

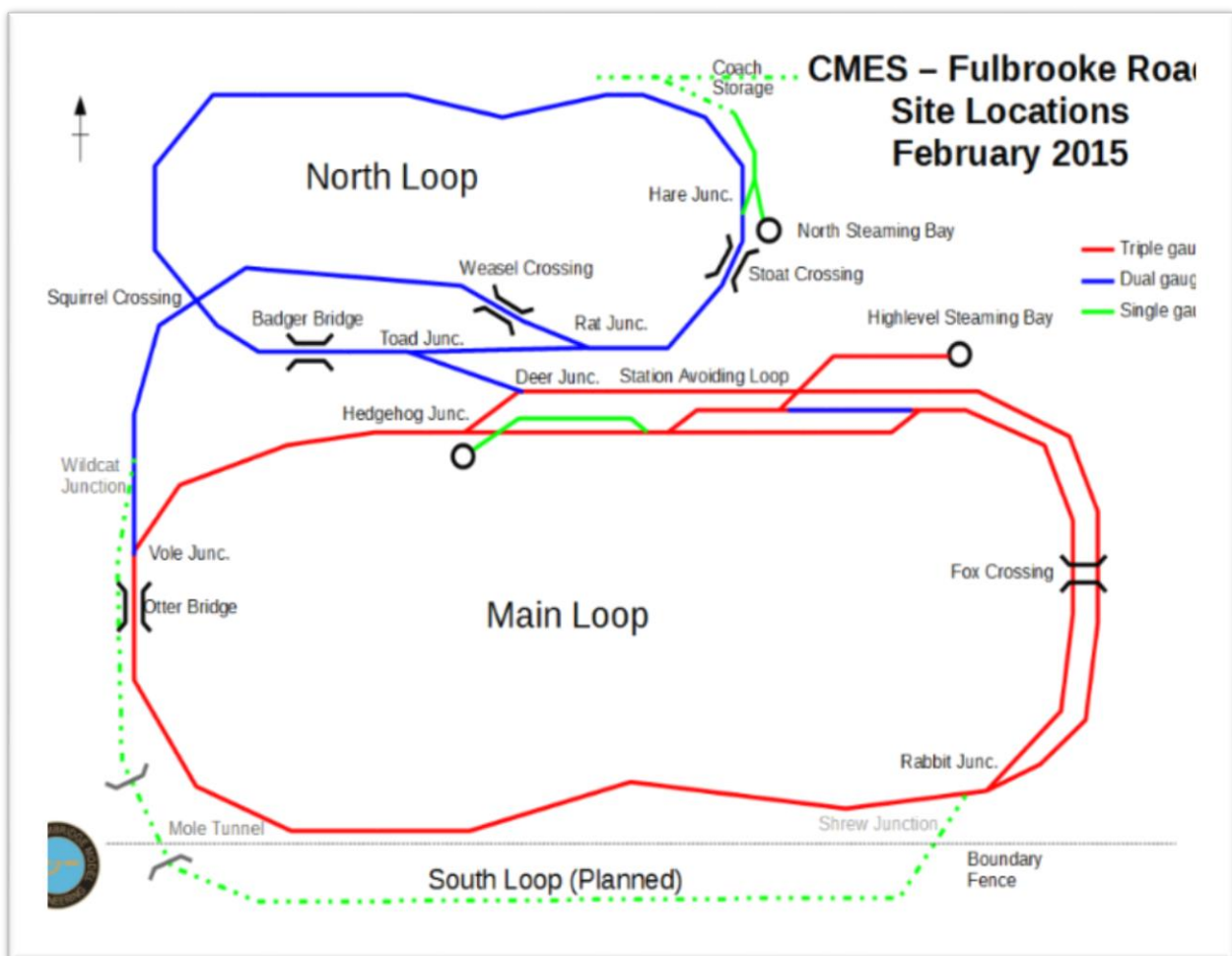
Visit to Cambridge MES. A Report by Baz Butcher

Finding myself in Cambridge on a Sunday I paid a visit to the Model Engineering club there. I have tried to drop in before but it's been a Saturday so the site has been deserted. The last time I got to see them was about 35 years ago when they had a short circuit of ground level, 5 & 31/2 running through some small woodland trees and a small wooden clubhouse.

The clubhouse was burned down by vandals a few years after that. They rebuilt and recovered but a big change came about some 5 years ago when they acquired access to more of the wood and expanded the track considerably.

It is a wooded area with close packed deciduous trees roughly 50 years old and a drainage ditch meanders through it so a couple of bridges add to the interest.

The trees mean limited visibility so the compactness of the layout is not apparent and makes it seem longer and more adventurous for the children on open day rides.



The figure 8 of the extension involves a plain 90 degree crossover instead of a gradient and bridge so it seems the whole run is dead level.

The land is public ie council owned and incorporates some allotments and playing fields but is protected from being sold off as development or housing.

The next door rugby club has recently upgraded their parking space to hardstanding and it is made available for the open days which makes those events very easy to handle.

Club members have direct access to the site itself for parking and unloading at the original steaming bays and turntable or the new 71/4 facilities.



There are not many traction engine owners in the club but there is enough room to operate one and probably use the playing field car park as extra running space.

Sheds and covered areas are all over the place. The 5in steaming bays and turntable are next to the clubhouse which has dual toilets and kitchen as well as a meeting room.

Near that is a compact but well equipped workshop with Harrison lathe, Beaver mill, substantial arbor press etc and additional loos for the public on open days.



The original track loop incorporated a grassed area now accessed by authentic style gated level crossing and bridge and is fully fenced to provide a 'sealed' area for small children.

And a turntable of course.



Near this is a 16mm raised layout



and another turntable.



The extension resulted in an upgrade to 71/4 for greater passenger capacity and growing interest in larger sizes so a separate unloading and steaming bay was set up with another turntable.

Here there is also a workshop and carriage store which splits the trains and uses two levels with one raised like a car transporter to let the other half run in below.



Although clever it takes time to prepare trains so a new huge shed is being constructed on the other side of the layout to store several multicar trains ready for instant operation. It is currently waiting for concrete to be laid in the foundations which already have substantial reinforcement cages laid.

They have a number of members with significant building and construction experience and access to some serious equipment at no or minimal cost. I saw a couple of regular small dump trucks and a mini-digger in operation but will get a 3 ton dump truck loaned for the main concrete pour.

They had started with a raised track many moons ago and a small section has been set up for up/down running when the main track is busy. They have options for a further extension of the track in the future when the carriage shed is finished.

They do public running once a month on 7 months of the year which pulls in over £2k each session at £1.50 a ride. This seems to be similar to the Bristol income but it does involve a number of large trains, good public access, and a long and fun ride to be good perceived value. Busy days but enabling the club to make the investments in track etc. to be self-sustaining.

On a sunny Sunday it was a great atmosphere up there, non-public running day, with plenty of members either busy on the improvements or steaming up for a fun run around or having a chat in the clubroom over a cup of coffee.

Did I mention they had a turntable, I forgot to take a picture of one of them.

Baz Butcher. July 2019