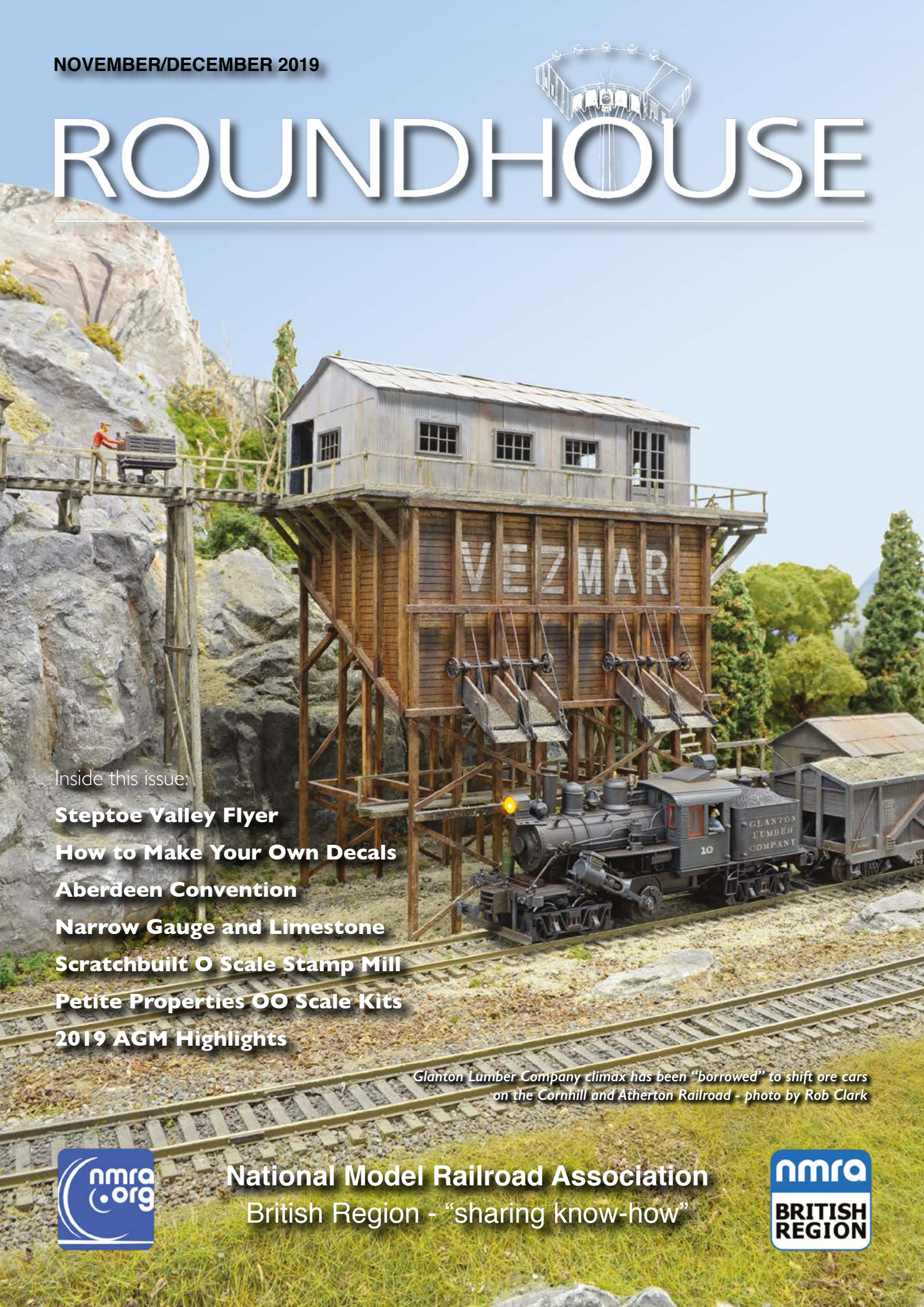
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2019

ROUNDHOUSE



Inside this issue:

Glanton Lumber Company climax has been "borrowed" to shift ore cars on the Cornhill and Atherton Railroad - photo by Rob Clark

National Model Railroad Association
British Region - "sharing know-how"

Lettering and Sign Techniques

Rob Clark

Photos by Rob Clark

We have many opportunities to apply images to our models ranging from a road name on a locomotive to large "ghost" adverts on buildings. Commercial products are available, but to get maximum flexibility, personal satisfaction and economy, I like home-grown solutions.

In this article I am showing some of my "tool kit" of my solutions. The only pre-requisites are a computer, some word processing software and an inkjet printer. A multi-function unit is useful to allow scanning, but this isn't essential and a digital camera can work just as well.

We'll start with locomotive and rolling stock lettering using decals. Waterslide decal paper is available for ink jet and laser printers, both in white and clear versions. Clear paper works best on light surfaces and white on dark surfaces. Laser printed decals can be applied immediately after printing, but those created on an inkjet printer require 20 minutes drying time and then sealing with a few thin coats of spray varnish to protect the ink from water.

The main issue with decal paper is the inability of all but some specialist printers, to print white.

I find the most practical way to deal with this problem is to use white paper and print a background image that has the same color as the model subject. The lettering becomes a stencil and the white paper shows through the background colour.

The background image for example a locomotive cab or tender side can be obtained either by scanning the model in a multifunction printer, or taking a photograph. Either way the resulting image is then cropped down to the size of the decal using your chosen software. In the case of Microsoft Word the image is inserted into a document and then a right click opens a menu with a crop option. Picture "handles" can then be used to zoom in on the part of the model image that the decal is to be applied to. Let's assume you have your base image, suitably sized. Insert your picture of the base colour and use the Format/Arrange option to ensure the picture will "wrap" behind the text. ***Photo 1***

Type your text I'm using Railroad Roman 1916 font, which you can Google to get a free download and then modify it to suit your preferences – note that I have changed the scale on the character spacing to 66% to get the look I prefer. ***Photo 2***

Finally, change your font colour to white it will "disappear", but it's still there and drag the colour image over the text. The result can be printed on white decal paper and then applied to your model as normal, making sure you trim your decal as close as possible to the letters and use a few applications of Micro Sol to settle everything into any surface detail. ***Photo 3***

After the decal is dry I use a fine brush with the same paint that I used for the locomotive or as close as possible to hide any paper edges that are showing. Final weathering blends everything in. ***Photo 4***

By far the easiest source of authentic advertising signage is the web and Google is a great way of obtaining artwork. For example, a search for "1930s

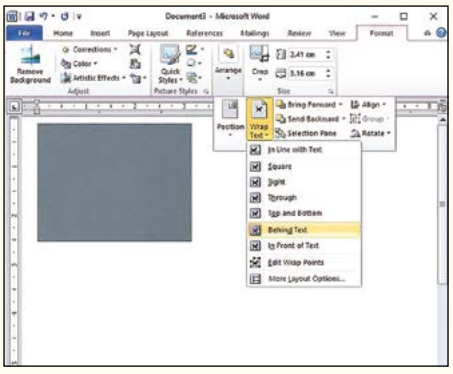


Photo 1

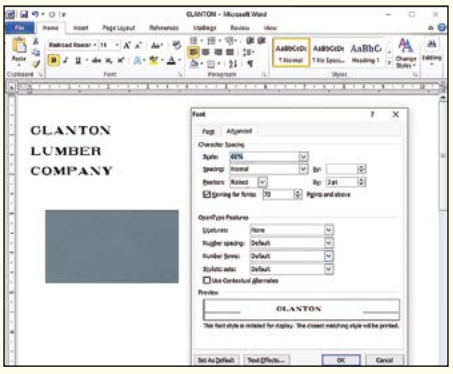


Photo 2

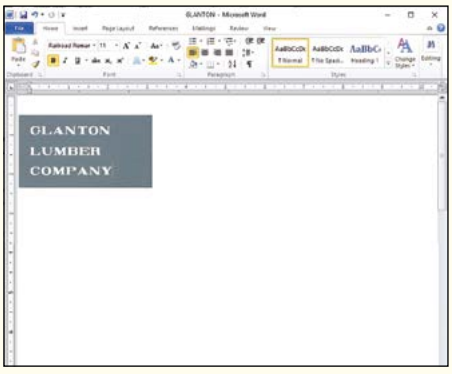


Photo 3

Photo 4

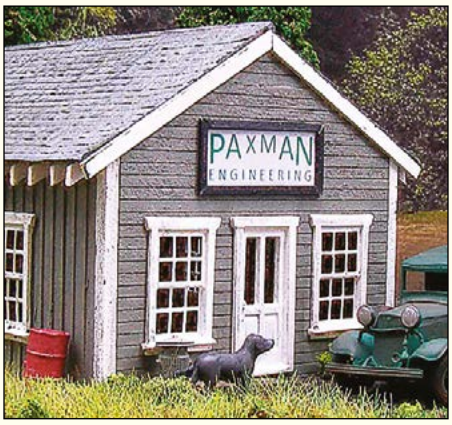
US adverts" will turn up a lot of useful images that can be downloaded. If you are using a Windows PC, then I would recommend trying the "Snip and Sketch" tool that comes as a standard feature. Using this allows you to capture a part of any image on your PC screen. Mac users can use the Skitch app. Provided you only use it for your own model railroad, then there are no copyright issues.

If you need a sign for an industry you have created yourself, then the simplest solution is a computer printed image that is just applied to the building. Black lettering with a white background or reversed can be done with a laser printer. The main issues are font selection and if you are not using a wood frame, hiding the edge of the paper which will have an un-prototypical thickness.

Font Selection is very much dependant on the period that you are modelling and you should take some care to use a font style that would have been or is in use at the time. For example – Edward Johnsons san serif font screams London Underground and Gill Sans is a development used by the LNER and the Flying Scotsman. If you Google "Vintage American fonts" or "Railroad fonts" you will get lots of sources both free and paid of suitable US style lettering. It's all about picking something that is both historically correct, visually appealing and representative of the object that it promotes.

If I am not using a frame and directly applying the image to the subject, I reduce the thickness of the paper using very fine sandpaper and a gentle touch to remove as much material as possible. The trick is avoiding perforation and this is very much one of those techniques which is improved by practice. I always print more than one copy of my final image to allow for disasters.

The photo above shows both a web sourced advert and a simple word processing software company sign.
Both are framed with strip wood which hides the paper edge.



In the case of Paxman engineering above, I designed my own company logo style advert using Microsoft Word by utilising different size letters. This is ink jet printed on plain white paper and then framed with strip wood painted black. Weathering powder or chalk dust applied with a cotton bud completes the effect.

There are occasions when no computer font will do, such as in this example of "The Shack" above, where I wanted to reproduce a sign that was originally painted free-hand on the building.

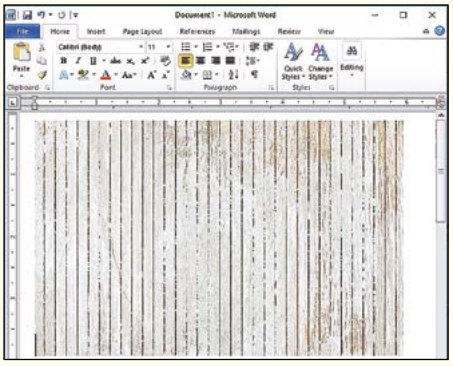
I ended up using the prototype photograph and created a decal from this image. I am fortunate in having Photoshop, so I can correct some horizontal skewing due to the original photograph not being taken "straight on". However, word processing programs like Microsoft Word or a free alternative like WPS Office usually have 3D rotation features which perform a very similar effect. Click on your picture and open up the "Format Picture" option to see what is available.

After some weathering the decal blends in well with the model building's wood facing.

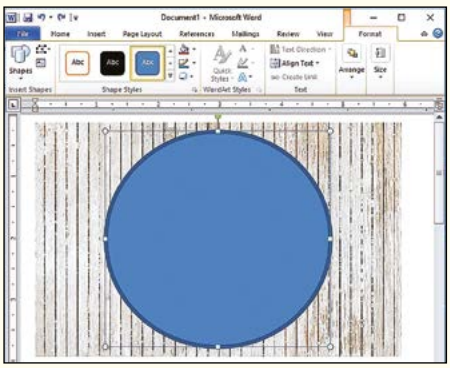
"Ghost" signs are old signage where you can see the background through the image – typically the brick or wood siding onto which the sign has been painted, as shown above. Creating this kind of effect is easier than you might think.

Firstly we need a source image for the sign and an image of the building side where we want the sign to appear in "ghost" format.

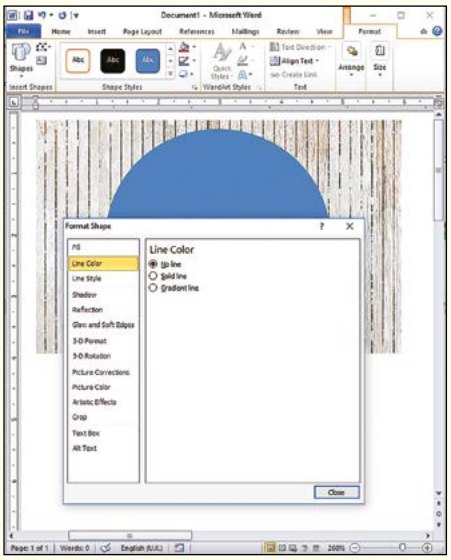
The garage sign was located using Google images and I used a photograph of the outbuilding while under construction. Cropping and rotating the image 90 degrees provides the necessary base image.



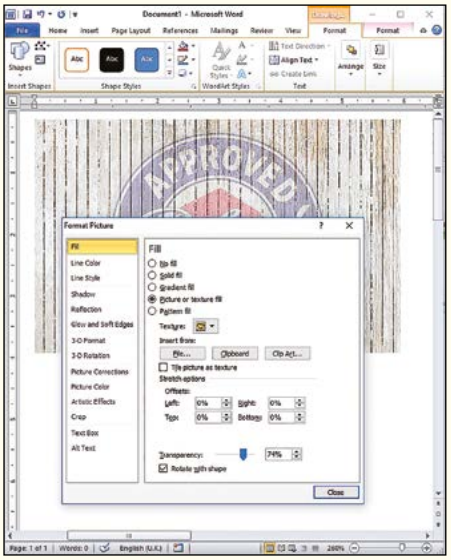
Here I've inserted the actual size picture of the building's wood siding into a Word document.



The next stage is to insert a "Shape" which matches the desired ghost image.



Next, the line surrounding the shape is removed – right click the image to get the "Format Shape" option.



Finally, fill the shape using the picture fill feature. Insert the ghost image using the "insert from file" option and then adjust the transparency to the desired level (in my case 74%). Printing can be done on ordinary copier paper and then applied to the building side. For the garage sign I cut out the roundel, sanded it thinner and also used a knife to score the plank lines after the adhesive had dried.

This photo of a scratch built low relief building shows three different sign techniques in action. The vertical "Printing" sign is created in Microsoft Word by using white text over a black background and then framed with strip wood painted black. "RWS Clark & Sons" (my grandfather, father and uncle ran the family printing business back in the 1950s incidentally) is created in the same way as the "Printing" sign, but is inserted into an image of the brick building side and then slightly ghosted. The "Curtiss" sign is a Google sourced vintage image, also inserted and ghosted. I use weathering powders applied with a cotton bud to both blend and age everything.

Individual large letters as shown on the title photo can be useful when you have obstructions on the face of your target building which make using a single sign or decal awkward. They are also just plain dramatic! I utilise a stencil technique using word processing software to create large lettering. After printing any colour you want on copier paper, comes the laborious task of cutting out each letter using a very sharp craft knife.

This is easier and certainly quicker with angular, rather than rounded fonts. Remember that you can change the look of your letters greatly through experimenting with scaling and spacing options within your word processing "Font Formatting" features. After applying with thinned white glue, the effect is greatly improved by scoring through the letters along plank lines and of course some liberal weathering.

Hopefully this has inspired you to try some home grown lettering or sign projects. It's cheap, relatively easy and very flexible as well as great fun – so what are you waiting for!

Rob Clark