

HOW THE 144 DIORAMA CAME ABOUT

by Chris Pearson

In 1968 I joined two clubs, the Model Bus Federation and the Hazel Grove & District Model Railway Society. Ever since the demise of Stockport's trams in 1951 and the electrification of the West Coast Main Line through Stockport in the late 1950s, I have had a keen interest in buses and trains, in that order. At the time I joined the clubs the Hazel Grove & District Model Railway Society (HG&DMRS) were meeting on a Friday evening once a fortnight in a room at the Civic Hall in Hazel Grove, while the Model Bus Federation (MBF) North West Area met monthly at Milton Hall on Deansgate, in Manchester city centre. Members from as far afield as Carlisle in the north and Stoke on Trent in the south would make the journey to Manchester on the last Saturday of each month. The area secretary, who was also the national treasurer, lived in Stoke on Trent. There could be as many as 75 to 80 members present at each meeting. Each meeting had a specific topic for discussion and many models would be on show for us to talk about as well. 2018 will be the MBF's Golden Jubilee Year. The HG&DMRS celebrated that special event in 2016.

The Model Bus Federation's Area Secretary devised the '144 Diorama' as a local competition some time during the 1980s. Up to 1996 the competition was held at our local AGM. The scale was mainly OO, though any scale was accepted if it was within the rules, of which there were only two, these being –

- 1, it must not exceed 144 square inches in base area, and
- 2, it had to have a bus or coach on it.

144 square inches doesn't have to be 12 by 12, and there was no restriction on height! In 1996 the Manchester area hosted the national AGM and our local competition became the 'special class' on the day and it has now become one of the classes in the national AGM competition event.

My first attempt at building a '144 Diorama' began not long after that AGM and I designed one that fitted inside an old briefcase I had used as part of my work kit before the boss bought me a new one. The diorama was more or less completed when I took it to the model railway club meeting the week before going to London to report on the 1997 British Toy and Hobby Fair at Olympia, its last one there before moving to a new venue in east London the following year. One of the then members of the HG&DMRS was a commercial artist and when he saw the diorama, he said that the back-scene, which I made as a slot in attachment, needed depth and offered to paint it for me to achieve that objective. The night before going to London I took the diorama to the club and it took him just 40 minutes to paint in the detail and it still remains as painted to this day. Unfortunately, the diorama measured 152 square inches so didn't qualify for the '144' competition. Oh, dear!

A lot has happened since 1997. My eyesight has got worse and a detached retina in 2000 didn't help, especially as it was my good eye that suffered such fate. I retired in 2011 after almost 35 years working for Stockport Council and decided to have another go at building a second diorama. I did a lot of the work during Railway Club nights. 144 square inches can be formed in many ways and I chose 16 inches by 9 inches so as to take full advantage of the available space in a new, slightly bigger briefcase I had given to me. The diorama was based on three modes of transport – rail, road and water and it had **two** bridges on it and it was **2mm** scale, hence the title, '**A Bridge Two Far**' and, yes, I have spelt it correctly and, yes, it did go through the planning process properly! To my surprise, it came 2nd in the MBF competition.

Stages in construction of “A Bridge too far”.

Starting the landform



Basic structures in place, with initial scenic treatment



Checking that it fits its intended home!



The reason I chose N-gauge was because the amount one can show is so much more than a OO-scale display on a base of 144 square inches. It creates more of a challenge when constructing it due to the smaller scale of the bits and pieces. One thing I did do was to take photographs showing various stages of construction.

A view of the finished diorama



It includes three modes of transport-bus, railway and canal.

As for the original OO-scale diorama, it has been stripped down and is now ready for refurbishment and in due course be reduced to 144 square inches but will retain its OO-scale specification.

Four years on I decided to have another go at building a '144 Diorama' and chose a country town scene as a basis. This one is also 16 inches by 9 inches and the same scale as 'A Bridge Two Far' but is called '**Two Into One Does Go**'. It is based on the merging of two streams into one with the edge of a village on one side of the streams and the main village by-pass road and the local church on the other. At first I had planned to have a funeral coming out of the church as I had a hearse and black Daimler limousine, but while I was at the all-N Gauge exhibition at Leamington Spa in early September, I spotted a wedding pack that took my fancy and bought it. So I needed a white Daimler limousine for a wedding car, which I duly bought at the same show. Putting the fine white cotton strands on the car as wedding ribbons took longer than I had thought, despite friends saying it couldn't be done because it was too small and difficult a task to achieve, but I did achieve it, despite it taking a couple of hours! Nothing is impossible if you put your mind to it.

However, with this diorama I did not take photographs showing the stages of construction. I wish I had, now. Nevertheless, it won first prize at the Model Bus Federation's 2017 Annual General Meeting '144 Diorama Competition' at the beginning of October and I had it and the winner's shield on show at the Hazel Grove & District Model Railway Society's 43rd Exhibition three weeks later at the end of October. It certainly created a lot of interest.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all those MBF and HG&DMRS members who have given me help and support during the construction work, particularly with the latest diorama, and allowing me to display it. I hope this article gives you as much pleasure reading about it as did me in building it and writing about it.