

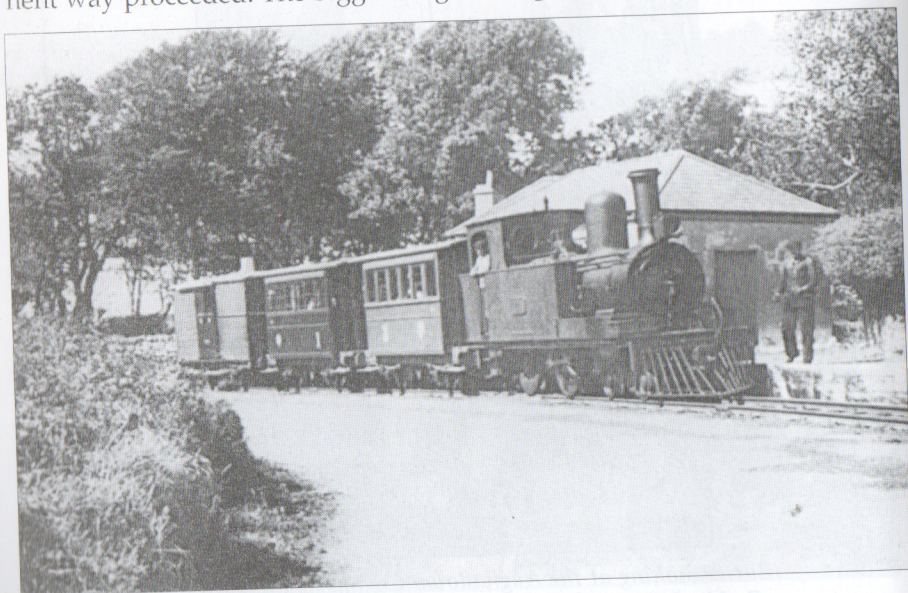
This article is an extract from the Cork Holly Bough 1952 and recounts the passing of the Schull and Skibbereen Railway

Adieu to an Old Friend

SOON now an old friend will have departed from the scene in West Cork: CIE has applied to the Transport Tribunal for permission to abandon permanently the little railway which for sixty years operated between Schull and Skibbereen. Though few may deny that it has had its day and outlived its usefulness, yet there will be many, especially amongst the older generation, to regret its passing.

The line as built was but a part of a very ambitious plan envisaged by the first directors of the company for a narrow-gauge system that would link Schull, Ballydehob, Skibbereen, Union Hall and Glandore. The promoters were the "West Carbery Tramway and Light Railway Company" the principal sponsor being Mr. T. Downes, Solicitor, Skibbereen. They availed of the Irish Tramways Act of 1883 to proceed with the project, and the contractors for the construction of the railway were Messrs. M'Eone, Robinson and Avigdor.

Throughout 1885 and 1886 the work of preparing and laying the permanent way proceeded. The biggest engineering task involved was the build-



The 1.45 p.m. ex-Schull arrives at Hollyhill. 1938

ing of the big stone viaduct over an inlet of Roaring Water Bay, at Ballydehob. For most of its 15½ miles length the track runs along the side of the public highway, but there are a few lengthy deviations where the line becomes a real "railway" and not a tramway.

The first public service on the line was a livestock train which serviced Ballydehob cattle fair on September 6th, 1886. There was great excitement and one newspaper in its enthusiasm reported that

as a result of the rail transport from the fair farmers secured a much better price for their animals. The line was opened throughout for passenger services three days later on September 9th, 1886.

Alas! for the directors' roseate hopes. Rarely has such an unfortunate railway operated in Ireland. Within a few days of the opening the line had to close due to mechanical faults in the engines and unsatisfactory construction of the track. Then services resumed, but in the following year the line again had to close down, this time for several months. However, by 1889 most of the engineering defects had been righted.

The line never paid its way. Before very long the directors – (who needless to say, had given up all hopes of extending the system) – had, by force of financial consideration, to hand over the concern to a committee of management of the Grand Jury (later the Cork County Council). It was estimated that in the first 30 years of its life (from 1886 to 1916) it incurred a debit balance of £39,212.

Yet through all the years it performed a useful public service. The people who used it were not as speed-conscious as the present generation, and they were quite content with their peaceful 12 mph journey along through the little stations and roadside "halts" at Woodlands, Ballydehob, Kilcoe, Hollyhill, Church Cross and Newcourt. The Skibbereen terminus is actually in the station premises of the main Cork-Baltimore line, and on the home-

Schull & Skibbereen Tramways.
BUILDING STONE WANTED.
 The Contractors are prepared to accept Tenders for the delivery of the following quantities of
GOOD BUILDING STONE,
 AT THE UNDERMENTIONED PLACES:
 Two Miles West of Skibbereen, near the Watering-Place, 80 Cubic Yards.
 On the South side of the "Box Road," about 500 Yards West of New Court, 200 Cubic Yards.
 On the road near Keel Bridge, 80 Cubic Yards.
 On the Bantry Road, close to Meen Bridge, and North Side of Main Road, 250 Cubic Yards.
 Measurement and Payment Fortnightly. The Stone to be of sufficiently good quality for Building Bridges and Culverts. Tenders stating the quantity offered, the Price, and the time required, to be sent at once in writing to—
MCKEONE, ROBINSON & AVIGDOR,
 GLENCURRIGH, SKIBBEREEN.
 (922)

ward journey the Schull train had to perform a complicated reversing operation before emerging on to the public road.

Goods traffic was fairly heavy in the days before motor lorries turned the roads into dusty, dangerous thoroughfares. In the 1890's a short branch line was built from near Schull terminus to the harbour pier, and there cargoes of fish, grain, coal and sand were entrained for all parts of Carbery and West Cork.

The railway was not spared in the dark days of the Black and Tan fighting and the Civil War. Engines were derailed and tracks ripped up, and it was a very unprofitable undertaking which was absorbed into the new G. S.R. in the big railway amalgamation of 1924. For another 20 years, however, it lived on, but now buses running direct from Cork to Schull were racing disdainfully past the trains on the hills around Ballydehob. Its end was drawing near.

The line closed during the fuel emergency of 1944. It was reopened in December 1945, and operated for another thirteen months, being finally closed early in 1947. No trains have run on the line since then. Near Schull the track is still in very good condition, but at the Skibbereen end whole lengths of it are buried under gorse, bushes and briars.

Of the line's interesting stock of engines three are still in Skibbereen, two in a shed and one out under the weather. The oldest is No.4 ("Erin") which was built no less than 64 years ago, and worked right up to the closing of the line. It was the first engine in Ireland or England to have a Belpaire firebox - a fitting generally adopted in locomotives later. Then there is the "Kent", with its name plate still attached. This was built in Bristol in 1914. The third is the No. 6S which was a link with the old Cork and Muskerry Light Railway, where it worked from 1893 to 1934, before being transferred to Skibbereen in 1938.

It is quite obvious that there will be little serious opposition to the abandonment of the line. Unlike other threatened branches of the C.I.E. system where a good case for retention is being made, nobody can deny that the Schull and Skibbereen line has outlived its usefulness. Yet its passing will be regretted by many who have pleasant memories of journeys along the verdant banks of the Ilan, by the shores of rugged Roaringwater, and under the slopes of towering Mount Gabriel.