

A Brief History of the Whitby to Pickering Line

Whitby and Pickering Railway (1836 – 1845)

After the Stockton and Darlington railway successfully opened in 1825, a route from Whitby to either Stockton or Pickering was deemed necessary. Whitby needed a railway to regenerate it because the local industries of whaling and shipbuilding were in decline. In 1832 the railway engineer, George Stephenson, was asked to do a report on the routes. He was in favour of a horse drawn railway to Pickering.

It was intended to link the line to York and beyond. Supplies to build the railway were brought by boat and then by ox-cart. The railway company didn't have a lot of money, so they wanted to start carrying passengers and goods as soon as possible. On Monday 8th June 1835 the line between Whitby and the Tunnel Inn (now called Grosmont) was opened. The company's First Class Coach 'Premier' left Whitby at 2 o'clock in the afternoon, returning about 8 o'clock. The line right through to Pickering opened on 26th May 1836 and connected at Pickering with the stagecoach to York, where further trains could be caught. The building of the railway created a number of new local industries, such as stone quarries, lime kilns and ironstone mines.

The earliest remaining structure on the North Yorkshire Moors Railway is the original tunnel at Grosmont, which was built for the horse drawn Whitby and Pickering Railway in 1834.

York and North Midland Railway (1845 – 1854)

The Whitby and Pickering Railway was taken over by the York and North Midland Railway in 1845, due to lack of money. The railway became part of George Hudson's growing empire and rail journeys became possible from Whitby right through to the industrial areas of Britain - such as Hull, Manchester, Liverpool and London. In the opposite direction, Whitby became an accessible destination for holidaymakers.

With a connected national rail network, Royal Mail soon started using the railways to carry the post. The first train from York to Whitby each morning was the mail train - a train that continued running for about one hundred and twenty years.

North Eastern Railway (1854 – 1923)

The York and North Midland railway merged with other railway companies to form the North Eastern Railway Company in 1854. In the early 1860s the North Eastern Railway decided to tackle the problems caused by the Beck Hole Incline* (see below) by starting to build a deviation line which avoided the steep hill. They also built a new station at Goathland and the work was completed in 1865.

Later years

The North Eastern Railway became part of the London and North Eastern Railway in 1923 and continued running until 1965. As part of the Beeching plan, it was suggested that all existing railways to Whitby should be closed. Only the Whitby to Middlesbrough line was allowed to remain open.

Many local people were convinced that the Whitby to Pickering line could still be viable if run with voluntary help. The North Yorkshire Moors Railway was formally constituted in 1967 by a group of enthusiasts intent on preserving at least part of the Whitby and Pickering line.

Owing to the high costs involved, the original intention was to buy just the section of line from Grosmont to Ellerbeck for £35,000, but then the County Council and the Tourist Board began to take an interest. They saw that, with the railway offering the best access to Newtondale, a railway would be preferable to having excessive traffic on the narrow roads. Therefore, the County Council provided the financial support for the purchase of the line right through to Pickering.

In 1971 the line achieved charitable status. The assets of both the preservation society and the company were transferred to the North York Moors Historical Railway Trust Ltd., which has as its aims “to advance the education of the public in the history and development of railway locomotion by the maintenance in working order of the historic and scenic railway line between the towns of Grosmont and Pickering”. The section between Grosmont and Pickering was opened by the Duchess of Kent on 1 May 1973 and trains now run daily from March to November.

***Beck Hole Incline**

The Beck Hole incline is a steep slope between Beck Hole and Goathland. It was so steep that trains could not travel up it unassisted, so a system was put in place which involved hauling the carriages up with cables. There were a number of instances where the cable snapped, resulting in overturned goods wagons. However, in February 1864 a fatal accident occurred. The wire rope broke and the passenger carriages shot down the incline and rolled over at the first sharp bend. Two men were killed and other people were injured. This eventually resulted in moving rail services to the new (1865) deviation line.

However, in 1908 the old Beck Hole line was reopened as a holiday service from Grosmont and operated until the outbreak of war in 1914. The incline is now part of a walk between Goathland and Grosmont called the Rail Trail.