

The Last Linka Newsletter

1995

As most of you will be aware, the Linka factory closed in late 1993, ending a fifteen year history of a unique and unusual product. And as this final Newsletter will go largely to Linka aficionados (about 20,000 strong, in Britain and around the world), it seemed a nice way to round off our association with Linka and Linka's many loyal supporters.

The Newsletters began in 1983 and ran for a number of years after that. In them, ideas and tips were swapped, and many ingenious and skilled results of Linka modelers shown. In addition, possible future moulds and accessories were proposed, of which some (but regrettably not all) were eventually produced. Who, of those who followed the Newsletters, can forget the myriads of models produced by Bob Van de Velde of Quebec, or the brilliant precision of Brian Zobel of Chichester (now Lincoln)? Unfortunately, the cost of producing and circulating the Newsletter became too much for Linka to bear and issue No 6 became the last one. Until now!

Anyway, this seems the perfect time to tell the whole Linka story.

It began in 1978 with an idea submitted to Thomas Salter Ltd by Peter Champion. There is a wonderful story that Peter Champion "pinched" the idea from someone else working for the firm of "Minibrix" (does anyone remember Minibrix?), but I have never been able to get to the bottom of that! Be that as it may, Salters liked the idea, and put it under a crash programme of development. The main mould range was primarily the work of their designer, Arthur Hunter, who worked all hours God sent to meet the deadline of the Earl's Court toyfair in January 1979.

It was launched with a great fanfare, and 1979 was a year of unmitigated success. Huge sales, aided by a massive TV and press promotion, led Salters to believe they had a new Meccano. Massive money was put into a simultaneous launch of Linka in America and throughout Europe; and millions of boxes, components, and instructions were produced for each country and language.

Then came the fall, the seeds of which had been laid in the crash development programme.

Unfortunately, although the 1979 TV campaign was successful in selling millions of pounds worth of Linka, no one had bothered to check if the customers who bought it actually liked it! Nor was any market research done in the new countries into which it was being launched (extensive market research was carried out in Germany, but only AFTER it had failed!). They just assumed that the wonderful sales of 1979 would keep on growing.

Down in the real world, too many buyers were not liking Linka. The crash development had led to confusing and misleading instructions and plans which, if you followed them, pretty well guaranteed ugly models with joints showing! Also, because of the way Linka was being promoted on TV, it was being bought for young children, who found it too complicated.

So instead of the popularity of Linka spreading by word of mouth, as all successful products must, the reverse was happening. The word on the street was "Linka is crap!"

At the same time, the 1980 overseas launches were not going too well either. In Germany (quite apart from setting up a deal with Noch where Salters could hardly ever make any money anyway) sales were going poorly – the German modeler liked his nice clean Faller models, thank you very much. And in America, the situation was even worse. For by the time the distributor, sub-distributor, and sub-sub-distributor had taken their cuts, the price ruled out any huge popularity – even if, as was never researched, the American modeler was prepared to spend the kind of time Linka demands.

By the end of 1980, things were in a sorry state – a huge investment committed to sets and packaging, coupled with dwindling sales in any part of the globe you looked.

Meantime, back in Alnwick, I was playing with Linka and getting some good results – mainly because I was one of those people who never read instructions!

In 1979 I built a large viaduct, and other models, for the exhibition layout of the local model club. This was well received, so the next year an even larger viaduct (5 ft long!) was built for the next exhibition layout. An article was written and accepted by *Railway Modeller*. Salters were notified.

The wheels of publication grind exceedingly slow, and it was late '81 before *Railway Modeller* gave a publication date. (It was eventually published July 1982.) Salters were again notified. They wrote back to say that they were scrapping Linka! I replied that I believed Linka could have a future with some redesign, and to my surprise, they took me up on it.

The subsequent meetings with Salters map the rapid decline of this once prosperous company: the first meeting was over a three-course dinner, the second included a pub lunch, and with the third it was virtually a case of “bring your own sandwiches”! (Salters went into receivership in 1983.)

Agreement was reached for me to take over Linka and attempt a re-marketing. The situation was clouded by Salters, in their desperation, having to sell off the hundreds of thousands of surplus Linka kits they had manufactured at a giveaway price to get immediate cash. This led to Linka sets, previously selling for as much as £24, being sold in the Zodiac and Maynards chains for as little as 99p. Such is the pattern of life that both Maynards and Zodiac went into receivership within a few years. (How long for Toys R Us, one must wonder!)

So the manufacture moved to Alnwick in late 1982. But with sets on the High Street selling at 99p, there was little immediate prospect of getting it back in the shops at full price. The next two years were spent designing new packaging for Linka's relaunch, as well as producing the Linka Manual (still the “bible” for this kind of modeling). In fact, the Manual alone required sending out hundreds of letters to modelers, who kindly sent back their tips and ideas, so that at last the old Salters' instructions could be swept aside forever. Then, in January 1984, Linka was re-launched at Earl's Court toy fair, with a greatly reduced fanfare compared to the previous Salters' introduction.

For the next few years Linka jogged along well enough, with a small but appreciative following, and slow progress was made. There were a few scares along the way. Then Salters went bankrupt, we still had not secured the tooling. A desperate period of negotiation with Peter Pan Playthings of Peterborough (who had bought Salters' assets from the receiver) finally secured them, but it took all spare capital. The Peter Champion popped up from the Caribbean where he had gone with the proceeds from his royalties after that successful 1979 launch. He wanted thousands of pounds of further royalties for sales since we had taken over, money we simply did not have. Despite showing him the books, he still insisted that his royalties were on sales, not profit – and if we didn't have the money to pay him, we had to find it. Luckily, a trip to Glenrothes to meet with erstwhile directors of the now defunct Salters clarified the position: Mr. Champion's royalties ended with the closing of the Salters' patents, and we owed him nothing. Otherwise the story of Linka might have ended there!

Even aside from these distractions, the business was becoming a struggle. Sales, although steady, were not increasing. The people who got into Linka really loved it, and did some marvelous things, but we couldn't seem to get greater numbers interested. This in turn left us always short of money for bringing out new moulds and accessories, so we could not extend the range to stimulate new interest. The pattern became quite familiar – quite good sales in winter where we would make a little progress, only to lose it in the summer when sales dwindled – and with factory costs and overheads rolling on remorselessly.

By the late 1980's it became clear we had to do something quite radical, or slowly be squeezed out of existence. It was decided to gather together all our resources for one last try to break into a larger field. The packaging would be renewed to bring it up to High Street standards (a very costly exercise in itself), and new sets designed to make Linka as "user friendly" and as easy as possible.

This resulted in the "step-by-step" instruction books and their allied accessories which were launched at Earls Court in 1989. We were aiming at Beatties, Menzies, Hobbies, Toys R Us, Fenwicks, Toymaster, and any other major outlet we could find. We had borrowed to the hilt to make this happen (and interest rates were penal in 1989) so it HAD to work!

We got Beatties and Hobbies. All the others showed interest but finally decided it was "too specialized for them". Still, Beatties and Hobbies were a great help, and sales in 1989 more than doubled. Unfortunately, they needed to triple for us to make progress. Same old story – the people who bought Linka loved it, but there was never quite enough of them.

By the end of 1990, it was clear we had failed. Enough sales to keep afloat, just, but no prospect of increased sales to pay back the crippling borrowings. Various tries at diversification into allied manufacturing came to nothing, and anyway there was little capital available for such projects.

Then early in 1991, my wife, Mary, had the idea of opening a small secondhand bookshop in part of the factory premises at Alnwick Station, in the hope of helping with the overheads. Meantime the business was advertised for sale. And although a number of people showed interest, an

American buyer, who had previously been importing Linka, was the only one to come up with a firm offer.

Meantime, the bookshop became increasingly popular and successful. In 1992 it was enlarged to about half of the total factory area, with Linka shoehorned into the remaining area. Then, as the American buyer was planning to take Linka over in 1993, it was decided to close the factory completely and enlarge the bookshop yet again.

Rather than just disappearing and leaving people with half-completed Linka sets, a “Last Orders!” campaign was conceived, and the closure advertised in the *Railway Modeller* during the Summer and Autumn of 1993. The idea was that anyone who wanted to complete their Linka mould collection would have this one last chance to do so.

And to our huge surprise, we were absolutely overwhelmed with orders!

In three or four months we sold more Linka than we had in the previous two years!

Nonetheless, the factory closed on schedule in September 1993 – but not until after we had manufactured enough stock to ensure that all “last orders” would be satisfied. Unfortunately, our American buyer went bankrupt, (with all the bankruptcies that have happened around Linka, it is amazing that the product itself survived!) so that his plans to continue manufacturing Linka necessarily fell through.

Meantime the bookshop has gone from strength to strength, so that it is now one of the largest secondhand bookshops in Britain – so large that it now covers a far bigger area within Alnwick Station than the factory ever did! In addition, and much to our satisfaction, we have been able to restore many features of the original station, including the old waiting room, and are gradually working on more restorations.

So is this the end of Linka? Probably so. But the tooling for Linka has been carefully mothballed, so that if anyone wishes to take up the torch by buying or leasing them, they are there.

If you are ever up visiting Northumberland, do call in – you will not be disappointed. And we want your books! We are always interested in good secondhand railway books and videos, so if you have any you wish to sell, please send us a list, and we will gladly make a good offer.

Finally, in this last Newsletter, I want to thank all of you for your tremendous support over the years. And for your appreciation of a product I will always believe to have been truly exceptional.

All the best –

Stuart Manley, Alnwick Station, 1995