

# My Achievement Program Journey

Jonathan Small MMR® #675



View of both decks at Sultan and Gaynor - photos by Jonathan Small MMR®

Many of you will know that my formative experience with American modeling was thanks to Cliff Young and his DRGW. Cliff was headmaster of my school in Ilford, Essex. I later learned that he and his layouts were quite renowned in the hobby at the time. I arrived for my first visit at Cliff's house in semi-rural Essex and was shown upstairs into his railway room – I was amazed! Here was a 21ft x 8ft representation of the DRGW in the Colorado Rockies, the line from Denver to Moffat Tunnel, with a western yard beyond. A fast clock, way freights, thru freights, 2-6-6-2 steamers and FA hauled streamliners, car card and waybill switching – all the elements of what I now know to be first-rate American model railroading were there. I went on to operate on Cliff's layout a dozen times. I literally had had no idea that this was what model railroading



Scratchbuilt N scale Great Northern Caboose X100 on siding at Berne

could be. Although I was set on my career path, studying hard to become a professional oboist, I kept those experiences very fresh in mind.

In 1982 I married my wife MaryAnn. My father-in-law was also a great train enthusiast, having grown up in Oneonta NY, an important railroad town. John Foord Sherman had an N scale layout of his own and a superb collection of railroad china and philately, and on my first visit to Washington DC he took

me to the NMRA National Convention, whence I came away with my first American cars and locomotives.

I was recruited to the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic a few years later and have been here ever since. I converted the top floor of our Edwardian house into quite a spacious railroad room. I set about designing a layout that would allow me to run long N scale passenger and freight trains, and to switch way-freights too. My layout follows many ideas learned from Cliff, and I managed to build the bulk of it to a basic level over the next two years and got trains running fairly quickly. Some of us prefer operations and others prefer modelling. I guess I'm about 50/50 there, and I find that operations tend to highlight areas for improvement, unless you're a design genius who can get everything right first time! So the layout has evolved while retaining much of its original character.

Sometimes having to move home can be a blessing in disguise as you have the



Scratchbuilt N scale Great Northern Tower Car X838

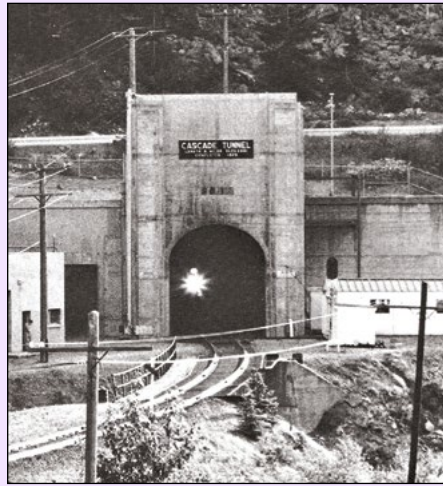
opportunity to learn and start over with a new layout. In my case, staying in one home for many years, I've instead remodelled much of the layout, and added an upper deck: N scale trains look very good at eye level. I love multi decking when it is done well, and my upper deck added about a third to the length of the mainline run. Most importantly the upper deck forms a return loop, so that with the yard loop at the western end there is never the need to reverse or switch a long consist. We run 14 car streamliners like this, and 30 car freights.

I'd joined the NMRA BR in 1986 and began to get into the Achievement Program around 1999. A visit from Steve Park, AP Chair at the time, led to my unexpectedly receiving my Golden Spike. Steve had quietly assessed my layout without letting on.

**David Gunn MMR® gave me some very valuable advice about working through the AP:**  
 plan carefully, keep records, drawings and photos as you go, and make everything you do count towards it

I identified a path to gain the required seven certificates, integrating this with my plans and needs for my layout and of course finding ways to volunteer for the NMRA.

First I tackled Electrical Engineer. I needed many of the listed features for my layout, and had designed it all carefully so it was a simple matter to complete the paperwork. Over a period of a few years I built several cars: a baggage-caboose unique to the GN, several passenger cars for my model of the Cascadian train, and some wood-chip gondolas. I entered these in the contests and earned the necessary

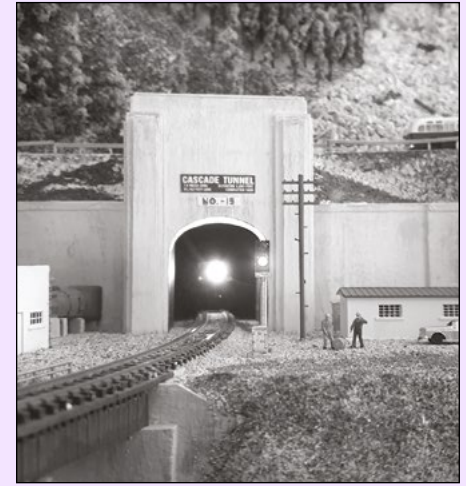


**Train about to exit East Portal, 1967**

Merit Awards for Master Builder Cars. I sought out a role to assist in the running of BR in 2006 and this helped me to earn my Association Volunteer. I also ran regular operating sessions on my layout which not only earned my Dispatcher certificate but also brought to my attention plenty of improvements I could make to the layout.

I think this is perhaps the key to it all – by engaging in the AP we not only hone our modelling skills, but the friendships and feedback we will inevitably get for our work are an enormous spur to improvement and learning. While I would never claim to be a particularly expert modeller I am certain that I would not have built the models and layout I now have to the same standard without taking part in the AP.

Furlough in 2020 helped get me over the MMR line. I completed MR Author with an article about making trees in N Scale Magazine, and I pressed on and finished my Scenery certificate, and with it Prototype Modeller, for which I set the rolling stock I had built some years ago in the correct setting. I would encourage everyone to read the AP paperwork through – key to it is planning where one piece of work can qualify for



**Train about to exit East Portal, on my N scale Great Northern layout**

several categories, especially Electrical/Civil/Dispatcher and Cars/Locomotives/Scenery/Prototype Modeller.

This last year has seen a big upsurge in BR members' interest and participation in the AP. I was incredibly proud to receive confirmation that I'd become just the 8th MMR in British Region in April 2021. It's taken me over 20 years working on and off, it's been great fun, incredibly rewarding and as so many MMRs say, the challenge is always to yourself to become the best modeller you can. If you haven't yet, do try it and join in.

I want to thank Steve Park, Keith Webb and Mick Moignard of our AP team, my family and my many friends in the NMRA for their encouragement and support.

Certificates gained:  
 Model Railroad Electrical Engineer  
 Master Builder Cars  
 Association Volunteer  
 Chief Dispatcher  
 Model Railroad Author  
 Master Builder Scenery  
 Master Builder Prototype Models.

**Jonathan Small MMR®**



**The 1954 Cascadian at Berne**