



1836

The Whitby to Pickering Railway Line

In the early 1800's Whitby's merchants decided they needed a way to increase trade in order to compete with merchants in Stockton. Stockton had good transport connections due to the Stockton and Darlington railway built by the engineer George Stephenson, which helped develop trade. Whitby had poor land transport connections because routes across the boggy moorland were difficult. In 1832 George Stephenson was asked to plan a route, and work began.

At first the line ran from Whitby to 'Tunnel' (Grosmont). It was then extended to Pickering and opened in 1836. But the line had been built cheaply and was unable to carry the heavy steam locomotives used on other lines. Passengers were transported in carriages which were pulled along the rails by horses. It was too steep for horses to get up onto Goathland's moor and a mile-long incline (gentle slope) was constructed. The carriages were attached to ropes and heavy tanks full of water slid downhill on rails, dragging the carriages up the slope as they went down, in a balanced system.



Entrance to horse-drawn railway tunnel at Grosmont

The line lost money because it did not carry a lot of goods or passengers. In 1845 it was improved by George Hudson, a businessman who invested in railways. At Grosmont a bigger tunnel was built and new stations were made. Importantly, the line was connected to the new Scarborough and York line that Hudson had developed. By 1847 the Whitby line was connected to York.

But there continued to be problems. At Goathland, trains were still being lifted and lowered by rope, and two people were killed in a runaway train accident in 1864 when the rope snapped. There needed to be change.

In 1860 The North Eastern Railway took over the railway and in 1865 improved the line, mainly because of the increasing ironstone trade in the area. A new line was built above Goathland from Grosmont to Moorgates, bypassing the rope incline but needing heavy engineering works due to its steep gradient.

A century later, due to the increasing use of motor cars, the government made cuts to the railway network across Britain, and the line from Grosmont through Pickering to Malton closed in 1965. The public outcry when the service south of

Whitby was cut resulted in a Preservation Society being formed in 1967, supported by enthusiastic volunteers who raised funds. In 1968 work started to revive the railway.

The North Yorkshire Moors Railway opened in 1973 and now carries over 300,000 passengers annually. The railway meets the Network Rail line at Grosmont: this runs on to Whitby, and the Whitby to Pickering Railway has therefore been reinstated.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why was it difficult for Whitby merchants to develop trade as well as their Stockton rivals did in the early 1800's?

They had poor transport connections.

2. Which engineer was asked to help improve the transport connections?

George Stephenson.

3. What had been the problem?

Routes across the moorland were difficult because it was boggy.

4. When was the Whitby to Pickering line originally opened?

1836

5. Why was the line unable to carry heavy steam locomotives?

It had been built cheaply and there was a steep hill up onto the moor.

6. How do you think the water-balanced system worked to get carriages up and down the incline? Work in groups and discuss this with your teacher.

Carriages ran on two lines. The carriages had water-tanks underneath them and a rope at the upper end of each of the two carriages which ran round a pulley at the top. When each carriage reached the top of the incline, its water-tank was filled with water (from a reservoir). As the carriage then descended down the track, its weight pulled the carriage on the other line upwards. The water was emptied from the tank when it reached the bottom of the incline to make the carriage lighter for the upwards journey. The system worked because of gravity.

7. Who helped save and improve the line in 1845 when it had lost money?

George Hudson

8. What important changes did he make?

A bigger tunnel was built at Grosmont and new stations were made. The line was connected to the Scarborough to York line, so that from 1847 steam locomotives were able to pull trains from Whitby and Pickering through to York.

9. Why did there need to be change in 1864?

Trains were still being lifted and lowered by rope and two people were killed when a rope snapped.

10. What reason is given for the North Eastern Railway to take over the railway and improve the line in 1865?

Mostly because of the increasing ironstone trade.

11. Why were cuts made to the railway network a century later?

Because of increasing car ownership ('the motor age') which made the government think trains were no longer so necessary.

12. What happened as a result of the closure of the Grosmont to Malton section of the line in 1965?

There was a public outcry and a Preservation Society was set up. Work began to revive the railway.

13. How has the Whitby to Pickering railway been reinstated?

The North Yorkshire Moors Railway (opened in 1973) meets the Network Rail line at Grosmont, which means trains can go right through from Whitby to Pickering.

Find out more:

- North Yorkshire Moors Railway, <https://www.nymr.co.uk/>
- 'A History of the Whitby and Pickering Railway' by G.W.J.Potter (1906, reprinted 1969)