

RODNEY'S RAILWAY



I wonder how many people are aware that one hundred and forty years ago there was a private railway in Alresford? The railway ran round the field next to Cardew House in East Street.

It was constructed by Robert Dennett Rodney, grandson of the famous admiral, who resided at Cardew House, then in use as a Dower House. The seat of the Rodney family was at Alresford House in Old Alresford.

The first reference to the railway is contained in the Hampshire Chronicle for March 27th 1843 :-

"A curiosity in railway engineering is now in progress in a meadow in the parish of New Alresford, where Captain Robert Rodney, of the Scots Guards, has constructed at great expense, a railway in the form of a circle, approximately 400 yards across, during the winter months which in its course presents various specimens of engineering, including a tunnel 70 yards long, under the trees by the side of the Alton road. The opulent proprietor has been very liberal to the workmen employed during the last four months. A loco engine and two beautifully finished coaches are being built for the line, which is expected to be opened for use soon after Easter".

The next reference is from an old guide to Alresford dated February 1896 :-

"LORD RODNEY'S UNDERGROUND RAILWAY - Few probably of the present generation are aware that there existed some few years since an underground railway at Alresford on the principle of the present roundabouts now in use at the few remaining fairs. In a meadow adjoining the town, opposite the residence of the late Major Pipon on the Bishop's Sutton Road, was a circular excavation, the exact

depth I am now unable to give, in which was laid a single line of rails reached by a flight of steps; and here his lordship was often wont to enjoy a railway trip on his own estate. His engineer was, I believe, the late William Spary, then the host of the Sun Inn, East Street. Perhaps some of your readers can give some interesting account of this toy railway, and the reason which led his lordship to make such an eccentric experiment - CL".

The most informative piece of evidence is an account, in a notebook, by Henry Spary, son of William Spary. William Spary is believed to have been the engineer of Rodney's Railway. The notes were made shortly before Henry died in 1917 :-

"Three quarters of a mile round. The cuttings - tunnel - 21ft. deep, 75 yds. long, under the trees by side of Turnpike Road. About sixty navvies employed, two and a half years to make. Brick tunnel about seven feet high,, six wide. Name of engine "Formidable". Made by J. Warner & Co., London. The largest engine took the two outside rails, the smallest an outside and middle rail.

To get level with bottom of tunnel on the lower side of the meadow strong piles about 8 feet long were driven down and all the chalk wheeled out and put between the piles to make a firm foundation all along by the large elm trees. Also a copper furnace fixed for getting hot water. About ten carriages and trucks would hold four persons each, would go round I should think from 20 to 25 miles an hour.

One day an accident and lot ran off the line down into the water meadow and lucky enough to go down by one of the large elm trees so pulleys could be used to get it up. Sometimes the engineers used to come down. If obliged to be repaired in London it had to be sent by Mr. Vine's 6 to 8 horse waggon with two large horn lanterns hung on by hooks and driven by a man commonly called Old Jimmy Collyer and George Wiltshire, two very old servants. It used to take eight of them to put it into the waggon and about three day's journey.

So far as the railway, after it was finished, ready in good going and safe order all the people in town was up there to have a look and any young ladies which was here in the forties, which many could be mentioned, was invited by the owner, R.D. Rodney Esq. to take a few journeys round. His delight was on going round about twice to get up a good speed and on just entering the tunnel he would put in about three sifters of dust charcoal so when they came out the other end of the tunnel there were several on fire. When Capt. Mannington Pipon and Miss Rodney, which was keeping company at the time, went round and used to have a time - anything for sport and fun".

"Formidable" was the name of Admiral Rodney's flagship at the Battle of the South 1781.

It is also of interest to note that Miss Rodney married Captain Pipon and Robert Dennett Rodney became the 6th Lord Rodney.

The Spary notes refer to the diameter of the railway as 400 yards and a circumference of 3/4 mile. This does not fit into the existing field but we must remember the notes are an old man's recollections of events which took place many years before.

In the field there appears to be no indication of an old railway, although two small pieces of old rail have been found elsewhere and in the late 1920's I recollect that a subsidence occurred in the edge of the A31 close to where the tunnel appears to have been. It was rumoured at the time that an underground passage was revealed but no one seems to have connected it with the old railway.

The absence of physical evidence is unfortunate as this railway was of quite remarkable antiquity. The first passenger carrying railway in the world was the Liverpool to Manchester which opened in 1825. Rodney's railway was probably the first private railway in this country if we exclude experimental railways before 1825.

There seems to be a widespread belief in Alresford that Rodney's Railway was much longer than the Spary notes suggest. It is claimed that the railway linked Cardew House with Alresford House, the route running parallel with the Great Weir and passing via a tunnel (which still exists) in the grounds of "Tanglewood" at the bottom of Broad Street. However, the tunnel in "Tanglewood" may well have been dug to store beer casks. I quote from the 1743 will of Thomas Fielder, brewer, who owned Brewhouse Close, which covered some of "Tanglewood":- "..... where I have a Brewhouse lately built with two vaults and other buildings".

In the grounds of Cardew House is a building often referred to as the "Signal Box". Dr. I. Sanderson considers this building shows no signs of ever having been used as a signal box, and it appears to be an eighteenth century summer-house or garden pavilion.

In the absence of evidence the case for the longer railway cannot be substantiated. In any case the gradient must put in doubt the feasibility of the route.

I have given all the available evidence on Rodney's Railway. If any reader has further information I shall be pleased to hear from him.

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