

# THE FAR TOTTERING AND OYSTER CREEK RAILWAY of Rowland Emmett

Ian Jopson

Way back in the 1940's the cartoons of a young artist by the name of Rowland Emmett appeared regularly in the pages of the British humorous magazine *PUNCH*. Many of these cartoons were of a railway nature, though trams frequently managed to squeeze in as well. These cartoons became extremely popular with the British public for their gentle poking at authority and the whimsical design of the locomotives and carriages; even the railway staff had an elliptic character all their own. A number of books containing the best of these cartoons were published under railwaylike titles such as *Saturday Slow*, *Buffer's End*, or *Sidings and Suchlike*.<sup>\*</sup> Even as late as 1977 the best of the best were collected in *The Early Morning Milk Train*, published by John Murray. There was an American collection, *Emmett's Domain*, published by Brace-Elarcourt in 1953.

At about this time, the government of the day decided that the British people needed cheering up after the recent disturbances in Europe, and a national festival was to be organised celebrating all that was the best of

banks of the Thames, at Battersea. The designer, James Gardner, planned to put a small passenger-carrying standard light railway around the edge of this Fun-fair; at one of the planning meetings he put forward the idea of turning Emmett's drawings into a 3-D reality. Emmett was approached, and immediately thought the idea of transforming his spindly creations into actual mechanisms was impractical. It was only some time after, when he got a panic phone call from Gardner's office, requesting his drawings for the planning meeting next day, that he took the suggestion seriously. By promising the drawings would be delivered by hand, and working into the night, he was able to produce an outline design, and a rough draft for one of the locomotives.

The idea was approved by the committee, but they found a dearth of enthusiasm among engineers about taking the project on. Eventually the railway concession went to Mr. Henry Barlow of S & B Miniature Railways, of Southport (owner of Southport's Lakeside Miniature Railway), who was initially bemused

standard(!) Emmett loco, with spindly chimney, bulbous boiler, and a body covered in copper pipes and brasswork; *NEPTUNE* theoretically ran the coastal section to Dogfish Point, and was supposedly constructed from various bits of the paddle-boat *Comet*, which was wrecked in Smuggler's Reach; and *WILD GOOSE*, designed in the fashion of a hot air balloon. James Gardner did mention a further locomotive, *DAFFODIL*, which doesn't appear to have got beyond the design stages.

The rolling stock was all fairly standard 15" gauge practice. There were three trains of 5 or 6 coaches, with a covered (but open sided) coach at each end and open coaches between. Each train carried approximately 100 passengers, and there was a two minute service.

The stations themselves were a fairly simple design, with double-sided platforms and run-round loops. I did find mention of turntables in one source, but most discount these. As locomotives ran tender first in one direction, it is probable that these were in the original proposal but not included for reasons of cost or time. The buildings were originally meant to be pre-fabricated structures, like those seen at many theme parks today, but it was felt that a better atmosphere would be created by "proper" buildings. Thus the architectural firm of Harrison and Seel were brought in to turn the Emmett designs into reality. This small, but reputable, firm were enthusiastic about the project, and soon produced workable drawings.<sup>\*\*\*</sup> They and the Emmetts were soon scouring the country for the assorted bric-a-brac detail required, from weathered brick (ex-LMS) to scallop shells.

FAR TOTTERING itself was a grandiose brick and clapperboard affair, some 40 feet long, and the station buffet contained one of the pleasure garden's numerous tea-rooms (a total of twelve in all). It had a small clock tower cupola, complete with escaping cuckoo, and the awnings were supported by carefully tilted cast-iron posts. The roof itself appears to be curved, though one doubtful source has it as a flattened mansard.

OYSTER CREEK, at the other end of the lane, was very sea-side in nature, and had the style of a Cornish net lodge, or fisherman's hut,



A train leaves Far Tottering  
Author's collection

festooned with nets, floats, and other nautical paraphernalia. One of the crowning glories was the weather predicting machine based initially on an old glass gingerbread pop (*US aerated lemonade*) bottle. The building was covered in limpets, the fixing of which nearly instigated a strike, according to Emmett, as the workmen insisted it was not his place to go nailing these on, but set up a team of three to assist him. Emmett picked a limpet from a basket carried by the first and marked where he wanted it to go, the second held it in place, and the third nailed it on. British trade unionism at its best! The whole project from conception to completion took about 10 months, and according to Gardner, came together remarkably smoothly compared to various other projects in the park.

The line itself ran for approximately 500 yards along the boundary of the pleasure gardens, with a tunnel acting as a shed for the stock over night, and as a "hide" for the railway from view while passing a "vista" designed by the artist John Piper. Unfortunately the route itself was poorly set out, and passed through a back-lot of corrugated sheds and wire fences. You could ride the whole length of the line for 1 shilling (children 6d). The line was so popular that it recouped its costs within three weeks, making Harry Barlow a happy man, though Emmett only received a flat fee of £1,500 for the original ideas ("only" being a relative term, bearing in mind the standard rates of pay at that time).

Some of the most interesting aspects of the railway were the notices. These were in the true Emmett style, and included: "It is forbidden", "Do not tease the engines", "Passengers must not cross here, so there", and, on the tunnel entrance, "Do not feed the bats".

The railway spawned much interest, and there were articles and pictures in many of the magazines of the day, though strangely enough not to any great extent in the "serious" railway magazines of the time. There were postcards of the line, both cartoon and photographic, and *NELLIE* even appeared on a Festival of Britain 3d charity stamp. There was also a card cut-out model of *NELLIE*, two coaches and driver Firebrace, as well as two fare-paying passengers, published by Puffin Books. This model could be motorised, and a review and construction hints appeared in *Model Maker* magazine.<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>

Emmett himself built a model railway which travelled extensively, and a number of imitators have appeared from time to time. I understand that *NELLIE* was modelled as far back as 1948, but the earliest I find recorded is the "Far Twittering

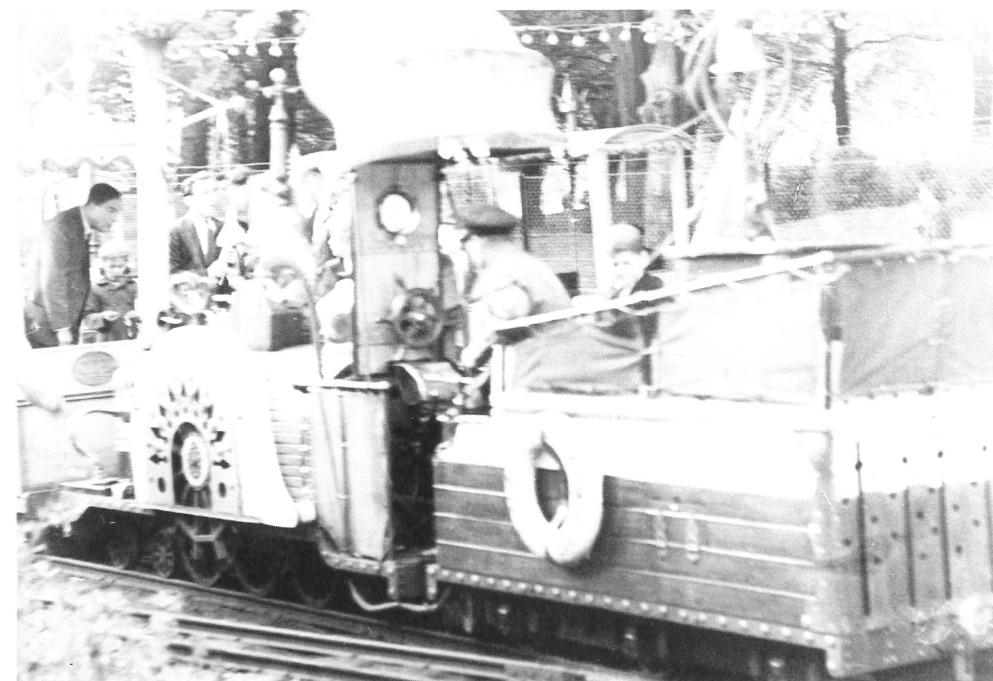
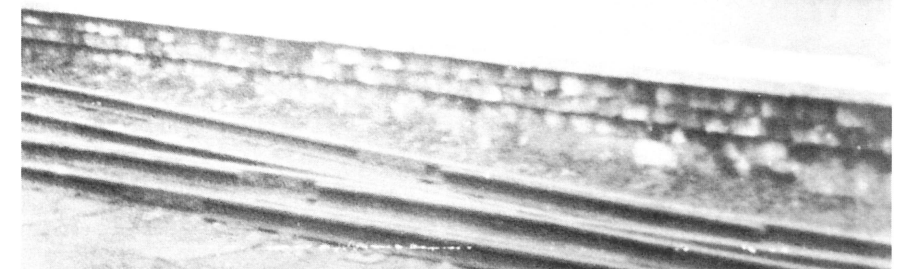
and Collarstuds Railway" in the *Model Railway Constructor* of 1961, which was a single circuit, spring operated diorama display built with a studious avoidance of right angles. Eric Fox and Paul Towers followed in the late 60's, and today we have Chris Brown and his "Friars Ambling" and "St. Torpid's Creek". Dave Rowe, at one time, had a series of cartoon-based cabinet models, but due to various legal difficulties caused by copyright problems he ceased to exhibit these. I have even heard of Emmett layouts in the Antipodes. I am sure there are many more Emmett enthusiasts out there who are quietly working away thinking they will be ostracised should their fascination come out.

As I say, for a railway that only ran 500 yards, and for a period of only two years, there are an awful lot of enthusiasts for this unique, and purely British, institution.

This article encompasses much of the information I have discovered over the years, but there are still gaps in the story. I still seek detail of the various buildings, both exterior and interior, and colour schemes for the locos and coaches. Many people still remember this short lived line with affection, as is witnessed by the mountain of correspondence it produces each time I try to dig deeper. So if anyone wants to add to my files, please write. (*Send any correspondence to the Editorial address, and I will forward it to Ian - Ed.*)

Finally, I'd like to dedicate this article to my daughter, Mary, who was born the year I started digging, and is now 18!

**NELLIE**  
Author's collection



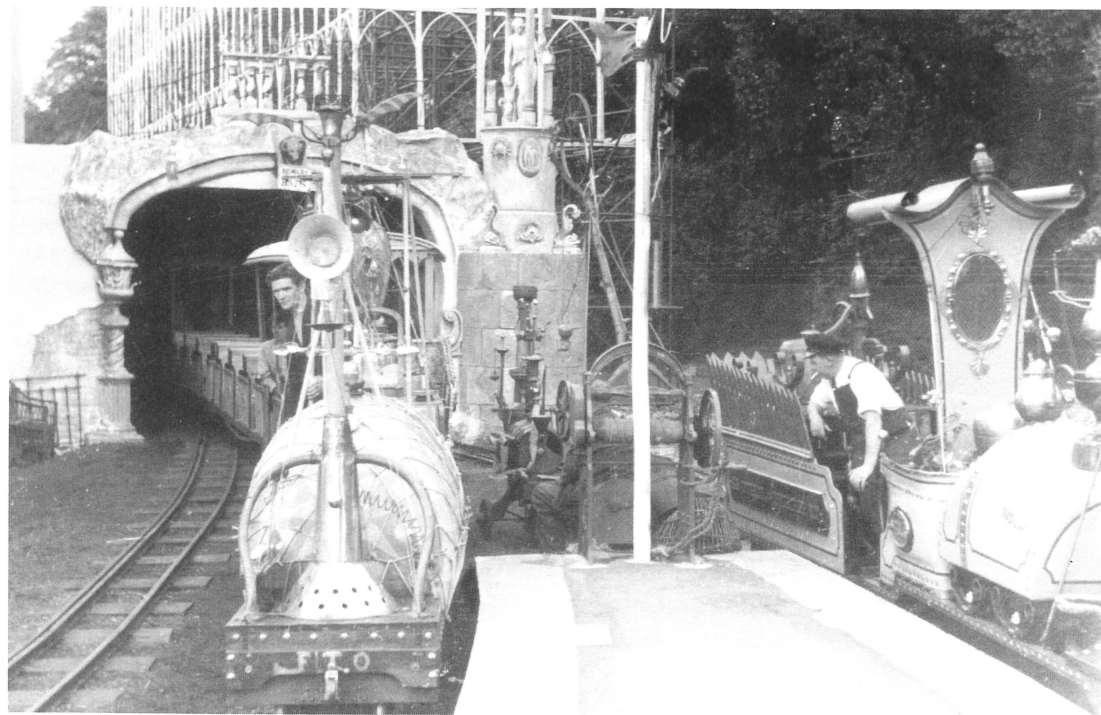
NEPTUNE: Original photograph from the author's collection

Industry, The Arts and Sciences, throughout the country. This became the Festival of Britain of 1951, and is still remembered by all who organised, took part, or visited the various displays.<sup>\*\*</sup>

Among the exhibitions and shows was to be a Fun-fair and Pleasure Park, built on the

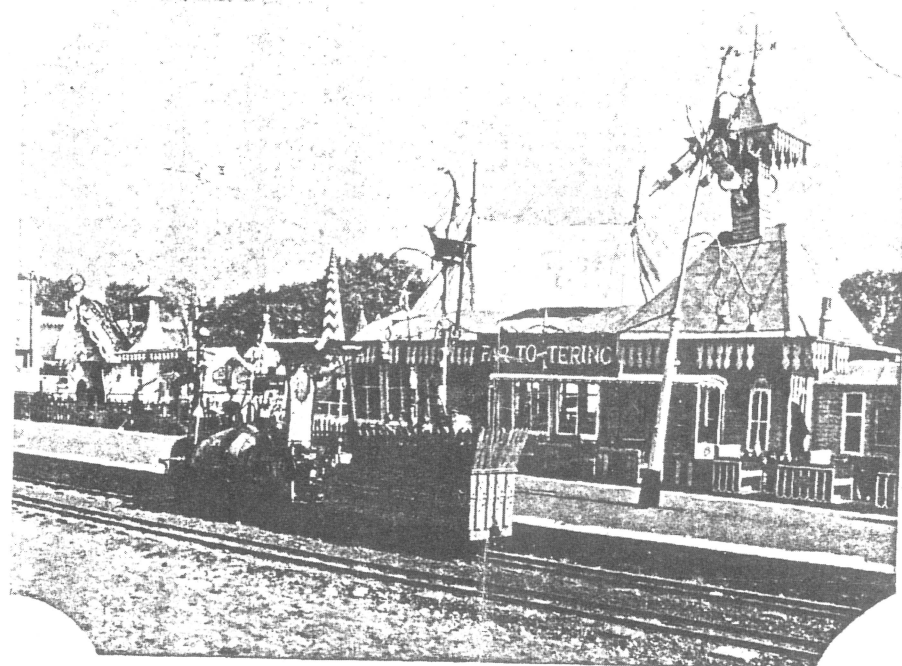
by the whole thing, but eventually came to enjoy the more unusual aspects of the job.

The locomotives were all based on the same 15-inch gauge diesel-electric powered chassis, to a 4-6-2 configuration, with a tender. All told they were an overall length of 13 feet. Three were provided: *NELLIE* was a



**Above:**  
WILD GOOSE and NELLIE at the tunnel mouth, Far Tottering, on 14 June 1951. Photograph: John H Meredith

**Below:**  
Unfortunately no original photograph is available, but this rather poor photocopy is included for its historical interest. It shows NELLIE standing at Far Tottering station, and originally appeared in Architect and Building News for December 1951, as part of their Christmas supplement. The permission of the Editor, ED Mills CBE, to reproduce it here is gratefully acknowledged.



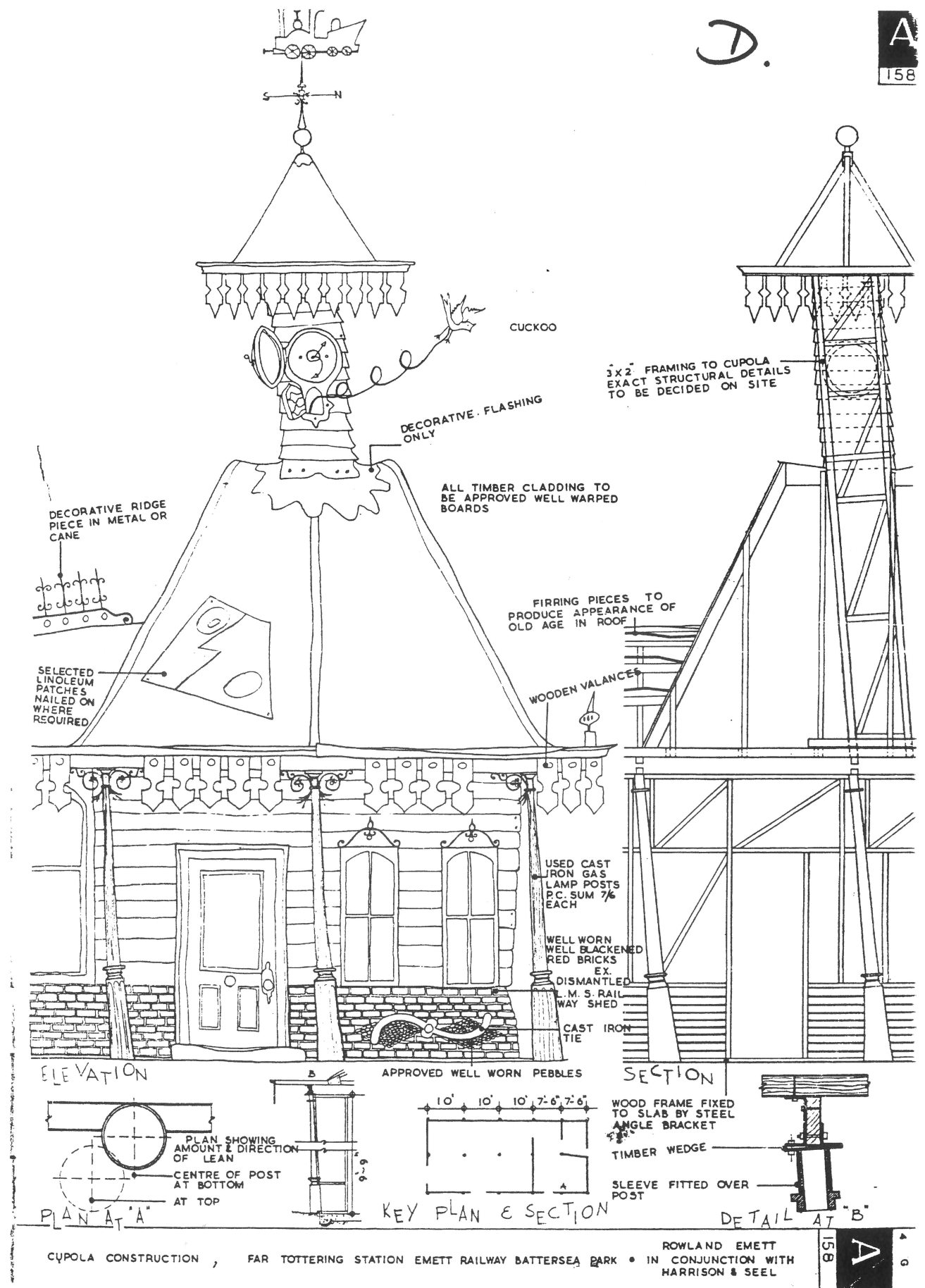
#### NOTES.

\* A full history of Emmett's publications, with a list of approximate prices, was written some years ago in the *Book and Magazine Collector*.

\*\* For a detailed look at the reminiscences of many of those involved (including Emmett), read *A Tonic To The Nation*, edited by Mary Burnham and Beris Hillyer, published by Thames and Hudson in 1976.

\*\*\* I have been unable to track down any drawings, apart from the small section reproduced here by permission of the draughtsman (E.D.Mills CBE), which originally appeared in *Architect and Building News* for Xmas 1951. As this was a government project on council land, and a temporary one at that, planning permission was not required, so plans do not appear to have been filed with any local authority.

\*\*\*\* I managed to obtain a colour photocopy of this book from Ironhorse Hobbies in New Zealand, though a copy of the original eludes me.



Drawing from Architect and Building News, Christmas 1951, reproduced by kind permission of the Editor and draughtsman, ED Mills CBE; as with the other illustrations accompanying this article, it is included more for its historical interest than for its graphic qualities.