

HAND-DRAWN

Only three models of pedestrian electric vehicles have ever been produced, all from London firms.

Robert Newson examines these items.

London has always had a strong presence in the manufacture of cast metal toys. This was due initially to the growth of Britains Ltd from the 1890s, through the transition from lead to zinc in the 1930s/40s, to Lledo in the present day — the only major British manufacturer still with no far eastern production. In researching some of the more obscure manufacturers, I have been surprised at how often a London connection has emerged. For this article, I am looking at pedestrian electric vehicles, the three known models of which all come from London firms.

Pedestrian electrics were widely adopted as successors to the horse and cart, particularly for milk deliveries, which inspired these three models. The Post Office also used such vans for local parcels deliveries, but the main use in which these vehicles are likely to be seen today seems to be by local authorities for street sweeping.

The largest of the three models was made by Charbens, of Holloway in north London. The zinc die-cast model is a heavy, thick casting. The top and bottom halves of the body are cast separately, and there is also a separate internal floor to the van. Opening rear doors are hinged between the top and bottom castings. Wheels are the usual Charbens pattern in solid metal. Cast underneath in rather small faint letters is CHARBENS MADE IN ENGLAND. There are two versions, either dark blue with DAIRY MILK printed in white, or orange with HOVIS printed in black with yellow outlines to the letters. The Hovis version also has the outline of a side door printed. A tray painted off-white accompanies the Hovis van, with separate brown loaves — these are all die-cast. The milk version presumably had crates of bottles, but these are missing from my example.

The figure shown with the Charbens vans in the illustration is the common Charbens milkman, hollow-cast in lead and usually found with their horse-drawn milk carts. A different baker's boy, and possibly

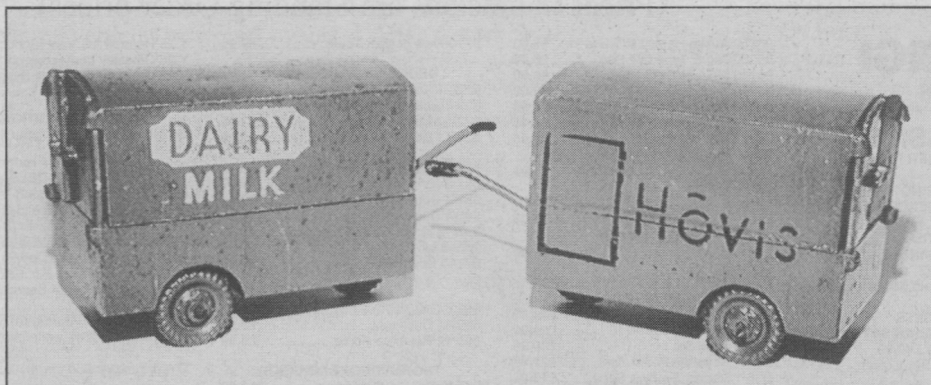
a different milkman were used with the electric vans. The baker's figure is shown with the van in Norman Joplin's book *British Toy Figures*.

The Charbens vans were introduced in the late 1940s, and both are mentioned in the advertisement from *Games & Toys* February 1950. They do not appear in the 1953 Charbens catalogue, but 'Milk Delivery Van, Man' was shown as no. 36 in the 1955 catalogue. By 1957 (the next catalogue I have seen), no. 36 had become the Maudslay Horse Box.

The Charbens vans are hard to find in complete condition, and metal fatigue, that scourge of all Charbens zinc production, often affects one or both halves of the casting.

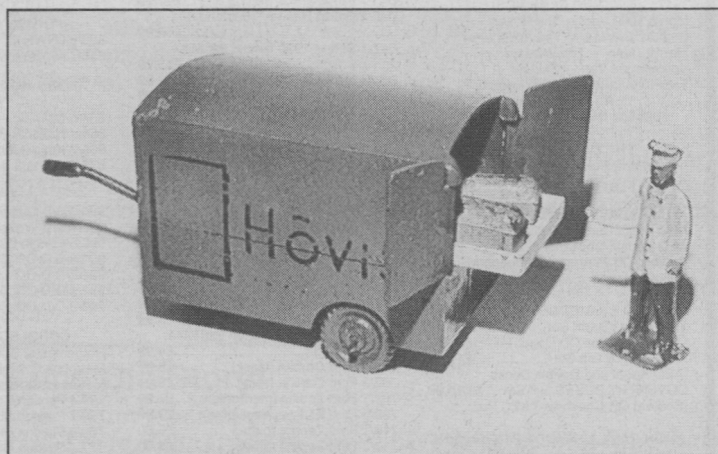
The next model in size is the nicest of the three, by Clarke's Toys & Novelties Ltd. It is a far superior casting compared with the Charbens, basically a one-piece, thinner and lighter in weight with no metal fatigue apparent on any that I have seen. The model is open at the rear end, but has separate sliding side doors. The stops for the sliding doors, on the floor of the van, could not be cast in place as this would prevent the mould from releasing. Instead they were ingeniously formed by punching through the base casting to make a small projection from the floor on either side. The control handle is a separate unpainted casting attached to the front wheel mounting, and wheels are solid rubber.

Cast underneath are the words BY CLARKES TOYS & NOVELTIES LTD. DCA MADE IN ENGLAND COPYRIGHT DESIGN, the



The two versions of the Charbens van.

Charbens 'Hovis' van showing the tray of loaves.



'Express Dairies' van by Clarke's Toys & Novelties Ltd.

letters DCA being enclosed in a diamond shape. Two liveries were available, UNITED DAIRIES in orange and EXPRESS DAIRIES in dark blue. Both types have paper labels on the sides which look to have been cut to shape by hand! The accompanying milkman is die-cast and holds his hands at an uncomfortable angle, allowing him to hold the control handle in one hand and a milk crate in the other. The crate is an unpainted tin plate pressing.

The box illustrated is for the United Dairies version and was printed in orange on white card. I have never seen a box for the Express Dairies version — perhaps it was printed in dark blue?

Clarke's Toys & Novelties Ltd was incorporated in May 1949 and listed in the London street directory for 1950 as 'toy manufacturers' at 322A King Street, Hammersmith, in west London. Prior to 1950 Clarke's Toys, toy dealers, were listed at this address, but in 1951 they

became Clarke's Universal Repair Co, ladies' handbag repairers! Probably their venture as toy manufacturers rather than retailers was not a success, and as far as I know they made only one model. This is a great pity because it is a well-designed toy, carefully made and finished.

DCA was presumably the die-casting firm involved who may have done some or all of the painting and assembly, and the most likely candidate here is Diecast Alloys Co of 42 Corsham Street, Hoxton, N1. They advertised 'Pressure castings in zinc, aluminium, lead and tin. Die-casting consultants.'

The Clarke's vans are very hard to find in any condition.

The third model is by Benbros, who were based at Walthamstow in east London, and appeared as no. 7 in their 'TV Series' of miniature models in 1955. Later, the 'Mighty Midget' style of box superseded the TV Series.

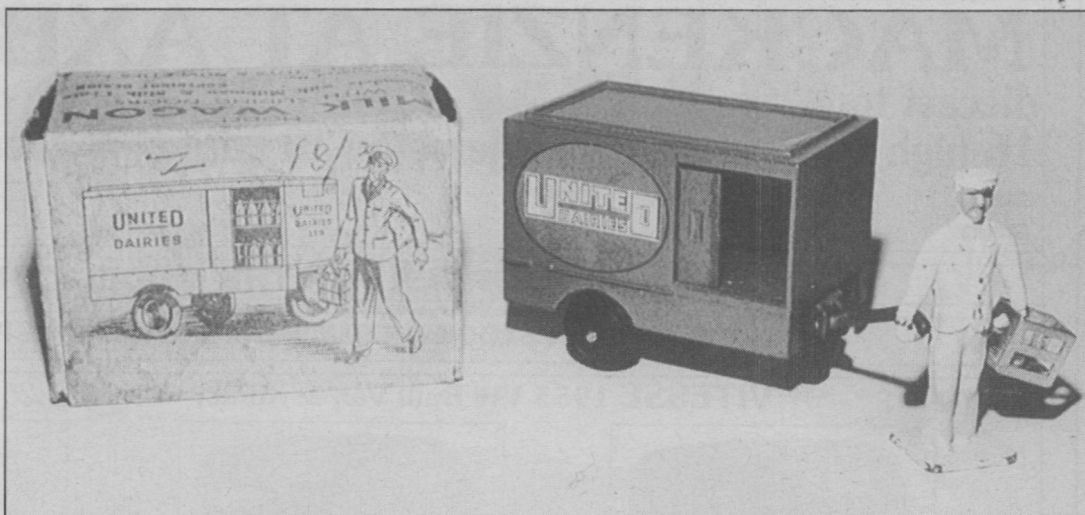
The outer frame of the model is one casting, including a board along the centre of the roof, a battery box below, EXPRESS DAIRY cast on each end and MADE IN ENGLAND BENBROS cast underneath. The crates of bottles are two separate pieces which plug into either side of the main casting — they are a tight fit and do not usually come astray. Wheels are unpainted metal.

The first version was painted orange with white crates, and this is usually found in the TV Series box. Later versions, usually in Mighty Midget boxes were dark blue (more appropriate for Express Dairy) or the ubiquitous Benbros metallic blue, both also with white crates. All these versions seem to have had the paint rubbed off the EXPRESS DAIRY lettering and the crates outline after painting. This made the lettering stand out in an unpainted finish, and left white milk bottles within unpainted crates — quite effective and an example of paint being chipped before the models left the factory!

The Benbros milkman has a hole through his right hand to take the control handle of the van, but this hole is often covered by flash on later models.

The Mighty Midgets continued to be sold up to 1965, when Benbros ceased all toy production. The milk wagon is not a rare model, and boxed examples can be found for £10-£20.

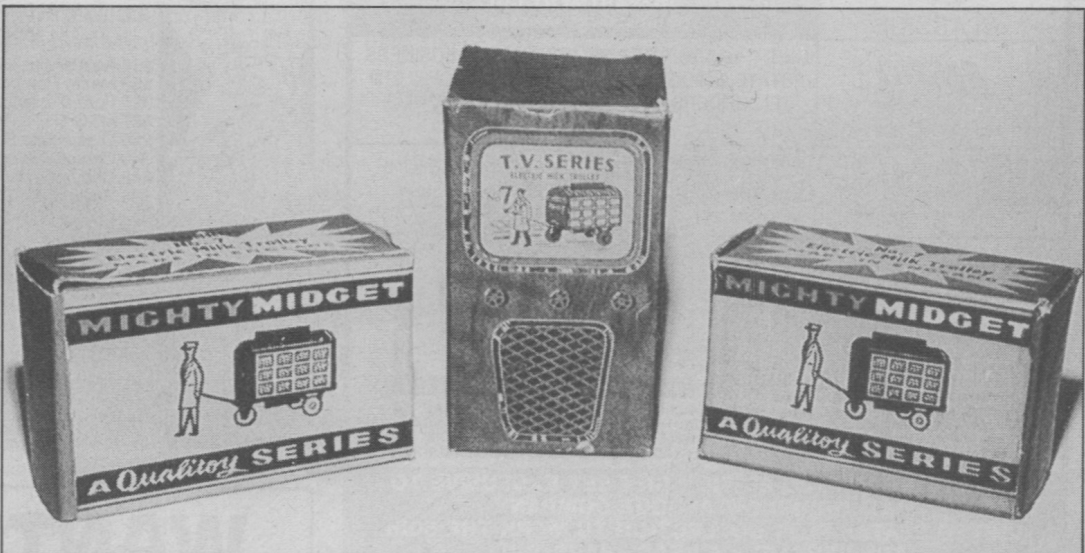
It is worth repeating at this point that there was no connection between Charbens and Benbros. Charbens was started by Charles and Benjamin Reid



'United Dairies' version of the Clarke's van with box.



The Benbros electric milk trolley.



TV Series and Mighty Midget boxes for the Benbros model.

around 1929, and Benbros was established in the late 1940s by the brothers Jack and Nathan Benenson. Collectors in the past sometimes jumped to the conclusion that the 'Ben' in Charbens was the same as the 'Ben' in Benbros, which is not the case at all.

Thanks to Patrick Talbot for the loan of models for this article.



Left to right: Benbros, Clarke's and Charbens models of pedestrian electric vehicles.