Through the railway room door in Rev. Wilbert Awdry’s footsteps

Edwardian splendour in 6' x 4'

The track plan for DARREN RAY’s pre-WW1 depiction of a fictitious Sussex branch line station, Handcross, is based on that of The Ffarquhar Branch, a OO gauge model built over six decades ago by the famous creator of Thomas The Tank Engine.

Photography by Ian Manderson except where stated

I think that the early preparatory stages of railway modelling are some of the most enjoyable, and over the years I have spent many happy hours scribbling ideas on paper for many dozens of possible layouts. However, I recently felt that the time had come to pull myself together and decide which one of my designs should be worked up into a layout.

Having never completed – or even operated – a model railway before, I felt I had to keep it simple, and there was something about the 6' x 4' traditional layout with an oval continuous run and standard-radius curves that had always appealed to me. It was with this in mind that I found myself looking at the December 1953 issue of RAILWAY MODELLER, which contained an article about the Reverend W. Awdry’s model of The Ffarquhar Branch.

Handcross in its entirety viewed from above the level crossing. The curving of the backscenes and the arrangement of the scenic elements assist considerably in disguising what is essentially an oval of track with some sidings.
The Rev. Awdry's plan was published in the *Railway Modeller* in 1959 – illustrating that track plan inspiration need not be confined to looking at modern day published plans.

The article also included a detailed description of the timetable that the Reverend tried to keep try, it occurred to me that if I could recreate his layout I could also try to run to the very same timetable. This would be not only a very interesting exercise but would save me having to work out a timetable of my own!

I decided to replicate the *Flanqhur* track plan as closely as I could, which benefited from having the fiddle yard and station area both on the rear baseboard to enable everything to be operated from a single position. Furthermore, if the layout is divided lengthways into two 6' x 2' sections (as *Flanqhur* was) all the turnouts are confined to the rear section, which helps simplify the wiring a bit.

**Getting started**

The baseboards were assembled from a Model Railway Solutions plywood kit and the track glued onto a thin layer of cork. Peco Setrack items and points were used for the majority of the layout, but I did employ some flexible track at the front of the layout where the transitional curves can be most appreciated.

Whereas the track plan of my layout was a bit of a copy, the buildings and scenery are 'all my own work'. I chose to set it in the village of Handcross in Sussex, which in real life was bypassed by the railway lines of the London Brighton & South Coast Railway, probably because of the hilly terrain. But it was where I was brought up and I thought nobody would mind if I rewrote history; flattening out the hills a bit and giving it a branch line of its own.

I then decided to make things a little difficult for myself by setting it in pre-Grouping Edwardian times, partly because I prefer the brown liveries to the greens of the Southern era and partly because I wanted to create a scene without any motor vehicles; in my mind the trains seem to look happier when there aren't any cars or lorries about!

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**HANDCROSS**

Overall size: 6' 0" x 4' 0". Each grid square represents 1ft x 1ft.
Buildings and scenery

The brick station building is from the Wills Craftsman kit range (ref CK16), altered slightly to make the windows more like those of preserved examples on the nearby Bluebell Railway. And with the roof a bit steeper too. It’s nice to be able to devise your own branch line architecture. There seemed to be room for a pub on the layout (when isn’t there?) and I chose to try and model, in card, the Jolly Tanners at neighbouring Staplefield, as it would have looked in the period modelled, but with the depth of the building reduced to better suit its location on the layout. Sadly, the front of the pub is quite hard to see as the layout is usually squeezed into my small study. In hindsight I should have designed the layout to fit the room – next time!

I spent many evenings experimenting with grass effects. I have had Barry Norman’s book on landscaping techniques since I was young and thought I would try to do everything according to his techniques, but I don’t think surgical lint is what it used to be. I made a bit of a mess of things and thought I would instead try teddy bear fur along the cutting and embankment at the front. That looked too synthetic for my taste so I tried hanging basket liner, painted green before tearing up, and that was a great improvement: quite natural looking and fairly easy to use.

The background artwork was painted directly onto the hardboard sections after fixing them in place. On hindsight this was a mistake as I found it very hard to paint the backdrop whilst leaning over 3’ of baseboard! I quite frequently found myself having to paint upside-down, but at least I was only aiming to achieve a sketchy impression of trees and fields, with a small group of roofs and chimneys to represent the village in the corner, so it did not matter too much.

I copied the device used in the Farquhar layout whereby the continuous loop passes through a split in the backdrop just behind the platform. At the front of the layout the track disappears off stage shortly after.

Often attributed to Maurice Deane, and used by Awdry on The Farquhar Branch, the design of the double-ended fiddle yard access allows some continuous running for testing purposes as well as an optional off-stage siding.

The backscenery has been carefully shaped so as to disguise the joint between which the track runs off stage as seen above.
bends as much as longer coaches would, and having an Edwardian branch line is a good excuse to limit yourself to tank engines and small four-wheel coaches.

My locomotives are all R-T-R. Compared to most other pre-grouping railway companies the LB&SCR is quite well catered for amongst the proprietary manufacturers and I was overjoyed when Bachmann announced its E4 0-6-2T in LB&SCR umber livery. I also have an A1X Terrier and an E2, both from Hornby.

that it was this class of locomotive that Thomas the Tank Engine was based on!

The coaches are all from Ratio plastic kits. I really could do with a few more goods wagons. The two I have are just a couple of old wagons I happened to have lying about,

The Bachmann rendition of the LB&SCR 0-6-2T Class E4 together with wood-panelled coaches built from Ratio kits, makes modelling the pre-Grouping scene relatively easy.

This view taken from between the trees on either side of the Jolly Tanners pub, belies the compact and oval nature of the layout.

passing through a bridge. However, in hindsight I should have put the bridge up against the back scene rather than leaving a gap. This is something I may come back to and revise in the future.

The Ratio signal does work. It’s probably not the right signal in the right place, but at least it goes up and down. The signal box was built from an ABM card kit, which is based on the Saxby & Farmer example at Isfield; the same type was used by the LB&SCR.

Pre-Grouping stock
I think it helps when you have tight 450mm radius curves such as mine, to try to use shorter items of rolling stock which do not draw attention to the tortuous

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stages of my layout's construction and this has encouraged me to carry on at times when I was beginning to lose momentum; but she completely fails to understand my interest in the subject of couplings. She did in fact get a little concerned when I said that I wanted to try out one of the more exotic types of coupling but that tight curves were an issue – I think she might have thought I was having a bit of a crisis!

In the end I chose to stick to tension-locks although I did replace some of the chunkier ones with examples from Bachmann. The non-ferrous hooks of these (the ones on my coaches were plastic and therefore also non-ferrous) meant that I was able to experiment with the Brian Kirby DIY uncoupling technique using staples glued to the hooks and magnets under the track. I have only installed one uncoupling position so far; next time I

before laying the track and ballasting!

repainted. The brake van was bashed together from the top of a Hornby brake van fixed to the chassis of an old wagon. It isn't quite right for the period but it was a good way of reusing old bits.

**Couplings**

My wife Siobhan has managed to show various degrees of interest in most of the

**And finally**

Despite being one of my original aims when planning Handcross, I still haven't tried out the Reverend Awdry's original timetable. Perhaps, when I have gathered together a few more items of rolling stock, completed a couple of outstanding tasks, and decided which of my engines shall be 'Percy' and which one 'Toby', I may give it a go...

An elderly Hornby E2 0-6-0T hauls a single four-wheel coach, built from a Ratio GWR kit, over the level crossing. Couplings are commercial tension-lock items with some hooks removed.

Using a modest camera and printing the image in black and white can readily capture the atmosphere of old railway photographs taken at the turn of the last century.

*Photo by the author*
Ffarquhar with "Thomas," "Annie" and "Clarabel" at platform, "Percy" in the siding.
two for coal and coke), one closed van,
one cattle truck, one oil tanker and two brake vans. These are all either Tri-ang adapted or made from kits.

**TRAFFIC WORKING**

For exhibitions we have a programme covering a morning's work (7.25 a.m. to 1.05 p.m.). This takes from forty to forty-five minutes, and can be divided into two sections.

1. "Toby" emerges from the tunnel at 7.25 with a workmen's train due at the quarry at 7.50. "Thomas" is now ready for the "Commuter," depart Ffarquhar 8.0. This train runs through to Tidmouth (arrive 8.34), so office workers have nice
time to be at their desks by nine o'clock. Connection is made too at Tidmouth with the "Sudrian" (depart 9.0), which runs through to Barrow non-stop and has through coaches for St. Pancras and the West of England.

"Percy" arrives with the morning goods at 8.34. He shunts the yard till "Toby" has crept out from the quarry line and backed to the passenger platform. "Scarborough fashion." When "Toby" leaves (8.45), "Percy" finishes his shunting, goes along the quarry line to the stone wharf, and picks up a load. He waits at the signal till the push-pull arrives from Tidmouth at 9.20, and then sets out for the harbour. "Toby" crosses him on the way, reaching the halt at 10.05, thereafter going straight through to the quarry.

This marks the end of the first section.

2. At 10.45 the push-pull leaves again for Tidmouth, to make connection with the "Wild North-Wester" (non-stop Barrow to Tidmouth). "Toby" follows at 11.15, backing as before to the passenger platform. "Percy" now rattles through with a load of empties. He leaves these at the stone wharf on the quarry line, and when "Toby" has gone (11.20) he returns light to the yard, collects the wagons left there earlier, and waits till "Thomas" has arrived (12.16) with passengers brought by the "Wild North-Wester" from Barrow and England. Then "Percy" draws his train out, with no brake van, and backs down on the quarry line, where a further load is attached. He leaves at 12.25, and on his way down the working timetable says that he is held at Elsbridge to cross "Toby," who with "Henrietta" and "Elsie" arrives at Hackenbeck at 1.05 and disappears along the quarry line.

This ends the second section and all rolling stock is now where it was at the start, all ready to begin again.

**CONTROL**

This, in the main, follows the usual principles, but one or two points may be of interest.