



**Bob Harper**

## 100 exhibitions for *Maristow*

Reflections on the life of an exhibition layout

*Like the Flying Dutchman we have wandered countrywide for a Century of shows.*

Bob Harper's 7mm GWR Edwardian layout *Maristow* (RM Dec 1992) will reach its 100th and possibly final public exhibition at the Manchester Show at the New Century Halls in Manchester on 3, 4 and 5 October this year (details in 'Societies & Clubs'). Here Bob recalls some of the joys of bringing the layout to a show somewhere near you!

Typing out the list of shows that *Maristow* has attended over the past 14 years – see table – has brought back loads of memories: of

places, journeys, problems and sometimes near disasters; but above all of people and the good times we have had in their company in so many places over the years.

We now have good friends all over the country, and in most of Western Europe and Canada as well (though I have not yet got to exhibiting in N. America!). A glance down my list and a few phone calls can raise a team of local operators for *Maristow* almost anywhere, which has the added advantage of keeping costs down; something that helps

hard-pressed exhibition managers of small shows and has been a not inconsiderable factor in the range of places to which we have been feasibly able to go.

Another crucial factor in the sheer range and frequency of the shows we have fitted in has been the speed with which an experienced team can dismantle the layout and get it in to the trailer – our record was driving away from Folkestone at 17.04, and there had been a train (OK, only a railmotor!) running on the layout until 17.00 exactly. Speedy setting up at the start of the weekend has also been a great bonus; usually we have been able to enjoy a mug of cold 'tea' within 20-30 minutes of arriving, as long as I have remembered to bring my bottle-opener with me!

However, the best thing I ever did was to lash out and buy a second-hand box trailer to carry the layout. Purpose built to fit just under a garage up-and-over door, it meant that now I could leave the layout in the trailer in the garage between shows, travel at car speed (nearly) rather than Luton van speed, and just un-hitch the trailer and push it loaded into the garage and shut the door on it after arriving home late on a Sunday evening. No longer did I need to arrange for a team of helpers to come round on the Friday evening to help load the hired van, and, even worse, come back with me on the Sunday evening to unload the van often at times approaching midnight, then travel with me up into the centre of Manchester to drop the van at Salford



**Left: Maristow station, complete with baulk road permanent way, Abbotsbury-based station building, and 517 class 0-4-2T No.551 in attendance.**

**Below left: GWR steam railmotor No.78 displays the crimson lake livery of the later Edwardian period.**

Van Hire, (where you have to find a petrol station still open nearby so as to leave the tank full, park the van in a lay-by outside the locked gates and then try and feed the keys back in through a letter box in the gate while keeping your fingers out of the snapping jaws of the guard dogs on the other side) and finally take me back home to South Manchester before eventually making their own way home, often to Leeds or Sheffield.

Phew! – the whole process was almost as long as that sentence! And still not finished, as I had to go back in again after work on Monday afternoon to sort out the paperwork. One problem that always arose was the final cost of fuel, and how much to put on my expenses before leaving the exhibition. Has anybody else found that the van always seemed to use far more fuel on the return journey than it did to get to the show on Friday – maybe it's uphill to Manchester. I did try a cheaper, closer van hire once, risking it for a fairly local show in Widnes, but when the gear stick came out in my hand, I decided that saving money on economy van hire could be taken too far.

A diversion (the whole article is a formless ramble through years of memories – the more I write, the more incidents come flooding back) into the merits of van hires where fuel goes full-to-full compared with empty-to-empty, one of the great questions of our times, I'm sure. Full-to-full leads to the late Sunday night search as mentioned above, but empty-to-empty always meant that the journey back was a constant gamble with the fuel gauge – what is the least you can put in and still get home without cutting it too fine? After a while you realise that there is an unwritten code amongst regular hirers, that you leave the tank about a quarter full when you hand it back. You get the benefit from the previous hirer, and you pass it on to the next person in return.

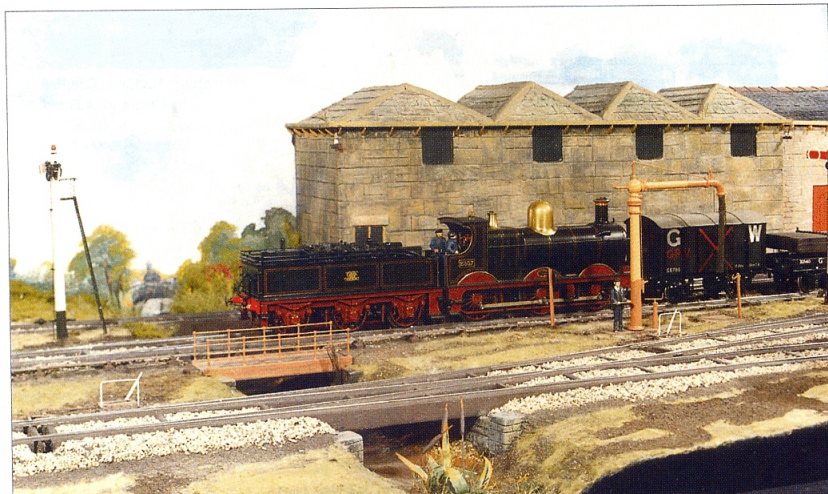
Once, though, things came unstuck in a big way, when the previous people decided not to play the game. The van was booked out for 16.30, to get the layout to the Warley Show, but no van was to be seen. The previous hirers had not brought it back yet, and the firm, being fairly small, didn't have another one available. Six o'clock came, and no sign of it, until finally they rang in; they were out of petrol on the hard shoulder of the M6 near Crewe. The van-hire people went out in a car with a gallon of fuel, put it in and warned the driver that there wasn't enough to get home – they had to stop at the filling station at the turn-off from the M6 and put some more in. But this lot were bloody-minded; they were determined not to leave a drop in the tank when they got back for the van hire firm to use for free (though of course, it wasn't the firm that suffered, it was the next hirer, me).

### Maristow exhibition history

<b>1989</b>	<b>1995</b>	
0 'Preview'	50	Southampton, Eurotrack
Manchester MRS 0 gauge Group Open Day	51	Hyde (Stockport MRS)
	52	York (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
	53	Whitby
<b>1990</b>	54	Liverpool
1 First Public Show	55	Weymouth
Scaleforum, Walkden, Manchester	56	Farnborough
2 Manchester (MMRS)	57	Barnsley
3 Rochdale	58	Watford Finescale Exhibition <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
<b>1991</b>	<b>1996</b>	
4 Guildford (Broad Gauge Society)	59	Filton GOG group
5 Barrow-upon-Soar (Heathcote MRS)	60	Rochdale
6 Lum Head School Hobbies Exhibition, Gatley	61	Rose Hill, Marple
7 Welsh Industrial Museum Exhibition, Cardiff	62	Horsham (Crawley MRS) <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
8 Gauge 0 Guild AGM, Alfreton	63	Bristol (Wales & West of England Show) <i>With Coldrennick Road; cup for best track</i>
9 Blackburn	64	Downham Market (Kloggies) <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
10 Wakefield	65	Guidex '96, Telford (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
11 Wigan (cup for best layout)	66	Colchester (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
<b>1992</b>	<b>1997</b>	
12 Merchant Taylor's, Crosby	67	Newton Abbot Rail 150 <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
13 Scale Modelling '92, Alfreton <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>	68	Merchant Taylor's, Crosby <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
14 Widnes North MRG	69	Wolverhampton (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
15 Barrow-upon-Soar (Heathcote MRS)	70	Bristol Brunel MRS <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
16 Derby, St John's (Mickleover) MRG <i>Cup for best layout</i>	71	Essen (Arge Spur 0) (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
17 Exeter, Exe MRS	72	Shrewsbury
18 Warley, GOG group Open Day	73	Leeds (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
19 Guidex '92, GOG Convention, Telford <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>	<b>1998</b>	
20 Warrington	74	Southampton (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
21 King's Lynn (King's Lynn GOG group) <i>Cup for best layout</i>	75	Cardiff (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
22 Marple	76	Carshalton & Sutton (Epsom racecourse)
23 Leeds	77	Aylesbury
24 Watford Finescale Exhibition	<b>1999</b>	
25 Manchester (MMRS) (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )	78	Tonbridge
<b>1993</b>	79	Swindon (GOG Spring Show)
26 Hemsby (Great Yarmouth MRC)	80	Portsmouth (South Hants MRS)
27 Bristol Temple Meads (Bristol GOG group)	81	Exeter, Exe MRG
28 Twickenham	82	Guidex '99, Telford (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
29 Solihull GOG group	83	Croydon <i>With Coldrennick Road; cup for best layout</i>
30 York (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )	84	Mechelen, Belgium (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
31 Bishop's Lydeard (West Somerset Railway)	<b>2000</b>	
32 Dundee (West Fife GOG group)	85	Merchant Taylor's, Crosby <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>
33 Aberaeron (Aeron Valley RS)	86	Barrow-in-Furness <i>With Coldrennick Road; cup for best scenery</i>
34 Bumham on Sea	87	Chippenham
35 Sheffield	88	Halifax (GOG Spring Show)
36 Sudbury	89	Colchester <i>With Coldrennick Road; cup for best layout</i>
37 Warley (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )	90	Warley, NEC (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )
38 Leigh	91	South Wales Model Show, Rhondda
39 Milton Keynes (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )	<b>2001</b>	
40 Scale Modelling '93, Castle Donnington	92	Romsey
<b>1994</b>	93	Reading (GOG Spring Show)
41 Sutton Coldfield	94	Exeter, Exe MRG
42 Winchester GOG group show	<b>2002</b>	
43 Great Western Study Group AGM, Bristol	95	Warminster
44 Exeter, Exe MRG	<b>2003</b>	
45 Rail '94, 's-Hertogenbosch, Netherlands <i>With Coldrennick Road</i>	96	South Wales Model Show, Rhondda
46 Folkestone	97	St. Neots
47 Chelmsford	98	Alexandra Palace (MRC)
48 Hull (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )	99	Sunderland
49 Swindon (with <i>Coldrennick Road</i> )	100	Manchester (MMRS)



*Above: the signal box is from Perranwell on the Falmouth branch, and the warehouses from an old photograph of Totnes Quay.*



*Centre left: like all the author's locomotives, Dean Goods No.2357 is powered by a Portescap RG7 motor and features a fully-sprung split-framed chassis.*

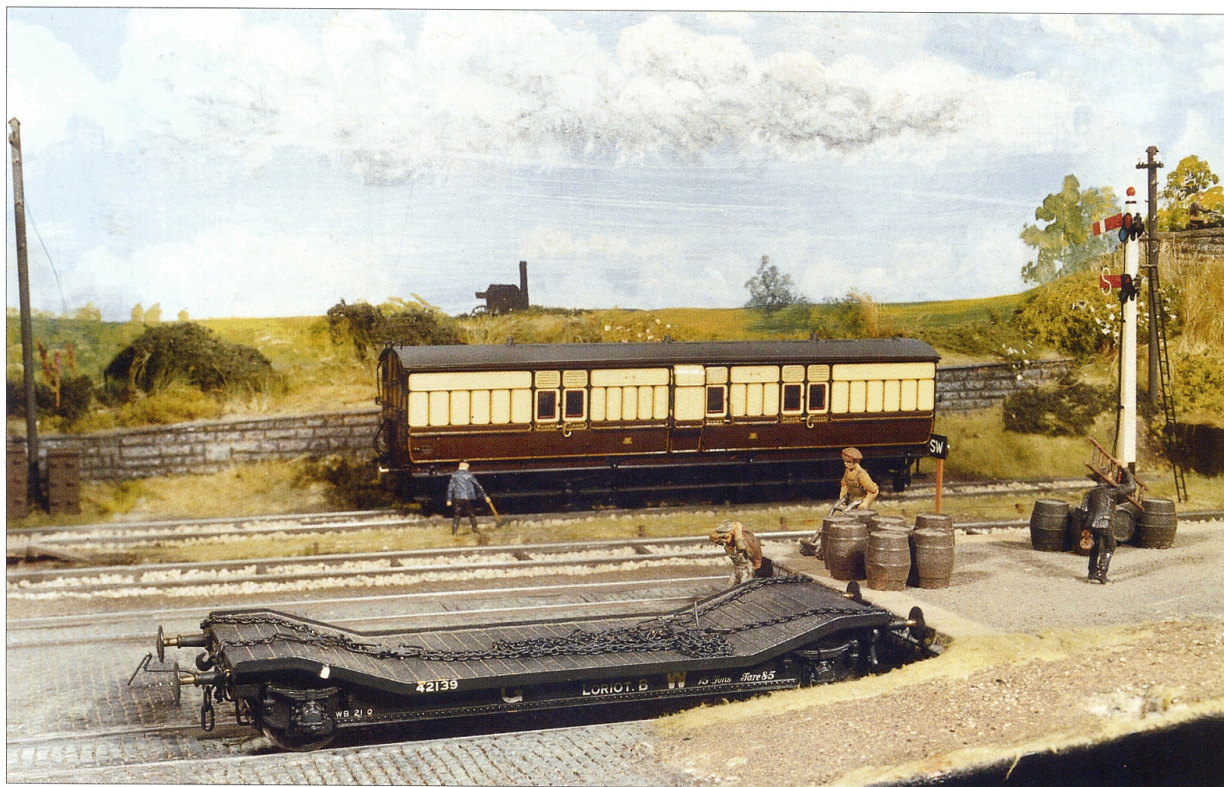
*Below left: pannier tank No.2761 leaves Maristow with a train of vans.*



So they sailed past the filling station, made it on to the M56, and there the last drop ran out again. By now it was 20.00, the layout was piled up along the pavement outside the house, and everybody was getting distinctly restless! So when the phone call came about being stranded a second time, it was time for emergency measures – I was piled in to the car together with the second gallon of petrol, off to the next exit on the M56, round the roundabout and screeching up on the hard shoulder behind the stranded van, where the drivers looked on aghast as everything they had in the back – a mattress, I seem to remember – was turfed out on to the grass bank, the petrol poured in, and I was off, leaving the other drivers to protest to the hireman. So I got back home by 20.30, the layout was thrown in the back, we all jumped in, and roared off back down the M56-M6 to Warley, passing the abandoned mattress on the way!

We arrived at the hall at 22.45, rapidly unloaded, and we were in the pub by 22.55, a few seconds before last orders. 'Fifteen pints, please!', which were all drunk by 23.15. My mates were quite surprised by this; I had a reputation for preferring quality to quantity when it came to ale, but there are times when your principles can't stand in the way of a serious thirst!

So the trailer did away with panics like this; now I can leave everything ready packed in the trailer on the Thursday night, come back from work on Friday afternoon, hitch on the trailer and be off literally in minutes, arranging to meet my fellow operators at the exhibition. The time gained, though, has been taken



back in different ways. It has been noticeable how the volume of traffic has increased over the past 10-15 years, particularly on Friday afternoons, and even more particularly on the southbound M6 north of Birmingham, which is now virtually impassable after 14.00-15.00 on a Friday afternoon. A bit of a problem, as many of the shows I go to are south of Birmingham. The A50 across from Stoke to Derby helps sometimes, and the new toll M6 round Birmingham may relieve the pressure, but I'm happy to say that having to travel on the Friday afternoon will soon be a thing of the past.

Having taken the plunge and decided that the stress of teaching isn't worth carrying on with, I've recently resigned from the world of full-time employment and can now look forward to setting off on Friday morning, with a much more leisurely journey ahead of me. Having a wide distribution of operator friends around to country now means that they usually don't need to travel very far – the layout comes to them, rather than vice versa.

More memories of transport – this seems to have little to do with railway modelling, but everybody who has done any regular exhibiting at any distance from home will know that it is a, if not *the*, major part of the

**Above right: the 40' PBV No.910 is painted in the 1900 fully-lined style.**

**Below right: 2021 class saddle tank pulls past the advance starter with the afternoon freight, composed mainly of special vehicles.**

Photographs by Len Weal, Peco Studio.

organisation, and causes the most stress and worry – far more than actually getting the trains to work after you have arrived! It's like a mini Odyssey with endless perils in our path, as we set off to brave the eternal furies of the traffic jams that wrack the roads of Britain on a Friday afternoon!

Finding the hall is often difficult, too. It's the last half-mile of the journey that is the hardest; a totally strange town, dark, raining, and one-way streets the wrong way everywhere. The trouble is, the local members know where the place is, and don't need to try and spot the street names which are always hidden behind a bush or facing the wrong direction.

Some exhibition managers provide excellent maps with clear directions, but others are less than perfect. They need to try and put themselves in the shoes/driving seat of a stranger arriving who has never been there before, and try and follow their own map/instructions in from the trunk road/motorway without using any local knowledge (better still, get a friend who doesn't live locally to do it). Then they will discover that the crucial road sign listed on their map has been turned round/nicked by the scrap merchants, that there are diversions for road-works, a road renumbered or now one-way, and so on.





**Above: a morning passenger train ready to depart for Plymouth, formed entirely of 4-wheeled stock and headed by 517 class No.551, finished in the pre-1906 livery with Indian Red frames.**

Or that useful sign/direction to 'Town Centre'. Oh dear, another diversion(!) How do I know when I've got to the town centre, or in the days of the Harry Mitchell Centre, where it always poured with rain on the Sunday evening, where is 'Warley' – can anybody find it marked on a national road atlas? Or in some areas, like the South Wales Valleys, the Black Country and the Lancashire towns between Wigan and St. Helens, which town? The areas are solidly built up with all the towns running into each other. The locals know exactly where one town stops and the next one starts, but I'm afraid that I can't spot the difference. How do I tell my Porth from my Tonypanydy?

An incident I always remember with great affection brought home to me the intense local loyalty in the Black Country. Going into the local newsagent in Brierley Hill and scanning the rows and rows of local papers (each covering an obviously closely defined small local area) and having to ask in desperation for a well-known national paper, to be told 'Sorry, luv, you'll have to go into a *big* town, like Dudley, to get one of those!' I've had this image of Dudley as the mecca of the outside cosmopolitan world ever since. And anywhere that has Ma Pardoe's (\*see end of article) excellent ale-house fairly close has obviously got its priorities right.

So finally we have made it, unless we have had a mishap on the way and are still stuck out in the pitch dark in the middle of the Peak District after the second puncture to a trailer tyre miles from anywhere. I've always carried two spare wheels with me since then. When we finally made it to the hotel near East Midlands Airport, well after 22.00, cold, tired and hungry, Jackie Statham from Slaters instantly made sure that the restaurant served us a full hot meal before I put younger operator, aged not very old, to bed!

Or on the way home, when I had another puncture on the M40 just after dropping down that long hill out of the Chilterns. Motorways are full of light and noise, aren't they? Right about the noise, wrong about the light! Until you have actually had to stand on the hard shoulder of a motorway where the traffic is going past very fast, you can have no idea how deafening the noise is, and the pressure waves that buffet you as a heavy lorry goes past. Out in the country parts of the motorway network, it is actually very dark indeed except when traffic actually goes past. When you are trying to change the wheel, on the side facing out towards the road, of course, so that your backside is shoved out into the main carriageway with lorries swooping past inches away at 70mph plus, you can't see a thing apart from the on/off blink of the hazard lights and the intermittent sweep of headlights from passing traffic. So you have to work in a weird, jerky slow motion like a silent film, with a tug on the wheel brace to coincide with each flash of the hazard lights and a frantic rush each time a vehicle comes by. Not a good place to drop one of the wheel nuts!

But now the absurd bit, as we drive into the car park; where is the door? At St. Neots recently, literally the last 20 yards were the hardest. In all other respects, the St. Neots show is excellent – good map, friendly people etc., but the show is held in a very rambling school building sharing a car park with a Leisure Centre. Lots of single storey blocks zig-zagging around all over the place, and could I find the door? Not helped by the fact that a big poster advertising the show was strung across the top of a different part of the complex from where the show was being held.

Unloading and parking is often a problem, though on a Friday evening, people general-

ly stagger their arrivals so that it is usually easier to get the van/trailer/car close enough to a convenient door. Unfortunately some people are very slow to move their, now empty, vehicles after they have finished unloading. Some places stick in my memory for the easiness of it all – like Chatham in the Rope Walk of the Old Dockyard – or the novelty, like Folkestone, where the entrance is half-way down the cliff face, at the end of a steep single track lane with no barrier on the seaward side. There is no room to turn round at the bottom, so you have to reverse your van all the way down the lane. Strong nerves needed!

At Chatham there was a clear direction from a traffic marshal as soon as I had gone through the gate – 'Yes, stand so-and-so, follow this road round the building and stop at the second door, where there are a group of lads waiting', and indeed, there was a group of lads waiting. 'Can we help carry things in?' After a 300 mile journey, it was 'Yes please!', and indeed, I gave them the keys to the trailer, and everything was whipped inside to the right place in no time – all I had to do was tell them where to put things!

Other places have been just as helpful, others rather less so. Not everything was perfect at Chatham – my bedroom in the hotel was right above the door to a nightclub, which played very loud music until three in the morning. The fact that it was a lovely sunny afternoon in early summer on the end fringe of the exhibition season added to the whole positive experience. More usually it is in the middle of the exhibition season, in Nov/Dec,



**Above: private owner coal wagons are all from West Country merchants or South Wales collieries. At the time of photography (circa 1992) there had not been time to tie down the location too precisely.**

pitch dark, cold, raining, and everything is absolutely soaked from the wall of high pressure spray thrown up by all the lorries on the motorway. I open the trailer and a wave of water gushes out! Let's hope that the hall is dry and warm, so that, as at Royston, the wood has had a chance to dry out overnight and that we can finally pull the baseboards together properly on the Saturday morning.

But the main factor is the physical layout of the hall, over which the local club has little control, and does the best they can in the circumstances, which leads to the whole question of choice of hall, and the cost of rental. Do you stick with a characterful hall in the centre of town, or move to a faceless leisure centre on the outskirts? I think that holding the show in a superb redundant 14th century perpendicular church in the centre of Sudbury takes some beating on the character stakes – the church is redundant because there is another, equally superb medieval church available just down the road!

But more typical of the well-established town centre show is the King George's Hall in Blackburn right in the centre of town, lots of passing visitors from families out shopping, fairly dubious pubs mostly selling really good Thwaites beer all around, and a reasonably sized hall with character. But the access is dreadful – the hall is actually on the (very high up) first floor, not ground level, and there is only one small lift giving access to the hall from the small loading bay, and very little long term parking for a van or trailer overnight at the hall. In the days when dear old Norman Wisenden had his vast trade

stand there, if you arrived or tried to leave when Norman was using the lift, then you forgot it – it wouldn't be free again for hours! So it was a case of lugging each baseboard up and down that endless spiral staircase by hand and then round to where you have been able to get the van parked.

Even worse was the City Hall in Sheffield years ago with *Chewton Mendip*, when the hall they actually used was a basement – level minus 4 – and the lift was out of order. We were younger then! So many clubs, like my own one, Manchester, stick to a city-centre venue for lack of a suitable, affordable alternative, and so as not to lose the advantages of easy access by public transport and years of accumulated loyalty and tradition amongst its visitors. There are also usually many more opportunities for after-show 'recreation' for the exhibitors in the town centre compared to an identikit 'motor lodge' on the outskirts).

Under the difficult conditions, they do their best for the visiting layouts and traders; but many clubs have moved out to, sometimes, faceless leisure centres or schools. The new ones like Wigan are distinctly better built and more comfortable. They actually give the impression of having been designed by an architect, and are pleasant places with everything under one roof and good access, but some of the older leisure centres are looking and feeling distinctly tacky – and they never sell good beer in the bars! Come to think of it, Halifax usually has one or two real ales on in the bar there, but after a heavy session in the *Three Pigeons* the night before, you aren't usually feeling very thirsty.

Even when the show has moved to a new, better, venue, the best laid plans of mice and men etc. On the face of it, the New Racecourse Stand at York is much easier to access than the old Assembly Rooms – lots of

stories to talk about there – and it was logical for Mike to put the heavy larger scale layouts on the lower levels, and the smaller, lighter 2mm layouts on the top floor. Trouble is, the 2mm scale rolling stock and most of the layouts are small and light, but the packing cases in which parts of *Copenhagen Fields* travel certainly are not! One box is known as the 'grand piano', and if it was as light as a real grand piano, it would have been far easier to carry up all those steps to the top floor. This was one of those times when you wish that you were one of the arriving exhibitors who can hand over the layout to the local porters *a la* Chatham. Unfortunately, in this case, I was one of the local porters.

But there are far more things to remember and I'm getting dragged down blind alleys. We are now safely at the Exhibition, and there are still lots of things to happen both during the show itself and around it, and getting home afterwards. So this is probably a good place to stop for the moment, and I can resume at another time if the readership and editor are willing.

PS. I've been to so many shows now with various different layouts over the years – *Maristow*, *Teign House Sidings*, *Coldrennick Road*, and before that, *Chewton Mendip* – that all the experiences have got mixed up, and some of those that have stuck in my memory and I have written about have been with layouts other than *Maristow*. Incidentally, all identities of layouts, places, people and clubs have been changed so as not to cause any embarrassment, and I've probably been exaggerating wildly – I'm very sedate really!

\*PPS The *Old Swan* at Netherton, for the younger reader one of only four remaining home-brew pubs in Britain in the dark days of the keg beer high tide in the late 60s/early 70s – who can name the other three? Prize drive on *Maristow* for the first correct answer.

Railway Modeller October 2003