

A HISTORY OF THE COATE WATER MINIATURE RAILWAYS

**A short history of two
10½" gauge railways in the
early 1950s**

Peter Scott

**MINOR RAILWAY
MINI HISTORIES - M2**

COATE WATER MINIATURE RAILWAYS

10¼" gauge. 1950 & 1952

Introduction

In 1950 and 1952, two 10¼" gauge railways were operated in Coate Water Park, Swindon. Both featured steam traction, but were only installed as temporary lines. These notes cover both railways, using Council Minutes, contemporary newspaper reports and what little has been previously published as resource material.

Coate Water Park, Swindon

Coate Water Park lies south east and around 2 miles from the centre of Swindon. The main feature - a large lake - was originally built in 1822 as a reservoir to provide water for the Wilts & Berks Canal. Coate Water remained outside the boundary of Swindon until the Borough's expansion in 1928. With the Canal abandoned, it became a popular park with the residents of Swindon - changing rooms and a wooden diving board were added. In 1935 the wooden diving platform was replaced with a 33ft high concrete platform in an Art Deco style, which was given Grade II listed protection in 2013. However, swimming in the lake has been prohibited since 1958. In the 1970s a smaller lake was created as a flood storage lagoon, which in 1976 was made Wiltshire's first Local Nature Reserve. Most of the site, now known as Coate Water Country Park, and all the water have been declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in order to protect the wildlife and wildflower meadows.

1950 Railway

By 1950 Swindon Borough Council was considering how Coate Water could be developed and a temporary miniature railway was laid down for a few weeks in August that year, both to judge public opinion, and to provide an additional attraction for the Jubilee Celebrations that were being held marking 50 years since the formation of Swindon Borough. At their meeting on Tuesday 22nd August 1950 the Parks, Markets & Cemeteries Committee gave its approval to the Chairman of the Committee in "*authorising Messrs David Curwen Ltd of Baydon, to operate a miniature railway at Coate Water for the period 4th to 18th August 1950*". It will be noted this approval came after the event!

The 10¼" gauge railway was officially opened on Saturday 5th August 1950 in time for the Bank Holiday events at Coate Water. These were advertised in the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Thursday 3rd August and the *Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser* of Friday 4th August 1950, and included the railway with fares noted as Adults 1/- and Children 6d. The *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Friday 4th August 1950 had a good photograph of the railway showing the locomotive and at least one coach, apparently carrying a number of children. The caption stated it was trial run - indicating the first passengers may have been carried on Friday 4th August. The driver was stated to be Miss Alison Burgess. However, a report in the same paper noted "*the first train will not get under way until tomorrow afternoon, when a member of the Corporation is expected to give it the all clear*".

The advert for the Borough of Swindon Jubilee Celebrations, which appeared in the *Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser* of Friday 4th August 1950.

The *Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser* for Friday 11th August 1950 reported, under the headline "Test Railway at Coate", that "the first train started on Saturday afternoon". The report went on "A blue engine weighing 12cwt pulling two open carriages capable of carrying 12 children and six adults will steam round 250 yards of circular track laid on the east bank of Coate Water". The paper noted the railway was extremely popular on Bank Holiday Monday (7th August). It also explained the reasoning behind the provision of the railway, calling the locomotive "utility", it noted "the track is only temporarily laid. The whole thing is just an experiment to test public reaction. From it the Corporation hopes to gain data valuable in the possible construction of a model railway at Coate as part of future development schemes". The railway was operated by David Curwen Limited of Baydon, Marlborough. This company had been incorporated on 6th April 1946 and started building miniature railway locomotives in early 1947.

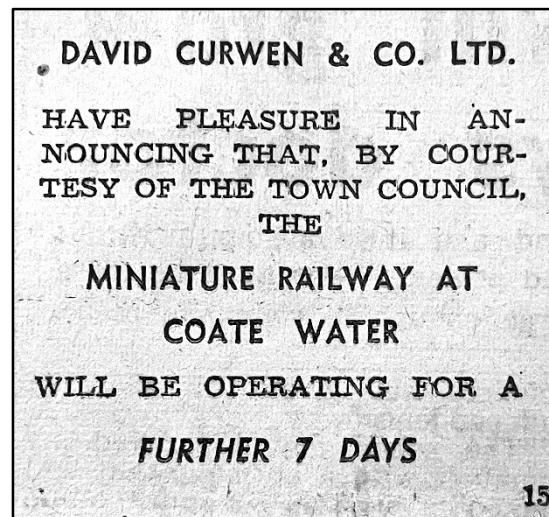
The locomotive used was new, having only just been completed. Construction of this locomotive was started around 1939 by Herbert Coghlan of Newbury as a 10½" gauge 0-4-2T, using some 9½" gauge castings (wheels & cylinders) from Bassett-Lowke. However, it only got as far as a set of parts before it was acquired by David Curwen Limited, who completed the locomotive as a

10¼" gauge 0-4-2, in Caledonian Railway style in a blue livery, with a 6-wheel tender. It was given the number 1750, although the picture of it noted above in the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Friday 4th August 1950, shows it was not numbered at that time. Its number, using David Curwen's system, indicates it was completed in July 1950, so was virtually new when it was put to work on the line at Coate Water. The railway would have been located at around SU178825, presumably on some of the open ground on the east side of Coate Water.

According to the Council Minutes the railway was to have run until Friday 18th August 1950, but it must have proved reasonably successful as adverts appeared in both the Monday 14th and Tuesday 15th August 1950 editions of the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* stating it would be "operating for a further 7 days". Therefore, the railway seems to have run until about Monday 21st August. At their meeting on Tuesday 22nd August 1950 the Parks, Markets & Cemeteries Committee received a report from the Town Clerk in connection with "activities carried on at Coate Water during the summer months and in particular concerning the public response to

(a) the provision for an experimental period of a miniature railway and (b) special attractions provided for the Jubilee celebrations". The Committee must have considered the railway popular enough with the public and gave its approval to the "*provision of additional attractions and amenities while retaining the natural beauty of the area*". Initially, these were to include a "*miniature railway, illuminations and other minor amenities*". However, it wasn't until the summer of 1952 that another miniature railway was laid at Coate Water.

This notice appeared in the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Tuesday 15th August 1950 (and the previous day's edition, with exactly the same wording).



1952 Railway

The first we hear of a railway following the experimental line in August 1950 was in the minutes of the meeting of the Parks, Markets & Cemeteries Committee on Tuesday 17th June 1952, when on "*meeting a deputation of the Directors of the Baydon Miniature Railways Ltd and a report of the Officers*" it was resolved that "*facilities be afforded to the Baydon Miniature Railways Ltd to install a miniature railway on the East Bank of Coate Water*". The actual position of the railway was to be agreed by the Company and the Borough Surveyor. The takings were to be split between Baydon and the Corporation, with Baydon paying the Corporation 7½% on the first £500, 12½% on the next £250 and 15% thereafter. The Town Council approved the Committee's resolution at their meeting on Tuesday 1st July 1952, as reported in the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Wednesday 2nd July 1952. Here the paper reported the railway would be installed by the "*same company which operated one there during Swindon's Jubilee celebrations in 1950*". Although, as already noted, that line was operated by David Curwen Limited - the two companies, however, were very closely linked. The paper also reported that it was planned to use an "*Atlantic locomotive, some 12ft long with three carriages on a track about 570 yards long. There will be a turntable at one end of the system and a loop line at the other*".

Little time was lost in laying the track and getting everything ready, and the railway was opened on Saturday 12th July 1952. The *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Monday 14th July 1952 reported "*With the Mayor of Swindon (Ald A E long) at the driver's controls, and a load of aldermen councillors and their friends in the carriages behind, miniature steam engine "2271" stood ready to pull out. The scene was Coate Water, on Saturday afternoon, and the opening of the miniature railway season, which will continue through the summer*". The paper went on to report the station, of wooden construction with a nearby water tank, was called "*Coate Water Station*". On the opening special train, with the Mayor at the controls and despite him "*expertly*"

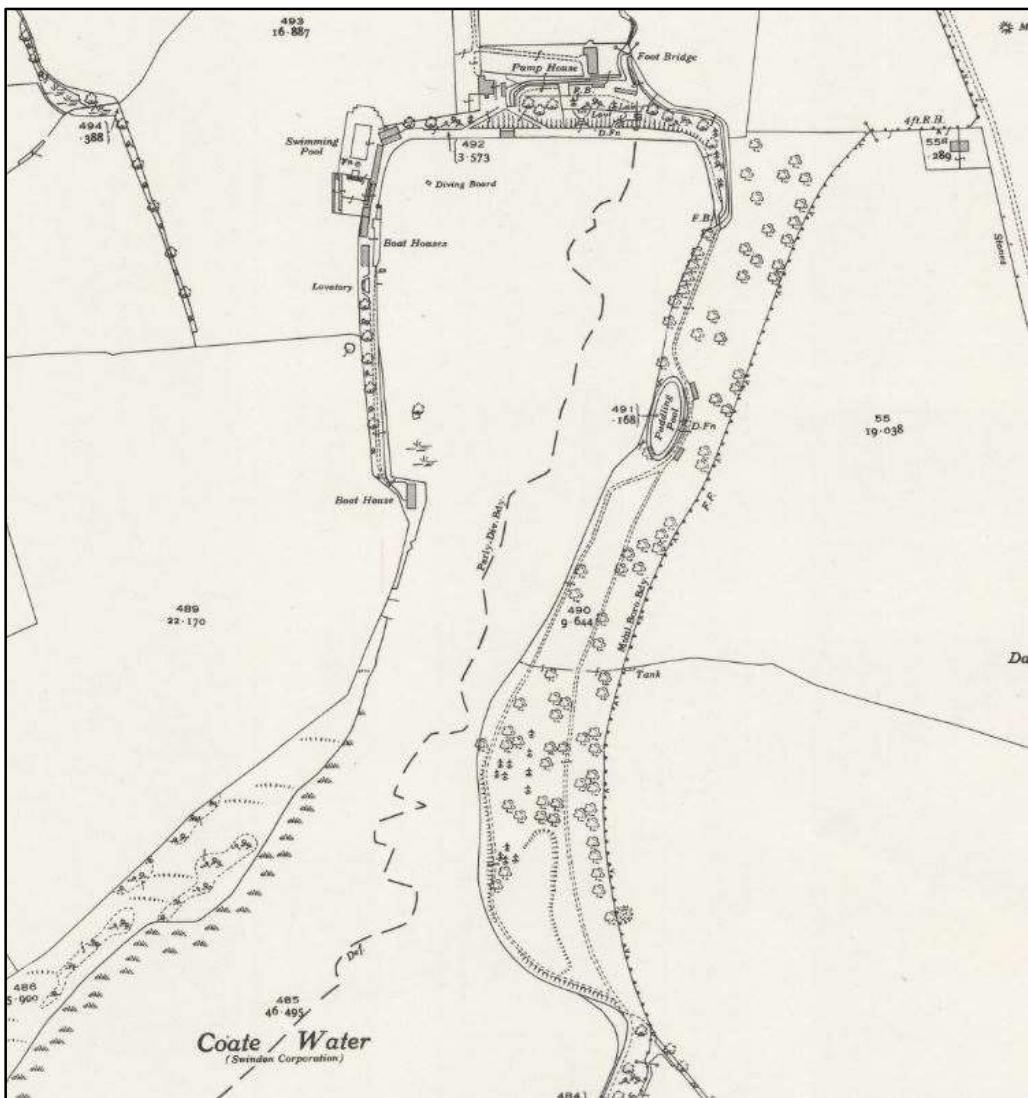
tooting the whistle, the locomotive slipped on starting "*There were a few seconds of wild flurry of wheels and swift panting of the little engine, as it struggled to get under way; then the wheels began to grip and the puffing became more steady*". At the far end of the line the passengers "*alighted to allow the engine to reverse*" - this was an end-to-end line. The paper noted the return trip was easier "*for the gradient was in favour of the engine*". The report was accompanied by a photograph of the Mayor and his passengers in the station. A similar report appeared in the *Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser* of Friday 18th July 1952, which also had a nice photograph of the locomotive surrounded by small boys looking on in admiration. The railway would have been located at around SU178825, on the east side of Coate Water and very close to the site of the 1950 railway.

The detailed report in the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Monday 14th July 1952 confirmed the identity of the locomotive - this was No.3548, a freelance 4-4-2, built by David Curwen Limited in May 1948. It had previously been at work, since new, on Baydon Miniature Railways Limited's line in the Kursaal, near the seafront in Southend, Essex. That line had closed at the end of the 1951 season, so the locomotive had become spare and available for use at Coate Water. Now numbered 2271 (the significance of the number is not known. In an error in the same article, and also that in the *Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser* of Friday 18th July 1952, it was also referred to as 2272. Photographs clearly show it was numbered 2271) it was turned out what the *Swindon Evening Advertiser* reported as following "*that of some of the early types of GWR engines - a sort of compliment to Swindon*". This was a lined green, with the Swindon Borough crest on the tender.

The *Swindon Evening Advertiser* of Friday 25th July 1952 quoted a Swindon man saying the railway could be "*made into a wonderful attraction. There should be a track right round the Water, passing through the bird sanctuary, with tunnels, cuttings and all the trimmings. People would come from miles around to see it, and ride on it*". However, Harry Longford, general manager of Baydon Miniature Railways Limited was not so enthusiastic, noting, while it was a good idea, the capital cost would be £5,000 or £6,000 to prepare the undulating ground and lay the track. He went on to say a longer ride would entail raising the 6d fare for children, which the Company "*had always declined to do, in spite of rising production and maintenance costs*".

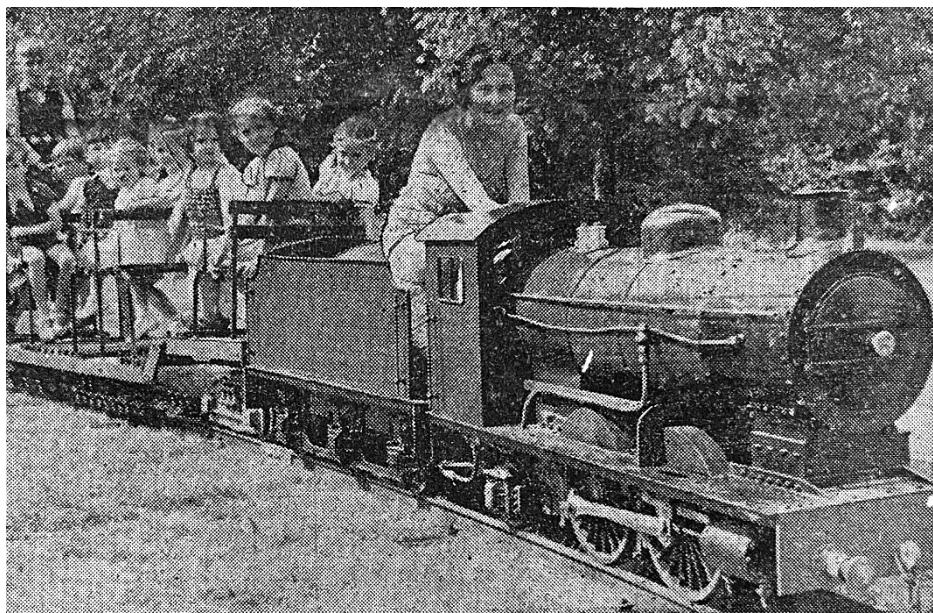
The railway was presumably closed and removed at the end of the 1952 summer season. The Borough Treasurer reported to the Parks, Markets & Cemeteries Committee at their meeting on Tuesday 18th November 1952 with "*regard to the income received in respect of the Miniature Railway at Coate Water*", but no details were recorded in the minutes. However, the Council must have been reasonably satisfied with having a miniature railway at Coate Water, because at their meeting on Tuesday 17th November 1953 to discuss the development of Coate Water, the Parks, Markets & Cemeteries Committee approved that the "*Borough Surveyor do negotiate with the Directors of the Baydon Miniature Railways Ltd*". However, nothing seems to have come of this and there was no further mention of a miniature railway in the minutes, at least up to May 1955.

In 1965, the North Wilts Model Engineering Society constructed a small circuit of raised 3½"/5" dual gauge track at the north east corner of Coate Water. In the late 1960s this became a ground level track, with 7¼" gauge added in 1980. Now operating as the Coate Water Miniature Railway, the line has been extended a number of times and provides a complex and popular train ride with visitors to Coate Water Park.



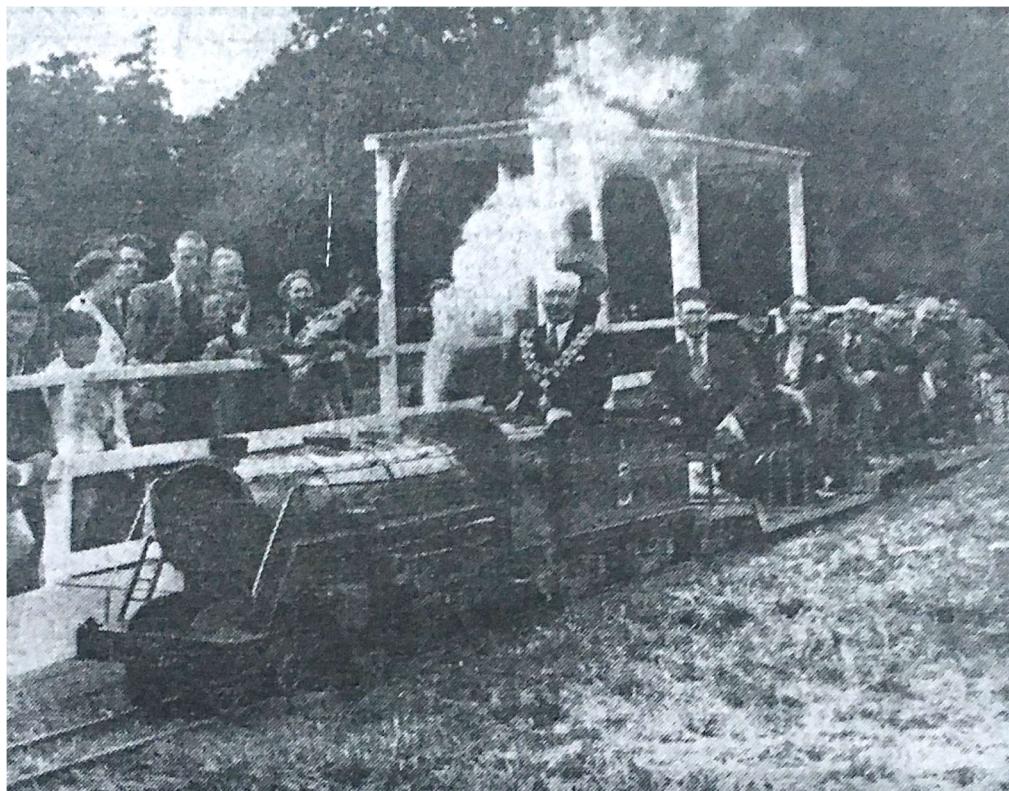
An extract from an Ordnance Survey 25" map, revised in 1943 and published in 1947. Both railways would have been located on the East (right-hand) Bank of Coate Water and to the left of the Swindon Borough Boundary (which is marked by a dotted line) - probably somewhere in the vicinity of the Paddling Pool.

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1950 Railway. This view was captioned "*Miss Alison Burgess driving the train on a trial run before the official opening tomorrow*". The locomotive is 1750, a 0-4-2 newly completed by David Curwen Limited. It certainly does look new in this view, where it is un-numbered.

(Swindon Evening Advertiser. 04/08/50)



1952 Railway. Swindon Mayor, Alderman A E Long, is sat in the driver's seat of Curwen Atlantic 3548 (here numbered 2271) in Coate Water station, ready for the official first train.

(Swindon Evening Advertiser. 14/07/52)



1952 Railway. A delightful view of a group of small boys gathered around Curwen Atlantic 2271 (3548), which had previously run at the Kursaal Amusement Park, Southend.

(Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser. 18/07/52)



1952 Railway. A nice view of 2271 at Coate Water in the summer of 1952. Note the Swindon Borough crest on the tender and lining out details on the tender, cab side & boiler.

(S. Townsend Collection)

Summary

1950 Railway

Opened: Saturday 5th August
Closed: Monday 21st August (approx)
Layout & length: Circular, 250 yards

1952 Railway

Opened: Saturday 12th July
Closed: End of 1952 summer season
Layout & length: End-to-end, 570 yards

Locomotives (10½" gauge)

1950 Railway

1750	0-4-2	Herbert Coghlan/David Curwen Ltd	1950	Caledonian Railway	1
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1952 Railway

2271	4-4-2	David Curwen Ltd	1948	Freelance	2
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- 1 From: new.
To: Skegness for temporary railway in connection with the 1950 September Carnival and then to Exmouth Miniature Railway, which opened 12th May 1951.
- 2 From: Kursaal Amusement Park, Southend (where numbered 3548).
To: Baydon Miniature Railways Limited and by March 1964 sold to Audley End Railway, Essex.

References & Sources

Swindon Borough Council Committee Minutes:

Wiltshire & Swindon History Centre. Ref: G24/100/56 - 61. (May 1949 - May 1955).
Parks, Markets & Cemeteries Committee.

Swindon Evening Advertiser:

Thursday 3rd August 1950 - Jubilee Celebrations Bank Holiday Attractions advert.
Friday 4th August 1950 - "Swindon has a new railway" & "all aboard for the Coate Riviera".
Monday 14th August 1950 - Advert railway operating for a further 7 days.
Tuesday 15th August 1950 - Advert railway operating for a further 7 days.
Wednesday 2nd July 1952 - "Miniature Railway for Coate".
Monday 14th July 1952 - "Mayor drives Coate special on its first civic trip".
Friday 25th July 1952 - "Coate railway".

Wiltshire Herald & Advertiser:

Friday 4th August 1950 - Jubilee Celebrations Bank Holiday Attractions advert.
Friday 11th August 1950 - "Test Railway at Coate".
Friday 18th July 1952 - "Coate Water Railway - Mayor drives first train".

Heywood Society Journal: No.21 p11.

The Miniature Locomotives of David Curwen. Lawson Little & Dave Holroyde.
Narrow Gauge Railway Society 2008. ISBN 978 0 9554326 1 3.

Acknowledgements

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