

E Bates & G Mitchell – near Ashey

Maintaining a railway was a 24-hour activity – so at 11pm on 6 December 1929, Southern Railway bridge inspector E Bates and bricklayer G Mitchell were at work.

With two colleagues they went to inspect a bridge crossing the railway between Ashey and Smallbrook Junction – on what's now the Isle of Wight Steam Railway.



Looking towards Ashey from Deacon's Lane overbridge. The runaway trolley would have come from the distance towards the photographer.

Isle of Wight Steam Railway Photographic Archive

They were using a trolley, a small non-powered 4-wheeled vehicle they pushed. It had no brakes, and it started to run away down the line towards Smallbrook Junction – moved faster by that night's stormy weather.

Mitchell was thrown off, injuring his arm and stomach. Bates jumped clear, injuring his head and legs. Both survived, though it hasn't been possible to find out any more about the men. It was recommended the trolley be fitted with brakes in the future!

The Railway Work, Life & Death project: revealing ordinary people's surprising stories

This leaflet looks at some of the thousands of ordinary people working on the Isle of Wight's railways in the steam era.

It is a collaboration between the Isle of Wight Steam Railway and Railway Work, Life & Death, a volunteer-driven social history project researching the lives and stories of British and Irish railway workers before 1939.

It does this via the accidents they had – and the records they left behind. Often it's the only way to find out about these people. The project's volunteers have created a free database of over 115,000 railway workers for you to explore.

The project is a collaboration between the University of Portsmouth, National Railway Museum and Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick. This leaflet was funded by the University of Portsmouth's Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Scan the QR code to find out more about the workers in this leaflet, at the Railway Work, Life & Death project website.



www.railwayworkeraccidents.port.ac.uk



railwayworkeraccidents@gmail.com



[RailwayWorkLifeAndDeath/](https://www.facebook.com/RailwayWorkLifeAndDeath/)



[@RWLDproject](https://twitter.com/RWLDproject)



[@rwldproject.bsky.social](https://www.bsky.social/rwldproject)



ISLE OF WIGHT STEAM RAILWAY



**Staff & work on the Isle of
Wight's railways before 1939**

Yarmouth station, c.1900

Isle of Wight Steam Railway Photographic Archive



UNIVERSITY
OF WARWICK

RAILWAY
MUSEUM



Robert White – Yarmouth

Robert White was connected to Yarmouth throughout his life. He was born there in 1867, and after time working as a carpenter, he joined the railway.

By 1901 he was Yarmouth's station master. As this was a relatively small station, with light traffic, it didn't have a big station staff. Even as station master, Robert was actively involved in the daily working of the station.



Robert White, right, at Yarmouth in approximately 1900.
Isle of Wight Steam Railway Photographic Archive

On 5 February 1901, Robert was coupling (joining together) two wagons. He tried to go under the wagon buffers (shock absorbers), but his leg was caught and severely injured by the wagon's wheels. He hadn't been given the proper tools to do the job.

It looks like this ended his railway career; in 1911 he was a gardener, and in 1921 he was Yarmouth's pier master. He died in 1937.

Elsie Knapp – Newport

Women worked on Britain's railways from the earliest days – usually in roles seen as 'appropriate.' The First World War opened new opportunities and expanded some existing ones – including carriage cleaning.



Women employed on the Island's railways as painters during World War Two.
Isle of Wight Steam Railway Photographic Archive

Born in Newport in 1889, Elsie James married Henry Knapp in 1909. She joined the Isle of Wight Central Railway as a carriage cleaner during World War One. She was one of at least 11 women on the Island to join the railways at this time; they also joined the National Union of Railwaymen.

On 29 January 1919 Elsie sprained her ankle at work. She was off work until 10 March 1919; whilst off, she received 19 shillings and 2 pence per week in compensation.

Sadly Elsie's husband, Henry, died in 1917. Elsie stayed as a carriage cleaner until at least 1939, a relatively long career for a railwaywoman. She died in 1983.

Albert Shepherd – Ryde

Whilst lots of the Island's railway system before 1923 was run by Island-based railway companies, Ryde was different. The section of railway from Ryde Pier Head to St John's Road was run by the mainland companies responsible for Portsmouth's railways.

Albert Shepherd joined the railway at Ryde in 1899 as a porter. Over the years he also worked as a shunter (someone responsible for joining and uncoupling railway vehicles).

It was in this role that, on 4 December 1910, he had an accident at Ryde Pier Head. While coaches were being moved he slipped and was hit by a coach footstep, injuring his hip. His employer, the London & South Western and London, Brighton & South Coast Joint Railway, was criticised for the unsafe conditions which led to the accident.

Albert's time with the railway ended under a cloud: in 1914 he was convicted of theft and lost his job. He later found work as a labourer; in 1939 he was a hotel porter.



Ryde Pier Head, c.1910.
Isle of Wight Steam Railway Photographic Archive