

The Dover – Martin Mill Mineral Railway

The following notes are taken verbatim from The National Trust Langdon Cliffs, Walk No. 3 Brochure entitled 'The Dover – Martin Mill Mineral Railway'.

The Mineral Railway

Although it seems so unlikely today, there was once a railway running across the cliffs, right in front of where the Visitor Centre now stands.

The construction of a large harbour at Dover had been recommended in 1883, but this particular plan was not adopted. The specifications for the harbour, much as it is today, were drawn up in 1897. The tender from S. Pearson and Son was accepted on 5th April 1898. Pearson planned to use concrete blocks for construction of the breakwaters of the harbour and, in order to make these, he built blockyards at either side of the chosen harbour site. The eastern one was where the docks now stand, below the Visitor Centre. The sand and gravel needed for the concrete came from Sandwich, at first by sea, but soon by train. Pearson constructed a railway from Martin Mill, on the passenger line between Dover and Deal, to a terminus just above the eastern docks. The route was pegged out within two months of him gaining the contract, and the line was in use by mid-1899. A lease with the Earl of Guilford, who owned most of the land, specified, among other things, that the line was to be single track, standard gauge, that approval was to be obtained for the carriage of passengers, and a passenger station should be built at Langdon Hole (it never was!).

From Martin Mill, the mineral railway ran parallel to the main line for about a mile, then turned south towards the cliff edge. It ran around the curve of the cliff above Langdon Hole on a ledge (now the footpath towards St. Margaret's) – the indentation of sleepers and, in some places, the wood of the sleepers themselves, can still be seen. It continued on a shingle embankment, outside the walls of the prison then on site (see Walk No. 2 – Langdon Convict and Military Prison), to its terminus (just below the turning off the road onto National Trust Land), where sidings and a ballast unloading shed were built.

To start with, the sand and gravel were just tipped down the cliff face, but within a year, a balanced lift installation (like a funicular railway) was built, and the materials were lowered in narrow gauge, side tipping skips, the weight of the full skips serving to raise the empty ones. Once at the bottom, they were pushed by hand along narrow gauge track, and emptied into huge concrete mixers.

All that remains of this funicular today is an indentation in the cliff edge. It was dismantled in 1909, upon completion of the harbour construction. The section of line from the cliff top terminus to a point in front of Langdon Battery (now the site of the modern Coastguard station) was lifted in 1917-18 to supply track for the seafront railway. The rest of the mineral railway remained intact until 1937, when it was taken up by the army for scrap, only to be relaid, for part of its route in 1940, when it became the Martin Mill Military Railway. Instead of coming to the cliff edge, the new route curved away towards St. Margaret's Bay, before reaching Langdon Hole. It served two batteries and several gun emplacements (see Walk No. 5 – Coastal Defences).

Part of the original lease with the Earl of Guilford stipulated that approval should be obtained for the carriage of passengers on this railway. Pearson did nothing about this. However in 1901, he, with Sir John Jackson and Sir William Crundall, formed the Dover, St. Margaret's and Martin Mill Light Railway Company. They applied for a Light Railway Order for a 3 foot 6 inch gauge electric tramway (not standard gauge, as had been specified by the lease). The Light Railway Order was finally made in 1909. The planned route was from the town, up the cliffs on a 'new road', round Langdon Hole, across the cliffs to St. Margaret's and then inland to the existing Martin Mill passenger railway station. This tramway would serve the proposed new development (Sir William Crundall had recently received planning permission for an extensive building programme near the South Foreland) of 'Dover on the Cliffs', which, fortunately, was never built.

In May, 1909, Pearson had also obtained another contract, to reclaim land at the new Western Docks, for the Marine Station. The station is now the cruise liner terminus. Pearson planned to infill with chalk quarried from the cliffs above the Eastern Docks. Starting from ground level at the docks, he cut a wide ledge at a gentle gradient, laying down rails as he went, in order to transport the chalk down to the water, where it was loaded into barges, and taken across to the Western Docks. He also erected fencing to prevent chalk falling into the harbour below. In this way, Pearson cut his 'new road' for the tramway. The lower end has since been cut away to allow further dock development, but it is possible to walk the rest of this 'new road' - it finishes on the inland slopes of Langdon Hole, on the old parish boundary between Westcliffe and St Margaret's (detached).

These 1909 works cut through the route of the dismantled funicular- the indentation in the cliffs above can easily be seen from the lower section of the 'new road' - effectively removing the possibility of delivering materials direct from Martin Mill to the Eastern Docks. Pearson therefore constructed another track, climbing backwards from his 'new road'. This link thus restored the connection between cliff top and ground level, and because of the (relatively) shallow gradients created by the zig-zag, it would be possible to bring locomotives and rolling stock, not just materials, from the main line down to the Eastern Docks.

Pearson also tendered for a seafront railway, to connect the Eastern and Western Docks by rail; the Western were already directly linked to the main line from Dover to Folkestone. The track was lifted from the now redundant section of the original mineral railway in 1917-18, and relaid along the seafront. The railway, on one side of, but not separated from, the road, was still operating in the 1960s.

The tramway up the cliffs was never built, and the 'new road' was only ever used as a track for vehicular traffic. However, the Dover, St. Margaret's and Martin Mill Light Railway Company sought, and was granted, repeated extensions of time for the Order, up to 1949; the Company was not wound up until 1952.

It is interesting, and worrying, to note that in the 1930s, there were also plans to develop the land from Nelson Park, in St. Margaret's, to Kingsdown. Nothing was built, but the proposed roads are shown on an Ordnance Survey map, dated approximately 1937. But if both the proposed developments had gone ahead, there would be continuous housing estates, along the cliffs, from Dover to Deal.