

TRAMS TO THE HILL OF HOWTH

1901 - 1959

DUBLIN AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Dublin at the turn of the century was a city of 350,000 people and was growing larger and expanding outwards. The middle classes were steadily moving in increasing numbers to the suburbs, in particular to the well-established townships of Clontarf, Drumcondra, Kilmainham and Rathmines. The once fashionable Georgian houses in the city were now filled with the poor who lived in desperate conditions rife with disease. Outside the city and its suburbs, rural life continued in County Dublin virtually undisturbed.

The introduction of new forms of public transportation, firstly of horse-drawn and then of electric trams, drew the city closer to the outer suburbs and towns, making them more accessible for both commuters and tourists.

“The value of tramways is now genuinely admitted; but as a boon to the poor citizens and their families who live in dark, noisome and often pestilential lanes and alleys, who have now but little chance of refreshing their eyes with the bloom of the country scenery; or invigorating their emaciated frames with the sweet breath of heaven in a pure ozonic atmosphere, tramways could not be too much praised.”

William L. Barrington, Managing Director of the Dublin Tramways Company

NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The earliest horse-drawn trams had started in Dublin in 1872 but tram operators were keen to look to other possibilities due to the cost of feed and bedding and the difficulty the animals had in negotiating steep inclines around the city. One of the first moves towards new technology was the steam-operated trams of the Dublin & Lucan Steam Tramway Company in the early 1880s. However, the tram operators had not factored in the opposition of the equine industry who vehemently lobbied against any changes to the tram system.

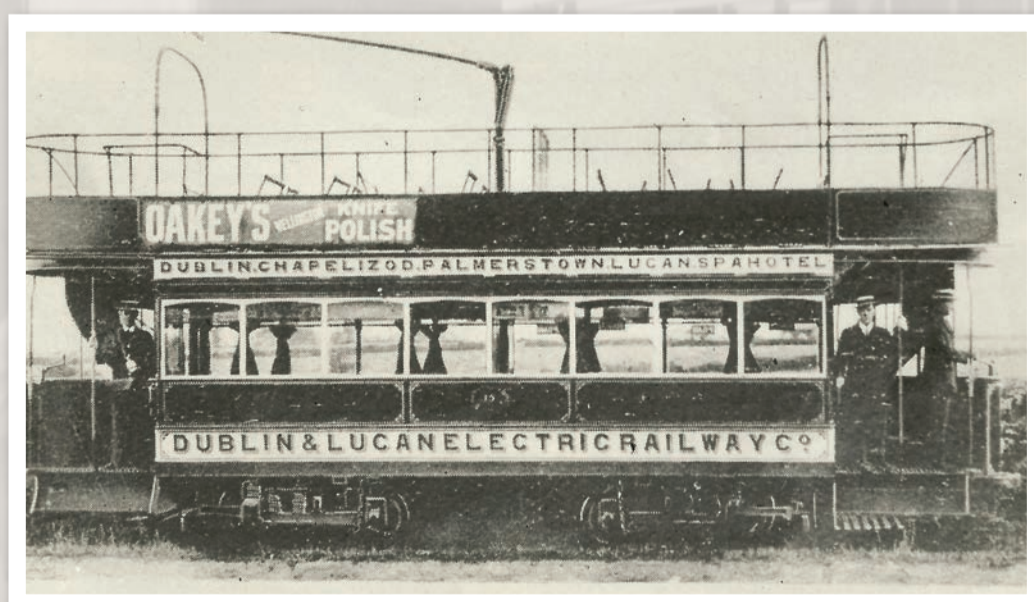
The world's first demonstration of electric tram technology had taken place at the Berlin Trade Fair of 1879 by Werner von Siemens. It did not take long for this technology to come to Ireland – the first electric tramway on the island was the Giant's Causeway line which opened in 1883.

Tramways in Dublin came to be dominated by one company, the Dublin United Tramways Company (DUTC) which was formed in 1881 by a merger of three smaller transport operators.

Although the DUTC had first considered converting their trams to electricity in 1887, much like the proposal for steam-power, electric trams in Dublin got off to an inauspicious start, mainly due to the reluctance of Dublin Corporation and its Lord Mayor to grant electric rights to the tram companies. The development of the tramways was tightly controlled by legislation and the local authorities. This was in addition to concerns from jarveys, local residents, those who feared there would be accidental electrocutions and even those who objected to the inevitable street clutter of overhead wires and poles. Finally, the DUTC also had to contend with other tram companies eager to challenge their monopoly.



Electric trams running along Grafton Street and College Green, Dublin.
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A Tramcar of the Dublin & Lucan Electric Railway Company which was in operation from 1900 until 1925.

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ELECTRIFYING DUBLIN

The first electrified line in the city was that to Dalkey, opened by the Dublin Southern District Company (DSDC) in 1896. The Corporation had looked more favourably on their plans as the company specifically noted their desire to cater for poorer areas of the city. This stood in stark contrast to the DUTC whose lines mainly catered for middle-class areas.

Spurred on by the benefits of increased speed, lower costs and greater passenger numbers, the DUTC pushed steadily ahead with their plans and their first tram line to be converted to electricity was that to Clontarf. In 1897, the horse tram sheds and stables on the seafront at Dollymount were replaced by a power station complete with 112ft high chimney. This station structure still stands, albeit now subsumed into the present CIE bus garage. The first electric tram to Dollymount operated from Nelson's Pillar the following March. The city then went through many years of disruptive works as electrification took place, with existing lines converted and new lines opened.

EARLY TRANSPORT IN HOWTH

In the 19th century, the peninsula of Howth was a quiet, rural place known predominantly as a fishing village. Its first major commercial development was the construction of the harbour and its two piers in 1807. The harbour would only briefly have the packet mail service from Holyhead before it was moved to the newer harbour in Dun Laoghaire (then Kingstown) which didn't have the same problem with silting and mail coaches being robbed in the 'badlands' of Sutton.

The next major development in Howth was the opening of a branch line from the Dublin & Drogheda Railway in 1847. The line does not seem to have ever been particularly busy, used mainly by a small number of tourists and residents, much to the undoubted chagrin of the railway company. From the 1860s, the only transport around the Hill itself was by horse-drawn char-a-banc. However, this did not prove practical due to the incline. With electric trams becoming a reality in the 1890s, the scenic Hill of Howth offered up the potential for both increased tourism and residential development and this was the main impetus for what became a race to build an electric tramway on its Hill.

PROPOSALS FOR THE HILL TRAMWAY

The first proposal for an electric tram around the Hill of Howth came from the Clontarf and Hill of Howth Tramway Company (CHHTC), who in 1894 announced their intention to open a line linking the Great Northern Railway (GNR) station at Howth to the Summit. The company suggested that the line would allow for the development of Howth as a health resort and the scheme was quickly given conditional approval by the County of Dublin Grand Jury. The GNR were concerned that another company were encroaching on what had hitherto been their territory, and this was heightened when the CHHTC added a further proposal to run a line from Sutton Station to the Summit. The GNR put forward legal objections to the CHHTC proposing a line which linked the two GNR stations and presented their own competing proposal. A legal tussle ensued but the GNR's complaint was upheld.

The CHHTC instead had to settle for an electric tram line which joined that of the DUTC at Clontarf and went as far as Howth Railway Station. It opened in July 1900 and was initially run as a separate service with the tram staff changing over at Dollymount. Even the construction of this line was not without controversy as Lord Ardilaun, the owner of St Anne's Estate in Raheny, was unhappy with the tram line passing under the wall of the demesne as it travelled along the coast, alleging that it interfered with the privacy of his estate. The CHHTC line was eventually brought under the umbrella of the DUTC.



An undated advertisement for the Hill of Howth Tramway.
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STARTING CONSTRUCTION

By 1897, the GNR were free to begin work on the Hill of Howth tramway. The tender for the civil engineering and permanent way was won by Alexander Ward of Dublin. It was for the most part a single line with some passing loops. However, its construction was no easy task. Although the tramway was only 5 1/4 miles in length, the incline presented some difficult engineering challenges. Delays in the construction and with the acquisition of land meant that the line itself was not ready until 1901.

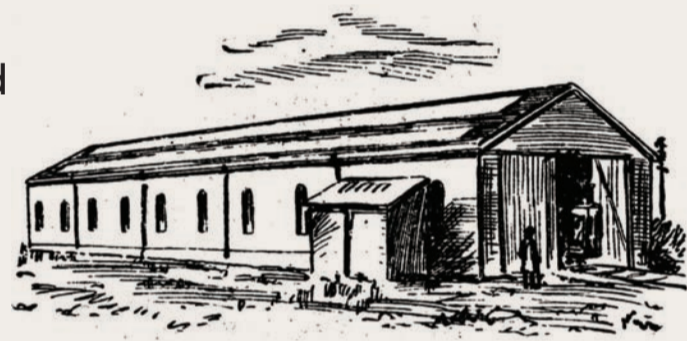
SUTTON POWER STATION

In November 1898, the GNR had tendered for the construction of a power station which was to be erected in Sutton on a piece of land west of Sutton Railway Station. The contract was won by Messrs. J & P Good of Great Brunswick Street. The power station had three dynamos of 250 horse-power alongside a boiler house containing three enormous twin-furnace boilers which measured 28ft x 10ft. Only two boilers were required to run the entire system, ensuring the line could still operate if one failed. It also contained a switch-board which was marvelled at in the newspapers - "The most striking feature of the powerhouse is the switchboard. The rows and rows of switches ... almost bewilder one unacquainted with the mysteries of electricity as supplied to rollingstock." A 120ft tall red brick chimney was also constructed. Being almost the same height as Nelson's Pillar, it was a distinctive landmark until its demolition in 1966.

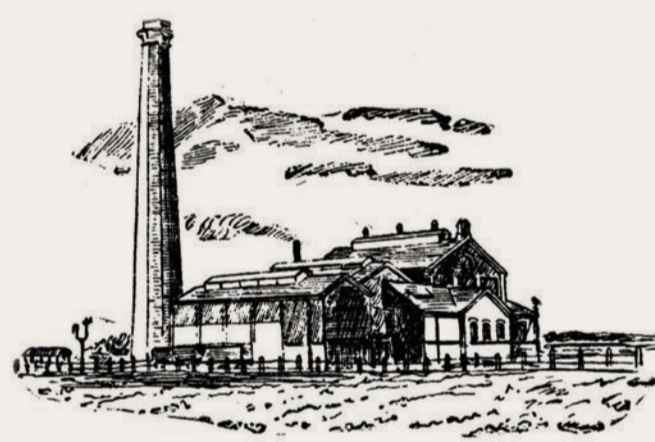
Interestingly, the tramway supplied electricity to domestic customers as well as some of the local hotels, including the St Lawrence and Claremont. This was in addition to providing it to the Howth Urban District Council for public lighting - tramway poles often had a dual use as lamp posts.

The other main building on this site was the carriage shed for the trams which was 200ft long and 42ft wide. It was mainly wooden with a large glass roof. The trams could be inspected via pits at either end of the shed. All the buildings at the power station were instantly recognisable as GNR buildings by their fine red brick construction with yellow brick surrounds on doors and windows.

By the 1930s, looking at the number of repairs then required to the power station and its equipment, the company realised it was cheaper to buy current from the ESB rather than to generate it themselves using steam and so in 1934 the power-station and battery house were closed and dismantled with the electrical equipment sold off. The power station later became part of Parsons paint factory and was burned down in 2009. There is now a modern development of houses known as Dargan's Way on the site.



The carriage shed at Sutton.
A view of the power station at Sutton.
Courtesy of the Irish Newspaper Archives



WORKERS' HOUSING

Jobs with the transport companies in Dublin were sought-after and highly regarded whether it was as a tram driver on the DUTC or a fitter in the Inchicore Works of the Great Southern and Western Railway Company. Pockets of transport workers can be found living close to their places of employment all over the city near the Inchicore Works, Broadstone Station, Clontarf Depot and indeed, in Sutton with the advent of the trams to Howth.

Just further west from the power station at Sutton is Railway Avenue, home to some of the worker's housing constructed by the GNR for the Hill of Howth tramway staff. Four large two-storey, red-brick Edwardian homes were constructed for some of the more senior and professional staff. In the 1911 census we find the Chief Clerk Robert Richie Best and electrical engineers James Alexander, Arthur William Whieldon and William Raine Gray all living in these fine homes.

Just behind these houses, the GNR constructed eight small cottages for other tramway workers. All along the Baldoyle Road in 1911 can be found motor-men (or tram drivers), conductors, signal men, engine fitters and workers from the power house including the stoker, stationary engine driver and caretaker. Other tram workers lived around the hill and in Howth town.

As the first trams were horse-drawn, there is a theory that it was mainly country people rather than Dubliners who were employed by the tram companies and that this trend continued even after their electrification. Looking at those tram staff living around Sutton and Howth this would seem to be correct as the vast majority were born outside the county. That said, the Hill of Howth tramway boasted many local men as staff.

THE TRAMS

For the opening of the tramway in 1901, eight double-deck, open-top tramcars were ordered from the Falcon Car Works in Loughborough, England. It was reported that they were constructed "on the most modern ideas and with the latest inventions" including an instrument which could regulate the brake-power. The trams had covered platforms for the driver and conductor, offering them some protection from the elements. Each tramcar could accommodate 30 passengers in the lower deck with 37 more on the top. Due to the proximity of vegetation on the line it was necessary for the company to put wire netting on the upper decks to protect the passengers. One of the most notable features of these trams was the 37 reversible garden seats on the top deck. Two more trams, nos. 9 and 10, were ordered in 1902 from Milnes of Birkenhead, England. These were of a different design and able to carry more passengers. The final tram, No. 11, was a service car with a high platform on one end which was used when undertaking maintenance and repairs to the overhead lines.

The original tram livery was a deep claret and ivory with 'Great Northern Railway' picked out in gold lettering. During World War I, the exterior lamps on the trams were fitted with blue

bulbs to comply with blackout measures. Additionally, due to a lack of paint at the time, the trams were sanded and varnished with them sporting this grained mahogany livery until the 1930s when they were painted Oxford blue and cream.

The tramcars were well maintained and renovated over the decades and additional trams to the original eleven were never ordered. Eight of these original tramcars were still operating in the final days of the line in 1959.



Hill of Howth Tramcar No.5 at the Carriage Shed in Sutton.
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An interior view of the Sutton Carriage Shed showing Works Tramcar No.11 in the foreground.
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Hill of Howth Tramcar No.3 at Sutton Railway Station.
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OPENING OF THE HILL OF HOWTH LINE

Newspaper advertisements placed by the GNR in June 1901 declared 'This triumph is now open to the public'. The line was indeed finally opened in 1901 albeit in two sections. The section from Sutton Station to the Summit opened on 17th June 1901 eventually extending all the way around the Hill to Howth Station later that summer on 1st Aug 1901. For the summer season, the trams ran at roughly 15-minute intervals from 7.15am until 8.30pm, meeting the Dublin trains at Sutton and Howth. Tourists could bring their bicycles for an additional 3d and locals were catered for with penny stages for those only going a short distance.

By early 1902, it was reported that tourist traffic during the first summer had not been as busy as expected and that numbers travelling during the winter months were very few. Great hope was placed on attracting more passengers with the construction of the Summit tea house and its music programme.

"The magnificent scenery of the Hill of Howth has been oftentimes spoken of and written about, but not until now, when the enterprise of the Great Northern Railway Company is fast realizing the dream of the tourist and excursionist, will the masses of the people have an opportunity of appreciating it at first hand and realising the gorgeous panorama of land and sea view which it presents."

Dublin Evening Mail, 22 March 1901

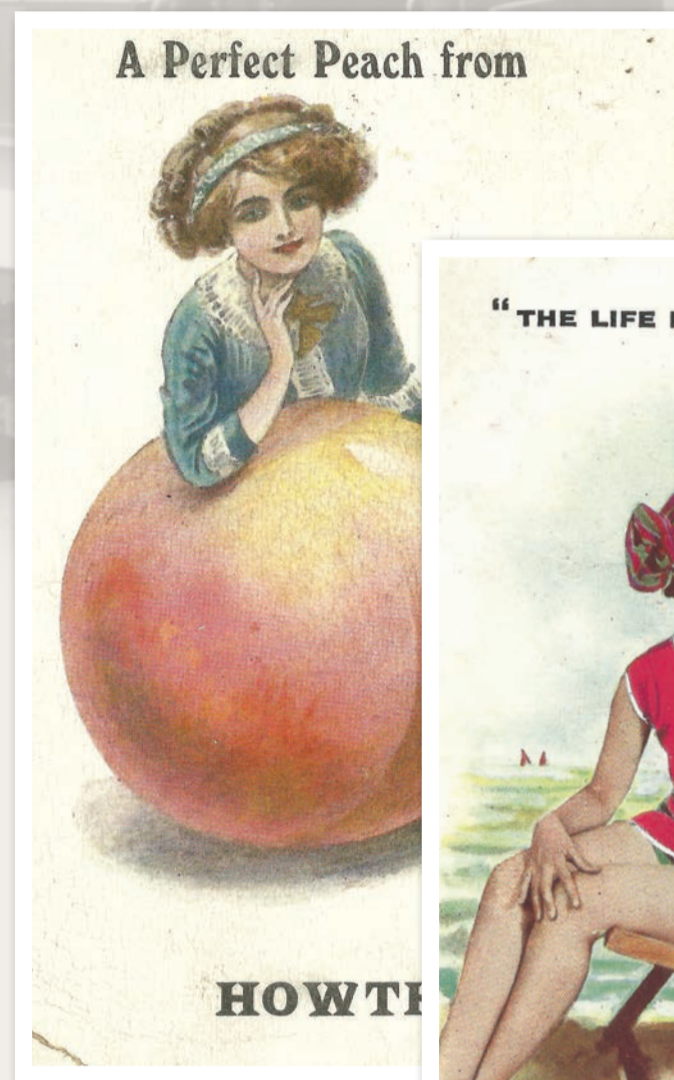
RAILWAYS AND TOURISM

Transport was critical to Ireland's domestic tourism boom in the 19th century. Bray had been transformed by the coming of the railway in 1854 and soon emulated those British seaside resorts like Brighton with its promenade, bathing huts, band stands and Turkish Baths. The easy access that railways and trams allowed to the newly-developed seaside and country resorts ushered in a new era of city-living day-trippers who could now enjoy the country or sea air of Howth, Bray and Dun Laoghaire and on by jaunting car to Enniskerry or Powerscourt.

"Yesterday was a day of popular outing. The Howth tram service was a boon and a blessing. Dublin's domestic spirit was strongly in evidence. One frequently saw the entire family, from the youngest member down to the father of the house, seeking enjoyment together. It was not a comfortable day for the amateur of solitude, or for the philosopher who considers that the best powder for a baby is gun-powder."

Irish Independent, 17 May 1921

Early 20th century view of the Waverly Hotel in Howth.
Fingal Local Studies & Archives



Early 20th century postcards from Howth.
Fingal Local Studies & Archives



Claremont Hotel, Evening
Irish Times, 17 July 1913.
Courtesy of the Irish Newspaper Archives

TOURISM IN HOWTH

Howth itself had long been a popular holiday resort for Dubliners though it was not spoken about in the same terms as "its more fashionable sisters" of Dalkey and Bray. In 1882, it was reported that over the course of only four hours on Whit Monday the GNR carried over 5,000 excursionists to Howth via the railway alone. This was despite a lack of tourist infrastructure such as promenades and band performances. The wild ruggedness of the landscape and pleasant bathing were the main draws for tourists of this era.

With the advent of the electric trams to Howth, new housing, transport, roads and hotels were developed, leading Dillon Cosgrave in his work on North Dublin in 1931 to note that a stranger visiting Howth after forty years would hardly recognise it for the "lonely and primitive place" it had once been.

Over the early years of the tram, multiple hotels in Howth capitalised on this appetite for tourism including the Claremont, the St Lawrence, the Royal, the Waverley, the Dalriada and the Summit. The Irish Tourist Development Company had opened the Golfers' Hotel (later the Strand and now the Marine) at Sutton Cross in June 1901 which boasted four acres of seaside grounds, tea-rooms, smoking-rooms, billiard-rooms, a ladies' drawing-room, tennis courts and croquet lawns and easy access to the Royal Dublin Golf Links and those of Sutton and Portmarnock. In addition, it intended to capitalise on the many cyclists who frequented the peninsula by offering special cyclists' teas on the veranda. The electric trams were a crucial feature in the advertising of these hotels and the many boarding houses in the district.

Early 20th century postcard of the Summit Hotel at Howth.
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The Claremont Hotel, Howth at the turn of the 20th century. It was later converted into the Howth Lodge apartments.
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FAREWELL TO THE CITY TRAMS

Although the Hill of Howth tramway had been constructed within a few years of the introduction of the new electric technology, progress was in quick pursuit and soon the proliferation of both motor buses and cars began to impact the service. By the 1920s, Dublin City saw the launch of increasing numbers of bus services and once again the DUTC were involved in running them. The days of the electric trams in the City were numbered when the DUTC decided in 1937 to replace all their tram services with buses. By 1941 the company had changed the meaning of the 'T' in their name from 'Tram' to 'Transport'. The last DUTC city tram to Howth Station ran on 29th March 1941 with crowds at Nelson's Pillar cheering it off on its last run. The Evening Herald bemoaned its loss – "It was the holiday tram...not so much a prosaic conveyance as a pleasure car bound for the open spaces..." No number of glowing tributes to the service could counter the £10,000 per annum loss which the DUTC were sustaining, however.

CLOSURE

Although used and fondly remembered by many Dubliners, there simply wasn't enough year-round traffic to make a profit for the GNR who never made a return on the £113,000 which they had spent constructing the Hill of Howth line. In 1954, the GNR made the decision to close the line but it was eventually given a reprieve following representations from a protest committee who argued that the roads in Howth were not suitable to carry a bus service and that it would inconvenience many residents who did not own a motor car. It was decided by the GNR that the service would continue for a further short period while arrangements were made for an alternative bus service.

This reprieve would last only until October 1958, when CIE took over the running of the GNR services in Ireland and confirmed that they would be closing the Hill of Howth tramway which was then running at a loss of £12,000 a year. Since 1954, it had been the last remaining electric tramway in operation in Ireland and would be until the opening of the Luas in 2004.

FINAL DAY

After almost 60 years serving Dubliners, the Hill of Howth tram took its last journey on Sunday, 31st May 1959. Thousands flocked to the peninsula that weekend to take the opportunity to go on one last trip. Several groups of railway enthusiasts had even chartered private trams to guarantee them their journeys.

The final run of the tram to the Summit was undertaken by tram car No. 9 with its usual crew of motor-man Christy Hanway and conductor Alfie Reilly.

The journey was notable for another reason - just after passing the Stella Maris convent, Hanway spotted a fault on the line marked with a red storm lantern. Four students had unscrewed a coupling and one of the lines was sitting a few inches above the other. With no hope of a quick repair, this last journey came to a premature end. A columnist from the Evening Herald alerted the 2,000 people who were waiting in the cold night air for the tram to arrive at the Summit and while some ran down the tracks in the darkness, most returned home disappointed.

No. 9 prematurely returned to Sutton where detonators placed on the tracks exploded as the tram rolled over them and a long line of cars drove alongside beeping their horns. The tram was greeted by cheering crowds on arrival at Sutton Cross at almost 1am as some eager would-be passengers clung to the outside of the tram for their final jaunt. The assembled crowd sang 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' and gave three cheers to Hanway and Reilly. Railway officials and a Garda escort were required to protect the tram from souvenir hunters.



Crowds queue to travel on the Hill of Howth Tramway on its last day, 31st May 1959. Image courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



Hill of Howth Tramway staff stand inside one of the tramcars. Fingal Local Studies & Archives

The following day, the remaining tramway staff reported for duty to the CIE bus garage in Clontarf whose motor buses would replace the tram service.

"Farewell, dear friends, this is the end; we've travelled miles and miles, For eight and fifty years we shared your laughter, tears and smiles. 'Tho some may say we're worn out, expensive or too slow, We brought you safely up and down in sunshine, rain or snow."

Text of a sign which was carried on the front and back of the No. 9 tram on its final trip, 31st May 1959.

AFTERMATH

The Hill of Howth tramway was so fastidiously and rapidly removed that some railway enthusiasts who visited Howth only four years after the closure remarked on how little remained of the line. The depot at Sutton was already derelict with three stripped Dublin City trams sitting out in the elements. The track which had once wound its way around the Hill had been almost entirely removed by January 1960 and portions of the old route were in the process of being repaved as a roadway. Even the fine bridge in Howth town crossing over to the railway station had been torn down. Although the return of the trams to Howth has been mooted several times, it has yet to come to pass. In the meantime, the tram lives on in the hearts of many who travelled its rails.

Fingal Local Studies & Archives are indebted to the many writers on the trams and trains of Howth including Jim Kilroy, R. C. Flewitt, Michael J. Hurley and Michael Corcoran.

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1. SUTTON STATION

The trams left the carriage shed and travelled down a short piece of line to cross the road over to Sutton Railway Station where the tram would await passengers from the city. With passengers aboard, the tram exited the station area and crossed back over to the right side of Station Road where it was shielded from ordinary motor traffic by a wall. Sutton Station had been constructed c.1846 and the red-brick Station Masters' house is still there today as a private residence.



2. SUTTON CROSS

The tram then arrived at Sutton Cross in front of what is now the Marine Hotel and was originally the Golfers' Hotel. Here the Hill of Howth trams crossed the tracks of the city trams which continued on the more direct and flat route to Howth town. The two different tram systems did not meet and it was necessary for the trams to coast through the break in power supply. This was a busy junction and great care was needed by the motor-man to avoid a collision.



3. STRAND ROAD

Leaving the hotel behind, the tram now continued along Strand Road. When the tramway opened in 1901, there were very few houses along this stretch and it was the most exposed part of the line, closely following the low sea wall. Jim Kilroy tells how in stormy weather the sea would break over the wall and drivers would have to briefly take shelter up the tram stairs to avoid getting wet.



4. HOWTH DEMESNE

Here the tram passed by the ancient church and well of St. Fintan's. The modern-day cemetery which has grown up around this early site would still have largely centred around the ruined church in 1901. Visitors wishing to see the impressive and ancient Cromlech (or Dolmen) of Howth could alight at this stop and make the climb up the Hill.



5. ST FINTAN'S

The tram now approaches Shielmartin Hill, the incline of the line growing ever gradually. This stop served Howth Golf Club which was founded in 1916.



11. HOWTH STATION

Finally, the tram entered Howth town opposite the railway station via a handsome iron bridge, which was supported on seven ornamental columns. Here the Hill service would again meet its city counterpart as the DUTC trams passed underneath. A gentle slope brought the tram line to the same level as the rails at the railway station where a separate platform for the Hill of Howth service was provided. The bridge was swiftly removed once the electric tram closed.



9. THE SUMMIT

The tram now made its way to an elevation of 365ft to the Summit station. Here were several buildings including a large wooden waiting shelter, a parcel office, a sweet shop and a small battery house which was constructed to act as a boosting station to ensure the trams didn't suffer any drop in current while at the top of the hill. This battery house closed in 1934 and is now a private residence.

The GNR were keen to provide refreshments at the Summit as it was the focal point of the line for many eager tourists. For the first season, only a marquee was available but eventually a tea pavilion was built in a field adjacent to the line where light refreshments were available during the summer months and entertainment was provided by bands who played on Sunday afternoons. However, the pavilion was not a success. Firstly, the Earl of Howth who owned the field refused to permit the sale of alcohol in the pavilion and then in 1918 it burned down and was never re-built. Many of the tourists were instead catered for in the nearby Summit Inn public house which is still in operation today. Indeed, when the Summit Inn and Hotel were being sold in 1914, the advertisement boasted about their unusually large profits.



10. DUNGRIFFAN RD

Leaving the Summit, the tram turned inland and southwards across the Hill on a separate line, passing many fine houses and the Waverly Hotel. As the tram wound its way down to Howth town, passengers would have had a commanding view of the sea and Ireland's Eye. At Balglass Road there was a level crossing and the keeper's cottage is still there on what is now Balkill Park.



8. STELLA MARIS

The roadway was crossed again at the Stella Maris Convent before the tram continued once more on its own line. A massive stone viaduct was erected here to stop passengers on the top deck from being able to look into the grounds. This viaduct is still in place today and the hinges which once held the tramway gate are still attached to the wall. This section represented probably the most difficult point in the construction of the tramway.



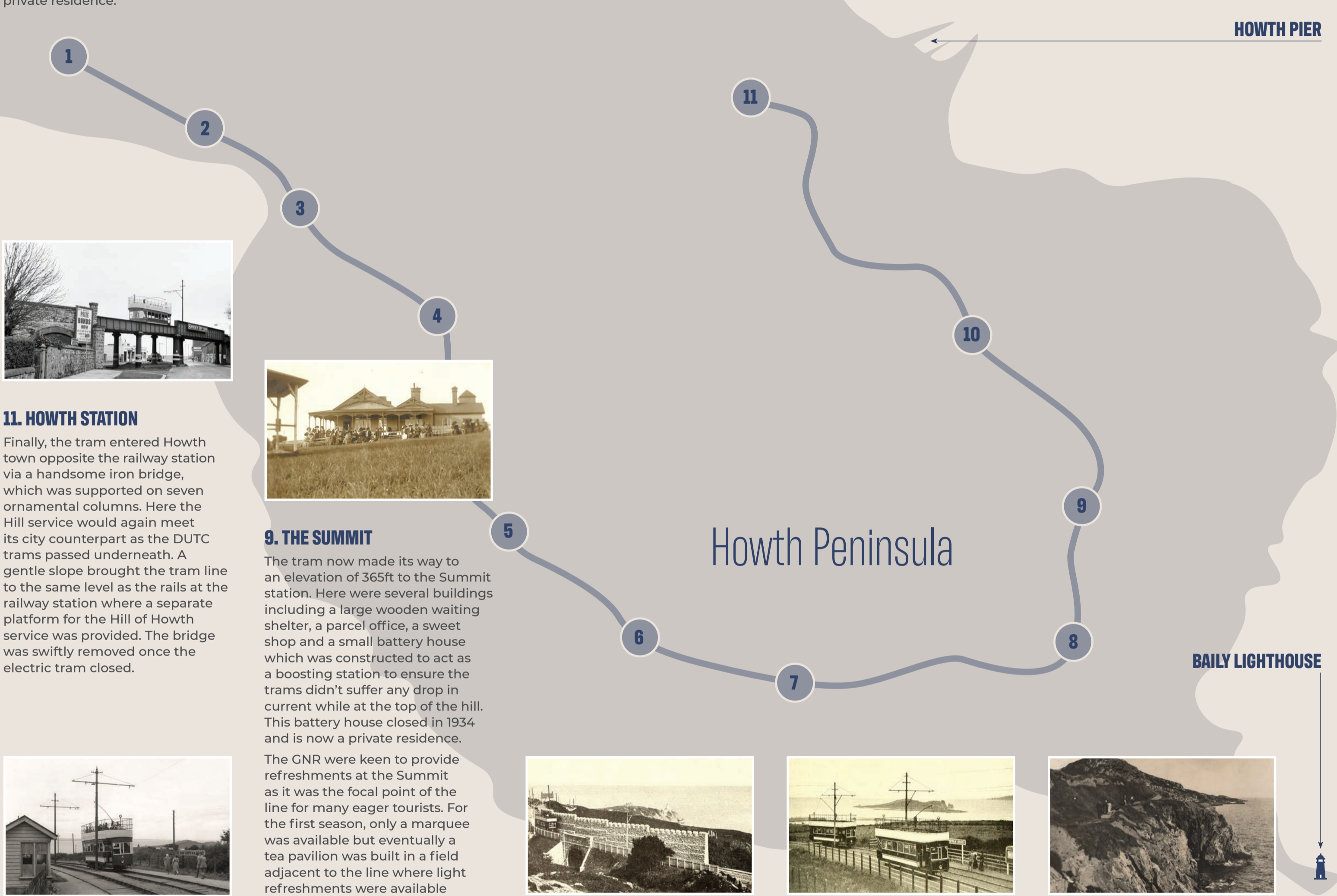
7. BAILY PO

The tram now left the main roadway and headed on its own separate line. From here, passengers on the top deck of the tram had a splendid view of the wide expanse of Dublin Bay. This section of the tramway line is now part of the modern Carrickbrack Road as it was repaved after the closure of the tram in 1959.



6. BARREN HILL

Along this section of the line, the tram passed what became known locally as the 'Somali Village' - a development of houses on a steep slope constructed after the builder was inspired by the stilted Somali houses on display at the Irish International Exhibition of 1907. Just further up the line was a request stop for Red Rock, a popular bathing spot for visitors.



THE FATE OF THE TRAMCARS

- No. 1** Scrapped.
- No. 2** Preserved at the Southern California Railway Museum.
- No. 3** Stored at St. James' Gate Brewery until 1965 and then scrapped.
- No. 4** Preserved at the Ulster Transport Museum.
- No. 5** Withdrawn from service in 1957 and later scrapped.
- No. 6** Body scrapped and parts acquired by the National Tramway Museum at Crich, England.
- No. 7** Scrapped.
- No. 8** Withdrawn from service in 1957 and later scrapped.
- No. 9** Restored by Jim Kilroy and his team and preserved at the National Transport Museum, Howth Demense.
- No. 10** Preserved by the National Tramway Museum at Crich, England.
- No. 11** Stored at St. James' Gate Brewery until 1965 and then scrapped.

