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SPECIAL COLOUR FEATURE INSIDE – THE MECCANO MOTOR CAR

Yesterdays

High power Drive.

Ackermann Steering Gear.

Internal-Expanding Brakes.

Solid Die-cast Wheels fitted with rubber tyres.

Chromium-plated lamps, radiator & bumper.

THE MECCANO MOTOR CAR CONSTRUCTOR

AN EXPERIENCE RE-LIVED BY **Roy Hallsworth**

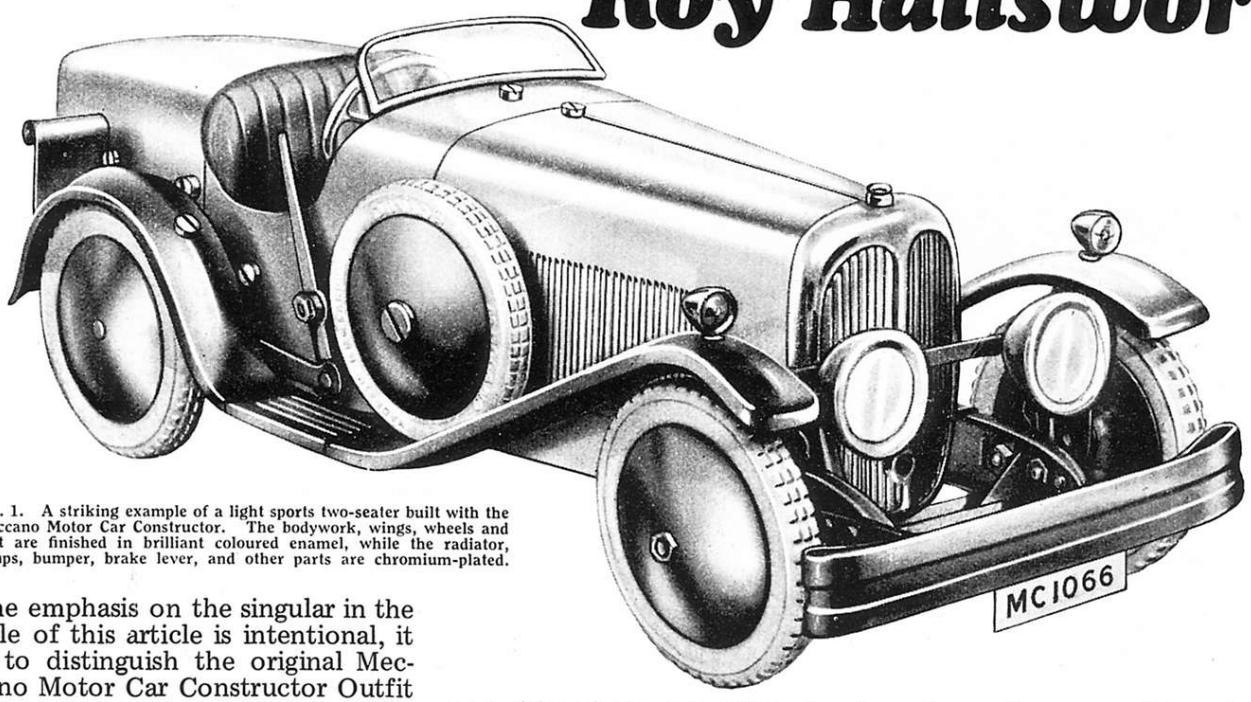

Fig. 1. A striking example of a light sports two-seater built with the Meccano Motor Car Constructor. The bodywork, wings, wheels and seat are finished in brilliant coloured enamel, while the radiator, lamps, bumper, brake lever, and other parts are chromium-plated.

The emphasis on the singular in the title of this article is intentional, it is to distinguish the original Meccano Motor Car Constructor Outfit introduced to the market in 1932. There were no alternative Car Constructor Sets in the Meccano range in that year — these came later.

The illustration at the top of page 23 shows an original 1932 car. together with the first Instruction Leaflet for it on the left, and the advertisement page inside-back-cover of the *Meccano Magazine* of October 1932, on the right. The only incongruous feature in the picture is the driver. He did not belong to this car, no provision being made for him, as he was not introduced until more than a year later, when he was described on page 149 of *Meccano Magazine* for February 1934 as part Nº A1100, price 6d.

An introductory article on pages 776 and 777 of the *Meccano Magazine* for October 1932 (from which the motor car pictures in this article are reproduced) makes the first announcement of these newly-marketed outfits under the title: 'Building Your Own Motor Cars! — The New Meccano Constructional Outfit'.

This outfit, which came packed in the usual exciting Meccano box — in this case blue — contained 176 items from 61 separate listed parts. From these, a variety of different-style cars could be built. To provide scope for variations, two types of radiator shell, two tail sections of different form, and mudguards of both the cycle type and the long running-board variety, were included. The instruction sheet for the set illustrated only four basic models, these were designated: Model Nº M 1 — Sports Tourer (Fig.2), Model Nº M 2 — Light Six-Cylinder Speed Machine, Model Nº M 3 — Light Sports Two-Seater (Fig.1), Model Nº M 4 — Grand Prix Special (Fig.3).

Special features claimed in the advertisement page for the Meccano

Motor Car Constructor Models included High-Power Drive, giving 45.5m run on one winding; Ackermann Steering Gear; Internal-expanding Rear Wheel Brakes; Solid Die-cast Wheels fitted with Rubber Tyres; and Chromium-plated Lamps, Radiator and Bumper. Colour choice was limited to Red, Blue, or Green for the body pressings, Cream for the mudguards, Vermillion or Blue for the wheel discs; and the price for all this was 25/-.

Only these first-year production sets contained five die-cast wheels and rubber tyres, the fifth wheel and tyre was replaced a little more than a year later with a pressed-steel imitation wheel-cover disc — Part Nº A1060 price 4d, announced on page 149 of the *Meccano Magazine* for February 1934. All outfits marketed with this item were designated 'Nº 2 Motor Car Constructor'.

These Car Constructor Outfits were markedly different from anything that Meccano had offered before — including the bolt-together Hornby engines and wagons of the 1920s. One of the main differences was the size and type of nut and bolt employed. These were 6BA, and the nuts were hexagonal. For the non-technical, 6BA is about half the linear size of the standard Meccano Nut and Bolt, but only a quarter of the handling volume. This means that they are four times more fiddling than the Nut and Bolt supplied with the ordinary and very familiar Meccano Sets.

Another significant difference is the form of the parts. These are very complete units with holes only where they are intended to be bolted to the adjoining components. The main body shapes are pressed from 0.432mm steel – much thinner than Meccano Strips and Plates. Their strength is derived from the carefully designed shapes.

It will be seen from the open box set at the top of page 22, that the components seem to be few in number, and arranged in a manner suggesting one of the models for construction. In fact, one of the two radiators supplied is actually fitted to the bonnet section.

This was the picture and impression which I got when I opened my present in the early hours of Christmas morning 1932, and first set eyes on a Meccano Motor Car Constructor Outfit. The very fine sight must have generated quite a lot of noise, for it brought 'father christmas' from an adjoining room with orders to stop waking the household at five in the morning, and to go back to sleep. No orders were more futile, no ears more deaf.

I wasted no time in getting to grips with the blue string, and very soon had the parts out of the box, on to the eiderdown, and under assembly. This operation absorbed me so completely in silent concentration until 'father christmas' made another appearance at around half past eight to announce that it was time to get up. By then I was proudly able to show him one model car almost complete. Later in the day, the model was shown to, and admired by, grandparents and other relatives in the usual way of these things.

As a young boy, I was particularly fortunate with everything to do with Meccano and Hornby products. My grandfather was a contemporary of Frank Hornby. The one had his business in Manchester, the other in Liverpool. Grandfather had contact with Manchester and Liverpool stores where Frank Hornby was trying to sell his 'Mechanics Made Easy' — later Meccano — at the beginning of the century. He also had four sons, my father being the youngest, and was always on the lookout for things to keep his boys occupied and out of mischief. Meccano was an early solution, and there was plenty of it in that Edwardian household until all four sons, laid it aside for the King's shilling in 1914.

That war ended, and my father married. When I appeared later, he found an excuse for re-awakening his interest in Meccano. His choice of wife was also fortunate for me, because this union provided me with an uncle who also

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CENTRE-PAGE SPREAD OVERLEAF: Examples of Meccano Motor Cars from Eric Morgan's remarkable collection, showing some of the permutations of colours and body styles that were possible using Outfits 1 and 2. Note the box lid designed for the Italian market, the original wooden display stand for the No 2 Car, the optional lighting set, the 'K'-Type Oilcan by the Instrument Board, the rare No 3 Car sitting on its original box, with the price ticket still in place, and the very purposeful-looking, short-chassis Sports Car, built from a No 2 set and using the non-standard yellow body panels. (A few of the Cars shown here have been repainted).

PHOTO by ROB INGLIS from 'THE ART OF THE TIN TOY' — published by NEW CAVENDISH BOOKS — see review on page 39.

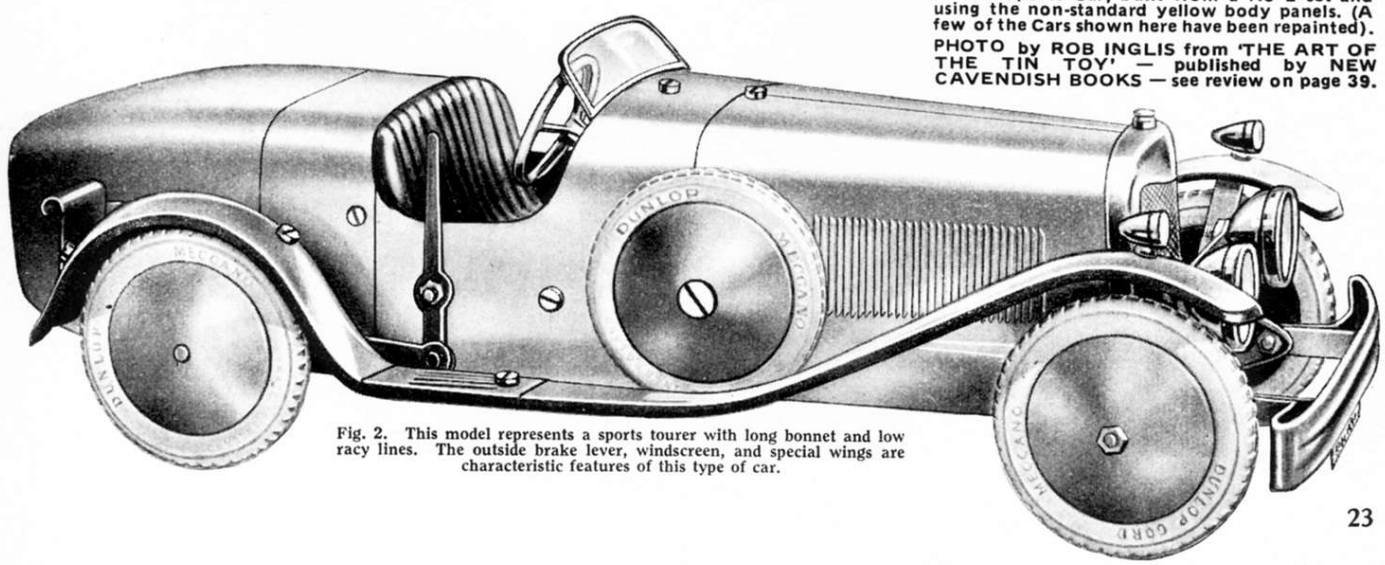

Fig. 2. This model represents a sports tourer with long bonnet and low racy lines. The outside brake lever, windscreen, and special wings are characteristic features of this type of car.

Collection, Eric Morgan Photo, Rob Inglis

Taken from *THE ART OF THE TIN TOY* published by New Cavendish Books

The most attractive toy ever produced

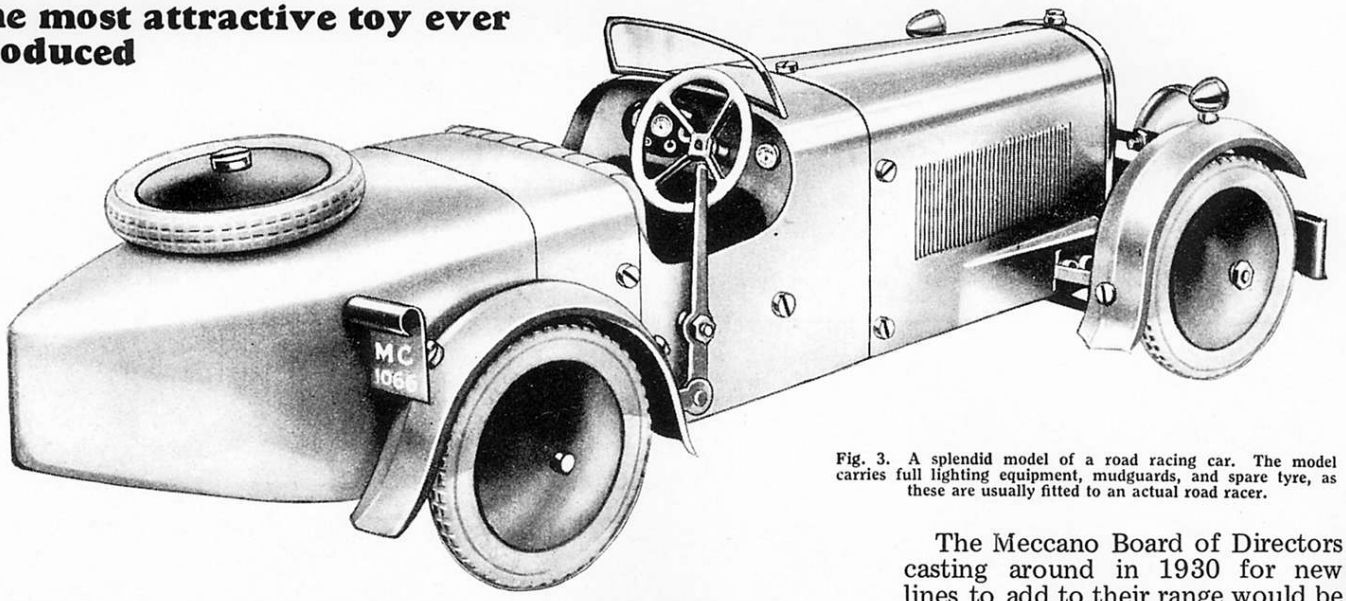

Fig. 3. A splendid model of a road racing car. The model carries full lighting equipment, mudguards, and spare tyre, as these are usually fitted to an actual road racer.

happened to be a keen Meccano enthusiast from Edwardian times, and was then an engineer. Between the two of them I enjoyed the benefits of getting Meccano and Hornby products hot off the presses as soon as they were announced.

Somehow though, I always had the feeling that these new presents were coming to me 'second-hand'; and that the real reason for buying them was to satisfy the long-standing old 'Meccano Boy's' enthusiasm, and capture some of the magic of past days. Perhaps this is why I got my Meccano Car Constructor.

Another war, a career in precision engineering, travel displacement and business, have all served to separate me from most of my early Meccano and Hornby, but not from the interest and appreciation, which have grown with the years, as has my collection.

Two or three years ago, another original 1932 Meccano Car Constructor came my way, this time ready-assembled, but in need of some slight restoration. It was the first time I had handled one of these cars in more than thirty-six years, and I approached the task with great care and boundless enthusiasm. This car is red and cream, my early one was blue and cream. Each nut and bolt was removed with something akin to a scientific investigation. Every part closely examined for condition, identified, and graded in order of degree of restoration needed. All the parts were there save two — the windscreen, and the split-pin from the Ackermann steering gear.

I will leave aside the details of the restoration, as they would fill a whole article in themselves.

In spite of its forty-four years, the car was in astonishingly good condition, and needed very little to bring it back to a pristine glow. The result can be seen at the top of page 23, and in colour on the cover of this magazine, sporting a windscreen kindly lent for the photographs by fellow enthusiast Jim Gamble of Nottingham, England.

Re-assembly was the most interesting operation — Christmas 1932 all over again, but with a difference. No longer the nine-years-old boy tackling the job with the glee of Christmas, but the long-time engineer scrutinizing every component and operation critically, and wondering what had prompted Frank Hornby and his Board of Directors, sometime in 1930 (or maybe 1929) to decide upon production of a motor car constructor outfit; what persuaded Meccano Ltd to abandon, in this case, the nut and bolt that had been standard throughout for the previous thirty years!

With experience of product development, costing, tooling, and marketing to draw upon; what decision would I have reached sitting at that boardroom table listening to the points of discussion on this project all those years ago? All this went through my mind as re-assembly of the car progressed. Was this fine precision-engineered product really meant for young boys to assemble? One thing is sure, I certainly made a quicker job of it the first time than I was making now, but now I was analyzing every step.

It may be that the answers to all these many questions lay elsewhere. Frank Hornby was a man always keenly looking out for new ideas and products. It did not necessarily matter that a particular idea was not new, his way of interpreting it would be new, and endowed with the fine quality of all his products. In this way, his Meccano products would be different to and better than any competitor.

The Meccano Board of Directors casting around in 1930 for new lines to add to their range would be bound to notice the many other motor car construction sets already on the market in the UK and abroad. Not a few of these had been in existence for some years. One was the Structo Auto-Builder. Three examples of this were advertised on page 789 of the *Meccano Magazine* for December 1926. These were: Nº 12 De Luxe Motor Car, Nº 8 Racing Car, and Nº 14 Giant Tip Lorry, but they were not cheap. Priced at 52/6 for Nºs 12 and 14, and 28/6 for Nº 8.

An even more sophisticated car constructor was produced in 1929 by the Citroën Car Company of France. This — 'Les Jouets Citroën —Le Chassis C6 Demontable' — came complete and strung down in a box reminiscent of the later Meccano Car Constructors. This product probably played a greater part than any other in showing the possibilities.

The Citroën C6 Chassis builds up into a car almost a third larger at 413mm overall than the Meccano Car's 330mm. An interesting point in the Citroën is that the nuts and bolts are of hexagon form, but not so neat as the special 6BA chosen by Meccano.

Although Frank Hornby did not give his car all the fiddly details available on the Citroën, he managed a lot of the essential features and embodied them in a product of greater refinement and flexibility than the French, and — all important — offered it at a price well below his competitors. He thereby enabled more boys to enjoy his products, and at a level of quality that would last for years and years. Such was the genius of Frank Hornby. Many men and boys today have very good reason to be thankful for it.

I hope to continue the fascinating story of the Meccano Motor Car in a future edition.