

Some people admit they never grow up. TONY FRANCIS meets the men who still play with trains. GRAHAM LINDLEY took the pictures

Weekend
PEOPLE

Train speaking

A GROUP of men got together to play trains at the weekend, and freely admitted they were like little boys who had never grown up. They were members of the British region of the United States-based National Model Railroad Association, holding a get-together in the hall of St. John's Church, Knaresborough.

They brought with them what they called their modules — four foot by two foot pieces of board on which they had spent countless hours recreating their own little pieces of railway heaven. The modules fitted together like a giant jigsaw puzzle — even if the whole did have some rather quick changes in scenery. The NMRA, which appropriately has its headquarters in Chattanooga — famed for its musical choo-choo, celebrates its golden jubilee this year.

Membership in the States may have declined to some 24,000, but the organisation has spread to Canada, Australia, Mexico and Holland, as well as Britain. On this side of the Atlantic the numbers now top 200, and include civil engineers, bus drivers, salesmen, dentists, and even the odd taxman.

Alistair Queen, 34, of Burton Agnes, Bridlington, is one of the youngest members. He bemoans the fact that youngsters today are more interested in computers and electronic games. "Trains are passe to today's children, just like a lot of old-time hobbies," he said. "A lot of it has to do with the lack of real trains. When I was a kid, British Rail still had steam engines and there were stations all over the country. Now it is all diesel units and closed stations. The romance is no longer there."

As if to prove his point, his son, Leigh, ten, who came along for the ride, expressed more interest in his computer and football than in the trains. Mr. Queen said: "Railway modelling has to get into your soul. When it does it is creative, relaxing and satisfying. For some, playing trains becomes almost an obsession".

Canadian-born Dave Gunn, 43, originally from Ottawa now lives in Middleton, Manchester, after a spell as a merchant seaman. His interest began a few years ago when his son, Nicky, 11, was given a train set for Christmas. Now father's passion is by far the greater of the two, and the family car sleeps out while the garage is filled with a layout.

"I am dedicated to the hobby," he says simply, and tells you he intends to enter for the NMRA's master builder award. For this, he has to construct 12 models, half of them to his own design. "I work from my own drawings done from photographs. I enjoy it, and my layouts also represent a little bit of my homeland," he said.

Mr. Gunn has poured 150 hours of work into building a turntable which, along with a grain elevator, ice house and station, is based on a small section of a line at Atwater, in Canada's mid-west.

The idea of different members making their own section of a large layout was hit on 18 months ago at a convention in Leeds. Saturday was something of a dummy run for a big gathering at Fleetwood, in September.

Paul Atkinson, a Harrogate dental surgeon, explained: "We could have more than 100 modules all linked together in Fleetwood, with each member producing a little vignette to his own design and fixed dimensions, so there are no problems in joining them up."

Noticeably there were no women members present. "It is not that we don't welcome them," said Mr. Queen. "Modelling could hardly be said to be a macho hobby, but it just doesn't seem to appeal to women. Perhaps it is because they grow up and we don't — at least not so far as playing trains is concerned."



Eye-level view, above, as David Gunn and son Nicky set up the track. Right, Paul Atkinson, of Harrogate, with a model of the world's largest production diesel loco, and, below, Alistair Queen and son Leigh see the real trains at Knaresborough railway station.

