



When Ventnor lost its railway



Devotees of classic cars will enjoy spotting the various models that figure in this busy forecourt scene at Ventnor station in the early 1960s. Pride of place probably goes to the 'Mini-Minor' (reg. no 585 ADL), which was, at the time, a novel mini car with front-wheel drive, a transverse-mounted engine and hydrolastic suspension that made cornering easy. I am sure there are many readers who had one of these as their first car.

Studying the picture more closely, the signs are of a station rather 'down at heel'. The road surface is looking very tired, for instance. Yet more significant is the 'Southern Railway' signage, a relic of railway ownership before 1948: 'British Railways' had failed to replace it, perhaps an ominous portent. Behind the scenes, of course, this in part reflected the failings of the nationalised railway system to pay. Annual deficits had been growing from the 1950s and lines were already being closed. By the early 1960s, the solution offered was drastic pruning of the network under the 'Beeching Plan', including all Island railway lines. The backlash from Island local government and from Islanders was considerable. An Isle of Wight Railway Retention Association was formed, with S.G. Conbeer, of Altofts Gardens, Ventnor, one of its prime movers. Ventnor townspeople were galvanised into action, organising no end of meetings and protests. By May 1964, an Island-wide petition had a staggering 82,000 names. For Ventnor, though, the efforts were in vain. The town lost its rail service in April 1966. The one saving grace was that the Ryde-Shanklin line survived and was modernised through electrification.

For many years, there was residual hope that, one day, Ventnor's rail link would be revived. Committees and pressure groups were periodically formed for the purpose. But in 1993, in the view of one local ex-railwayman, Joe Parsons of North Street, it was a pipe-dream. The heavy passenger loadings of the high summer months had been dropping steadily. For the rest of the year, traffic on the nine daily trains serving the town was scant. In winter, the guard was sometimes the only one to get off. Taxi drivers would sit stationary in their vehicles on the forecourt and pass the hours making woollen rugs. It was all a far cry from the halcyon days of the 1890s when you could 'express' on the special 3.15 pm train from Ryde Pierhead and arrive in Ventnor at 3.35 pm. On occasions, the train arrived even sooner than that. But this is for another story!!

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



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