

**"Airfix: Scaling Down Reality" by Simon Owen of Hornby Hobbies, Ltd.
(lecture given to the RAeS Loughborough Branch, on 4th February 2014)**

In a lively and entertaining lecture, Simon began with a review of the history of the Company which eventually incorporated Airfix from its origin in 1939. Started by an Hungarian called Nicholas Kove, the Company first manufactured airbeds and Li-Los, before beginning its injection moulding of plastics to make combs in the mid-1940s. The first model toy, in 1948, was a one-twentieth scale model of a Ferguson tractor, followed by one of the "Golden Hind" ship in 1952. The first aircraft model – perhaps unsurprisingly – was a Spitfire, at what became the standard 1/72 scale, in 1953.

Airfix as a distinct Company was inaugurated in 1957. Nicholas Kove died in 1958, the same year as the next model, of an Avro Lancaster, appeared, marking the beginning of a rapid expansion in "boom years" for Airfix. Its first catalogue came out in 1962; 170 new kits were marketed between 1963 and 1970. Further expansion through the 1970s included the purchase of Meccano and the Dinky Toy brand, while Airfix increased output to 20 million plastic kits per year in 1975.

Various transactions subsequently changed the Company's status – Meccano was discontinued in 1979, production moved to France in 1981, and then the Company was sold to Humbrol in 1986. Co-operation with Heller in 1995 preceded a change in Airfix's fortunes through the 2000s, with UK sales showing a five-fold growth by 2007. Airfix became part of the Hornby Hobbies Group (also including Corgi and Scalextric). Military aircraft models were now also frequently themed around historical events to give extra interest, and backed by the Airfix Club and Magazine, plus interaction on Facebook, and Roadshows at which young (in age and spirit) enthusiasts could enjoy examining the range of kits.

One of the aspects which most surprised the audience was the long period of planning involved in producing a new addition to the range – up to five or even ten years in initial appraisal, and then often as much as three years in active development through research, design, prototype, and finally full production. The choice of a new model type was preceded by a look at the competition in the market: in one of the many flashes of humour in the lecture, Simon said it was rather dismaying to find that Revell, the German-owned company, was producing the best Lancaster kit, "so we made the best Dornier". A great deal of work was done in order to ensure that every detail was correct. When the research was complete, development of the designs and tooling for the moulds used computer-aided design as a standard approach. It was nice to hear that all four designers – "working individually, committees don't work" – were Loughborough graduates. Production has now shifted to China or India.



Fig. 1 – Airfix 1/24 scale model of a Hawker Typhoon Fighter

Simon's own position as a researcher in the Company formed the background to the major part of the talk, with an extensive illustrated discussion of his work done in preparing for the introduction of a 1/24 scale model of a Hawker Typhoon fighter (from the later years of World War Two) as shown in Fig. 1.

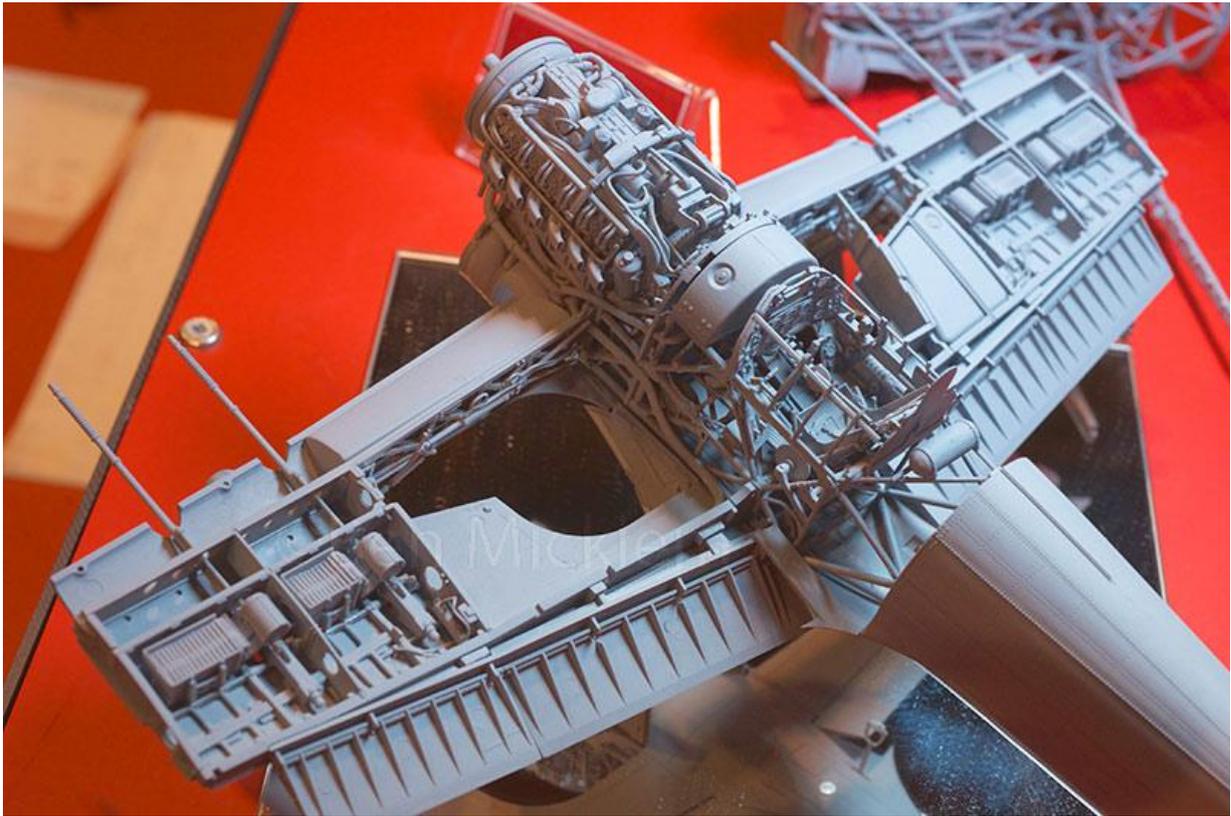


Fig. 2 – Airfix 1/24 scale model of a Hawker Typhoon Fighter under construction (showing detail of “under the skin features”

The 1/24 scale Typhoon model (Fig. 2) shows an incredible degree of detail, with "under the skin" features such as fuel tanks, cannon-feed mechanisms, etc., included. The Napier Sabre engine has such detailed representation of the fuel, oil and electrical systems that the cowling cannot actually be closed (because of the stiffness of the plastic) – but the model is complete for those who like to see "the full works". Great care was also taken in preparing all the literature and packaging (Fig. 1) associated with the kits, with a very high standard of illustration.

The overall impression was of a highly professional organisation, with a small team responsible for the whole product development, in the age range 23 to 28 years old. Simon's command of his subject, as shown both in the lecture and in response to the questions afterwards, was extremely impressive and laced with humour and a light touch throughout. It was greatly enjoyed by the audience of about eighty, age range probably ten to ninety.

Lecture notes by Francis Maccabee