

# A Welsh workhorse

Our resident Roundhouse loco tester **JOHN HARWOOD** gets his hands on the latest from Doncaster, the Welsh Highland Heritage Railway's Peckett 0-4-2T 'Karen'.

**A**lmost from the beginning my wife has been able to read my mind. In the dim distant past a glazed look whilst watching the 'box' on a Saturday night has signalled my analysis of 'our' (Doncaster Rovers) performance against our local rivals or whether we were going to avoid the dreaded 'drop'. It's all changed in the season that has just ended, but that's another story. In recent years the same glazed look has usually meant that I am thinking of yet another way of converting a Bachmann clerestory coach to represent something Ffestiniog to add to my ever-growing rake. Most of you reading this epistle will probably have had a similar experience (excluding the Doncaster Rovers one) and never really thought about it, but the release of Karen by Roundhouse at this year's annual show has made me wonder whether this mind-reading ability is no longer exclusive to wives.

In the relatively short time that I have been involved in 16mm some talented person at Roundhouse must have also developed the ability to read my mind because over the years the firm has been able to 'see' my leaning towards anything Welsh, particularly the Ffestiniog/Welsh Highland, and has produced locos on a regular basis that have needed very little thought on my part to add to my collection. Surprise, surprise! Roundhouse appears to have done this again, and with my

also having a penchant for filling in between steamings with the odd battery-powered loco, the release of Little John at the same time is a double whammy! I would like to think that that loco is named after me, but then not being little, I suppose I can only dream.

## The prototype

Built by Peckett of Bristol in 1942, 'Karen' was one of three locos supplied to the Selukwe Peak Light Railway in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) where she worked hard hauling 70-80 ton trains of chrome ore over a six-mile stretch of line with gradients of up to 1 in 45. She was purchased by a consortium of members from the Welsh Highland Heritage Railway in 1976, arriving in Wales two years later. After restoration she entered

service in 1983 and worked on the line until 1993 when her boiler certificate expired. Since then she has remained as a static exhibit in the museum at Gelerts Farm, awaiting her turn for overhaul.

## The model

The technical specification follows what we have come to expect from Roundhouse, in that the standard FG burner is used along with an outside-framed chassis with a wheel arrangement of 0-4-2, this has two double-acting slide valve cylinders operated by Roundhouse inside valve gear. Controls fitted as standard are steam regulator, safety valve, pressure gauge, displacement lubricator and reversing gear. A water top-up system is fitted along with a water gauge, which for those who ►

**Heading:** Karen on test in the sunlight, with a suitable rake of passenger stock.

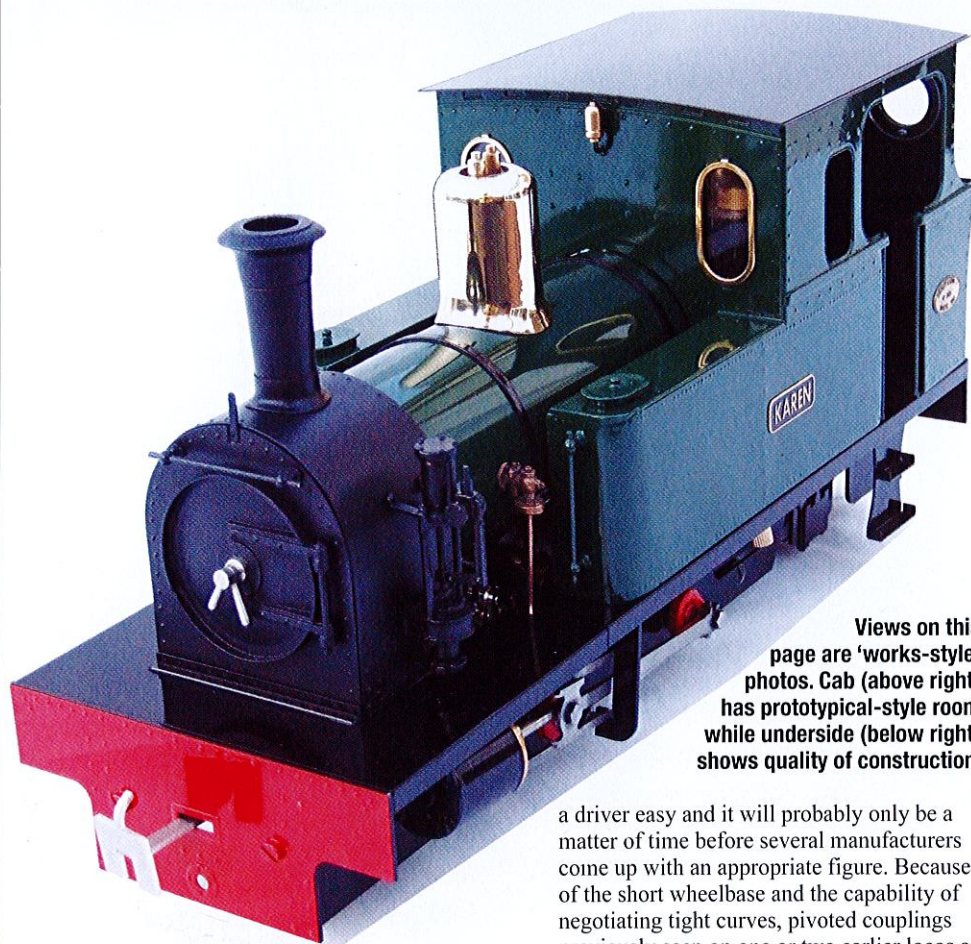
**Right:** This three-quarter rear view shows the loco's chunky proportions and spacious cab.

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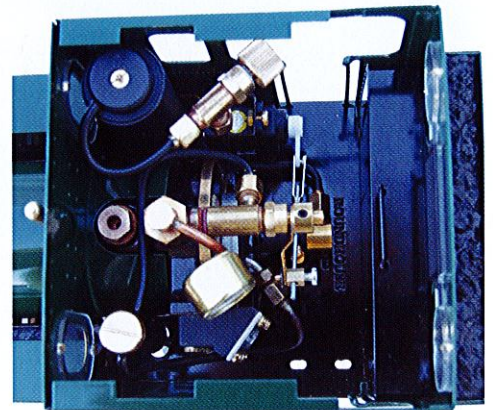


Photos by author





Views on this page are 'works-style' photos. Cab (above right) has prototypical-style room while underside (below right) shows quality of construction.



are happy to re-gas will prolong an already decent running time, but more of that later.

In factory form with radio control fitted Karen weighs in at 3.7kg. Measuring 313mm over buffers and with a width of 113mm, together with prototypical cut-outs in the frames for the trailing truck, she will be comfortable on even the tightest curves. With a height of 159mm she is some 15mm taller than the Alco from the same maker, and this, together with a pretty big cab, helps create a chunky look that I find most attractive. What's more, the size of the cab makes fitting

a driver easy and it will probably only be a matter of time before several manufacturers come up with an appropriate figure. Because of the short wheelbase and the capability of negotiating tight curves, pivoted couplings previously seen on one or two earlier locos are fitted, and whilst these have provoked the odd comment in the past, in my experience they have always worked very well. Don't let the odd muttering put you off!

A new feature introduced by Roundhouse on this loco is an 'exhaust enhancer', more of which later – and this, together with glazed cab windows, an intricate 'pump thing' (*the air brake pump, a sound of steam locos my slightly odd wife particularly likes – Ed*) on the left side of the smokebox, and clack valves which are painted black on the model but stand out better unpainted, all add to the sound and sight experience.

As we have come to expect a 2.4 Ghz stick radio-control system is available for those who wish to go down this route, and it was in this form that I got to play with the factory prototype. The batteries are housed in a box in the rear of the cab and are a little fiddly to remove but the factory is aware of this so consideration is being given to re-siting them under a removable coal load. I have to stress that this was the factory prototype so any changes made prior to production will only serve to enhance the ownership

experience. Whilst not wishing to decry manual operation, my days of the 20-second 100 yards sprint are long over and so I would plump for RC operation every time.

Insulated wheels are fitted as standard and there is a gauge-conversion kit available separately to allow changing between 32mm and 45mm – you need to state the gauge when ordering. Available in any standard Roundhouse colour, the loco is supplied with etched brass name and works plates, the latter being pretty impressive if your sight is good enough to be able to read them.

## And so to the garden

After reviewing a few Roundhouse locos over the years I run the risk of becoming somewhat stereotyped in that I tend to repeat myself, and it becomes more difficult to find new things to say. This year, thank goodness, Roundhouse has eased my problem a little by adding the exhaust enhancer to what is already a cracking model. You do, of course, have to follow the usual preparation of lubricating all round, followed by adding gas, steam oil, and water and waiting a few minutes to get up to pressure. But boy, is it worth the wait! (whoops, I nearly forgot! Don't forget to remove the dome and what is now becoming the standard sliding cab roof before turning the loco over to use your oil can...).

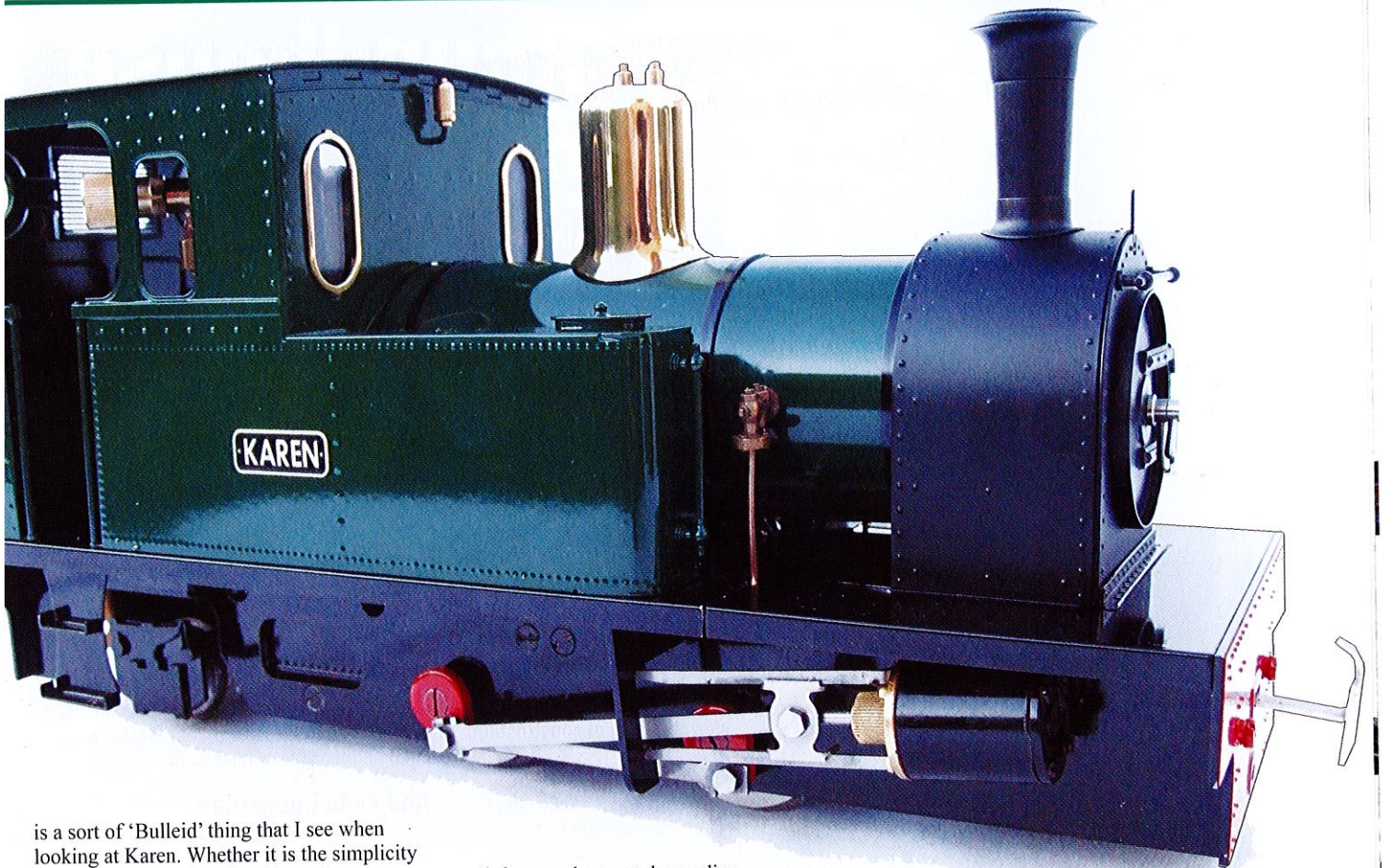
Add a long train, engage forward gear, gently open the regulator and listen to the sound as Karen moves off. This is a totally new experience from a Roundhouse loco and is as good as it is possible to get bearing in mind the simplified design when compared to the 12-inch to the foot prototype. Describing a sound in words is not easy but the noise it made was a pleasant 'chuff' without any harshness, which drew very favourable comments from those who I reluctantly let have a play when I took her out for the first time on the afternoon of the factory open day.

Someone famous some time ago uttered the immortal phrase, "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," and I have to admit that centuries ago when I was a lad, the greatest pleasure in life was to save up my pocket money and hop on a train up (down from Doncaster?) to London to soak up all things Bulleid at Clapham Junction. This feeling never left in many years of electric-snail modelling, notwithstanding numerous attempts to convert me to the Grotty, Worthless and Rusty (GWR) where everything looked the same, and it



The inspiration – 'Karen' pictured in service at Porthmadog in the mid 1980s. Photo: ANDREW CHARMAN





is a sort of 'Bulleid' thing that I see when looking at Karen. Whether it is the simplicity of the design, the functionality or just the different-ness that attracts me I don't know, but whatever train you put behind the loco it looks right. I am not going to insult the guys at Roundhouse by getting out my ruler – I know there might be the odd millimetre compromise to accommodate standard Roundhouse parts, but as this helps with the cost and provides us with the quality performance that we have all come to expect, so what?

Every time I review a new Roundhouse loco I set out with the good intention of timing a few steamings so that when people ask the inevitable question; "How long does it run mister," I can tell them, but once again I forgot. Whether it's because I don't bother wearing a watch and rely on my mobile thing if I want to know the time, and the fact that I always seem to have my hands full of RC transmitter I don't know, but what I can say is that the running time is pretty good and should

satisfy even the most demanding.

Performance is also what we have come to expect from Roundhouse, and it's a pity that Dave Billmore wasn't able to be there with his camera when I took the loco to Rick Collett's after Roundhouse's open day. Because I didn't expect to get my hands on it so soon I didn't have any stock with me so had to borrow some. Roger Offord came up with six I P Engineering four-wheel carriages that provided a nice train but not much of a test, so we attached three of Rick's Bachmann bogie carriage conversions that added significantly both to the weight and the length of the train. Not only did this look good but it also gave the loco a little bit more to do which made the exhaust enhancer sound even better. All-in-all it was a very pleasurable afternoon that was over far too quickly, followed by a disappointing Monday morning when I had to take the thing back to

the factory so that they could let Tag have it for his *GardenRail* review.

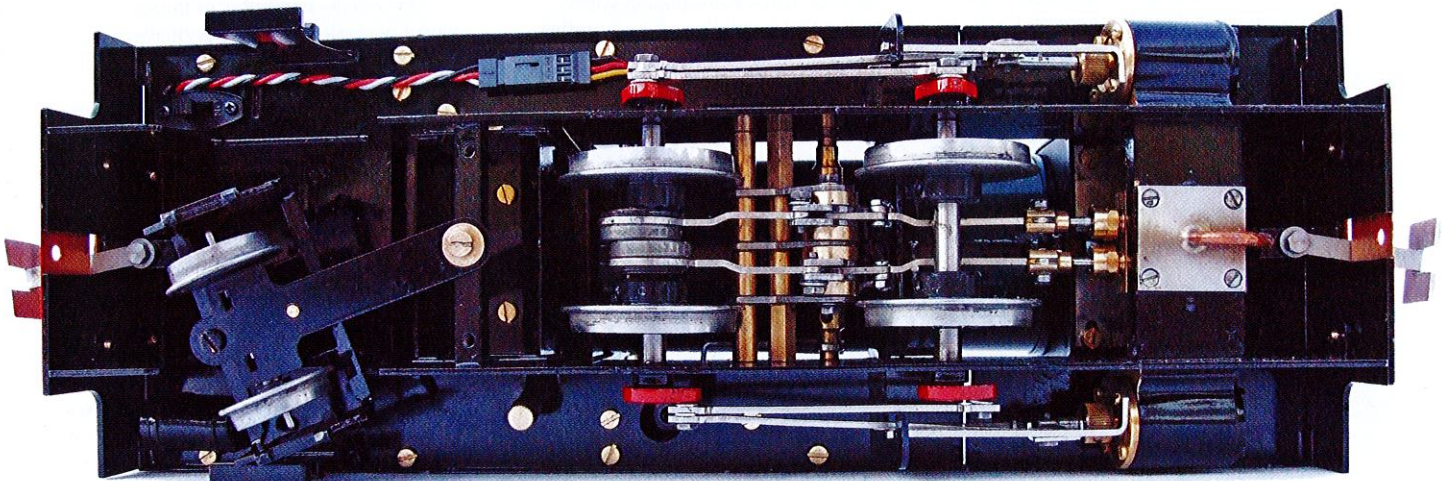
### Conclusion

Yet another winner from Roundhouse that will look good in any garden. The only problem, what colour to choose? It would look good in green with a full lining job as seen on the Welsh Highland Heritage Railway website, but then again.....

### The cost

Including VAT a manual one will set you back £1510.00 and a radio controlled one will cost you £1695.00.

Roundhouse Engineering: Tel 01302 328035  
E-mail: [sales@roundhouse-eng.com](mailto:sales@roundhouse-eng.com)  
Web: [roundhouse-eng.com](http://roundhouse-eng.com)





# Roundhouse powerhouse

Also newly out of the Roundhouse works, a useful diesel. Little John is again given the once-over by JOHN HARWOOD.



For some time there has been speculation as to whether Roundhouse would ever make another diesel loco following the release of Criccieth Castle quite some time ago, and I have to admit that I was beginning to wonder myself. Well, what can I say? The firm took us all by surprise with the release of Little John at the Peterborough Show and I am hoping that when I return the prototype to the factory, having put it through its paces, I will not have to eat too many pieces of humble pie. This would not help in fostering my belief that the loco was named after me, because whilst the 'John' bit applies, too much pastry would certainly not help with the 'Little' bit. Fantasy over, what are we looking at here?

The loco is a freelance design typical of a small narrow gauge shunter that would be at home on any line, and in keeping with the Roundhouse philosophy, is built to be equal in performance with the firm's steam models. Certainly on the factory test track the great big 13lb lump of metal that all steam locos have to be able to haul as a minimum, and in some cases even more before they leave the factory, did not cause any problems for this contender,

and re-assured that such a small beast could haul a load of this magnitude, I could not wait to get the thing into the garden.

## The technical bit

Weighing in at 1.275kg with a length of 179mm, a width of 76mm and a height of 139mm, this 0-4-0 outside-framed engineering marvel is all the more surprising when you realise that it is fully radio-controlled as standard. Control is via a Roundhouse LocoGlyde electric speed controller for stop, start and speed in both directions, with power being provided by eight AA NiMH rechargeable batteries. Charging time is about five hours so you can have a lie in, get up and plug the charger into the socket in the front of the cab, and still be able to play trains after a leisurely lunch. If lunch takes longer than anticipated, this is no problem because the light on the smart charger will turn from red to green when it's done, and you don't have to unplug it straightaway.

Another advantage with this charger is that it will recognise when the battery is almost totally flat and will start to charge,

whereas some smart chargers need a couple of volts remaining in the battery for them to work. Whilst you should always try to keep rechargeable batteries reasonably topped up with the charger supplied this is not quite so critical. With an anticipated running time in excess of six hours tea might be somewhat delayed, but more of that later.

The 2.4Ghz handset is of the steering-wheel type and is somewhat smaller than what we have seen before. Direction is controlled by the steering wheel with clockwise being forward and anti-clockwise reverse. The wheel is not spring loaded and will stop turning where you leave it, which means that when you get up to the required speed, so long as you leave the transmitter turned on, you can put it down and the loco will run without you having to do anything. There is a very slight notch feeling when the wheel is in the neutral position, which becomes more obvious with experience, but as a belt-and-braces job when handling the set for the first time I got the guys at the factory to mark the neutral position with a paint marker pen. By doing this it is reassuring to know that the



loco will not shoot off at full speed when turning the transmitter on, if by some chance it is not noticed that the wheel has been turned when last putting the handset away. Hopefully this mark will be a feature when production starts, but if not it's a simple matter to do and one that I would recommend.

Without wanting to re-ignite the steering-wheel versus stick set debate I have to say that with just a little practice this works very well and should suit most people. Once the speed has been set it is easy to wander round the garden following your train with the handset gripped comfortably in your left hand and a can in the other; try doing that with a stick set and I don't think you will find it quite so easy! The only downside is that the handset is exclusive to this model and thus cannot be re-programmed to any other, but what the heck! If, like me, the KISS (Keep It Simple, Stupid) philosophy is the way forward then this is not a problem.

The brass body is easily removable – it says in the instructions – but not wanting/daring to take a screwdriver to one of only two factory locos in existence I was not able to examine the size of the motor, but seeing the size of the nylon gear set there can be no doubt that this is pretty big.

If you do want to remove the body you will need the right-size Allen key and a small screwdriver to undo the six screws that are revealed when you turn the loco over. You don't have to worry about the wiring being disturbed because the design is such that the bulkhead with the on/off switch and the charging socket is part of the chassis and remains in place when you carefully lift the body off. You can therefore run the thing without the body and this obviously opens up all sorts of possibilities for the modifiers out there who might want to try fitting a sound card or do other things to the gubbins inside.

To satisfy everybody this loco is gauge adjustable between 32mm and 45mm, and as insulated wheels are fitted as standard it will run anywhere. With multi-height couplings it will haul anything you care to put behind it.

## Decisions decisions

Little John is available in any Roundhouse colour, and you have to choose between plain red or yellow/black chevrons for the buffer beams. With the coupling rods in red you have to make up your mind which you see as the best combination. After imagining several schemes I am fairly certain I am positive as to what I would choose, but then again...

## In the garden

Assuming that you have remembered to charge the loco preparation is non-existent. Turn on the transmitter, flick down the switch in the cab and off you go. Set the steering wheel to your desired speed and then just stand by and watch. You can shunt if you want or you can run on the main line without worrying too much about holding up a following steam loco because, whilst not as fast as a steamer, it has a reasonable turn of speed without being ridiculously unprototypical. In fact you can do just about whatever takes your fancy secure in the

**Heading: Metal-bodied Little John is an attractive locomotive.**

**Right: Cab detail, with on-off switch and battery charging socket.**

**Below: LocoGlide speed controller is easy to use.**

**Bottom: Tough metal chassis, built for hard work.**



knowledge that you can play for anywhere around six hours without having to do anything to it other than turn the steering wheel in one direction or the other.

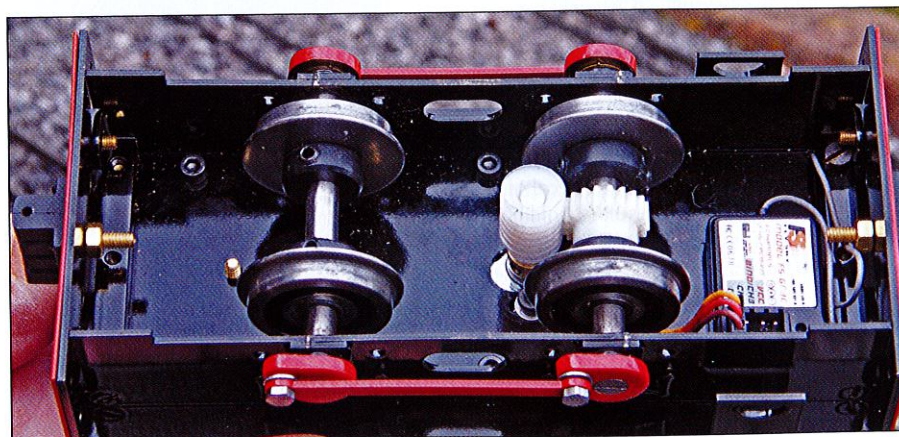
In the introduction I alluded to the fact that the loco was capable of pulling the loaded wagon that Roundhouse uses to test the minimum haulage capacity of its steamers. Whilst Little John can quite easily manage this, and has done so for a long time on the test track, when you realise that this lump of metal weighs some 13lb, I personally would not subject my own loco to a load of this magnitude. I don't know how many wagons that would equate to on an average garden railway but on my indoor train set I am looking at getting on for 12 scratchbuilt five-plank wagons each with Brandbright wheels and axleboxes, metal buffers and a load comprising foam board insulation topped with a half inch of genuine Welshpool coal. Add to that a brake van and you have a train that looks good behind the average steamer, but quite daft behind Little John. After all, in

real life you would not expect to see such a small loco hauling a train of this length, so why should you in the garden? But then when you buy one, you will have the possibility of pleasing yourself.

## A final observation

When testing this loco on Dave Billmore's Isle of Axholme Light Railway a couple of the usual suspects were heard to mutter that at £550, including radio control and VAT this is not a cheap loco. Step back for a minute and consider the following; you get a metal chassis as standard; the body is metal and not plastic; the loco has radio control fitted as standard; it has a pretty impressive haulage capacity; it has Roundhouse build quality and is made in England. Now ask yourself what else out there has a similar specification and if you can find anything, what is the price? ●

Roundhouse Engineering: Tel 01302 328035  
E-mail: sales@roundhouse-eng.com  
Web: roundhouse-eng.com



Photos by DAVE BILLMORE