

**A HISTORY OF THE
SEASIDE
MINIATURE
RAILWAY**

**A short history & survey of the
Seaside Miniature Railways
of Great Britain**

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SEASIDE MINIATURE RAILWAYS

of Great Britain

Background

Very little seems to have been researched and published on the subject of Seaside Miniature Railways in Great Britain. Although histories of individual such railways have been written (the Author has published a number in his *Minor Railway Histories* and *Minor Railway Mini Histories* series) only two works have appeared on the wider subject of the Seaside Miniature Railway - abbreviated to SMR in this work.

The first of these was *A Survey of Seaside Miniature Railways* by D J Croft (Oakwood Press 1992). This book received a rather uncomplimentary review in the *Heywood Society Journal* No.30 (Spring 1992) "The term "seaside" is used in its broadest sense, even the R&ER and RH&DR being included because they are coastal. The real strength of the book lies in its 118 photographs. Covering a wide variety of subjects, all are well reproduced and many have never been seen in print before. Unfortunately the book is let down by the quality of its text and captions. A lot of its facts seem to have been extracted from previously published works, and in some sections this is not detrimental. However, many errors from previous titles are repeated and more are committed. The whole book is littered with inaccuracies and it will be a challenge to see just how many one can find. Despite this many enthusiasts will consider that £7.95 for 136 well presented pages represents good value for money". As a general overview of the SMR scene the book is adequate and as the reviewer points out the photographs are its strength. But as an historical record of the various railways described, as the reviewer correctly points out, it is very poor.

Rails by the Sea is a detailed academic study of the SMR by Dr Marcus Rooks (Masters Dissertation, University of York 2012). The Author of this scholarly work poses the question "In what ways was the development of the seaside miniature railway influenced by the seaside spectacle and individual endeavour from 1900 until the present day?". As Croft's *A Survey of Seaside Miniature Railways* was about the only work available to him, the Author has used its content as the source of his list of SMRs in Appendix 5, which therefore contains a large number of errors. However, as a general overview of numbers of railways and gauge, this does not have too great a detrimental effect on the Dissertation, which is a good background and overview of the development and later contraction of the SMR. Dr Rooks even made the effort to talk to a number of SMR operators of the time.

The British SMR has long been an interest of the Author of the work you are now reading. My aim is to provide a good general history of the SMR set against the development of the seaside resort, from its origins in sea bathing for the upper classes, through the Victorian period where the introduction of the Bank Holiday and the railway system brought thousands of working class people to the resorts, to the development of the resorts by forward looking local councils in the 1920s & 1930s, through to the post-war boom of the late 1940s & 1950s, the decline of the 1970s & 1980s and the limited revival in more recent years. From the very first SMR at Blackpool in 1905 to the present day, their well-being closely followed that of the host resort. This is a different approach to *Rails to the Sea* and is written by a miniature railway historian and enthusiast, as opposed to a qualified academic.

Introduction

Miniature railways were, and are, built and operated for the enjoyment of their passengers - and of course for financial return for their owners and operators. Therefore, where better than the seaside to locate a miniature railway, where there were a plentiful supply of prospective passengers looking to amuse themselves and have a good time?

Great Britain is an island nation and we seem to be instinctively drawn to the sea. According to the Ordnance Survey, who made a calculation in 2003, the furthest point from the sea in the country is Church Flatts Farm near the village of Coton in the Elms in Derbyshire (south of Burton upon Trent and between Litchfield and Ashby-de-la-Zouch). From there the nearest coast line is 70 miles away, on The Wash, south of Boston in Lincolnshire. Paul Gogarty in his book *The Coast Road* (Robson Books 2007) made the observation "*As an island race, we are all suckled by the sea, and whatever the particulars of the image seared on our memory, inside each of us there is a seaside all of our own. We carry it with us like the buckets of sand we once used to build doomed sandcastles*". He concluded that, despite the distractions of overseas "*The real seaside is the one on our home shore*". In his book *Beside the Seaside* (Penguin Books 1978) James Walvin noted "*It goes without saying that the most obvious attraction of seaside towns is the sea itself, with its invigorating climate and breezes, coastline vistas and its sharp contrast to inland, urban life*". However, in his book *Coastlines* (Granta 2015) Patrick Barkham states "*For centuries, the sea was feared, a fickle, destructive god that brought invaders, pestilence and death on a whim. The coast was a place for fishing communities, military fortifications and lawless pirates and smugglers*".

The Seaside Resort

Introduction

What follows is a very general history of the British seaside resort. Whilst the resorts may share a common story of development, boom and decline - linked to transport and changes in social history - each one is unique in some way. Some resorts have fared better and managed to retain some of their traditional appeal, while others have shrunk beyond recognition as a busy seaside resort. However, many boasted the attraction of a miniature railway at one time or another, and thankfully, some still do.

Sea Bathing & Early Development (1700-1840)

Many seaside resorts started life as small fishing communities or trading ports. Scarcely anyone travelled to these villages solely to see and enjoy the sea. In fact, very few people would have had the time and means to do so unless their business took them there.

From the 17th century bathing in the spa waters of towns like Buxton, Bath, Harrogate and notably Scarborough, became popular for health reasons and these towns developed to afford facilities to those visiting to take the waters. In the early 18th century various physicians started to recommend sea water baths for health reasons. One of the first was Sir John Floyer (1649-1734), who wrote in 1702 of their medicinal properties for ulcers, colds, catarrh and arthritis. "*Since we live in an island, and have the Sea about us, we cannot want an excellent Cold Bath, which will both preserve our Healths, and cure many Diseases*". In time, sea water became

accepted as a healthy cure-all and seaside villages and towns started to cater for those visiting to bathe in the sea or take sea water baths. As these sea bathing resorts grew, their architecture copied that of the inland spa towns. There was the same provision of buildings: assembly rooms, billiard & card rooms, tea rooms, libraries and theatres. However, it was only the upper classes who were able to visit for the restorative effect of sea water - they had the leisure time, money and ability to reach the seaside - there were no railways yet.

Those resorts closest to London, or other centres of population, developed first with their easier access - towns such as Brighton, Hastings, Ramsgate and Margate. Accessibility was to govern how a resort developed and what class of people visited. Resorts like Brighton and Blackpool did see some middle class as well as upper class visitors. However, eventually seaside resorts started to appear over much of the British coastline, although it was the coming of the railway which democratised the accessibility and enjoyment of the seaside resort.

The Coming of the Railway (1840-1870)

The arrival of a railway in a seaside resort dramatically changed its accessibility - greatly reducing the travelling time and the cost - thereby making a visit to the seaside a viable proposition for millions more people.

Over the period approximately from 1840 to 1870 most of the seaside resorts were connected to the railway system. As the railway reached each resort, so it expanded. The 1851 Census noted that seaside resorts had expanded more rapidly than any other group of towns and had overtaken inland spas. As the seaside resorts expanded so things like promenades and piers were built. Piers were originally merely a functional means of a berthing place for ships allowing passengers to alight and board. They now increasingly became an attraction in their own right with the addition of small kiosks and other entertainments to hopefully keep visitors amused and return for another stroll above, but not in, the sea. Pavilions at the pier head were built accommodating theatres and music halls. Many resorts built swimming baths in the 1860s, which usually used sea water and allowed those who did not like the open sea to bathe. From around 1850 improving conditions meant at least some working class people had a little spare money to spend on leisure. However, as early as the 1850s the upper class was in full retreat from seaside resorts as waves of middle class people arrived.

Arrival of the Working Class (1871-1914)

However, although the railways allowed easier and cheap access to the seaside resort, what was needed was more time away from work before the working class could fully benefit from the railways and visit the developing seaside resorts. Sunday was the only day off and train services were restricted for religious reasons. Saturday afternoons slowly got accepted as time off between the 1830s & 1870s.

The need for more time away from work was finally met by the 1871 Bank Holidays Act. Introduced by Sir John Lubbock (1834-1913) this granted four Bank Holidays in England (five in Scotland) on Good Friday, Whitsun Monday, first Monday in August and 26th December. The Act gained the Royal Assent on 25th May 1871 just in time for the first ever Bank Holiday on Monday 7th August 1871. On that day thousands poured into the seaside resorts on ordinary and special excursion trains, in some cases totally overwhelming the local population. The

working class, of course, were only away from work for one day and returned home the same day having, nevertheless, enjoyed the seaside probably for the first time in their lives. The middle class could afford to stay for longer and the upper class fled to more remote resorts or to Europe and the Mediterranean. However, it should be noted the Act had little influence over much of the industrial north, where "Wakes" weeks were already established.

These day trippers now fuelled the need for entertainments in the resort. Theatre, music halls, pleasure gardens, zoos, switchback railways and pay-in-the slot arcades sprang up to meet that need. However, it was not until the Edwardian era that miniature railways became part of the seaside entertainment offering. The very first resort to gain a miniature railway was Blackpool, with the opening in 1905 of a line on the South Shore Sands.

Between the Wars (1918-1939)

In the years up to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the seaside resorts boomed - simply because the main centres of population vastly increased and more and more people flocked to the seaside. The First World War inevitably slowed development of the seaside resorts and greatly altered social attitudes and expectations. After the war moves were made to provide workers with paid holidays, aside from the Bank Holidays. Although steadily more workers were granted up to a week's paid holiday each year, by the mid 1920s only around 16% of workers received such a benefit. The economic depression of the 1920s & 1930s held back progress, with many people just glad to hold on to a job. It was clear that state intervention was needed and this led to the Holidays with Pay Act of 1938, which received the Royal Assent on 29th July 1938 - too late to have any effect until after the Second World War.

However, those who could afford and had time for a holiday, went to the seaside in their masses and the resorts boomed. Whereas before the First World War working people went to the seaside for a day out, now they visited for at least a week's holiday. Seaside holidays dramatically increased between the wars. This was assisted by the Health Resorts and Watering Places Act of 1921, which removed the advertising restrictions on local councils and encouraged coastal towns to promote their resorts. Prior to the Act advertising was left to the various Railway Companies, which served the seaside resorts. In this context, note should be made of probably the most well-known advertising poster for a resort, commissioned by the Great Northern Railway (GNR). In February 1908 illustrator John Hassall (1868-1948) produced a drawing depicting a fisherman skipping along Skegness beach, pipe in mouth, with arms outstretched. The railway company apparently added the iconic words "Skegness is SO Bracing". The resulting "Jolly Fisherman" poster was first displayed at Easter 1908. It seemed to work as the number of trippers arriving in Skegness by rail increased 2½ times between 1907 and 1913.

Such was the popularity of the resorts they were at bursting point in the peak summer season. By the mid 1930s between June and September, Blackpool attracted 7 million visitors, Rhyl 2½ million and Redcar 2 million. All these holidaymakers needed accommodation and seafront facilities. Consequently, there was massive investment in hotels and house building, while local councils, it was estimated, spent £3m-£4m a year on improving their seafront facilities; building promenades, bathing pools, boating lakes, gardens, tennis courts and, in the case of Scarborough, a miniature railway. Lucinda Gosling in her book *Images of the Past - The British Seaside* (Pen & Sword 2017) stated miniature steam trains were "essential for any resort". Many resorts added bathing pools and lidos to their attractions in the 1930s. However, some of

the smaller resorts - trying to outdo each other - built them far too large for the number of visitors they ever received.

The outbreak of the Second World War on Sunday 3rd September 1939 brought an abrupt end to this holiday boom, although by then the main summer season had finished. Resorts on the east and south coast, nearest to the enemy, were fortified against invasion with their piers breached and promenades barricaded by barbed wire. Safer resorts received government departments decamped from London, while some took evacuees. Very few people visited the seaside resorts during the war - long working hours, petrol rationing and rigid control of public transport made it all but impossible for the majority.

The Resort Boom Years (1945-1960)

Peace came at last in May 1945 and holidaymakers poured into the resorts in the summer of 1945, happy once again to experience the seaside and its attractions. Barbed wire and other barricades were hastily removed and gaps in the piers repaired.

It was now, in peacetime, that the full effect of the Holidays with Pay Act of 1938 was to be felt. By 1945 some 80% of the work force received paid holidays and the majority chose to take them at the seaside. By the late 1940s seaside resorts were booming and reached a peak in 1948-1949. At this time the majority of the visitors would have travelled to their chosen resort by train. However, as car ownership slowly grew and road coach travel developed, the balance slowly changed. The split between the three modes used by visitors to Skegness in 1947 was: 67% rail, 16% coach or bus and 17% car. By 1951 those using the railway had shrunk to just under 50% and in 1955 the three modes were almost evenly divided.

With this post-war boom, the cost of providing amenities for a few months each year to deal with the invasion of holidaymakers was enormous. Consequently, residents of the resorts subsidised the short term demands of the visitors. To an extent this may have been offset from the profits made by the council operated seafront facilities such as bathing pools, boating lakes etc and even miniature railways; directly operated as at Scarborough or more commonly by profit sharing with a private operator. The period 1947-1955 saw a boom in the provision of SMRs. The 1950s were a good time for the seaside resort, but by the 1960s the winds of change were starting to be felt.

Decline (1960-1985)

Throughout the 1960s motor car ownership grew and eventually it became the mode of transport for the vast majority of the population. The arrival of the motor car made day trips to resorts easier, allowing the visitor to spend less time and money in the town, and without an overnight stay. The car also brought about the possibility of touring caravans, whose parks started to cover fields on the east coast and elsewhere. In 1955 2 million people took their holidays in a caravan - by the late 1960s this figure had risen to 4½ million. In 1955 caravan holidays accounted for 8% of the national total, while by 1970 that figure had increased to 18%. This changed the nature of many resorts; as caravans were self-catering, the demand for hotel and bed & breakfast accommodation fell as did demand for eating and drinking places.

As use of the motor car increased, use of the railway to reach the seaside resorts sharply declined. Some of the lines only ever saw heavy traffic on peak summer Saturdays and this made them vulnerable to being closed under the "Beeching" closures of the 1960s. The infamous "Beeching Report" of 27th March 1963 proposed closure of the railway to many resorts; among these were Brixham, Exmouth, Hornsea, Ilfracombe, Lyme Regis, Minehead, Perranporth, Sidmouth, Seaton and Withernsea. Even the line to Skegness was threatened, but thankfully survived, as did a simple branch to Exmouth. Not originally proposed for closure by Beeching, the line to Hunstanton was also later closed. The resorts which lost their railway connection suffered, especially those like Ilfracombe and Mablethorpe, which were relatively isolated and well away from the main road network.

Apart from the change in how holidaymakers reached the resorts, the type of attraction on offer also changed in the 1960s and 1970s with the arrival of bingo halls and amusement arcades. Some of the other traditional attractions lost their appeal - among them the SMR.

The 1970s and 1980s were troubled times for seaside resorts in Great Britain. Prolonged post-war austerity and under investment in resorts had laid the seeds of decline. Additionally, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, British holiday habits were changing dramatically. In 1970 almost 6 million people holidayed abroad - but within ten years that figure had doubled. As Bill Aitken succinctly observed in his book *Dear Bill Bryson* (Icon Books 2022) "*what the trains gaveth, planes tooketh*". The Thatcherite reforms of the 1980s also reduced the traditional working class holiday market as heavy industry, such as coal and steel, was all but destroyed. In addition, those that did still go to the seaside, went only for a day or short stays - not the traditional week or two weeks - reducing the need for hotel and guest accommodation, which saw a sharp decline between 1961 and 1971. As Madeleine Bunting noted in her book *The Seaside - England's Love Affair* (Granta 2023) "*In the space of two decades, the British resort pivoted from being a symbol of modernity and progress to a symbol of the past and the outdated*". She added this decline "*happened in the full view of millions of visitors as well as those attempting to make a living in these towns*".

Revival (1985-Present)

From a low in the mid 1980s seaside resorts have managed to stem the decline and start a revival of sorts. Short breaks and day visitors needed to be attracted to replace those who stayed for longer - the traditional two week holiday at the seaside was long gone for the majority. Promenades have been revamped and improved, gardens restored and new facilities provided.

Some resorts have managed to provide alternative attractions to the traditional seaside offering. Air displays are one example - the seaside being ideal for such an event - there is plenty of viewing space on the seafront and promenades, with the flying taking place safely over the sea. Margate has been transformed by the opening of the Turner Contemporary gallery on the seafront by the harbour in 2011. In the 2000s, some resorts saw large scale investment through the Government's "Sea Change" initiative (2008-2011) and later the Coastal Communities Fund. For example Blackpool received £100m for promenade improvements, Whitley Bay £36m for a facelift, Hastings £14.2m for restoration of the pier and Rhyl £85m for a regeneration master plan. By around 2015 British holiday makers were spending £3.5 billion at seaside resorts and after a long period of decline, VisitEngland was able to report a 10% increase in the number of seaside visits in 2015. The "staycation" effect of the 2020/2021 Covid pandemic also gave the British seaside resort a welcome boost.

Definition of a Seaside Miniature Railway

There is no "official" definition of what is, or is not, an SMR. Dr Rooks in his Dissertation *Rails by the Sea* used his own definition of "*A miniature passenger railway of 21in G or less, operating within the environs of a seaside resort, whose primary function is purely for leisure and amusement*", which is very acceptable. However, for the purposes of this work the following definition will be used.

- A passenger carrying railway with a gauge of at least 7¼" up to and including 2'.
- Permanent, unless laid in the same location each season.
- Located in a seaside resort, being part of that town's attractions, on or near the seafront.
- Not part of a paying attraction such as an amusement park or theme park.

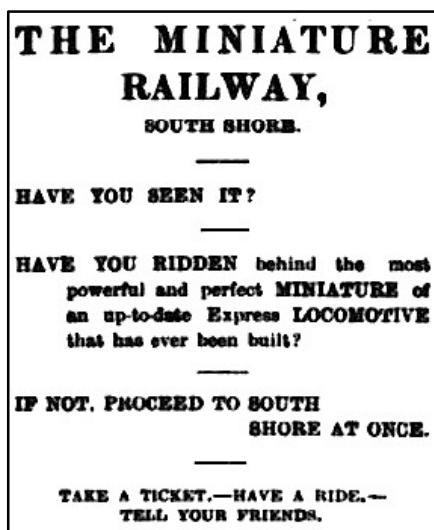
Both Croft and Rooks included the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch Railway and the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway as SMRs, but in the opinion of this Author, and considering the above definition, they are not true SMRs. The various railways, which operated in the Butlin's Holiday Camps are also excluded from this survey.

Overview of the Seaside Miniature Railway

Although seaside resorts developed rapidly through the Victorian period with the arrival of the railways, it was not until the Edwardian era that the first SMR opened - at Blackpool in 1905. At the end of Queen Victoria's reign in January 1901, public miniature railways were unknown in Great Britain. The very first examples (albeit only temporary) ran in conjunction with Exhibitions, which were popular following the Great Exhibition of 1851. Short 12⅞" and 15" gauge lines ran at Earl's Court and Glasgow respectively in 1901. These two railways were operated by Cagney locomotives imported from the United States of America. Having been inspired by these locomotives and railways Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke (1877-1953) and Henry Greenly (1876-1947) opened the first permanent SMR on Blackpool South Shore Sands in June 1905. The line was short lived, closing in 1909 - a sandy beach was found not to be the best place to run a railway! However, the seed was sown and other Bassett-Lowke SMRs followed at Southport and Rhyl in 1911 - using locomotives designed by Henry Greenly. These two lines proved to be very long lived - that at Southport has been in continuous operation since 1911, while that at Rhyl was closed for a time in the early 1970s.

Not all seaside resorts lent themselves to accommodating an SMR. Ideally, there was a wide seafront promenade with perhaps gardens or greens behind, which would allow plenty of space for an SMR. Felixstowe and Lowestoft were examples of this. Seafront boating lakes or other water features also provided a suitable place to site an SMR - Cleethorpes, Southport and Rhyl are good examples. Resorts, such as Bournemouth, which had a narrow promenade with high cliffs immediately behind were not suited to an SMR - unless there were large open spaces on the cliff tops - like at Whitby. Piers also afforded a good flat space for an SMR, with such lines at Hunstanton, Herne Bay and Margate. Public parks near the seafront also offered a good location - Hotham Park at Bognor Regis and Happy Mount Park at Morecambe are examples. In any event a central location on, or near, the resort's seafront would be preferred - an area where it was busy with visitors. However, not all resorts encouraged or even permitted SMRs, which they may have seen as too vulgar for their genteel visitors. Frinton in Essex would be a good example of this attitude.

What would a typical SMR look like? It was probably located on local authority property (before the 1974 local government reorganisation that would have been the local Urban District or Borough Council for the resort). The most popular arrangement was for the SMR to be run by a private operator paying a yearly lease, or more likely on a profit sharing basis with the council. However, some councils chose to operate the railway themselves, purchasing the track, locomotive(s) & coaches and using direct labour - Lowestoft and Scarborough were examples. Motive power would probably have been steam. Steam operation of SMRs continued long after steam locomotives finished on the British railway network in August 1968. Lowestoft Borough Council ordered a new steam locomotive for their railway as late as the winter of 1964/1965. However, the cost of operating a steam locomotive, and the need for a suitably trained driver, meant from the 1970s internal combustion would be the preferred motive power. When at their most popular SMRs made good money for their owners and when on council property the resulting income was used along with other council run seaside attractions to keep the local rates down.



An advert from the *Fleetwood Express* of Saturday 10th June 1905 for the very first SMR, which ran on the South Shore Sands at Blackpool from 1905 until 1909.

List of Seaside Miniature Railways

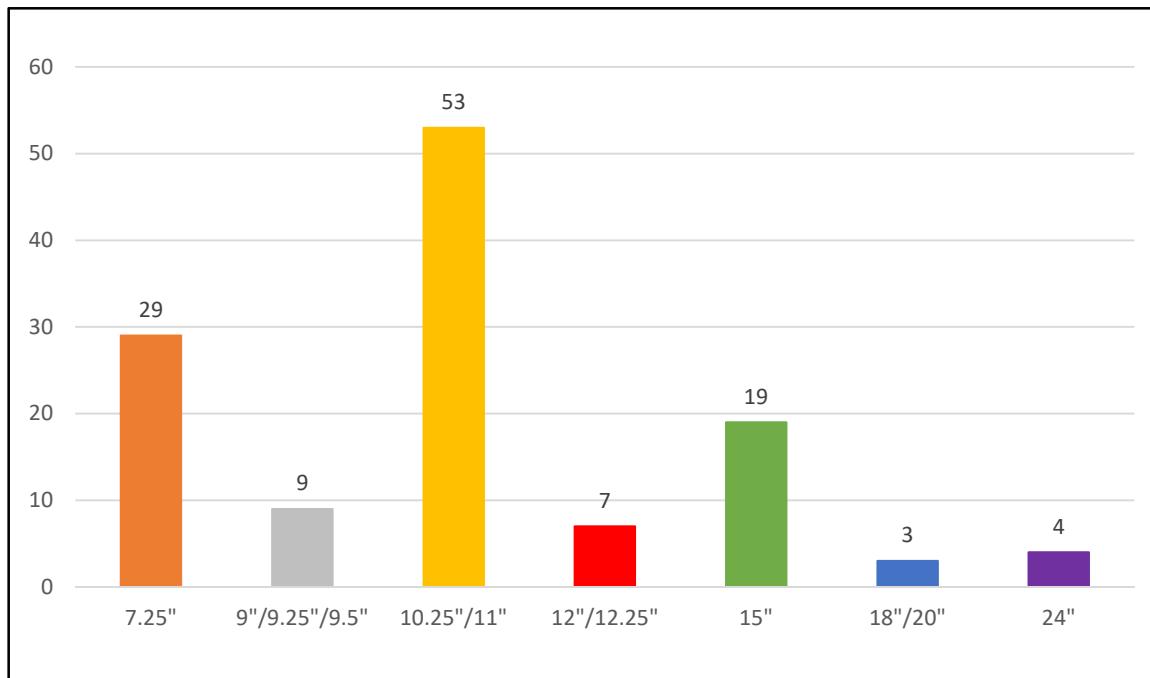
A list of SMRs can be found in Appendix One. This is not claimed to be a full definitive list of all SMRs that have existed. A small number of other lines may have existed for a short time and escaped being recorded. Note also the definitions stated on page 7.

Those SMRs still open and providing a passenger service are shown in **bold text**. The gauge shown is generally that at the time opening. Opening & closing dates should be reasonably accurate (within a year or two), although one or two are informed estimates - but will be close enough for the statistical analysis which follows.

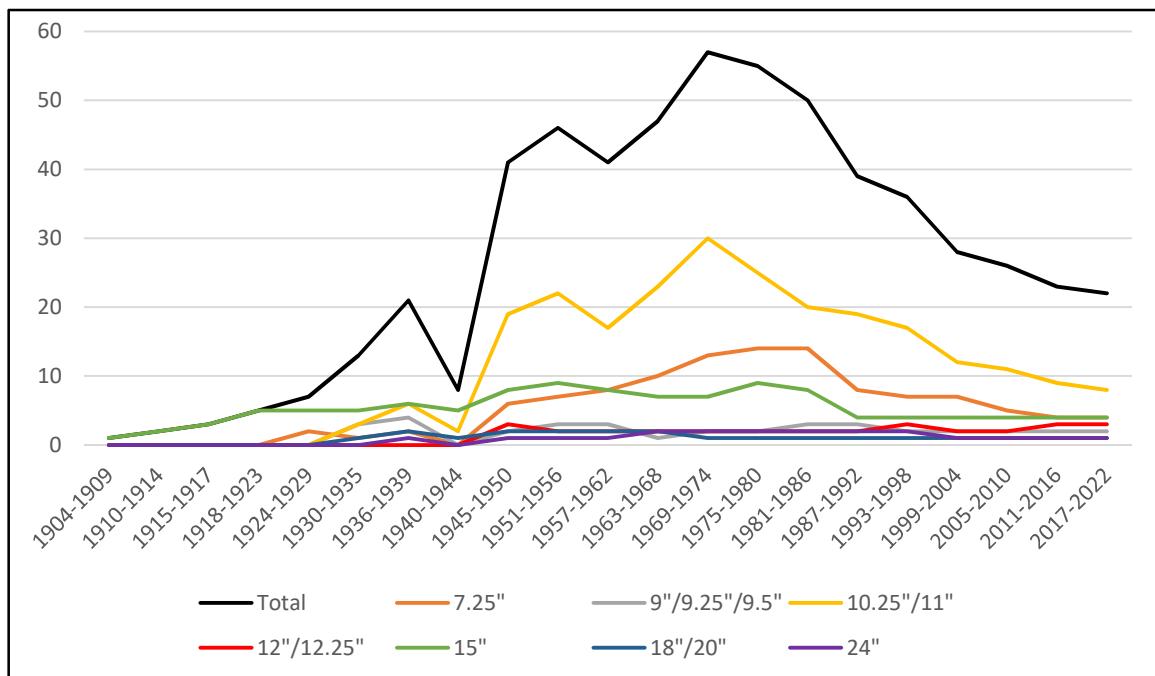
Statistics & Analysis

The following charts and graphs have been derived using the data from the list of SMRs, which appears in Appendix One. Each chart or graph is followed by explanation of the data shown.

Seaside Miniature Railways by gauge

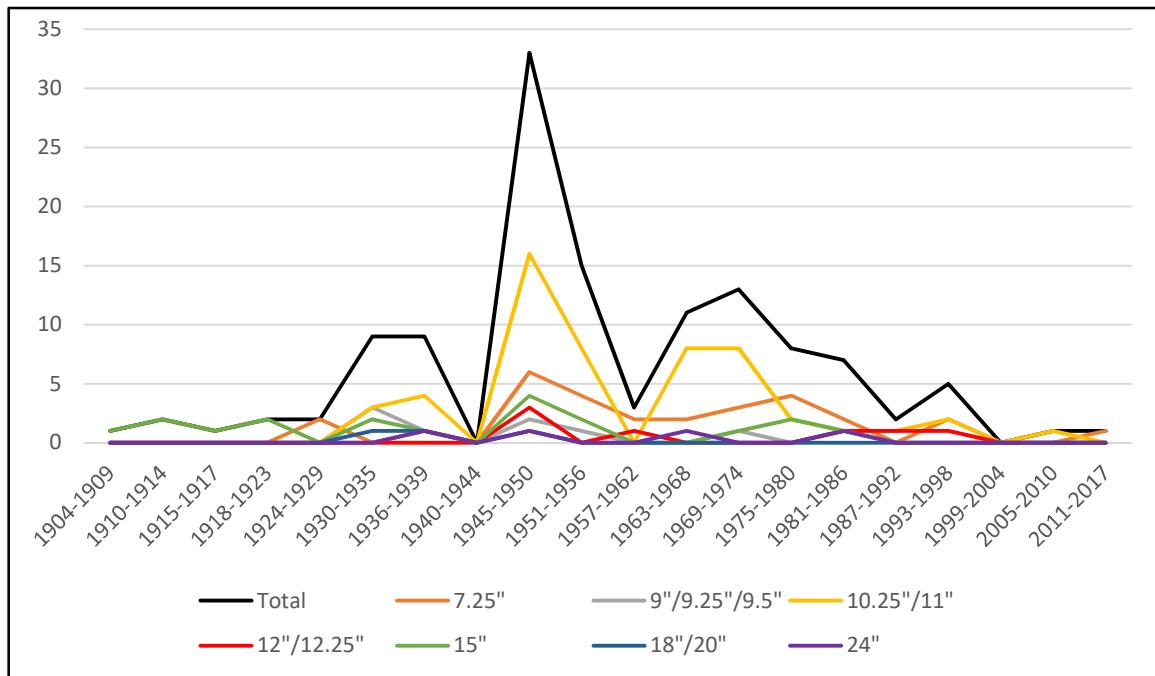


This chart shows the total number of SMRs divided by gauge. It clearly displays the overwhelming popularity of 10¼" gauge. Perhaps surprising is the number of 7¼" gauge lines, which exceeds by some margin the 15" gauge lines. The larger 18", 20" & 24" gauge lines were never a popular choice for an SMR, where space was probably constricted due to the nature of the seafront site, and the expense of the equipment.

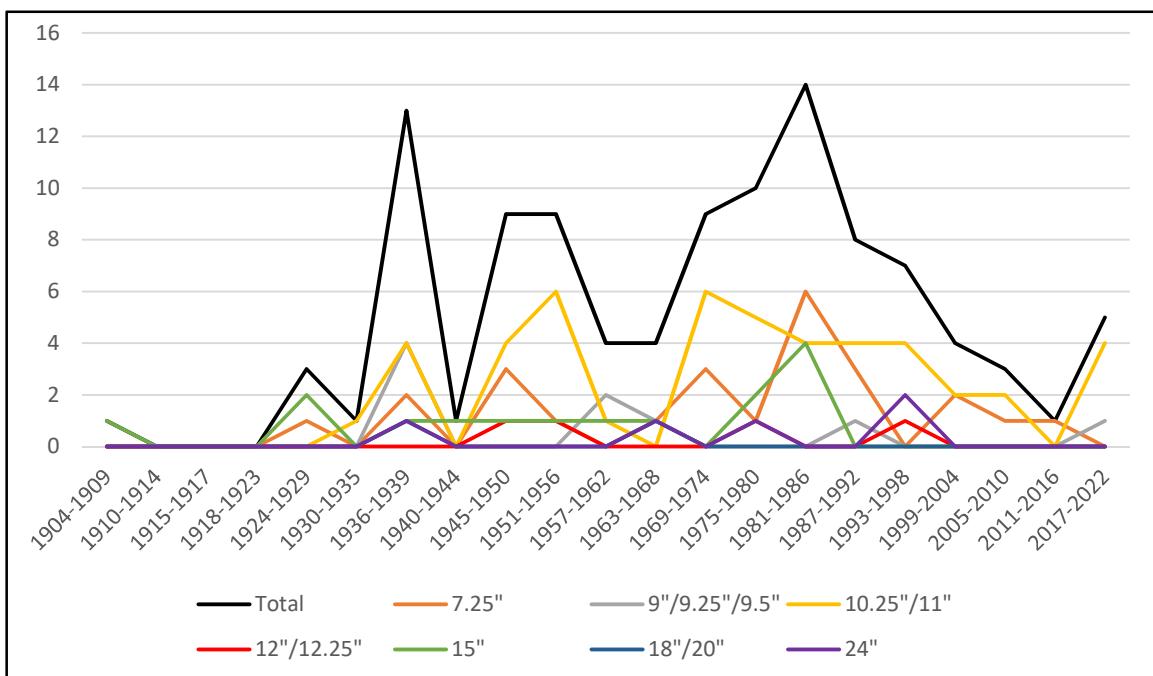
Seaside Miniature Railways by gauge and date

This graph shows the total number of SMRs divided by gauge and date. All the early railways, up to the end of the First World War, were of 15" gauge, which remained popular until a decline in the 1980s. Use of 10¼" gauge rose sharply after the Second World War and has remained the gauge of choice for the SMR. The smaller 7¼" gauge became popular by the early 1960s and especially so in the 1980s. The total number of SMRs shows a steady increase after the First World War, with a peak in the 1930s, which was brought to an abrupt end by the Second World War. There was then a steep increase immediately post-war as seaside resorts saw a boom and the number of SMRs ballooned. With such a large number of SMRs opened in this short period of time (1945-1950) it is not a surprise that some turned out to be located on poor or unsuitable sites. Hence there was a period of consolidation and a small decline in the late 1950s, before another period of growth in the 1960s.

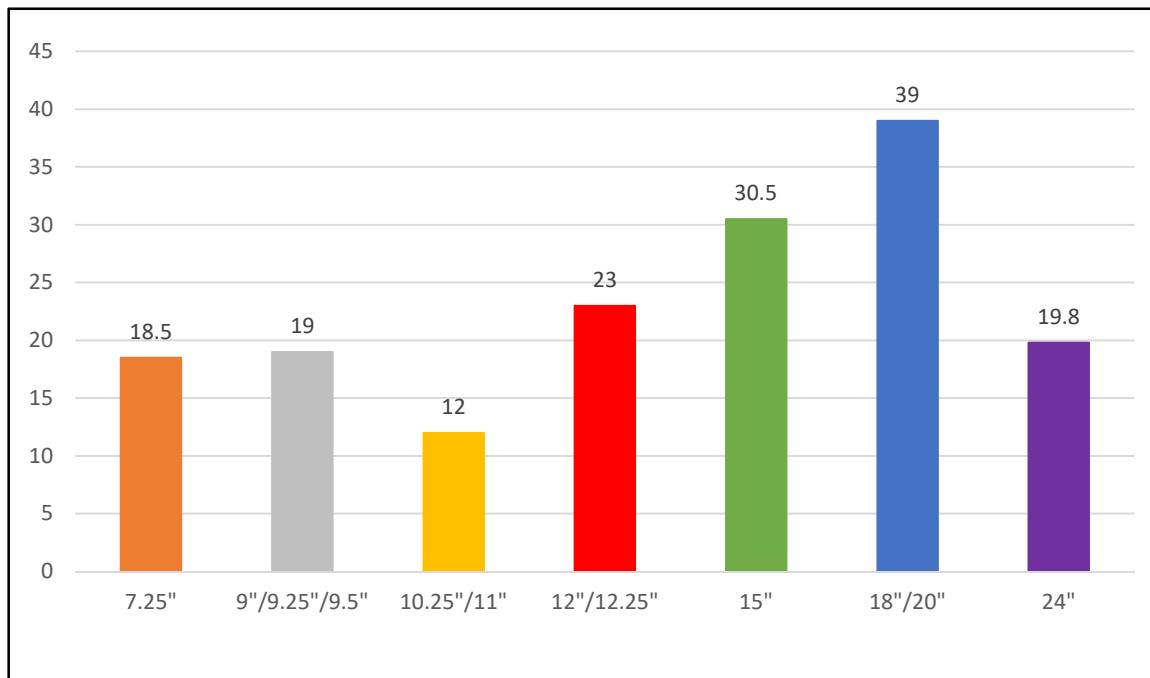
The total number of SMRs reached a peak (of 57) in the period 1969-1974, just as seaside resorts started their decline. There was then a subsequent steady decline in the number of SMRs until just 18 remain in 2025 - whose average age is 64 summer seasons of operation. The history and fortunes of an SMR would be tied closely with that of its host resort. A decline in fortunes of the resort would inevitably mean reduced takings on the SMR as prospective passengers moved to a different resort, or spent less time there. The Local Government reorganisation of 1974 did not help the fortunes of the SMR. Control of the affairs of many seaside resorts passed from an Urban District Council, which just looked after that resort, to a much larger District or County Council, which covered not just the resort, but much larger areas and therefore didn't always act in the best interests of the resort.

Seaside Miniature Railways opened by gauge and date

This graph shows the number of SMRs opened by gauge and date. Unsurprisingly, it mirrors to a great extent the total number of SMRs shown in the previous graph. However, it clearly shows three periods of growth of the SMR, as openings took place between the wars (1930-1939), immediately post Second World War (1945-1950) and during the 1960s. A steady decline in openings then followed, with a small blip in the 1990s. The period of consolidation in the late 1950s, mentioned in the previous graph, can be clearly seen with very few openings during that time. The graph also emphasises the popularity of 10¼" gauge, even in the 1930s up to the outbreak of the Second World War.

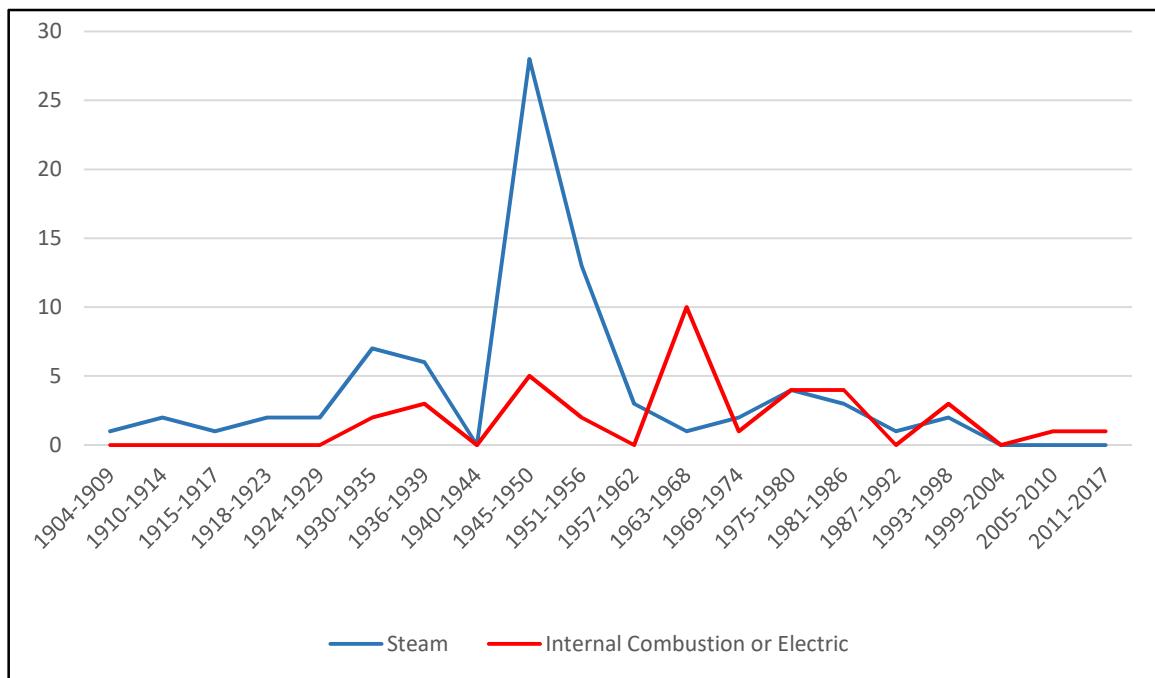
Seaside Miniature Railways closed by gauge and date

This graph shows the number of SMRs closed by gauge and date. Three peaks can be seen: at the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, during the period of consolidation in the late 1950s, and in the 1980s when the number of closures reached a peak (of 14). At that time seaside resorts were suffering their worst period of decline and therefore SMRs struggled. The number of closures then steadily declined as seaside resorts saw a period of regeneration and an increase in popularity. The worrying up-turn in closures in the period 2017-2022 can be attributed to a number of historic lines sadly closing; at Clevedon, Arbroath (Kerr's), Worthing (Brooklands) and Exmouth, for a variety of reasons. Thankfully, there have been no closures since 2022. The saw-tooth nature of the graph for each individual gauge emphasises the ephemeral nature of the miniature railway - SMRs being no different in this regard.

Seaside Miniature Railways longevity by gauge

This chart shows the average number of summer seasons each SMR operated, divided by gauge. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it shows the overall trend is for the larger gauge lines to be the longest lived (although it should be noted the sample of 18"/20" gauge and 24" gauge lines is very small - there were only ever three and four railways of those gauges respectively). The overall average across all gauges is 23 summer seasons of operation.

Seaside Miniature Railways by motive power and date



This graph shows the predominant motive power employed at opening of each SMR. It clearly shows that steam was the only option for motive power until the development of the internal combustion engine after the 1920s. Use of steam locomotives then declined sharply in the late 1950s and early 1960s as the use of internal combustion was found to be more convenient and economical. However, after the end of the 1960s the use of steam and internal combustion closely matched each other, as perhaps by then steam was seen as an essential facet to draw passengers to the railway. Of the 18 SMRs still open, 5 presently employ steam motive power on a regular basis. Electric motive power has had very limited use on SMRs, with the notable exception of Cleethorpes between 1954 & 1971, but will probably become much more popular for environmental reasons.

A selection of Seaside Miniature Railways in Pictures

Rhyl Miniature Railway



The first SMRs were of 15" gauge and the Rhyl Miniature Railway opened on 1st May 1911 running for 1 mile around Marine Lake at Rhyl on the North Wales coast. Seafront water features, such as boating lakes as here at Rhyl, made ideal locations for an SMR. Rhyl Miniature Railway was designed and built by Miniature Railways of Great Britain Limited - founded by Wenman Joseph Bassett-Lowke (1877-1953) and Henry Greenly (1876-1947). It initially used locomotives built by Bassett-Lowke and designed by Greenly, but later became known for its fleet of 4-4-2 locomotives built by Albert Barnes, but designed by Greenly. It has proved to be one of most enduring SMRs, but unfortunately suffered a period of closure with the track removed between 1970 and 1977. However, today it still operates around Marine Lake with steam locomotives hauling trains of happy passengers, despite much else of the nearby traditional seaside attractions having been removed. Here we see the attractive new station, which was opened in May 2007 and is a representation of the railway's former station on a slightly different location. Barnes 4-4-2 "Joan" is preparing to set out on another trip around Marine Lake, which can just be seen far left. Just visible on the right, partly hiding in the station building, is a Cagney 4-4-0 locomotive. It was one of these small locomotives, which Wenman Bassett-Lowke and Henry Greenly saw running at the 1901 Glasgow International Exhibition, that inspired them to set about building and running miniature railways in this country - their first being an SMR on the South Shore Sands at Blackpool in 1905.

(P. Scott. 9/9/07)

North Bay Railway, Scarborough



In the 1920s & 1930s many seaside councils spent vast sums of money on developing their seafronts with promenades, boating lakes, bathing pools and gardens. Scarborough developed an entirely new area at North Bay with a large lake, gardens and a miniature railway. This 20" gauge railway opened on 23rd May 1931 and employed a steam outline diesel locomotive with hydraulic transmission (a world first) built by Hudswell Clarke. Scarborough Borough Council chose to build and operate the railway themselves with direct labour. The railway was an immediate success and a second identical locomotive was provided for the 1932 season. The railway has proved to be long-lived and the council directly operated it until December 2006 when it leased the line out to a private operator. As well as an attraction in its own right, the railway also provides a useful transport link between Peasholm Gardens & Northstead Car Park, and the Sea Life Centre on the seafront at the north end of North Bay at Scalby Mills - a run of about 1,300 yards. In this view, taken from the now closed footbridge at the former Beach station, "Neptune" passes with a train on a beautiful sunny day. Clearly visible in the background is the Sea Life Centre and Scalby Ness. Passengers get a glorious view of the sea here. Just visible in the front of "Neptune", by the lineside gate, is part of the automatic train stop system, which must be unique on a miniature railway. This prevents two trains meeting head-on on the single line, which had unfortunately happened twice previously in the line's history before the system's installation.

(P. Scott. 9/6/15)

Kerr's Miniature Railway, Arbroath



10¼" gauge has been the gauge of choice for SMRs, although it wasn't until after the Second World War that the number of 10¼" gauge SMRs outnumbered those of 15" gauge. The Kerr's Miniature Railway opened as a 7¼" gauge line in 1935, but was converted to 10¼" gauge in 1938. The railway ran for some 350 yards on the West Links by the seafront and alongside the main railway line between Dundee and Aberdeen. Seaside parks and open grounds were a good and popular location for an SMR. Starting with steam motive power, it later changed to internal combustion, although latterly steam did make an appearance on special occasions. Tragically, the railway closed in October 2020 a victim of falling passenger numbers, partly due to the local council reconfiguring the park. However, there are now signs it might reopen. Its location, alongside the main line, afforded many photo opportunities as seen in this view. A steam hauled goods train passes on the main line towards Dundee. On the left is 4-4-2 steam outline locomotive "Auld Reekie", which in its 9½" gauge days had once worked on the SMR at Barry Island. On the right is a large battery electric locomotive originally built in 1959 as a back-up for the three identical locomotives on the Cleethorpes Miniature Railway, but found to be surplus. It was sold to the Kerr's Miniature Railway in 1960 where it ran until 1981 - retaining the original batteries to the end!

(Postcard 1960s)

Southsea Miniature Railway



This railway had originally opened as a 9½" gauge line in 1932, but was closed at the outbreak of the Second World War. Left totally derelict, it was completely rebuilt as a 10¼" gauge railway, reopening on 21st July 1945 - one of the first SMRs to be opened after the war. It was located behind the sea wall and promenade, and near a children's playground, boating lake and bathing pool - an almost perfect location for an SMR. This made the railway very popular and profitable in those immediate post-war years. It later suffered a chequered history and ran for the last time on 1st October 1989. After 1951, and for a good many years, the railway was operated by Southern Miniature Railways Limited who also ran the SMRs at Poole, Bognor Regis and Stokes Bay at Gosport. One of their 4-4-2s "Victory" is seen here in the station. The railway then ran out behind the sea wall to a return loop below Southsea Castle.

(Postcard 1960s)



This photo, taken on the railway, shows the undoubtedly benefit of a 10¼" gauge railway. The coaches were big enough to allow a parent and small child to sit beside each other, or allow two children to sit together. Not possible on a 7½" gauge railway, it allowed more passengers to be carried and therefore more fares to be collected. The gauge also allowed the railway to be sited on a relatively constricted site, which would not be possible with a 15" gauge railway. There must be hundreds of similar photos in family albums of SMRs taken during holidays or days out. This example came from a friend of the Author and shows him sitting next to his mother during a ride on the railway.

(9/1951)

Hunstanton Pier Miniature Railway

Piers were in some ways an ideal location for an SMR - flat and straight - and a lengthy pier allowed a reasonable run. There would always be a good supply of prospective passengers nearby enjoying a walk on the promenade or on the pier itself. Hunstanton was one of the first pier SMRs, opening on 28th June 1947 during the post-war boom years for the SMR. The gauge was an unusual 9¼", due entirely to the locomotive purchased for the railway - a model of a Midland Railway 4-4-0 compound. The railway and the 4-4-0 locomotive achieved fame by appearing in the 1957 film *Barnacle Bill* - an Ealing Comedy starring Alec Guinness. The railway was regauged to the more common 10¼" gauge in 1958 and the 4-4-0 locomotive was replaced by internal combustion. The railway soldiered on until closing in 1961, just before the fortunes of Hunstanton as a seaside resort started to decline. The town lost its mainline railway link (to Kings Lynn) in 1969 speeding its decline. The pier was closed to the public by 1977 and was mostly destroyed during a storm in 1978. In this view we see the 4-4-0 locomotive well into its 220 yard journey to the pierhead. The driver is smartly turned out with his white topped cap. The train is only lightly loaded and no one appears to be enjoying the delights of a stroll on the pier. Although the pier and railway have long gone, fortunately the locomotive is still with us, under private ownership in Sussex. The full history of this railway can be found in No.3 of the *Minor Railway Mini Histories* series.

(Postcard)

Felixstowe Miniature Railway



The SMR at Felixstowe was laid out in open ground behind the promenade - in many ways an excellent location for an SMR with a steady flow of prospective passengers walking up and down the promenade enjoying the many attractions of the seaside. The layout was a small circuit of some 130 yards, for which the 7½" gauge used was ideal. Its opening in 1960 came in the third period of expansion of the SMR. Proving it was a good location, the railway survived until the end of the 2003 season - a very respectable 44 summer seasons of operation. By the time of its closure, Felixstowe had long ceased to be an important seaside resort. The site is now home to a selection of fairground type rides and other attractions. In this typically brightly coloured postcard scene, Cromar White built "Hymek" petrol locomotive D7024 is taking a three coach train around the circuit. D7024 was originally built in 1971, but arrived on the railway in 1974. Originally, the railway employed steam motive power, but like so many other operators, found the lower cost and immediate availability of internal combustion attractive - especially at times of light traffic.

(Postcard. 1970s)

Kingsbridge & District Light Railway



Bucking the trend of SMR closures is this 7¼" gauge railway at Kingsbridge in Devon, which opened on 28th May 2017. This is perhaps stretching the definition of an SMR - Kingsbridge is at the head of a long estuary - but the waters alongside the railway are tidal. Laid tramway style, the railway runs along the promenade on the eastern side of the estuary, as opposed to through the gardens between the promenade and the road. This probably made gaining planning permission easier, but those using the promenade seats need to watch their legs and feet when trains are running! Between 1969 and 1991 a 7¼" gauge line ran along the western side of the estuary and was the inspiration for the current railway. Here we see a train running out along the railway away from the town with a battery electric locomotive hauling a lightly loaded train of two coaches. The tidal waters of the estuary are clearly visible to the left - the tide being in on this occasion. Battery electric motive power may be seen on more of our SMRs in the future as it is convenient, clean and "green".

(P. Scott. 11/5/19)

Conclusions

The SMR proved to be a popular addition to a seaside resort's attractions from its early beginnings before the First World War. As resorts developed in the inter-war period with local councils spending large sums of money on promenades and seafront amenities, the number of SMRs grew. The Second World War necessarily interrupted the growth of SMRs, but as the seaside resorts boomed in the immediate post-war period as war-weary holidaymakers besieged them, SMRs opened in many resorts as operators and local councils looked to cash-in on their undoubtedly popularity. There was then a period of consolidation and a slight retrenchment before the number of SMRs peaked in the period 1969-1974. This was just at the time the seaside resorts started a steady decline, which speeded up in the 1980s - the number of SMRs consequently fell as holidaymakers deserted the resorts. As seaside resorts saw investment and an upturn in their fortunes from the 2000s, the situation of the SMR steadied and the rate of decline in numbers slowed.

It has been shown the most popular gauge for an SMR is 10 $\frac{1}{4}$ ". This is small enough to allow a reasonable track layout in a constricted seafront site, but has large enough coaches to allow a good number of passengers to be carried per train, and hence earn a respectable income for its owner or operator. It is also a popular gauge generally for miniature railways and therefore there is plenty of equipment available. Early SMRs were of 15" gauge - simply because that was the founding gauge of the public miniature railway in the country.

It has also been clearly proved the health of an SMR is inextricably linked to the success or failure of its host resort. Whilst some resorts actively encouraged SMR operators to come to their town, others declined the offer of an SMR. Of course, some resorts just were not suitable to host an SMR for geographical reasons

Currently (2025) there are 18 seaside resorts, which can still boast an SMR as an attraction for their holidaymakers - from a peak figure of 57. These are distributed around the country as follows: south of England 5, north east 4, north west 3, south west 2, east 1, Wales 2 and Scotland 1 (see list in Appendix One).

For an SMR to flourish and survive it needs a good location with a steady flow of prospective passengers nearby. Although an owner or operator will not make a vast profit from an SMR, it should allow a reasonable income and/or cover its operating costs. The days of an SMR making large profits ended with the decline of the seaside resorts in the 1970s & 1980s. Those SMRs which are volunteer run, or operated by dedicated miniature railway enthusiasts, are probably well-maintained and run, and therefore likely to have an ensured future. It is good to see two of our oldest SMRs, at Rhyl and Southport, still at work running trains and providing an attraction and entertainment to holidaymakers, just as their founders and builders intended way back in 1911 - in a very different world before the First World War.

Appendix One

List of Seaside Miniature Railways					
Resort	Name of Railway	Gauge	Opened	Closed	
Aberdour	Aberdour Miniature Railway	7.25	1967	1984	
Allhallows on Sea	Wilson's Pleasure Railway	24	1939	1939	
Arbroath	Kerr's Miniature Railway	10.25	1935	2020	
Ayr	Ayr Miniature Railway	10.25	1968	1998	
Banff	West Buchan Railway	15	1984	1985	
Barry Island	Barry Island Miniature Railway	9.5	1936	1939	
Blackpool	Blackpool Miniature Railway	15	1905	1909	
Bognor Regis	Beaulieu Gardens Miniature Railway	7.25	1968	1976	
Bognor Regis	Bognor Miniature Railway	10.25	1951	1957	
Bognor Regis	Bognor Pier Railway	10.25	1949	1970	
Bognor Regis	Hotham Park Miniature Railway	12.25	2007		
Bognor Regis	Hotham Park Miniature Railway	10.25	1970	2005	
Brean	Brean Sands Miniature Railway	7.25	1974	2002	
Bridlington	Bridlington Miniature Railway	7.25	1951	1967	
Burnham on Sea	Burnham on Sea Miniature Railway	10.25	1934	1937	
Burntisland	Dicks Miniature Railway	7.25	1953	1969	
Burry Port	Shoreline Caravan Park Miniature Railway	10.25	1968	1985	
Caernarvon	Fort Belan Miniature Railway	7.25	1978	1983	
Carnoustie	Carnoustie Beach Model Railway	7.25	1937	1939	
Christchurch	Christchurch Miniature Railway	10.25	1953	1978	
Cleethorpes	Cleethorpes Coast Light Railway	15	1972		
Cleethorpes	Cleethorpes Miniature Railway	10.25	1948	1971	
Cleethorpes	Cleethorpes Wonderland Miniature Railway	7.25	1949	1970	
Clevedon	Clevedon Miniature Railway	9.5	1952	2022	
Cleveleys	Jubilee Gardens Miniature Railway	7.25	1955	1987	
Colwyn Bay	Colwyn Bay Miniature Railway	10.25	1953	1986	
Colwyn Bay	Narrower Gauge Railway (Eirias Park)	10.25	1992	1995	
Cruden Bay	Port Erroll Railway	7.25	1980	1983	
Dawlish	Dawlish Warren Miniature Railway	10.25	1972	1980	
Dymchurch	Dymchurch Miniature Railway	10.25	1938	1946	
East Worthing	Brooklands Miniature Railway	10.25	1965	2018	
Exmouth	Exmouth Miniature Railway	10.25	1949	2017	
Fairbourne	Fairbourne Miniature Railway	12.25	1986		
Fairbourne	Fairbourne Miniature Railway	15	1916	1985	
Felixstowe	Felixstowe Miniature Railway	7.25	1960	2003	
Fleetwood	Fleetwood Miniature Railway	15	1975	1982	
Fleetwood	Fleetwood Miniature Railway	10.25	1954	1955	
Folkestone	Folkestone Miniature Railway	7.25	1947	1955	
Fraserburgh	Fraserburgh Mini Railway	24	1964	1997	
Gillingham	Strand Park Miniature Railway	7.25	1948		
Goodrington	Goodrington Miniature Railway	7.25	1953	1973	
Gosport	Stokes Bay Miniature Railway	10.25	1948	1950	
Great Yarmouth	Yarmouth Miniature Railway	15	1932	1937	

List of Seaside Miniature Railways					
Resort	Name of Railway	Gauge	Opened	Closed	
Hartlepool	Crimdon Dene Miniature Railway	7.25	1947	1947	
Hartlepool	Crimdon Dene Miniature Railway	15	1949	1955	
Hartlepool	Seaton Carew Miniature Railway	15	1946	1947	
Hastings	Hastings Miniature Railway	10.25	1948		
Hayle	Towans Railway	10.25	1972	1995	
Hayling Island	Hayling Island Miniature Railway	12.25	1948	1953	
Herne Bay	Herne Bay Pier Miniature Railway	7.25	1948	1950	
Hilsea	Hilsea Miniature Railway	10.25	1946	1949	
Hornsea	Hornsea Miniature Railway	10.25	1933	1935	
Hunstanton	Hunstanton Miniature Railway	9.5	1950	1957	
Hunstanton	Hunstanton Pier Miniature Railway	9.25	1947	1961	
Ingoldmells	Ingoldmells Miniature Railway	7.25	1960	1983	
Jaywick	Jaywick Miniature Railway	18	1936	1939	
Kingsbridge	Kingsbridge & District Light Railway	7.25	2017		
Kingsbridge	Kingsbridge Miniature Railway	7.25	1969	1991	
Leysdown on Sea	Leysdown Coastal Railway	9	1985	1987	
Littlehampton	Littlehampton Miniature Railway	12.25	1948		
Llandudno	Great Orme Miniature Railway	10.25	1953	1954	
Llandudno	Llandudno Miniature Railway	7.25	1948	1950	
Lochgilphead	Lochfyne Miniature Railway	10.25	1998	2005	
Lowestoft	Lowestoft Miniature Railway	10.25	1955	1973	
Lowestoft	Lowestoft South Pier Railway	10.25	1948	1954	
Lowestoft	Lowestoft Upper Esplanade Railway	7.25	1980	1981	
Mablethorpe	Mablethorpe Miniature Railway (Beach)	7.25	1924	1925	
Mablethorpe	Mablethorpe Miniature Railway (High Street)	7.25	1926	1939	
Mablethorpe	Mablethorpe Miniature Railway (Queens Park)	7.25	1971		
Maldon	Maldon Miniature Railway	10.25	1948	2004	
Margate	Margate Pier Railway (Harbour Pier)	10.25	1948	1963	
Margate	Margate Pier Railway (Iron Jetty)	10.25	1964	1975	
Millom	Little Hoddy Railway	7.25	1996	2006	
Minehead	Minehead Miniature Railway	10.25	1965	1989	
Montrose	Montrose Miniature Railway	10.25	1938	1939	
Morecambe	Happy Mount Park Express	10.25	1950		
Morecambe	Morecambe Bay Miniature Railway	10.25	1997	2000	
New Brighton	New Brighton Railway	18	1948	1965	
New Romney	Littlestone on Sea Miniature Railway	10.25	1952	1955	
Pembrey	Pembrey Country Park Railway	24	1985	1998	
Poole	Hamworthy Park Miniature Railway	10.25	1968	1974	
Poole	Poole Park Railway	10.25	1949		
Porthcawl	Coney Beach Miniature Railway	15	1935	1986	
Prestatyn	Ffrith Beach Miniature Railway	10.25	1965	1971	
Prestatyn	Prestatyn Miniature Railway	10.25	1972	1979	
Rhyl	Rhyl Miniature Railway	15	1911		
Rhyl	Voryd Lilliput Railway	11	1947	1951	
Rochester	Woodland Park Miniature Railway	15	1923	1926	
Rothesay	Ettrick Bay Railway	15	1936	1943	

List of Seaside Miniature Railways					
Resort	Name of Railway	Gauge	Opened	Closed	
Saltburn	Saltburn Miniature Railway	15	1947		
Saltcoats	Saltcoats Miniature Railway	12	1962	1980	
Sandown	Sandham Castle Miniature Railway	10.25	1970	1991	
Scarborough	North Bay Railway	20	1931		
Severn Beach	Severn Beach Miniature Railway	15	1955	1964	
Severn Beach	Severn Beach Miniature Railway	10.25	1965	1976	
Severn Beach	Severn Beach Miniature Railway	10.25	1936	1939	
Shoreham by Sea	Shoreham Miniature Railway	10.25	1936	1938	
Silloth	Silloth Miniature Railway	7.25	1981	1988	
Skegness	Pleasureland Miniature Railway	15	1923	1926	
Skegness	Skegness Electric Tramway	12.25	1994	1995	
Skegness	Skegness Miniature Railway	10.25	1951	1992	
South Shields	Lakeshore Railroad	9.5	1972		
South Shields	South Shields Miniature Railway	10.25	1950	1951	
Southend	Southend Miniature Railway	10.25	1978	1985	
Southport	Lakeside Miniature Railway	15	1911		
Southsea	Southsea Miniature Railway	9.5	1932	1939	
Southsea	Southsea Miniature Railway	10.25	1945	1989	
St Annes	St Annes Miniature Railway	15	1956	1961	
St Annes	St Annes Miniature Railway	10.25	1973		
St Austell	Riviera Coast Railway	10.25	1974	1993	
St Leonards	St Leonards Miniature Railway	10.25	1947	1947	
Stranraer	Agnew Park Miniature Railway	7.25	1993		
Sunderland	Seaburn Miniature Railway	15	1950	1980	
Walton on the Naze	Walton Pier Railway	24	1948	1977	
Wells	Wells Harbour Railway	10.25	1976	2021	
Weston super Mare	Birnbeck Pier Railway	15	1977	1978	
Weston super Mare	Weston Miniature Railway	7.25	1981	2012	
Weymouth	Bowleaze Cove Railway	7.25	1975	1983	
Weymouth	Rio Grande Railway	10.25	1983		
Weymouth	Weymouth Miniature Railway (Greenhill)	9.5	1934	1936	
Weymouth	Weymouth Miniature Railway (Radipole Lake)	10.25	1947	1971	
Whitby	Whitby Miniature Railway	10.25	1969	1985	
Withernsea	Withernsea Miniature Railway	9.5	1933	1937	
Worthing	Worthing Miniature Railway	12.25	1947	1947	

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A short history & survey of the Seaside Miniature Railways of Great Britain

MINOR RAILWAY MINI HISTORIES - M8

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