

'A Four Mile Ride by the Sea'

This extract, used by permission of Brian Hart, from his book.

The Hythe & Sandgate Railway

For the monied classes, Folkestone was indeed the 'gem of the south coast' as it liked to call itself in its publicity brochures. A typical day for its hotel residents began with an unhurried *petit dejeuner* amongst the huge palms of the sumptuous dining rooms. Suitably attired, a leisurely stroll westward along the broad promenade of the Leas cliff bestowed unparalleled views of the English Channel with the French cliffs peeping above the horizon. Below, the sound of gentle surf lulled aged Victorians until they were soon dozing in their bathchairs, parked in grassy suntraps, while the more agile put their best foot forward and imbibed lungfuls of the freshest of air.





At the western end of the Leas stood the decorous and imposing red-brick upper station of the Sandgate Hill Lift. On opening the glazed, heavy wooden doors, the faint smell of machinery assailed the nostrils while an indistinct rumbling impressed itself upon the ear as the huge iron wheel, concealed beneath the floor, allowed one car to climb the hill as the other descended. As the lift car slowly eased to a halt, the



attendant would open the door to enable its load to disembark while those who had paid their penny toll, filed into the car.

Sitting in a row along either side, their hearts would beat faster as water, gushing into the tank beneath, heralded its departure. Once the 'ready to go' bell had been rung from the lower station, the brakesman would pass along the side, step upon the canopied platform at the front end and grip the brake wheel, easing it until the car began to sink. The comparative gloom of the building was left behind, causing eyes to squint as the sun's rays burst through the windows. Running down the gentle gradient, most heads would be tempted to gaze seawards before looking ahead to watch the other car make its simultaneous journey uphill.

Once the cars had passed each other, Radnor Cliff Crescent was immediately crossed via an ornate iron bridge, whereupon the steeper gradient resumed. A few moments later, the brakesman turned his wheel, slowing the car to cause it to gently glide to a halt at the lower station. Here the sound of water gushing out of the car's tank accompanied the passengers exit as they followed one another, surrendering their tickets, before entering the impressive lower station. Here it was possible to make use of the commodious lavatories with their strikingly tiled patterns assimilating those so favoured by the Greeks. In the main hall, a bookstall tempted a purchase of a newspaper, likely woefully portending the coming embroilment, or a journal to while away the loose hours, or maybe a picture postcard for that maiden aunt at Sydenham.



Out into the sunshine once more, it was impossible to resist one last look at this strange machine as the lift car ascended before turning to walk downhill to find the start of the tramway. If lucky, there would be no long wait for a tram and likely as not, No. 5, the 'toast-rack', would already be waiting whilst its equine power quenched a hearty thirst at the nearby horse trough. The conductor meanwhile busied himself with swinging over the backs of the reversible seats in preparation for the return trip to Hythe. While passengers jostled over their seats, the horses would be

backed up towards the Hythe end of the car and coupled up ready for the command that would set them off. By now all seats would be full and disappointed latecomers would have to wait for the roofed car, which wasn't half as much fun as on days like these.

Releasing the brake, the journey would commence, allowing the conductor to pass along the running board collecting fares and likely commenting on the warm spell of weather currently being enjoyed. Through busy Sandgate High Street the tram would rumble, causing heads to turn and smile and where maybe class barriers would be transcended when a workman would wink at a pretty girl on board, causing her pale complexion to blush.

Leaving the noise of the main street behind, the tram rolled onto the promenade alongside the sea which drowsily lapped the shore, hardly moving a pebble. Now and then a swell would cause a tiny wave to break, its soothing sound still one of life's great pleasures. A motor bus invariably whined past, its clanking gears and spluttering engine driving it faster to its destination, but who would want to hurry on such a perfect day? A pause at the entrance to Princes Parade enabled some passengers to disembark, perhaps to catch a train at Sandgate station, whilst up in the yard the sound of an engine shunting wagons filled the air with the clattering ring of buffers meeting. From here the tram left the bustle of business and the main road to wander off with its happy band along the promenade.

On the left, the sea shimmered and sparkled whilst in the hazy distance Hythe could be seen standing out against the hillside. The empty promenade allowed the horses to quicken to a brisk pace towards the halfway passing place where the other tram was usually waiting. Ahead, the rails glinted in the sunshine whilst to the right the empty fields permitted an uninterrupted view across to the canal.



This shelter, standing alone and now under threat from housing developers, is all that remains along Prince's Parade.

How different it all might have been had Watkin's dreams* come true and what fine houses might now have graced this pleasant aspect - Watkin Avenue, Watkin Square, Watkin Villas and so on! There was little else but the Imperial Hotel, even so, its proprietors attempted to make its isolation appear a positive asset:

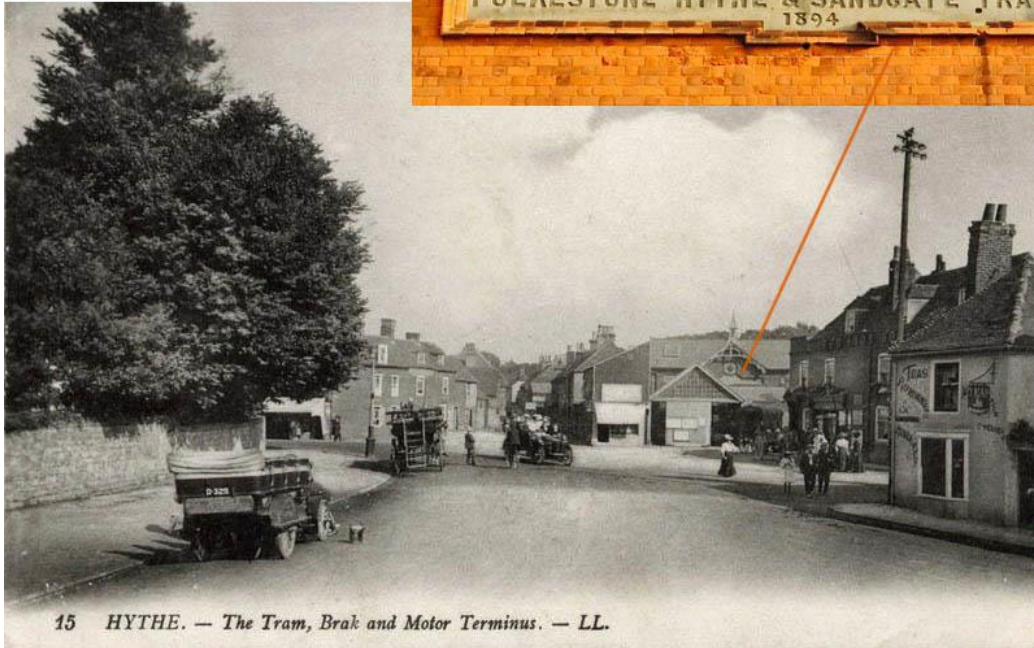
'As a holiday resort Hythe possesses many advantages, amongst which may be mentioned its comparative quietude as against its modern neighbour Folkestone, its close proximity to which, brings the more noisome pleasures of that town within easy reach, should a yearning for same be experienced.'

Once past the Seabrook Hotel frontage, the tram swung inland into Twiss Road, resuming its westwards course a few yards further when turning into South Road. At the end of the road, the tram slowed once again while the driver operated the device for watering the wheels, thus enabling the curve to be negotiated as quietly and smoothly as possible.

Heading inland once more, the tram passed along Stade Street, thereby taking it into the town. Crossing the canal via Town Bridge, punts and skiffs would be seen scattered upon the water where trailing fingers causing ripples upon the glassy surface idled away an hour or so.



Once over the bridge the tram turned westwards along Rampart Road, passing the tramway shed and stables on the right, before entering Red Lion Square where this pleasant journey came to an end.



Red Lion Square, showing the Tram Shed, which is still there today.

Here a variety of restaurants, luncheon and tearooms satisfied the pangs of hunger felt by the travellers, after which an afternoon spent lazily rowing along the canal might be enjoyed. Back at the square, a cream tea would beckon the palate before a return to Folkestone by tram and lift.



The tram turning into South Road, from Stade Street, on its return journey to Sandgate

In the evening, after a relaxed dinner, there was nothing quite the equal of a stroll eastwards along the Leas, the air scented with flowers and still warm as a rufescent sky heralded a glorious sunset. Descending the cliff face on the Leas water-balance lift, a few steps beyond the gaily-lit entrance to the Victoria Pier was reached. Here, the cooler air from the sea wafted welcomingly up through the wooden decking, whilst ahead the glittering lamps of the Pier Pavilion beckoned with the delights of the music hall. From the shore the pier took on the appearance of some titanic liner, with its lights reflecting in the water below. Within, came the sounds of music and laughter, from people who were likely just as unaware of an impending catastrophe as those poor souls who, two years earlier, had perished in the cruel, ice-bound waters of the North Atlantic.

On 7th August 1914, just three days after the First World War began, the tramway service was suspended, its horses requisitioned by the military authorities, whilst the depot at Red Lion Square is understood to have been taken over by the Canadian Military Police. The tramcars were put in store and those members of staff who had not enlisted were required to fill vacant posts in the railway's service elsewhere. For instance, James Pilcher, one of the drivers, went to work on the railway's horse buses, first of all at Hythe then later at Folkestone Junction.

The indescribable horrors of the years that followed will never be allowed to be forgotten, and rightly so, but a thought should be spared here for the tramway's horses whose happy lives pulling holidaymakers were abruptly ended, to perish, along with thousands of others, in the living hell of gore, mud and misery. They had no argument with their counterparts, for them there was no patriotic call to arms, no leave, and perhaps worst of all, no ability to reason. Their plight did not go unnoticed, however, and the sight of these good-natured creatures being shipped out to almost certain death broke many a heart. Edward Elgar, who had to endure the unbearable by hearing his glorious music commandeered by the tub-thumping war-mongers, was distraught at the prospect: 'The only thing that wrings my heart and soul is the thought of the horses. Oh, my beloved animals. The men and women can go to hell, but my horses. I walk round and round this room cursing God for allowing dumb brutes to be tortured. Let him kill his human beings but how can he. Oh, my horses!'.
.