Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Meccano, Hornby and Airfix

Tees Valley Museums

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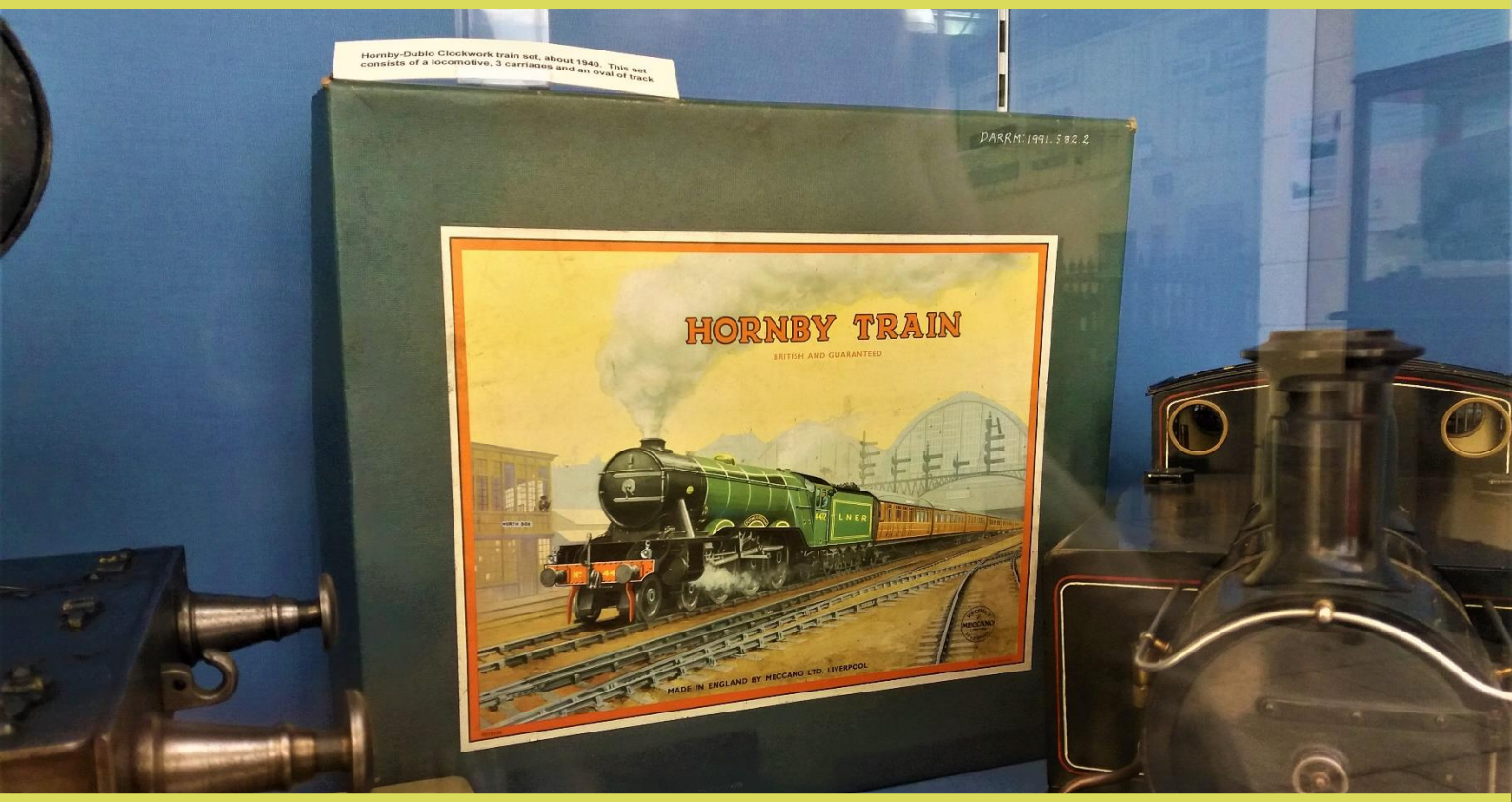
Tees Valley Museums

Welcome to another edition of the Talking Tees Valley Activity Pack

Each month we use objects and photos from our museums in the Tees Valley to take a closer look at the lives and stories from people in our area.

This month we look at the Meccano, Hornby and Airfix sets kept in our museums. Find out about the history of these three companies and how they made their signature toys, and also learn how to make your own paper airplane.



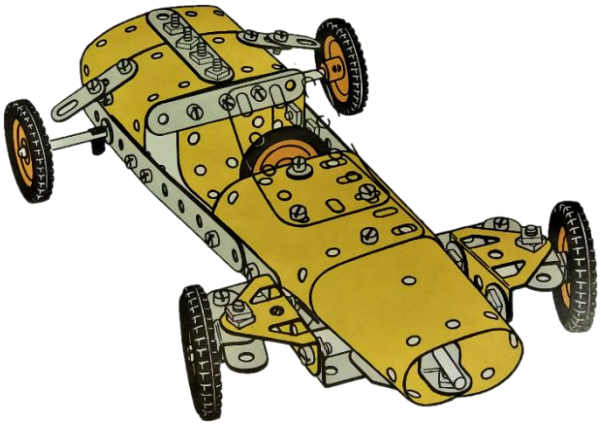
Head of Steam – Darlington Railway Museum have a display of their Hornby train sets. Have you seen it?

MECCANO

Meccano was created by Frank Hornby, who worked as a bookkeeper in Liverpool in 1899. He was fascinated with engineering and in his spare time he made sheet metal toys for his sons. These toys were interchangeable nuts, bolts, axles and shafts which could make anything from vehicles to construction machinery.

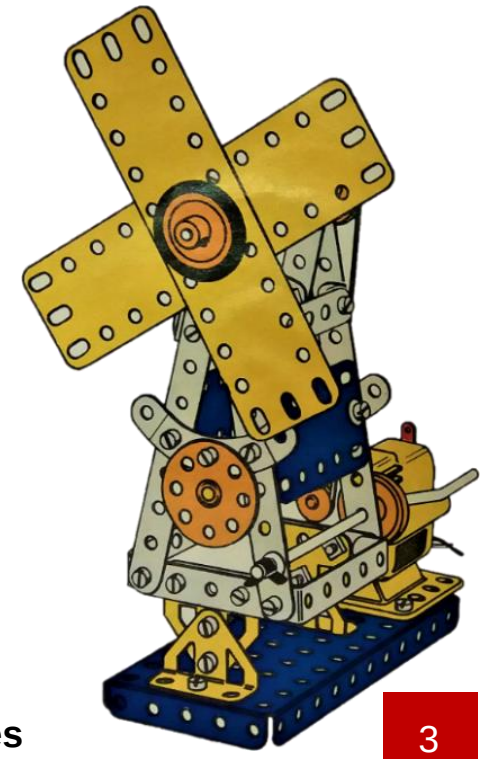
Hornby began to see the potential to market his toys to children and in 1901 he patented his construction toys with the name ‘Mechanics Made Easy’. After a slow start they grew in popularity.

By 1907 ‘Mechanics Made Easy’ had become ‘Meccano’. The company quickly became the largest toy manufacturer in the UK, and factories were built overseas in France, Germany, and Spain.



Hornby worked hard to make Meccano a recognisable name. He released Meccano Magazine for the first time in 1916, and it was in these that he promoted the idea of a club - a few years later the Meccano Guild was founded. Hornby also held building competitions to promote interest, as well as get ideas for new constructions.

Meccano booklets came with a small reminder – that the models were only a suggestion of what could be made. It was possible to design something completely original with any Meccano set.



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Did you have a Meccano set?

What did you like to make with yours?

Meccano Ltd didn’t stop with construction sets – they also diversified into trains and vehicles figures with Hornby and Dinky Toys.

HORNBY

Following the end of the First World War there was a gap in the toy train market. Frank Hornby saw an opportunity and produced tin trains from 1920.

These trains were powered by clockwork motors and typically were held together with Meccano nuts and bolts. Once again these were slow to gain in popularity, but the company kept diversifying the range with new machines.

Some of these trains required electricity to run, and in some cases the voltage needed was quite high! As time went on trains that only needed small amounts of electricity were produced.

In 1938 Meccano Ltd released its Hornby Dublo range, a miniature table railway system with smaller trains made from die-cast metal.

Customers could make their own railway systems, complete with trains of their choice, buildings and scenery.

These sets were popular but for some children were also quite expensive.

DINKY TOYS

In 1933 Meccano Ltd released a new line of toys of cars, buses, trucks and other vehicles – Dinky Toys.

Dinky Toys had started out as Modelled Miniatures and were used as accessories for the model railways. They helped to enrich table-top railways that customers made.

How did Dinky Toys get their name?

Apparently when one of Frank Hornby's daughter-in-laws first saw the models she called them 'Dinky'.

AIRFIX

Airfix was founded by Nicholas Kove, a Hungarian businessman who had moved to London in 1938. The company started out as a manufacturer of inflatable rubber toys. However, rubber became scarce in the 1940s, and the company had to investigate new ways to manufacture.

This is where Injection Moulding came into play, a process of injecting molten plastic into moulds to make small model parts. Airfix used this process to make their first commissioned model of a Ferguson tractor. These models were later sold in kit form in Woolworths stores.

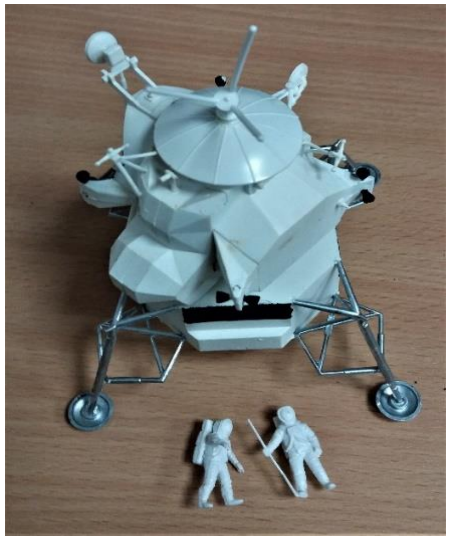
Fun Fact

Injection moulding also came in handy for Airfix in making other small plastic products. In the 1940s they were the biggest producer of pocket combs in England.

In the 1950s the company released the first of many RAF spitfire model kits, and also a '00' range featuring some famous locomotives, including George Stephenson's Rocket.

This boxed model is on display at Head of Steam, Darlington Railway Museum.

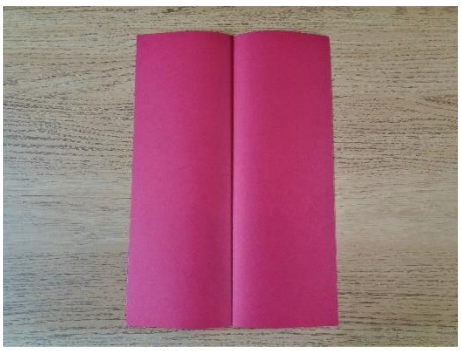
Airfix began to make larger kits and expanded from planes and trains to other feats of engineering, including the Apollo Saturn V Lunar module to mark NASA's exploration of the Moon. They also acquired Meccano and Dinky Toys in 1971 and became one of the largest toy manufacturers in the UK.



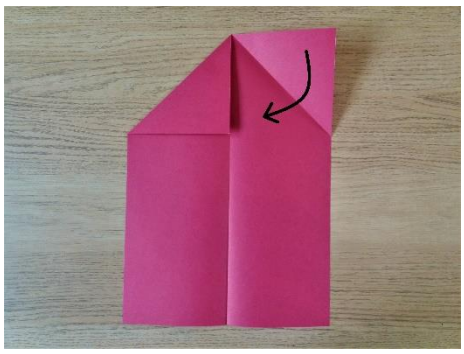
Although the company went bust in 1981, they were purchased by General Mills who had them target the movie toy market and release Star Wars related merchandise.

Airfix is still going strong today, now under the management of Hornby Hobbies. In 2022, in anticipation of the new 'Top Gun: Maverick' film, they released a 'Top Gun' series of models including the F-18 Hornet and Jester's A4 Skyhawk.

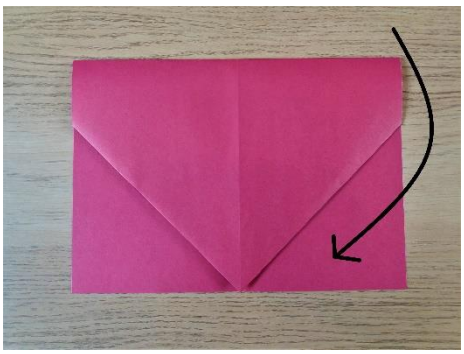
Make your own Paper Airplane!



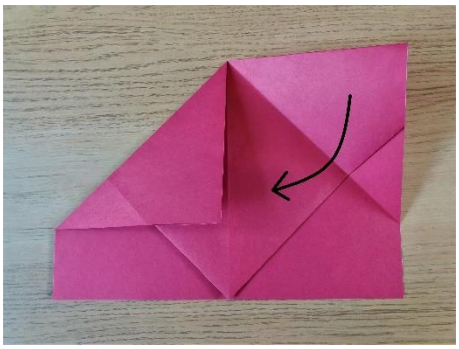
Step 1 – Take an A4 piece of paper and fold it down the middle, then open out again.



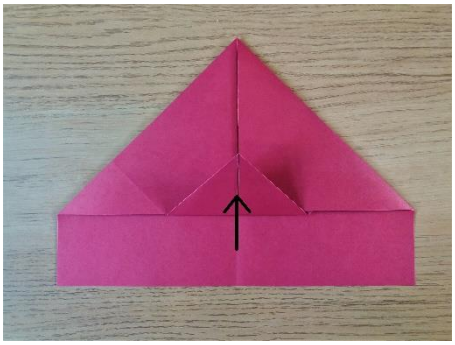
Step 2 – Fold the top corners down so they make a triangle at the top of the paper.



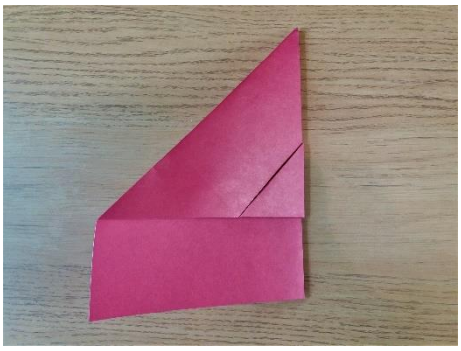
Step 3 – Fold the paper in half. It should look like an envelope.



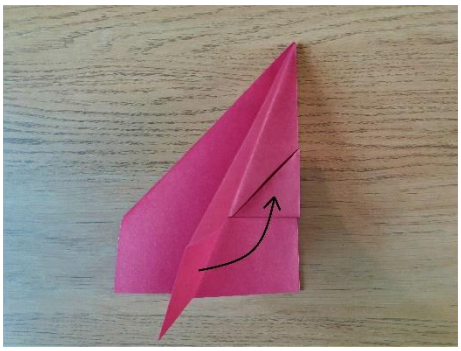
Step 4 – Fold the top corners so they line up at the middle.



Step 5 – Fold the small triangle of paper upwards.



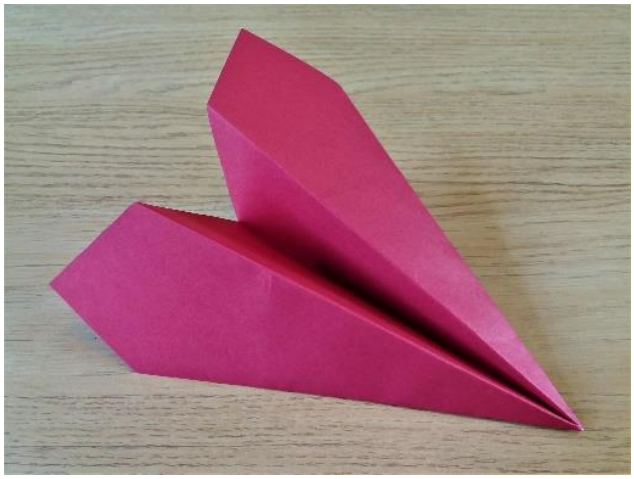
Step 6 – Fold the plane in half.



Step 7 – Fold the flaps down to make the wings.

And there you have your paper airplane!

Try racing yours with others!



All images used in this pack are courtesy of Head of Steam – Darlington Railway Museum, Kirkleatham Museum, Dorman Museum and Preston Park Museum and Grounds.

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If you would like to share your stories or contact us about the packs please e-mail teesvalleymuseums@stockton.gov.uk