

From 'Rails From The Rubble 2020' to 'Back On Track 2022'

A 'Back On Track 2022' Christchurch Convention Report

– A personal recollection from one who was there –

Well, I suppose that which ended up as the New Zealand Association of Model Railway Club's Christchurch Back On Track 2022 National Model Railway Convention will be remembered as the one that almost got away. In early 2020 I and my travelling mate, Mike Lyons of Palmerston North, had made our transport bookings, paid our Convention (Rails From The Rubble 2020) fees and accommodation costs and were only a few weeks from making the trip down to Christchurch when the cursed pandemic struck complete with the resultant lock-down. Two years later, when 'things' were looking better the long delayed (now dubbed Back On Track 2022) convention was all set to occur at the same venue when a variant of that same Covid plague struck the country and we once again found ourselves in lock-down – another delay. Anyway, six months later in October 2022 Mike and I arrived at Saint Andrew's College in Christchurch and the long awaited, long delayed event actually began.

Following arrival by plane in Christchurch on Thursday (6th) morning in the middle of a miserably cold Spring storm we taxied to Saint Andrew's College, the venue for the event and provider of our accommodation in a school dormitory. As we could not register until later in the day we left our bags (previously arranged) in the care of the convention organisers and bused into Christchurch city centre with a view to checking out the Free-Mo modules at SkillWise, Acorn Models and Ironhorse Hobbies, all of which were located within a few yards of the same street, albeit at opposite ends; about a twenty minute walk into a cold, blustery, southerly along Manchester Street found all three venues. Later that day, Acorn Models, a major supporter and sponsor of the Convention held a friendly open-house event for convention attendees.

Bussing back to the College, Mike and I formally registered and were shown to our on-site accommodation – a modern high-school girls' dormitory block which along with its small kitchen and generous common room was to be our (and about 24 others) home for the next five nights. The college's kitchen was operating and was not only used for the conventioneer's evening meals but also for our cooked breakfasts as well. This accommodation was warm and comfortable in every respect and I considered being able to stay on-site in such pleasant surroundings an enjoyable bonus. It was here that I realised that I had left my new railway book on the aircraft. Oh well, such is life!

Our registration pack which took the form of a useful 'goody' bag with our individual names emblazoned on it included such things as the Convention Timetable, map of the site, a packet of small drills, a pen and notebook and an assortment of Christchurch touristy stuff as well as some sweets etc. During that Thursday evening Mike and I got in the way of people setting up layouts and trade stands and caught up with the early contingent of friends that started to fill the gym which was the hub of operations. It was fun watching the in-house layouts being erected and I took note of the different ways that various layouts were put up and connected although when it came to Brent Hopley's large layout, experience told me it was time to scarpa.

The largest of the in-house layouts was Brent Hopley's 1:34 NZR/1:48 US layout that ran alternatively as an NZR 9mm scale or an American 0 scale layout. Nearly as big was the One Track Minds 1:64 S scale NZR modular layout which featured exquisite NZR scenery. A third large layout was the Blenheim Model Railway Group's H0 American Pine Ridge Railway. The 80% group (Richard

Poff, John Hey and Tim Marshall) featured a range of small, intriguing, novelty On30 scale layouts such as 'Any Old Iron', 'It's A Gas' and 'The Dominion Box Co.' And at the smaller end, Stan Agar exhibited a small push-along-models layout featuring 1950/1960's 000 scale Lone Star models. Graig Galilee displayed his H0 Free-Mo desert module while Mark Andrews and Michael Gee showed their 1:64 scale NZR Kai-Iwi period layout (see if you can find the scale Tuis Karl - bugged if I could find them, but there they were when shown – must be getting old after all). At the other end of the scale Douglas Parker had part of the Märklin Gauge 1 display layout set up with point-point running – I do love those big, graceful 'krocodil's'.

There were a few other models on display and for various reasons a couple of other layouts that were listed in the Timetable didn't seem to make it to the Convention which fortunately didn't detract from the pleasure that was obtained from discussing various features of the in-house layouts with their builders - unashamedly a bloody gifted bunch of modellers. The Garden City Model Railway Club hosted the buy/sell/swap table which eventually ran for a distance of about 12 metres across the room and must have had more than three hundred items for sale; EFTPOS had been set up for this table in order to facilitate the transfer of money from my bank account to theirs.

Other trade stands that were operating were Allister Green's Blue Mountain Models which was promoting and selling TCS 'WOW' sound decoders and accessories. Rodger Cullen had his South Dock NZR kits on show and available while Peter Esler had set up his NZR S scale Cross Creek models stand which also included a range of American models as well. While not having an actual trade stand VCC Models' Michelle Andrews was showing an assembled example of their upgraded S scale NZR DG locomotive kit to those that were interested.

At 10:00pm the venue closed and those of us staying at the on-site accommodation went there for even more coffee and further discussions.

8:30am the following morning (Friday 7th) saw the opening of venue for registration. It is my understanding that we had 122 pre-paid registered attendees of which 117 actually turned up. I believe there could also have been one or two walk-ins that arrived on the day. I was disappointed to learn that this was the fewest number of attendees at a National Convention in the entire history of the NZAMRC.

At 10:00am, after completion of registration, competition entry formalities and final setup had taken place, found us in the Saint Andrew's Memorial Chapel for the official opening by Craig Galilee while the 'Partner Programme' participants met in the Gym in order to commence their off-site programme. Subsequent to the official welcome the Keynote address was presented by Gavin Hince from Australia (Publisher/Editor of Narrow Gauge Down Under magazine). His topic was 'Pushing The Boundaries' – a polite way of emphasising that we should get off our butts and get on with our modelling. Immediately following Gavin's enlightening presentation, Tim Marshall conducted a continuation of this theme with audience participation which I felt perhaps did not quite hit the mark with the conventioners at the level the organisers anticipated.

The next official event was to eat the provided lunch. On the menu was a delicious, generously-filled chicken salad in a large bread roll, an energy bar, an apple or an orange and a small packet of potato chips – a perfectly adequate repast. It would be appropriate to point out at this juncture that coffee/tea and biscuits were available in-house at any time during the event.

At 1:30pm Session One of four clinics started with the following choices being available: Methods of imagineering a layout, techniques to help visualise complex designs including methods of building a model of a model and useful mock-ups etc – Mark Dalrymple.

Inspiration to build something. Using photos to help with all those lineside details etc – Glen Anthony.

Heavy industry modelling, operations and how to fake it – Stan Agar.

Modelling of brick and stone using foamboard and modelling clay plus making and using silicone rubber moulds – Merv Sarson.

I chose to attend the Heavy industry modelling clinic and found what Stan had to say will be of use to my future plans.

After this session a coffee and a bickie or two was in order to prepare me for Session Two of the clinics timetabled for 3:00pm. This time our choices were:

Building and operating a tiny layout – Tim Marshall/Richard Poff/John Hey.

TCS (Train Control Systems) WOW sound decoders – Rodger Cullen/Allister Green.

Creating realistic trees – Geoff Elmsly.

Various ways to control turnouts on a model railway – Brian Roulston.

This time I chose to attend Brian's clinic on turnout control which again will prove to be of value to me in my future endeavours – I surprised myself by actually taking a few photos of some of Brian's demonstration pieces in order to help me in the future.

As the day progressed judging took place at the model competition of which I understand there were 31 entries and all the in-house layouts were operating. Pretty soon dinner, for those who had pre-paid for it, was available at the Saint Andrew's College dining room. The menu was simple but tasty – chicken drumsticks with various pastas and salads followed by a nice dessert.

That evening at 7:00pm a choice once again presented itself. Some attended the New Zealand Model Railway Guild Inc. AGM while others could attend one of the first round of Special Interest Group's (SIGs) meetings; these being separate British, North American and European modellers forums. I cannot comment on the British and European meets. However, I convened the North American Modellers SIG which was attended by about thirty noisy, self opinionated individuals.

The subjects discussed at the North American modellers SIG included the very popular ongoing, bi-annual AMRA meets which are booked up through to 2025 and beyond coupled with several intermediate mini-AMRAs that have already been announced or rumoured. Another long topic of discussion was the recent, very successful, American modellers Free-Mo meet held in Morrinsville which accounted for a temporary layout of 107 modules which ran over a four-day period. James Kelso assisted by hooking up his phone to the school overhead projector so that all could see photos of the event. The American Central Model Railroader's newsletter, Highball, was also commented on as this electronic newsletter for some reason is read by numerous (hundreds) of like-minded modellers here in New Zealand and off shore. I noticed a few outsiders stopping at the door to see what was going on as there was much laughing and the discussions went overtime and ran for about 90 minutes.

Later that same evening the New Zealand Association of Model Railway Clubs held its AGM and as well as electing new officers to this organisation the big topic of discussion was indeed the actual ongoing viability of this organisation, its magazine (The Coupler) along with the future of the National Conventions – more on this later.

Further SIGs were timetabled that evening including four for the various NZR scales, NZ48, NZ120, NZ 1:64 and 1:34. I attended the location of the NZR 1:64 SIG but unfortunately no meeting took place – perhaps I was at the wrong locatio? As I heard no comments about the other NZR SIGs, I have no knowledge as to how they went. The venue closed at about 10:00pm not quite bringing a close to the first day's activities as a series of discussions continued in the dormitory common room

for some time until the early hours.

Saturday (8th) morning saw many of us at the college dining room for a cooked breakfast before the venue opened at 8:00am and at 8:30am layout tour bookings for that afternoon opened. At 9:00am Clinic Session Three commenced with another choice needing to be made:

Prototype freelancing with a slant towards narrow-gauge – Gavin Hince.

The modelling product that I can't do without - tile grout – Kathy Millatt (via video link from England).

Layout operation using car cards and waybills – Spencer Lawry.

Controlling an airbrush to achieve a fine level and subtle applications of colour – John Atkinson.

I chose the Kathy Millatt clinic as I was already familiar with her work having previously watched many of her tutorials on YouTube. I was not disappointed and I recommend that it would be wise to follow up this clinic with Kathy's various on-line videos.

At 10:30am a small group of workshops was held in the gym mezzanine area. A range of open workshops was held and you could wander around and observe and ask questions of the following: Taking control of the airbrush – John Atkinson.

Using jigs to achieve uniformity – David Low.

Wow sound decoder programming – Allister Green and Rodger Cullen.

Card modelling – Stan Agar.

Handlaid points – Daryl Roe.

Scratchbuilding a woodshed – Garth Cook.

Creating realistic trees – Geoff Elmsly.

All the while others could socialise around the display layouts. Lunch followed which was along similar lines to the previous day.

Mike and I had earlier decided on the Southwest Canterbury tour which turned into a pleasant ramble around the Canterbury Plains with us seeing first an old friend, Scott Rose's H0 American layout followed by Brendon Groufsky's also H0 American layout. Both of these layouts featured extensive use of modern digital electronics as part of their operation. Next was Mark Dalrymple's H0 NZR freelanced layout based in Jackson's Bay in the 1930s had the proposed town there gone ahead. Think George Selios's Franklin and South Manchester layout for the concept of this ambitious project – definitely one to watch into the future. And finally we went to Bryan Howard's H0 European layout while larger than most was built along traditional European lines. I wish to offer my thanks and gratitude to Kelvin Heads of Wellington who was our driver on this occasion.

Arriving back at the venue in time for dinner (for those who had previously paid for it) we walked over to the college dining room for a pleasant ham roast dinner and dessert. After dinner Clinic Session Four commenced with the following topics on offer:

How 3D printing has made the impossible possible – Lawrence Boul.

Fitting visually realistic landforms around our track right-of-way – Mark Andrews and Michael Gee.

Modelling a branch railway including the planning and weathering of structures – Barry Fitzgerald.

Adding interest to a bush tramway by using prototype examples of various scenic elements and sawmills – Paul Mahoney.

This time I chose the Mark Andrews and Michael Gee clinic which reinforced my belief that following prototype photos for scenic believability and realism was a good approach to achieving this goal. A long day, a full stomach and a comfortable warm clinic room; certainly not the clinic's content nor the dulcet tones of Michael and Andrew were the prime causes of my struggling with consciousness during the tutorial – but I did hear most of it – I think.

At 8:00pm the contest room was opened for viewing and the contest results had been posted. At

the same time Workshop Session Two commenced in the gym's mezzanine with a variety of techniques being shown, this time the choices were:

3D scanning – Trevor Corrin.

Loksound decoder programming – Peter Ross.

New developments in weathering – Barry Fitzgerald.

3D printing - how hard can it be – Mark Andrews.

Building a 3-story curved brick warehouse from own laser cut and printed parts – Julian Allom.

At 9:00pm a further group of SIGs commenced. Peter Ross conducted a talk on on-board sound and Stan Ager discussed British P4/EM fine scale modelling. I chose to attend the session by Michelle Andrews who conducted an audio-visual discourse on KiwiRail Plans primarily relating to their historical numbering and sizing through to today which answered a few questions that I had been occasionally wondering about for decades. See Michelle, contrary to my belief, you could teach me something after all.

The venue closed once again at 10:00pm and Mike and I returned to our accommodation in one of the college dormitories – more coffee, bickies and rubbish talk.

A bit after 7:00am on Sunday (9th) morning saw the same group of us in the college dining room once again for a cooked breakfast after which we booked our afternoon layout tour before the Fifth Session of clinics began at 9:00am. The choices were:

Modelling water – Kathy Millatt (again via video link from England).

Desert scenery – Craig Galilee.

Getting started in garden railways – Gavin Hince.

DCC on a budget – James Kelso.

I again chose the Kathy Millatt clinic which will be of value to me in my future modelling endeavours.

After yet another coffee and bickie Session Six of the clinics got underway at 10:30am with another bewildering array of subjects"

Arduino for newbies – John McIntosh.

Give it a bash, the art of modifying and adapting kit and structures. – Garth Cook.

How to model an 88-seat railcar from scratch in 1:24 scale – Dean Farrow.

Modelling West Coast bush in 1:64 scale – Lawrence Boul.

I missed out on this session as I was too busy talking with several other modellers through to lunch time when another nice filled roll with extras was provided along with the obligatory coffee and bickie. I should point out that all of the clinics were slated to take 60 minutes to present and all those that I attended were well prepared and professionally presented. I found that with each clinic being only held once it was quite difficult to make the best choice for me. There were several of the clinics that I would have liked to attend but could not because of conflicts of scheduling.

We left for our second layout tour shortly after noon and this time we picked the North Canterbury tour which had been slightly re arranged with another tour so it wasn't as shown in the timetable booklet. We visited Richard Lang's H0 scale European layout, The North Canterbury Model Railway Club rooms which contained an assortment of permanent and moveable layouts. Ian Galbraith's outdoor American themed 'Culcreuch Fold' garden railway and Karl Marshall's N scale European layout.

There were a total of Eighteen layouts on five different tours, so it was impossible to go to them all. In addition to the layouts already mentioned I would take this opportunity to thank those whose layouts I visited along with the following people for making their layouts available but because of

time/tour constraints I was unable to visit them. Neil Andrews, Glen Anthony, Ken Henderson, Merv Sarson, Richard Lang, Reuben Romany, The Trimms, Garden City MRC, Colin Barry, and Chris Gunn.

Return to the venue was at about 4:00pm; more coffee, more talking, and suddenly it was time to change for the Awards Dinner which was held off-site at the Hornby Club. A double-decker bus transported us from the college to the Hornby Club for the Awards Dinner which commenced at about 7:00pm. The arrangements allowed for about 10 people seated around large, round tables which was very conducive to getting to know everyone. Like most tables of which each seemed to acquire a Mother (or Father) Hen in charge, our table was taken over by Michelle Andrews of VCC Models who quickly got most of us in line. The food was good, the company and conversation great and the speeches not too long all of which contributed to a great night out.

During the course of the evening Craig Galilee offered a toast to absent friends along with words of thanks to everyone for their part in what was overall a great convention. A few other short speeches were made, notably a thank you to Jan Fortune, the organiser of the partner alternative programme and Gavin Hince made another, final presentation. The contest committee announced the major awards and presented trophies to the winners. Following all this the evening came to an end and we all boarded the double-decker for the run back to the college and our accommodation.

Monday (10th) morning found us back in the gym where the great layout pack up was taking place, although this had started during the afternoon of the previous day. It was about mid-morning that I heard on the grapevine that the morning's timetabled events had been cancelled. That was the forum regarding the future of the NZAMRC which was to be followed by the official closing – a bit of an unexpected let down really.

Fortunately Mike and I were contacted by phone and asked if we wanted to go and visit the RNZAF museum at Wigram. Nothing else was on offer at the convention so we eagerly accepted the kind offer and spent until early afternoon including a pleasant lunch at the museum. We were later dropped (thank you Michelle) at Acorn Models where we spent another hour or so browsing and spending a few more dollars. This is a well stocked shop and their prices are reasonable – I shall no doubt be availing myself of their internet sales facility in the future and also take this opportunity to thank them for being a major sponsor of this convention.

After this we bused back to the college. A group of us later bused to the next shopping centre on Papanui Road where we had dinner before again bussing back for a pleasant evening of discussion and our final night in the accommodation. The following morning Mike and I bused to the airport where Air New Zealand had found the book that I had left in the seat pocket and had it waiting for me (thank you Air New Zealand) and we returned home to the North Island – our Convention jaunt was over.

As an aside, we made some use of Christchurch's public transport and I think it is marvellous. Any other city in New Zealand would do well to copy what Christchurch has done, it was quite a revelation.

Bouquets and Brick-bats. In summary I believe that this narrative of my experience at the 'Back On Track 2022' convention should be considered as a big bouquet for the organisers who in fact effectively organised three conventions. I offer my thanks and gratitude to those who persevered and finally managed to hold the event regardless that they were bedevilled by death, plague, pestilence, Government policy and some apathetic modellers. I also wish to say thank you to the dining room/kitchen staff at Saint Andrew's College who did such a good job of our in-house meals

Notwithstanding there are also some brick-bats to hand out. I was disappointed at the apparent lack of use of the white-board notice-board in the foyer for notices pertaining to changes in the timetable. While it saw some use there were numerous changes to the timetable that were not publicly noted and unless you were lucky enough to be in the right place when any change was made you did not know about it – word of mouth is not sufficient.

As one who had travelled inter-island for this convention I also was disappointed to learn on the grapevine that the timetabled events for the last morning were annulled. I felt that both the forum on the future of the NZAMRC and the official closing formalities were important – I almost felt that we had been deserted at the last minute. I could in fact have gone home a day earlier and saved myself a night's accommodation had I known earlier that all the timetabled events for that morning were actually not going to take place. Instead Mike and I were left wondering how we were going to fill in the time that we found we now had with no car or other easy means of flexible transport. It transpired that Michelle Andrews of VCC Models took pity on a couple of grumpy old men and drove to the venue and took us on a delightful excursion to the RNZAF museum – thank you Michelle, it was much appreciated.

And a final big brick-bat to all those modellers who didn't bother to support the National Convention. I accept that some of you had genuine reasons for non-attendance, but for the rest of you, apathy is not an acceptable excuse.

And now for a couple of observations. School Holiday versus Easter: Since its inception in 1966 The Associations' National Convention has always been held over the Easter weekend in the 'even' years. Through a series of circumstances this Convention ended up being held over a four-day period during the school holiday break. It is my opinion that this change of timing was fortuitous as it makes the use of schools as a venue for future conventions viable. Locating a suitable venue has always been and is becoming an even greater problem and by changing the timing it made the use of school facilities a more realistic proposition. The nature of life-style and holidays is now vastly different than it was 56 years ago. As long as it is promulgated well in advance I have no issue with any future convention being held at a time other than Easter – indeed, the very future of the National Convention may depend on its being held at a time other than Easter simply by making the search for a suitable venue more flexible.

And that brings me to my second thought. The future of the NZAMRC and of course its importance to the hobby in general. There seems to be a perception that the Association's bi-annual National Convention is just for NZR modellers; this is not so! While I write this review as an H0 scale North American modeller (with a leaning and interest in all scales and prototypes) I believe that the 2022 'Back On Track' Convention appears to back me up in so much that there was a sprinkling of all denominations attending. I understand that North American modelling accounts for about 25% of the modelling market within New Zealand and as about 25% of the Conventioneers attended the North American modelling SIG that I convened sort of says it all from that point of view.

So, the North American modellers were fairly represented as were I think comparable proportions of the NZR, British, European and 'other' prototype modelling groups. The clinics, workshops, display layouts and private tour layouts also represented similar multi-denominational proportions which also reinforces my contention that the National Conventions are for everyone. Therefore, to mis-paraphrase an old contentious 'Ozzie' TV advert – "So, where the bloody hell were you?"

This was a good convention, if more of you had attended it could have been a great convention. Without the support you modellers, irrespective of your leanings, the National Convention will cease to exist and if that should occur then we will all be the poorer and quite

frankly then that will be what we deserve. Unfortunately this state of affairs is actually closer than you may think (it nearly happened only a few weeks ago at the AGM when one of the options was to wind the Association up) and I believe that we deserve better than that – so get in behind the new NZAMRC Committee and let's see if we can get back to the 200+ attendees that we used to have in the earlier years. When you analyse it the conventions already cater to the various prototype groups. As I see it the new Committee's job is not to attract various groups that have been perceived to have abandoned the convention, because in reality they haven't, but the need to attract modellers in general is paramount– I will continue my support into the future. While the 'Coupler' would be nice to have, I do not consider it in importance above the actual retaining of the Association – which must come first.

I know that this review has been written for the New Zealand Model Railway Journal which is primarily the NZR modelling magazine. However, I am also going to ask that it appear in the digital newsletter of the American Central Model Railroader Group, Highball, which is read by several hundred modellers each fortnight. If anyone knows of any other group newsletter that may wish to pass on this 'word' of support for the Association, please let me know (Karl Morris <kvmorris100@gmail.com>) and I will pass this article on for wider circulation in order to help 'the cause' – the Conventions are worth the effort!

Having now finally recovered from caffeine overload suffered at the 2022 Convention and re-read what I have written here, especially the rant at the end, I trust that you will at least consider what I have said and start budgeting now for the next NZAMRC 'BACK FROM THE DEAD' National Convention – wherever and whenever it may be held in 2024 – not only will you likely enjoy yourself, you also will probably end up better modeller for it!

Karl Morris.

END OF TEXT.