

The Telegraph

Meccano for the digital generation

Meccano is holding its own in the video game age, 110 years since it first went on sale.



Meccano is pinning its hopes on the new Space Chaos range By Harry de Quetteville 17 Dec 2011

In France, where imperial measures were swept away with the Revolution, there is not much call for a unit 12.7mm in length. But in one dusty, eccentric corner of an industrial estate in Calais, the imperial equivalent of 12.7mm remains cherished more than two centuries after Robespierre's Reign of Terror.

For this is the exact distance between the holes in pieces of Meccano, and Meccano – once the pride of England – is these days an entirely French brand.

'This distance is a sign of our English heritage,' says Mattei Theodore, who runs Meccano's factory, before indicating the gap between one hole and another with his thumbnail: 'Un demi pouce.'

Half an inch. That was the gap that Frank Hornby, a man Theodore describes as a toymaking 'genius', settled on when he began designing construction kits for his children in 1898.

It was the end of the Victorian era, and Meccano, with its miniature struts and girders, its tiny rivets, was an invention of its age, guaranteed to inspire junior Brunels just as the model railways with which Hornby's name is still most associated inspired junior Stephensons.

By 1901 Hornby had refined, patented and started selling his idea. 'Mechanics made Easy' (later contracted to Make and Know – Meccano) consisted of wheels, pulleys, gears and strips of metal perforated at that imperial interval, all of which could be assembled using nuts and bolts and simple tools. Six years later he opened a factory in Liverpool to keep up with surging demand.

This year marks 110 years since Meccano first went on sale. It remains a fabulously recognisable toy – a global brand, says its current owner and CEO, Michaël Ingberg, on a par with that other icon of British industry, the Mini. And after a long series of economic rescue missions, Meccano – like the Mini – is staging a comeback.

Frank Hornby would feel very much at home in the Calais factory's nooks and corners – his Liverpoolian production line must have looked similar. Stacked up on shelves are hundreds of numbered heavy metal moulds, one for each Meccano piece. About 60 workers wander between cacophonous machines that cut, slice, pierce and mould metal. It is an authentically industrial world of jolting, jogging, clunking mechanisms. Today's Meccano factory feels, rather magically, as though it is made of Meccano itself.

Once they have been spat out of the cutters, the metal parts that still form the basis of almost every Meccano kit are attached by hand to an array of revolving hooks, where they hang while spray-painted. Colours were introduced in 1926, to mark Meccano's first quarter of a century. The difference between now and then is that the paint is edible. Children deciding to treat Meccano pieces like a lolly 'might get bright yellow teeth,' Theodore says, 'but they don't get sick.' At the end of the process, there is a further manual inspection. Bumped, twisted and scratched pieces are rejected.

It is a production line that is bizarrely old-fashioned for a toy that was intended to celebrate a pioneering engineering spirit. But what was once its main selling point – its tangible connection to the real world – has become its Achilles' heel. In this virtual age, middle-class parents may ache to buy their children playthings wreathed in nostalgia – sets of Meccano and wooden pushbikes. Children themselves, though, are often keener on the hyper-real graphics of video games.

Meccano may have always been a bit too much like hard work for some, and may seem increasingly so in the computer age, but for others that is part of its appeal. 'I've got four kids,' Ingberg says. 'They can't spend all their time playing the [Nintendo] DS. The completion of a project is so valuable, worthwhile. There's nothing more creative and innovative than Meccano.'

So it is reassuring that elsewhere in the Meccano factory there are signs that this business is not an anachronism ripe for mothballing quite yet. Around the corner from the spray-painting line, for example, there are no workers to be seen among a sparkling array of automated machines, which sort and bag Meccano pieces of every shape and size.

The machines have allowed Ingberg and his father, Alain, whose Ingroup owns 51 per cent of Meccano (the rest is owned by an investment fund, 21 Centrale Partners), to shrink the workforce dramatically. Such economies are vital. Until recently all the brand's manufacturing was done in China. Now costs have fallen to a point where it makes economic sense to repatriate some of the work. As well as shortening delivery times, that has allowed Meccano boxes to sport, proudly, the logo Made in France. Theodore notes that consumers these days are 'far more sensitive about the origin of goods'.

More important by far than what is on the boxes – around a million of which leave the factory each year – is what is in them. That is largely down to Bernard Fleuet, Meccano's chief designer, who has been with the company for 22 years.

Fleuet's lair sits at the far end of the Meccano complex in Calais and amounts to a boy's dream of the perfect workplace. Its entrance is lined by endless large plastic bucket drawers, stuffed with an array of Meccano pieces. Further in, toys and models, not only by Meccano but from Lego and other competitors, litter every surface, all for Fleuet to tinker with as he dreams up new designs. In an average year he comes up with 100 ideas, of which 20 – given a simple nod of approval by Michaël Ingberg – might head towards production.

Lying on a large table in Fleuet's workshop is a Meccano reproduction of the seaplane that attacks Tintin in *The Crab with the Golden Claw* – it is constructed from thousands of silver pieces, its wingspan is a yard across. Fleuet has been building it for a promotional exhibition of Meccano models, and it is the kind of freestyling, large-scale construction that is still pursued by dedicated – usually adult – Meccano fans around the world. The seaplane is a joyful thing to behold up close, nuts and bolts emulating the rivets found in real aircraft panels. But in many ways it represents 'old Meccano'; Fleuet is looking to the future.

'The hardest thing is to find the idea – the starting point,' Fleuet says. 'We're looking for something that will make children dream.' Among his ideas is the Metal Robots range – stylish desktop models with brushed-steel pieces that might serve as executive toy as easily as child's plaything. But the design that Fleuet – and the company – are pinning most hopes on is the Space Chaos range. This marks a departure for Meccano: not only are there space-themed kits to build, but there is a back story, too. In it, the universe is riven between the Dark Pirates and Silver Force – children are encouraged to pick a side and involve their friends. The narrative is given further depth (and commercial potential) with associated trading cards and even an online game. The signs so far are good: the range has already won industry awards and is appearing on 'best toys for Christmas' lists. 'We're pinning a lot on Space Chaos,' Fleuet says.

The decline of Frank Hornby's engineering kits began in the 1960s, after more than half a century of roaring success. From the original factory in Liverpool, the craze spread across Europe, with factories opening in Berlin in 1912 and outside Paris, first at Belleville in 1920, then at Bobigny where, in 1951, half a million Meccano sets were produced daily.

Meccano initially offered a range of six sets, introducing the seventh in 1922. This expanded to nine kits, numbered 00 to 7, and then, in 1934, to 11. These, amazingly, were to continue to provide the basis of the company's product range for the next 50 years. The only significant changes came with the outbreak of war, when the Liverpool factory was converted to produce armaments.

Meccano experienced the first of its financial troubles in the early 1960s, only a few years after building the Calais factory that is now its home. In 1964 Meccano Ltd was bought out by its principal competitor, the toy manufacturer Lines Bros. But Lines Bros itself survived only a few years more, and

in 1971 it went into liquidation and was sold to the plastic kit company Airfix. Meanwhile, the French side of the business was acquired by the American food giant General Mills. 'They were looking to diversify – we were tiny to them,' Theodore says. When, in turn, Airfix went bust in 1981, Meccano's 80-year production history in Britain ended. General Mills bought up the British side of the brand name and soon the Calais factory was Meccano's only production site. The existing kits were scrapped and replaced by smaller sets, often using plastic pieces.

But within four years General Mills had tired of its plaything, and Meccano was sold again, only for Marc Rebibo, the French businessman who had taken it on, to sell it on again in 1989. Each new owner tried to stamp their own identity on the brand. Shinier, less clunky models were introduced; there were space-themed sets and tiny electric motors; plastic was increasingly used.

But each 'advance' served only to highlight the fundamentally Victorian nature of the concept underpinning the toy. It was a contradiction that endured even as Meccano was taken over, in 2000, by Nikko, a Japanese toy manufacturer specialising in radio-controlled toy cars. Soon elements of its radio-control systems began to appear in Meccano sets and, in 2008, a year after Nikko sold out to the Ingbergs, Meccano launched Spykee, a plastic robot that – while it can connect to an Apple iPod – is bereft of metal strips perforated at 12.7mm intervals and would, as a result, be unrecognisable as Meccano to Frank Hornby.

Inevitably, Meccano purists, of which there remain many, and who gather in enthusiast groups around the world, disapprove of such developments. They remain fiercely and solely attached to the 'true' Meccano – the sets numbered 00-7 or antique pieces, some up to 2ft long – sourced from specialist second-hand suppliers. These they use to construct enormous models, like the 1:5 scale replica of an RAF Tornado fighter, 12ft long and 10ft wide, that was pride of place at this year's annual gathering of British enthusiasts at Skegness – known fondly in the Meccano world as Skegex. Unlike the Tornado, however, many of the models at Skegex hark back to an earlier era, and the cranes, bridges, locomotives, steamrollers and tramcars on display would have been reassuringly familiar to Meccano's creator.

In Calais, the conundrum is how to update Hornby's invention without destroying its soul (Ingberg admits that when it comes to innovation the Meccano company has sometimes been 'behind the curve' compared with rivals such as Lego). Because there is no doubt that it has a soul. At the end of my visit to the factory, Fleuet presents me with a small kit. Like Spykee, it is of a robot. Unlike Spykee it is made of shiny metal parts, punctuated with those all-important holes.

On the train home I settle down to build it. It is a task so absorbing that arrival at London's St Pancras station goes unnoticed. Once completed – using the same simple construction techniques first employed by Frank Hornby's children in 1898 – the chunky, funky, characterful robot claims a place on a kitchen shelf where, for some reason, he goes by the name of Randy.

'In the world we live in today, how many brand names are there with global reach?' Michaël Ingberg asks. 'Very few. But Meccano has that. We have to be able to lift the models towards the future. If we can do that the name will take us where we want to go.'

Pfd file published by the www.nwmg.org