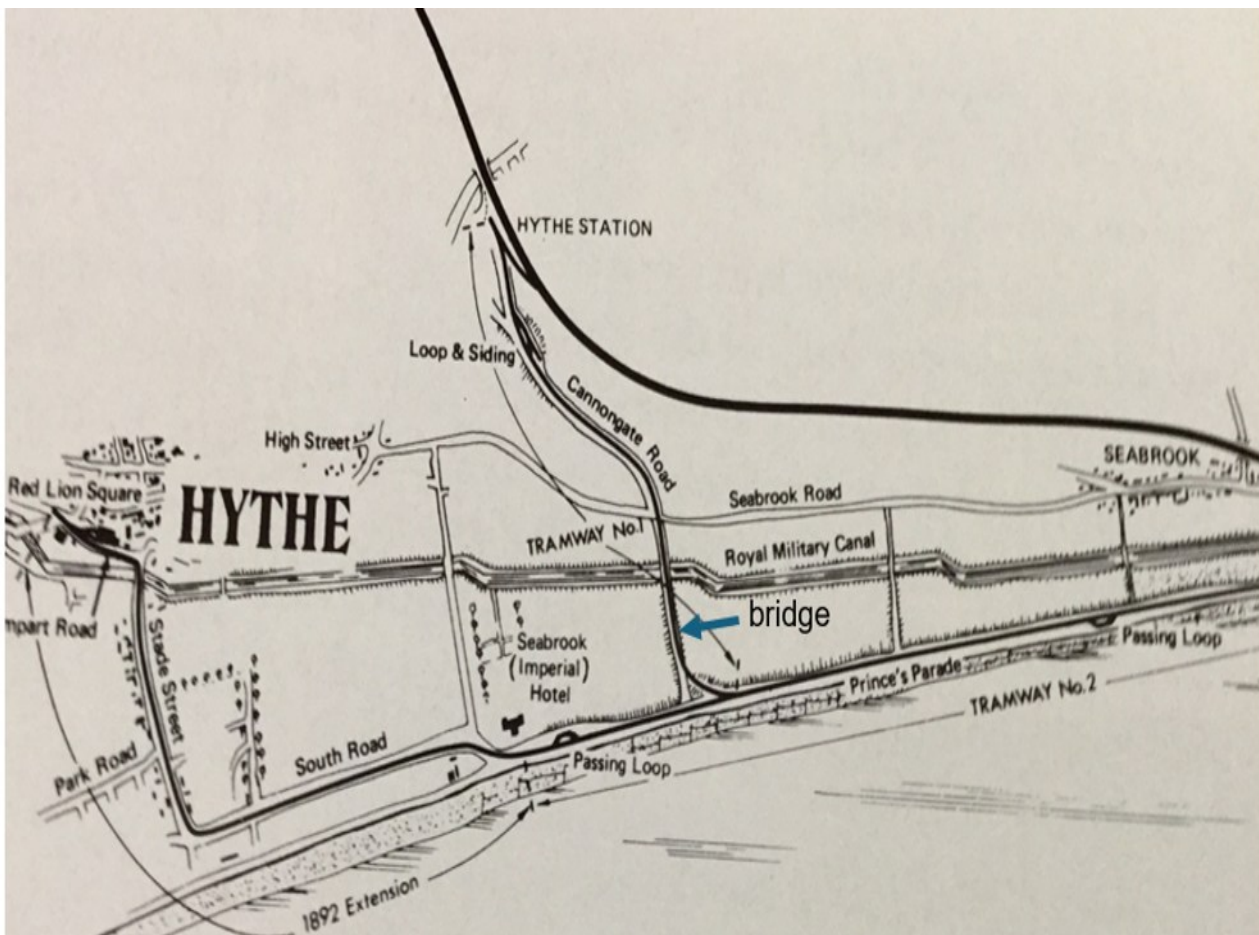


Historical Report: Cannongate Canal Bridge & Tramway No. 1



Project Overview & Structural Intent

- **Official & Local Names:** Known historically as both the **Tramway Bridge** and the **Cannongate Bridge**
- **What was it?** Originally a heavy-duty railway bridge and track built over the Royal Military Canal in Hythe, Kent. Today, the site features a lightweight pedestrian footbridge.
- **Who built it?** The South Eastern Railway (SER).
- **Why was it built?** To carry heavy stone from an inland quarry to the coast to build the sea wall and Princes Parade.
- **What went wrong?** The hills were too steep for horses, and the track was built with the wrong type of rails. Because of this, it **never carried a single public passenger** and was eventually torn up.

Timeline of Events

1881 — The Early Idea

The railway company wanted to build a tram line to carry people from Hythe train station down to the seafront. However, the hills were too steep for horses to pull the cars, so they put the plan on hold.

1885 — Fast Construction & Naming Origin

- **Autumn 1885:** The company decided they needed the line to move heavy stone for sea defences. Chief Engineer Francis Brady was told to start building immediately.
- **November 1885:** Workers began building the new heavy bridge over the Royal Military Canal, located just east of the existing Bell Bridge.
- **The Bridge Name:** The bridge did not have a special name when it was first built. In paperwork, it was just the bridge for "**Tramway No. 1.**" Because it connected directly to **Cannongate Road**, locals quickly began calling it the "**Cannon Gate Bridge.**"

1886 — Opening and Heavy Freight Trains

- **January 1886:** The bridge and the track (called Tramway No. 1) were finished.
- **The Route:** The track started at Hythe station, ran down the side of Cannongate Road, crossed the main highway, **went over the new Cannon Gate Bridge**, and ended at the seafront (Princes Parade).
- **Operations:** A small steam locomotive immediately started running over the bridge to haul heavy stone trains.

1889 — The Government Says "No"

The railway company tried to get permission to use this track for paying passengers. A government inspector visited and completely banned it for two reasons:

- **Wrong Tracks:** The track was built like a regular train line with raised rails. By law, street trams had to use flat, grooved rails so they didn't block road traffic.
- **Wrong Power:** The hills were too steep for horses, but the company did not have legal permission to run loud steam engines near public coastal roads.

Key Technical & Engineering Details

The Extreme Hills (Gradients)

The biggest engineering challenge was the hill on Cannongate Road leading up from the bridge to the train station. The slope was incredibly steep, which made horse power completely useless.

The Special “Sudanese” Steam Engine

- **Locomotive** No. 968, built by Messrs Manning Wardle of Leeds, was originally constructed for use on the Suakim–Berber Railway in Sudan. It is photographed here at the Lydd Royal Artillery Gunnery Establishment. Although normally a six-coupled 0-6-0 locomotive, it is shown in this photograph with the front driving wheels de-coupled, effectively making it a 2-4-0. The front coupling rod was removed to enable the engine to negotiate the sharp curves of the temporary railway along Cannongate Road and the associated construction tramway.

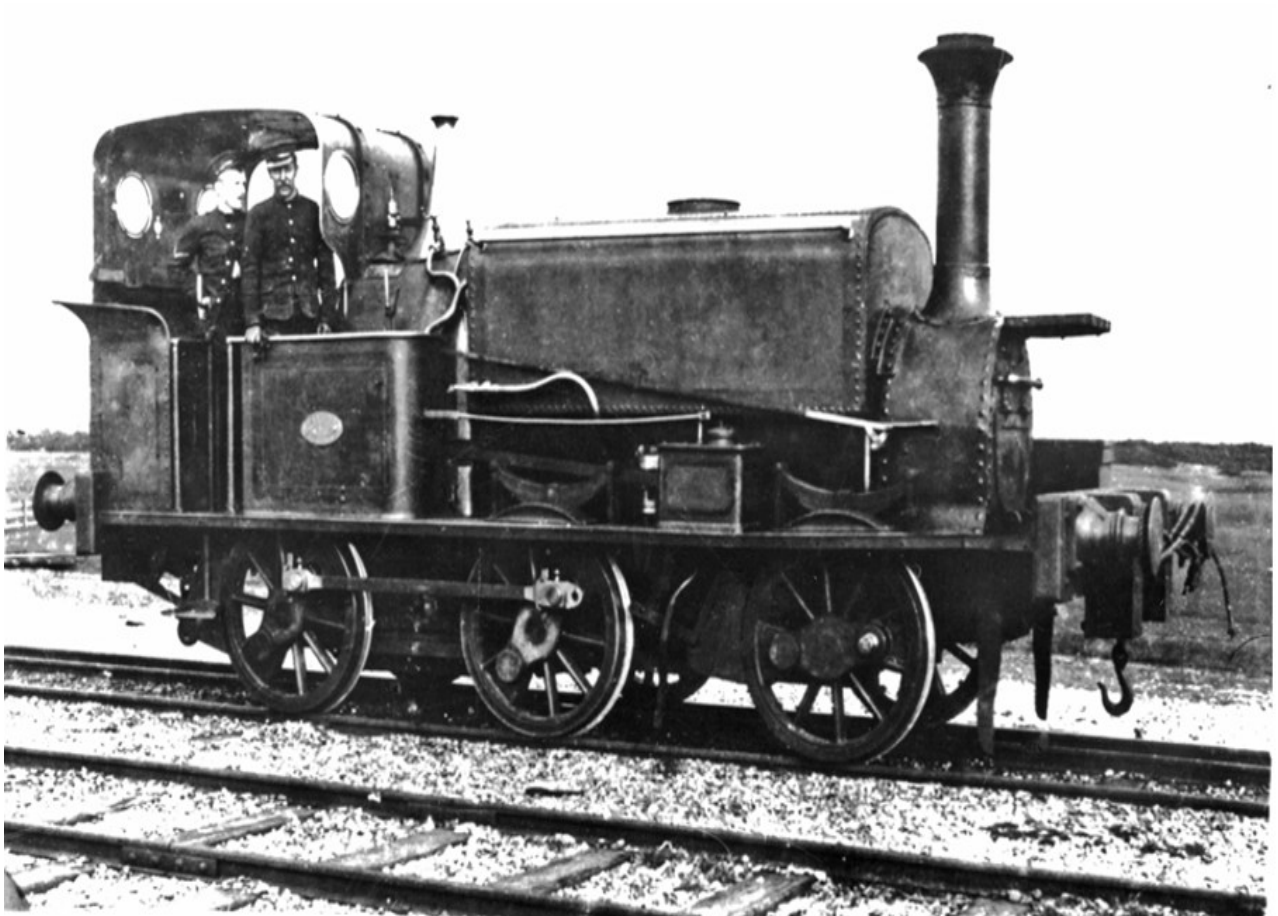


Photo Credit: Courtesy of the Industrial Railway Society, J. A. Peden Collection.

- **Background:** Built for the British military campaign in Sudan, the locomotive became surplus when the conflict ended. It was subsequently shipped back to Kent and purchased for use on the railway.
- **The Noise:** The small locomotive had to work extremely hard hauling heavy stone up the incline from the bridge. Its vigorous exhaust beat was said to alarm local residents and frequently frighten passing horses.
- **The Crossing:** Because the train popped out from the bridge area and crossed a busy main road at grade, the company had to install a special safety signal post near a local mailbox.

The Ticket Boundaries

Even though passengers could never ride over the bridge itself, the name "**Cannon Gate Bridge**" became completely official in the community. The nearby horse-drawn beach trams used it as a prominent local landmark and an official stop to calculate ticket prices:

- A ride from the Sandgate Terminus to the **Cannon Gate Bridge** cost **2d**.
- A short ride from the **Cannon Gate Bridge** to nearby Ladies' Walk cost **1d**.

Decommissioning & Evolution to a Footbridge

1911 to 1912 — Removal of the Railway Line

- **Summer 1911:** After years of lying empty, the railway company decided to give Cannongate Road to the local council. The council refused to take it until the tracks were gone. A gang of workers dug up all the metal rails.
- **December 1912:** The old rails were sold as scrap metal. The road was repaired, the railway company gave up its private rights to the land, and the heavy railway bridge was eventually taken down.
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Post-World War II to Present Day — The Modern Crossing

- **Post-War Reconnection:** For decades, the crossing point sat entirely empty. After the Second World War, a pedestrian footbridge was built on the exact site of the old railway crossing to reconnect the walking paths.
- **The Modern Bridge:** While the initial post-war footbridge was a lighter structure, it was later updated. The current bridge standing today is constructed of strong **iron or steel girders**.



Source

The author gratefully acknowledges Brian Hart for his kind permission to use information from his excellent book, *The Hythe & Sandgate Railway*, and for providing access to photographs, including several not published in the book. (Jun 2026)

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