

Avoiding the “Flat Earth” Look

Many model railways are far too obviously built on top of a flat baseboard. Most or all the track is at that level, many of the roads are, and only in one or two places is it cut away to allow say a stream to go under the railway. But railways are rarely level in Britain, nor most streets and roads. Stations were built level if possible, but the track either side was often on a slope, even if only slight. It is common, for example, to find the ends of sidings furthest from the station at a different height to the running lines as the sidings remain level and the running line falls or rises. And in the same way that gently curving track looks better and more interesting than straight track, these slight differences in heights add to the appearance of a layout.

Railway lines are rarely at exactly the same level as the surrounding ground. Over the length of a typical model it might well go from a shallow cutting at one end to a slight embankment at the other. Heights were chosen not only to minimise earthworks and gradients, but also so that approximately the same amount of material was removed from cuttings as was needed for embankments.



A Commercially Made Open Plan Baseboard

If you plan the baseboards in conjunction with your track plan, and use open top baseboard construction, it is no extra work to have the track and scenery at whatever level you want, and it will look more interesting and realistic. Open plan baseboards, if you are not familiar with them, consist of a solid frame with cross pieces every 6 – 12” and diagonal braces between them to make it rigid. The tops of the cross pieces (often ply) are not level but have roughly the profile of the layout surface. Strips of ply cut to the shape of the track bed are attached to the top where the railway goes: obviously this can go up or down as you want. For roads, buildings, etc., foam can be used to form the surface, so you save weight.

If you are modelling a real location then you know the height of the land, but for a fictitious

layout it will look more convincing if you think about the ground levels at the layout planning stage, and try to make the location and height of the track match where it would have been sensible to build it. Have a look at some similar real locations and see if you can copy from them.

The other part of planning baseboards is where the joins will come. Many layouts simply divide the area into equal sized rectangular boards, which are easy to build and help storage and transport, but may not be the best suited to making the layout look good and run well. The most important thing about joins is you don't want them under points; in fact you want them as far away from points as possible, particularly on the main running lines. A train that is running smoothly will rarely derail on points, but one that is bouncing around on the track because it has just gone over a slightly uneven baseboard joint may.

The baseboards don't have to be all the same size or rectangular. For example, you might make 2 near rectangular boards join at a slight angle so as to better follow the track.

The more realistic the appearance of the layout, the more the joins will stand out and detract from the realism. The eye/brain is extremely good at recognising straight lines, so try to hide or disguise them by cunning positioning or scenery:

- If there is a road front to back, can you make the join along the edge of the pavement? Even perhaps if it means the join cannot be at right angles to the front edge. Similarly if there is a fence or a hedge, or a barrow crossing over the tracks in a station.
- Can you have a lift-off section of scenery that goes across the join? For example a building or group of buildings, or a plot of land or roundabout. This is one of the easiest and most effective ways to hide the joins, as it lets you move the real join (the edge of the base of the lift off area) so as to break up the straight line join, and to put it somewhere it is easier to disguise.
- Place other objects over or near the join: vehicles; people; trees, etc. Anything for the eye to focus on in preference to the join.
- Joins in the sky are difficult to hide. Could you make the backscene (or perhaps just the sky) a single roll up sheet rather than permanently fixed to each board?