

Photo: R. D. Rickard

Ryde Pier Head Station on October 19, with crane at platform (on which sleepers are stored) and main "up" signal lying between tracks. In the foreground is the pier tramway, which now carries all passengers to the Esplanade

Repairs to Ryde Pier

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DURING the winter months work is continuing on repairs to Ryde railway pier, in the Isle of Wight. The pier, used by thousands of visitors as well as residents travelling to and from the mainland each year, has served the ferry boats and the island railways for many years without any major overhauls. After engineers' reports on its poor condition, British Railways was faced with two alternatives—to close it permanently to railway traffic or to initiate a costly repair programme.

At first it was planned to close the pier at the end of this year, at the same time withdrawing all the remaining railway services in the Isle of Wight. When given the news in confidence, the island's Member of Parliament, Ald. Mark Woodnutt, appealed to the Minister of Transport. The latter asked the British Railways to re-examine the economics of the island railways, including the pier. The result of this consideration was the abandonment of the closure plan and its replacement by a repair programme.

The news that the pier was to be repaired at a cost of £250,000 appeared in the local newspapers in March, only a few days before the Beching

report was to be published. The decision to spend such a large sum of money on the Isle of Wight railway system was taken locally as an omen of good news to come in the report. However, this relief was short-lived, for "The Reshaping of B.R." proposes the closure of the entire Isle of Wight system. Despite this proposal, work has gone ahead on the pier repairs. Rumours that the pier was being converted to take a bus station, at the Pier Head, were quickly put down.

The Isle of Wight authorities may be holding the trump card in the form of a written promise from the former British Transport Commission to the effect that five years' notice will be given of closure of the Ryde-Cowes line and seven years' notice for the Ryde-Ventnor line. Whether this document has affected the British Railways Board's decision to continue the repairs is a matter for conjecture. Whatever the motives behind the action, repairs commenced on September 29 and it is anticipated that the work will be completed by April 25, 1964. This first major overhaul for 30 years is being carried out by contractors.

The pier was built jointly by the London & South

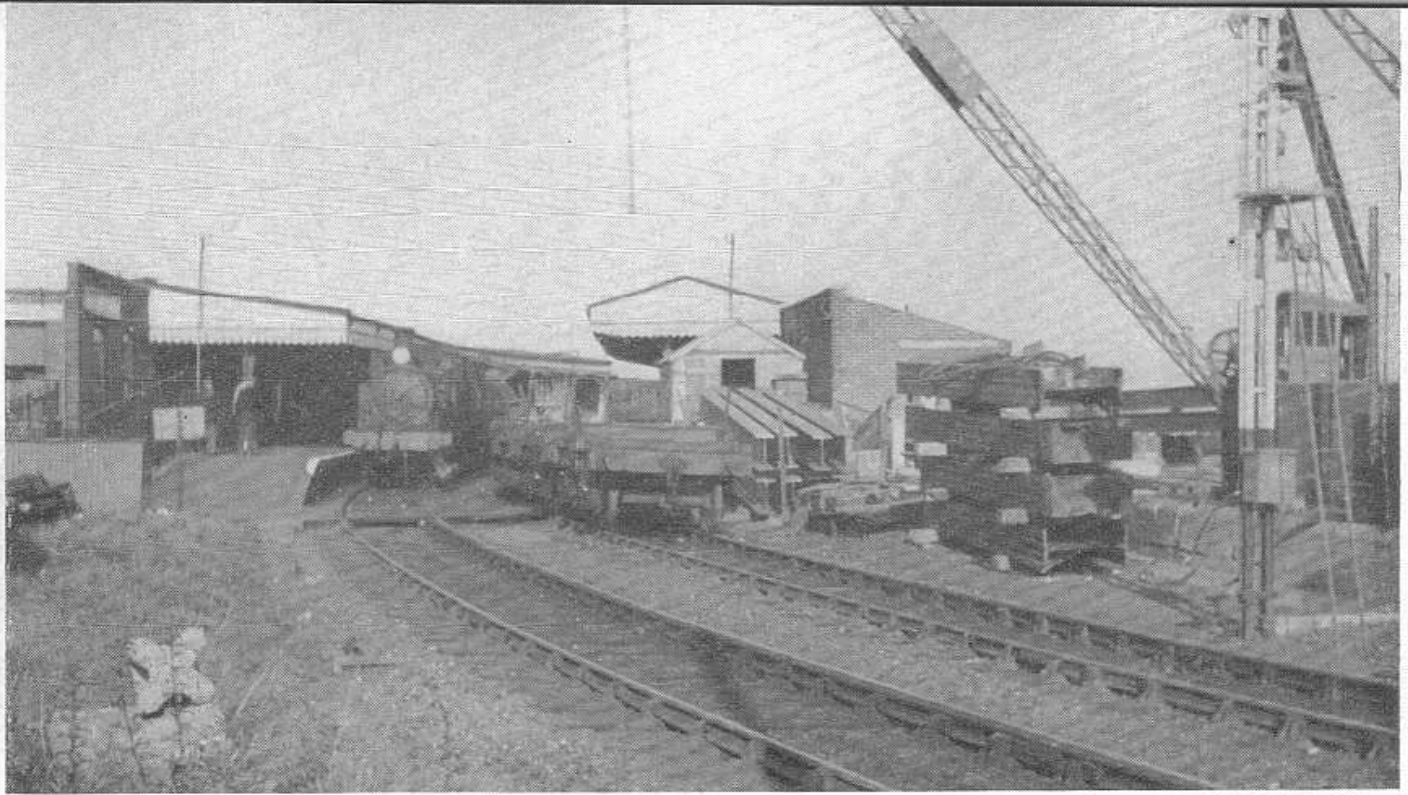


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Ryde Esplanade Station, looking north-west. A Ventnor train is awaiting departure, headed by 0-4-4 tank engine No. 22, "Brading"; the down platform is occupied by contractors

Western and the London, Brighton & South Coast Railways, replacing an old horse tramway which used to connect the pier with the Isle of Wight Railway Company's station at Ryde St. Johns Road. The two mainland railways obtained their Act on July 23, 1877, to construct the railway pier beside the existing tramway and promenade piers, and lay down their railway from the Pier Head to Ryde St. Johns Road Station. The pier was opened for services to the Pier Head on July 12, 1880.

By 1932, with the increase in the popularity of the island as a holiday centre, the Pier Head Station was becoming too cramped for the rail services needed. Thus, in the winter of 1932-33, the Southern Railway rebuilt the station buildings and added a fourth platform. The opportunity was taken to improve the two other stations in Ryde at the same time.

The work being undertaken at present involves the replacement of the entire railway pier superstructure on the existing iron piles. These are part of the original pier and are still in good condition, though more than 80 years old. Two mobile steam cranes are in operation on the pier and another fixed crane has been erected at the eastern end of the Esplanade Station.

Rail services to the Pier Head have had to be discontinued while the work is carried out and to cause as little inconvenience as possible a new timetable has been devised for the island's winter services. Only Ventnor-line trains serve the Esplanade Station—Cowes-line trains stop at Ryde St. Johns Road. For up services, the Cowes-line train arrives at the up platform at St. Johns Road, off-loads its passengers, and then shunts into the main down platform line. The Ventnor-line train arrives at the up platform and picks up passengers for the Esplanade and ferries to the mainland.

Because there are no run-round facilities at Ryde Esplanade, a second engine is shunted on to the rear of the Ventnor-line train which then proceeds with an engine at each end, to the Esplanade up platform. Passengers for the ferries to Portsmouth are here transferred to the trams, which are still operating on their separate pier. A telephone link with Ryde St. Johns Road Signalbox has been set up on the platform at the Esplanade, because this station is normally controlled by the Pier Signalbox, now closed. A telephone call to St. Johns Road ascertains whether the train may return from the Esplanade.

For down services, the double-engined Ventnor-line train carries both Cowes and Ventnor passengers to the down line island platform at St. Johns Road. Here Cowes-line passengers transfer to their waiting train, which then departs. The spare engine at the rear of the Ventnor train is uncoupled and the train shortly proceeds on its journey.

It is expected that full train services will be resumed on April 26, 1964, and until that time the down platform at Ryde Esplanade, unused for passenger services, is closed. The Pier Head Station is at present being used for equipment storage.

How long the pier will continue to be used for railway services after the repairs are completed one cannot tell. The Line Manager of the South Western Division, Southern Region, has revealed proposals for a bus station on the railway site at the Esplanade, with extra tram facilities between it and the Pier Head, should the surviving trains be withdrawn. However, the island is fighting the Beeching proposals and appears to have a very good case prepared. The County Council has even engaged a Q.C. to conduct the appeal. Whatever happens, whether it carries trains or trams, the railway pier should be sound for another 30 years.