

Revisiting Marine Drive - Do

Buildings at Risk looks at buildings and structures lost, saved and currently at risk. This week's instalment - written by Frank Cowin of the Isle of Man Natural History and Antiquarian Society - includes all three: a lost tramway, a saved archway, and the Marine Drive itself which is at risk from both geology and further access restrictions.

In 1890 more or less at the same time as the 'Eiffel Tower' bridge scheme ran out of money and failed, a company calling itself 'Douglas Head Marine Drive Limited' was working on a scheme to form a road along the coast from Douglas Head towards Port Soderick so that people could take advantage of the spectacular views it would provide access to.

Most of the land involved was part of the Nunnery Estate and ran close to the edge of the cliff.

The company would charge people to use the road and pay 5% of the receipts to Major Goldie Taubman.

Work started and by 1891 some mile-and-a-half of roadway had been formed. It was approached through a very imposing double-arched gateway with the toll keeper's house attached and which clung precariously to the cliff face. The arches and house were all built of local stone with some brick detailing.

Pigeon Stream had been bridged allowing the roadway to get as far as the steep-sided inlet at Wallberry.

At that point, the money ran out but the following year extra funds from some Lancashire businessmen allowed work to continue with the construction of remarkable bridges



Some of the convoluted geology along the Marine Drive

at Wallberry and Horseleap. However, by the time the roadway reached Keristal the money had run out again.

Turning inland, the road joined the 'Old Castletown Road' at the foot of Oakhill

alongside the steam railway line constructed some 20 years earlier. Another toll house was constructed here but using timber and corrugated iron.

Some of the Lancashire

Archway and toll keeper's House

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businessmen were also involved with an engineering firm at Old Trafford and it was no doubt that involvement and experience that had resulted in the bridges at Wallberry and Horseleap.

They saw the possibility of a railway along the road and, having got a concession for it, they obtained the help of the Electric and General Corporation of Westminster who were to be paid largely in shares in the proposed Douglas Southern Electric Railway Limited which was to build and run it.

It was built as a single line

with passing places and, unlike the other rail systems in the island, was 4'8½" gauge (standard British railway gauge). The rails were laid on the landward side of the road but along the centre line of the bridges.

There were six motorised trams and six trailers all with two decks fully open at the top and open at the sides below, but later fitted with canvas drop-down curtains at the sides.

The railway company undertook to pay the Marine Drive Company one (old) pen-

ny per passenger carried.

The Douglas terminus was opposite the 'Playdium' - later a restaurant and now apartments - and which was visited by George Formby during the 1935 filming of No Limit, the showing of which was for so long a feature of race weeks.

The Pigeon Stream bridge, originally built of wood, had been replaced in steel with a timber deck like Horseleap and the two spans, 256-foot long Wallberry bridge.

The Railway Company had taken the line past Keristal to terminate some 180 feet above the beach level on the north-side of Port Soderick Bay, with steps and pathway down to the beach.

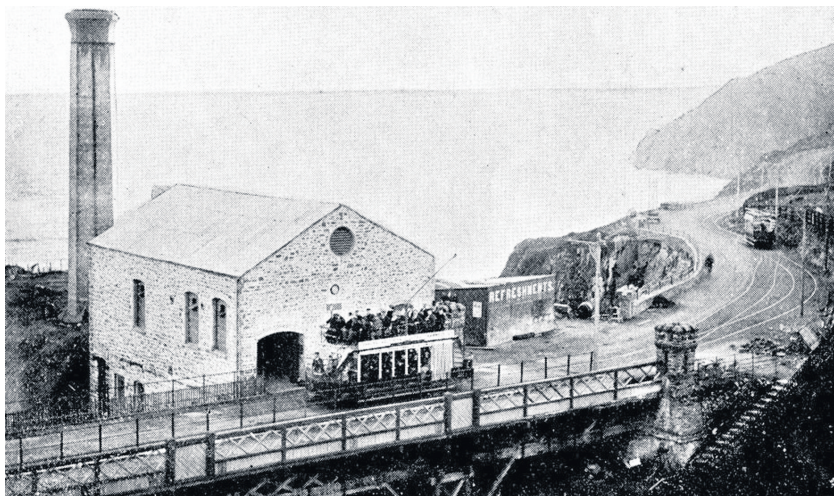
The generating station which provided the electricity for the lines was built into the steep southern valley side of Pigeon Stream of stone with corrugated iron roof. It ceased to be needed when the Douglas Town supply was extended to Douglas Head in 1933 and the generating equipment was sold off.

A 'garage' and workshop for the trams was constructed at Little Ness and was a corrugated clad structure.

A paybox and a shelter were provided at the Port Soderick terminus and when the original cliff lift at the Falcon Cliff Hotel in Douglas was replaced on a new site in 1897, it was relocated to serve alongside the path and steps at Port Soderick.

Some time later, the lift's original 'cars' were replaced with larger ones and the old ones used as kiosks at the north end of Port Soderick promenade.

Not long after the Electric Railway opened to the public in August 1896 (the year after the Snaefell Mountain Railway opened), the Marine Drive Company went into receiver-



The Pigeon Stream power station in operation



The derelict power station, now demolished as infill for the Pigeon Stream parking area

Douglas Head to Port Soderick



The precipitous Wallberry viaduct

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The tram garage

iMuseum

ship, leaving the Railway Company unaffected.

The development of Port Soderick and its attractions by the Forrester family into a 'must visit' place for visitors and locals was the subject of earlier articles in this series.

In 1914, with the start of the Great War, Port Soderick with its attractions along with the railway and all the Douglas Head facilities had to close prematurely towards the end of what should otherwise have seen the greatest ever number of visitor arrivals.

The island and its activities survived the war and the closedown but never again achieved the visitor arrival numbers of 1913. Many families and individuals suffered, as witnessed by the great number of names on the War Memorials.

Port Soderick flourished once more but many of those going there used other methods of transport, going by

boat, walking on inland roads or the footpaths which took in the 'other' Fairy Bridge near the boundary of the Nunnery lands – more properly Priory lands.

Big numbers chose to travel on the Steam Railway and then down the road or alternatively the glen.

Consequently, the Douglas Southern Electric Railway saw a drop in passenger numbers and consequently income, but survived.

The start of the Second World War in 1939 saw another closedown for all activities – indeed a greater degree of closure with HMS Valkyrie requisitioning the Douglas Head Hotel and surrounding area for use in connection with equipment and personnel.

At sea just off Little Ness was a practice bombing range greatly used by the Barracuda aircraft stationed at HMS Urley (Ronaldsway) whilst undergoing training.

These planes, only half-jokingly, were said to be nearly

as lethal to the crew as to the enemy.

Built on Little Ness was a 'Spotting'/Observation station to check the accuracy of the bombs or torpedoes dropped. A number of planes were lost during these activities.

Despite the supposed closure of the area to the public during the nesting season, it was a magnet to those wishing to supplement their egg ration despite seagull eggs having a fairly strong taste.

Their activities unfortunately sometimes ended in tragedy.

This time, re-opening after the war ended in 1945 was generally successful but, while visitor numbers were initially high, they dropped as overseas destinations became more easily and more cheaply available.

Some changes occurred straight away in that increased age and lack of maintenance meant that the Douglas South-

ern Electric Railway did not reopen.

The Marine Drive did, however, but the bridges were made pedestrian only and later they were confined to the centre between the railway lines before even that was considered dangerous and a pathway constructed up and around the two bigger bridges.

The Marine Drive had been acquired by the Manx Government in 1946. The trams which had survived the war in their shed were scrapped, although Tram Number 1 was rescued and went to the Crich Tramway Museum in Derbyshire for preservation.

By 1956 the Marine Drive had been reopened, the bridges having been removed and the cliff face cut back to form a roadway around each gully.

At Pigeon Stream the stream was culverted and the roadway 'embanked' over it. The adjoining Generating House was demolished and the site filled over to form a parking/viewing area.

At the southern end, the

road was extended to join up with the Port Soderick Road and a generous car park provided. At Port Soderick itself a turning circle was provided so that a drop-off system could operate for both private vehicles and also buses.

In 1955, Douglas Corporation had taken a lease on the whole of the facilities at Port Soderick with the intention of upgrading it so as to be a major attraction once more. The following year the lease became a purchase and work centred on the main buildings.

An initial success gradually dwindled away, partly because of the drop in visitor numbers, but also in part due to intermittent closures of the access along Marine Drive.

The spectacular nature of the geology with the clearly visible folds and faults of the rocks meant that they were weak and subject to breaking away and falling onto the road,

or worse to allow a section of the roadway to collapse.

In 1976 the road was closed and the bypass footpath reinstated. In 1975 the glen had been transferred to the care of the then Forestry, Mines and Land Board. In 1984 the main Port Soderick site had been sold and any remaining land dedicated to public use.

The roadway was reopened in 1994 but it was not long before the area, including Wallberry and Horseleap, had to be gated to exclude vehicles on all but very controlled occasions.

Even as this is being written, a scheme has been put forward to close the whole of the Marine Drive to vehicular traffic beyond the archway leaving it open only to walkers and cyclists.

This would deny the best of the views to the less mobile and it would seem more desirable to make any such closure point at Pigeon Stream and to improve the parking there, with the best of the views reserved for those with disabled parking permits.



Port Soderick, with inclined railway to connect with the Douglas Southern Electric Railway



The wide range of attractions and activities at Port Soderick