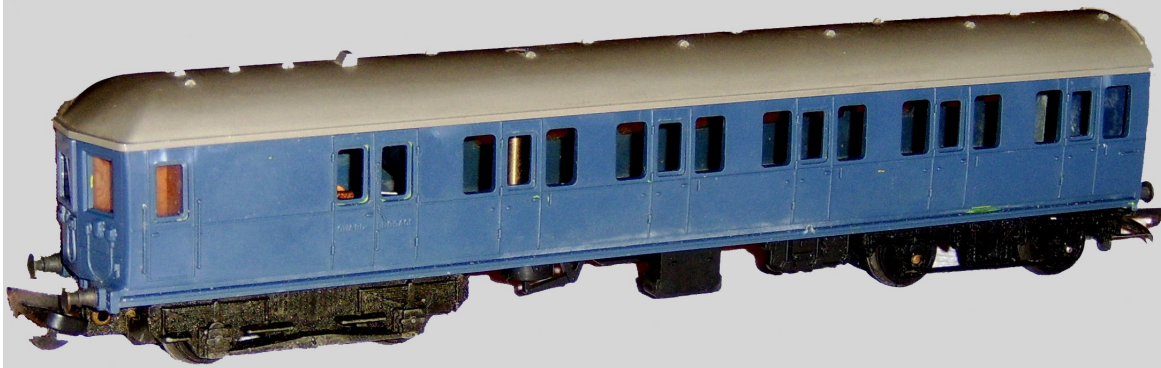


A Southern Blue EMU



Above: Blue R.156 SR Suburban Motor Coach

This gem of a model surfaced on eBay in September 2007. It was offered by a reputable dealer at a substantial starting price. But the question on many collectors' lips was, 'Is the Blue EMU genuine?'

Initially, on examining the pictures, there were several issues which gave cause for concern about the 'correctness' of the model but yet it seemed strangely genuine. Of course, with every potential rarity comes a questionable provenance - a mixture of fancy laced with just a tinge of truth to excite the pulse - and this was no exception.

Right: 2-BIL EMU pictured near Brighton in 1957

The auction listing advertised the model as a 'Tri-ang mega rare SR Suburban EMU Motor Coach in blue! This is a model I've only ever heard about. I never thought I'd see one let alone have one.' In the description, it went on to state that 'The original owner painted it green because it didn't match his dummy car and then later on removed the paint with Model Strip. He also put a later bogie on the rear but this can easily be changed back.' The vendor later added, 'I had a faint notion that it may be a New Zealand produced model as ... they used varying shades of plastic'.



Above: The 1958 R3.F Suburban Electric Train Set

cars modelled, S1057S + S1052S, are actually a freelance 1920/30s design suburban EMU, said to have L&SWR features but with Maunsell 2-BIL ends.

The model is very crude by today's standard but it was a 'state of the art' toy when it first appeared. A key feature was an illuminated indicator window in the motor coach but the coaches were far from being scale length.

The first EMU sets were in the shops by the summer of 1957 and the model remained in production in

the UK until the end of 1963.



The production tools were then sent out to New Zealand where production continued from 1964. Train set production had ceased by 1968 and the R.156 Powered and the R.225 Non-powered Suburban Motor Coaches were last featured in the Tri-ang Hornby New Zealand illustrated retail price list of June 1969.

The UK produced green EMU

Individual models and train sets containing the EMU 2-car unit were introduced in 1957. These were the RF and RFX Suburban Passenger Sets which both contained an oval of the grey Standard Track and a controller. In 1958 these were replaced by the R3.F Suburban Electric Train Set which now contained the newly introduced Series 3 Track. The bodies were manufactured in a bluish-green coloured plastic and all featured the Tri-ang Mk2 open type couplings.

1959 saw the now familiar Mk3 tension-lock coupling introduced. The revised R3.F set featured for only one year and by 1960 all EMU train sets had been withdrawn.

It would seem that ribbed roofing was introduced on individual models in 1960 and separate seat units also became available; by 1962 these had become fitted as standard and the body colour changed to a yellowish-green coloured plastic. The individual models last featured in the UK in the 1963 catalogue and price list.

A brief history

Tri-ang produced a BR Southern Region green livery Electric Multiple Unit (EMU) comprising a Suburban Motor Coach Powered and Suburban Motor Coach Non-powered which has variously been described as a 2-BIL, 2-NOL or, coupled with the Suburban Composite Coaches, either a 3-SUB or 4-SUB unit. In fact, it is none of these. The



Left: Tri-ang New Zealand produced R.156 Powered and R.225 Non-powered Suburban Motor Coaches

New Zealand produced models

It is not certain how much was manufactured in New Zealand and how much was sent out ready made from the UK. It seems as if the bodies and roofs were moulded in New Zealand and transfers and heat printed numbers were applied locally. All other parts seem to have been supplied from the UK.

There are a number of shade variations in the green plastic used. The ribbed roofs are of a much paler grey colour than the UK production. The undercarriage still carried the inscription 'Built in Britain' and seat units were fitted as standard.

The Blue R.156 S.R. Suburban Motor Coach

On first seeing the Blue S.R. Suburban Motor Coach it looked very striking at the head of a suburban train with its green liveried counterparts. The colour is a very interesting shade of dark blue.

There had been much speculation in the internet chat-groups at the time of its sale as to the authenticity of the colour and it was put to the vendor that 'the consensus is leaning toward this item having been chemically treated to turn the green into blue. It certainly does not help that it has a whitish film (typical of chemically treated plastic) ...'

On examining the bodywork closely, small deposits of green paint remain in some of the difficult to clean corners and recesses. Also, the typical whitish film caused by chemical cleaning is present. So, there is clear evidence to support the assertion that the body had been painted green and, at a later date, typically the paint had been removed with Model Strip.



However, to suggest that in some way the body colour had been chemically changed would be totally false. Even if this were possible, the body colour is consistent throughout, even with the previously unpainted areas. This is also supported by the fact that the vendor had attempted to remove the rear bogie (goodness knows why since this is an

original factory fitment) and had inadvertently chipped away a small portion of the interior floor, next to the bogie rivet, with his screwdriver revealing that indeed the plastic colour was blue throughout.

The colour does not resemble that of any known standard production locomotive model. The closest colour match is to the dark blue version of the R.238 Transcontinental Depressed Center Car with large Cable Drums and also to the R.116 Transcontinental Gondola. Since the plastic was ordered in batches and the colour was very specific to these particular models, comparison would indicate a probable production date of either 1961 or not later than 1962.

There is no evidence of a heat printed number having been applied to the cab sides; even with the use of Model Strip for cleaning there would still have been an impression left as the heat melts the plastic in the process leaving a shallow recess for the number to be applied.

Despite the damage to the rear bogie rivet it appears to be correct being factory fitted. The rear bogie itself has open axle boxes whereas closed axle boxes had been introduced into standard production during 1962.

The cab interior insert is reddish-brown and typical of the UK produced model.

The roof is the earlier smooth (not ribbed) version in the standard UK grey coloured plastic dating from 1957 to 1960. This seems to be at odds with the rest of the body, as one would have expected to

find the later ribbed roof as the Blue EMU is almost certainly of post-1960 production.

The power bogie is the Tri-ang Mk2 open type coupling version dating from 1957 to the end of 1958. This definitely appears to be non-original.



Below: Blue R.156 SR Suburban Motor Coach

Left: the interior of the Blue R.156 SR Suburban Motor Coach showing the chipped area around the rivet

So why make a Blue EMU?

There can be no doubt about the authenticity of blue coloured plastic body, it is absolutely genuine. But the intriguing question is, 'For what reason and when was the Blue EMU made?'

Is the Blue EMU a standard production model? Absolutely not.

Was it a production error in the wrong coloured plastic? Just possible but highly unlikely.

That leaves only one further option; that this is most probably a factory pre-production model, albeit later made-up into a complete working model with added incorrect power bogie and, perhaps, an added early roof.

Originally, thoughts of a comparison with the Tri-ang Hornby R.157C 2-car BR Blue DMU first issued in 1970 had come to mind but this was quickly discounted for several reasons; the colour was wrong and by then the EMU tools in New Zealand had already been long-since damaged.

It seems highly likely that the model was made in Margate. However there is a possibility of a New Zealand connection.

In 1962, a decision had been made to introduce a Victorian Railways blue version of the famous NSW Sydney Suburban EMUs for the Australian market. An incorrect livery of course but, since there was a very solid client base in Victoria, it seemed to make economic sense so to do. Though this was never released, it is believed some samples of the models were made but are still yet to be discovered.

The New Zealand connection? Well, you could argue that, when it came to Tri-ang Railways, whatever Australia got, New Zealand got fobbed-off with something lesser as a make-do measure; being the poor relation and all! (No howls of protest please!)

So, in 1962, was a Blue EMU also planned to be delivered to New Zealand?

An intriguing thought; I'd like to think it were true! And, is the 'Southern Blue EMU' the evidence?



Right: A repainted Sydney Suburban EMU in Victorian Railways blue livery (photo: Graeme Brown)