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BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE

Tony Bagwell discusses modelling the Alps – or a bit of them.

Project finished with greenery

PHOTOS: Tony Bagwell

In Britain we are always being told about the wonders of the Settle to Carlisle Line, but having seen Switzerland we all know better. Replicating typical UK scenery on a model railway is relatively easy - the smooth contours can be made in a variety of ways. However, to replicate the large rock faces so typical of the Alps is another matter. Life's too short to carve each crag separately.

Can I suggest a method that is both quick and realistic? You will need some chicken wire, a Sunday Supplement, TV magazine or other semi-glossy paper, PVA glue (builders type, not quick grabbing woodworking), Artex (or other brand – not Polyfilla) powder, brown powder paint and aluminium cooking foil (barbecue sort is best).

Start by making your basic contours out of chicken wire, stapling it to suitable MDF or chipboard formers. Thicken up some PVA with some Artex powder, rip up the paper into pieces about 4" square (the size is not important) and paint a liberal mix on both sides. Then lay the paper over the chicken wire, ensuring each piece overlaps the previous ones. Allow this to dry and then repeat the process to make a second layer. Don't be tempted to put on more than one layer at a time, as it will take forever to dry.

When this "shell" has thoroughly dried, it's time for the rocks on any suitably steep parts; this is where the aluminium foil comes in. Decide roughly where you want the rock face to be and cut a piece of foil at least 50% bigger. Crinkle it up by screwing it into a tight ball and then carefully open it out again leaving all the wrinkles and humps in it. Make up a mix of

Artex and again add some PVA to give it added strength and then carefully spread this over the foil. Try to get a good covering without any air bubbles and thin it out towards the edges of the foil. Being careful not to tear it, pick up the foil and lay it onto the area of the rock face. Gently press it down but don't flatten the wrinkles, and make sure the edges are flared down to the surrounding shell. Once in place the foil can be squeezed and formed to give additional shape, producing outcrops, ledges etc. Once you are happy, leave it to thoroughly dry, which can be a couple of days if the weather is not hot and sunny. When completely satisfied that it is dry, gently pull off the foil to leave the Artex shape behind. Fill in any odd holes or cracks that you don't want.

The rest of the scenery shell now needs covering so mix some Artex powder with a small amount of brown powder paint, add water to make a stiff, but brushable, mix and finally add a squirt of PVA to give it some added strength. This can then be brushed over the paper shell to give the basic contours that you require. By adding some extra mix, you can form the shapes of any paths etc, particularly across any slopes. Keep your brush wet to get a reasonable smooth surface finish. Blend the mix into the edges of your rock faces to give a realistic effect. By adding the brown colouring you have formed the basic earth colour, such that should you damage any at some time, the horrible white Artex won't show through.

Now comes the job of painting your newly constructed rock face – not as hard as it may seem. You'll need some brown and black paint, either powder, or better some cheap acrylics (as sold as part of a children's set!), a paint brush, an old household plastic spray container (as used for window cleaners, disinfectants etc), and plenty of paper towels. Fill the sprayer with water and add a drop of washing up liquid (to break the surface tension), and wet your rock face generously; then having put out some brown and black paint onto a suitable "pallet", brush small amounts onto the rocks. I stress "small" as the idea is to let the water flow into all the cracks and shapes made by the foil. By starting at the top, gravity will flow the colour down the face. If you put on too much paint, just spray on more water and mop up the excess with the paper towels. The idea is to get a gentle blending of the brown and black tints, whist still allowing the white of the Artex to show through. Experiment somewhere not too prominent before you attempt your North Face of the Eiger!

When completely dry, you can now start using your favourite scatter materials on the "earth" shell. I would recommend Heki, Woodland Scenics or Green Scenes as being particularly good. Remember to vary the textures as well as the shading – look at the real thing! The "puffable fibres" as sold by Heki etc are particularly good for parts of the "greenery" but that's another story. Add clumps of greenery to your rock faces in realistic places such as ledges etc. Remember, if you accidentally get a run of glue going down the rock face, just sprinkle some green scatter on it and it will look like you intended it to be there.

I hope this will encourage you to have a go and that the accompanying pictures show you a little more of the technique. Right, now to get back to training the spiders to build the catenary.