

STEAM RAILWAY VENTURES IN SANDOWN

1864 - 1879 - 1932 - 1936 - 1946 - 1948 - 1950



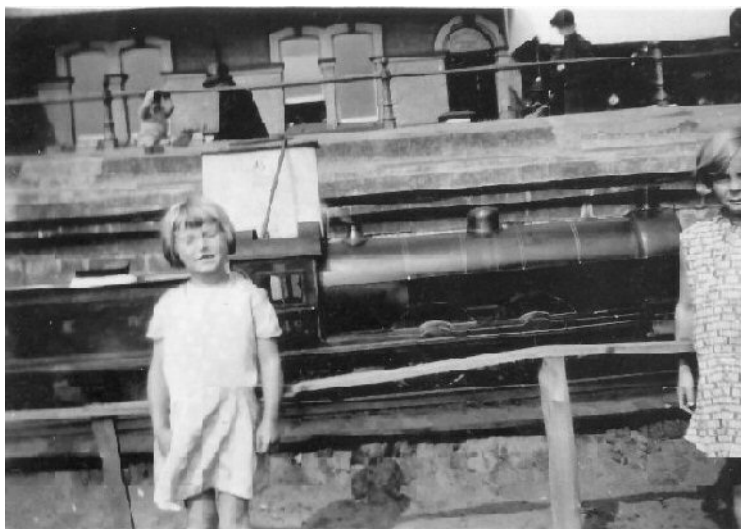
Beyer Peacock 2-4-0.

When a Beyer Peacock 2-4-0 locomotive entered the newly built Sandown Railway Station on August 23rd 1864, it was the first steam passenger train to grace the town. It is more than probable that many local people had never seen the likes of it before, even more unlikely was that many of them would ride on one, as the cost of railway travel was prohibitive for the working class at the time. The Isle of Wight Railway ran from Ryde St. Johns Road to Shanklin until 1866 when the extension to Ventnor was completed.

The London & South Western Railway in conjunction with the London Brighton & South Coast Railway, joined forces to build the Railway Pier at Ryde and complete the line from Ryde St. Johns to the Pier Head in 1880.

The line to Ventnor was truncated at Shanklin and closed to passengers in April 1966, leaving the 8½ miles that remains today. On August 23rd 2008 the initial section will have served the Island for 144 years, and long may it continue.

The Isle of Wight Railway, in isolation on commencement from the Cowes and Newport Railway



The London North Eastern Express seen outside of Guadeloupe Terrace in 1932.



(completed in 1862) were finally connected by a branch line from Sandown to Newport in 1879. Curiously named, the Isle of Wight Newport Junction Railway, it ran via Alverstone, Newchurch, Merstone, Herringford, Blackwater and Shide. Never a financial success, it served the patrons of the line well, especially during the war years, taking hundreds of workers to the factories at East and West Cowes. Just prior to closure it also carried pupils from Sandown to East Cowes Technical School, and from Newport, pupils attending Sandown Grammar School but sadly British Rail closed it on February 6th 1956.

The 1932 steam railway was a narrow gauge line on Sandown Beach in front of Guadeloupe Terrace on Sandown Esplanade. The man behind the venture was a Mr. A. G. Webb of Basingstoke. He applied to the local council in July of that year with his proposals, receiving permission, subject to a condition that the track must be as near the sea wall as possible. The specifications of the rolling stock and line were as follows: - the engine 18 inches high, the track gauge 8¼ inches and the track length was stipulated at 70 yards.

The engine and carriages arrived on July 27th 1932, the permanent way was laid on the 28th and the official opening took place on Friday 29th July at 2.30pm. The engine was a true scale model of a London North Eastern Railway Express, built by Messrs. Bassett Lowke Ltd of Northampton. The three passenger carriages held a maximum of twelve children. The opening ceremony was advertised to be filmed by Gaumont, unfortunately unconfirmed. Gaumont a French film production company was founded by engineer turned inventor Leon Gaumont, then acquired theatre chains in this country and became British Gaumont.

The Sandown Beach railway existed for the season of 1932 only, suggesting it was probably not a financial success.



Yet another attempt to make a living from running a railway that didn't get off the ground, came in 1936. An offer of £80 to run a steam Railway in the Sandham Grounds by a Mr. C. J. Jacobs was provisionally accepted by the Sandown & Shanklin U.D.C. Amusement Committee. However, when the surveyor submitted a report to a full council meeting, they recommended that the offer of Mr. Jacobs be not entertained.

At a Council meeting on March 6th 1946 a letter was read from a Mr. J. H. Dams offering to secure a miniature railway to be run in the district on a suitable track to be provided by the council, for the purpose of pleasure rides. The council decided that no action would be taken, as there were no sites readily available.

Another rather surprising refusal by the Council came in 1948. Ian Allen Limited requested permission to run a Steam Railway at a suitable site in Sandown, on terms to be arranged. The Council refused on the grounds that there was not a suitable site for the purpose. Ian and five friends then turned their attentions elsewhere, and became the owners of the Hastings Miniature Railway. He then went on to become a major force in writing, publishing railway books, railway excursions for loco-spotters, providing equipment for commercial miniature railways nationwide and many other successful railway connected business ventures. On reflection, it may just be that the S.S.U.D.C. of 1948 were a tad short sighted in dismissing this proposal.



Mr F. A. Mills at the Sandham Grounds site in 1950.

At a meeting on January 17th 1949 the entertainment manager read out a letter from a Mr. F. A. Mills of Birmingham, suggesting the advantage of having a steam railway for children running in the district during the holiday season. Having refused Ian Allen the previous year on the grounds that there was no suitable site, they now favourably contemplated the possibilities of this proposal and instructed a committee member to

submit a report of any sites that the surveyor was able to recommend for the purpose desired. Mr. Mills was invited to meet with members of the Amusement Committee in September 1949 to discuss the merits of his proposal. He was informed that Sandham Grounds was deemed as the ideal site for the railway but certain conditions had to be agreed on before he would be given the go ahead. Although the Council were supporting the idea in principal they refused to assist Mills with any financial assistance toward the venture. Some of the Councils terms imposed were as follows: - Mr. Mills would provide all of the necessary equipment, lay a tarmac strip to support the rails and fence the line in. (The Council generously offered to lay the tarmac strip and charge Mills accordingly).

The rent would be £200 for the first year. He was offered an option of a further 3 years agreement subject to payment of £200, but would also be required to pay 20% of gross receipts over the first £1000 of gross takings. The Council would have the right to inspect all books of account and if required all books of tickets, to be issued by the council. The length of the line would be 150 yards running

eastwards from the Sandham café and the proprietor must indemnify the Council in respect of all risks that might occur in the undertaking. Mr Mills accepted the terms on January 3rd 1950 whereupon the Clerk and surveyor were authorised to proceed with the necessary arrangements for the preparation of the site in accordance with the terms agreed with Mr. Mills.



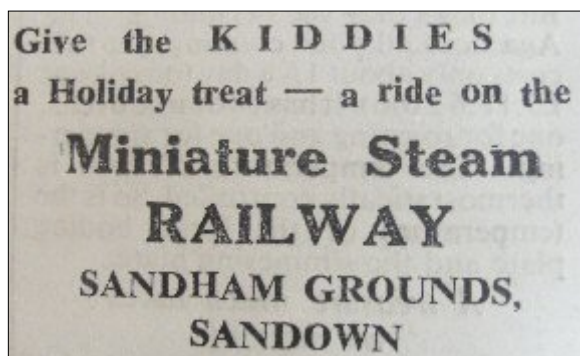
The 1951 advert with a play on the word "Festival" (of Britain)

Having accepted the terms, Mills wrote to the council in April suggesting that the Council should meet the cost of construction of the track on which the miniature railway would run, including the necessary foundations. This of course was not acceptable, as a condition of the agreement was that the proprietor would be responsible for all expenses occurred in construction. In their reply the Council suggested that Mills should employ a local contractor for the work.

The railway was up and running by the start of the 1950 season but revenue did not come up to expectations, according to Mr Mills. He wrote a letter to the council requesting a reduction in the rent he paid, they were not of course inclined to comply with this request. He also requested permission to erect an advertisement sign on the nearby embankment, and to cut steps down to the railway from Culver Road, the council also declined this suggestion.

The attraction for climbing aboard steam trains in 1950 of any gauge size was nothing in comparison to the wave of nostalgia that swept the country after the many line closures that took place in the 1950's and 60's. British Rail would close a line, a bunch of enthusiasts open it up again, charge five times as much for a shorter ride and people started queuing up to get on. Not so for Mr. Mills, he was not attracting as much business as he expected and in early October 1950 he requested a reduction of £25. 17s 6d of the amount outstanding under terms of the agreement of the running of the railway. His reason was that he had carried out work on the site in respect of work, which he thought the Council should have carried out. This of course was totally unacceptable to the Council and the Clerk reported on the 10th October that the balance of the sum due had now been received. This was not the first time that Mills had questioned the terms of the agreement, the Council had refused to vary them on a request from him in July.

Takings must have improved during the summer of 1950 as in January 1951 Mr. Mills and the Amusement Committee agreed new terms for the forthcoming season on the payment of £130. Smooth running on the railway was one thing but smooth running with the local Council was another. Having now erected a shed in which to store the engine Mr. Mills attention was drawn by the Council in July to the colour of the shed roof and he was requested to paint it green. This it seems was not to the approval of all members of the Amusement Committee and an amendment proposed by a Mr. Brown seconded by Mr. Le Maitre, that the Engine shed roof be painted in a colour to match the roofs of existing buildings, was carried.



Understandably, by July of 1951 Mr. F. A. Mills had had enough of running his railway at the Sandham Grounds Recreation Park. Through his legal representatives he wrote to the Council enquiring if they would approve the transfer of interests in the Miniature Railway to a Mr. G. B. Evans and a Mr. A. E. Grimmet of Upper Yard Farm, Godshill. He stated that he was suffering ill health in controlling his business interests, both in Birmingham and Sandown. The Council approved the transfer, subject to satisfactory references and to payment by Mills of the

rental owing under the agreement of May 1951. An agreement was reached for the 1952 season on similar terms and conditions with the aforementioned pair, upon payment of £130 prior to commencement of the season. The railway was in operation during 1952, one assumes under new management, with the season ending in the first week in October. Research suggests that this was the end of the Sandham Grounds Miniature Railway as there are no advertisements for it running in 1953, neither is there any report on who actually owned it on demise, or when and who dismantled it. (End).

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