

Part of Historic Environment Scotland



CANMORE

NATIONAL RECORD OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT



Archaeology InSites



◀ [Return to Archaeology InSites](#)

Wemyss Bay Railway Station and Pier - Inverclyde



The Allure of Steam

Perhaps it is something to do with the sensory experience of rail. The whistle blowing, smoke billowing out, the metallic strain of each cast component, the smell and feel of soot and coal. In any case, the steam train is guaranteed to excite as if in the presence of a wild animal. Rare as it is today, I inherited an enthusiasm for steam from my father who remembers the morning train to school some 65 years ago. Fundamental though steam was to our industry and economy, it was a role in the leisure industry that helped to take Scotland's workers away from the stresses and strains of a daily grind, and brought about the construction of some of the finest stations.

The curving, sinuous station at Wemyss Bay, on the Firth of Clyde, represents one of these gateways to leisure. From here hundreds of tourists from Glasgow and the rest of Scotland emerged onto the platforms and headed for the steamers to the island of Bute, 'doon the water'. The design is stunning. Captured from the air it still looks futuristic more than 110 years after construction. The way it melds delicate cast iron metalwork with massive columns and hundreds upon hundreds of tessellated panes of glass is enriched by the circular concourse, from where train platforms head west, and a gently curving and descending timber walkway that tempts one 'to the steamers'. Outside, the building creates a more bizarre chocolate box visage sporting numerous miniature gables and a fine 60ft clock tower.



An Engineering Marvel

The current building was constructed in 1903 and replaced an earlier station of 1865 which itself was a substantial Georgian building of two storeys. The original specification of the new building survives providing a huge amount of detail on each element of its construction. Sandstone was to come from local quarries and the slate from Ballachulish or Wales. All the steel and ironwork was to be made in Britain to ensure quality and it was to be coated in boiled linseed oil before four coats of paint were applied, to protect it from the sea air. While some materials were local, others were sourced from far afield for the same reasons of quality: white pine from the Baltic was used liberally while the best Quebec red pine was specified for timbers in contact with stone, where rot was more likely.

This detailed specification and unusual design were the work of two men; Donald Matheson, chief engineer of the Caledonian Railway; and James Miller, architect. Either with the Railway or working for his own practice, Miller designed nearly 70 railway stations in Scotland and the pair also worked together on Glasgow Central station, successfully combining engineering, aesthetics, passenger flow and economy. Their achievement at Wemyss Bay still functions well today after electrification in 1967 and a major restoration in 1994, informed by those detailed specifications of 90 years before.

The holidaymakers who disembarked at Wemyss Bay were often heading to the island of Bute, one of the lesser known and easier to reach gems in Scotland's island family. By the mid-1950s Bute was still attracting 400,000 visitors a year, though the number was to plummet over successive decades as international holidays and car journeys became more affordable. Nowadays Bute is witnessing something of a resurgence with restoration and improvement in Rothesay bringing it back to its heyday. An article in the Guardian newspaper describes it as 'the Scottish island that could just have it all', and the trip there by rail and sea from Glasgow is certainly part of its magic.

Sources :

Boyne, S, Hall, D and Gallagher, C 2000 'The Fall and Rise of Peripherality: Tourism and Restructuring on Bute' in Brown, F and Hall, D (eds) *Tourism in Peripheral Areas*, 101-113.

Clar, A J C 2001 *Caley to the Coast or Rothesay by Wemyss Bay*, Oakwood Press.

George Geddes, Archaeologist, Survey and Recording



<https://canmore.org.uk/site/68123/wemyss-bay-railway-station-and-pier>



#ArchInSites

Please be aware that this site may be on private land. For more information regarding access please consult the [Scottish Outdoor Access Code](#)



[Accessibility Policy](#)
[Buying Images](#)
[Cookie Policy](#)
[Legals](#)
[Glossary](#)
[Contact](#)
[MyCanmore](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[User Guide](#)



SUPPORTING
year of young people
bliadhna na h-òigridh
2018



HISTORIC
ENVIRONMENT
SCOTLAND

ÀRAINNEACHD
EACHDRAIDHEIL
ALBA

© Historic Environment Scotland. Scottish Charity No. SC045925