

# The Shillingstone Light Railway

by Derek A. Bayliss

THE *Guardian* for 11 July 1975 carried a report that:

"An entire light railway was among the lots . . . at Christie's fourth annual sale of vintage vehicles held yesterday at Lord Montagu's estate at Beaulieu, Hampshire.

The Shillingstone Light Railway, from the Dorset farm of the late Sir Thomas Salt, fetched £7,690. The 10½ in. gauge railway, comprising 1½ miles of track, four locomotives, a 12-passenger coach and four trucks, was used for transporting pig foodstuffs and manure.

"Sir Thomas had set out to prove that he could run his farm more efficiently with the train than with traditional farm machinery. It paid for itself in the first year.

"The bulk of the railway was bought by a Mrs. Webb from Penzance, Cornwall, who plans to open a miniature railway for the public."

This article gives a fuller account of this unusual railway.

Sir Thomas Salt had railways in his blood, for his grandfather was chairman, and his father a director, of the North Staffordshire Railway. As a boy he was allowed to drive the engine on the Leek and Manifold narrow-gauge line. Once he felt a bump while driving through Swainsley tunnel, and found a dead sheep on the front buffer-beam when the train reached Hulme End.

But his own career lay in the Army, and later in farming at Shillingstone, which is near Blandford Forum in Dorset. He was active in Dorset life, serving at different times as County Commissioner of Scouts, chairman of the county magistrates and High Sheriff. He acted as host to the Q.C. who conducted the Crichel Down inquiry in 1954, and one reminder of this was a hole in a stout oak door at Shillingstone House, which resulted from a bet between them about whether a pistol could fire a candle through the door.

Meanwhile his interest in railways was not neglected. For example he helped Blandford Forum to obtain, for display in the Town Hall, the nameplate and crest of the "West Country" Pacific named after the town.

More importantly, he accepted an invitation in 1959 to become Chairman of the newly formed Welshpool and Llanfair Light Railway Preservation Company Ltd., successor to the Preservation Society of 1956, and remained Chairman until his death in 1965. He played a key part in the negotiations for leasing the Railway from British Railways

and in the crisis following the collapse of the bridge over the Banwy in floods in December 1964. Sadly, he died only a day after the first train had crossed the rebuilt bridge.

In 1952-3 a very wet and muddy winter made it impossible for his farm tractor to take feed to the pig sheds in the fields round the house. He decided to show that the job could be done more economically—and enjoyably—by a narrow gauge railway. The Victorian engineer and landowner Sir Arthur Heywood had shown to his own satisfaction, by his Duffield Bank Railway of 1874 and later in his book *Minimum Gauge Railways*, that 15 in. gauge was "the smallest width possessing the necessary stability for practical use". Since then, of course, successful passenger-carrying miniature railways had been built on narrower gauges; but for railways to carry a significant industrial or agricultural traffic, day in and day out, as Heywood had in mind, few would have disagreed with him.

Sir Thomas was one of the few, and chose a gauge of 10½ in. for his railway, mainly because it was already widely used for more conventional miniature railways. Construction began on 21 June 1953 and the first locomotive was delivered at Easter 1954. As with the later extensions, flat-bottomed rails were laid on home-made concrete sleepers, resting on coarse gravel ballast.

As first planned, the railway connected the farm buildings behind Shillingstone House with the pig feeding points in the fields on either side of the drive, and was rather over ½ mile long. A short branch near the farm buildings led, through a bridge or short tunnel under a continuation of the drive just beyond the House, to a firewood store and the manure heap.

The railway was a complete success, carrying feed to the pigs daily in any weather and proving useful from time to time for other farm jobs, and also carrying occasional parties of visitors. The pigs had a Pavlovian reaction to the train, and would come towards it even when it was carrying passengers. Sir Thomas estimated, as the *Guardian* said, that the railway paid for itself in the first year; and in 1962 he quoted the fuel costs of the first locomotive, *Belle*, which did most of the work, as 25s. (£1.25) a year. But it is not clear whether his costings included the labour costs of building and maintaining the line. He once said that when his fellow-farmers said—as quite a few did—that they were thinking of building similar lines, he told them that they could only make a success of it if

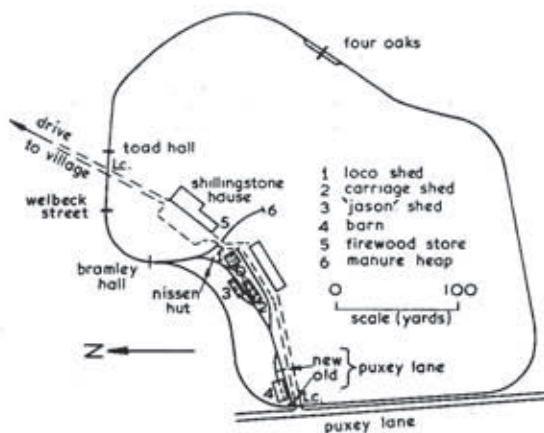
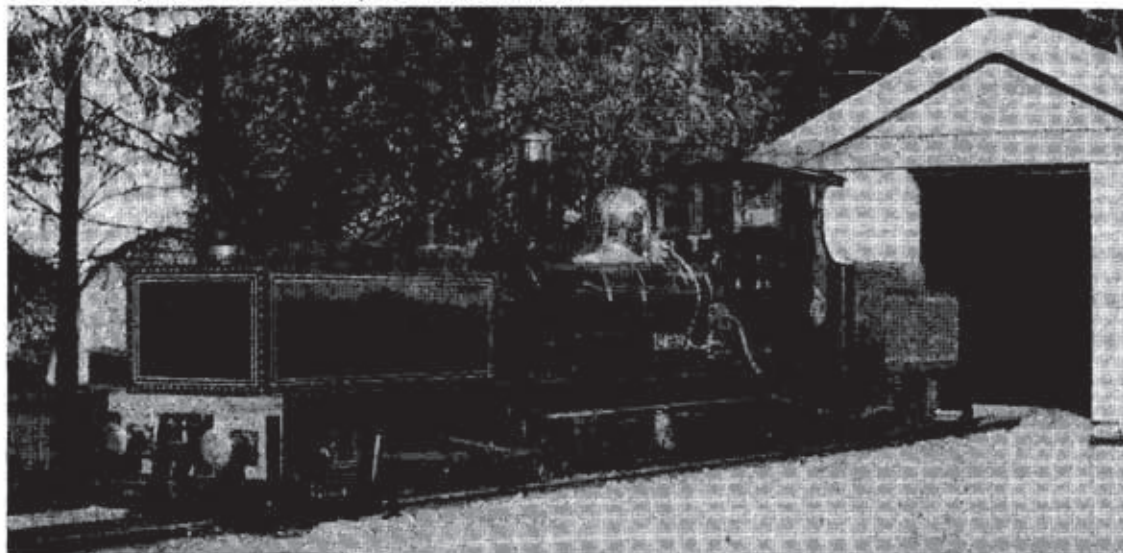
they gave to the railway the time they had hitherto spent on hunting. After that, he added, none of them went ahead!

*Belle*, mentioned above, was a 0-4-0 petrol locomotive built in 1953 by David Curwen, with a Petter AVA-1 single-cylinder engine. It could pull five tons, and was used practically daily throughout the active life of the railway. In 1960 it was joined by no. 2 *Cyclops*, a Bo-Bo diesel built by Guest of Stourbridge, with a centre cab and a 5 h.p. Petter PC3 engine. This however was too rough on the track, and was soon rebuilt with a Ford engine and a cab nearer one end. But the new engine was under-powered, and in Spring 1962 was replaced by a 35 h.p. Daimler Scout engine with five speeds each way. At the same time its headlamps were changed, and it thereupon became no. 3 *Ulysses* because, Sir Thomas explained, *Ulysses* had put out the *Cyclops'* eye. It had a magnificent livery of bright blue with black and maroon underframes and name and number plates of red and polished brass. The railway gave it little chance to show its full paces, but it made an impressive passenger locomotive for visiting parties and when the annual village fete was held in the grounds.

Meanwhile in the summer of 1961 a four-wheel, four-seater "permanent way" trolley, *The Wasp*, had been built at Shillingstone (apart from the welding), around a 197 cc. Villiers engine. It had four speeds each way, and was mainly used to take small groups of people round, though it could pull a wagon if needed. Its design, with back-to-back seating, was inspired by the Welshpool and Llanfair Light Railway's Wickham trolley.

Hitherto the railway had had no steam locomotives; internal combustion, though unromantic, was

*The ex-Surrey Border & Camberley Garratt locomotive.*



THE SHILLINGSTONE LIGHT RAILWAY

more efficient for daily work around the farm. But Sir Thomas had always hoped to bring steam to the line, for his pleasure if not for daily use, and now the chance came to buy a highly unusual locomotive. The short-lived 10½ in. gauge Surrey Border and Camberley Railway had had two 2-6-6-2T Beyer-Garratt articulated locomotives built by Kitson in 1938. After that line closed, one is thought to have gone abroad. The other, works no. 4013, was sold to the Royal Anchor Railway at Liphook, Hants., where it did little work. In the mid 1950s it was sold to someone from Rhodesia, who sent it to Cherrys for regauging. This was unsuccessful, however, and it went into store at Beyer Peacocks, where Sir Thomas bought it in 1963.

It quickly became his pride and joy. Before it came to Shillingstone, it was "narrow gauged" by



The engine shed and turntable. "Belle" on the left, "Ulysses" on train on right.

fitting a higher and wider cab and a taller chimney and other minor modifications, and was splendidly repainted in dark red. A new shed was built specially for it, with a single raised track to help maintenance. But sadly it proved a great disappointment. Chronic injector trouble was eventually cured by a member of the Welshpool and Llanfair's locomotive department. But a tendency to derail on sharp curves proved more intractable, and it is doubtful whether no. 4 *Jason*, as it became, ever got right round the now extended railway. The trouble was caused partly by the long rigid wheelbases of the two engine units, particularly as the leading and trailing axles were not in pony trucks but in the same frames as the driving axles; and partly by the wheels themselves, which had shallow flanges and narrow "miniature" treads unsuitable for the curves at Shillingstone.

There were five coaches and wagons, all bogie and most built by Curwen. No. 2 was a pig wagon, no. 3 a flat wagon, and no. 5 a tank wagon for whey. The three-compartment coach no. 4, open but upholstered, had been built on the frame of the first flat wagon, no. 1. Finally no. 6 doubled as a manure wagon and, after cleaning out and the addition of a superstructure, numbered 6A, as a second coach. There were plans, never carried out, to build a three-coach articulated passenger set, with air brakes, and a low roof to go under the drive on the manure heap branch; and also to build more wagons at Shillingstone.

The hub of the railway was among the farm buildings behind Shillingstone House. The layout and buildings here were improved over the years, and latterly comprised a three-road engine shed, a two-road carriage shed, a turntable, a number of

sidings, and the separate shed for *Jason*. There were signals outside the sheds, but they were removed about 1963. They were to be replaced by disc signals but only the first of these was installed. The original line began a short way beyond the yard, at a dead-end station called Puxey Lane. Like all the stations, this had a concrete platform, and a name-board in the familiar London Underground shape but coloured black and green. The line then met a siding from a barn and ran past the yard. A station called Nissen Hut adjoined the drive just beyond the House, which it served. The manure heap branch then trailed in on the right. Next came Bramley Hall station, and then Welbeck Street, both serving the piggeries. The line then crossed the drive on the level. Road traffic was warned by "Crossing No Gates" and "Stop For Blink" signs (the latter a Scandinavian road sign, indicating flashing lights), and, when they were working, flashing lights and a bell, operated by track relays. But these were often out of action because of insulation problems and in 1962 because a lorry ran into them. Immediately beyond the drive was Toad Hall station, with a small shelter which, however, found its way into the adjoining field as a pigsty about 1963, when a breeze-block wall was built along the back of the platform. The line then ran through plantations and fields, mainly downhill, to a terminal loop at Four Oaks.

At this stage the line was shaped like a rather open, and irregular, letter C. In 1961 Sir Thomas began work on an extension to complete the circle. This led from Four Oaks through another plantation, across rough ground at the bottom of a cabbage field, and uphill through a cutting to Puxey Lane. The lane and farm buildings left too little

space for an end-on junction here, however, so the new line cut through the platform of Puxey Lane station at right angles, and looped round to join the old line by a trailing junction just before Bramley Hall. The yard was thus now on a terminal branch within the continuous loop of the "main line". The earthworks of the extension were completed, and most of the track laid, by 1962, and it was opened in 1963. As a minor consequence, Puxey Lane station was closed on 25 May 1961 so that the new track could cross it, but remained in existence with a name-board calling it Puxey Lane (Old Station) and giving its date of closing. A Puxey Lane (New Station) was built a little nearer the yard.

On the extension, problems were experienced with moles, which undermined the track in the cutting. Sir Thomas maintained that they could be driven out by directing *The Wasp's* exhaust into the ground.

The railway now had 1½ miles of track—with, incidentally, a maximum gradient of 1 in 50 and a minimum curve of 60 chains' radius. But Sir Thomas had plans for further improvements and extensions. The pig feeding points were to be taken off the main line by building loops, to allow through running at feeding times. Four Oaks was to have longer platforms, a pig feeding point, a refreshment hut, station seats, Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway lamps from Shillingstone station, and a period piece cast-iron "Gents" from Lightmoor in Shropshire, which meanwhile languished on the manure heap branch. This branch, which in 1962 was overgrown and threatened with cutting back to the firewood store, was now instead to be extended across the middle of the circle in an S, to a junction, possibly triangular, in the Four Oaks

area. Also near here, a branch was to be built on the outside of the circle, with a viaduct 100 ft. long and 70 ft. high en route and ending in a loop. This would allow *Jason*, which was too big for the turntable, to be turned, while the proposed layout as a whole would permit continuous running in a variety of directions.

Alas, it was not to be. Sir Thomas died on 15 August 1965 before these plans could be realised. Within a year the pigs had been sold, some of the piggeries leased out to neighbouring farmers, and regular traffic on the railway came to an end. Passenger trains continued to run for the annual village fete; and about twice a year, for some years, parties from the Welshpool and Llanfair Light Railway Preservation Company and the Bourne-mouth Model Railway Club went to Shillingstone to tidy up the line and look after the stock, pending a decision on the railway's future. Sections of track were rebalasted with shingle from Poole Harbour, using ordinary garden spades and forks, and the locomotives were maintained in much the same way as an ordinary motor car and given an occasional run round the railway. On one occasion two members of the party inspected the track by punting round it on a flat truck.

Finally the decision was taken to sell the railway, and now it has passed into history. While there have been, and still are, longer and more ambitious estate railways, it deserves to be remembered, not only for the pleasure it gave to its owner and others, but because it showed the capacity of such a narrow gauge to do a useful job in all seasons and for over ten years.

My thanks are due to Lady Salt and to Messrs. Bob Vice and Henry Gunston for help in preparing this article.

## BOOK REVIEWS

### "Steam Coasters and Short Sea Traders"

by Charles V. Waine, Ph.D.

Published by Waine Research Publications, Mount Pleasant, Beamish Lane, Albrighton, Wolverhampton. 152 pp. Price £7.95.

Here is a book which will prove very useful to builders of scale models of steam coasters and similar vessels, as some excellent hull drawings are included, also drawings of typical boilers and engines, pumps and condensers.

Chapters include The engine room, Early steam coasters, Clyde "Puffers", Short and long raised quarterdeck coasters, Thames up-river colliers, Coastal tankers and Owners and traders.

The work is very well illustrated, though with reproduction by litho from typed MS, the quality of the text has inevitably suffered. R.M.E.

### "The Bowes Railway" by Colin E. Mountford

Published by the Industrial Railway Society, I.R.S. Publications, 47 Waverley Gardens, London NW10. 186 pp. Price £2.70 (softback) or £3.50 (hardback), postage 50p.

This is the second edition of a work first published in 1966, which has been greatly enlarged by the addition of much new information.

The Bowes Railway (known as the Pontop & Jarrow Railway until 1932) was one of a number of colliery railways developed in North-East England to carry coal to the rivers for shipment. Its oldest section was designed by George Stephenson and opened in 1826. During its life, it served 13 collieries with another three on the surviving section of the Pelaw Main Railway, which was linked to it in 1955. The book is well illustrated and well produced. R.M.E.

## STAKING TOOL ARTICLE

*We must apologise for an error in the first part of this article in the last issue, pages 1078-1082, where the wrong drawings were published. The correct drawings are included in this issue, pages 1149-1151.*