

Section 1 – Introduction

Meccano in the United States An Introduction by Kendrick Bisset

What is Meccano?

To paraphrase Mark Twain: you don't know about me without you have read a book by the name of *The Meccano System and the Special Purpose Meccano Sets* by Bert Love and Jim Gamble (see the Bibliography). While this present work is about Meccano in the United States, Meccano originated (and was extremely successful) in England. *The Meccano System* is THE reference work on Meccano, and should be in any serious collector's library; however, it is hard to find, and is expensive. There were a number of differences between the original Meccano and the US flavor; this present work addresses the US Meccano.

For those who do not have the book referred to above, Meccano was (and still is) a metal constructional toy invented in 1901 by Frank Hornby. It was originally named Mechanics Made Easy, but became Meccano in 1908. In the US, Erector became the best known constructional toy, and the name has almost entered the language as a term for anything bolted together. In England, and over much of the rest of the world, Meccano has similar associations. Meccano information is, of course, available on the internet.

Why Meccano in the US?

Why would I want to try to tell a story of Meccano in the United States? I suppose it started when I was about ten years old; Mom married a friend of ours from England. He had a collection of Meccano, and was very proud of it. Dad and I built some things with it, including a classic Meccanograph. Dad also had a collection of Meccano Magazines from 1925 through 1933, which kept me occupied for many hours. When I was in my late 30's, Mom and Dad moved, and Dad gave me his precious Meccano and magazines. Our children and I played with the parts, including making an orrery. Mom and Dad

died about six years later (at different times). About that time, I started to wonder about the history of Meccano. A trip to England, and a visit to Pollock's Toy Museum in London led to a copy of *The Products of Binns Road* coming home with us.

We lived in the western suburbs of Chicago, and found a number of antique toy shows, and a group of Erector collectors which met twice a year. Discovering that Meccano was made in the US, and that there were "other systems", led me on a quest to find out more. By the time we moved from the Chicago area in 1997, my collection had grown enough to require consideration when house hunting.

While near Rochester, NY, we found more antique toy shows, and more Meccano and other systems. I started attending the CMAMAS (Canadian Modeling Association for Meccano and Allied Systems) shows in the Toronto area, probably starting in 2001.

By the time we left that second house five years later, the ceiling below my Meccano room had started to crack (it was an older house, but...). So, the next house had a larger finished room in the basement. Around this time, I found (probably from Richard Symonds from Canada) Tony Knowles' *Other Systems Newsletter*, and subscribed starting with Issue 9 – and, of course, bought all the back issues, too. The collection continued to expand, although we did not find any antique toy shows near Louisville, Kentucky. Ebay became the major source of additions.

Another relocation was to Mountainhome, Pennsylvania in 2009. We moved into the summer home of my grandparents which had been winterized by my parents. It had been our summer home for many years. A small home with seven small bedrooms, it was furnished several times over from various relative's homes. With no space for Meccano, etc., the collection went into storage for a few years until a garage was built with a

room over the space for cars. The contractor thought it very strange when I specified the design floor loading for that room, until he saw the bill of lading from the movers. The truck, a full sized forty foot semi-trailer, was within 600 pounds of its axle limit. Books and Meccano are heavy!

Some Meccano related stories along the way have been recorded on www.usmeccano.com, and will not be repeated here. A number of people along the way have helped and encouraged me, of course. Our gatherings in the western suburbs of Chicago were greatly facilitated by John Drury, a well known television newscaster, and attended by a pretty large number of active collectors. The A. C. Gilbert Heritage Society (ACGHS), Canadian Modeling Association for Meccano and Allied Systems (CMAMAS), and the Southern California Meccano and Erector Club (SCM&EC, apparently no longer active) provide newsletters and gatherings to share information.

Corporations

In England, the corporate identity was Meccano, Limited (abbreviated Ltd.), formed in 1908. The factory moved several times in the early history, all in Liverpool, England. In 1914, the famous factory on Binns Road opened; “Binns Road” is commonly used to refer to British production of Meccano. A company was formed in the United States in 1913, named Meccano Company, Incorporated (Meccano Co., Inc.). That company was apparently replaced in 1930 by Meccano Company of America, Incorporated. In this discussion, the corporate names will be used where appropriate.

When referring to products or publications, for example, “US Meccano” will be used to distinguish from British production.

Some words about sources

The author cannot claim any personal insight into this story – it all occurred well before he was born. Sources are usually identified at the end of a work, but I think that more needs to be said about sources than a simple list. Everything here (unless specifically identified as speculation) comes from writings of others, from contemporary documents, or from collections of the construction toys and associated paperwork.

In relation to the last mentioned, an important source is the *Other Systems Newsletter*, by Tony Knowles in England. This newsletter documents over 1,000 metal construction toys from around the world. The “Other Systems” refers to other than Meccano, because Meccano has been and continues to be well documented elsewhere. While Meccano is usually not included in the OSN, US Meccano has appeared several times because of the differences when compared to British Meccano. The website is www.osnl.co.uk, and although the newsletter itself is not on line, there is an index of all of the systems with some basic information. Sadly, Tony passed away in 2022, and his website has closed. All of Tony’s information is now available on Timothy Edwards’ site: <https://www.meccanoindex.co.uk> (though that is subject to change, too).

An important source is the internet, but this information is ephemeral. Very useful websites have disappeared, and the information is no longer available (see above for an example). Occasionally, old websites are available on the “Wayback Machine” at archive.org, but the URL (web address) must be known. Frequently, their archive does not capture the entire website, so lower level pages and documents might not be available. On the other hand, information is being added all the time, particularly old publications with expired copyrights.

Many documents have been downloaded, mainly from www.archive.org. That web site contains

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millions (as they claim) of documents and other files. Finding things can be a bit tricky, but the results, particularly when looking for older documents, can be staggering. One important tool is the word search within a document; if there are no results, the response is quite fast. If that word is in the document (I used “meccano” often, of course), the pages where it appears will be identified; a big help in a 1000 page book. A caveat: word searches do not always work. I found a few in which OCR (optical character recognition) was not used when the file was created. Fortunately, at least in the legal documents, many cross-references are included, and an index is included in many books. This allowed the document to be found, and then the particular case could be located within the document.

Google Books sometimes has documents not found on archive.org, so Google was searched, especially for more issues of periodicals when only a few were found on archive.org.

Timothy Edwards has an excellent website on Meccano and associated documentation: <https://www.meccanoindex.co.uk>. This site has a huge amount of information on Meccano manuals, both UK and overseas editions; Meccano Magazines; other systems; patents; and on and on. There is so much on this site that I have referred to it rather than trying to find an item from my own collection.

James Mietlicki, a lawyer and Erector enthusiast, wrote an article titled “The Debunking of a Myth – Gilbert’s Early Meccano Connection”. He first wrote in the SCM&EC Newsletter in 1994, and expanded the story in the book by Marshall McKusic titled *Wards Catalog Erector*, printed in 1998. This article includes some discussion of the Meccano lawsuits as well as the purported (and debunked) early Gilbert association with Meccano. It is very helpful to have a lawyer’s review of legal issues, and comforting that his views are in line with mine.

Books on The Great War are not as common as books on the Civil War or World War Two. One that was of interest for this work is *The War and the Shipping Industry* by Fayle, which has data on the net tons cleared in British ports from 1913 to 1923.

A number of toy construction outfits from the period have been examined. Many (but not all) are in the collection of the author. That makes it convenient to review items when questions arise. Many outfits are not complete; some are little more than collections of parts. The major difficulty is dating the outfit, particularly if it has passed through several hands, and parts (or manuals) added without concern for historical accuracy.

Another source through the internet is the Statue of Liberty – Ellis Island Foundation (<https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org>). Ship’s registers are available and can be searched; I used this to find when Frank Hornby and James P. Porteous entered the United States. Frank visited about 25 times between 1911 and 1930. James arrived to become the manager of the New York office in 1916.

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