



## Combe Rail members' magazine - issue #9 Spring 2018

(Combe Rail CIO – Registered charity 1164083)

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### IN THIS ISSUE....

*CR Roger Griffiths shares his photos of a journey down the line in 1969, John Bradbeer explains the complex process of shunting at Rolle Quay, Barnstaple, and former Barnstaple Town porter Frank Kidwell recalls the perils of coupling and uncoupling the wagons there.*



### COMBE RAIL NEWS

In early January, a small group of volunteers led by CR John Burch tackled the ivy which had covered the concrete railway fence in Station Road, Ilfracombe for the last 50 years. Thanks to the CR members and Cairn Conservation Carers who helped. This is the location where, with the assistance of Pall UK who occupy the former station site, we hope to restore the old steps and install a replica "Ilfracombe Station" sign.



On 31<sup>st</sup> March we were once again guests at the Ilfracombe Model Railway Society's Easter exhibition, which was held this year in The Space, Emmanuel Church. Thanks to all the CR members who attended, and to all the visitors who showed an interest in our plans.



Next Friday 13<sup>th</sup> April CR John Burch will be giving an illustrated talk: *The Ilfracombe line – Past, Present and Future* at The Puffing Billy, Torrington Station EX38 8JD. The talk is hosted by the Tarka Valley Railway and starts at 7.30pm



13<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> June is Ilfracombe's traditional Victorian and Steampunk Week, and we have been invited to attend and have a stall at The Lord Mayor's Tea Party 2.30-4.30pm on Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> June in The Landmark. We hope to see you there – in suitable attire, of course!

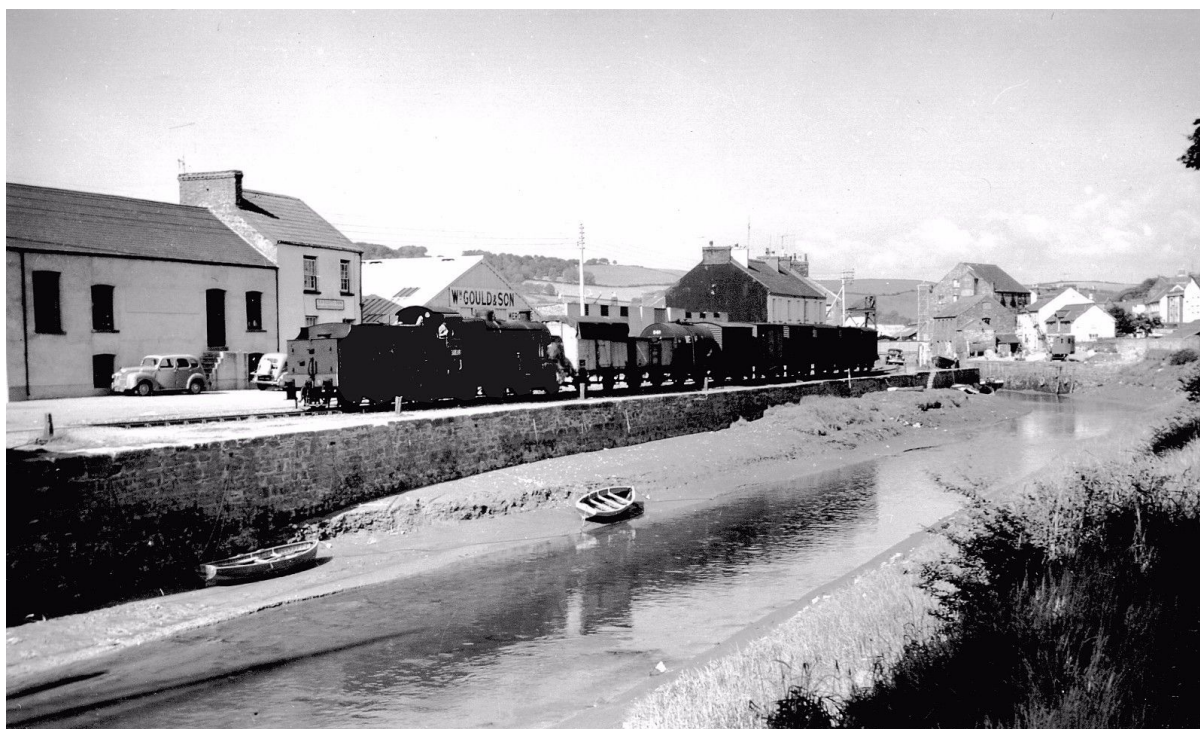
Our own Railway Exhibition and AGM will take place in The Landmark on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> September. Further details will appear in the July issue of Devon Belle, and ballot papers and proxy forms will be emailed to members in early August.

## TAW LINK NEWS



The TawLink tramway proposal was unveiled last year, with several local presentations, and an extended exhibition in Branton Museum. The proposal is now under consideration by the Branton and Barnstaple Neighbourhood Plan steering groups, for inclusion in their plans. We are stressing to both groups the importance of protecting the route against adverse development.

## ROLLE QUAY SIDING by John Bradbeer



(N Class 2-6-0 31838 shunting on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1958 photo R.E. Tustin)

Barnstaple has more or less forgotten its maritime heritage and no-one under the age of sixty will have memories of shipping at any of the town's quays. Rolle Quay is one of these overlooked locations and what is more, it had a railway line running along its length. The history of Barnstaple's port and the influence of the railway upon it are complex, and another story in its own right. Rolle Quay had been built in the 1830s as part of an 'Improvement' that gave a new turnpike road to Braunton along the estuary, using Rolle Street to leave the town and also greatly expanding the yardage of quays in the town. Rolle Quay lay on the river Yeo and was effectively only navigable on spring tides and vessels of much over 150 tonnes rarely entered and all vessels had to reverse out into the Taw to turn. Nonetheless, a few years after the line to Ilfracombe was opened, a siding was constructed, running from Pottington signal box along the full length of the quay and terminating just a few metres short of Rolle Street. It was something of an operational challenge as there were no other sidings and so the shunting train had to manoeuvre outgoing and incoming wagons, using the running lines to make up the train ready for departure.

The working timetable by the 1960s provided only the one path for the Rolle Quay shunting train and this was an early afternoon duty. In the 1930s, there were two paths provided, one at around 11-30 and the other at about 16-00. By the 1960s Rolle Quay would only rarely have more than two vessels at any one time, but pictures (and my father's recollections) of the 1930s show often as many as eight ships lining Rolle Quay, so the two daily trains were often needed. By the 1960s, the only loaded wagons going to Rolle Quay would be tar-oil tankers for the Devon County Council depot at the southern end and all other wagons would be used to carry cargoes discharged from the ships or being despatched from warehouses.

I can only ever remember the Rolle Quay shunting train hauled by an N class 2-6-0, always working tender first to Rolle Quay, so as to give the engine men a better forward view when shunting. The siding came off the down line and was a trailing connection, crossing the up line. The Ilfracombe line became double again at Pottington after the single line section from Barnstaple Junction across the Taw railway viaduct and through the Town station. The Rolle Quay siding itself was controlled by a ground-frame, unlocked by Pottington signal box.

The ground-frame also controlled a trailing cross-over between the up and the down lines. As I recollect, the trains were rarely more than eight to ten wagons, with a brake van and one of the Barnstaple Junction shunters (and his pole) accompanying the guard. The train reversed onto Rolle Quay and the wagons to be taken away were coupled outside the brake van and then left on the down line, with the brake van attached and its brakes screwed down whilst the engine then left the incoming wagons at the right places along the quay. When passenger trains on the main line were due to pass, then the Rolle Quay train would run up the siding and the points were set and locked to allow the passenger train to come through.

Shunting finished, the loco would haul its new train out onto the down line and then run round the wagons, using the cross over, and come back inside Pottington box's 'station limits' using the up line, and onto the single line. It would then gently approach the train along the down line before propelling it just clear of the cross-over and then use this to regain the up line and head back to Barnstaple Junction.

Barnstaple Boys' Grammar School used to hold its sports days at Barnstaple Rugby Club's Pottington ground and the Rolle Quay siding ran immediately behind the main grandstand, so I have had several grandstand views of both the sports and the shunting train. Perhaps it was fitting that Rolle Quay siding closed the year before I left school and I would guess that the last regular use of the siding was probably during late 1962, as the river Yeo froze over during the severe winter of 1962/3 and I suspect that the number of ships never recovered and what cargos did arrive, were now moved on by lorry.



(In this 1960s view the siding can be seen trailing off the down line and through the gate behind the signal)

### **ROLLE QUAY SHUNTING by former porter/shunter Frank Kidwell**

(as recounted to North Devon Journal in 2009)

*Following my return from National Service in September 1947, I returned to railway work and was sent to Barnstaple Town station, where part of my duties included shunting wagons on Rolle Quay. It was a steep learning curve, as the use of the pole was not as easy as it looked – often resulting in blackened thumbnails where the pole had slipped and crushed the thumb on the underside of the buffer case. It required coordination of eye, arm muscle and good judgement of the speed of two wagons meeting. It is hard to imagine now that at that time, Rolle Quay could accommodate up to 98 goods wagons, a guard's brake van and an N class engine. Each evening, when the 5.18 down and the 5.24 up crossed at Pottington, we had to get into the siding out of the way. After January 1950 I went into signalling and held posts at Umberleigh, Mortehoe and finished as signaller at Ilfracombe.*



### A TRIP DOWN THE LINE IN '69 – by CR Roger Griffith

These photographs represent a visit to Ilfracombe by car on 4th May 1969, and a train journey from Exeter St Davids on 14th July 1969. I was 14/15 and although I lived in Teignmouth I boarded at Grenville College in Bideford. The school used the train from Exeter to Barnstaple Junction even though Bideford was closed by then. My mother - the lady in the Ilfracombe photograph - was very supportive of my railway interests and took me to many long closed, recently closed and operational railways in Devon and Cornwall over the years. The Haytor Granite Railway was an early interest. I did a lot of original research on the Bideford, Westward Ho! and Appledore Railway - even interviewing a member of the railway staff. I built a model of the line in N Gauge and won the 'Bursar's Prize' prize at Grenville College for my project! A very knowledgeable chap worked in the model railway section of a Bideford toy shop at the time. I had a very enthusiastic teacher who took us on a clay waggon ride at the Peters Marland Narrow Gauge line, etc.

Torrington Station was a favourite place to visit, as were Meeth Halt, etc.

The first Ilfracombe visit on 4th May 1969 was on a Sunday and no trains were running.

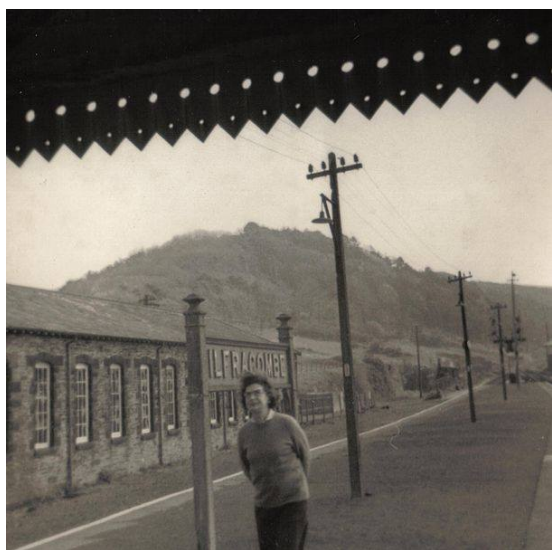


I must have been at school and my mother had collected me from Grenville and taken me to Braunton Burrows for a picnic followed by the railway expedition.



That's her mini car in the forecourt, and Timothy, our Yorkshire Terrier is partly visible in one of the platform pictures.

I remember how foreign the LSWR/SR seemed compared with the GWR of Teignmouth - especially the station name boards. A really strong feeling of the desolation at the site still lingers from that visit - long island platform, empty goods sheds, unused carriage sidings, large car park, etc.



On the Ilfracombe train journey on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1969, I recollect that it had few passengers all the way to the terminus. However to my surprise the buffet at Ilfracombe was busy and perfect - like the *'Brief Encounter'* buffet at Carnforth station. It was a long walk into the town, and a shop there had been a sort of booking office for the railway. It had a sign saying *"British Railways Buy Your Tickets Here at Station Prices."* The Booking Office was closed and empty.



(the red totem-style sign can still be seen today in Ilfracombe Museum)



(Barnstaple Junction, looking towards Exeter)



(Barnstaple Junction, departing for Ilfracombe)

The air of desolation was prevalent with so many signs of a once busy and important line now in terminal decline. The large number of staffed crossings struck me as a great expense - one at least was worked by a lady. Wrafton still had sidings that I speculated were for RAF Chivenor use. The out of use second platforms were another depressing element.



*(approaching Barnstaple Town)*



*(departing Wrafton)*

I had to watch out for my head at Ilfracombe Tunnel - the train was really struggling though on the return journey up the extreme gradient. Morthoe & Wolacombe station was fairly busy.



*(approaching Braunton)*



*(emerging from Slade tunnel north portal)*



*(descending to Ilfracombe from the tunnel)*



*(the final approach past the dismantled signal gantry)*

Many years later, I honeymooned on Lundy and we caught an overnight train from Glasgow that arrived at Barnstaple Junction at 6.30am. We walked to the bus station only to be denied access to the waiting room at 7.30am, because that's where they kept the morning papers and they had been stolen in the past! We sat in the cold mist outside until the public toilets opened at 8.30am - the attendant shared a flask of coffee with us and at last we were allowed into the bus station. I later wrote a vitriolic letter to the bus company having apologised to my wife for this astonishing experience of Devonian discourtesy and explained that the closed Ilfracombe railway staff would never have behaved in such a fashion.

#### **AND FINALLY...**

*There are a lot of black and white photos in this issue, so to redress the balance, here's a colour shot taken on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1963 by Norman Thomas. 34 075 "264 Squadron" prepares to depart Ilfracombe platform one with an afternoon service.*



*(photo reproduced by kind permission of The Monmouthshire Railway Society)*

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