



THE NORTH STAR CHRONICLES – a newsletter primarily for the model railway fraternity

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Editorial

This month the main feature is a 16mm but 45mm track gauge railway in Mauritius. I venture to suggest this is the first time such a railway has featured in the media although of course there were narrow gauge tramlines and industrial railways in Mauritius which delivered sugarcane to the mills up until the 1950s and 1960s.

Anyway, the prototype on which Jeremy Clarke's railway is modelled is the Southwold Railway. This railway line is one of about 30 lines built to that gauge in the UK albeit there was (and still is!) an extensive 3' gauge network in the Isle of Man and of course the County Donegal Railways Joint Committee at 125 miles was at one time the largest 3' foot system in the British Isles.

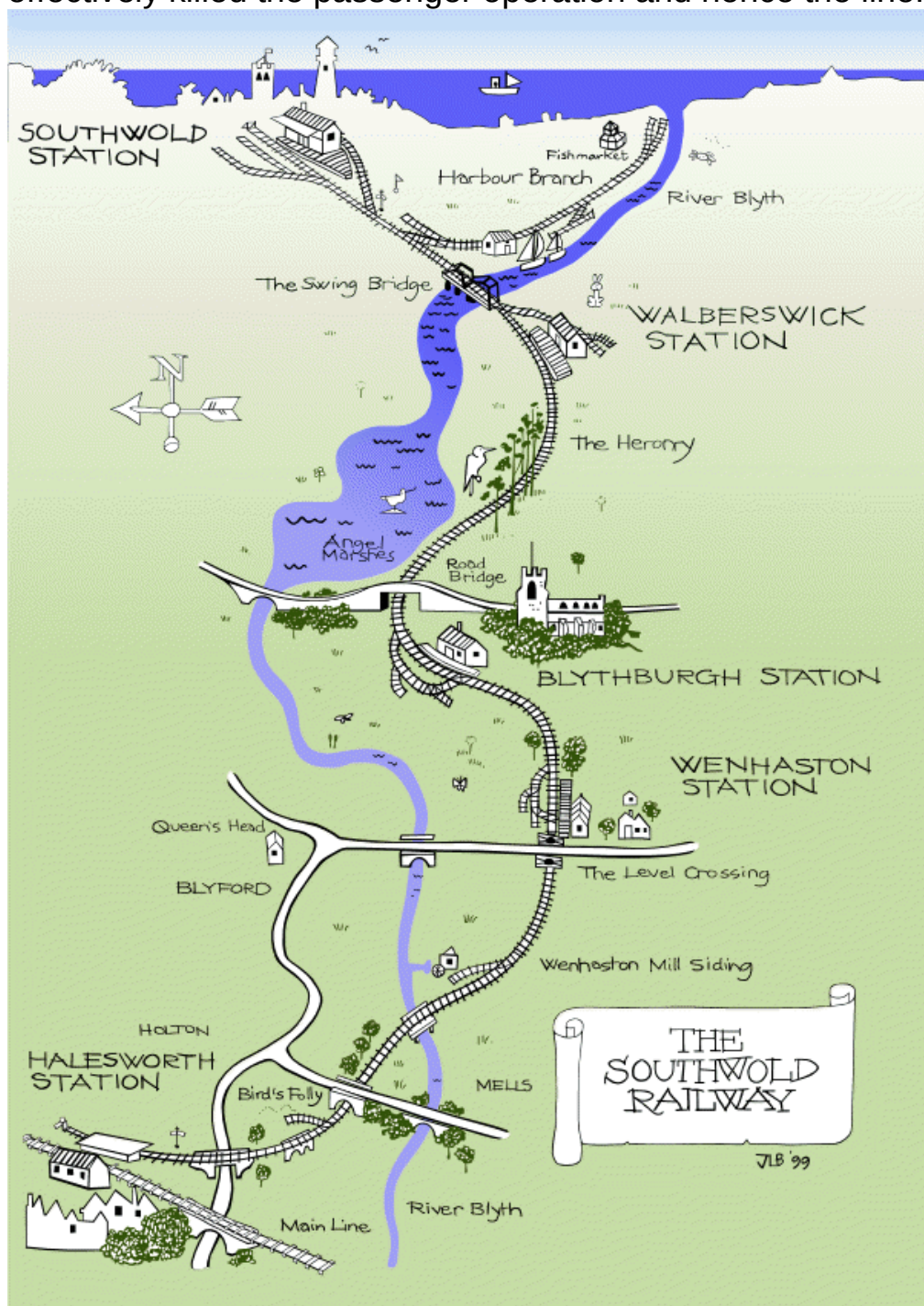
Before it was converted to 15 inch gauge in 1915, the Ravensglass and Eskdale was a notable 3 foot gauge system. A list of such operations in the UK can be viewed at:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/3_ft_gauge_railways_in_the_United_Kingdom

As will be noted from the Wikipedia list, only a few 3' gauge lines remain in operation in the UK. These are Alan Keef Headquarters, Crowle Peatland Railway, Trevithick Shed and Deep Mine Railway (located in Llechwedd Slate Caverns). As will be discussed later, plans are afoot to re-establish part of the Southwold Railway line but this can only be a long term project as before tracklaying can commence to any extent, the land concerned has first to be acquired!

The Southwold Railway

Wikipedia, (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southwold_Railway), the Southwold Railway Trust (<https://www.southwoldrailway.co.uk/>) and several informative YouTube videos provide background to the railway: Briefly, it was opened in 1879 and closed exactly 50 years later in 1929. The line was 8 miles and 63½chains (14.15kms) long and was built to join Halesworth where there was a junction with the standard gauge East Suffolk line with the seaside town of Southwold (fishing harbour/port and holiday resort). At one stage, the line was carrying 100000 passengers and 15000 tons of freight a year but the introduction of a coach service in 1926 from outside Halesworth and from within the town in 1928 effectively killed the passenger operation and hence the line.



Hand drawn map by John Bennet of the Southwold line

However, the story does not end there. The line's original motive power comprised three 2-4-0 locomotives built by Sharp Stewart. These were cut up for scrap in July 1941. Over the years, attempts have been made to resurrect a portion of the line (as the British do!). This culminated in the Southwold Railway Trust commissioning the building of a replica of one of the 2-4-0s (no 3 named Blyth) after the river along whose course the railway line followed around 2019. The loco made its first public appearance in May 2026. This was the first time in 97 years that a steam locomotive departed Southwold station (to the sound of the ringing of the original SR Company bell), albeit it only travelled a short distance!



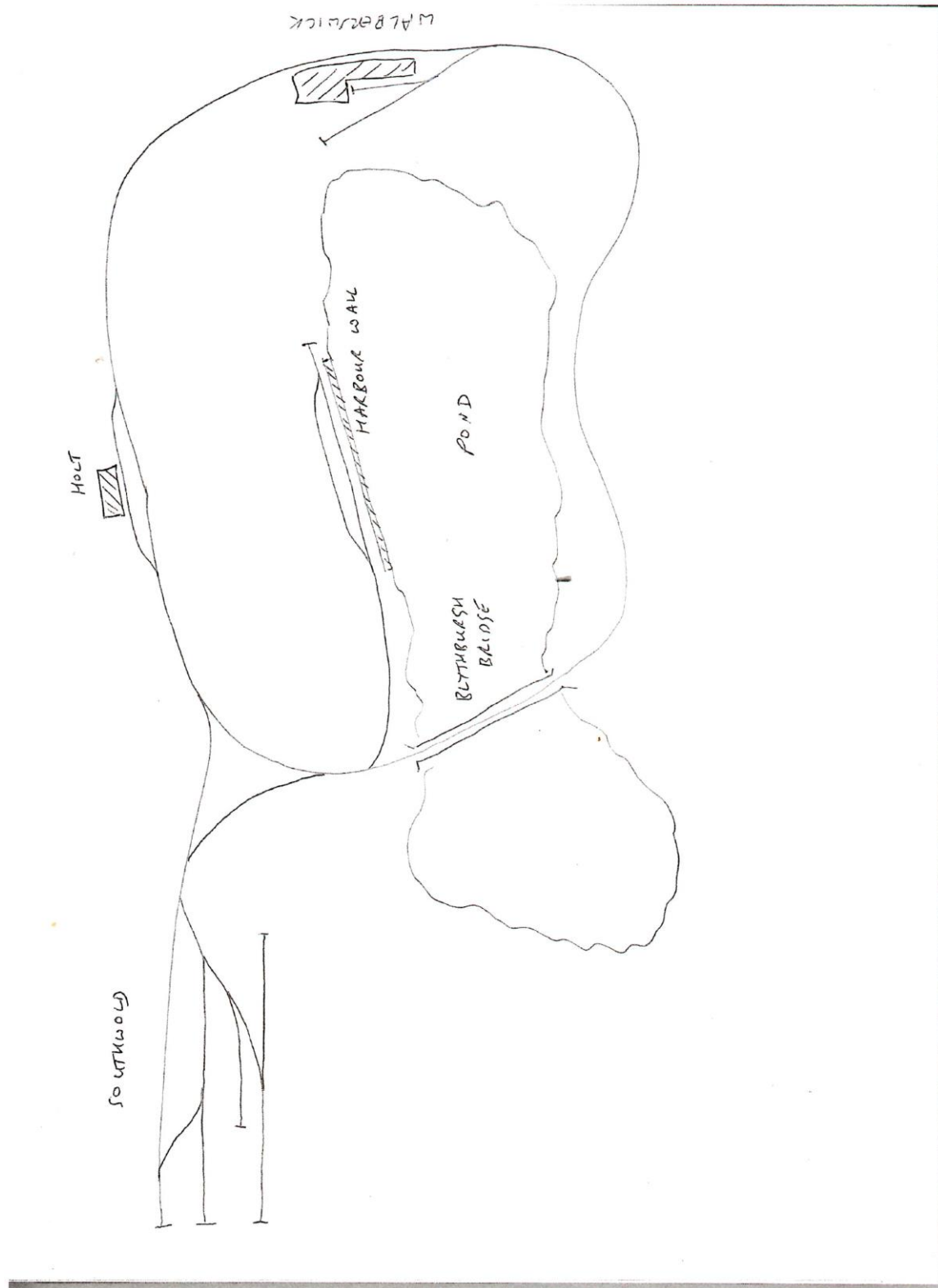
Mixed train as ran on the Southwold line and a rebuilding project of the members of the Southwold Trust.



Replica of no 3 'Blyth'. Photograph taken in June 2026 by Richard Stone.

Southwold South by Jeremy Clarke

The layout plan



The History

"Just over three years ago, my wife and I retired to Mauritius after spending most of our working lives in Africa. My new layout is the third iteration and most definitely the last!"

I started modelling in 16mm live steam in Johannesburg around 2000. We lived in Forest Town at that time and hence the name "The Forest Town Light Railway" seemed appropriate. This first layout was mainly just a small loop around the back garden and was an ideal size to start to learn about garden railways. The first steam loco I bought was a Pearce Auric from Brandbright when they still had a shop in Holt, Norfolk, close to where my parents used to live. I also bought a few simple wagon kits from the same shop so that I could learn how they could be constructed before starting scratch building.

Many years later we moved to Saxonwold where the second layout was built. The plan at this time was that this would be our retirement home and the railway was built on an elevated brick-built structure to make maintenance easier as age creeps up. It was a more ambitious project partly based on the Southwold Railway in Suffolk, England but with a lot of artistic license so that I could run other locos and rolling stock. At this time I bought a few larger locos as there was plenty of space in which to operate them. These included an Accucraft NGG16 Garrett, a Shawe Coal fired Fowler and a Darjeeling B Class. These are not really practical for the new layout, but I am loath to part with them. The Garrett is in a static display at present as it is too heavy for the Blythburgh bridge. This is a bit of an eclectic mix, I know, but I just like these locos. As David knows, I am also keen on a Shay but really can't justify it at all: not that that is a good reason not to get one anyway!

Unfortunately, due to the political and security issues in South Africa, we decided that we would move to Mauritius. We spent the first year renting a property to see if we could settle in our newly adopted country and to better understand where we might want to live if we did decide to stay. After this first year we decided that we would remain and bought our new house in Grand Baie in the north west of the country. The new house took priority over the railway for the first year and a half, but eventually I was able to consider the third iteration layout.

The new layout, which I call "Southwold South" is much more closely aligned to the original. It includes the Southwold terminus (still under construction), Walberswick station, and the Blythburgh bridge which was the main engineering work on the line. This version is back to ground level as it would have been too intrusive in the garden to build it higher. I needed to allow for a passing loop on the layout which is not prototypical and so I built a small halt, called Holt, after the station on the North Norfolk Railway in Sheringham where my brother lives. Also, my wife's favourite animal is the otter so this seemed even more appropriate. As this is the only 16mm layout in the island, as far as I am aware, there is no need for steaming bays, and lots of storage space for visitors. The Southwold Station provides this if it ever becomes necessary.

The base is a simple bed of concrete with breeze blocks installed on top to bring it about 300mm above ground level. The track is all Peco G45, including the points, and was all recovered from the previous layouts and reused. A couple of the points needed some serious attention, but otherwise all went well. I did think about using either electrical or air systems to operate the points, but decided they would stay manual for now. External electrics in this sub-tropical environment are not very reliable, and air could be an issue due to condensation in the tubing with high humidity most of the year.

The method of ballasting took some thought bearing in mind that we get some serious cyclones here in Mauritius! I initially used aquarium gravel fixed with a synthetic rubber latex used to make cement and plaster waterproof, and this has proved to be very successful to date. However, life on an island can throw in some curve balls at times. The supplier of the gravel could no longer get deliveries and so I had to change. The Southwold Railway was unusual in that the ballasting was laid to above the sleepers and so I decided that I would try to emulate this and use rock

sand and the latex. Rock sand is crushed volcanic material quarried on the island for cement and plaster. This new mix worked well and gives the railway a different look. To date, the main loop has been completed and the inaugural run was done on 2 August 2026 using an old Brandbright Cricket that I had modified quite a bit to make it more interesting, along with a couple of wagons. This was generally successful with only a few sections of track that needed minor adjustments. The one thing that I learned for the previous two layouts is that one must not skimp on the track foundations. I also tried to run my Roundhouse Katie live steam loco but this did not operate well at all having been in storage for over 3 years. The same went for the Accucraft Baguely: both of these will need a good overhaul.

At least the first major milestone has now been overcome with the completion of the loop that allows me to run trains. The next phases are to lay the track for the Southwold Station and the Harbour Branch and then start with setting out the buildings and lineside features, most of which have been completed over the last few years. The buildings include a few old British Outline Buildings bought for the Forest Town layout: the windmill which has been motorized; the engine shed which has become a boat builders shed; and the station building which is now a ships' chandlers. These latter two are used on the Harbour branch in order to fill a hole until I build the "kipperdrome" an octagonal fish factory/market that was there during the line's heyday. In addition, Walberswick station, a pill box (common in the area in WWII), and the Holt building have been scratch built.

Other rolling stock includes a Wickham trolley, a number of Southwold wagons from Bole Laser Craft and a rake of IP Engineering carriages and a brake van.

So what is next? As I am now finally fully retired after finishing off a few consulting jobs, I have bought a lathe and a milling machine and the plan is to scratch build some of the Southwold locos. They are obviously essential for the layout and are not commercially available so I do not have much of an option. This is quite a daunting task and will only start in earnest once everything else is finished to a state that looks more or less complete"



Foundations: breeze blocks



Southwold station base



The pond. (Must consult Jeremy. Don't think Mrs Cairns would permit the same level of the railway's intrusion in her garden, albeit see below - Ed)



Some landscaping completed



Inaugural run 2nd August 2026

YouTube videos about the Southwold line

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbA2bK3Bgak>

https://youtu.be/wYd5OPfG_OY?si=lehKmx8wp-5TI5WX

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HxXGRYHUt3s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bkS33v8P-E0>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-FZuCJL1I>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BATVrquTni4&t=107s>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NbA2bK3Bgak>



Boat builders workshop (modified British Outline Buildings (BOB) engine shed.) Note wiring cord for interior lighting. All buildings have interior fittings and are illuminated.



Weighbridge was scratch built. The third rail was from the original standard gauge weighbridge bought second hand.



Walberswick station building scratch built.



Fishing boat. Heavily modified kit.



***Scratch built
model of a
Second World
War pillbox.*** (You
would never have
guessed!) They
were still dotted
around the coast of
Britain when I was
growing up.



Poetic licence. Scratch built model of Holt which was actually on the North Norfolk Railway



Ships chandlers: a modified BOB station building.

It would appear to me that the Southwold Railway deserves another guest appearance in the NSC – motive power and rolling stock and the techniques and materials used for the buildings?

My thanks to Jeremy for this article and for shining a light on a railway I knew nothing about until I met him.

The end