

150 years of Trains to Sheppey

1860 - 2010

Commemorating the railway between Sittingbourne,
Queenborough & Sheerness since 19th July 1860



In celebrating 150 years of the railway link across the Swale from Sittingbourne to Queenborough and Sheerness, we remember the importance of the line in the development of the area, and that it is a major asset today.

The Coming of the Railway to Swale

East Kent Railway trains reached Sittingbourne in January 1858. By 1860 the EK Railway had become part of the London, Chatham & Dover Railway, providing its own route to London via Swanley & Bromley. The first trains ran northwards from Sittingbourne on 19th July 1860, and Sheppey had a direct link from the Medway towns & London, avoiding Sittingbourne, by 1864.

With the railway stretching out across Kent in the 1850's, Sheerness became a major destination for people visiting the seaside on a



Sunday, especially those from the East End of London. From Queenborough, a branch line ran to Leysdown from 1902, to transport passengers to this popular destination. Another line ran from Queenborough to a pier in the Medway, where passengers could cross to the Dutch port of Flushing. From the

times when most people did not have access to their own transport, the railway has had a very big impact on Sheppey's expansion as a holiday destination.

Originally, services ran into Blue Town. This line still exists, being used by steelworks traffic and occasionally freight from Sheerness Port. Both Blue Town & Sheerness were served from 1883 by the addition of a new loop line, with the former being closer to industry & Sheerness being close to the sea, the main residential & shopping area.

Services were geared to workers' and scholars' transport needs and there were additional stopping services directly to Chatham and to London. These trains were also supplemented by specials, including excursions from London and further afield, to provide a day at the seaside, and encouraged many visitors from the East End of London. There were extra trains provided for football matches or carnival days, when normal services would not be able to cope with the numbers of people. Excursions were also arranged in summer to Crystal Palace, Chessington & Primrose Hill (for London Zoo). The coming of the railway opened up a new era of day trippers to and from Sheppey and provided hugely enjoyable leisure activities which could not have been contemplated before this.



Then and Now

Sittingbourne station was fronted by large open area from where buses departed, timed to meet trains. They served many outlying areas which no longer have a service today. There were open coal yards alongside, which served the steam trains and for the coal fires, that were situated in the waiting rooms, to keep passengers warm in the cold weather. Queenborough station is still the original building and is instantly recognisable in old photographs. In Queenborough a number of sidings remain in use, once a part of a larger system, which served now defunct industries.

It was the railway which saw Queenborough's industries flourish from the 1860's until the end of the 20th century. Raw materials, such as sand for the glassworks, were brought in by train, and then the finished product was transported out by rail to London and other major markets. Sadly, with the decline of industry on Sheppey, the railway is not the lifeline it once was.

During WW1 & WW2 there was considerable movement of military personnel to the Garrison & Dockyard. Later, the line featured in the evacuation of servicemen returning from Dunkirk. During the war periods, only special passport holders could travel to Sheerness, and other visitors had to make special arrangements to travel there. Sheerness on Sea was close to the barracks, which made it a sensitive area.



Sheerness station was rebuilt following an incident in 1971 when a train from Victoria continued towards the sea. The earlier building was much larger, with a W.H. Smith bookstall and a confectionery kiosk. Post would arrive by train, and in 1971 Sheerness station handled over 7000 parcels & Queenborough over 1000. Sheerness station was a child's delight, with slot machines selling small bars of Cadbury's Dairy Milk for one penny and Fry's Chocolate Cream or Five Boys Chocolate bars for 3 pennies. You could also weigh yourself and print out your name on a metal strip for one penny.

Kemsley Station was a later addition and opened when the paper mill village was created. The journey itself is quite similar today, despite houses near Milton Regis, with hawthorn fringing the line and many species of birds which can be spotted on the marshes.

The most spectacular feature on the line is the Kingsferry Bridge which figured in several incidents involving shipping accidents or extreme weather conditions. After the lifting span was damaged, passengers had to cross the Swale by rowing boats accessed by planks across the mud or by descending the damaged structure towards the murky waves. At night torchlight or moonlight was all that was available – this would not be allowed today. Fortunately, during the difficulties, a train was always on the island so services could be maintained.

The Line Today

There is no doubt that the coming of the railway to Sheppey in 1860 has been of tremendous benefit and has had a great impact on development.

Today the line has a regular half-hourly timetable on weekdays and hourly on Sundays, providing a level of service far above that in operation a century ago. With smooth, efficient, well-lit electric units, the level of comfort is also much improved. Although there have been huge changes in technology and incredible social change over the last 150 years, it is clear that many of the features which made the journey to Sheppey unique are still there to be enjoyed today.

The line continues to bring visitors and tourists to the island, contributing greatly to the local economy.



Acknowledgements

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The Faversham Society – especially Peter & Gerry for loan of panels, help & advice

The Library Service – staff assistance & hosting the exhibition

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John Langford – for photographs

Publications for further Information

Branch lines around Sheerness by Vic Mitchell and Keith Smith, Middleton Press (1993)

Sittingbourne to Ramsgate by Vic Mitchell and Keith Smith, Middleton Press (2002)

Dartford to Sittingbourne by Vic Mitchell and Keith Smith, Middleton Press (1994)

The Sheppey Light Railway by Brian Hart, Wild Swan Publications (1992)

The Sheppey Light Railway by Peter A Harding, Binfield (1984)

Chronology

- 1858** Chatham – Faversham line opened. Bridge to the island replaces the ferry.
- 1860** First trains reach Sheerness (Blue Town).
- 1863** Lines serve wharves in Queenborough.
- 1876** Services to Queenborough Pier begin.
- 1883** Sheerness-on-Sea station opened on the present site.
- 1897** Bridge across the Swale closed for 2 weeks during the Great Flood and storms.
- 1900** Regular services between Sheppey & Port Victoria for the **'Hundred of Hoo'** line to Gravesend & London cease, although reduced services operate during special circumstances until the station at Port Victoria becomes too dangerous (all wooden construction).
- 1903** Trams run in Sheerness – uniquely in England using Siemens equipment of an unusual design.
- 1904** New lifting span on Kingsferry Bridge.
- 1910, 1911, 1912** Through Great Western Railway – expresses to Queenborough from Wolverhampton, Birmingham & High Wycombe.
- 1911** Maidstone & District buses operating in Sittingbourne from Chatham, Maidstone & Faversham.
- 1917** Station opened at Kingsferry Bridge. Trams cease in Sheerness.
- 1922** Sheerness Dockyard station no longer served by passenger trains. Sheerness-on-Sea, closed during the war, reopens for all traffic.
- 1922/3** Station provided on north bank of Swale **'Kingsferry Bridge North Hall'** while bridge closed due to damage when SS Gyp collided.
- 1923** Queenborough Pier finally closed with transfer of Shipping services permanently. During fires, floods & war, Flushing Steamers had been diverted periodically to Folkestone, Harwich, Port Victoria & Sheerness.

- 1926** Maidstone & District begins operating on Sheppey. By 1931 all buses in the area are operated by this company – now Arriva.
- 1929** Kingsferry Bridge Halt re-named Swale Halt. Tolls for vehicles, pedestrians & livestock across the bridge cease with the County Council paying the Southern Railway £50,000.
- 1950** Sheppey Light railway closes (Queenborough to Leysdown)
- 1953/4/6** Various bridge closures, with collisions and floods for periods from 5 days to 3 months.
- 1959** Electrification of lines East of Gillingham.
- 1960** New Kingsferry Bridge '**opened**' although in use since electrification. By this time the Army & Navy have left Sheerness.
- 1971** Accident when train demolishes Sheerness Station.



Celebratory Events Marking 150 Years of Sheppey Rail July 2010

- 5th – 31st July** ‘150 Years of Sheppey Railway Exhibition’ at Sheerness Library, **free entrance** – normal library opening hours.
- 3rd July** Poetry on the Rails transport related poems read by members of the Betjeman Society
Queenborough Library – 10.30am – 12 noon
Free event – for more information 01795 663695
- 17th & 24th July** Rail Trail – historical guided journey by rail and on foot - Jonathan Fryer.
Tickets £1.50 + cost of train ticket
Details/Tickets on the day, meet 9.45am at Sittingbourne Railway Station
- 19th July** Commemorative Plaque Ceremony to mark the 150 years - Queenborough Railway Station at 11.00am
Look out in the local press for details
- 21st July** Pictorial Exploration of 150 years of Sheppey Rail
Talk & Slides – Ken Ingleton
Sheerness Library 7pm Tickets £1.00
For tickets or more information 01795 662618

This leaflet is available to view or download on **www.swale.gov.uk**

In association with the Sheppey Local History Society and Sheerness Society.

For further information about the line and the SwaleRail Community Rail Partnership please contact: Ian Paterson – Community Rail Partnership Officer on 07917 841005 (Monday to Thursday only)
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