

The Railway Companies, Steam Packets and Tourism

For centuries before the advent of the steam engine, visitors to Guernsey had been transported by wooden sailing vessel.



Passengers disembarking onto the Castle Cornet Breakwater, St. Peter Port, Guernsey. Early 19th Century.

With the construction of the first steamships at the beginning of the 1800s the possibility of fast passenger links with the islands started to become a reality. Initially steamship services for both passengers and cargo were provided by independent operators who owned or chartered individual vessels. However, transport developments on the mainland at around this time prompted significant and rapid changes to the whole Cross-Channel service. The factor that proved to be of most significance was the railways.

The railway line being built by **London & South Western Railways (L & SWR)** reached Southampton on **11th May 1840** and ensured that the port would be the



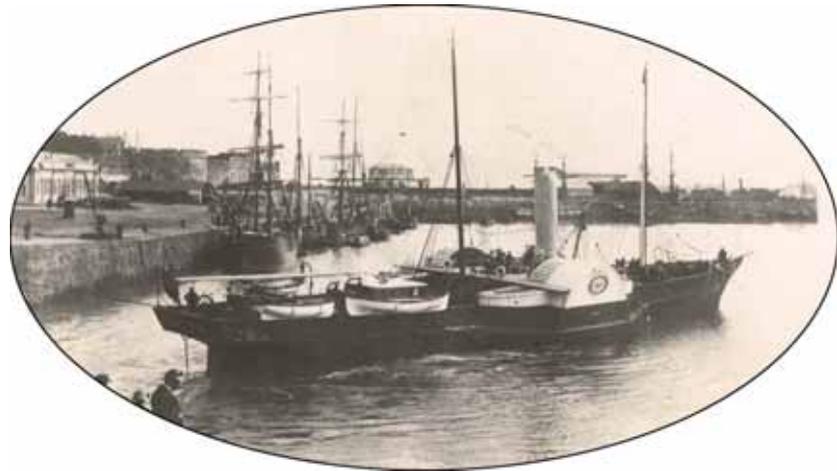
Rail travel in the early 19th Century.

primary choice for travellers going to the SW of England. In addition the railway line connection meant that the access to not only the markets in London, but also to other areas of the mainland was extremely good and a great deal faster than it had been previously. By the end of **1841 L & SWR** was beginning to view the independent packet steamers operating out of Southampton as an extension of the railway itself. Unfortunately due to

the private members Railway Act the railway was not permitted to operate its' own steamships. The company found a way around this by establishing the **South Western Steam Packet Co.** to run a steamship operation on its behalf. The directors of **L & SWR** then proceeded to 'lend' their subsidiary company £20,000 to "put the services in proper order".

On 17th November 1835 a prospectus was published for the formation of "**The South of England Steam Navigation Co.**" which was to operate in competition with the **South Western Steam Packet Co.** out of Southampton for the Channel Islands' passenger and cargo traffic. In 1844 both these companies reached an agreement to operate a joint service from Southampton to the Channel Islands. However only 18 months later a newspaper article reported that "differences had occurred between the two companies" and they had both returned to solo operations. The truth behind the situation was that the **South Western Steam Packet Co.**, run by the railway, had been holding secret talks with the Post Office for the lucrative mail service contract to and from the islands. The fact that they were subsequently awarded the £2000 a year contract released them from any need for co-operation with the other company. With the continued financial backing of the powerful **L & SWR** and the mail contract the **South Western Steam Packet Co.** was able to purchase two new paddle steamers and expand and strengthen its' operations. This consolidation of its operation culminated in its merger, on 1st October 1846, with its rival **The South of England Steam Navigation Co.** The merger created a new company called **The New South Western Steam Packet Co.** However the operation was, once again, effectively a subsidiary of the

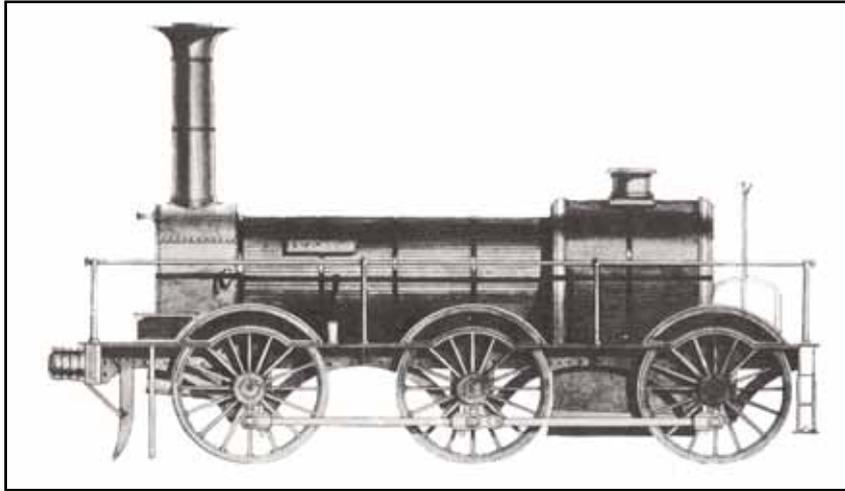
big railway company which was clearly demonstrated shortly afterwards when the railway company agreed to 'loan' them £50,000 to upgrade the 11 strong fleet and purchase 3 new paddle steamers for the C.I. routes.



The Alliance. L & SWR. 1855.

These loans made to the steamship company led to most of the fleet being mortgaged to the railway company in November 1847 giving **L & SWR** a controlling interest in the steamship operation. The railway company had always maintained its' view that the cross-Channel routes from Southampton should be regarded as an extension of the service provided by the railway and to this end they presented a private bill to Parliament in 1848 to open and operate their own steamship services. This bill was passed on 14th August 1848 but was granted for a period of only 14 years. Immediately **L & SWR** sought a lease of **The New South Western Steam Packet Co.** which was granted on 18th February 1849 effectively making the railway the owners and operators of the steamship services. Once this was in place the railway company scrapped some of the older vessels, re-organised the operation and invested in overhauling and upgrading the remaining vessels on the routes.

In [January 1857](#) the rail line being built by the **Great Western Railway (GWR)** reached Weymouth and a whole new chapter of the cross channel steamship



Alligator Class Steam Locomotive. GWR. 1847.

story unfolded – competition. Because Weymouth was closer to the Channel Islands than Southampton, making the journey time shorter, many in the Channel Islands believed that steamship links to Weymouth would make better sense than the link to Southampton. To this

end, investors from Weymouth, Jersey and Guernsey created the “**Weymouth and Channel Islands Steam Packet Co.**” in [1857](#) which created direct competition for the Steam Packet operating on the Southampton route. Their first act was to charter two paddle steamers to operate the service between the Islands and Weymouth.

L & SWR answered this threat to the Southampton services by returning to Parliament to lobby for permanent steamship powers. These were granted to them on [16th August 1860](#). On [30th June 1862](#) the railway company took over the **New South Western Steam Navigation Co.** and was finally able to bring the cross channel steamship services under the full control of the **L & SWR**. The direct backing of the powerful railway company initiated a huge expansion and development of the Southampton port in terms of both passenger services and cargo traffic. **L & SWR** began an investment program to improve both the ships and the services. On [1st January 1870](#) the service from Southampton to the Channel Islands was increased from running 3 times a week to running daily.

GWR began providing financial support for the steamship company operating out of Weymouth in order that its services might be maintained in direct competition to the Southampton service which had the backing of **L & SWR**. However, **GWR** had much the same view on the steamship services as their rivals in Southampton and, in [1871](#), they too applied to Parliament for steamship powers – these were granted the same year. At this point the competition between the two steamship operations was very uneven. Because **L & SWR** had been running its own operation for 10 years they had already begun introducing the modern, faster screw steamers onto the routes. The **Weymouth and Channel Islands Steam Packet Co.**, having less money behind them, were still using paddle steamers. In [1889](#) a

decision was taken by **GWR**



The Gazelle. GWR. Built 1889.

to move towards resolving the situation and to this end they stopped any financial assistance they had been supplying to the steamship company. This inevitably led to the demise of the Steam Packet Co. and it folded in June of the same year. The collapse of the steamship company left **GWR** free to concentrate their resources on running their own steamship operation out of Weymouth. The railway company ordered three new fast screw steamers for the route, the *Lynx*, *Antelope* and *Gazelle* and competition with Southampton began in earnest.

GWR made such an impression on the cross channel traffic with its inauguration into the business that it reduced **L & SWR**'s previous 3:1 domination of the Cross Channel traffic to a 1:1 ratio in a period of only 2 months. **GWR**'s new powerful vessels caught up and overtook ships operating out of Southampton on a regular basis.

Not to be outdone, the following year, **L & SWR** ordered 3 new vessels of their own, the *Frederica*, *Lydia* and *Stella* which could reach speeds of 19½ knots under forced draught. Whilst the technology of the new vessels helped **L & SWR** to regain its lead with regards to journey times the presence of **GWR**'s steamships on the cross channel routes kept the competition neck-and-neck.



The Frederica. L & SWR. Built 1890.

GWR purchased one more modern screw steamer, the *Ibex*, in 1891.

L & SWR meanwhile turned its attention to the port of Southampton itself and in 1892 purchased the **Southampton Docks Company** and then proceeded to begin an investment program that initiated a massive expansion of the port's passenger and cargo handling facilities.



Passengers on deck during a speedy crossing. 1885.

GWR purchased two new vessels in 1897 for the daylight service to the Channel Islands. These ships, *Reindeer* and *Roebuck*, were built by the Naval Construction and Armaments Co. Ltd. and went on to become the biggest and fastest ships on the Channel Island routes at that time. It was during this decade, from 1890 to 1900, that both companies began what many regard as a period of out and out "racing" in order to try and provide a faster passenger and cargo service. Despite denials from both companies it was widely believed that captains of vessels in the rival companies were encouraged to push their vessels to the limit in order to overhaul the competition and make harbour early to secure the first berth and make

the quickest turn-around time. Unfortunately this “unofficial” practice inevitably led to risks being taken at sea and safety margins being compromised. Within these two fleets alone, it should be noted that in the 30 years prior to 1890 only 2 vessels were wrecked and in the 30 year period after 1900 only 2 vessels were wrecked but within that 10 year period the fleet vessels of **GWR** and **L & SWR** endured 6 wrecks (an increase of almost 900% on the statistical average). It was only after the *Stella* disaster and the 2nd wreck that befell the *ibex* that the two companies came to their senses and called a halt to the racing practices. The two companies agreed to operate an amalgamated steamer service within which each company would operate 3 services a week to the Channel Islands during the winter and then during the summer



The Frederica. Circa 1890s. Loading passengers & produce. St. Peter Port, Guernsey.

GWR would run daylight services and **L & SWR** would run overnight and return by day. Up until this point passenger vessels had also carried cargo and it was a common sight to see passenger steamers with their aft decks stacked with hundreds of baskets of tomatoes and other produce. But both companies began to realise that they needed ships that were dedicated to cargo alone. **L & SWR** had the “*Ada*” built to carry cargo and she ran trials in 1905 and proceeded to visit Guernsey and ship some of the tomato traffic. In 1908 **GWR** converted the “*Gazelle*” to a cargo carrier.