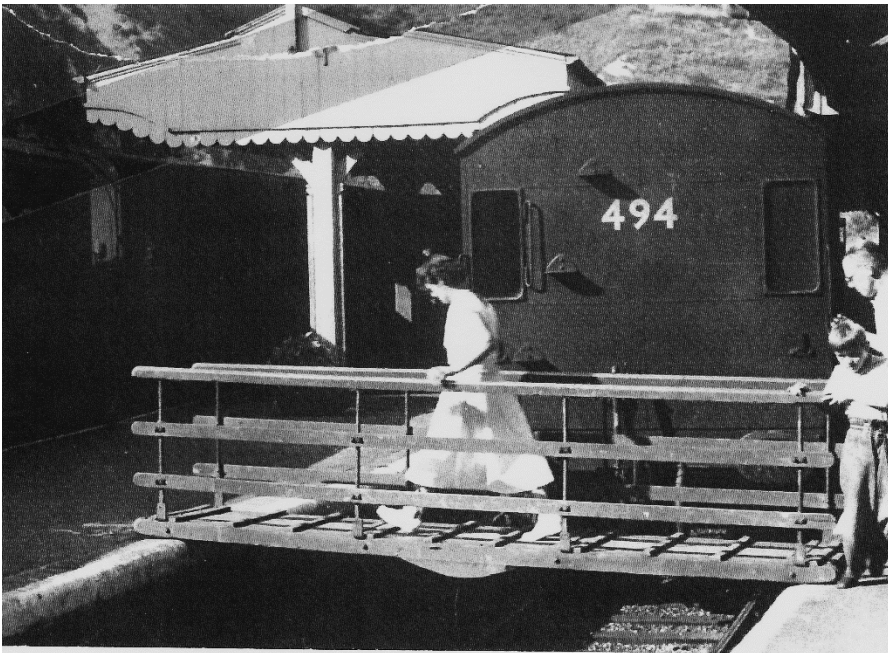




A Railway Porter's Life

The picture shows the former Ryde Pier gangway that, from about 1960, was used as the 'bridge' between the main platform and the island platform at Ventnor station. It replaced a much wider and heavier contraption that was capable of handling not just passengers but a 4-wheel platform trolley. As one might guess, the former was much less cumbersome for the portering staff to handle than the latter. One of those porters was Percy Primmer who came to be an expert on the Island's railways and was a contributor to the local *Maple Society Newsletter* in the 1980s. He had joined the railway in 1929 and was employed at Ventnor's main station on Mitchell Avenue for eight years, before moving on to Newport and, later, Ryde. He retired in 1978.



The job title of 'porter' appears no longer to exist on the railways today. For those with long enough memories, the railway porter was viewed largely as a member of the station staff who carried your luggage. But as Percy Primmer was quick to point out, this was a very minor part of their regular duties and there is even some doubt as to whether it was, formally, a duty at all. On Ventnor station, the list of tasks undertaken by porters seemed to Percy to be almost open-ended. One primary duty was cleaning the station on a daily basis and undertaking regular maintenance tasks. They were also responsible for ticket collection, which included going through all the accumulated tickets, sorting them by station of origin,

placing them in numerical order, before tying them up in bundles and despatching to the central sorting depot. Passenger luggage sent in advance was another of the tasks that fell to the porters. Labels had to be carefully checked to ensure that items did not end in the back of beyond. A lot of perishable goods traffic was carried on passenger trains at the time and this was also the responsibility of porters to load and unload.

Returning to the picture again, Percy Primmer noted an important innovation that had been introduced in 1936 concerning the use of Ventnor's platform bridge. This was the introduction of a bell code system between signal box and platform whereby a coloured collar was put on the appropriate signal lever to ensure that a train did not enter the platform while the bridge was in situ. There had been a number of 'near misses' in the past and this was a clear safety improvement.

In the present age of electronic ticketing and electronic parcel tracking, where many no longer go anywhere near a station ticket window or carry a paper ticket, Percy's story comes from another world. But then when our glorious (or inglorious for some) 'techno-world' fails unpredictably, we become like ships lost at sea, helplessly adrift, wishing perhaps that we had that small square of printed card that guaranteed our passage from one place to another.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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