



Dean Crossing and the new Whitwell Road



If you were an inhabitant of Whitwell in the 1890s, this was the decade when the village's local world changed fundamentally. The sleepy farming community was soon finding its space-time horizons transformed in a way that the arrival of the Penny Post had begun fifty years before. In June 1890, the new Whitwell road, linking the village with Ventnor, was opened. It had first been mooted as early as 1877, but it was 1889 before a tender was finally accepted of £1779, with local estate owners donating the land. The new road ran mostly on a level, skirting the top of the downs eastward to Gills Cliff, following a route that we are all familiar with today. It thereby avoided the difficult descent (or ascent) via what was then called Whitwell Shute (now St. Lawrence Shute). The Ventnor Local Board was unambiguous about the new road's benefits. It opened up a magnificent new piece of country for residents and for visitors. But it was also expected to facilitate the supply of agricultural and dairy produce from Whitwell into Ventnor. In fact, the *Isle of Wight Mercury* was not long in having to report that the road had been so much used by wheeled traffic that ruts almost a foot deep had started to appear as the winter of 1890 approached.

Seven years later, Whitwell had the good fortune to see the railway arrive in the village, as part of the Newport, Godshill and St. Lawrence Company's branch from Merstone. The line traversed the older part of the Whitwell Road at what became Dean crossing, seen in this picture taken in 1920 when there was a pedestrian bridge for those who had not the patience to await the passage of a train. The crossing-keeper's cottage that marks the site can still be seen today. It was another three years, though, before the railway line reached Ventnor proper, to complete Whitwell's new found accessibility. Unfortunately, the branch was never the success that its promoters hoped for, the anticipated through traffic from Cowes to Ventnor failing to materialise in any significant measure. But new road and railway still expanded the life-worlds of Whitwell's inhabitants, especially among younger age-groups. By the later 1930s, continental youth was even showing up in the village, attracted by the nearby youth hostel opened at the Hermitage from 1935, which became linked to the new International Youth Hostel Federation.

Today, this railway line is barely a distant memory, for it was closed 70 years back. The road, however, remains as a vital artery, the more so since the closure to all but pedestrian and cycle traffic of the road through the Undercliff in 2014.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre.



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The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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