

BRITAIN'S BIZARRE RAILWAYS REPRINT

Robin Jones

Everyone has their own idea of what a railway is and there is no single defining image of the railway concept. Yet it has to be said that some railways are definitely stranger than others!

Why have two rails when just one will do? Ireland has the utterly bizarre Listowel & Ballybunion Railway, where Siamese twin-like double locomotives run on a V-shaped monorail.

Britain is also home to a working steam monorail, while one train from a 1960s' bid to invent a high-speed hovertrain survives, as do both carriages from the country's first dabbling in magnetic levitation.

Steam, diesel and electric locomotives and horses are not the only form of traction: sail power has been used on British lines, and if your line is steep enough, why not let the train roll by itself from one end to another? Why have traction at all, when, as Brunel discovered, you can pull trains along at high speeds by a vacuum pipe in the middle of the tracks?

Railways can be designed for any location, and used to tackle any task or terrain, no matter how difficult or improbable. For example, the wartime railways on the tiny Bristol Channel seagull sanctuary of Steep Holm, the world's smallest public railway in Norfolk, a secret system serving Britain's nuclear bunker city beneath Wiltshire, the country's own prison railway where Borstal boys pushed wagonloads of mud, the numerous lines built to collect potatoes from the Lincolnshire fens, and Bristol's forgotten funicular line, to name but some. And if you think Brunel was over the top with his broad gauge, what about the man who has a garden railway where the locomotive is too big to run on any modern British line?

Discover these and many, many more in *Britain's Bizarre Railways*, a book which opens many new doors into the understanding and appreciation of the concept of railways – however insane!



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A graduate of the University of Central England, Robin Jones, founding editor of *Heritage Railway* magazine, was a news editor and chief investigative reporter at the *Birmingham Evening Mail*, and over the years has produced several books and special publications, along with historical features for numerous other newspapers and periodicals.

He has been interested in railways from a very early age, when his elder brother Stewart took him trainspotting at Widney Manor station in Solihull at the age of four; at the end of the British Railways steam age.

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BRITAIN'S BIZARRE RAILWAYS



The modern-day replica of Charles Spooner's Festiniog Railway inspection saloon 'The Boat'.



Spoil being tipped to build up the sea wall at Freiston Shore, as seen in the early 1970s.



Adrian Shooter's Model T Ford at Rhiw Goch farm crossing on the Ffestiniog Railway in May 2010.



Norfolk Hero in steam at Walsingham station.



The replica steam outline Listowel & Ballybunion locomotive encounters one of the points. The train travels at 15mph while on the main line, approximately the same speed as the originals.

BRITAIN'S BIZARRE RAILWAYS

The first steam locomotive to be built in the 21st century, built in the Poldoc Waggonway, which eventually replaced the one at the top of the Duchy Cornwall Waggonway. It is owned by the Poldoc Waggonway Trust.

The oil painting of 1830 is the last of a number of pictures to show that the Steam Elephant ever existed. It shows the original Steam Elephant, one of three, hauling a load of children's toys towards the docks at Walsingham.

The replica Steam Elephant was built at Barmouth. It was built by the Poldoc Waggonway Trust, and is the only one of its kind in the world. It is the only one of its kind in the world. It is the only one of its kind in the world.

A MAMMOTH ACHIEVEMENT

Once the researchers at Barmouth had established the identity of the mystery locomotive, it was decided to use just the oil painting and four other contemporary pictures, combined with knowledge of other early locomotives, to draw up a blueprint for a modern-day replica - which was built over six years at a cost of £360,000.

The project was headed by Jim Bates, former of industry at the museum and locomotive driver on its Poldoc Waggonway railway demonstration line, and Andy Gray, a library researcher.

The final assembly was completed by locomotive builder Alan Keef at his workshop in Ross-on-Wye, and the new Elephant was launched in 2012 to widespread acclaim. While the new Elephant is built to standard gauge, few heritage railways today could run it, because of the problem of bridges and the unbalanced chimney.

Looking back, its design seems to have led to a technological side-effect: it did a job on a local basis, but was too cumbersome to compete with other early locomotives to take the concept much further forward.

Chapman also invented the bogie, while it was Buddle who first installed metal springs on engines, and both innovations shaped the course of steam locomotive development, long outliving their locomotive that time nearly forgot.

Nevertheless, the 21st-century Steam Elephant offers an invaluable window into those embryonic times.

A contemporary engraving shows Buddle's first steam locomotive being delivered - built by Boulton!

Example of a double-page spread.