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BUILD NOTE

WW1 ROD Steel Bodied Couverts - 04/11/15

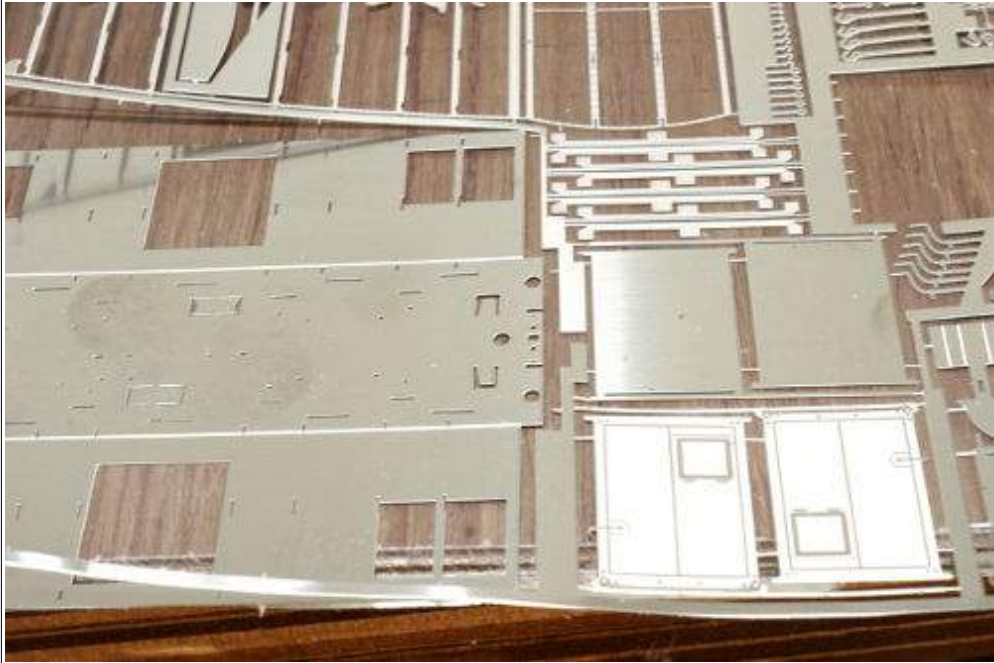
Once the Western Front had stabilised after the initial German thrust towards Paris had been halted by the British Expeditionary Force, the two sides found themselves in a stalemate, facing each other over a strip of no-mans land stretching all the way from the Belgian coast to the Swiss frontier. Initially, it was thought that the French railways would be able to handle the transportation requirements of the British armies, simply by allocating 2,000 wagons for their exclusive use. By 1915 however, it was realised that this was an insufficient number to feed the voracious appetite of the armies at the front for everything thing from bully beef to barbed wire, Stokes mortars to shovels, and field telephones to tank track oil. Indeed, by the end of the war, the British Railway Operating Division alone had been supplied with around 24,000 newly-built vehicles - in addition to the 31,000 requisitioned from UK private owners' and railway companies'.



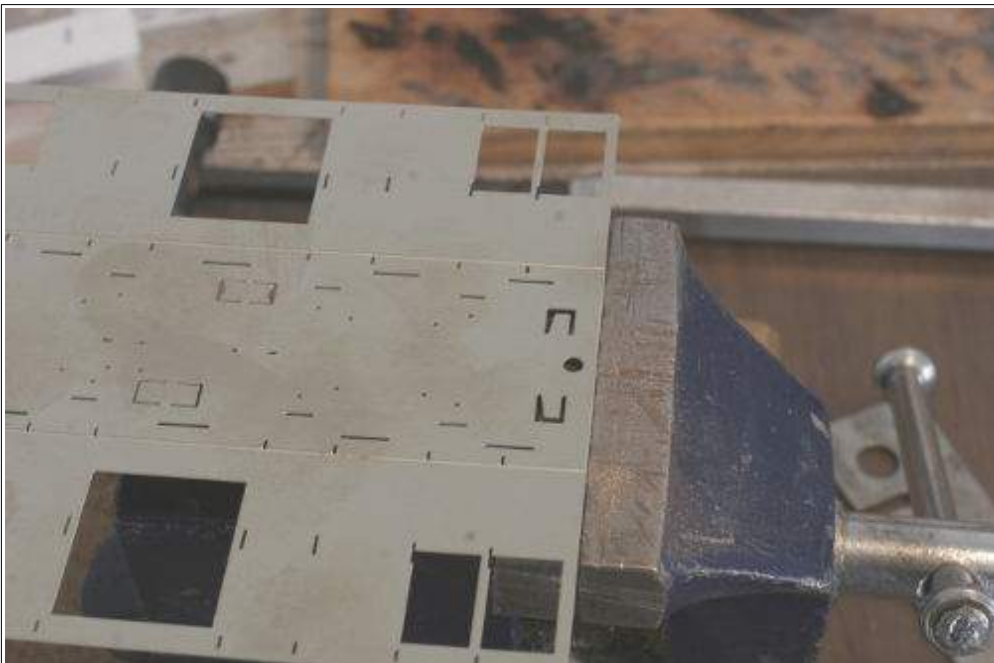
Wooden bodied Couvert built in UK to French norms. Note the lack of continuous brakes and the corrugated iron roof.

Whilst it proved relatively easy to muster enough open vehicles for coal, roadstone and ballast from home stock, meeting the need for closed vehicles was a different matter. With a canny eye towards their subsequent disposal after the war, several long-wheelbase continental types were selected for series production, including a nominally 15 tonne capacity pitched-roof Belgian design, and a 20 ton Nord example - most of which had corrugated iron roofs for protection against shrapnel.

In HO scale, French kit maker AMF87 have a steel-bodied variant of the Nord design in their range, some examples of which lasted until the 1950s. It is a relatively straightforward build, if a bit fiddly in places, on account of the small size of some of the components. However, the instructions include some good isometric diagrams of where everything should go, even if - like me - your main foreign language happens to be German rather than French.



A beautiful set of etchings - but where do they all go? Smaller pieces cannot be snapped off, so have to be separated with a sharp craft knife, working from one end. The doors are half-etched and need to be treated with particular care, to avoid damaging the integral lower runners.



The buffer beams are folded up first, taking care to get the fold as clean as possible to allow the vertical ends to sit flush with the ends of the sides....



Sides next. Use a stiff flat piece of sheet to extend the jaws of the vice sideways, if you cannot support the whole side at one go.



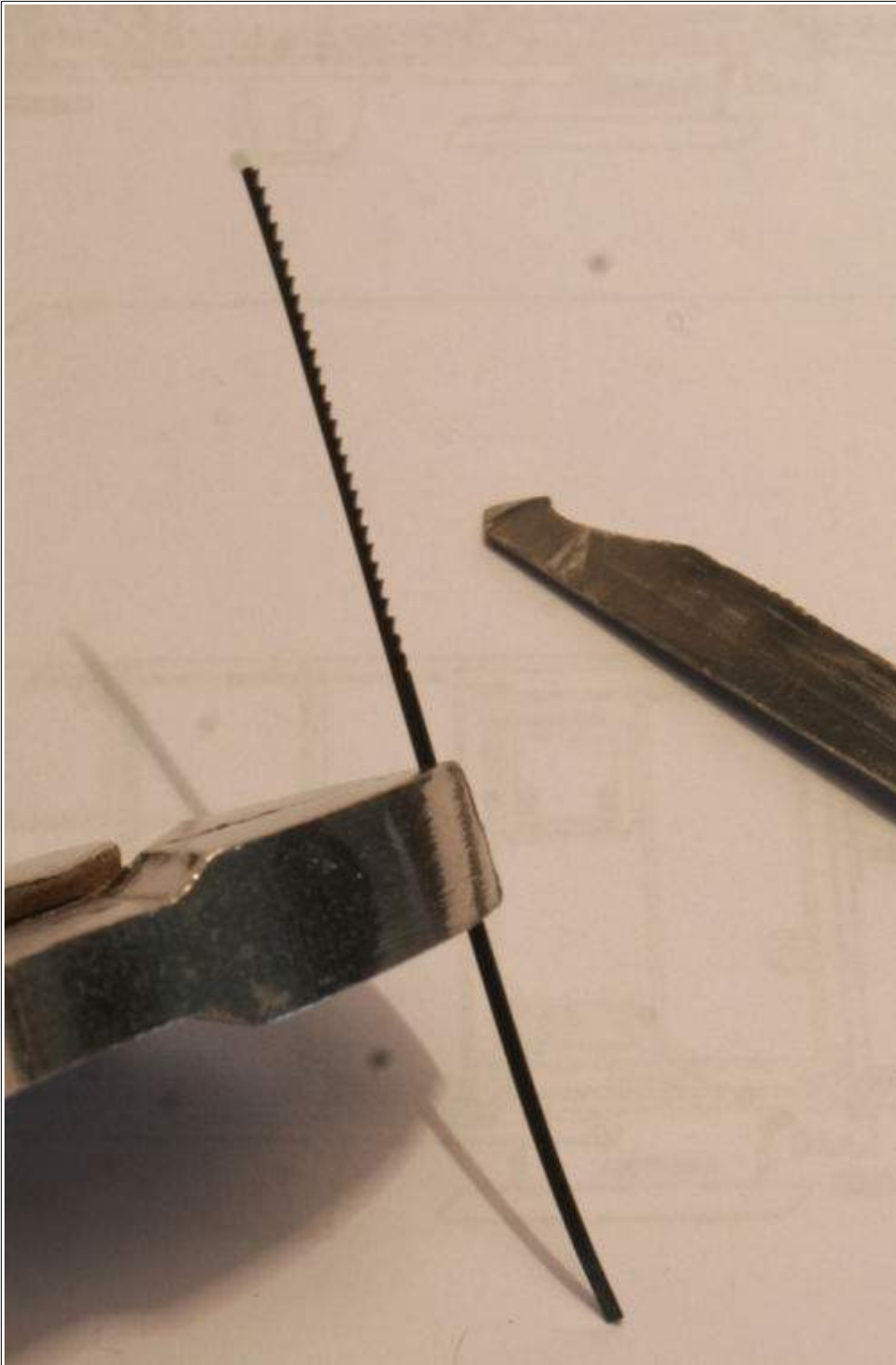
Doing the first side is easy because you can see what you are doing. Making the full 'U' however demands that you fold the already folded side up and over the outside of the vice jaws. If the vice is too wide front to back to allow this, the only way to achieve the fold is by extending the jaws upwards with a pair of stout metal strips that are higher than the model's own sides.



...Done.



Checking for squareness. It is not just a visual thing - the sides need to be vertical so as to match with the end pieces that need to be fitted in-between them later.



Often, you can find that halfway through the construction of a kit, a part will not fit in the slot it is supposed to. This can be due to a number of factors - a build misalignment elsewhere, too-tight tolerances in the design of the kit - or simply that there is no hole where there should be. The scrap of broken fretsaw blade held end-on in a pair of small mole grips will allow you to 'saw your way out of trouble' as it were by elongating a drilled hole or extending an existing one. The other tool is a junior hacksaw blade end ground into a hook shape, which can be used to score new fold lines on etched brass and nickle silver, if required.



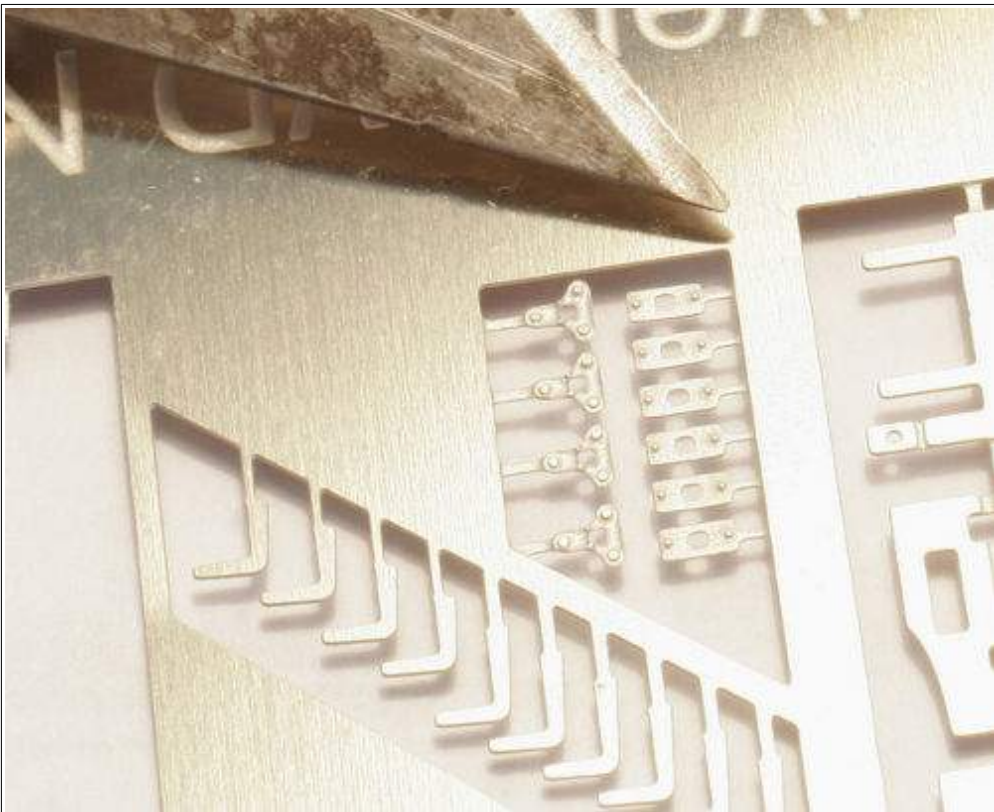
Two more indispensable tools for working with etched kits. The pin vice is for holding drills from 1mm down to about 0.5mm - though beware that small pin vice jaws as here may only grip the shank at one point. The drawing pin in the end allows one to 'twiddle' the pin vice without wearing a hole in the finger. The other tool is an old junior hacksaw blade ground to an angle point, for opening out too-small slots for locating tabs.



As I have two more of these AMF87 kits to complete in addition to the ones pictured here, so once a section of bar had been milled to the correct height to mount the Kadee couplers on the Couverts, I went ahead and marked out centre lines and drilling centre pops for four plus two spares, and then drilled and tapped them all in one go. Cutting off the individual pads only when all operations had been completed.



Reducing a section of brass bar down to the right thickness for the Kadee coupler mounting pads. It was a toss up between filing the bar down or milling it in the lathe, and the latter seemed like marginally less work, plus promising a bit more uniformity across the 8 pads I needed to make. Note that the bar is supported at the rear with a spacing block, so that the jaws only have to exert a clamping force rather than have to contend with the cutter trying to push the bar away from itself as well.



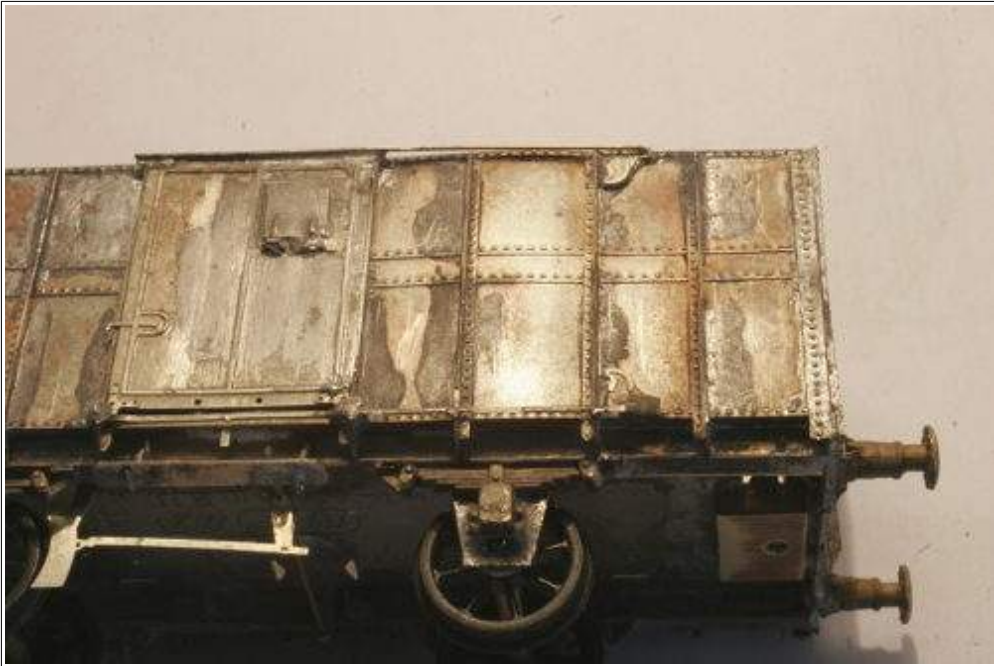
A close up of the etch showing the end lampirons, and - centre of picture - the hinges for the door ventilators. Be aware that these also need to be 'cranked' so as to sit properly on the surface of the sliding doors.



Roofs come pre-bent, but require two cross-ribs to be soldered in near each end. When the time comes for the roof to go on for keeps and after checking for fit at the eaves, the edges of these cross-ribs will be liberally coated in contact adhesive, and then popped into the body.



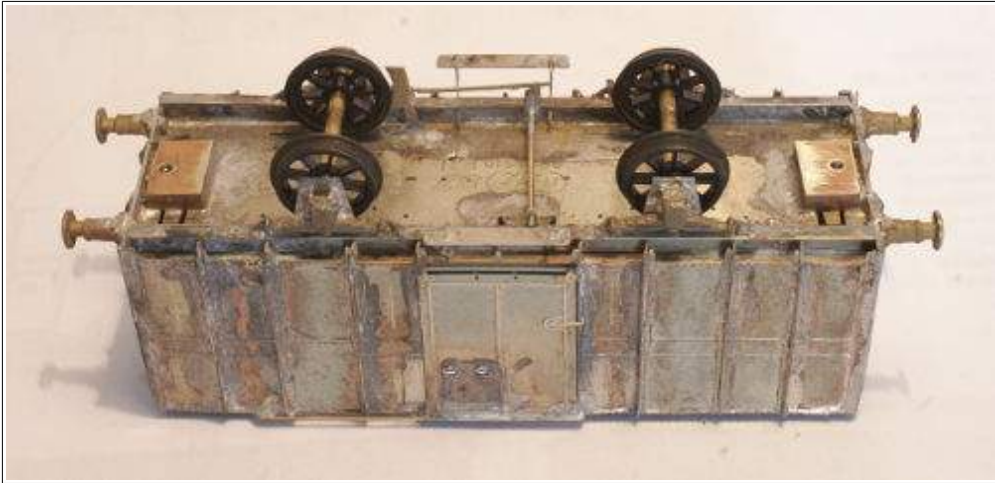
Overhead view of the corrugated iron roofs fitted to these and other ROB WW1 closed wagons. Normally, the roofs would have been made at this time from timber, covered with canvas and then tarred, but the idea behind the corrugated iron was to protect the contents - or the men or horses inside - from shell splinters.



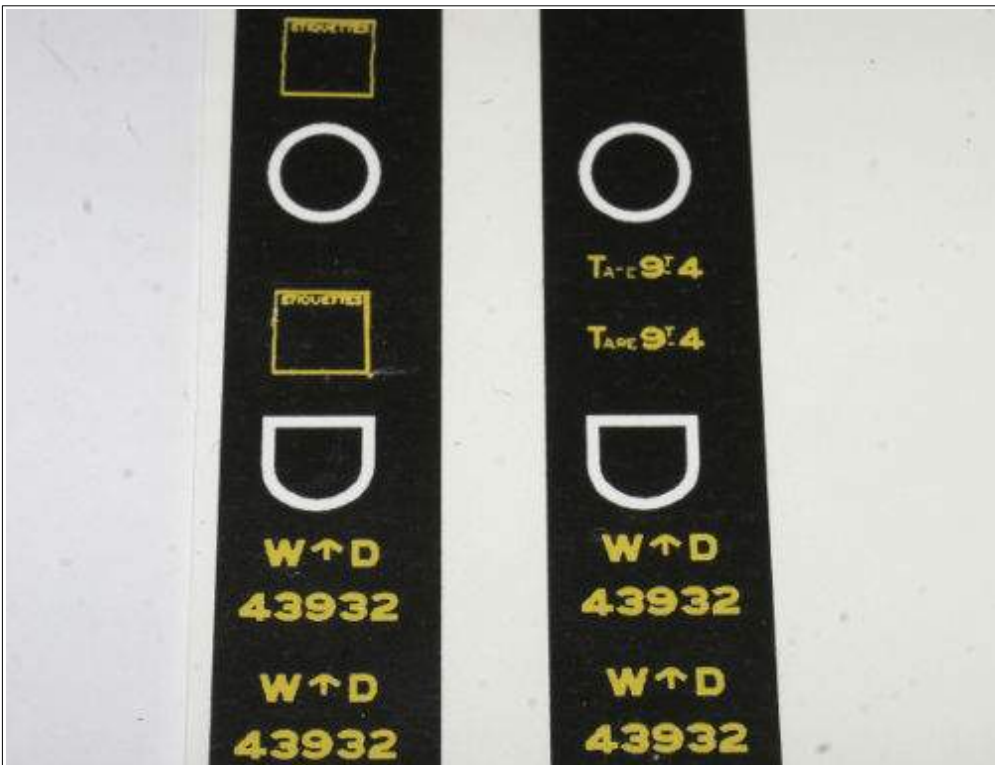
An area to watch when soldering the sides onto the basic folded up wagon structure: you can see how the area to the right has warped and bulged outwards, thanks to the heat expanding the thin nickle silver, compounded by the gassing of the liquid flux trying to escape. Thankfully something that is not too apparant once the model is all finished..



Don't worry, it looks far worse than it is. A Couvert ready for its primer coat, with all the surfaces either glass-fibre or brass suede brush buffed. Most of the joints on these two models were soldered, though I did resort to super glue for the lower door handrails and parts of the brake gear. Basically if nothing comes off at the pre-paint preparation stage, then it is highly unlikely to come off when the model is completed.



There is not much to the underneath, barring the two coupler mounting pads, a cross shaft for the single-wheel brake shoe system. Perhaps through my inability to understand French, I could not find anywhere on the fret a second support bracket for the cross shaft, so had to make my own with a bit of brass scrap.



Blackham dry transfers are first rubbed down onto a conventional waterslide decal film, and can then be treated - apparently - just like ordinary transfers, if as here, the model is an awkward shape. Ignore the white lettering and the black background. Ignore the white lettering and the black background. I was not sure this technique would work, so re-used areas of a spare home-mand transfer set for another HO locomotive.



'Only Allah is perfect..' but with the naked eye, as opposed to the cruel enlarging glare of the close-up camera, the model should pass muster as part of a WW1 divisional supply train. The all-over black livery carried by these Couverts does tend to mask some of the kit's fine details, though I have tried to provide some subtle definition of the constructional features by dry brushing a bit of dirty black around the bottoms of the sides and around the headstock area so as to break up the uniformity of the finish.

