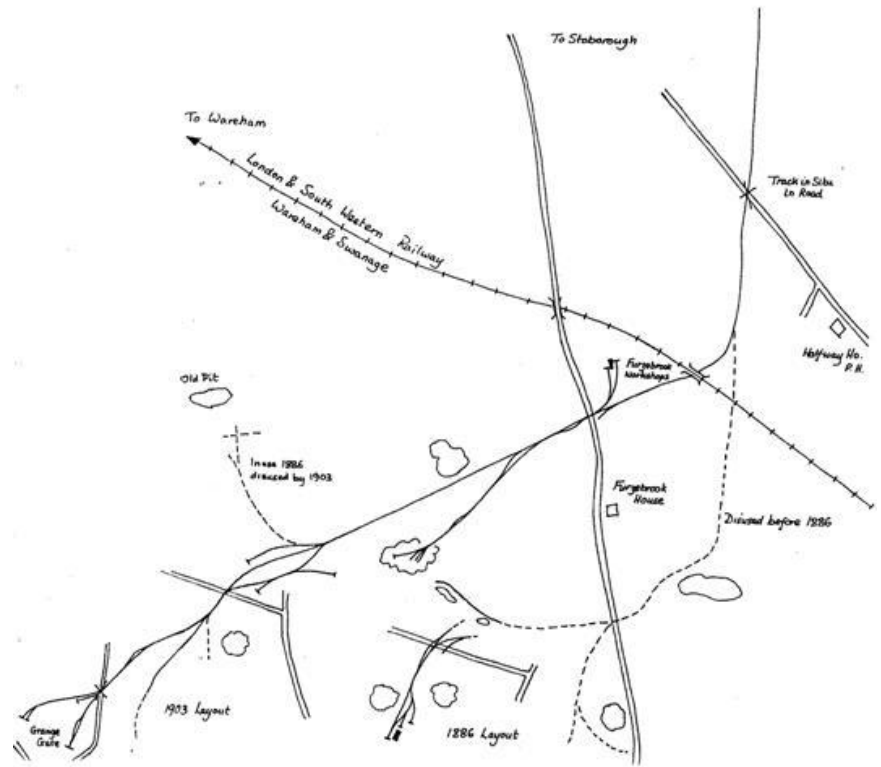


## Purbeck Clay

Just to the south of Wareham in Dorset there used to be two interesting narrow-gauge railway systems serving the ball-clay pits and works in that area, providing an outlet to the sea and later to the Swanage branch railway line.

That at Furzebrook was of 2ft 8ins gauge, started in 1866. From the claypits around Grange Gate it ran NE, crossing the road to Kimmeridge Bay and the L&SWR branch near Furzebrook House, where the workshops were situated. Turning due north and crossing the main Swanage road, in a mile or two the Ridge clay works was reached, then a loading pier at Ridge Wharf on the River Frome, a short way from where it entered Poole harbour and a mile or so east of Wareham town. The Ridge branch was commandeered by the wartime government in 1940 and closed down, but the rest of the system, shown on the sketch map as it was in 1903, worked on until 1956. By 1970 when I came to spend some time in the Bournemouth area, the route of the track could be followed easily, but there was not much of interest to see by then.



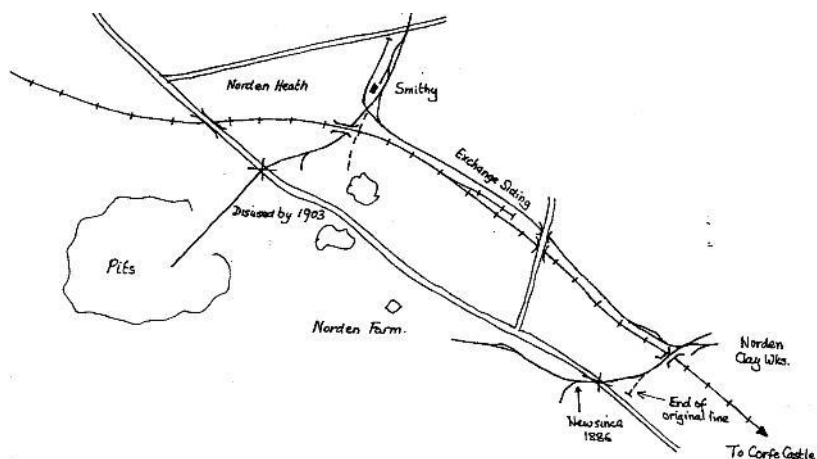
About 2 miles to the SE at Norden, the second system of Pike Bros, Fayle Ltd (by then English China Clays) remained in operation just into the 1970s. This railway originated in a 3ft 9ins gauge horse-worked line, Benjamin Fayle's Middlebere plateway, opened in 1806. It ran about 3½ miles generally NE from the clay pits at Norden Heath to Middlebere Quay, again on the fringe of Poole Harbour. This section was closed around 1907 when the nearby Goathorn Tramway (then running from Newtown to Goathorn Pier, south of Brownsea Island) was extended to Norden. As is quite usual in such cases, the stone sleeper blocks holding the rails survived in situ for many years, and we found plenty of evidence along the route in 1971.....



The layout at Norden in around 1903 is shown in the sketch map below, with the then route to Middlebere Quay leaving northwards at top centre and the Goathorn extension line, aka "Fayles tramway" soon to exit north-eastwards from centre right. The latter was nearly 6 miles long and locomotive worked but fell out of

use in the later 1930s and this route was also taken over by the Ministry of Supply in wartime. Post war the remaining lines around Norden were converted to 1ft 11<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>in gauge, well known in narrow-gauge railway circles as the last working home of the ex-Welsh Highland Railway locomotive “Russell” until 1953.

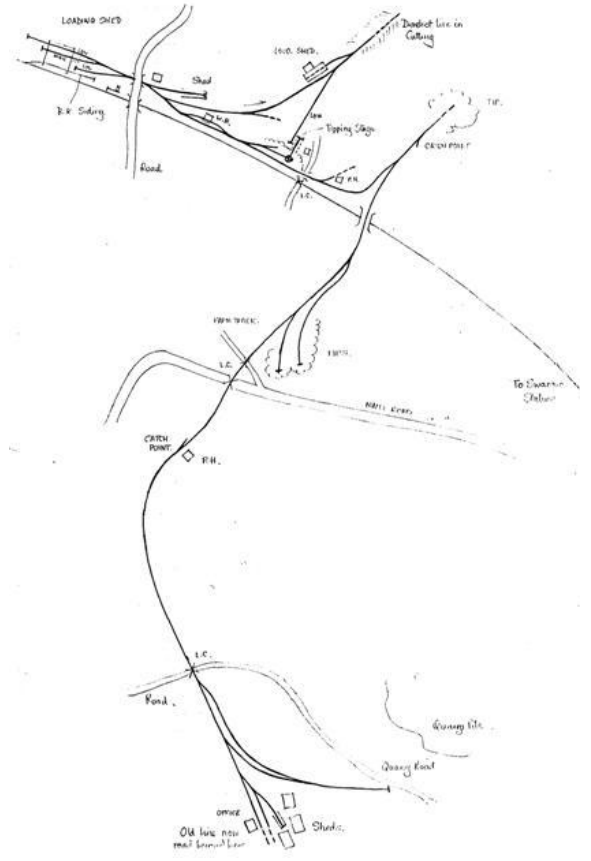
The L&SWR Swanage branch railway line runs from top left to bottom right on the plan as does the main A351 road, and the area between the marked “exchange siding” and “Norden clay works” is now occupied by the Norden station of the Swanage steam railway. There are paths and picnic tables along the line of the old narrow gauge rails here, and the cast-iron bridge which carried them over the SW line at the southern end is still in situ, though very derelict and overgrown. Nearby is an interesting small museum of the Purbeck clay industry.



How very different this area looked in April 1971 when we first visited. At that time the BR Swanage branch was still open (until the end of that year), worked by a diesel unit train. These picture show the scene at Norden then.....



In the picture top right the LSWR line runs in cutting behind the tipper wagons and under the stone arch bridge at centre. My notes record that there were 5 diesel locomotives on site; 3 Rustons nos 392117 (42DL type, in green), 175413 (18/21HP, grey) and 179889 (20HP, Lister engine, grey) all in working order, and 2 Orenstein & Koppel RL3 type, nos 20777 (working) and 21159 (no gearbox), both in green. Our sketch plan of the lines (not to scale, but showing the general layout) is reproduced.....



There were around 50 wagons, mainly Hudson tippers or the frames of same. One tank wagon (a home-made conversion) and a few flat wagons. Despite the fact that the Goathorn line had once had a passenger service – even a school train, and some sort of provision was later made for carrying workmen, we recorded “no carriages”. Our visit was on a Sunday, so unsurprisingly there was no activity whatsoever at the site. We thought that use of the railway had ceased very recently and that demolition had started – there was a pile of rusty rail stacked adjacent to the A351 road crossing.

However while photographing the death throes of the BR Swanage branch on a frosty New Year’s Eve 1971 (a Friday) we were amazed to see a narrow gauge train trundling across the main road on its way south. We parked up the trusty Morris Minor and ran after



it into the old quarry area, where dismantling was indeed in progress. In the gathering dusk, the little train of 3 flat wagons, men and tools returned across the road, which was fortunately not at all busy then. Around 10 minutes later it shunted back parallel to the BR branch (in foreground) at Norden with one man warming his hands on the exhaust (left), before being put to bed for the night. The following evening we returned for a trip on the last ever Wareham-Swanage line train, then all was quiet – or so we thought, not knowing what was to happen around here in later years!