

The making of *THOMAS*



Chris Leigh

Photographs courtesy Clearwater Film Co unless stated

FEW READERS with children under the age of 10 can have failed to notice the arrival of *Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends* on Independent Television on Tuesday afternoons. The series is based upon the Reverend W. Awdry's popular children's books which today sell in excess of 750,000 copies per year. Southampton-based producer Britt Allcroft has turned the much-loved stories into 26 live-action animated episodes of around five minutes duration, narrated by no lesser personage than Ringo Starr. A considerable amount of model-making was obviously involved in the construction of the trains and the sets through which they operate. But, how does one go about making such a series and what sort of model making skills are involved?

My investigations took me to a row of small industrial premises not far from Clapham Junction station, to the home of Clearwater Features who were producers for the series. With model-makers, Dave Payne and Jamie Jackson-Moore I went to find *Thomas* and the other characters neatly packed away in a storeroom alongside one of the workshop/studios.

The Company specialises in animation and special effect work, its more usual projects involving characters such as robots and singing and dancing lemons for TV commercials. Dave and Jamie describe themselves as special-effects model-makers and on *Thomas* they worked with a third team-member, Tom Vaine, to produce locomotives and with many other model-makers to produce rolling stock and sets for the series.

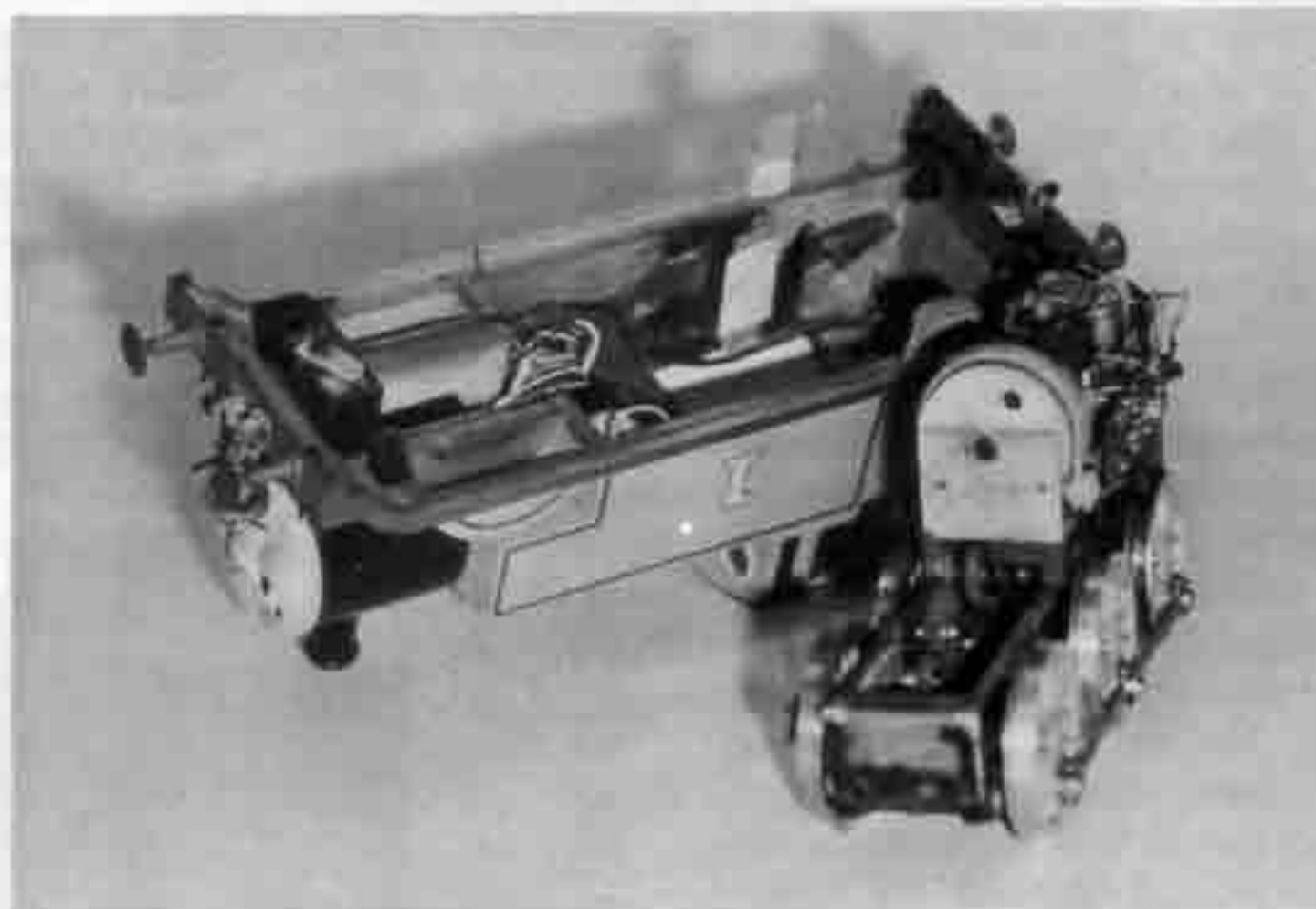
To obtain a satisfactory size and the necessary level of reliability, the model-makers worked in Gauge 1, using Marklin components as a basis for the locomotives. In fact, the Marklin items are scarcely recognisable, being confined to chassis (often extensively modified), motor and wheels. The chassis had to be Anglicised and new bodies constructed to represent the various characters from the books. In all, seven locomotives are featured, *Thomas* and *Percy*, the two small and mischievous tanks, *Gordon*, *Henry*, *Edward* and *James*, and of course *Toby* the tram engine.

These seven were built in just six weeks, a considerable achievement in view of their complexity, and the fact that none of the model-makers could boast any previous railway modelling experience. Take the body off any one of the engines, and there's almost as much equipment as a James Bond car! The body shell has a flat, clear perspex front to the smokebox and

incorporates a pair of moving 'eyes'. These can be moved up, down, sideways or round and round, by radio control. Receiver and servos to operate the eyes are mounted within the locomotive body and powered by four rechargeable batteries squeezed into available space.

Actual movement of the locomotives is by conventional two-rail electrification using the standard Marklin equipment which proved impressively reliable throughout the arduous nine months of filming. In addition the mechanism is linked to a diaphragm pump and a smoke unit arrangement to realistically puff a specially formulated smoke. Plans to reproduce leaking glands and suchlike on stationary locomotives were simplified to the provision of a concealed smoke arrangement located under the track.

The locomotive bodies capture well the character of those in the book illustrations although some adjustments to shape have been made in order to accommodate all the equipment. This is scarcely as drastic as it sounds, since close inspection of the books will reveal considerable artistic license in variations of shape from one page to the next! *Thomas*, of course, is the 0-6-0T with 'short stumpy funnel, short stumpy boiler and short stumpy dome', *Percy* is a diminutive and bulbous 0-4-0ST, while the main line types range from *James*, an inside-cylinder 2-6-0, up to *Gordon* the big blue Pacific.



Above left:
**Thomas with Annie and Clarabel in a wintry
 and scene typical of the attention to detail
 evident throughout the series.**

Above:
**Thomas with resin cast face in position.
 Chris Leigh**

Above right:
**Thomas with working parts revealed. Eye
 nervos visible in body behind splashers,
 smoke pump and diaphragm prominent on
 chassis. Chris Leigh**

Above:
**Scenic dressing on the engine shed set, with a
 camera in the foreground.**

Above right:
**James is a splendid red engine', here seen
 with Percy the little green 0-4-0ST.
 Chris Leigh**

Right:
Portrait of Gordon the Big Engine. Chris Leigh

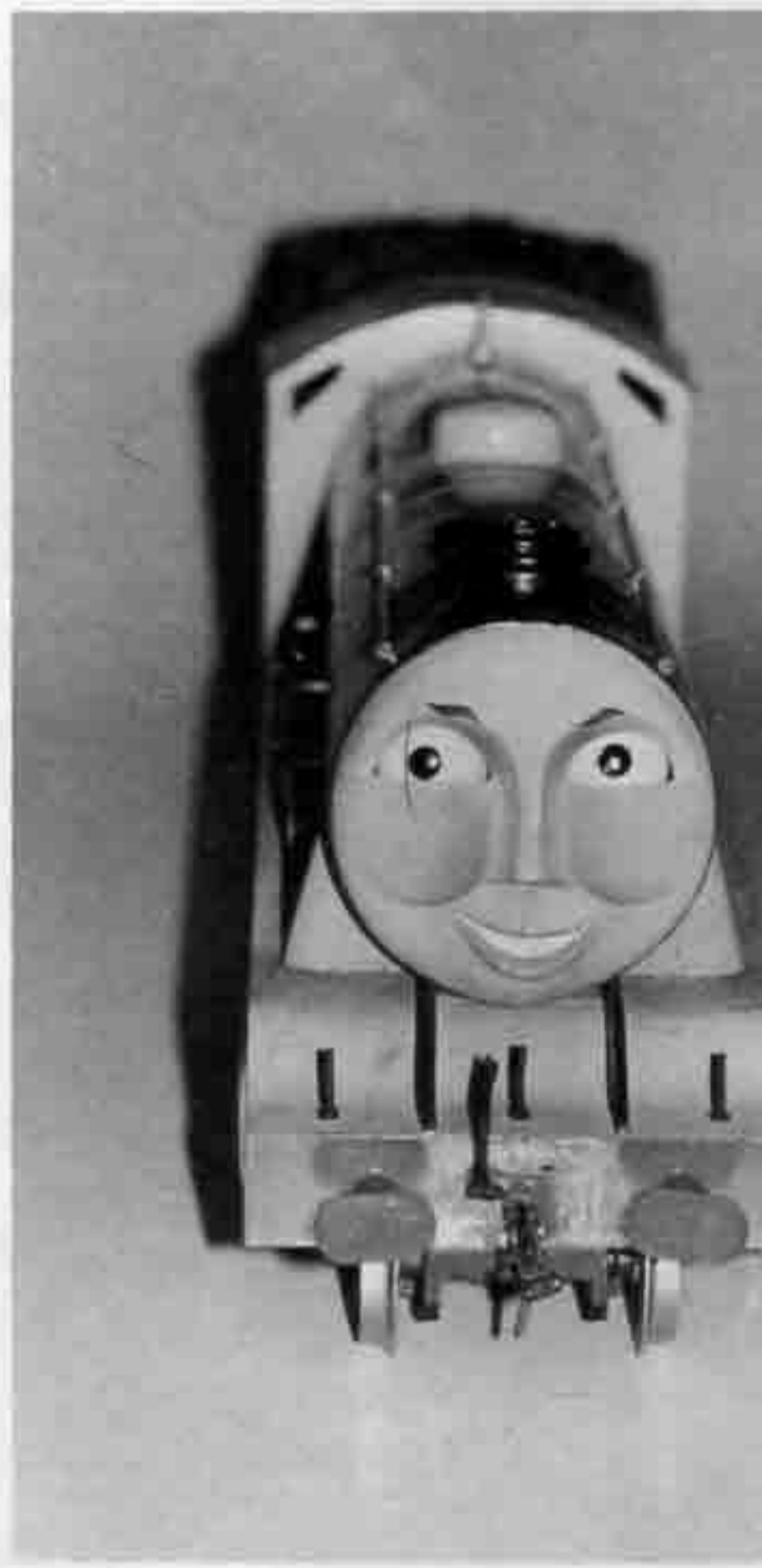
The faces are separate resin castings fitted and changed between shooting sequences in order to obtain changes of expression. They are held in place with nothing more sophisticated than double-sided adhesive tape. To allow for differing boiler diameters and a variety of fixed expressions, some 70 individual faces are available. Coupled with the wide range of eye movements they provide for great flexibility in the available expressions.

The filming sequences involved live

action — that is filming of moving models rather than the stop-frame animation technique which results in the slightly jerky movements associated with many of the TV children's series. Thus convincing movements and reliable operation were essential. During the nine months of filming, Jamie was on hand to service and maintain the locomotives and the railway. It was a full-time job in keeping wheels and mechanisms clean, batteries charged and rails free from the combined effects of extraneous scenic materials, dirt and smoke oil.

Sets were constructed on a rostrum some 3ft above ground level using the specialised techniques of the industry. Grass, for instance, is the plastic variety as used in greengrocers' shops, but specially treated to make it appear more convincing. Each set was used for all the relevant sequences and then dismantled and replaced by the next. Anyone who knows the books will realise that quite a substantial number of different sets would be required. The human characters in the stories, particularly the Fat Controller and the train crews featured much larger scale figures posed alongside enlarged parts of the trains such as cab sides. *Thomas*, however, does have a driver with an arm which moves to the 'waving' position.

Apart from the locomotives, the model-makers had to provide a wide range of rolling stock, most of which was scratch-



built using parts from the Tenmille range of gauge 1 accessories and fittings. Two other important characters are *Bertie* the Bus and *Terence* the Tractor, the latter quickly nicknamed 'Drac the Trac' by the film crew.

Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends is the culmination of five years work by producer Britt Allcroft. The series was directed by David Mitton, with incidental music specially written by Mike O'Donnell and Junior Campbell. UK television rights have been acquired by Central TV and UK video rights by the Guild Organisation Ltd.

The model makers are hoping that their efforts will attract the kind of cult following received by such series as *Magic Roundabout* and *Postman Pat*. Certainly the commercial spin-offs from such a venture, in the form of a whole range of *Thomas the Tank Engine* goods, toys and models might provide a valuable shot-in-the-arm for the toy sector of the model railway market, with trainsets based on the series attracting children into the hobby once more. For the moment, any such suggestions are purely thinking aloud.

As I talked to the model makers and they pulled out some of the locomotives and set them out for photography it was interesting to note the reactions of other members of the Clearwater team. The little engines, had obviously been in store for some while, since filming ended, and they were greeted with some obvious delight by several who witnessed our short photographic session. Had these little characters

endeared themselves to those who created and worked with them? I've a suspicion that I met several people who won't ever see trains in quite the same way they did before *Thomas*.

Note: Since the completion of *Thomas the Tank Engine* the model-making team have formed an independent company, Penicott, Payne & Lillie Ltd, offering models and special effects for Film and TV.

Below:

Preparing to film a yard sequence with James and Thomas. An unaltered Marklin locomotive is visible in the centre.

Bottom left:

A gloomy Toby waits amid the dereliction after the closure of 'his line', with a camera hovering overhead.

Bottom right:

Jamie Jackson-Moore (left) looks on as Thomas heads Annie and Clarabel into the tunnel past Terrence the Tractor.

