



Margate Museum

THE ISLE OF THANET TRAMWAY SYSTEM 1901-1937

Introduction

Tramway systems (that is, passenger-carrying road vehicles running on rails) were first introduced in England in Birkenhead in 1860, with the tram being horse-drawn. Electric trams were introduced to the country in 1883, in Northern Ireland and Brighton. Until trams were introduced, the only way that the general public could get about was on foot or by horse-drawn carriages, so the relatively speedy and reliable tramway was a great social development.

In 1871, a proposal to run a tramway between Dover and Ramsgate was refused by the Board of Trade. A similar proposal in 1872, to operate between Dover and Margate, was given official go-ahead but failed to raise sufficient finance. In 1883, construction started on a steam-powered system between St. Peter's Church and Broadstairs Railway Station, but this also failed because of a lack of funds.

In 1896, the Light Railways Act was passed, which encouraged the introduction of tramways and light railways by removing Board of Trade restrictions and relaxing the legislation requirements. There was a rapid growth of light railways and tramways following the introduction of this Act.

The Isle of Thanet Light Railways (Electric) Company

In 1896, shortly after the passing of the Light Railways Act, the Isle of Thanet Light Railways (Electric) Company applied for permission to operate electric trams from Pegwell Bay to Westgate, via Ramsgate, Broadstairs and Margate. The promoter was William Murphy, from Bantry in Ireland, who had been involved in tramway construction in Dublin, Belfast and Cork.

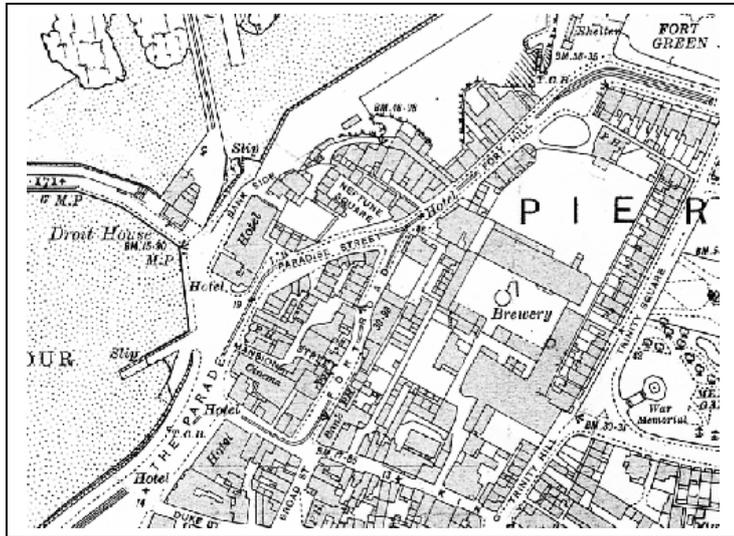
Permission for operation from Ramsgate to Westgate was given by the Board of Trade in 1897 but the select residents of Westgate-on-Sea were strongly opposed to noisy trams bearing holiday-makers entering their town and disturbing the "restfulness, quietude and pure air", and after a long debate, the final plan was to run from Ramsgate to Margate. Construction work began

in May 1899. The company also obtained powers to provide electric lighting to Margate and Broadstairs.

The Route

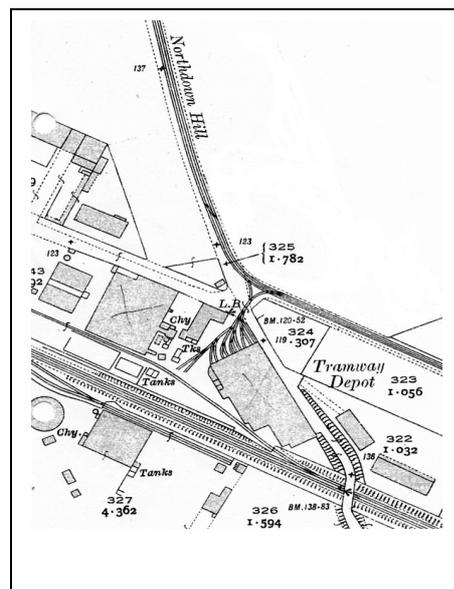
The western terminus of the line was in Westbrook, at the depot which is still standing adjacent to the Westbrook House NHS Centre at 150 Canterbury Road. This is the only place where the track is still visible. From there, the line went along to Margate Harbour then up Paradise Street and Fort Hill to Fort Crescent.

The line towards Margate split at the bottom of Fort Hill and went along Fort Road and King Street, to meet up



with the north-bound line on the Parade. Unlike most of the rest of the route, this part has changed considerably but comparison of the map extract with a modern map will show the route.

From Fort Crescent, the route went along Cliff Terrace and Ethelbert Terrace and turned into Athelstan Road. At the end of Athelstan Road, it turned left into what is now Northdown Road (then Alexandra Road until the junction with Wilderness Hill when it became Northdown Road). The tramway came off Northdown Road on to a private stretch to Lower Northdown Road; this stretch is now a footpath which starts on Northdown Road opposite Princes Gardens and comes out on Lower Northdown Road opposite Cedar Close. The track went along Lower Northdown Road, past the Wheatsheaf and along another private stretch of track (now St Mary's Avenue) to Northdown Hill.



The main depot for the tramway stood at the foot of Northdown Hill, at the junction with Westover Road,

Northdown Road and what is now Dane Valley Road. The tram shed is still standing, used by, amongst others, D C Homewood Ltd as retail premises. Adjacent to the shed was the electricity generating station which provided power for the tramway system and for electric street lighting in Margate and Broadstairs. The shed held 40 tram cars on eight tracks, and a siding from the main railway line was constructed for coal deliveries to the power station.

From Northdown Hill, the tram lines went along Westover Road, right along Church Street and left into Albion Road and St. Peter's Park Road. At the Broadway in Broadstairs, the line split. One part went straight ahead, on to Osborne Road and Gladstone Road, then ahead into what is now Salisbury Avenue but was then a private stretch of track through the fields. This was known as the "Top Road". The other route went down Broadstairs High Street (where a new railway bridge had to be built to allow trams to pass safely). It turned into Queen's Road, then into Oscar Road to Victoria Parade. From there, the route went along what is now West Cliff Avenue to Dumpton Park Drive; like Salisbury Avenue, this was a private tramway route. This "Main Line" section met up with the Top Road line in Dumpton, at the present-day junction of Salisbury Avenue and Dumpton Park Drive.

From there, the tracks ran along the rest of Dumpton Park Drive, Bellevue Road and along Plains of Waterloo to Wellington Crescent and down Madeira Walk. Then Royal Parade, the Paragon, St. Augustine's Road and along the length of Grange Road to Park Road. The Ramsgate terminus was near the South Eastern Railway Company station (which closed in 1926), in the vicinity of the junction of Hollicondane Road and Chatham Street.



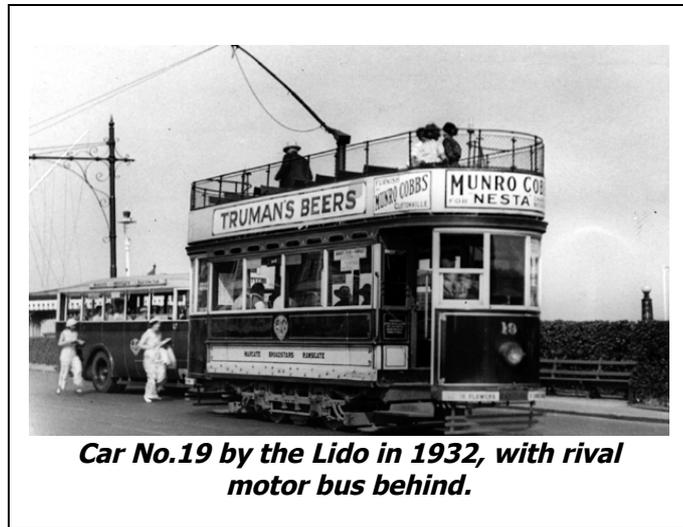
A well-loaded car No.55 descending Madeira Walk

The tramcars

There were 60 cars altogether. All were open-topped double-deck, but nos. 1 to 20 were 4-wheeled vehicles whilst 21-40 were longer and had eight wheels. Each car was equipped with two 28hp electric motors, with the power fed from overhead cables. The supply was at 500 volts and the track gauge was 3 feet 6 inches. The initial order was for 40 cars (nos. 1-40) and these were built in the United States by the St. Louis Car Co. Because of the success of the system, a further 20 cars were ordered in 1901, and these were built by the

British Thomson-Houston company. These vehicles were numbered 41-60.

Cars 1-20 had a seating capacity of 55; the larger cars 21-40 could seat 68 passengers whilst 41-50 and 51-60 seated 52 and 50 respectively. The fares at the start of the service ranged from 1d (one old penny) for short journeys (such as Garlinge to Margate Harbour) to 5d for a journey from one terminus to the other.



Car No.19 by the Lido in 1932, with rival motor bus behind.

Construction and opening of the tramway

Work started in April 1899, near the White Hart Hotel in Margate. By May, the section between King Street and the Clock Tower was complete but, as with all good projects, it was soon behind time and over budget and the Company had to ask for a time extension. In March 1901, the system was complete and a series of test runs were carried out with Board of Trade approval being given. The total length of the system was 10.84 miles. Service started on 4th April 1901 using the "Top Road" route because the Broadstairs railway bridge work had not been completed, and with a limited number of tramcars because of delays in building electricity sub-stations. However, the full route opened on 6th July 1901 and was an immediate success, despite efforts by the owners of horse-drawn cabs to block the lines; the cabs invariably came off worse when the tram drivers pushed them out of the way.

Accidents and incidents

Although the tramway was a success right from the start, there were a number of accidents in the first few years of operation. Within the first two months, on 15th April 1901, car no.8 ran away down Fort Road and failed to make the sharp turn into King Street. It came off the tracks and ran into Broad Street and stopped just short of the Old Town Hall (then the Police Station, now Margate Museum). The local press reported that police were soon on the scene. Reports in the Museum archive indicate over 50 accidents, mostly minor collisions and derailments, in the first six months

Two serious accidents occurred in 1905. On May 27th, car no.47 failed to take a bend and came off the tracks into a grocer's shop in Bellevue Road, Ramsgate, seriously injuring the driver, conductor and the grocer's 7-year old daughter.



Car No.41 after the accident

On 3rd August, car no.41 lost control descending Madeira Walk in Ramsgate and fell over 30 feet into the ground behind the Queen's Head public

house. The driver, Mr Lloyd, the conductor, Mr Jones and the four passengers on board were injured, although not as seriously as might have been expected after such a severe crash. The tram was completely wrecked.

The end of trams in Thanet

The first motor buses in Thanet were purchased by the Isle of Thanet Tramway and Lighting Company in 1913 and this enabled them to operate a service to Westgate and Birchington. After World War I, only 14 trams were in good order, the remainder either having been damaged during the war or had been cannibalised to keep the others working. The Company did, though, continue to rebuild cars and maintain and enhance the track right until the last days of the system. In 1924, the Company changed its name to the Isle of Thanet Electric Supply Company, which reflected the fact that electricity generation and supply had become more important than the tram service. By 1935, the town councils of Ramsgate, Broadstairs and Margate petitioned the Company to abandon the tram service, which had become unreliable and was noisy and uncomfortable compared to the motor buses. There were only 15 trams in service by 1937, as more people travelled by bus and there was a much reduced demand for the trams. The trams made their final journey on Wednesday 27th March 1937, with the last journeys being driven by the town mayors.

The tramcars were scrapped at the St. Peter's depot and the Company's fleet of 45 motor buses was sold to the East Kent Road Car Co. Ltd., which had been set up in competition to the Company in 1916. Some of the track was left in place and covered over, but

most of it was sold for scrap including 500 tons which was sent to Germany in 1937, leading to the suspicion that the molten iron was subsequently used for armaments.

By the end, the tramway had become old-fashioned and uncompetitive compared to the motor bus. However, the system served the area well over its 36 year life and carried over 3½ million passengers. After the flurry of accidents in the early 1900s, the system ran safely and reliably and was of huge benefit to the people of Thanet.

This article is based on material in Margate Museum Research Archive where much further detail and many photographs can be seen on request.

-----0-----