



## The Whitby and Pickering Railway

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Whitby's early 19th century wealth came via the sea, since land communications across the boggy moorland had always been difficult. Then in 1825 Whitby's merchants saw the impact of railways on their Stockton rivals. George Stephenson had built the Stockton & Darlington Railway for local coal-mine owners, transforming the wealth of the Tees Valley by bringing coal to the coast quickly and cheaply. Whitby's future clearly depended on better links, but what sort - and where should they go? Plans for a canal were soon discarded and the advice of George Stephenson was sought.

Stephenson explored options, surveyed a route and, after parliamentary approval, supervised construction; he was a busy man, however, and the exact survey of the chosen route to Pickering was prepared by Fred Swanwick, one of his young assistants, who subsequently became a significant railway builder himself.

After opening first from Whitby to 'Tunnel' (Grosmont), services ran to Pickering from May 1836. But the Whitby & Pickering line had necessarily been built cheaply. Structures could not carry the heavy steam locomotives used elsewhere; horses provided the motive power, while passengers travelled in mail coaches on railway wheels. To lift carriages up onto Goathland's moors whilst avoiding gradients too challenging for horses, a mile-long

inclined plane was installed where the weight of descending loads lifted ascending trains via a connecting rope. The descending load had always, of course, to be heavier than that ascending. This was achieved by travelling water tanks, filled from a reservoir at the top of the incline and emptied at the bottom.

Whilst the new railway worked, its low capacity, limited market and high costs brought commercial failure. In 1845 it was saved by George Hudson, who was busy shaping a network of railways across the north, including a line from York to Scarborough. Hudson bought the railway at a bargain price and rebuilt it to higher standards, laying double track over new, stronger, bridges. A bigger tunnel was made at Grosmont and new stations were built. Crucially, the line was extended to join the new Scarborough to York line. From 1847, locomotives pulled full-sized trains from Whitby to Pickering and onwards to York and even London. But the route still included Goathland incline, and for another eighteen years, trains were raised or lowered on the end of a rope between Goathland and Beckhole. Charles Dickens noted the system's curiosity in letters written to Wilkie Collins at Whitby in 1861. The system prevented extra holiday trains being run to Whitby and it was feared by the public: in 1864, two people were killed in a runaway after the rope broke. Change was needed.

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By 1860 most of northeast England's railways had been consolidated into a huge regional monopoly, the North Eastern Railway. In 1865 the NER improved lines serving Whitby and the Moors, not least because of the increasing ironstone trade from the area. Eventually, a new line was built from Grosmont to Moorgates, above Goathland, bypassing the rope incline but requiring heavy engineering works as the line climbed a three-mile 1:50 gradient – near the limit for contemporary locomotives. The Esk Valley's railway network was now complete.

A century later Dr Richard Beeching was charged with reshaping the railway for the motor age. Much argument resulted over which of Whitby's routes should be maintained, and eventually the Esk Valley villages' need for school transport prevailed over Whitby's connection to York and the south. The line from Grosmont Junction through Pickering to Malton closed in 1965.

Public reaction to the Beeching closures was

immense and the loss of services south from Whitby was no exception. In June 1967 local people launched a Preservation Society. Volunteers came together, funds were raised and public support was garnered. In 1968, once a deposit was paid for the railway's land between Grosmont and Pickering and the track as far as the summit at Ellerbeck, work started to resuscitate the railway. Later, the County Council helped the Society buy the rest of the track through a mortgage.

After a huge amount of hard work to provide the locomotives, carriages and maintenance facilities which a free-standing line needs, the North Yorkshire Moors Railway opened in May 1973. It has never received regular public funding but thanks to the efforts of staff and volunteers it has become the world's busiest steam heritage railway, with over 300,000 passengers annually. Uniquely, it has gained powers to run trains onwards from Grosmont over Network Rail's line into Whitby, thus reinstating the original service of the Whitby & Pickering Railway.



### Find out more

North York Moors Historical Railway,  
<https://www.nymr.co.uk/>

'A History of the Whitby and Pickering Railway'  
by G.W.J. Potter (1906, reprinted 1969)



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*North Yorkshire Moors Railway: Levisham*