

Goodbye Aster.

It is with great sadness that we have to report that our long Association with Aster Hobby Co Inc has ended.

It was in Robert Head's garden following the G1MRA 50th anniversary event in 1997 that I first spoke seriously to Toyoki Inoue about the possibility of having an exclusive distribution agreement for the United Kingdom.

Aster Hobbies UK Ltd was formed in 1998 initially with the late Roy Scott, and our first commission, the L&NWR Jumbo arriving before Christmas that year. We have commissioned ten all new models (and overseen three rehashed models) and by our efforts and the support of our loyal customers, increased the size and interest in Gauge One as the finest garden railway format.

Sadly, everything started to go wrong in the Summer of 2016 after the Brexit referendum. Mr Fujii owner of Aster Hobby Co Inc decided, without reference to his International Distributors, to sell the key assets of his business to Accucraft Trains Inc. a decision made even more bewildering by his proposal a few months earlier to seek an alliance with Bowande.

Problems started with the last all-new Aster for the UK came in 2014. This was the Rebuilt Merchant Navy class. Although the model itself was one of the best, serious Quality Control issues bedevilled it from the start. With the help of my expert builders (and the sacrifice of several kits) all the UK kits were built up successfully. However, the steep decline in quality at Aster started from that time.

There were no new Aster models for the UK in 2015, 2016 or 2017. With nothing new to sell and with Simon and Elaine Colbeck appointed as our successors at Aster Hobbies UK, we had to do something because no business can survive with nothing new to sell for 3 years! Consequently, we started a relationship with Wuhu Brand Arts and Crafts Co. Ltd., makers of Bowande range of live steam models not knowing of the bitter animosity of Accucraft Trains Inc. towards that enterprise. However, with the hostile attitude of Accucraft towards us and the poor quality of recent Aster productions, we were led to a difficult decision to step away from Aster after nearly 22 years.

We now see Bowande as the best partner for future business development with great products and a 'can do' attitude.

You may wish to know that Aster Hobbies UK LLP had initiated two Gauge One projects with Aster Hobby Co Inc several years ago before Accucraft came on the scene. They are an LNER / BR B1 and an LNER P2. Others will claim ownership and authorship and their own special "understanding". The reality is that these are our projects and we provided all the drawings and research materials for Aster Hobby Co Inc to make these locomotives. Whether or not they are able to proceed with no competent design staff, is a matter for speculation.

What happens now?

Warranty of kits and RTR models sold by Aster Hobbies UK LLP (and via Live Steam UK Ltd) will continue to be honoured. We will assist as far as we are able all our customers who have older models and kits no longer covered by our 12 months guarantee. We have asked Accucraft repeatedly for direction on Spare Parts for older models but had no decision.

As already mentioned, customers who have purchased from us will be given every assistance to complete their kit and keep their locos running, but we cannot be associated with the shambolic mess of the Aster / Accucraft partnership with damaged, poorly made and missing parts and

glacial service which turns the once proud brand of Aster Hobby into a fourth rate reflection of its former self.

However, Aster Hobbies UK LLP will continue but concentrate on mint & near mint models and unbuilt kits from the Aster back catalogue when Quality came as standard. We have recently taken a collection of first-class models and after expert checking, we will offer them with our usual warranty. Further collections or single items are welcome for outright purchase or part-exchange.

So, we will be following the route taken by Hans Huwyler at Aster Hobby USA and Remo and Hansruedi Twerenbold at Aster Europa as ex-distributors for the Aster Hobby Co Inc. We all tried hard to keep this once proud enterprise on the rails but when product quality means nothing and you let your best designers leave and then you sell your key assets to your inflexible rival, then the road to oblivion is guaranteed.

And finally...

To all our customers and friends (and customers who became friends) and all who have helped with model selection and design and by building models and giving their advice freely to help others, we say an enormous and sincere thank you. We couldn't have done it without you.

Hasta la vista!

Andrew and Daphne