

CROSSING NO GATES

By Nicholas Oddy

As a tiny child, before I was interested in toy trains, I had a passion for willow pattern crockery and road-signs dating back to my earliest memories; even before I was school age I had started acquiring examples of both. For the toy train collector willow pattern crockery has little to offer, but road-signs are a bit different. One, in particular, is toy train related, this article focuses upon it.

British road-signs, as we would recognise them, have their origins in 'danger boards' put up by cycling organisations in the 1880s. In 1904 a series of four 'Motor Car Notices' was introduced for motorists under the authority of the Motor Car Act of 1903; one of these was a red, 18 inch equilateral, open triangle, which acted as a 'caution' for three hazards, cross roads, dangerous corners and precipitous hills. Motorists had to guess what lay ahead and some local highways departments expanded the triangle's remit by giving extra detail on an information board mounted below.

In 1921 the newly founded Ministry of Transport (MoT) published *Form 39: Roads*, which introduced six pictorial plates to be mounted below what was now termed the 'danger' triangle. Each comprised a pictogram above descriptive text. Amongst these was LEVEL CROSSING, but as this was represented by a gate, unguarded crossings remained uncatered for. This national signage was recommended, but not prescribed, and for ten years all sorts of local variations occurred. In 1930 the MoT introduced more pictographic signs, amongst which was an alternative version of LEVEL CROSSING, with a locomotive instead of a gate for unguarded crossings. However, to avoid confusion the text was soon revised to CROSSING NO GATES.

Finally, in 1933, all the MoT's 'traffic signs' were re-specified and made mandatory, with the pictograms standardised. The 1933 signage survived with minor tweaks and additions until the current signs (which, at last, complied with European standards) were introduced in the wake of the Worboys Report, published in 1964. Walter Worboys was to road-signs what Richard Beeching was to steam locomotives in that from 1st January 1965 the maintenance of all older signs became illegal, instead total replacement was to be achieved by the close of 1974. As a result only a handful of pre 1965 road-signs survive in situ and relatively few were salvaged before being lost to scrap.

UK toy train collectors are familiar with many of the 1933 signs (and some pre-1933 varieties) by the miniature versions made in lead, brass, mazac and

plastic by myriad makers. While all these signs have application to a toy train layout, the one that stands out is CROSSING NO GATES, the pictogram for which is a locomotive. And, what makes this doubly attractive is that the locomotive is no accurate depiction of the real thing, it is definitely a toy loco. Moreover, just like in old toy trains, the locomotive never seems to come with a tender and it can be found in a number of variations. The CROSSING NO GATES plate, in any of its forms, is a worthy addition to a toy train collection, both in miniature and full size, the latter of which, at 21x12 inches, is nicely manageable. As with toy trains, road-sign collectors like originality and dislike restoration. Signs are best found in factory finish; then 'roadside' condition, weathered, often with local council overpainting; worst, stripped and repainted by a collector. Again, like toy train collectors, sign collectors like makers' names; the most frequently encountered are Franco, Needham, Gowshall and Royal Label. This article looks at the output of the latter two. Of course, a true completist will require not only the information plate but also the sign itself, the triangular head. It adds a fair bit of size, but does look good and for full effect both can be mounted on a black-and-white striped post.

Pre-war pictographic signs are usually made from cast aluminium or, more rarely, iron. Vitreous enamel is rare (except for those issued by the RAC after 1933) as the Ministry favoured raised lettering. Post war, pressed aluminium is common; finally, in the late 50s, plastic-coated steel or aluminium sheet begins to take over. All but the plastic coated signs can be found with inset reflectors which add a lot to their visual quality. Until the late 1930s reflectors were usually bulls-eye form, although 'Fairylite' smooth-faced prismatic were an alternative. The bulls-eyes were slowly displaced by 'Serilight' style reflectors, now often termed 'fruit-gums', while late prismatic are sometimes plastic. By the end of the 1950s all had been outclassed by reflective 'Scotchlite' adhesive plastics.

Before looking at some actual examples, some words of warning. Huge numbers of reproduction and forged road-signs abound on the market place and the novice should be very suspicious of any sign that does not have inset reflectors (these seem to be too much of a fiddle to reproduce). With a non-reflective sign do not touch anything in which the border is anything other than half-an-inch broad as deviation from this measurement is a sure indication of fraudulent re-casting. In aluminium the frauds come with carefully weathered 'original roadside' paintwork and a lot are traded from the Shrewsbury area. I append a number of images of commonly found examples at the close of the article.

First up is a 1904 Motor Car Notice **Fig 1**.



Fig 1: Motor Car Notice 1904-21, its broad-bladed triangle suggests it is an early example. The whole history of this long-lived sign can be read from the build-up of different layers of paint on its post (Silver, then white, then regulation stripes, then added brackets which have carried at least two later information plates, one with a green back).

These are often easily spotted by their massiveness. The post is five inch diameter with half-inch walls (as appose to the later standard, three inch by a quarter) and this rare survivor, instead of being replaced in the 30s, has had special brackets made to carry a later information plate and bring it up to date. The blades of the triangle are broader than its successors and the sign is set into a monumental cast iron cap. Originally the post would have been plain white or silver.

Imagine the brackets on the 1904 notice being enhanced with something like this delicious pre 1933 plate by the Royal Label Factory **Fig 2**.



Fig 2: Royal Label, 1930-33. In spite of the clunky naivety of the image, it is remarkably effective as a reflector outline, better than any of its successors.

Original paint in this case and seemingly never mounted, which is probably the reason for this early example's survival. The locomotive is simply wondrous, as if warning one that a 1/1 scale carpet toy is about to be pushed into the road ahead by a gigantic three-year-old. Its reflectors are recessed into the image (a patent of 1929) and therefore are not vulnerable to chipping. CROSSING NO GATES was not common prior to 1933 and to my knowledge was not modelled by toy makers during this time, a pity, because the lack of regulation allowed the image to run wild.

Toy equivalents of pre 1933 signs reflect the lack of 'official' specifications. **Figs 3 and 3a** are of one of the most commonly found.



Figs 3 and 3a

I suspect it is Johill, but I have yet to find evidence of maker. It is in the manner of a typical wooden board (complete with cast 'grain') with moulded edges and applied lead lettering. One side says 'LEVEL CROSSING', the other 'BEWARE OF THE TRAINS'. The example here is very beautifully painted and I suspect has been refinished a long time ago by someone who had a detailed coarse scale layout. Most are found in plain white with the lettering fairly crudely picked out in red or black. **Fig 4** is certainly by Johill, c1927, (note the similarity in base to **Fig 3**).



Fig 4: Johill, c1927. Although officially the sign was just the triangle, as time went on it became common to fit a textual information plate below.

It represents a Motor Car Notice with information plate, which is usually found with a red-printed paper label applied. Many paper labels were made, but I have yet to find 'LEVEL CROSSING', therefore the anonymous plate. Some makers modelled the 1921 LEVEL CROSSING plate with gate. **Fig 5** is a smaller-than-0 gauge example, possibly by Taylor & Barrett.



Fig 5

Fig 6 is Gauge I size. I do not know the maker, but it is paper on wood and bears a fine trade mark **Fig 6a**. It is most unusual in its 'continental' gate with no gatepost, few uprights and no diagonal brace, very rarely used in the UK and illegal from 1933-65.



Figs 6 and 6a

All these signs have white posts. This is quite correct as, although the Ministry had considered black and white striped posts (which were used by the AA) in 1921, it decided in favour of plain white or silver. It reversed the decision in the early 1930s and, from 1933, the familiar striped post was mandatory. The odd proportions of the triangles on all these signs are probably due to their makers taking them from early Motor Union and AA enamel signs, rather than the government specification **Figs 7, 7a**.



Fig 7 is an enamel sign issued by the Motor Union, c1905. After the MU merged with the AA in 1907 the colour scheme was changed to black on yellow; specific hazards, such as LEVEL CROSSING, replaced generic cautions and the striped post was adopted. **Fig 7a** shows the Britains model of such a sign. The MoT deemed them 'signs of another character' in 1933 and the AA began to remove them thereafter.

The 1933 regulations prescribed a staid silhouette of a 4-6-0, but enhanced by a plume of smoke and, shades of Hornby, buffers on the drawbar beam. **Fig 8** shows its specification in *The Traffic Signs (Size, Colour and Type) Provisional Regulations 1933*. These regulations deemed all 'signs of another character' to those specified illegal, explaining the rarity and desirability of 'non-standard' pictograms such as **Fig 2** today.

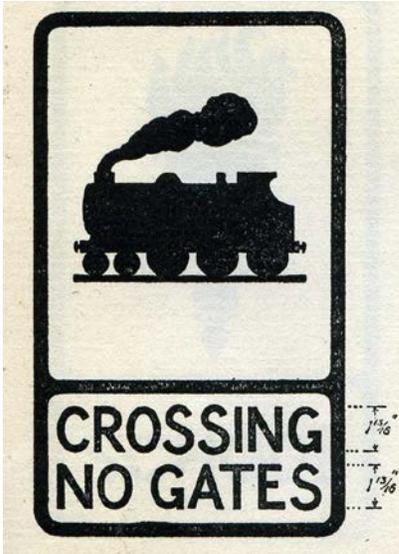


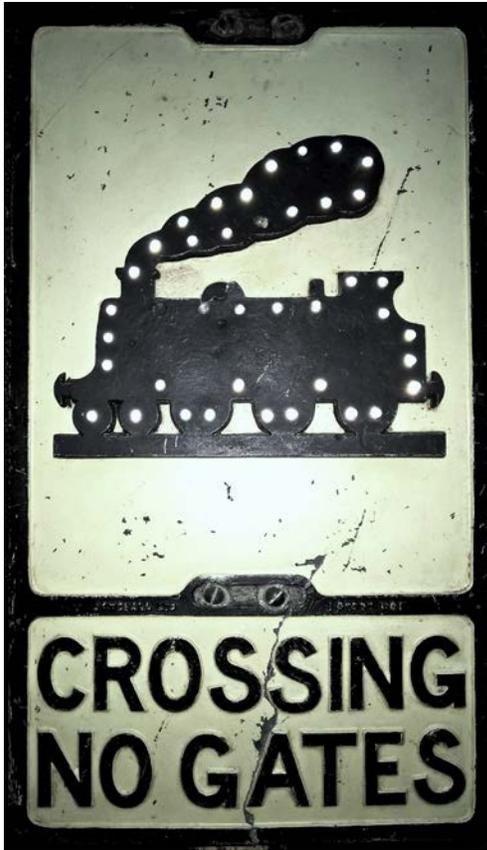
Fig 8

Soon after, the 1933 sign was beautifully miniaturised in the Dinky Toy series **Fig 9**.



Fig 9: Dinky version of the 1933 sign, issued as No47s in 1935 and manufactured with minor variations until 1954, the triangle's solid centre suggests a post-war issue.

In full size, **Fig 10** is a Gowshall example. It is a standard sign, but its cast-in pictogram is overlaid by another with miniature reflectors, giving the pictogram greater depth **Fig 10a**.



Figs 10 and 10a: Gowshall, 1933-46, the overlaid image suggests the company attempted to 'reflectorise' it almost as an after-thought, using miniature bullseye reflectors for the complex image.

The 4-6-0 had a problem in that the fineness of the outline was difficult to reflectorise. It was redesigned in 1944 as a 0-6-0, although the new pictogram was not actually introduced until 1946. It is seen far more frequently than its predecessor (particularly so because it is this style that is most often forged).



Fig 11: Royal Label 1946-50. The 0-6-0 version of the 4-6-0 was easier to reflectorise, but still produced an outline that looked more like a brick than a locomotive. The bullseye reflectors stand proud and are very vulnerable to damage, but presumably they were cheaper than the patented sunken and bordered versions of 1929.

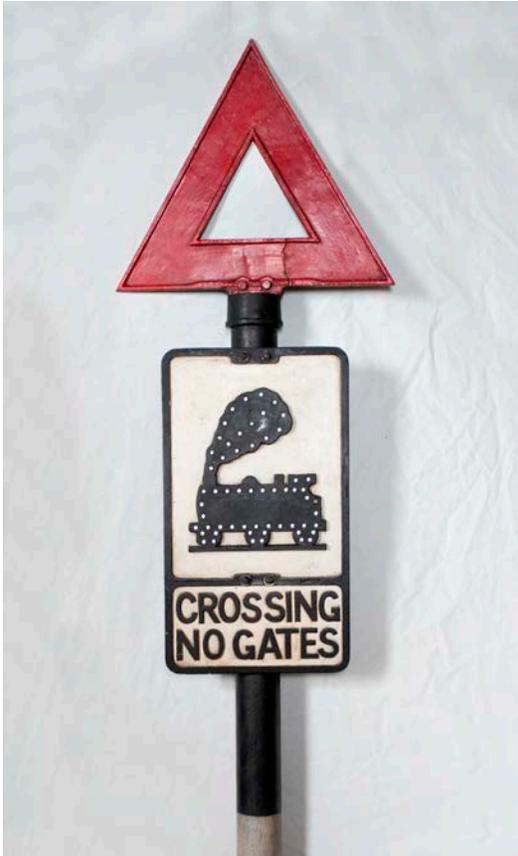


Fig 12: Gowshall 1946-50, continues to use miniature bullseyes. They are less prone to damage and look 'normal size' in use by clever use of glass. The potential outline delineation the small size made possible was never exploited though.

Both of the signs illustrated here are in good 'roadside' condition; **Fig 11** is the Royal Label version, now with 'standard' bulls eye reflectors standing proud and therefore very vulnerable; **Fig 12** is by Gowshall, again with miniature reflectors. Here the reflectorised pictogram has no 'normal' version underneath. In spite of the simpler image, the outline remained difficult to reflectorise, with details such as safety-valve, dome and chimney being 'lost', but the plume of smoke became more magnificent, worthy of three lines of reflectors.

The change of loco type was duly recorded in toy land – in this case by Gilco **Fig 13**, Cherilea (with a paper label depicting a rather extended loco, rather than casting) **Fig 14** and anonymous **Fig 15**.



Figs 13 14 15: Gilco, Cherilea and anonymous versions of the early pattern 0-6-0 from c1950, unfortunately it was obsolete at the time these signs were introduced. It was not unusual for toy makers to make the plate proportionately larger and the post shorter than they should be.

While the 0-6-0 was an improvement on the 4-6-0 in terms of reflectorisation, neither was as effective as the primitive outlines of the pre 1933 sign in Fig 3. This prompted the final, post-war version introduced in 1950, a much squarer 0-6-0 with less detail, but actually a nicer proportion, recorded in the post-war Dinky range **Fig 16**.



Fig 16: Dinky version of the later 0-6-0, issued as part of No772, made from 1959 – 63.

Also illustrated here are two full size versions, both in factory finish, but ex-roadside.



Fig 17: The 1950-64 0-6-0 is clumsier than its predecessor, but much more effective in terms of reflectorisation. Royal Label persisted with bullseye reflectors. The amount of lettering was problematic for the space available and some later signs, such as this, are found with reduced letter height to give the text more space. This plate is mounted on post with its triangle by the same maker.

Fig 17 is a bulls-eye reflector type, again by Royal Label. The Gowshall version has 'fruit-gum' reflectors, which are pretty in their jewel-like quality **Fig 18**.



Fig 18: Gowshall 1950-64. It has 'Serilight' reflectors, popularly called 'fruit-gums'. The reflectors are usually set into plaster and therefore can work loose and are sometimes lost, even on an example as well preserved as this.

This clunky, but very effective pictogram lasted into the Scotchlite and plastic coatings period. The transfers used by both Lesney and Triang on 'Matchbox' and 'Spot On' road signs and also the direct-print on plastic of Triang Minic road signs (which all depict the 1950 0-6-0) could be said to quite accurately reflect late 1950s/early 1960s practice, as the relief casting of their predecessors had mimicked the practice of their time **Fig 19**



Fig 19: Tri-ang 'Spot-On' sign in diecast metal, 1959, later versions were plastic. The 'Spot-On' series made a serious attempt to get the proportions and the height accurate, but, as here, often failed on the striping.

The 1950 0-6-0 remained in force at the time of the Worboys Report, but it did not survive this. Margaret Calvert was employed to redesign the pictographic signs in European manner, with images placed inside the triangle without any text. Reflectorisation was no longer an issue; so, Calvert reverted to a 4-6-0, now travelling to the right and somewhat more square than the 1933 version, with a definite funnel **Fig 20**.



Fig 20: Margaret Calvert's 'crossing without gate or barrier' still current. From *The New Traffic Signs* (HMSO 1965)

Worboys also disposed of the black and white posts, specifying an overall mid-grey. In spite of the passage of time, this pictogram and the grey still remain standard in 2017. Although a pedant might note that, in the mid-1960s, a 4-6-0 would be far less likely than a 0-6-0 at most ungated crossings; it would certainly be a welcome surprise to find oneself having to put the brakes on for either today.

ROGUES' GALLERY



Fig 21: Modern cast iron 'reproduction'. These are sold as garden accessories, but are often claimed as antique second-time round, particularly when a bit weathered such as here. Note the thin border, square corners and non-standard proportions.



Fig 22: Modern 'Heritage' sign, available in four sizes from Scaleway Signals in Hemel Hempstead. Designed to enhance miniature railways, some are now weathered and have crept into the antiques market.



Fig 23: Cast iron forgery. Recently for sale on ebay. Few vendors know that they are handling forgeries and most are sold entirely in good faith. This is likely to be cast from an original, note the rough casting and clumsiness of detail. Tellingly it is 20.5x11.5 inches.



Fig 24: Cast aluminium forgeries. These are supplied in 'weathered roadside' condition (as in these pictures) and therefore qualify as forgeries rather than 'honest' reproductions, but as so many have been sold a lot have now been repainted or 'restored'. The quality is good but the borders are usually broad, closer to five-eighths than half inch (to compensate for casting shrinkage), and the thickness of metal is too great, nearly half an inch (the sort of thickness normally found in cast iron), when aluminium originals are closer to a quarter. Some bear fictitious tradenames, such as Branco or Brookside, while some others have the names of real manufacturers.