

Frank Hornby

Inventor of the world's most famous toy



Frank Hornby was born in 1863 at 77 Copperas Hill, Liverpool. He was brought up a Methodist and met his wife, Clara, when they were members of the Liverpool Philharmonic Society choir. They married in 1887 and had two sons, Roland and Douglas and a daughter Patricia.

To amuse his sons Hornby made a toy crane out of perforated metal strips held together with nuts and bolts. The crane could be dismantled and the parts used to make different models. Hornby saw a future for this versatile toy and set to work producing it for the mass market.

The toy was patented on January 9 1901 as 'Mechanics Made Easy.' It became known as Meccano in 1907 and went on to take the toy world by storm.

Hornby began to manufacture his own parts in a small one-room factory at 10-12 Duke Street. He later took premises in Tuebrook but these soon proved too small. He then bought up 5 acres of land in the Old Swan area of Liverpool. It was here the Binns Road factory opened in 1914. This became the company headquarters for more than 60 years.

By 1922 Meccano kits of various sizes and costs were available. At its peak the Meccano system consisted of over three hundred pieces and inspired a generation of boys to take up technical careers.

After the First World War Hornby began making clockwork trains. The first Hornby railway engines were sold in 1920 as construction kits. By 1925 all Hornby trains and accessories were sold ready-assembled. These train sets were the ultimate child's toy and are still very popular today.

Originally marketed as 'modelled miniatures' in 1931, the first set of Dinky toys consisted of six cast miniature figures of station workers. The toys were originally intended as line-side effects for model railways but became popular in their own right.

The products of Binns Road were phenomenally successful. Frank Hornby was a visionary in toy development and production, producing three of the most popular lines of toys in the twentieth century.

During the 1920s and 1930s Meccano Ltd was the biggest toy manufacturer in Britain.

In its heyday Meccano also had factories in Speke and Aintree, as well as manufacturing bases **in Argentina**, France, Germany, the USA and Spain. In 1963 there were 2,000 employees at the factory (of which 80% were female) and another 3-400 on staff.

A decline in profits led to a take-over by Lines Brothers in 1964, and the Airfix Group in the 1970s. The Binns Road factory finally closed in 1979.

Whilst running his company Frank Hornby also became unionist MP for Everton in 1931. He died on 21 September 1936. His legacy lives on today with thousands of enthusiasts all over the world still building Meccano models and running Hornby Train Sets.