

CLIMB EVERY MOUNTAIN

THE VENTNOR FUNICULAR RAILWAY THAT NEVER WAS

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It used to be claimed that one of the worst coach journeys in the country was from Ryde to Ventnor, so it is not surprising that from its earliest days, as it developed into a tourist resort, the town has been very conscious of its real isolation and determined to compensate for it. Ventnor was very early in encouraging communication by steamer from Littlehampton and elsewhere; it eagerly adopted new technologies such as gas, electricity, telegraph and telephone to show its eminence over other Island towns. Having welcomed the arrival of the railway, and even after obtaining two rail routes to the town, it still strove to be ahead of its Island rivals. So it is not surprising that the idea of a funicular railway had caught the imagination of a quite a large majority of the rate paying inhabitants by the mid 1890s. The importance to Ventnor of transport both to and within the town is well illustrated by the great celebrations it held on the day the first passenger train arrived. They were no doubt still being recounted by many when several different plans for a funicular were debated over successive years. The *Hampshire Telegraph* had several unusually long articles during September and October 1866 on Ventnor and the railway.



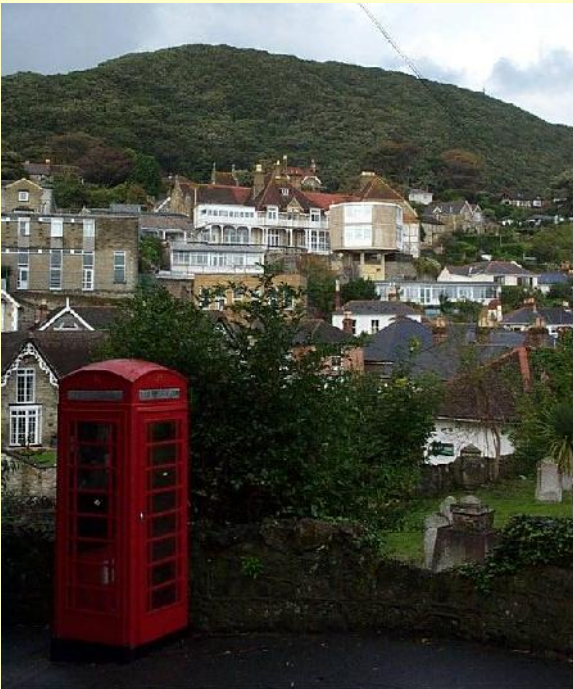
Ventnor – Opening of the Railway – Last Monday was a day which will give cause for many a happy recollection to flow into the minds of the inhabitants of Ventnor. At an early hour of the morning crowds of person of all grades wended their way in the direction of the railway terminus in order to witness the arrival and departure of the first regular train, and not a few availed themselves of the opportunity of being the first to travel on the line. For many years past the inhabitants have kept up unceasing efforts with the view of obtaining, like our neighbouring town, railway accommodation ---- Great interest was manifested as the train emerged from the tunnel, for, no doubt, both rich and poor were alike impressed with the idea of the favourable results which would doubtless accrue from the new mode of communication --- It was high time the inhabitants were released from the inconvenience of travelling by road, the course of which was so much impeded by the lofty hills over which they had to mount in their transit from Ventnor to Ryde ---- that they were unable to make the journey in less than about five hours ---- We are happy to state that no accident occurred to mar the day's enjoyment, and now that the inhabitants have done everything possible in commemoration of the great boon which Ventnor has received by the opening of the railway, let them again go to work to endeavour to improve the town, and loose no time in placing themselves in that position which they long before would have been placed in had they been blessed, like other towns, with ample railway communication.

12 Sept 1866

Ventnor – One of the advantages accruing from the opening of the railway is already apparent in the increased number of visitors who have for the past few weeks flocked into the town, and we have no doubt that this extra accommodation in travelling will be the means of enticing many invalids, who

have hitherto been deterred from taking up their abode here during the winter months owing to the annoyance experienced in changing conveyances, this year to come and reside amongst us. The fame that Ventnor has obtained as a winter residence is world-wide, and we trust that the governing body will be alive to the advantages conferred by the opening of the railway, and will do all in their power to render the place as attractive as possible.

Sat 6 Oct 1866



No matter wherever one is in Ventnor, St Boniface Down dominates the town. Visitors have always wanted to climb it to take advantage of the wonderful views. So a cable tram or funicular railway would be ideal to enable the less agile and convalescent, for which the town was catering, to partake. There was also the all year round difficulty faced by walkers and horse drawn transport alike up the steep hills from the esplanade and pier to the upper town and its main station. Having a two stage funicular railway with a winding engine house in the middle provided an ideal solution.

This essay has been included in those of inventors and inventions simply because of what it might have done for the town. For its time, there was the novel idea of it not just being for tourists but providing transport interchanges between railway, town, esplanade and pier with

its steamers. Hasting had its first lift in 1889 followed seven years later by the Aberystwyth cliff railway. Building the Great Orme tramway started in 1901 and, at the same time as Bournemouth opened its first of three, in 1908 Ventnor was seriously considering again a practical all-the-year-round system.

The local newspapers in October 1908 reported the resuscitation and revision of plans from ten years earlier. Then a number of adventurous businessmen had obtained a light railway order. They may well have had knowledge of and consulted an even earlier tramway plan of 1863 which was intended to connect the old quarry site by the railway to a point near to Grove House; a distance of just about half a mile. Within a few months Ventnor ratepayers had met and voted 414 to 171 to support the venture. During the spring of 1909 public meetings were held and detailed working drawings and specifications made, so that by July Ventnor Rural District Council was fully involved, as can be seen from the minutes and plans which survive in the local Record Office

The proposed scheme was to be of two stages with a central machinery hall and of total length 4 furlongs 1.55 chains, some 914 yards. It would have some five stops and with gradients up to 1 in 2.70, or 37% in modern usage – 22 deg.



No 1 railway was to run from a station behind the then Esplanade Hotel as there was a right of way through the passage to Mill Bay and the Pier. It would then climb up to the junction of Belgrave Road and Church Street through the Burt Butchers and old stables with a station by Grove Lodge. Alpine Road would be raised and diverted by St Catherine's churchyard. It would then go across Mr Judd's garden and Mr Harvey's

builders yard with another station near the Clarendon at Grove Road. Then it would go across the Newport Road, through the cottages on the north side to an interchange built on the eastern side of the Central Station structure where there would also be the machine hall powering both sections of the railway. The length of this first section was to have been 2 furlongs 4.45 chains, some 538 yards.

The gradients given by the surveyors for Railway 1 going down from the Central Station and interchange:

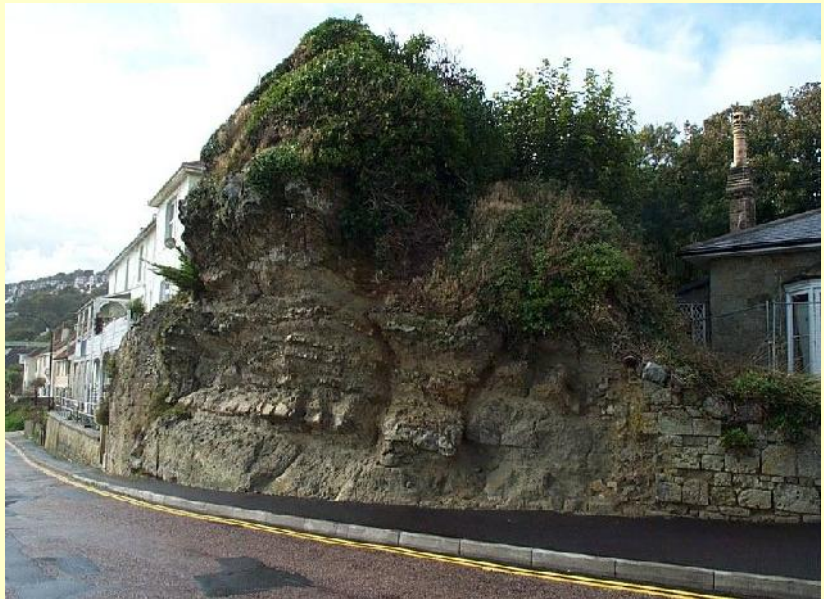
1 in 4.54 to near Grove Rd from the Central Station

1 in 6.25 to the boundary between Elm Grove kitchen garden and lawn

1 in 10.53 to about Church St

1 in 3.54 down the final incline to the Esplanade Hotel

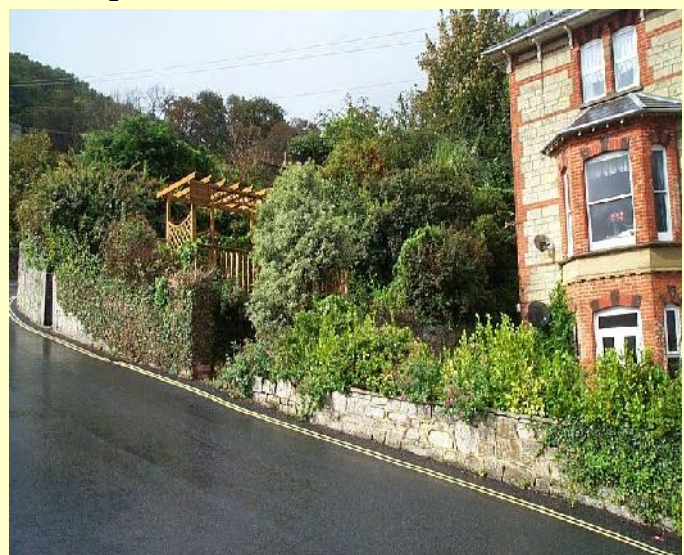
For Railway 2 which was to run up to the top of St Boniface 2.70 and finally just 1 in 400.



Today it is possible easily to trace the route of Railway 1, which was to be the lower haul of the tramway, for there is still much open ground. Perhaps it needs to be remembered that the scheme had been proposed with a light railway order obtained many years before the ratepayers and others demanded the council finally took some action. No doubt an early example of 'planning blight', but it has actually been much to the benefit of Ventnor. St Catherine's School for instance has its playing fields.

The well known rock outcrop, still a landmark by the route, would have been protected by having a tunnel for the track under the road at that point.

Service providers at the beginning of the twentieth century were still surprisingly few. The Ventnor Urban District Council was responsible for sewers. Ventnor Gas and Water Company needed to be consulted in respect of gas and water mains, hydrants and other works. The IW Electric Light and Power Company then owned the main cables, standards and lamps, which left only the Postmaster General with the National Telephone Company protecting their cables, posts and wires. IW Railway as well as the station even owned a poultry run. In all well under 30 owners and organisations were involved and needed to be consulted over the project.





With the demolition of the station buildings and the construction of an industrial park on the site, it is not possible now to see exactly where the machine hall and interchange station were to be situated. However the photographs above give an indication where they both were.

Railway 2 was to be 1 furlong and 7·10 chains in length, some 376 yards, and to climb the hill in a north-easterly direction from the Central Station to one at the summit where land would need to be leased from the Evans estate. For the second lift only three owners needed to cooperate – for the yard and poultry run it was to go over belonged to the IW Railway Company, the Ventnor Urban District Council over a footpath and the owner of the Downs who at that time were the Trustees of Colonel Evans. (It is because of the planting by Colonel Evans of the evergreen oaks that the Down has its Alpine appearance today and his generosity that preserves it as a public open space today.)

Mr Behr, who was the engineer for the project went on to build a number of funicular railways and the like elsewhere in the country. No doubt he learnt much from the frustrations of the Ventnor plan – resident enthusiasm, officialdom and public / private partner financing.

For the funicular to achieve the goal of visitors experiencing the magnificent views from the top of St Boniface, as mentioned, permission had to be obtained from the owner for the line to be constructed. On 23rd November the clerk to the Ventnor Council was instructed to get an interview with Mrs Evan's solicitor or agent for although:



“The late Colonel Evans wished that the Downs behind Ventnor should under certain circumstances be made over in perpetuity as an open space in the Town of Ventnor and it has therefore been arranged that her nephew (now a minor) shall eventually make over the whole of the downs to the Ventnor Urban District Council”

The clerk understood:

“That Mrs Evans was so displeased with the action of the town by having a public meeting, and what transpired at that meeting, that it must be understood that such an offer was at an end.”

The interview must have been very successful for the clerk was able to report in December that there had been provisional negotiations and a draft lease obtained with the Evans Estate for 99 years at a rent of just £100 per annum.



His efforts were though in vain for the failure of the scheme was inherent from the Council Meeting held at 8pm on 7th December 1908 when 15 of the 19 members were present and the body of the Town Hall was occupied by a large number of owners and ratepayers *“for the purpose of considering the proposed Funicular Railway from the Esplanade to the top of the Downs”*. Mr Behr, the engineer, explained the scheme in great detail and at length they resolved:

“To make application to the Light Railway Authority for necessary order under the Light Railways Act 1896 – to drop the procedure entirely should negotiations prove unsatisfactory or the cost exceed the sum of £20,000”

It was the latter that was to scupper the scheme, costs and compensation had greatly increased since the scheme was first envisaged and a profit on fares seemed to becoming more unlikely. Still Ventnor’s pioneering spirit had only been slightly, but not permanently, dampened. For in the press a few weeks later there was talk of having a trolley bus network installed around the town.

By 1899 Ryde had also taken advantage of a light railway act and had prepared drawings for a tramway from George Street to the gates of Seaview Pier. Fortunately it was never constructed. For if it had been its route would have gone along the coast below Appley and St Clare estates, the Puckpool Battery, then across Seaview Duver and the Salterns. It would have destroyed the special ambiance Seaview enjoyed as an ‘up market’ exclusive holiday village. Unfortunately the reverse is true for Ventnor. A funicular running these days would continue to bring in the visitors as it does for the only along-street cable car left running, the one up the Great Orme. Perhaps it may have provided the vital factor in not losing the railway to Ventnor and once again making the town conscious of its isolation. The additional tourists might well have prevented, in the last half of the 20th century, the

rapid run down of the Esplanade and even conceivably the neglect leading to the destruction of the Pier. Then Southern Water could not have used the Pier site opposite what would be the funicular terminal for its 'spaceship like landing platform' sewage pumping station –vital as it is!



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