

**A HISTORY OF THE
MAIDSTONE ZOO
RAILWAY**

**A short history of a
2ft gauge railway in Kent**

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***MINOR RAILWAY
MINI HISTORIES - M6***

<p style="text-align: center;">MAIDSTONE ZOO RAILWAY 2ft gauge. 1937 - 1959</p>

Introduction

Although running for over 20 years the 2ft gauge Maidstone Zoo Railway is relatively unknown, but this brief history has been assembled from what few records survive. Maidstone Zoo was the inspiration of local businessman Hugh Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake and his love of animals. He formally opened his Zoo at Cobtree Manor to the public in 1934, but even by 1910 he had built up one of the largest private collections of animals in the country and then admitted local people to visit at certain times. He added the railway to the Zoo in 1937 to transport visitors from the main road to the entrance, being constructed using local equipment. The Zoo and railway closed in 1959. The majority of the background information and history of the Zoo itself has been drawn from *The Story of Maidstone Zoo* by Vickie Harris (Meresborough Books 1994) - for a full description of the Zoo and its animals this is recommended.

Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake & Cobtree Manor

The Cobtree Manor Estate lies some 2 miles north of Maidstone in Kent, and to the west of the main Maidstone - Chatham road. Hugh Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake (always known as Garrard) was born on 22nd May 1881 in Maidstone. His father, Hugh William Tyrwhitt-Drake, moved to Cobtree in 1896 and created the Cobtree Manor Estate, which passed to Garrard on his death in 1908. Garrard had an interest in animals from a young age and in 1899 his father sent him to Argentina to spend a year on a ranch owned by friends of the family. This seems to have strengthened his love of animals as he brought back two examples from South America - a puma cub and a viscacha (a small rodent). These were housed in a hut adjoining the house at Cobtree and were the foundation of his animal collection, which grew to be the largest private collection in England and eventually into a major regional Zoo.

His menagerie contained about 100 animals by 1912 and he started opening it to the public on Wednesday afternoons - early closing day in Maidstone - for a charge of 6d. In November 1912 he was elected to Maidstone Borough Council and became Mayor in 1915 - the first of twelve times he held that honour. By 1913 Garrard had the largest private collection of animals in England, including six lions, four bears, eight wolves, two camels and a vulture along with sheep, goats and birds. In July 1913 the entire collection was sent by train to Edinburgh on loan for three months to the Scottish Zoological Trust for the opening of the new Edinburgh Zoo.

On 26th May 1914 Garrard opened the Maidstone Zoological and Pleasure Gardens at nearby Tovil Court. Unfortunately, the venture was short-lived, closing in the spring of 1915 due to the First World War and a disagreement over Sunday opening. In December 1915 and for the Christmas seasons from 1919 to 1933 he displayed his animals in London. During the summer months they were on show at Southend Kursaal, Margate, Wembley or Crystal Palace. In 1922 Garrard realised another ambition when he toured with his own travelling circus - "Garrard's Royal Circus".

On 8th July 1925 he married Miss Edna Mary Vine. Apart from married life, by the early 1930s Garrard was getting more involved with local authority work together with his business interests and therefore decided to bring an end to touring with his animals and circus. He now turned his thoughts to opening a Zoo again - this time on his own estate at Cobtree Manor.

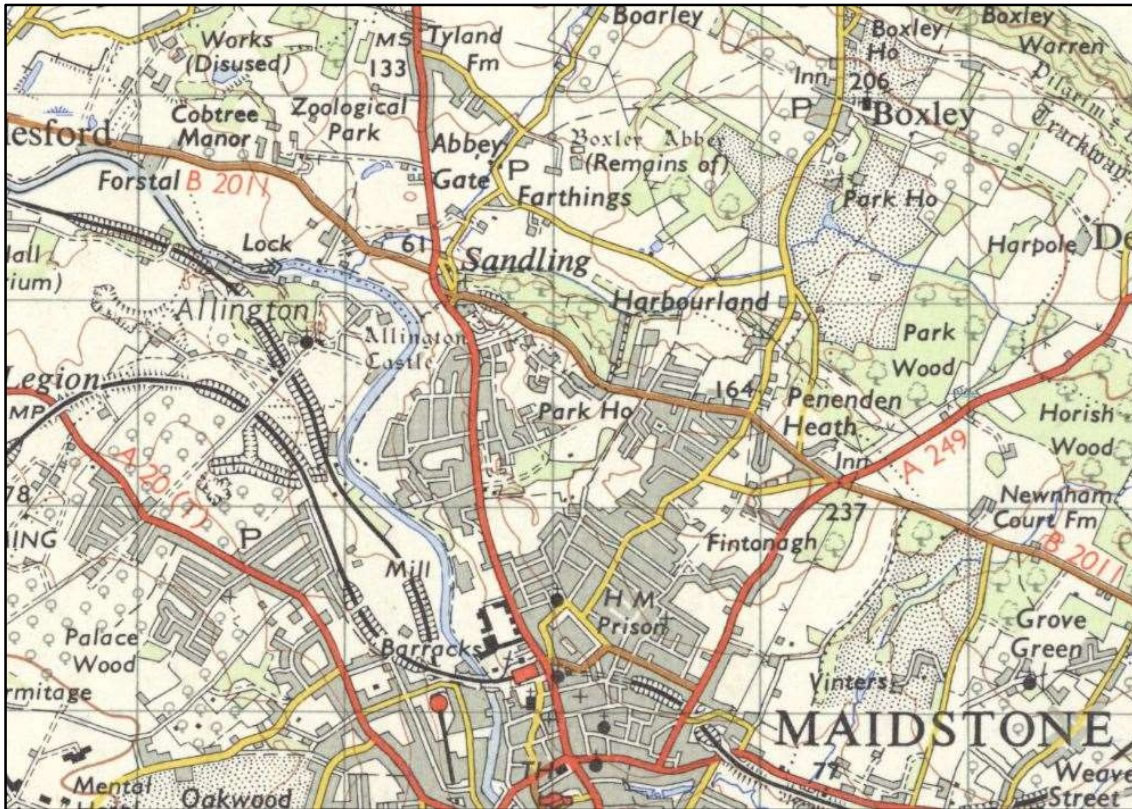
Maidstone Zoo

Garrard now set about making plans for the Zoo - initially on 10 acres of the estate. He created paddocks and cages along with interconnecting paths. Car and coach parks were laid out alongside the long tree lined drive, which linked the manor house to the Chatham Road. An ex-Army hut was erected and set up as a café. In an article in the *Kent Messenger* of Saturday 10th March 1934 Garrard described how the different animals had to be treated, fed, caged or fenced. He added "*I expect to have on exhibition, lions (14), tigers, pumas, bears, wolves, wild dogs, hyenas, camel, wild sheep and deer (several varieties), monkeys, parrots, water fowl, emu and many other beasts and birds*". He referred to his new attraction in the article as "*Maidstone Zoo Park*". A piece about the forthcoming Easter holiday in the *Kent Messenger* of Saturday 24th March 1934 noted "*The opening next Monday of the Kent Zoo Park at Cobtree Manor, Maidstone, by Alderman H G Tyrwhitt-Drake, has provided a second Whipsnade for Kent, and this should be a big Easter attraction for all ages. The largest private collection of wild animals in the country is housed amid beautiful rural surroundings*".

The Zoo opened on Monday 26th March 1934 - a week before the Easter holiday weekend. The *Kent Messenger* of Easter Saturday 31st March 1934 reported "*Kent Zoo Park at Cobtree Manor began its career on Monday afternoon, when the opening ceremony was performed by the well-known Olympia circus proprietor and showman, Mr Bertram Mills, a close friend of Mr H G Tyrwhitt-Drake*". The ceremony, which was opened by the Mayor of Maidstone, Alderman William Day, took place at the top of the driveway by the Zoo entrance near the manor house. Garrard presented Bertram Mills with a bronze of a lioness and two cubs. The new Zoo was open daily, including Sundays, from 11.00 to sunset. Admission was adults 7d and children 3d. By the end of the first season in early November over 87,000 people had visited the new attraction. Over the winter a number of improvements were made, extending the site to 12 acres, and the Zoo reopened for the 1935 season on Sunday 24th March. During the 1936 season two elephants were added to the collection and over 100,000 people visited the Zoo. In the same year Garrard was knighted for public services by King Edward VIII during his brief reign.

**G. TYRWHITT-DRAKE'S
ZOO PARK**
Cobtree Manor, MAIDSTONE
Entrance:—Maidstone-Chatham Road.
OPEN DAILY
(including Sunday) 11 a.m.—Sunset.
Admission: Adults 7d., Children 3d.
REFRESHMENTS, MOTOR PARK.

An advert for the Zoo from the *Kent & Sussex Courier* of Friday 30th March 1934.



An extract from an Ordnance Survey 1" map, revised in 1954/1955 and published in 1957 (sheet 172). The main road to Chatham (A229) can be seen running north from Maidstone off the top of the map, with Cobtree Manor and the Zoo (denoted as "Zoological Park") set at the end of the long driveway to west of the road.
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Planning & Opening

Although car parking was provided, local people from Maidstone and the Chatham area would have probably made up the majority of those visiting the Zoo and they would have arrived by bus and alighted close to the Cobtree Manor Estate entrance gates on the main Maidstone - Chatham road (A229). A tree lined driveway led from there up to the pay hut by the manor house gates and the actual entrance to the Zoo. This involved a long walk of some 600 yards ($\frac{1}{3}$ mile) and would have been especially tedious after a tiring day in the Zoo walking around the animal paddocks and cages - more so with fractious children. Therefore, to make a visit to the Zoo more enjoyable, Sir Garrard decided to install a railway to transport visitors between the main entrance gates on the road and the pay hut at the entrance to the Zoo.

The new 2ft gauge railway opened on Sunday 21st March 1937 - the first day of that year's season. The *Sheerness Times* of Thursday 18th March 1937, reporting on the upcoming opening for the season, which was to be carried out at 3.15pm on Sunday 21st March by dancer, actress and singer Jessie Matthews (1907-1981), commented "*A new, and useful, attraction is a miniature railway, which runs from the Chatham Road to the Zoo entrance, just over a quarter of a mile. This addition will, no doubt, appeal to the juveniles for its novelty, and those of more mature age for its utility in saving Shanks' pony*". The paper also noted the "*difficulties of expediting outdoor work, caused by the abnormal weather of the past few months*". However,

everything seems to have been ready for Sunday 21st March. The *Kent Messenger* of Saturday 27th March 1937 reported Jessie Matthews, accompanied by her actor husband Sonnie Hale, formally opened the Zoo for its fourth season. It noted the opening ceremony was attended by 2,500 visitors and went on "*After she had been received by Sir Garrard and Lady Tyrwhitt-Drake, Miss Matthews christened the new light railway, breaking a bottle of Kent's champagne cider over the engine. It was named Jessie, after her*". The 1938 Zoo guidebook states the locomotive was named "Jessie M", but the caption to a photograph of the event notes it as just "Jessie". The ceremony appears to have taken place at the Zoo entrance station at the western end of the railway. Aside from the railway, other improvements for the new season included two new lion pens and a model village.

Description of Railway

The 2ft gauge railway ran for 500 yards (scaled from Ordnance Survey maps) from a station at TQ75285866, some 100 yards from the Chatham Road entrance gates and near the Lodge, west to a station at TQ74825871 - close to the Zoo entrance pay hut. The line ran dead straight, adjacent to the south side of the driveway, passing the lake and waterfall not long after leaving the east end station. The platforms at both stations were on the driveway (north) side of the line. There were no run-round loops at either terminus and from photographs of the railway it appears the locomotive was usually at the west end of the train - hauling it to the Zoo entrance and propelling back to the Lodge end.

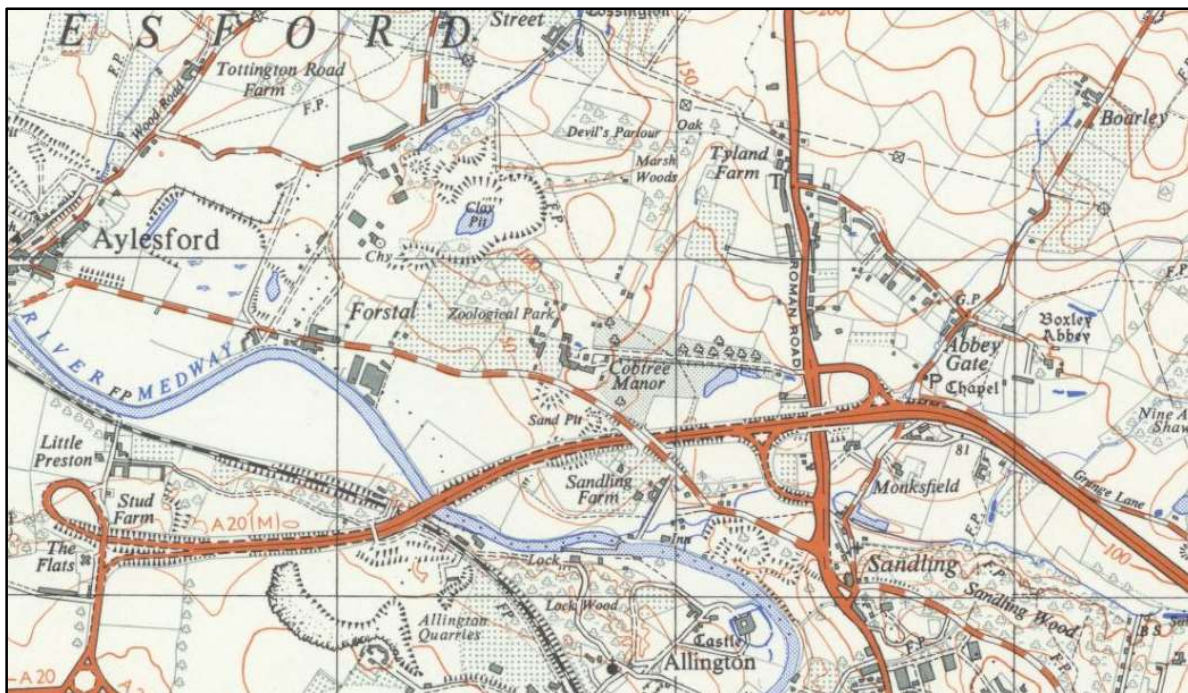
The choice of gauge was not unusual at the time for such a railway - large scale miniature railways were fairly popular in the 1930s (see Author's article online at: www.minorrailways.co.uk/history3.php). In any event, local equipment would have been available from nearby industries - such as quarries - some of which were on the Cobtree Manor Estate. In her book *The Story of Maidstone Zoo* (Meresborough Books 1994) Vickie Harris describes the railway "*He [Garrard] purchased the track second hand from a local quarry, and built simple stations, named Chatham Road and The Zoo, at each end. Wooden barriers were erected at both, so that access to the tarmac platforms could be controlled and queues organised at busy times*". Fares were 2d for adults & 1d for children travelling to the Zoo and 1d for all for the trip back to the main road entrance. Zoo admission was now 6d for adults and 4d for children, with car parking at 6d per car.

To operate the railway, Sir Garrard provided a locomotive and two coaches. There has been some speculation as to the origins of this locomotive, which was a 6w type with a petrol engine and a steam outline body. The *Sheerness Times* of Thursday 18th March 1937 stated "*The locomotive*" (*built by Messrs. Avery of Maidstone*) *receives its power from a 14-h.p. Morris engine, and will draw two "carriages" mounted on bogie frames, each accommodating eighteen adults*". The *Sheerness Guardian* of Saturday 27th March 1937 noted "*The locomotive, which was made by the local firm of Avery, draws two "coaches" seating a total of 36 people*". Vickie Harris in *The Story of Maidstone Zoo* states "*Avery Brothers of Maidstone built a steam-outline locomotive powered by a 14hp petrol engine*". A note in the *Kent Messenger* of Saturday 6th May 1939 states that Avery Brothers of Tovil Bridge, Maidstone were "*Boat, Punt, Launch and Canoe Builders*". Whether they built the complete locomotive or just the steam outline bodywork is not known. Vickie Harris also notes "*Mr Avery himself often drove the engine, and at other times Ray Mitchell, Sir Garrard's chauffeur, was in charge*". The company was run by Edward, Robert and William Avery - which one drove the

train is not stated. The dummy side tanks of the locomotive had "Z R" lettered on them, with the letters separated by a crest.

As stated above by the *Sheerness Times* and the *Sheerness Guardian* the two coaches each seated eighteen adults - and presumably a greater number of children if less adults travelled! Vickie Harris noted the coaches were constructed "*on the frames of old tram-cars, the reversible seats being used*". Photographs show the frames were mounted on what appear to be two 2ft gauge 4w wagon frames, making them bogie coaches. The wagon frames were probably obtained along with track from a local quarry. Consequently, the passengers were seated high up and could see over the locomotive cab. The former tram seats were arranged "toast-rack" style across the coach. Adults appear to have sat two to a seat, which would mean there were nine seats to each coach. Given Sir Garrard's close association with the Borough Council, the tram frames and seats were no doubt obtained locally. Maidstone Corporation Tramways operated a 3ft 6in gauge system from July 1904. There were 17 open top 4w cars, plus one single deck, water and snow plough cars. The system was replaced by trolley buses from 1928 and the last trams ran in 1930. Presumably, the cars were not immediately scrapped and parts were available for Sir Garrard to utilise.

The railway immediately proved popular. The *Sheerness Times* of Thursday 1st April 1937 commented that the railway carried over 3,000 passengers on Easter Monday. The same paper for Thursday 20th May 1937 recorded that the railway carried 4,216 passengers over the Whitsun holiday weekend, with 9,011 people visiting the Zoo over the same period. The Zoo and the railway closed for the season on Sunday 31st October 1937.



An extract from an Ordnance Survey 2½" map, revised 1936-55 and published in 1963. The railway can be seen running along the south side of the driveway.
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A composite extract of two Ordnance Survey 6" maps, revised in 1955 and published in 1961 (western half) and 1965 (eastern half). The latter has been updated to show the new A20(M) Maidstone by-pass. The railway is depicted as "Tramway" and can be seen running along the south side of the driveway. The 2½" map, shown on the previous page, marks the railway extending slightly further east closer to the Lodge - and is believed to be the more accurate.
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Ongoing Operation of Railway & Zoo: 1938-1945

The Zoo reopened for the 1938 season on Sunday 20th March. The *Tonbridge Free Press* of Friday 18th March 1938 noted the Zoo was now "*Bigger and Better*" and "*The miniature railway that carried 50,000 fares last year has been overhauled and painted*". The 1938 Zoo guidebook noted "*Trains run most afternoons and other busy times from the Entrance Lodge on the Chatham Road to the Entrance to the Zoo (500 yards) for the convenience of pedestrians who find the walk up the avenue somewhat long, and for the children just one long thrill*". This indicates the railway did not necessarily run every day the Zoo was open. During the 1938 season, which ended on Sunday 30th October, 60,000 people rode on the railway.

On 5th June 1939 keen amateur filmmaker Sydney Bligh from Canterbury visited the Zoo and made a wonderful colour film of the Zoo and the railway. The 3 minute long film is available to view online on the *Canterbury Christ Church University Amateur Film Archive* web site (see References & Sources for details). The film starts with two views of the train running towards the Zoo entrance and arriving at the station there (0m 15s - 0m 25s). The locomotive is hauling the train, which is formed of just one lightly loaded coach. The narrow platform is supported by wooden boards and has what appears to be a gravel surface with a wooden and wire fence to the rear. The film ends with a shot of the train arriving back at the station by the Chatham Road entrance (2m 55s - 3m 05s). The locomotive is propelling the train, which this time is formed of two well-filled coaches. The line ends here with a simple stop block. In all the shots the locomotive can be seen to be in a dark green livery, with the tank side lined out in white, and with a red buffer beam. There is no name visible, but the tank side has "Z R" with a crest between the two letters. The track is overgrown with grass between the rails. Both platforms are on the driveway (north) side of the line.

The outbreak of the Second World War on Sunday 3rd September 1939 meant immediate closure of the Zoo. However, with Government permission it reopened on Sunday 10th September 1939 providing local entertainment - travel would be restricted and discouraged as the war progressed. The railway, however, remained running for the time being. On Sunday 5th May 1940 Catherine Hale-Munro, the adopted daughter of Sonnie Hale and Jessie Matthews, visited the Zoo to open Pets' Corner. The *Kent Messenger* of Saturday 11th May 1940 reported that among the other things Catherine did "*There was a ride on the train up to the Zoo Park with her mother and father, and lots of other people. And incidentally Jessie Matthews was interested to notice that the engine of this train had been named after her, and that her signature stood out boldly on its boiler*". Admission prices to the Zoo were increased to 1/- for adults and 6d for children for the 1940 season. Despite the war the railway was still running in the summer of 1942. The *Kent Messenger* of Friday 31st July reported that on Sunday 26th July over 100 Land Girls (from the Women's Land Army) were entertained at the Zoo - guests of Sir Garrard and his wife (at that time Mayor and Mayoress of Maidstone). The paper noted "*In addition to the attractions of the Zoo, the Land Girls had free passes for the Miniature Train and Pets' Corner*".

Running the railway must have become ever more difficult as the war progressed and petrol became scarcer. Petrol rationing, with purchase by coupons, was introduced on 16th September 1939. However, even this basic ration was withdrawn entirely from 1st July 1942 - after that date only official users were permitted to obtain petrol, such as emergency services, bus companies and farmers. Use of already purchased petrol was permitted until 31st July 1942. Private cars on the roads all but disappeared. With Sir Garrard being Mayor of Maidstone and

no doubt expected to set an example, it is likely the railway - with its petrol locomotive - ceased running after the end of July 1942.

The first German V1 flying bomb (or "Doodlebug") fell on London on 13th June 1944 and they kept coming until the end of the war. In August or September 1944 one fell in the Cobtree Manor Estate, exploding in one of the trees by the lake - felling the tree and blowing all the tiles off the nearby Lodge. Fortunately, no one was injured - although the track of the railway may well have been damaged. An article about the history of the Zoo on the *Kent Online* web site states "*The zoo was also struck by a doodlebug which put the light railway out of action for a while, but fortunately caused no injuries*". As already noted above, it is thought the railway was not running at this time due to the unavailability of petrol and did not reopen until the start of the 1946 season.

Ongoing Operation of Railway & Zoo: 1946-1959

The Zoo remained open each season throughout the war, which ended in Europe on 8th May 1945 and the Zoo closed at the end of that season on Sunday 28th October 1945. The *Sheerness Times & Guardian* of Friday 19th October 1945 reported the upcoming closure and noted "*The Zoo will reopen in March 1946, when it is expected the train will once more be running*". The Zoo reopened on Sunday 24th March 1946 and the railway started running again that day - the *Kent Messenger* of Friday 29th March 1946 reporting "*The "railway" from the main gate down to the Zoo entrance was in operation, and on Sunday there was keen competition among adults and kiddies alike for the first ride*".

The railway seems to have reopened with a new locomotive. *Industrial Railways and Locomotives of Kent* (Industrial Railway Society 2016) records a Ruston 4wDM 16/20hp locomotive, works number 191641, arriving at the railway by 26th July 1946. Therefore, it would have been this locomotive with which the railway reopened on 24th March 1946. It was built by Ruston & Hornsby Limited of Lincoln in 1938 and delivered to Lindsey District Council on 25th February 1938 for use on the Caistor by-pass, which the Council's Highways Department were then constructing. After use there it moved to a company in Wolverhampton before arriving with Kent & Sussex Contractors Limited at Sidcup in Kent. Presumably, Sir Garrard acquired the locomotive from that company. The arrival of this locomotive was not reported by any of the local newspapers, nor did the Zoo guidebook make any reference to it. In fact the 1955 guidebook had the same photograph of the previous locomotive "Jessie M", which had been used in the 1938 edition to illustrate the railway!

"Jessie M", the 6w petrol locomotive that opened the railway in 1937, was probably life expired by the end of war and in any event it seems to have lain unused from the end of July 1942. It was probably either sold and removed for scrap or scrapped on site. The same two coaches, with their reversible tram seats, were used as previously. In her book *The Story of Maidstone Zoo* (Meresborough Books 1994) Vickie Harris notes "*A second hand diesel locomotive had been acquired from a local quarry at some time since the end of the war to replace the steam-outline "Jessie", who presumably had worn out. Avery's did not maintain the replacement engine, the contract for this being awarded to E A Gardener & Son of Maidstone*". She also noted the train was driven at this time by "*A cheerful lad named Sam Carter*". Writing in *The Narrow Gauge* No.145 (Winter 1994/95) Malcolm Shelmerdine recalled that he "*rode on the railway in the late 1940s when the loco was clearly an ex quarry diesel, with the driver sitting sideways on a metal saddle*". He also noted the two "*toast-rack*" coaches with their "*ex-*

tramway reversible seats" and went on *"The driver, who collected my fare in a leather satchel, told me they came from a Maidstone tram"*. Malcolm recalled the track *"was obviously ex quarry, with no fishplates discernible in the encroaching grass. The loco shed was simply a roof on wooden pillars at the end of the track, with wire mesh sides. An oily tarpaulin was thrown over the exposed engine on the loco to protect it from the elements"*. This is the only reference we have to any form of shed on the railway. Malcolm does not say at which end of the line it was located, but was most likely for reasons of security at the Zoo end. Additionally, since the locomotive was normally at this end, it could easily run into the shed. The 1939 film by Sydney Bligh (see above for details) certainly shows no such construction at the Chatham Road end of the line - it simply terminating in a buffer stop. Unfortunately, no photograph of the Ruston locomotive at work on the railway has been traced.

In *Bygone Kent* (Volume 5 No.2) Irene Hales, in her article about the Zoo, records that in 1946 *"two ex-Maidstone Corporation Ransome trolley buses of 1928 vintage were purchased and used as staff rooms"*. Malcolm Shelmerdine notes *"when Maidstone Corporation disposed of its original three-axle Ransome trolley buses in 1947, several of them were bought by him [Sir Garrard] and used at Cobtree as stores and shelters"*. As with the tram frames and seats he originally acquired for the coaches, his close contacts with Maidstone Borough Council would have made the purchase of the trolley buses a simple business. The Maidstone trolley bus system first opened on 1st May 1928 and closed completely on 15th April 1967. The 18 original 6-wheel trolley buses, built by Ransomes, Sims and Jefferies of Ipswich and dating from 1928, were replaced in 1946 and 1947. Otherwise things at the Zoo progressed as usual. Admission rates for the 1946 season were 1/- for adults and 9d for children. The season ended on Sunday 3rd November with over 140,000 people having visited the Zoo. Princess Elizabeth, the future Queen Elizabeth II, made a private visit to the Zoo on Tuesday 12th November 1946. As this was an out of season visit it is very unlikely she had a ride on the train! In a series of photographs of the visit, none show the railway.

The Zoo reopened for the 1948 season on Sunday 21st March and not long afterwards the railway suffered its only reported accident - a derailment on Sunday 11th April. The *Kent Messenger* of Friday 16th April 1948 reported that *"Two Land Army girls were slightly injured when two coaches of the miniature railway were derailed on Sunday afternoon"*. The two girls, aged 17 & 19, were allowed to go home after treatment at the West Kent General Hospital for leg injuries. In her book Vickie Harris states the *"railway was closed for several weeks while the cause of the accident was sought. Possibly the rails, which were not very heavily ballasted, had spread, or perhaps there was an obstruction on the line"*. Otherwise it seems the railway continued to run each season between Chatham Road and the Zoo entrance, carrying visitors to and from the Zoo. By the 1949 season admission prices had risen to 1/6 for adults and 9d for children.



An advert for the Zoo from the *Kentish Express* of Friday 18th March 1955. Adult admission was now 2/- and 9d for children.

Closure

Maidstone suffered a major outbreak of polio in the summer of 1957 and as a result attendance figures at the Zoo sharply declined and only slowly recovered as the epidemic subsided. By this time substantial investment in new buildings and equipment for the Zoo was required, but at the age of 77 Sir Garrard was reluctant to undertake anything other than routine maintenance. The Zoo opened for its 25th season on Sunday 15th March 1959 although Sir Garrard was unable to be present at the ceremony having been ill over much of the winter. Admission prices by then were 2/- for adults and 1/- for children. However, it would be the Zoo's last season.

The *Kent Messenger* of Friday 4th September 1959 reported the Zoo was to close for good in October that year. Sir Garrard said "*I have made the decision with deep regret and for purely personal reasons. The owning and running of a big collection of wild animals, many of them dangerous, must necessarily be a great responsibility and entails considerable worry, and it is for these reasons that I have come to a decision that I would have liked to have avoided*". At the time it was the country's largest private Zoo and over 2,250,000 people had visited over the 25 years it had been open. The Zoo closed permanently at 6pm on Sunday 4th October 1959. The railway presumably continued to operate until that date.

Afterwards

After closure the animals were dispersed to other Zoos, while an elephant went to the Butlin's Holiday Camp at Pwllheli in North Wales. An advert for a sale by auction of various fixtures and fittings from the Zoo appeared in *The World's Fair* of Saturday 23rd April 1960 (a similar advert also appeared in the *Kentish Express* of Friday 22nd April 1960). The sale, to be held at the Zoo at 2pm on Thursday 5th May 1960 by E J Parker & Sons, included a Wooden Sales Shop, Lined Timber and Iron Building, Timber Pay Office, Wooden Stable, Six Animal Travelling Wagons, 223 Chairs, 48 Tables, Refrigerator, Cake Oven, Candy Floss Machine, Lolly Making Machine, 3 Gas Ovens and other kitchen equipment. This list interestingly gives us an idea of the simple café fare of the day. No railway equipment was listed and the locomotive, along with the two coaches, were probably sold on site for scrap together with the track.

Sir Garrard retired from Maidstone Borough Council in 1961 after 49 years service - the final meeting he attended being on 24th May. He died on Saturday 24th October 1964 and was given a civic funeral on Thursday 5th November at All Saint's Church and was buried in Maidstone Cemetery. Sir Garrard had founded the Cobtree Charity Trust in 1951 so after his death the Cobtree Manor Estate was left for the benefit of the people of Maidstone. The Estate was leased in 1971 to Maidstone Borough Council for them to maintain and manage. The first part was opened to the public in April 1981 as a nature trail and picnic site. A golf course was opened in 1984 on the eastern part of the Estate - bordering the A229 Chatham Road - where once the railway ran and visitors' cars and coaches were parked. The site of the extreme eastern end of the railway and the Lodge have been lost under the improved and realigned M20 slip road to the A229 Chatham Road. The lake, just south of the now lost former driveway and course of the railway, still survives. The western part of the Estate became a country park, known as Cobtree Manor Park. Nothing now remains of the 2ft gauge railway, which ferried thousands of visitors to and from the main Zoo entrance between 1937 and 1959.

Some 40 years after the Zoo and railway closed a plan was put forward for a new miniature railway on the Cobtree Manor Estate. *Branch Line News* No.947 of 14th June 2003 reported that the railway would offer a 15-20 minute ride from Cobtree Manor Park to the Museum of Kent Rural Life (now called Kent Life) via an existing "gap" under the M20. The plan apparently had the backing of the Cobtree Charity Trust and it was said Maidstone Councillors were "*now getting behind the scheme*". The line would be 12¼" gauge and trains formed of five coaches taking up to 30 passengers each. The idea for the railway came from Lawrence Martin of Hunton, to the south of Maidstone, who had built an extensive private 7¼" gauge railway in his grounds. Nothing seems to have come of the proposal and nothing further was heard of the scheme.

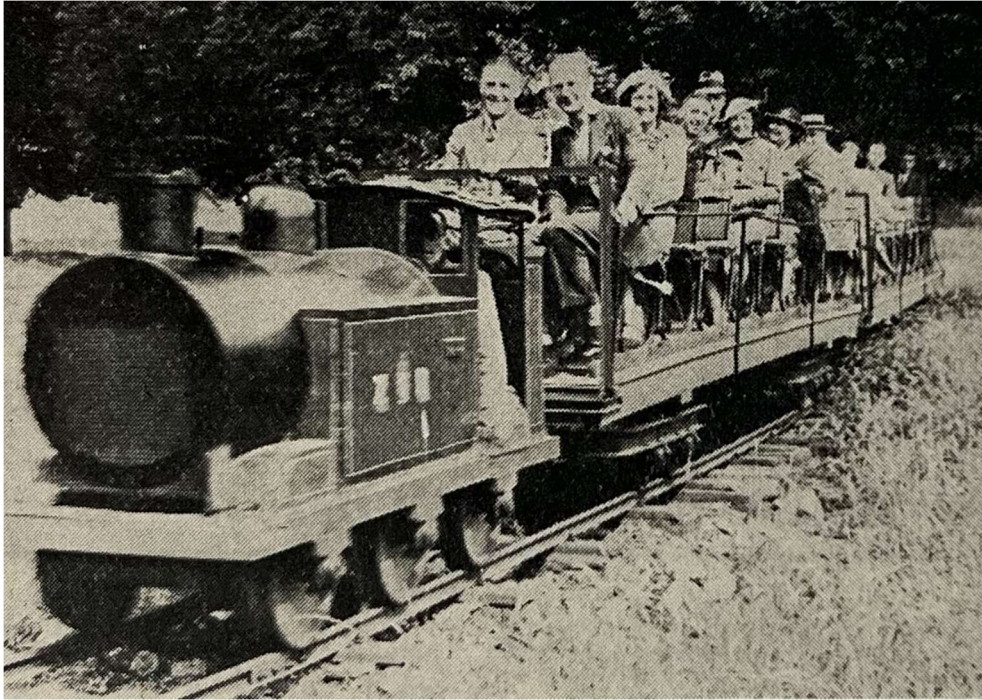


Jessie Matthews has just broken a bottle of "*Kent's champagne cider*" over the locomotive to officially open the railway on Sunday 21st March 1937. Sir Garrard stands alongside her.

The photograph appears to have been taken at the Zoo entrance (western) end of the railway, which simply ends without a stop block - the rail nearest the camera dipping down alarmingly! Jessie and Sir Garrard are standing on a temporary small platform.

(*Zoo Guidebook 5th edition 1938. Ref: C150373432.*

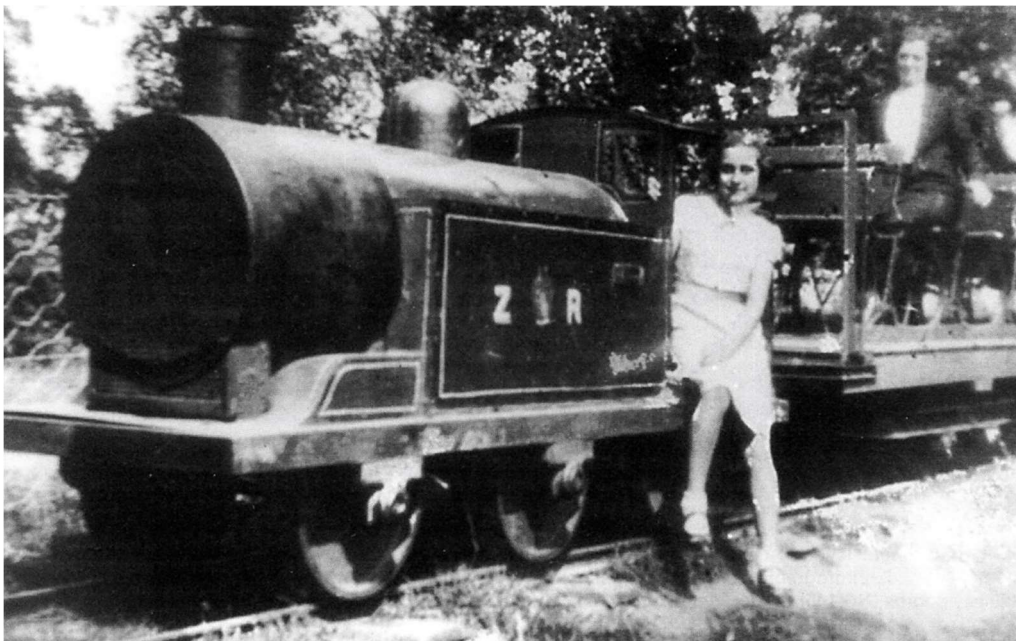
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During the 1937 season a well-filled train runs alongside the driveway, which is to the left, behind the train. Note how the passengers are seated high up on the former reversible tram seats mounted on the ex-tram frames. The driver can just be seen inside the cab.

(Zoo Guidebook 5th edition 1938. Ref: C150373432.

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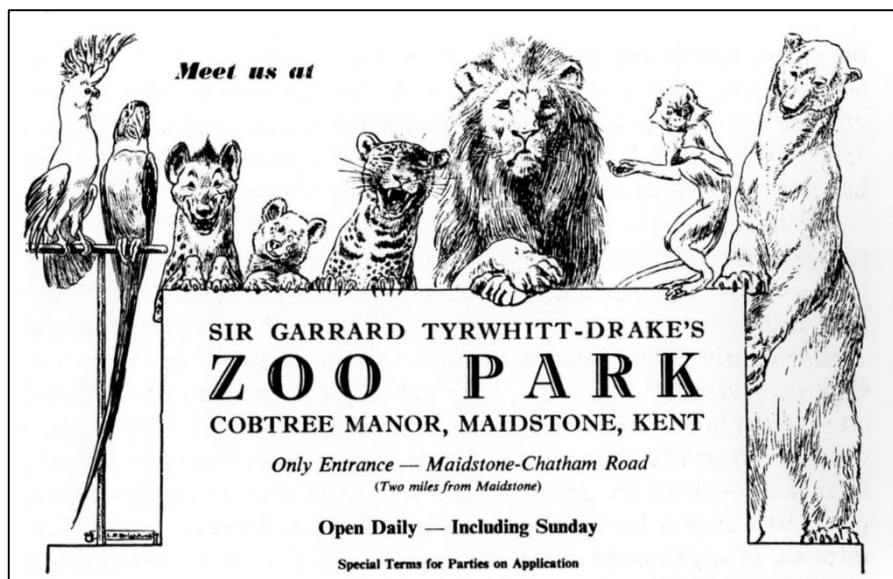
This view comes from the late Ivor Gotheridge, with his cousin sitting partly in the cab of the locomotive, which has "Z R" on its tank side separated with a crest. Ivor stated the photograph was taken "around 1935", but clearly dates from at least 1937. No name is visible on the locomotive, although it may be on the small plaque to the top right of the tank.

(Reproduced with permission from The Narrow Gauge No.147)



The late Brian Rogers took this photograph of the train at the Chatham Road station in April 1938 or 1939. Note the narrow platform - the driveway is to the left. The locomotive sports a large headlamp - the Zoo did open until dusk. Some sleepers are visible in the grass.

(Reproduced with permission from The Narrow Gauge No.108)



The Zoo's attractive Letter Head. The animals were drawn by Sir Garrard.



This lovely photograph was one of a series taken by Frederick Carley on the occasion of Jessie Matthews and her husband Sonnie Hale visiting the Zoo on Sunday 5th May 1940, along with their daughter Catherine Hale-Munro who opened Pets' Corner. This view shows the train at the Zoo entrance station with its narrow platform - to the rear of the train the line can be seen running down through the tree lined avenue. Sonnie Hale (left with glasses) and Sir Garrard stand in the cab of the locomotive. Jessie is in front of them, lying on top of the boiler, while a rather unhappy Catherine sits behind the chimney. A number of people in uniform (this being during the Second World War) stand behind in the first coach.

*(Frederick Carley 5/5/40. Ref: CARLEY-NEGS2-119.
Reproduced courtesy of the Frederick Carley Collection)*



This photograph clearly shows the design of the two coaches. Ex-Maidstone tram frames were mounted on two 4-wheel wagon frames, probably from a local quarry, to form bogie coaches. Reversible ex-Maidstone tram seats were used for the passengers. The photograph was taken on the same occasion as the previous one. Jessie Matthews can be seen, with fur wrap, in the middle of the coach, with Catherine seated alongside. Behind is Sonnie and behind him, to the left, is Sir Garrard. The lady sitting alongside him with a hat may be his wife. The other lady passengers are all well-dressed.

*(Frederick Carley 5/5/40. Ref: CARLEY-NEGS2-050.
Reproduced courtesy of the Frederick Carley Collection)*

Summary

Opened: Sunday 21st March 1937
Closed: Sunday 4th October 1959
Layout & length: End-to-end, 500 yards

Locomotives (2' gauge)

Jessie M	6wPM	Avery Brothers	1937	Steam outline	1
	4wDM	Ruston & Hornsby 191641	1938	Industrial	2
1	From: new. To: probably sold for scrap or scrapped on site c1945.				
2	From: Kent & Sussex Contractors Limited, Sidcup by 3/1946. To: probably sold or scrapped on site after 10/1959.				

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A HISTORY OF THE MAIDSTONE ZOO RAILWAY

A short history of a 2ft gauge railway in Kent

MINOR RAILWAY MINI HISTORIES - M6

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