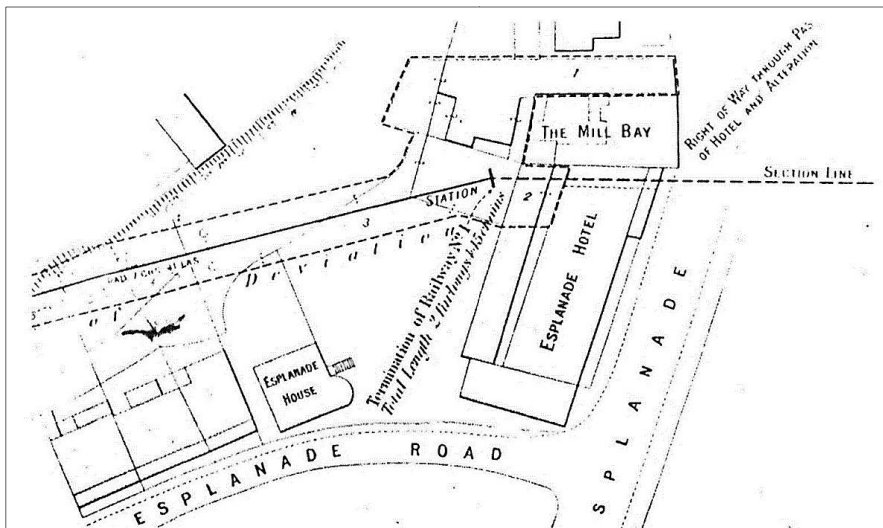




## The Ventnor Cliff Railway or Funicular that never was! Part Two



In this week's article, we continue to trace the story of Ventnor's efforts to construct a cliff railway, beginning with a French engineer's scheme of 1908. Fritz Bernard Behr, who lived locally, presented a new plan that once more linked Esplanade, Church Street, Station and the top of the Downs. This time, however, the railway was to be electrically operated rather than using the water balance principle, with a powerhouse located near to the station. Unlike the failed 1897 project, the planned railway (especially its middle section) would be above ground: in shallow cuttings, or on low embankments, with a few short underpasses. The cost was estimated at about £25,000, which included land and property purchase. The latter rested on negotiating satisfactory compensation agreements with owners. It was Behr's recommendation that Ventnor Urban District Council should undertake the project rather than leave it to private enterprise. Behr was subsequently invited to prepare drawings for the Light Railway Commission and, in due course, Commissioners attended in the Town Hall for a public enquiry in July 1909. By early 1910, though, it seems that the scheme had foundered for the lack of agreement over land and property acquisition. The ground plan below shows the location of the planned station for the Esplanade, behind the Mill Bay Inn, the line itself running uphill behind the buildings on Esplanade Road.



In 1912, the local architect Theodore Saunders was party to an offer to Ventnor's Council of a scheme to construct an inclined lift, wholly in a tunnel, that connected the Esplanade with Church Street. It was again to be electrically operated and offer a journey time of just one minute, its two lift cars accommodating 15 passengers each, with fares of 2d up and 1d down (pre-decimal money). Unfortunately, even this much less ambitious scheme foundered. The Town Council had recently mortgaged its rate income to renew sea defences and could not raise any more funds.

After the Great War of 1914-18, the newly formed Southern Railway Company decided in 1924 to revive the idea of a funicular linking the station with the Esplanade. It was to run from a point near to the Pier entrance up to Church Street (by Morant's Café) and thence through the grounds of The Grove and Elm Grove to reach the station yard. The Company did not envisage any intermediate station, on the funicular, but after pressure from the local council, it was agreed to include one near to Alpine Road. Unfortunately, and like so many of the earlier scheme, the proposals soon faded from view, for reasons that are not entirely clear, although the estimated cost of £40,000 may have been one of them.

Looking back over the years, the list of schemes discussed above is anything but exhaustive, for there seems to have been a powerful residual demand to find some way of addressing the way Ventnor's heavily terraced site and steep slopes presented a challenge to visitors. Inevitably, one is bound to speculate just how much more impressive Ventnor's current visitor profile might have been today if it had succeeded in building a funicular or lift and if that facility had been maintained to the present. It is another of those tantalising streams of thought that imagine a Ventnor still with Steephill Castle, or still boasting a railway along the Undercliff through St. Lawrence to Ventnor West.

*Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre*



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