



The Ventnor Cliff Railway or Funicular that never was! Part One



Cliff railways or funiculars, as well as cliff lifts, have long been a familiar sight across some British seaside resorts, most constructed in the later Victorian era when there seemed to be an almost endless fascination with applying ingenious engineering solutions to the problems that steep gradients presented for visitors in resorts located in areas of challenging topography. Over the past forty or fifty years, the heritage appeal of such railways has grown formidably, with many turned into star tourist attractions. One memorable example is the cliff railway linking Lynton and Lynmouth in North Devon, illustrated in the adjacent image. Built in 1888, it remains the United Kingdom's only water-powered railway, as well as the highest and steepest water railway in the world, with an elevation of 500 feet and 862 feet of steep track at a gradient of 57 per cent. The two passenger cars, connected by steel cables, operate on a balancing principle, using water from the West Lyn River which fills whichever car is docked at the summit. The lower docked car then discharges its water, whereupon it ascends as the heavier upper car comes down.

Just over 120 years ago, Ventnor appeared to be on schedule to have just such a railway, cable-operated and worked on the same water-balance principle. However, the scheme was a far grander one than that at Lynton-Lynmouth. It envisaged three separate sections. One was to run from the town centre to the railway station, another from the town centre to the Esplanade, and a third from the station to the top of the Downs. Two cars would run on the middle section, each with a capacity of 16 passengers, while single cars accommodating 20 passengers would run on the two other sections. The construction cost was estimated at £13,000. The Ventnor Inclined Light Railway Company gained parliamentary sanction in 1899. Thereafter, however, the scheme seems to have sunk without trace. From a report by a civil engineer, Francis Newman, commissioned by Ventnor Urban District Council in 1897, it appears that the middle section (between Church Street and the Station yard) was to be partly in tunnels beneath roads and property, with Newman raising questions about the varied surface

geology and the difficulties that the underlying gault clay might present for such excavations. He further observed how much of the town was actually built on slipped strata, something that the town's residents know all too well today.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre – part two next week



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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