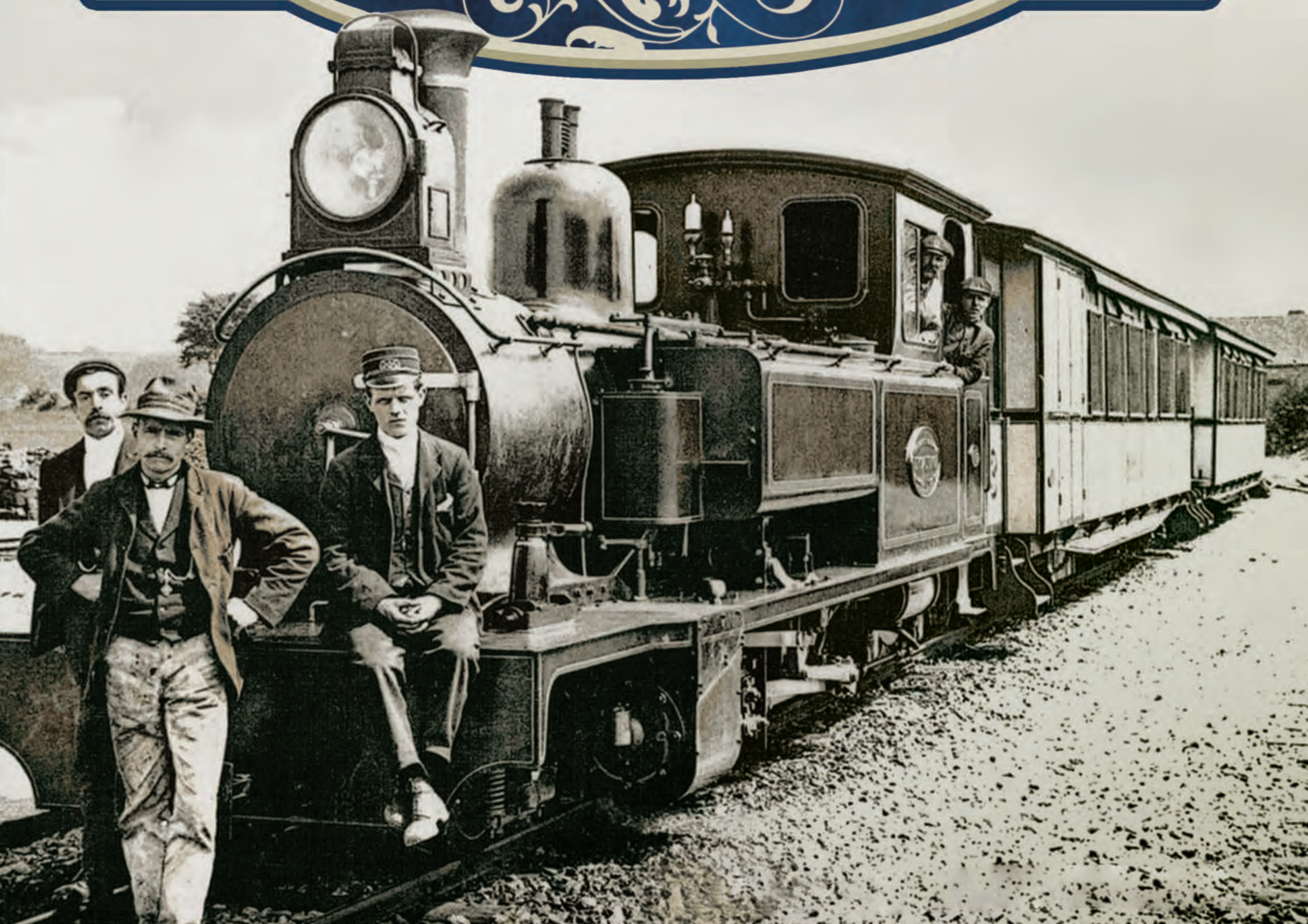
# The Light Railways of Britain & Ireland



ANTHONY BURTON & JOHN SCOTT-MORGAN

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Rev Teddy Boston, on the footplate of Bagnall 0-4-0st *Pixie*. (*Anthony Burton*)

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Anthony Burton and
John Scott-Morgan

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of a good friend and light railway enthusiast, the Rev. Teddy Boston.*

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# Preface

The aim of this book is to give a picture of the light railway age in Britain. The main text is principally concerned with the story of the railways and the running of the lines, with details of locomotives and rolling stock mainly given in the photographs and captions. The pictures are not intended simply as illustrations to the text, but tell their own parallel story of light railway development. The reader should not be surprised to find that an extensive treatment in words of a particular line will not be matched by a profusion of illustrations, nor that a line that is particularly well illustrated will not be given an equally full description in the text.

It has not been possible to give detailed histories of every single light railway in Britain, indeed since many had essentially similar stories it would have been tedious to do so. The authors have selected those descriptions and those illustrations which seem best to illustrate some important general point. Inevitably some readers will find that their own particular favourite has been omitted – we can only apologise and hope that what is included will compensate for what has been left out.

Finally, it always looks a little odd to see that two authors are credited with a book. Did they alternate sentences, or what? In this case, the main text is by Anthony Burton and the pictures were collected and captioned by John Scott Morgan.

# Preface To The Second Edition

There have been substantial changes in the photographs: there are more than in the first edition, and approximately half of the illustrations that appear in this edition were not used in the previous version. The text for this edition has been updated, mainly to include changes in the surviving light railways.

*Chapter One*

# A Railway Outing

Mention the name of York and what image comes to mind – the Minster, the Roman city, the Medieval streets or perhaps, if you happen to be a railway enthusiast, the splendid station, the no less magnificent railway hotel alongside and the National Railway Museum? All these are facets, in their way, of York the great city, York the tourist city. But there is also another aspect of the place. There is also a workaday York, a county town set amid rich agricultural land, a place with a living to earn. This was the York I came to in the summer of 1978, the city that had spread outside its old walls. It had an industrial face, yet looked outwards towards the fields and meadows of the Vale. This was Layerthorpe, home of the Derwent Valley Light Railway, in one sense the last of its kind.

Railways were not new to York when the little Derwent Valley line was born, for York was after all home to Hudson the Railway King himself. But these older railways were for those who steamed off to distant horizons; the Derwent Valley was built and run for local folk, and something of that intimate, home-grown atmosphere still clung to the line that bright day in 1978 as I hurried along to catch the afternoon train. The little tank engine, a J-72 class JOEM, stood muttering to itself in steamy whispers at the end of the platform like a cantankerous old man. It certainly looked aged for although it was only built in 1951, the class to which it belonged first saw light in the boiler back in 1898. The feeling of a cosy, comfortable old age was reinforced by the rolling stock, carriages decorated with tinted prints of landscapes by long – and justifiably – forgotten Royal Academicians. Every picture was, as befitted a local line, of Yorkshire scenes: Whitby and Robin Hood's Bay on one side, Bridlington and Scarborough on the other. They evoked memories of holiday excursions to the seaside, though this little line had never aspired to such glories. When complete it ran for just over 16 miles, but now it was down to the rump, for just 4½ miles were left. But although our train was to take us just over 4 miles along the line, it was to take us back in imagination over more than half a century in time.

We drew away smoothly through the industrial hinterland of York, though already there was a hint of the country straying into the town on the grass verges: willow herb, wild briar and thistle, a splash of poppy and a rich crop of blackberries. The latter were so plentiful that it might have been worth the company's while to resurrect one of the most attractive of the excursion trains that they ran in the 1920s – the 'Blackberry Specials'. This report appeared in the *Leeds Mercury* of 21 September 1928:

> I travelled on a 'Blackberry Special' today. The passengers were carrying all kinds of bags, baskets and tins – and even buckets! Alighting

> at Skipwith, the party split into two sections. The station-master's wife led one party down the line, and the stationmaster himself directed the others to the best areas for blackberries.
>
> Six hours later, when we returned to the station, every basket, tin – and bucket – was full.
>
> Babies, 'flappers', and old people made up the happy crowd. One old lady of eighty declared it had been one of the most enjoyable outings of her life.
>
> The station master, of course, is delighted with the resumption of passenger traffic. He directs passengers to the spots where blackberries are most plentiful; he acts as signalman, telegraphist, crossing keeper, and booking clerk, and warns visitors of the approaching danger of traffic on the common at the same time as he collects their tickets.

They used to run eight of these specials a year, each with as many as a thousand blackberry pickers. Our train would never have held that many, and one might find it harder these days to fill the baskets, for looking across the fields one could see the spaces left by uprooted hedgerows. But if those days have gone, then some things at least have not changed. As we passed the local primary school, the children rushed to wave at the train just as their grandparents would have done. Then we left the last of the town behind and it was out to the country and the flat fields. A level crossing with impatient motorists went by, with alongside it the simple crossing cottage, its walls smoke-blackened by a thousand passing trains. It was another level crossing that caused the company to erect the one and only signal on the line – more being unnecessary on a railway run on the one-engine-in-steam principle. Trains approaching this particular crossing from the direction of Elvington came up to it round a sharp bend, giving the driver no time to stop should the gates have been left closed. The signal itself was connected to the gate, so that it was automatically pulled off when the gate was opened. Now even that one signal was superfluous, for trains no longer reached it.

The white plume drifted over the fields, the locomotive working steadily and rhythmically over the level way. There was a derisory whistle as it passed a scrap heap of rusting car chassis, most of them less than half the age of our engine. But the motorists got the last laugh as we came to halt at the buffers facing the busy main road. Dunnington station has no pretensions to grandeur; a simple structure of plasterboard on a wooden frame, not unlike an overgrown cricket pavilion. There was time to admire the engine as it ran round the train ready for the return journey. Time also to look over to the site of Dunnington Industrial Estate – land bought by the company in the hope of attracting new industry which would provide customers for the railway. And this was the factor that set the Derwent Valley Railway apart from all other preserved steam lines: it had never ceased to carry goods traffic since the day it first opened. Born in the early years of the century to carry freight and passengers, it still carried freight and passengers – the last of the line of light railways that had remained independent and at work. There had, however, been several major changes over the years.

The line had a modest beginning in a resolution carried unanimously by Riccall Rural District Council on 21 March 1898, proposing that they should build a railway. They also decided that the project might prove a little too ambitious for one rural council, so they called on neighbouring Escrick Council for support. The roll call of places to be

served by the line gives a very clear notion of the sort of community it was to serve: Cliff Common, Skipwith, North Duffield, Thorganby, Cottingwith, Wheldrake, Sutton Newton, Kexby and Dunnington. These tiny rural communities were to be connected by rail to the main line between Selby and Market Weighton. It was to be a rural line serving rural needs, bringing passengers and produce to market. Indeed, within three years of opening, over seven thousand head of livestock were being carried annually.

But that is looking a little ahead of ourselves, for construction and the grand opening ceremony did not follow very quickly on the heels of that first meeting of the Rural District Council. It was not until 1910 that an order was placed with Patrick Dix of London for the actual building of the line – and it would not appear to have been the happiest of choices, for Messrs Patrick Dix and Company proved somewhat wayward in their financial dealings. Locals were regaled by a splendid new sporting pastime – 'Hunt the Loco', with the bailiffs trying to locate and impound the engine while the contractors tried, with surprising success, to hide it. None of this was, however, much help in getting the line completed, and it was something of a triumph when it was. In 1912 Lady Deramore cut the tape and the first train was on its way. Rather curiously, it ran out tender first, and as the tender was covered by flags and bunting the driver's view of the way ahead must have been decidedly limited.

So, at last, the railway was at work and passengers were provided with a fine new timetable, complete with a map of the route and descriptions of the delights on offer among the 'charming villages and natural beauties' of the Derwent valley and their 'comfortable inns with modest charges' – just the thing it seemed for 'angler, nature lover, and picnic parties'. It was not, it might have added, just the thing for those in a tearing hurry. The timetable showed nine stops between Layerthorpe and Cliff Common, the junction with the North Eastern line, and a total journey time of 48 minutes for the 16 mile journey – 'subject to alterations' it added ominously. It was, in fact, common practice to run mixed trains of freight and passengers and it needs little imagination to conceive of the delays incurred by attaching and detaching goods waggons at the halts along the way.

When the railway began operation it owned a little rolling stock, mostly goods but including two coaches – but no locomotive. This was hired from the North Eastern Railway and served well until, in 1925, they bought a Sentinel geared locomotive, the first to be used in Britain. For a while all went well. In 1918 there were 564 first class passengers and 46,982 second class, but the 1920s and the days of the motor coach lay ahead. First class passengers dropped to 173 in 1924, to a mere 3 the following year, and none at all travelled in 1926. In the same period, the number of second class passengers fell from 23,171 to 5,381. The service ended, apart from a few excursion trains and specials. Freight traffic, however, continued to prosper, and although the peak loads of the early 1920s were never to be seen again loads remained at very respectable levels.

There followed two key events in the history of the line: nationalisation and the arrival of Beeching. Why, when it seemed that the whole railway system was to be nationalised, was the Derwent Valley left out of the scheme? In fact, it was by no means the only line to be so neglected; altogether twelve standard gauge and twelve narrow gauge lines, representing

nearly 300 miles of railway were left out of the reckoning. Officialdom thought these lines to be insignificant. This was regarded as a mortal insult by the Yorkshire men who had worked like slaves to cope with massive demands during World War II, but there it was. The railway had begun as an independent concern, and as an independent concern it would continue. Then along came Dr Beeching. The Derwent Valley was not Beeching's concern, but the old Selby–Market Weighton line was – and was duly felled by his famous axe. Quite suddenly, the Derwent Valley had become a line that led to nowhere. It must have seemed that the end had been reached, and certainly the end of the original 1913 line had arrived. The axe had cut one line, and now the Derwent Valley had to be pruned as well, chopped back from 16 miles to just over 4. Fortunately, there were a number of small concerns that could still be served by rail, and a new bulk freight programme was begun.

There was one other lifeline that the railway could cling to – the growing enthusiasm for steam preservation. So, on that summer day I found the Derwent Valley still struggling on. Freight traffic for the previous year had run at nearly 50,000 tonnes and over 10,000 passengers had come along to ride the train. There was a decidedly chirpy air about the staff at Layerthorpe. Management talked with optimism about the future. The station staff talked irreverently about the 'ruddy slave drivers', but were still content to turn their hands to anything from ticket collecting to plate laying. The old tradition, it seemed, was lingering on. But before I left at the end of a very pleasant day, I was handed a copy of the company balance sheet for 1977, and the message printed there was being sung to a different tune. Read it how you would, one thing was clear: expenditure on the railway was running at £51,400 per annum, income stood at £46,722. It was not a message of hope. Over sixty years of light railway history were soon to come to an end. The last of the light railways, run as light railways were intended to be run, carrying both passengers and freight, was about to reach the end of the line. It was officially closed down and the last train to operate on the Iine ran on 27 September 1981. And that, everyone assumed was that, but the Derwent Valley had attracted the attention of enthusiasts who were determined to preserve something for the future. A Light Railway Order was issued for the section at Murton, which was a site that had an obvious advantage. It was also home to the Yorkshire Museum of Farming and it seemed reasonable to hope that visitors to the museum might like to pop across to the little station for a short line down the track and back again. Twelve years after it had closed, this section was up and running and steam locomotives again puffed down the line and they were able to celebrate the Derwent Valley's centenary.

Other preserved railways still run, some still running as they were when built, but these are special cases, such as the Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch. But the days of the commercial light railways were ended, and with their passing an era of British railway history ended as well. In this book we shall mourn their passing, but we shall be much more concerned with celebrating their achievements.

York Layerthorpe station, on the Derwent Valley Light Railway in the 1920s, with the Ford Rail Bus set waiting to depart with a local service. (*Photomatic*)

The Derwent Valley Light Railways 0-4-0 Sentinel locomotive, here seen shunting at York Layerthorpe station, c 1925. (*Photomatic*)

A wooden posted slotted signal on the Derwent Valley Light Railway, c 1925. (*Photomatic*)

Wheldrake station on the Derwent Valley Light Railway, c 1925. The buildings are of simple construction, with basic facilities and track layout. (*Photomatic*)

*Chapter Two*

# Filling The Gaps

So far we have been blithely discussing light railways without making any attempt to define the term – a course of action for which there are good precedents. The government of the United Kingdom passed the Light Railway Act in 1896, and they, too, singularly failed to attempt even a vague definition. Authors, however, cannot claim the same latitude as governments, so here is a definition that must serve for this book at least. It is an adaption of a version first put forward by John Charles Mackay in his classic discourse on the subject first published in 1896 – providing, in fact, just that description that Parliament failed to provide that same year. A light railway is one constructed of lighter rails than those commonly in use on main lines, worked at a slower speed, providing poorer accommodation for passengers and less facilities for freight. It is a line that can be worked to less stringent standards of safety and signalling than apply elsewhere in the rail system. It should be, in short, a cheap railway. If this description makes the light railway sound very much like a second-class railway, then perhaps it is because that too is a reasonable working definition. The light railways *were* inferior to the great main line routes in terms of facilities offered and standards of operation. But – and the but is vital – without them whole communities would have been entirely deprived of the benefits of rail travel and rail freight. To paraphrase a popular advertisement of a few years ago: they reached the parts other railways failed to meet. Second rate they may have been in comparison with such giants as the Midland or the Great Western, but they never set themselves up to match their standards. Their aims were modest and, in a surprisingly large number of cases, they achieved those aims, and in doing so earned themselves the affection and respect of generations of rail users.

To understand the need for light railways you have to look back to the golden days of the Victorian era when the railway network first spread across the face of Britain. Then, it seemed, there was a fortune to be made by those who could push a railway across the country from, say, London to Birmingham or Newcastle to Edinburgh. There was also a very fair prospect of good profits for those who would join Peterborough to Leicester or Shrewsbury to Chester. But where was the profit in joining Tenterden to Bodiam? None, if you had to go to all the expense of obtaining an Act of Parliament to authorise construction, if you had to provide a track that could withstand the pounding of main line expresses, and signalling to cope with a rush of fast moving traffic. There was little prospect of gain if you needed to build impressive stations and staff them to the levels that were obtained on the major through routes. Yet the traffic was there. Inhabitants of villages wanted – and needed – to travel just as much as