

Tramway and Railways at Ryde

By MICHAEL ROBBINS



Collection]

[A. B. MacLeod

Esplanade Station, pier, and pier head, Ryde, about 1900

BEFORE the Railway Age, the town of Ryde, lying on the Isle of Wight side of Spithead, opposite Portsmouth, was not the principal port of entry into the island. That distinction belonged to Cowes, where ships could run into the mouth of the River Medina and come conveniently alongside, whereas Ryde was cut off from sea water at most states of the tide by a broad stretch of sand and mud. A company was formed to build a pier at Ryde, and an Act was obtained in 1812. The pier was opened to the public two years later. It was an attractive promenade, but it was very long (1,740 ft.), and Cowes continued to attract most of the traffic from the mainland.

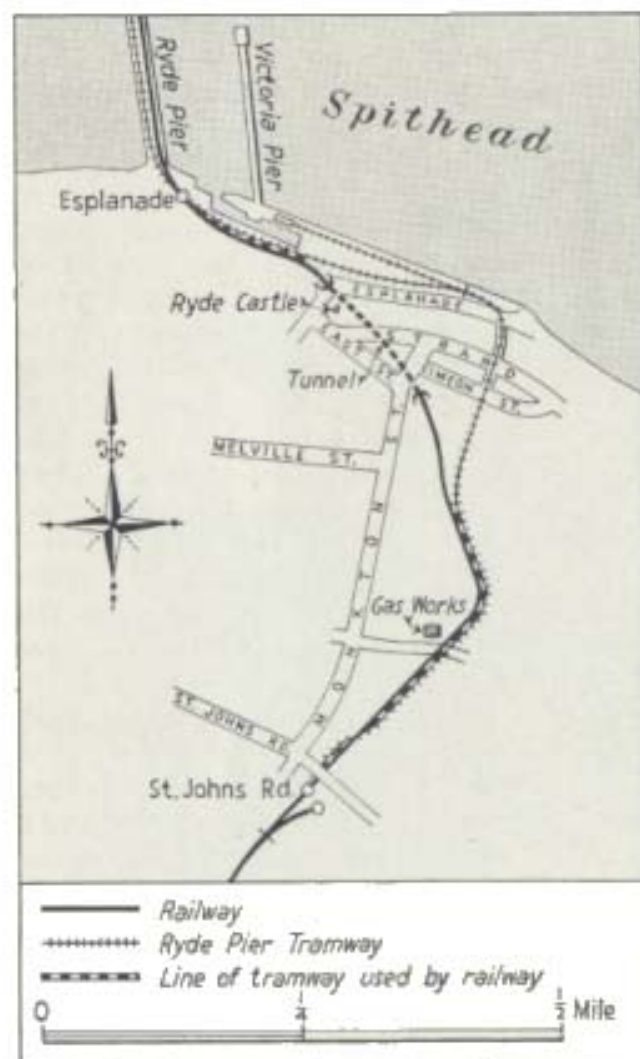
By the late fifties, the opening of the "Portsmouth Direct" railway from London through Guildford and Petersfield was imminent. It seemed likely that railway promotion in the Isle of Wight, which had not come to anything in the "mania" of the forties, would soon be successful, and the directors of the Ryde Pier Company determined to bid for an important place in handling the transit traffic to the island. They had an important asset—the pier—and they were in Ryde first. Nevertheless, after some twenty years of intricate manoeuvre, in which half-a-dozen schemes for linking the pier head with the interior of the island had been taken up and

discarded, they found themselves left out of the business altogether. If the pier company directors had been less assured of their position, or less jealous of their rights, they might several times have come to favourable terms with some of the other parties; but as it was, the company suffered a serious reverse, which led eventually to its absorption by the Southern Railway Company under its Act of 1924.

The story is of considerable interest, both as an example of the way the British railway system has been built up in detail, and for the light it throws on attempts made between 1860 and 1885 by manufacturers and engineers to devise a form of railway traction suitable for lighter duty than the standard main-line requirements. The story has been briefly told in *The Railway Magazine* for June, 1952 (vol. 98, page 416), but that left a good deal to add. The following sketch is based almost entirely on the minute books of the board and general meetings of the Ryde Pier Company, and the author's thanks are due to the staff of the Chief Regional Manager's office at Waterloo, Southern Region, for affording access to these documents, in accordance with arrangements made by the B.T.C. Archivist.

A good many parties were involved: primarily, of course, the Pier Company; in smaller degree, the Ryde Town

Commissioners; the London & South-Western and London, Brighton & South Coast Railway Companies; the Isle of Wight Railway; the Ryde & Newport Railway; the Isle of Wight Ferry Company, which was in alliance with the Stokes Bay Railway and thus indirectly with the L.S.W.R.; and the Ryde (Isle of Wight) Railway, which intended to build a central station with connections in Ryde (and, incidentally, to provide slaughterhouses).



Ryde piers, tramway, and railway, 1880

The Ryde Pier Company seems to have begun thinking of the extension and improvement of its pier in 1857. The Isle of Wight Ferry Company was undertaking pier works at Ryde under an Act of 1856; when, in 1859, it attempted to transfer its interest to the Stokes Bay Railway (and thus to the L.S.W.R.), the proposal failed in Parliament. In the same session, the Isle of Wight Railway (Eastern Section) Bill also failed, but a similar Act was passed in the next year, for a railway from Melville

Street, Ryde (some half-mile inland from the Esplanade), to Ventnor. Early in 1861 the project of building a line of tramway on a new structure adjacent to the existing pier was put forward, and on December 21, 1861, the pier company accepted the tender of Messrs. J. and J. Langdon (£13,080) for the tramway, a slipway, and associated works. Construction was much delayed during 1862 while alternatives at the shore end were being considered, and early in 1863 it was decided not to run "ordinary heavy locomotives" on the pier. In April, 1863, the directors began to wonder what kind of rolling stock they should order, and an enquiry on the point was sent to Southend, where a pier tramway had been in operation for some years. A vehicle was approved with two classes of accommodation (an enquiry into the matter of seats on the roof is mentioned once), and "a light luggage van 13 ft. long with break power" was also called for. In September the shareholders were told that one line of tramway had been completed and connected with a line of temporary rails on the pier head to admit of the "luggage trucks" being brought opposite the steam boat landings, and that carriages for the tramway had arrived. In October the directors decided not to use horse power, but they had not decided what power they would adopt. In November, however, "a small locomotive, 6 in. cylinder and 12 in. stroke, 6½ tons in working order, sufficient to move a gross load of 96 tons on the level," was ordered from Manning, Wardle & Company. The engine was tried during March, 1864, apparently with success, though some vibration to the pier was caused. In May the directors were considering "a light saloon omnibus" with horse traction, which T. B. Ayshford of Walham Green, proceeded to supply. The locomotive was returned to the makers in June, and the hire charge of £152 19s. 2d. was paid.

Public service with horse traction at last began on Monday, August 29, 1864. At once the question presented itself of making an extension to connect with the Isle of Wight Railway, opened six days earlier from Ryde (a station situated in St. John's Road, at the back of the town) to Shanklin. The I.W.R. decided not to undertake construction of a tram-

way link, though it suggested that omnibuses and flies from the station should run through to the pier head—a proposal that the pier company did not welcome. Plans were therefore made to extend the pier tramway to the railway station, in order to anticipate the ferry company which was thinking of doing the same thing from its pier, but here the Ryde Town Commissioners came on the scene. They were highly suspicious of the tramway plan, and, like all highway authorities, they had the right of veto on tramways using their streets or crossing them on the level. The pier company offered to work the line without steam engines, and subject to a speed limit of 10 m.p.h., but the Commissioners would not agree. In the summer of 1865 the ferry company disappeared, and its unfinished works were taken over by the pier company.

Late in 1865 the pier company was proposing to seek powers for a railway—not a tramway, but a locomotive-worked railway—from the station in St. John's Road to the Pier, but the Town Commissioners were adamant against having a locomotive north of Melville Street—that is, the point to which the I.W.R. had been authorised to build its line, though it had in fact stopped short at St. John's Road. The Bill failed in Parliament in March, 1866, and the pier company had quickly to come to terms with a new antagonist—the Ryde Station Company, which succeeded in the 1866 session with a Bill for a line one mile long, extending the Isle of Wight Railway to the shore. The pier company next applied for powers to extend its tramway to join the I.W.R. in a fresh way, and in spite of the station company's opposition, these were granted in the Ryde Pier Railways Act, 1867. The station company, with no works progressing, was getting into difficulties, and in 1868 it adopted the desperate measure of seeking amalgamation with the Stokes Bay and Isle of Wight Railways, but the Bill to authorise this was withdrawn.

At the end of 1868 the I.W.R. approached the pier company with a proposal to build a tramway link jointly, but the station company insisted that it fully intended to carry through its authorised line, despite its total inaction on the scene. It opposed the pier

company's application to Parliament, in a Bill of 1869, to extend the tramway to the I.W.R. station from the point authorised in the 1867 Act, and was successful, but, on the application being renewed in the following year, the required authority was given, by the Ryde Pier Railways Extension Act, 1870. The contract for the first portion, along the Esplanade, had been let to Langdon on June 5, 1869, and the second was let to Coker on September 24, 1870. The first portion seems to have been completed in the summer of 1870, and the second at the end of July, 1871, when Mr. J. Bourne, General Manager of the Isle of Wight Railway, was appointed to superintend and manage the Ryde Pier Railway. Work still continued on the alignment of the tramway along the Esplanade, which was not completed in permanent form until the next year, although the tramway extension from the Pier to St. John's Road Station was opened on August 1, 1871. Some luggage vans were hired by the I.W.R. to the pier company during this period. They were worked through to the pier head by horse traction, not by locomotives. At the end of 1872 a spur line to the basin lying between the Victoria Pier and the Esplanade was begun, and this was opened for goods traffic in 1873.

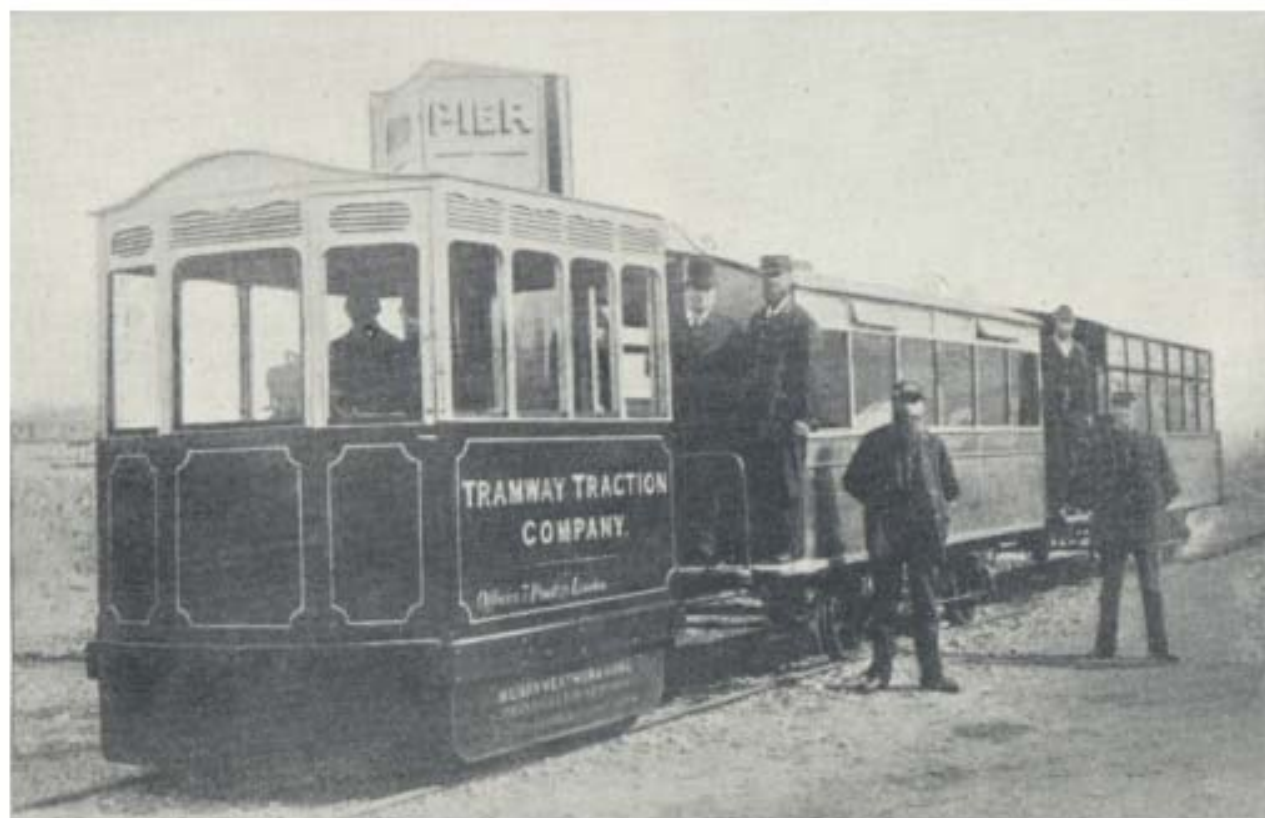
So now there were rails all the way from the pier head to the I.W.R. The pier company prospered—the dividend was 8 per cent. in 1872, and 7 per cent. in 1873. The Crown Prince and Princess of Prussia used the pier portion of the tramway in 1874, travelling in a car specially decorated for the occasion. It seemed obvious, however, to all concerned in the Isle of Wight transit traffic that these arrangements could not last; they involved too many changes, and the horse tramway was a very weak link in the chain. The difficulty was simply stated; so long as the tramway crossed three streets on the level—the Esplanade, the Strand, and Simeon Street—the Corporation would never agree to the use of locomotive traction.

In 1875 a Bill to give authority to stop up certain roads and to run steam engines on the tramway was opposed by the town and rejected by Parliament. In the next session, a Bill was promoted by the London & South Western and

London, Brighton & South Coast Railways to cut the knot. It would provide for a railway to be built from the I.W.R. station at St. John's Road, tunnelling under the streets and rising to a new pier adjoining the existing pier on the east side, on which through locomotive-hauled trains could run up to the pier head. In the same session there was another Ryde Pier Bill, which under pressure from the Ryde & Newport Railway, newly arrived at St. John's Road, was seeking powers to adapt the line from St. John's Road to Simeon

after the new line had been opened in 1880).

The pier directors were still considering how traction on the pier itself could be improved, and in June, 1876, it was agreed to hire a steam engine from Merryweather's. The engine stopped on the way for trials on the Southsea tramways, and it arrived at Ryde early in September. The mayor and corporation were invited to see it at work on Friday, September 29, 1876; it is recorded that they "inspected the working of the Tramway Traction engine



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[A. B. MacLeod

Merryweather steam tramway-type locomotive during trials on the Ryde Pier Tramway in 1876

Street for locomotive traction. It was apparently intended to use this line both for steam and for horse-drawn trains, but Colonel Yolland, inspecting officer of the Board of Trade, who looked at it on March 10, 1876, did not think much of the idea. The mainland scheme looked like succeeding, and, in desperation, to save what they could from the wreck, the pier directors offered to lease their whole undertaking to the two companies. The best they could get, however, was a working agreement with a provision for payment of toll to the pier company (which gave rise to a good deal of trouble and litigation

and expressed themselves much pleased with the engine and particularly with the facility with which it could be pulled up." Presumably they were still thinking about the level crossings. Nevertheless, the corporation refused permission to run the engine—apparently on the ground that it made excessive smoke—and in December it was decided to return it to the makers (who, it turned out, did not want it back and unsuccessfully offered to sell it at no more than cost price).

Throughout 1877 the dispute with the town continued. The pier company pointed out that locomotive-hauled trains

commonly ran across streets at Southampton, and at one time the council seemed likely to make a bargain, but it was no good. The Act for the new railway and pier received Royal Assent on July 23, 1877, and construction work was begun in the summer of 1878. Meanwhile the pier company and the town council continued to bicker about steam traction on the tramway. During 1878, Henry Hughes, of Loughborough, and Stephen Lewin, of Poole, both negotiated with the company about supplying engines, but by the time the council came to the point of agreeing to mechanical traction, in July, 1879, other forms of traction were being considered for the pier line. These were wire rope haulage, or a car driven by a gas-fired steam engine, which F. Bradley was to supply. Bradley is described as "of Glensmore Works, Kidderminster"; he seems to have been a civil engineer.

In 1880 the new pier and railway line were opened—from St. John's Road to the Esplanade (Pier Gates) Station on April 5, and to the Pier Head on July 12, in each case for I.W.R. trains; Newport trains did not begin to use the extension until October. The pier company proceeded to draw 3d. a passenger booked from the mainland to any of the three Ryde stations, under the 1876 agreement, but the effect of the new line on its income was disastrous. Bradley's gas-driven cars were not a success, and it was decided that he should convert them to coke burning. In January, 1881, two arrived and were put to work on the 31st.

They were not very satisfactory—an axle broke in November, 1881, and another axle broke the next year. It appears that the engine did not run round the cars but propelled them from the Pier Head to the Esplanade—a practice which caused some disquiet.

Enquiries were still being made for alternatives—to Kitson's of Leeds, to Merryweather's, and to Magnus Volk, of the Brighton electric railway. In 1884, after negotiations with Volk had fallen through, an agreement was made with W. Blanch Brain, a London electrical engineer, for equipping the line for electric traction; but this also came to nothing. The steam engines proved so unsatisfactory that they were withdrawn at the end of October, 1884, and the tramway reverted to horse traction on November 1. The two engines were offered for sale, and at last, in May, 1886, they were sold for £150 to W. Ferguson, of Leytonstone.

Meanwhile, discussion about the future form of haulage broke out afresh. On May 2, 1885, a special meeting of shareholders was held to decide upon the method of traction, and on a proxy vote electricity was chosen. Negotiations were begun with W. H. Traill, of Coleraine, who was connected with the Giant's Causeway electric tramway. Also, oddly enough, there were some negotiations with Crossley Brothers, of Manchester, about cable haulage. In the end, a scheme for electrification prepared by Siemens Brothers, of Charlton, was accepted.



Photo]

[R. W. Kidner

Drewry petrol-driven train near the pier head on the Ryde Pier Tramway in 1937. The main-line railway is on the right

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The contract was signed in October, 1885, and electric traction began, without any special ceremony, in March, 1886.

In comparison with the critical situation of 1880, electrification improved the pier tramway's prospects, and for the rest of the century it maintained a steady, if modest, prosperity. This was a good deal less than the pier company might have been expected to get, seeing how well situated it was at the beginning of railway-building in the island; but the directors had been inflexible in protecting their own interests, and refused to work very closely with anyone else (except the Isle of Wight Railway, which never joined heartily in any of the Ryde schemes), until it was too late and the mainland companies had lost patience.

Perhaps the modern traveller might sometimes spare the seven minutes

booked between Ryde Pier Head and St. John's Road to recall the twenty-year-long struggle to establish a railway between those two points. There are not many stretches of British railway just over a mile long that have so much history behind them.