



Before the railways - coming to Ventnor by coach

Ventnor Railway Station opened in 1866 and closed in 1966, having served thousands of visitors as well as local people during those hundred years. William Mew Judd, the owner of the Royal Marine Hotel, described in 1905 the arduous journey by horse drawn coach undertaken by visitors to Ventnor before the coming of the railways:

Five and forty years ago there was no Bournemouth, and the choice of a winter residence lay between Torquay, which was considered too damp and relaxing, and Madeira, which necessitated a long sea voyage. The Riviera was little known and very difficult of access . . . Ventnor was the first place thought of when arranging a winter holiday. We are always complaining of the difficulties and delays which visitors encounter in coming, say, from London to Ventnor [but] Just let me picture for you the discomforts of those who came before the opening of our railways.

On arriving at the Portsmouth Station, now called the Town Station, you and your luggage were placed on an omnibus and driven down the long road through the narrow, crooked arches and gates of the old fortification to the landing stage at the mouth of Portsmouth Harbour. Rolling and bumping against this old makeshift for a pier was a small steamer, into which you and your belongings were with great difficulty transferred. When on board, you were herded with a number of other unfortunates in a stuffy cabin.

I am supposing this to be a wet, stormy evening in November, this being the month when our winter visitors usually arrived. I am further supposing that the traveller is coming with an invalid wife to spend the winter here. After a most miserable three quarters of an hour, you have reached Ryde Pier. There was no train, no rail down the pier then, but if you had had the forethought to have ordered a special bath chair for your wife, you could put her in it and trot by her side with head bent well forward facing the cutting wind and pelting rain; your luggage on a small trolley being pushed up the pier by a sodden porter.



The photograph above shows Ryde Pier at around this time – on what looks like a wet windy day.

William Mew Judd continues his story: Arriving at the pier gates, and asking how you are to get on to Ventnor you are told there is a coach about to start. 'Oh, we will have two inside seats.' 'Very sorry, they are all booked.' You are, in consequence, perched on the outside, making yourself as comfortable as you uncomfortably can under the dismal circumstances. The coach then starts and crawls up Union Street . . . [there follows an arduous journey across the island, until the coach reaches Shanklin]: after which the weary climb of the Shanklin Cowlease, and along the wind-swept road to Luccombe, down Old Barn Shute, now obliterated, until Ventnor was at last reached, and where, I am sure, the benumbed and very damp passengers met with a warm welcome.

The railway from Ryde to Shanklin opened in 1864 and horse drawn trams began running along Ryde Pier. The rail line was extended to Ventnor in 1866.

Of course travelling by railway had its own problems, but the passengers were usually tolerant, as H De Vere Stacpoole recalled when describing a journey in 1870 on the mail train known as 'The Wild Irishman': *No corridors, no lavatory, no restaurant car all the way from Holyhead to London. There was a stop for eight minutes at Crewe, where the traveller was given the choice between the lavatory or the refreshment room, where everyone was in a hurry except the lady who served. The curious thing was that with the good old stage-coach days in memory no one seemed to resent this state of things.*

Lesley Telford, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#). William Mew Judd's reminiscences taken from copies of newspaper articles in Fay Brown's files. Quotation from H de Vere Stacpoole from his autobiography *Men and Mice*.