



The Birth of Gauge '3'

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The origins of model railways and the early scale models interests me, but I cannot claim to be an expert, so this short piece contains several queries which I hope more knowledgeable members may be able to answer.

Our Society's literature and web site says that "No.3 Gauge" was one of five standard gauges recommended by a subcommittee of the Society of Model Engineers on 1st February 1899, and thus was born "Gauge 3".

Whilst I am sure that is correct in the UK, an un-attributed American web site gives an even earlier reference, claiming that at the Leipzig Toyfair in 1891, Maerklin introduced a complete range of track parts with geometric curves, straights, points and crossings in 5 different scales. These were: No.V gauge 4 5/8"; No.IV gauge 3"; No. III gauge 2 5/8"; No. II gauge 2 1/8"; and No.I gauge 1 7/8". The gauges were measured from rail-centre to rail-centre, with a common rail-head width of 1/8", giving Gauge 3 a track gauge of 2 1/2in.

The actual scales seem to have been somewhat variable but they were true model railways as not only locomotives, carriages and wagons were advertised, but stations, and lineside buildings etc. Bing adopted the same nomenclature, their early literature referring to Gauge 3 as 67mm gauge, whilst Shonner's 67mm gauge was described by them for reasons that appear to have been lost, as "Gauge IIa". I believe that both of these, like Maerklin, measured their gauges between rail centres, so would now be described (in English) as 2 1/2in.

Planck stated their track gauge to have been 65mm and I would be interested to know whether anyone has any early Planck models and can confirm whether this is the true gauge (as I suspect) or centre-to-centre of the rails. The above-mentioned American web site claimed that Planck described this as "Gauge 8", though items seen at auction in recent years have been described as "Gauge 3", making me wonder whether somebody misread a badly printed number "3" as an "8"?

It has also been stated that when "American Flyer" in the USA decided to manufacture a new size, they looked at the Maerklin catalogue and selected the No.3 gauge, but assumed that 2 5/8" was the distance between the rails rather than the centre to centre distance and thus unintentionally started a completely new gauge!

So far as I am aware, the track gauge was really just ratified by the SME in 1899, and has remained at 2 1/2in ever since. Amongst our members we have some experts on early commercial models, and if they can add to this, or even provide photographs of the earliest Gauge 3 ("No.III gauge") models, I am sure other members would like to read about them as much as I would.