

**A geological ramble on the closed railway from Shide to Sandown with the
Isle of Wight Natural History and Archaeological Society: Saturday, 16th
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Start time: 9.30 Saturday 16th July, 2016

Start point: Shide. South side of B 3401 on National Cycle route 23

adjacent to information board about John Milne

Finish: Your choice. Car (Jo Bingham) will shadow the walk as the railway track crosses roads and will ferry folk to Newport or Sandown (which ever is closest)

Bus: One way fare Sandown to Newport is about £4.50

Introduction

Walking closed railways is hardly an unfamiliar pastime (see various examples of guides referred to in Donovan, 2015), but investigating a closed line while following a geological ‘field guide’ published 102 years ago is, at least, unusual. Our guide today is the third edition of *Stanford’s Geological Atlas of Great Britain and Ireland with Plates of Characteristic Fossils preceded by Descriptions of the Geological Structure of Great Britain and Ireland and their Counties; of the Channel Islands; and of the Features observable along the Principal Lines of Railway* (Woodward, 1914). This is an inspiring volume, recalling the days when railways were widespread and the principal form of long distance transport inland, encouraging the naturalist to look out of the train window and appreciate the succession of strata over which they were passing. But today, a little over 60 years since the railway from Newport to Sandown was closed, we are going to follow the train journey of Horace B. Woodward (1848 – 1914) on foot.

Recommended maps include the Ordnance Survey/AA *Isle of Wight Walker’s Map* (1:25,000 scale; 2012) and the *Isle of Wight Special [Geological] Sheet* (1:50,000; British Geological Survey, 1976). I strongly recommend a packed lunch and ample fluids as convenient places to buy food and drinks are sparse at best. Attendees are entitled to join or leave the trip at any of the intermediate stops – catching a bus home or calling for a lift – although I shall endeavour to walk all the way to Sandown if there is sufficient interest. Distances of (closed) stations from Shide are summarized in Table 1.

Railway

The island's railways have formed the topic for many books, but the Newport to Sandown line had not received the attention afforded some of the other lines. Newport to Merstone to Sandown and Merstone to Ventnor West were essentially rural lines operated by the Isle of Wight Central Railway (Allen & MacLeod, 1967, map on p. 6). Both served essentially rural areas, but connected Cowes to resorts on the east coast; "... it is hard to say for certain why these two lines were built. Either they were to open up rural areas, or they were an attempt to recoup Cowes's status as the Isle of Wight's main passenger port by providing direct rail links to the main resorts, or they were a pure and simple attempt to rob the IWR [Isle of Wight Railway = Ryde to Ventnor line] of as much of its traffic as possible. The reality probably lies largely in the last two ..." (Kardas, 1998, p. 89).

The early history of the railway was more complex than it needed have been. Initially it was built too cheaply and required further engineering refinements before the Railway Inspectorate would permit it to open. Sandown to Shide opened in 1875; Shide to Pan Lane opened in 1879; and Newport was finally reached in 1880. The Newport to Sandown line closed on 6th February, 1956 (the Merstone to Ventnor West line had already closed in 1952).

Table 1. Distances of closed railway stations from Shide, following the cycle path (modified after Whittington, 1975(?), p. 20).

| | |
|-------------|---------------------|
| Shide | 0 |
| Blackwater | 1.1 miles (1.8 km) |
| Merstone | 2.9 miles (4.6 km) |
| Horringford | 4.5 miles (7.2 km) |
| Newchurch | 5.5 miles (8.8 km) |
| Alverstone | 6.7 miles (10.7 km) |
| Sandown | 8.2 miles (13.1 km) |

Geology

(Modified after Donovan, 2015, p. 82.) This excursion will start at Shide, rather than Newport, because the railway between these two closed stations has been eradicated since closure 60 years ago. For example, the site of Shide station on the north side of the B3401 road is now a tyre service centre for motor vehicles (for contrast, see Gough, 2005, p. 34; also Margham, 2015, fig. 1). Meet on the south side of the B3401 on National Cycle Network route 23 and adjacent to the information board celebrating one of the Isle's most celebrated geologists. John Milne (1850-1913), D.Sc., F.R.S., F.G.S., led an active life as a field and laboratory geologist, and was a pioneering

seismologist, but whose principal discoveries were in distant lands, mainly Japan. Although he continued his seismological research on his return to Britain, he lived in his 'retirement' on the Isle of Wight and was thus removed from the main centres of geological research (Kabarna, 2007).

To the south of Shide the route initially keeps to the west of the stream, which extends to both sides about halfway to Blackwater; the path is paved with pebbles, mainly of flint. I first made this walk in July 2014, which may not be the optimal time for a geologist; in February, with the trees bare, the lie of the land will be more obvious. Further, railways follow the easiest paths wherever possible, such as river valleys, avoiding prominent topographic features.

Between Shide and Blackwater, the route moves onto the Cretaceous greensands. St George's Down, to the north-east, is a prominent Lower Greensand feature, mantled by plateau gravels which still appear to be quarried, but which were also reported by Woodward (1914, p. 143; Donovan, 2015, p. 85, fig. 5F). The valley of the River Medina is left at Blackwater, the river flowing from the south while the railway trends south-east. The Cretaceous substrate to the landscape is emphasised between Blackwater and Merstone by the common chalk and flints in the soil (Donovan, 2015, fig. 5B), derived from further south, although the geological map is necessary to determine that the low hills are Cretaceous greensand (Donovan, 2015, fig. 5D). The path is bordered by old concrete fence posts before Merstone Junction, probably of railway origin and possibly produced locally from quarried chalk or other limestone.

The track bed from Merstone to Sandown drops and curves tightly north-east and then east, following the valley of the River Yar. The soils are a prominent deep red colour as the line straightens towards Herringford (Donovan, 2015, fig. 5C). There are also more of the concrete fence posts, already noted. From about midway between Merstone and Herringford to Langridge and beyond the track bed is in the floodplain of the River Yar, the Yar River Trail to Sandown (Donovan, 2015, fig. 5E).

References

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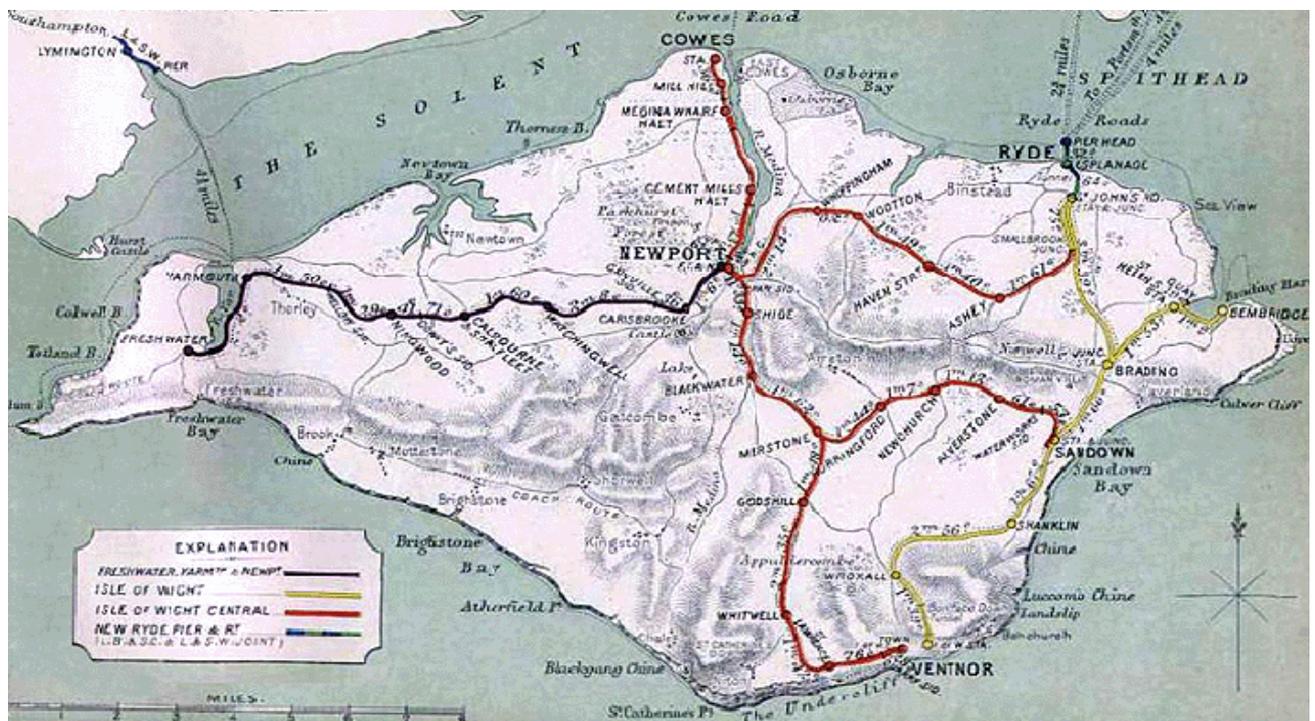


Figure 1. Pre-grouping railways of the Isle of Wight (after http://www.disused-stations.org.uk/graphics/wight/iow_station_index.htm).