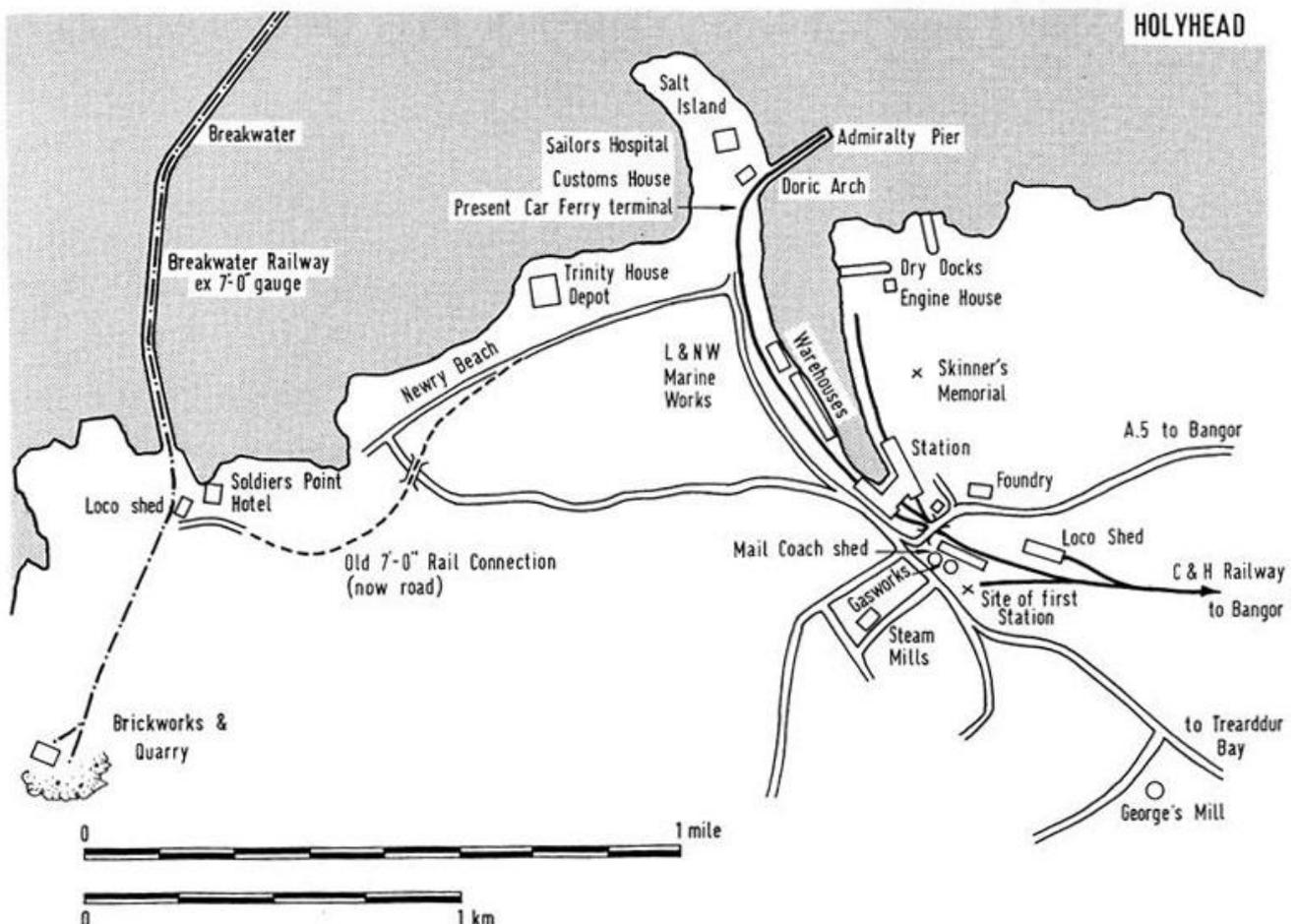


## 17 Holyhead & district

The present-day importance of the town of Holyhead derives fundamentally from its long history as a packet (or mail) port for Ireland. Had this not been so, the main A5 trunk road from England, heading straight as a die across Anglesey, would have been terminated instead at Bangor or Llangefni, and the main line railway long since closed down as an uneconomic and wayward country branch line, if indeed it had been built at all. In 1800, Holyhead was fourth only in size of the island's towns, after Amlwch, Menai Bridge and Beaumaris.

Although the district bears some evidence of pre-Roman habitation, the connection with the sea and shipping almost certainly has its origins in the fourth century Roman garrison of *Caer Gybi*, which probably included a fortified quay. The beginnings of the present day Irish service can be traced to the year 1493, after the Irish ports had been annexed by Henry Tudor to forestall their use for invasion purposes; the resultant increase in Anglo-Irish traffic was handled, however, not by Holyhead, but via Chester and the River Dee ports. By 1558 there was a postal service from London to Chester, which was extended to Holyhead before 1576, via ferries at Conwy and the Menai Straits. Due to the inconvenience of these ferries, the route via Holyhead was slow to become practicable for the ordinary passenger as distinct from the hardier post-boys: it was not until 1647 that the first public passenger and mails service from Holyhead was licensed.

Starting in the year 1810, a proper quay was constructed by John Rennie, which enabled the boats to be received at most states of the tide. The clue to Holyhead's subsequent rapid eclipse of the River Dee ports lies in the far shorter sea crossing provided by the former. The 720 ft high landmark of Holyhead Mountain was a useful aid for navigation into the harbour: its lighthouse, South Stack, had been commissioned in February 1809. The small quay on the south side of the headland at Porthdafarch was also available for use by sailing vessels at this time, on the rare occasions when Holyhead itself was not accessible due to bad weather.



Our survey of present-day items of interest should thus rightly commence with the period of rapid development of the port, consequent upon the arrival of Telford's Holyhead Road through from Shrewsbury and London, eliminating the hazardous Conwy and Menai ferries, in the mid-1820's.

The present car ferry terminal at Salt Island (253829) uses the former Admiralty Pier of 1821. The island is artificial and was named after the factory that operated hereabouts in the reign of Queen Anne, producing salt from seawater. The Doric Memorial Arch (picture right), constructed by Thomas Harrison in 1824, commemorates the unintended visit of King George IV three years previously, when his sailing was detained for five days by bad weather. The structure should thus in no way be regarded (as has been suggested) as a provincial counterpart of that later and more famous one at the other end of the railway line in Euston Station, London. The Holyhead version, strangely, carries its inscriptions in Latin and Welsh only. Close by, note also the substantial Customs House, the Port Offices of 1830, and the Stanley Sailors Hospital, still functioning as such.



Development was also proceeding apace on the east side of the harbour at this time. The dry dock known as the Old Government Dock, Turkey Shore (254826) was built of Mona limestone in 1825 for the maintenance of the Royal Mail Packet steamers, and both this and the second much larger one added later are still in regular use for work on the Sealink ferries of British Rail. The Italianate style stone building adjacent to the latter housed a steam engine for operating water pumps used to empty the dock, but this has now been superseded by an electrical installation. Nearby, another engine house contained until very recently the original 1827 Boulton and Watt steam-pumping engine of largely wooden construction that was still working in 1948. At this time it was the second oldest of its type in regular use and was preserved by the then British Transport Commission. It has since been removed, it is thought, for restoration and display in a Scottish museum. The engine has a single cylinder of 16 in diameter and 24 in stroke and it operated pumps capable of lifting 1,000 gallons per minute from the dock at 50 gallons per complete stroke of the beam. The original Cornish Boiler, pressed to 6 psi, worked unusually with seawater, and survived until 1912 before requiring replacement. "Skinners Memorial" (1832), overlooking this side of the harbour, commemorates the contribution of a greatly respected mail-boat captain towards contemporary improvements to the facilities for shipping at Holyhead.

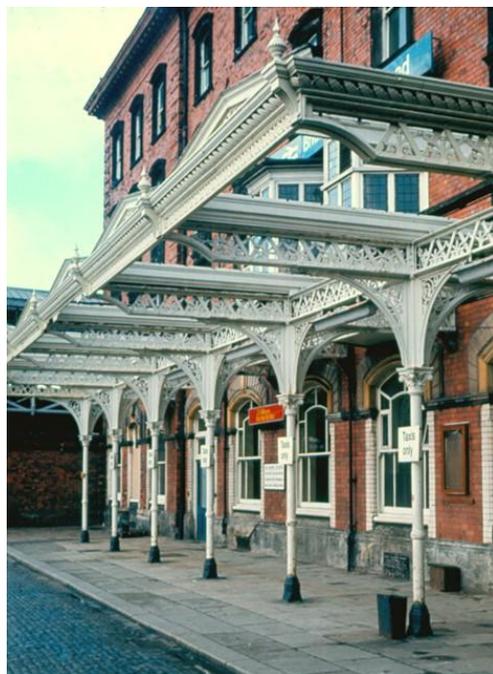
Although it might be assumed from the foregoing that the future of the port as a terminal for the Irish traffic was assured long before the coming of the railway, this was to be the subject of prolonged wrangling in the "railway mania" period of the 1840's. Three ports were considered for rail traffic development: Llandudno (quickly discarded on account of harbour difficulties), Holyhead, and Porthdinllaen on the west coast of Caernarfonshire. Both the two latter schemes included amongst their supporters influential politicians and landowners, but Holyhead suffered the apparent disadvantage of requiring a railway bridge over the Menai Straits, a feat considered by many at that time to be impossible. However, a Royal Commission pronounced in favour of Holyhead, which thus came to be served by rail from 1848, and joined to the rest of the mainland system by through trains across Stephenson's ingenious Britannia Tubular Bridge over the Straits, from March 1850.

Construction of the first Holyhead railway station had been started in 1845, but this lay somewhat short of the present site: the old building by the high wall, now used by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, is close to the original location (248818) and may date from this period.

The third of a mile extension to the present passenger terminus and harbour beyond was laid out by 1851, but all the structures now existing were erected as a third and final station during the 1870's and 1880's. The twin train sheds indicate a strong London and North Western Railway influence at an early date, when the Chester and Holyhead Company was still a nominally independent concern. The hotel between them, now part offices and part derelict, was finished circa 1880 and used for its original purpose until 1949. A splendidly decorated clock tower on the concourse facing the dock bears the legend: HOLYHEAD OLD HARBOUR EXTENSION Works commenced January 1875 Opened by HRH the Prince of Wales 17th June 1880.....



Gas lamps and the ornate iron columns to the station canopy (right) complete this pleasant survival into these modernized days of British Rail. It is unfortunate to have to record that for the last few years the whole station area has been under the threat of "redevelopment", minimized so far only by lack of the necessary funds. Wholesale destruction commenced however in December 1978 (pictures below).....



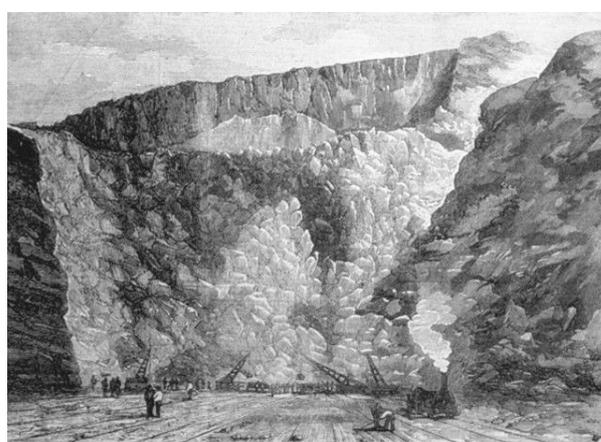
The area adjacent to the station bridge contains on the east side a distinctive Italianate-style pumping house which supplied water for station and engine purposes, and the remains of the large Black Bridge foundry next to the "Boston" public house.

On the west side of the railway are the large L&NWR signal box (photo right) and extensive covered mail-coach storage sheds by the site of the original station, with the town gasworks between them and the road. The offices and workshops of the latter are now occupied by Fairfield Garages Ltd. The buildings of the former Steam Mills in Kings Road, once used for grinding corn, survive in alternative commercial use.



Extensive railway sidings continue along the quays on both sides of the inner harbour beyond the passenger station. Those on the east, or Turkey Shore, side have been refurbished as a modern “Freightliner” Depot, but on the other side are the extensive workshops of the L&NWR marine department, laid out circa 1870-1880. The solid stone buildings with massive chimney stack form a good example of a compact Victorian engineering works, this one albeit lavishly capitalized by a large and wealthy company. Maintenance of a different and unusual kind is still carried out at the Trinity House depot for buoys at Newry Beach (245833) where many and diverse examples from all around our western shores are brought for periodic overhaul.

Holyhead Breakwater, a solid stone arm jutting 1½ miles out into the bay, was constructed over a period of twenty-five years from 1848 to 1873, to enlarge and further protect the usable harbour area. It possesses its own railway system, originally laid out by the contractors J & C Rigby and having a distinctive history. Starting life as a 7 ft gauge line, it was first used to convey stone from the quarry on Holyhead Mountain for the construction of the jetty.....



On completion, the railway was taken over by the Board of Trade for maintenance purposes, and the quarry was subsequently developed by William Wild and Sons as a silica brickworks from 1902. The broad-gauge track was used until conversion to standard gauge in 1913 (some 21 years after the demise of its more famous counterpart, Brunel’s Great Western Railway) but the old system was not finally removed for another twenty years. One of the original broad gauge locomotives, “Prince Albert” of 1852, which was used to haul the Royal Train to the inauguration ceremony, survived derelict until 1945 but somehow narrowly escaped preservation: another example was sold, going to

Brazil in 1872 and was rumoured to exist very recently; perhaps it might yet be found and brought back home.

The present road past Newry Beach to the start of the breakwater at Soldier's Point lies on the course of a 7 ft gauge rail connection to Holyhead Station; bridges and stretches of embankment will be noticed.

The engine shed (236836; to the left in our picture) is still used by British Railways to house two small diesel shunting locomotives, although now completely cut off from the rest of the national railway network. A short length of broad gauge track survives set in the floor of the building.

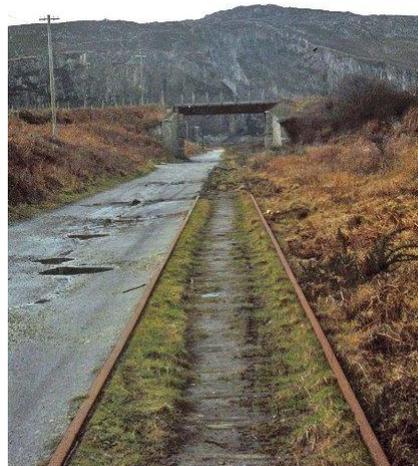
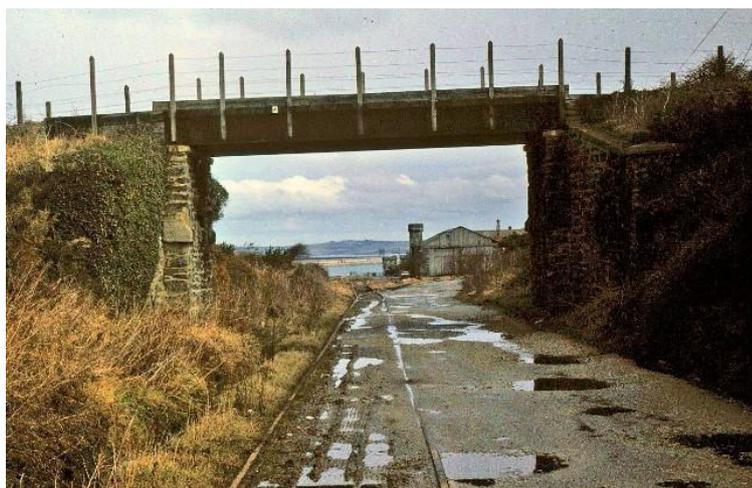


The standard gauge railway remains intact from the quarry environs, past the shed to the end of the breakwater, a total distance of about two miles, with three passing loops along the length of the jetty. Nowadays only one track is in use, the former upper level line being reduced to one rail and traversed by an unusual split-level gantry crane whose other wheels run along a third rail at the edge of the lower deck.....



At the far end of the breakwater a plaque records the history of the construction and the names of the engineers and contractors involved on this lengthy assignment, for some the best part of a life's work. The lighthouse has not been manned since 1962 but still contains the original brass clockwork machinery installed to drive the lamp rotation mechanism in 1873.

Going back towards the silica quarry from the engine shed, the railway no longer appears much used (photos below, courtesy of David Mills), and the clay workings and brickyard are now totally derelict. Note the interesting stone building with cast-iron window frames (227833), kilns with underground flues and stack, and the narrow gauge railway running over clay hoppers. The special wagons for carrying stacked bricks were designed to be run right inside the kilns with their load for firing. The workshop contains an anvil and forge, also the cast-iron bed and crank of a horizontal engine. This was supplied with steam from the large Lancashire boiler bearing the name Hawksley, Wild and Co. Sheffield (an associate company), and another boiler of the Cornish type is to be seen supported within the roof members. Water for these boilers was drawn from a nearby lagoon by means of a small steam pump which is still in situ.



Away from the town and harbour, there are a number of other miscellaneous items of interest around Holy Island. Of the windmills, Stanley Mill at Trearddur Bay (266789), built 1826, was the last to work in the whole of Wales and the West Country, but has now been converted to a private dwelling with no machinery remaining. It ceased operation in 1934 and was smashed beyond repair during a gale in November 1938, the cast iron main shaft being snapped. George's Mill or Melin-yr-Ogof, Kingsland (249811) is however the only one in Anglesey which still contains most of its internal machinery in reasonable condition (but not the cap or sails). Unfortunately it has also now been the subject of a planning application for conversion and may not survive much longer.

There were until 1870 three or four tide mills in use for grinding corn on the shores of the "inland sea" between Holy Island and the Anglesey mainland. These became largely disused after construction of the Stanley embankment in 1822 which drastically modified the availability of their water supply. Little evidence of them now survives, but the mill dam at Felin Wen is still partially intact (297771). The mile-long embankment was engineered by Telford to carry his Holyhead Road (A5) to its final destination, and the railway line also accompanied it across to Holy Island several years later. The contemporary tollhouse at the west end has been dismantled and re-erected as part of road alterations, on a new site nearby. This was necessary as a result of construction of the giant and ugly Rio Tinto / BICC aluminium smelter at Penrhos in 1972. A reminder of earlier industry hereabouts is provided by the solitary grindstone on the summit of the White Arch, Penrhos Bay, for here and elsewhere locally the weathered Holyhead quartzite was once worked for china clay, the product being taken away directly by boat.

Keith A. Jagers    November 1978

## Updates - January 2012

A new footbridge was installed across to the **South Stack lighthouse** in 1997; the light is now operated remotely, and the site is open for tours in the summer season.

The Admiralty Quay at Holyhead is now the main road-haulage freight terminal for Ireland. The **Doric Arch, Port Office and Customs House** all survive as listed structures, but lie within the customs restricted zone, thus not accessible to the general public except by prior arrangement. The **Stanley Sailor's Hospital** closed in 1996 and was demolished to provide additional lorry parking space in this area.

The **Old Government Dock** on the east side of the harbour is now used as the main car and coach ferry terminal; the rail Freightliner depot was closed by 1993 and all tracks were then removed. The **large dry dock** was filled in with rock, sand and concrete to provide an additional parking area; the massive corroded steel gate could not be moved, so was buried in situ. The Boulton & Watt **pumping engine house** is undergoing restoration, but the current location of the historic engine formerly within is not known. The older, **small dry dock** on the north side of the quays was filled in many years ago. The **Skinner memorial** is a listed structure.

The A55 Expressway road runs into Holyhead on the south side of the main railway line, and has obliterated all traces of the **original station site, the mail coach sheds and the gasworks**. Strangely though, modern housing on Cleveland Avenue, a little to the west, carries the name "Yr Hen Orsaf" (the Old Station). The large L&NWR **signalbox** survives in use, beside the roundabout.

The **station hotel** was completely demolished, and replaced by a modern building in vaguely similar style. The elegant **clock tower** is listed, and was moved a few yards southwards to stand in the centre of a small roundabout in front. Of the two large **train sheds**, only the eastern one survives, and again is listed. The **pump house** beside the station road bridge was demolished many years ago to provide additional station car parking. The Boston public house still functions, but the site of **Black Bridge Foundry** behind it is now occupied by a supermarket and housing.

The **Steam Mills** site in King's Road opposite Cleveland Avenue was cleared, and the Holyhead Angling Club now occupies modern premises here.

The L&NWR **Marine Workshops** complex is a listed site, but within the restricted port area; the buildings may be seen by looking over the stone wall in Victoria Road, opposite Water Street.

The former **Trinity House** workshops and buoy depot complex is also listed, and is currently occupied by the RNLI and Trinity Marine yacht station. The old lifeboat station building to the east is now a small maritime museum.

The road towards the breakwater is still very clearly a former railway route, with its embankment and original under- and over-bridges. The **Breakwater** itself, together with its **Lighthouse, Railway, Locomotive shed, Brickworks and Quarry** sites are now collectively designated as the "Breakwater Park Conservation Area". The track between the engine shed and quarry was removed during 1979 and that on the pier became disused soon afterwards; stone needed for maintenance was then brought in by road lorries. The **engine shed** has been renovated as a storage warehouse and workshop for the conservation project. It is intended to eventually refurbish and relay the standard-gauge tracks on the pier and to the quarry; currently a "road train" service operates down the length of the breakwater during the summer months. An old 7ft gauge **locomotive** (though not the "Prince Albert") has been located in storage at Ponta Delgada Port Authority, Azores, and negotiations for its repatriation are ongoing.

There is now a good road right into the quarry area, with ample parking at the far end. A visitor interpretation centre is located here, and the former **brick kiln ruins, chimney and crusher mill** have been conserved. The latter contains a small museum of artefacts found during tidying up of the quarry site, with a set of 8 excellent information boards. A network of good footpaths is created in the workings, and it is intended to install a 15" gauge miniature railway here in due course.

The **Stanley Windmill** tower at Kingsland is a listed structure in private residential use. That at **Melin yr Ogof** is privately owned and cared for, but not open to public access; it still contains its internal machinery. The **Tide Mill** dam remains on the beach at Felin Wen are a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

The **toll house** at the western end of the Stanley Embankment was moved about 30 yards NNW from its original site and re-erected; it now functions as a pleasant tea-room. The **White Arch** ("Bwa Gwyn") headland with its former china clay workings remains a spectacular and popular walk, with sheer drops on either side! The location is near Rhoscolyn, at SH259762.