

ISLE OF WIGHT UPGRADE – TOWARDS CONCLUSION

by John Mitchell

My previous update on Island Line's upgrade had concluded with the testing of Ryde Tunnel with 484.001 being taken through it with an unimog. On the mainland, 484.002/003 were undertaking night time tests between Eastleigh and Fareham. Testing was to ramp up a notch on 14 July with daylight runs starting. On the same day across the water, 484.001 made a run under its own power between Ryde St. John's Road and Shanklin. This was the first run of a 484 since the line had been released from its engineering possession and the first occasion a train has used the new Down loop at Brading. Vivarail were looking to achieve 700 fault-free hours on each unit but it is known that some faults did occur. Readers will recall that problems were experienced with the computer software. A satisfactory fix must have been found with the sets being allowed out on the main line in daylight hours. One can imagine the frustration at achieving, perhaps, 687 miles and then encountering a fault, not that we are aware that scenario has actually happened!

On the Island, 484.001 made several runs to Shanklin over the following days. A week later on 28 July and 484.004 was to make its first trip out also between Ryde and Shanklin, and like its sister, was to do this for several days, but not at weekends.

At the time of writing 484.004 has not ventured north of St. John's Road. 484 004 had some parts missing when transferred across to Ryde in May and therefore spent several weeks in the depot whilst everything was put back into place.

The summer has seen a mixed batch of weather, and on the Island a reasonable amount of rain. The afternoon of Sunday 25 July was to see some very intense downpours, the western part of Ryde taking the brunt with considerable flooding in places and the Sandown Bay area also being affected. Just over a week later on Monday 2 August, a further intense storm this time was to reek havoc on the Island Line. Washouts occurred at Shanklin, Sandown and Ryde St. John's, ballast being removed at the former two locations. Ryde St. John's has often been prone to flooding and damage to rolling stock has previously occurred.

Luckily, apart from getting somewhat damp, no damage was done on this occasion. The higher 484s should fare better over the earlier tube stock, simply because of their increased height. 484.004 did spend some time out of the shed alongside 483 006 drying out, the first time a 484 has stayed outside the depot. Testing runs on the Island therefore had to come to a halt for a few days whilst track repairs took place.

The last ten days of August was to see a lot of activity with 484.002 and 003 transferring across to the Island. Testing had at long last come to a satisfactory conclusion. In addition to that, an evacuation exercise took place on Monday 23 August with the fire brigade in Ryde tunnel. 484.001 was used and propelled by a unimog north from St. John's Road station leaving around 17.45. This was only the second time a 484 has gone through the tunnel, on this occasion the unit was propelled. The actual exercise took place in the single bore section of tunnel just before it emerges at the Esplanade. A lot of personnel were involved and the exercise took around 90 minutes to complete when 484.001 was pushed to the Esplanade station. The opportunity was taken to test sighting for the down starting signal and to achieve this, the unimog was uncoupled from the train. It headed a short distance towards the footbridge by the Hovercraft terminal and stopped. After a while, it was eased back to the 484 to adjust its position, this in fact being done several times before everyone was satisfied. Final departure back to St. John's Road was made in the dark at 21.25.

Meanwhile, earlier that afternoon across the Solent at Eastleigh, 484.002 and 003 were shunted separately, each between class 20 diesels 20.007 and 20.205 across to the east yard, where they could be loaded onto lorries for transport across to the Island.

D end car (300) 232 was the first to be loaded and heading for Portsmouth early on Tuesday 24 August. As before, Reid Freight were the contractors. The writer understands that as a result of their mainline testing, the complete car number is shown, unlike the earlier units which came to the Island without testing. 232 lacks 484.002 on the front of its cab we understand from a couple of incidents.

Arrival was made in Gunwharf Road at around 09.10 some 30 minutes before the 09.40 departure of St. Clare. Another Reid's lorry was already positioned further along the road for the purpose of attaching

a dolly to the trailer containing 232, with the purpose of reducing the axle loading for driving on and off the ferry. Having to remove the tractor unit, insert the dolly and then re-couple up was not a quick process but it was completed fairly speedily. It would not be an understatement to say that time was by now tight for the cross Solent passage. St. Clare at the linkspan already had its engines running for the departure as 232 eased through the terminal and onto the linkspan. In the event, a credible 9-minute late departure was recorded.

Once disembarked at Fishbourne, 232 made its way to Sandown by way of Newport for offloading onto Island Line. Its arrival on the Island meant that 50% of the fleet had now arrived. 132 followed across the Solent the following day on St. Clare's 11.40 sailing. After offloading at Sandown, the two cars of 484.002 were coupled and in the early evening hauled to Ryde by the unimog. Arrival was made at dusk and the new arrival placed in the depot shed. The week before the August bank holiday is a particularly busy period for Wightlink, and due to capacity constraints, only one car could be transferred each day. 233 of 484.003 crossed the Solent on St. Clare's 11.40 sailing on Thursday 26 August, its partner 133 having to wait until the following Tuesday 31 August for the 17.40 sailing, the complete unit arriving at Ryde the following evening.

We therefore may be in the final few weeks of testing and crew training before Island Line reopens. Mid-October is likely to be the earliest feasible timescale. 484.005 is not expected to head across the Solent for some time as it has donated a lot of parts to 002 and 003 and this equipment will likely be replaced at Eastleigh.

There is also news of the retired 483s. 007 was formally handed over to the Isle of Wight Steam Railway in train story at Havenstreet on 30 July by SWR Managing Director Claire Mann. Work has commenced on the restoration of 004 at Holliers Park, the graffiti attacks having been painted over by a grey undercoat and attention given to its roof. Your writer understands that one car will return to LT red the other into Island Line red, logos and transfers being the main difference. It is unclear at present as to what will happen to the interior, which is to be a seating area for the adjacent café.

Further afield, car 229 remains at Reids freight storage in Stoke-on-Trent, having been privately purchased. A surprise development has been car 129 arriving on the East Somerset Railway for a restoration project, apparently for a private owner. 129 has suffered damage to the front cab end due to shunting at Booths in Rotherham from the buffer of a full height vehicle. It also is missing its front cab door, right hand side cab door and the interconnecting door and the guards end. These had been recovered by the London Transport Traction Group as spares for 006 and 008. It is not known if the full £32,000 advertised ebay price for this vehicle was paid or not. 122 and 225 remain at Booths.

Not all appears to be going well on finding homes for 006 and 008, and when they leave the Island, interim storage is likely to be at Reids storage yard. It had been expected that 008 would leave on the back of the August class 484 deliveries but due to ferry capacity problems this did not happen. Both sets therefore remain on the Island for the foreseeable.

The contract for the Island Line bus replacement service with First Group came to an end at the beginning of August, Zelabus taking over. They had provided the back-up service in the final weeks of class 483 operation when just one unit was in service, or when no unit was service, as was so often the case.

Government funding for new rail projects has again seen interest expressed in extending Island Line south from Shanklin to Ventnor. The main hurdle would be finding a diversion route around Wroxall, where a housing estate has been built across the line to the south of the station. Restoring rail service to the Island capital in Newport has been mooted for some time and it was always expected the IWSR would be the route used, although this would create a conflict of interest with the steam railway operation which runs daily in the peak summer months.

Instead, the former Sandown – Newport line is to be evaluated for its reopening either as a heavy rail or tram operation. With building development in Newport over the years, any terminus there would have to be south of the town, perhaps to the north of Shide towards St. George's roundabout. The line had many level crossings at Alverstone, Newchurch (Langridge), Horryngford where the busy main A3056 is crossed, Merstone, Blackwater and Shide. The question has to be asked as to what rolling stock would be used. Extension of the 3rd rail is not favoured today so class 230 D Stock might be an option. Should Ventnor re-open, the obvious choice would, in your writers mind, be to extend the 3rd rail, but would that happen? This could well be the subject of much debate, but it remains to be seen if the project even gets beyond initial evaluation.



Above: 484.003 leads 484.002 at Eastleigh when on test between Eastleigh and Fareham.

Photo: George Odlum



Opposite: (Bottom) 484.004 on a test trip at Truckell's bridge (Left) and at Shanklin (Right).

Right: The same unit at Smallbrook Lane, heading towards Shanklin.

All photos: James Pilbeam

Below: Restoration work is now progressing on 483.004 at Holliers. The roof has received attention, as seen on 13 August 2021 (Left), and work undertaken on painting over some of the graffiti. Five days later further work had been done on one motor car.

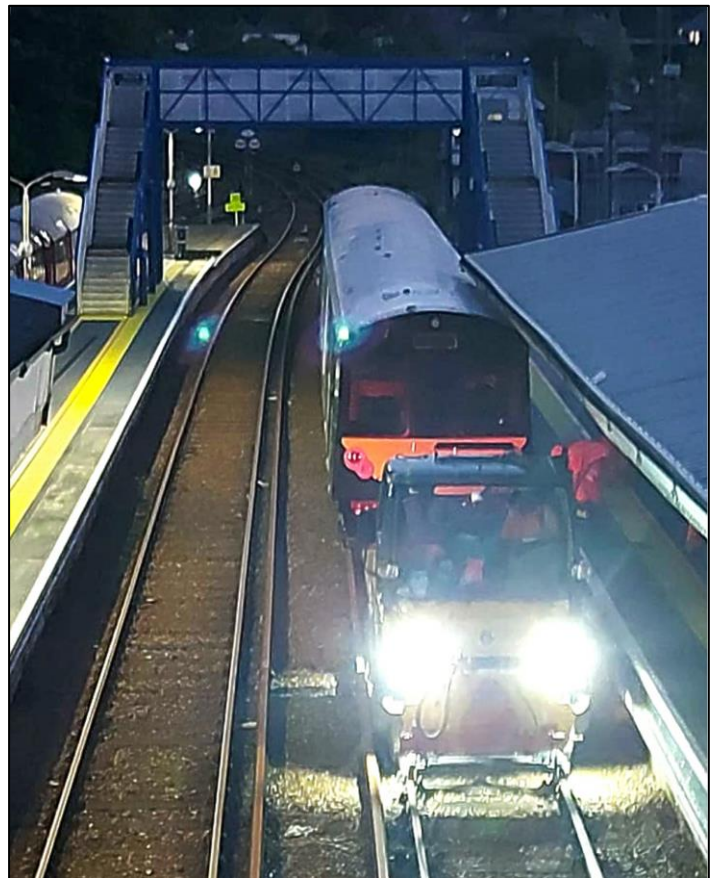
Both photos: John Mitchell



Below: An unusual take on car 233 from unit 484.003 on 26 August 2021 at Eastleigh, seen heading over the bridge heading to Portsmouth.

Photo: James Pilbeam





The arrival of DM 233 on the Isle of Wight (Top Left and Right) on and the arrival of the complete unit at St. John's Road after dark on 25 August 2021 (Right), hauled by the Unimog. To make room for the extra unit, class 483.006 was shunted north along the bay platform track (Above). In addition to this unit, 483.008 continues to remain at Sandown awaiting return to the mainland.

All photos: John Mitchell