

Going soon – part of Dawlish's railway heritage

The plans for the new sea wall northwards have a major impact on some of our heritage. The bathing pool which Brunel inadvertently created will be unrecognisable; the doorway where hundreds of Exonians were inveigled every Sunday to use a bathing machine amidst much rivalry and occasional fighting will disappear; the lower half of the downside station building which has kept out the seas for nearly 150 years will be encased in concrete and lost to view; the boat house which was home to the life-saving craft of the coastguard will be demolished and the pleasing design features of the steps that Brunel built which led from the lookout station to the boatshed will be half submerged in concrete. All this and a mysterious tunnel under the railway which may keep its secrets.

Exactly when the rebuilding will start is unknown at present so there is still time to visit the site and enjoy these landmarks of the early days of the railway. Here is a little guided tour to help you.

Standing on the iron Jubilee Bridge across Dawlish Water and looking towards the viaduct you can see the sea both under and above the viaduct. This is what Dawlishians had called for and raised a subscription for after the GWR had proposed a 9 arch bridge which would not have allowed a sight of the sea. The new plans will still give a view under the viaduct but above the viaduct the view will be partly obscured by a concrete bridge which links the new sea wall towards the tunnel and the proposed sea wall from the viaduct to Coastguards bridge.

From Jubilee Bridge head under the viaduct and turn left. You will notice that the platform extension is supported by metal columns. On closer inspection you will see that six of these metal columns are quite ornate (photo below). These were originally gas lamp standards but were reused here during the war when metalwork was in short supply. The plans say that they will be re-used for waymarking but no details are given.



Just beyond is a bricked in doorway designed to get excursion train passengers quickly off the platform and onto the beach. The last time that local people can remember it being used was during the war when a train of evacuated children drew in. Since then the ravages of the weather have led to its being blocked up. However, in its early days it was well known for being used when the sixpenny bathing train arrived on a Sunday morning. Representatives from the rival bathing machine companies would gather outside and sign up as many bathers as possible and sometimes the rivalry led to fights. For the bathers it was important to get to the beach quickly as their tickets only allowed about an hour before they had to be back at the station.

In front of the viaduct is the stilling basin designed by Brunel. It has been repaired many times and not a lot remains that is original. It is also a shadow of its former self as at one time people could swim here and some even played water polo. Under the new plans there

will continue to be a stilling basin but it will be redesigned and become a positive feature, an open space which will allow outside performances and the like. Before this happens though, if the tide is sufficiently low stroll onto the sand and look back at the basin and enjoy what is almost certainly the original stonework near the viaduct. There are large granite coping stones alternately laid horizontally and vertically presumably to key in and strengthen the limestone walling which you can find echoed just beyond the boat house and towards Langstone Rock. Note also the recurve at the top of the wall (see photo below). The current planners make great play in their presentation of their new recurve but Brunel got there first and subsequent engineers didn't always follow his advice. The Kings Walk towards the tunnel for instance was completely flat sided.



To get the full effect stay on the beach and walk until you are opposite the station building. From here you can see the original sea wall on either side of the building which continues towards the boat house. The limestone sea wall although repaired is the one built by Brunel and originally the footpath followed the base of the wall but at a lower level than now.



The station building from the beach.

The station building was not built by Brunel but by the South Devon Railway and opened in 1875 only one year before the company was taken over by the GWR. It is the best example of SDR architecture which is why it is grade 2 listed. Its rugged exterior has done well to hold back the storms for nearly 150 years. The ground floor has some useful inset seating areas but no windows. The first floor does have windows but the protective measures have not improved their appearance. Apparently when originally built the walls of the first floor were covered in a stucco plaster like the main station building.

The image of this impressive and rugged building is going to change completely. Only the first floor will be visible in future as the height of the new sea wall will be the same as that by Marine Parade so there will be a sheer wall of concrete with a recurve at the top from the level of the sand to the bottom of the first floor.

If you come back onto the pathway and past the building you will be taken under the platform extension supported by wooden columns. The concept of this sheltered cloister-like walk was proposed by Brunel in 1858 when the down platform was being built. The wooden construction of the platform has proved useful on several occasions for making quick and simple repairs. Old photographs show that the path was originally only as wide as the wooden pillars.

Just before the limestone wall gives way to granite there is a mysterious walled in archway 12 feet across (see photo below). It must have been walled in by 1875 when the footpath was raised. We are hoping that someone will be able to explain what it was used for. For now all we can say is that this archway was in direct line with the old atmospheric pumping station so maybe there was some connection.



This section of pathway ends at the steps and boathouse. When Brunel built the railway he had to knock down the original coastguard station with a boathouse below and lookout above as it was on the course of the line. The new lookout station and boatshed in dressed limestone were a great improvement but were unfortunately on different sides of the line and a bridge was needed to connect them. If you look carefully you will see that great care has been taken to match the steps and boatshed and both have interesting design features.



The boathouse and slipway.

The slipways will also disappear so it is worth noting that there are launching points on either side of the breakwater and can be used according to the direction of the wind. The launch point on the station side of the breakwater looks odd because there is a drop to the sand below. However old photos suggest that the sand was probably at a higher level when it was built. Despite its history the boatshed has not been listed and has been allowed to get into its current derelict condition. The plans ensure that it will be remembered as the back wall will remain in situ.

The steps and bridge (see photo below) have also not been well treated. The original ornate bridge deck was replaced by a depressing utilitarian design and various repairs have been carried out without love, but it still retains much of its grandeur and it will be sad to see half the bridge engulfed by concrete.



If you stand on the bridge deck you can see the station as it is now and envisage a wider down platform built of concrete but with the view of the station buildings mostly obscured by the new lift and stairs which will be a godsend to anyone with heavy luggage, buggies, wheelchairs and the like who currently has to rely on a barrow crossing which can only be used when the station is staffed. What with the new lift and the height of the new sea wall the joy of standing on the platform with a view of the bay and the impression of being part of the seascape will become just a memory.

One bonus that the plans offer is the reopening of waiting room facilities on the down platform at some point when the building has dried out.

If you want to learn more don't forget that Dawlish Local History Group has published three books:
Dawlish and the railway in the 19th century
Dawlish and the railway 1901 to today
Dawlish Railway History Walk [as it was before work on the new sea walls].

In addition, do remember that although we are losing Brunel's stilling basin, boathouse and half the coastguard steps you can still see the back wall of Brunel's atmospheric pumping station in Dawlish station carpark (see photo below).

