The Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway

Introduction

But please don't let these differences in size fool you into thinking that the RHDR is anything but a proper railway. We carry nearly 200,000 people a year over our 13.5 mile long line. There are six stations at which you can break your journey, cafes at New Romney and Dungeness, 12 locomotives, over 70 passenger coaches including a Royal Saloon and a licensed observation car, a splendid model exhibition at New Romney and a full time staff of over 30 people to share the operation and maintenance.

A Brief History

In 1925 Howey acquired two part finished 15" gauge 4-6-2 pacific locomotives being built by the Colchester firm of Davey Paxman to the order of Count Louis Zobrowski. Unfortunately Zobrowski, a great friend of Howey, was killed whilst racing at Monza before the engines were finished so Howey stepped in and had them completed.

The locomotives were designed by the eminent model engineer Henry Greenly who based them on the 'Flying Scotsman' type locomotives then in service with the London and North Eastern Railway. In order to extract the maximum power from the locomotives Greenly had specified that they should be one third full size instead of the true 15" gauge scale of one quarter.

Howey now had the two finest miniature locomotives ever built and he commissioned Greenly to find a suitable site and build the worlds first 15" gauge double track mainline railway on which to run them.

The route finally chosen was one that linked the Kent seaside towns of Hythe and Dymchurch with the Southern Railway station at New Romney. As well as the railway providing a useful local service the almost level terrain of the Romney Marsh would mean that high speed running was the rule rather than the exception!

Construction of the line was far enough advanced by August 1926 to allow a special train to be run to convey the Duke of York from St. Mary's Bay to New Romney where he was able to inspect the progress being made at the line's headquarters.

A Journey by Train.

Hythe Station stands at the West End of the town alongside the Royal Military Canal. Trains travelling towards Hythe are said to be 'up' trains, while those travelling away from Hythe are said to be 'down' trains. This station is the only terminus on the line and even though the track layout has been simplified it is still an imposing place. As you enter the station from the large car park you will find a bright booking hall with a ticket office and one of the railway's souvenir and gift shops.

Once through the ticket barrier you will find that the station has three platform tracks and an 'engine road'. This latter track allows the engines to be released from their trains to proceed to the turntable. At the far end of the platforms you will find a signal box which houses the levers for operating the points and signals, and the large signal gantry which has both colour light and 'semaphore' type signals. Nearby is the turntable and watering facility for the locomotives; the small engine shed is no longer used by the railway as all engines are kept at New Romney.

On leaving the station the railway runs between the suburban houses of West Hythe before breaking into open country at Palmarsh. From here the railway takes an almost dead straight course across an area known as 'The Willop'. This is the fastest stretch on the line and you will be travelling at 25 miles an hour. The hills of Lympne together will the remains of the Roman Fort lemains and the imposing Lympne Castle fall quickly behind as the driver hurries the train on towards Dymchurch. A gentle curve leads the train across Burmarsh Road and past the platform used by the children of Southlands School as they wait for the morning school train.

Arriving at Dymchurch

Soon the train arrives at Dymchurch station (5 miles from Hythe). Although much rebuilt in recent years the station retains some of its old features, not least of all the footbridge with the toilets built into the step supports (the designer of the line - Henry Greenly - was not a man to waste space). The town, which has a fine sandy beach and offers all the usual seaside amusements, is only two of three minutes walk from the station.

When the railway first opened Dymchurch had a signal box, several sidings, a turntable and an overall roof spanning the main line. Over the years all of these features have disappeared, but on a warm summers day Dymchurch is still one of the nicest stations on the line.

Jefferstone lane

The next station is Jefferstone Lane which is the closest stop to the fine sands of St. Mary's Bay. Alongside the Hythe end of the down platform you will see a long single storey bungalow called 'The Long Boat'. For several years before her death this was the home of the author E. Nesbitt, amongst her most famous works was the much loved 'Railway Children'. She is buried in the church at nearby St. Mary in the Marsh.

From Jefferstone lane the railway wends its way between houses and fields towards New Romney. As it starts to leave the houses behind, the railway crosses a wide drainage canal and it was from here in 1926 the Duke of York (Late King George VI) drove the first train to and from New Romney.

Now you are travelling through open fields with the line curving gently round to the left through a shallow cutting known as 'The Warren'. Suddenly you are plunged into darkness as the train rushes through the short tunnel round to the right before crossing yet another small canal and entering New Romney.

The History of New Romney

For the answer we have to go back several centuries to the time when New Romney stood at the mouth of the river and had a large harbour. In those days the area in which we now have our headquarters was just above the middle of the harbour and the bank that we know as 'Half Mile Curve' was part of the sea wall. One day there was a terrible storm, so bad that it diverted the river, which now flows into the sea at Rye. Slowly over the following years the harbour silted up and the sea moved farther away from the town. Although this happened many years ago we still have problems with drainage at New Romney and in bad weather the level of water in the tunnel under the road really does depend upon the state of the tide!

New Romney Station

New Romney station (8 miles from Hythe) is the largest station on the railway and is also its headquarters. All the locomotives and rolling stock are kept here. There are comprehensive facilities for the repair of engines and coaches as well as a coach building shop and permanent way store. Although these areas are not normally open to the public it is possible to arrange tours providing some advance warning is given.

The railway has recently opened a new buffet at New Romney which provides a good selection of hot and cold snacks and drinks in comfortable surroundings. Upstairs there is a superb model exhibition, where as well as a number of large exhibits there is a magnificent operating model railway. The souvenir shop is larger than that at Hythe and also carries a selection of video tapes relating to different sorts of transport.

Before the train can leave New Romney to continue its journey to Dungeness the driver must first collect the 'tablet' from the post by the footbridge. This is because the line beyond New Romney is single track and there is only one place that trains may pass. This 'passing loop' has been installed at Romney Sands and effectively splits the Dungeness line into separate sections, one between New Romney and Romney Sands and one between Romney Sands and Dungeness. No train may enter either single line section unless the driver carries, or is shown, the 'tablet' for that section.

Leaving New Romney

The train leaves New Romney by tunnelling under Littlestone Road. Once through the tunnel the line becomes single track and starts to climb up the bank between the trees. A gentle curve to the left brings the line out into open countryside at 'Half Milecurve'. You may have thought that the Romney marsh was flat and wondered why there was a gradient out of the station.

Dungeness Station

The train slows for Britannia Points before entering the turning circle at Dungeness Station. Here next to the two nuclear power stations and the two lighthouses is the end of the line. For the hungry or thirst there is a cafe at the station and a public house within easy walking distance.

Dungeness was once called 'The Lane That God Never Finished' and at first glance you can see why. But it still has a charm of its own; the area is a haven for many thousands of visiting birds, it is world renowned for the moths and butterflies that abound, and if you look closely at the ground you will find a great variety of unusual plant life. If you have more than a passing interest in natural history then Dungeness will not disappoint you.

Working on the Romney Hythe and Dymchurch Railway

If you fancy the idea of working on the RHDR then you need one major qualification - adaptability!.

The station master who directs you to the trains during the summer could well be the railway's electrician in the winter, your train driver is possibly a member of the track laying gang or a coach painter, and the person who clipped your ticket could also be the railway's gardener. By having multi-skilled people working for us we are able to provide regular employment all year round for about 30 people.

During the summer we take on more 'seasonal staff' to work in the shops, cafes, ticket offices and model exhibition.

The RH&DR is no ordinary railway, in physical size for instance it is smaller than most. On a standard gauge railway such as British Rail the distance between the rails is 4' 8.5" but here on the Romney we use the smaller 'minimum gauge' of 15". To run on this track we have special locomotives and coaches which are only one third as big as their full size brothers and sisters.

The RH& DR owes its existence to Captain J.E.P. Howey an English millionaire who owned a large section of land in the commercial centre of Melbourne (Australia). The income from this property gave Howey more than enough money to indulge both his love of fast cars and his enthusiasm for miniature steam locomotives.

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