body around the boss; it was modified to the straight-sided form in the 1926-29 period. The collection has examples of both types.

11) Braced Girders, part no's 98-100. Originally with open ends and square corners. Around 1920 the corners became rounded but the ends were still open. Closed ends were introduced in 1929. There are examples of both latter types in the collection. The post-war parts had a much more open latticework.



12) Pawl, part no. 33 (later part 147). This item was current only from 1921-25 and is now rare. It was incorrectly painted in dark green, but is now restored to nickel-plate finish. The shape was changed in 1925 to the more familiar pattern, and the part renumbered.

13) Pulley Block 2 sheaves, part no. 152. Early parts had no cord lug; this being incorporated from 1929. However, whereas the part in the collection is dark green with red pulleys, a photograph of a 1930 part shows battleship grey with bright-plated pulleys. Thus our part almost certainly dates from late 1929. The item was blue after 1935 and not made after 1941. It is now rare in any colour.



14) Signal Arm Distant, part no. 158b. This is something of an enigma. For as long as I have had it (since 1951) it has been yellow with black V bands. However, photographs of other parts show this item to have normally been Red, with white V on front, as indeed were real railway distant signals until around 1930.



On restoration, red paint was found underneath the yellow, but with a straight white band on the front. Also, the end V notch appears to have been cut by hand, rather than machine. Thus the part has been modified at some time from a Home signal part 158a; rather thoroughly it seems, since the celluloid was also changed from red to amber!

It may possibly have been modified by a dealer, to modernize his stock when real distant signals generally became yellow from 1928, and purchased in this form? This item has been restored as I remember it, in yellow as a curiosity.

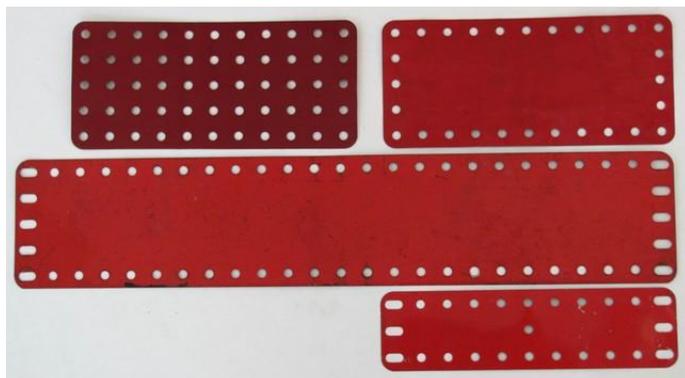
15) Boiler End, part no. 162a. As introduced in 1928 this part had no holes in the rim and was painted battleship grey (as were the contemporary boiler, sleeve piece and chimney adaptor). By 1934 rim holes had appeared, and the colour changed to standard red/green, then blue/gold. There is one post-war replacement part, in red with rim holes.



16) Chimney Adaptor, part no. 164. Again, this was originally grey, without rim holes, changing by 1937. The post-war part is bright green.



17) Flexible Plates and Strip Plates, all types.
Before 1954 all these had standard round end holes.
From that year the end rows of holes were made
slotted, to increase their construction usefulness.
There are examples of both patterns in the
collection.



18) There are two parts in the collection which
cannot be identified.....

An 11" crank handle. This looks genuine enough
but is of no conceivable practical use! It does not
appear in any Meccano parts list.



Two 8-hole wheel discs (left) like part 24a
(right) but much older, with 4 standard holes and 4
small holes spaced alternately around the rim. A
cheap-looking grey metallic finish. This is possibly
a pre-war part from a competitor, of which several
are known to have imitated the Meccano system.



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