

# The Closing of the Malta Railway

By A S Coase The Railway Magazine July 1934



First and third class train stationary in Hamrun station; headquarters and workshops on left

The growth of motor transport has compelled the closing down of the Malta Railway, of which a full account appeared in THE RAILWAY MAGAZINE for October, 1929. It was built in 1883 by a London registered company, whose prospectus, filed in the Malta Public Library, shows that, apart from the route actually completed, it was confidently anticipated that branch lines would be added down to the harbour and quayside and also round to Sliema, the favourite residential quarter. None of these branches was ever begun, and after some years of working difficulties the Government took over the line. It was reopened, after reconditioning, in 1892. The Malta Railway was 7.5 miles long, of metre gauge, and single-tracked except for passing loops at stations. It ran from just within the main gate (Porta Reale) of the capital, Valletta, into a tunnel 730 yds. long under the fortification, and beyond that was carried on up to the old capital, Citta Vecchia, 600 ft. above sea level. The history of the latter city goes back to 700 B.C., and few railways can have served a city of such antiquity. Few cities, too, bear in common use four separate names derived from successive occupations -Medina, the Arab title; Notabile, the title given by the King of Aragon; Citta Vecchia, the Italian for Old City; and Rabato, the adjoining town, from the Arabic name meaning suburb; the booking-clerk would receive requests for tickets to either of the four. The railway passed under this Citta Vecchia by a tunnel 600 yds. long to the Museum terminus, which served the Roman Villa Museum, and also the neighbouring Mtarfa Military Hospital and the Barracks.



Hamrun headquarters to-day; workshops and sidings on left, locomotive sheds on right. Note workmen's open-sided carriage

There were in all six stations and five halts on the line, and the journey took 35 min. There were only two semaphore signals on the line; telephone bells controlled the train movements and the points at the stations were hand-worked. No accident appears to have occurred during the life of the railway -an enviable record. There were nine 0-6-0 and 2-6-4 tank engines in all, supplied from England at various dates, seven of which were in service until the closing down, and 33 four-wheeled first and third class passenger coaches, weighing about 6 tons each, built at the Hamrun works, with some open-sided workmen's carriages. There was no goods traffic, but four trucks were built for transport of railway materials. In its heyday, the line carried approximately 2,000,000 passengers annually, at rates of 1d. per mile first class, and 1/2d. per mile third. The coaches were built to carry 24 or 28 persons each, and as they travelled in the rush hours with passengers tightly packed, both inside and outside, the hauling capacities of the engines up the grades of 1 in 40 and 1 in 60 were severely tested with a maximum load of twelve coaches.

At Hamrun station, the late headquarters, grass now grows high on the points and tracks, but the adjoining workshops are still being put to service as a Government engineering training centre. Hamrun station garden is still beautifully kept; indeed, the gardens at the stations were always a feature of note, being supplied with rainwater from the station roofs, stored in specially constructed sunken tanks. A fence across the line forms the barrier in one direction at Hamrun, and in the other the track has now been broken by the demolition of the picturesque bridge over the Sliema road, to allow the passage of double-deck motor buses. At Birchicara station all traces of the railway have disappeared; the level crossing has been removed and the station garden has been converted into a beautiful public garden. In conclusion, the writer's thanks are due to Mr. C. Rizzo, late Manager of the Malta Railway, for his courtesy in granting facilities to take the photographs reproduced.