

Lartigue Monorail.

History:

The Listowel Ballybunion Railway opened on 1st March 1888; it ran the ten miles between the two towns and was remarkable because it was the first mono-railway in the world. How two small towns in the south west of Ireland came to be linked by the world's first monorail is a fascinating story.

The monorail employed on the Listowel-Ballybunion line was invented and developed by a French Engineer by the name of Charles François Marie-Thérèse Lartigue, hence the name Lartigue Monorailway by which the line was best known. Lartigue had built a prototype monorail in Algeria, it was about 90Km in length and was used to carry esparto grass across the desert. The cargo was carried in pannier-like wagons slung on either side of a single rail, which was itself mounted on A-shaped trestles. The wagons were connected to bogies whose wheels ran along the rail. Lartigue is reputed to have got the inspiration for this design from watching camels serenely carrying large loads in panniers balanced either side of their backs. There is no doubt that the single raised rail was a distinct advantage in the desert where shifting sands would have made a conventional rail line virtually unusable. The track which is portable consisted of 27 lb. per yard running rail in 33 ft lengths secured to the apex of the A shaped iron trestles. There is a legendary tale (typical Irish yarn) that says they once needed to carry a big bull and to balance the wagon they carried a pair of calves in the other side and then the calves were transported back one on each side!

In 1886 Lartigue brought a length of his line to an exhibition in London in the hope of selling his idea as a viable railway option. Coincidentally at this time the populace of North Kerry were lobbying for the railway system to be extended to include a link between Listowel and Ballybunion. This request was at that time lying on a minister's desk in Westminster, the rest as they say is history. It was decided that the Lartigue idea would be tried out on the Listowel-Ballybunion Railway.

The Listowel-Ballybunion Railway was opened in 1888 at a cost of £30,000 and it ran for 36 years until it was closed in 1924. The closure was hastened by the severe damage that was inflicted on the line during the civil war of 1921-23. The line was only barely financially viable for the whole of its existence, it is reputed never to have made a profit. The train carried freight, cattle, sand from the beaches and passengers. Among the passengers were Ballybunion school children going to the Listowel Secondary Schools, Kerry and Limerick people making their way to the beach resort of Ballybunion and golfers going to the fledgling golf course at Ballybunion which was to develop into one of the greatest golf courses in the world.

The engines, for instance and all the carriages had to be specially made at considerable expense (each locomotive had two boilers and two cabs, balanced on either side of the rail, the driver riding in one cab and the fireman in the other). And because the elevated railway crossed the country like a fence, bridges were needed to carry roads over the line - there could be no such thing as a 'level' at-grade crossing. There were two different methods for taking a road through the track. One was to have a section of the track that rotated out of the road and the other used an opening bridge similar to those often seen in Holland crossing the canals. The three original engines were built in Leeds by Hunslet Engine Company (works numbers 431-3 built in 1887).

Lartigue Restoration:

1988 saw the centenary of the opening of the Lartigue and several initiatives were taken to celebrate the event, among the most valuable of these was a history of the Lartigue written by local politician and Lartigue enthusiast Michael Guerin. Michael Barry of Lisselton had already assembled 50 metres of salvaged track and an original carriage and Michael Foster had written a valuable book on the Lartigue. From this time a feeling emerged that a restoration of the Lartigue should be attempted in some form. As a result, in the mid 1990's a Lartigue Restoration Committee was set up under the Chairmanship of Jimmy Deenihan TD, with Jack McKenna, who had travelled on the footplate of the original Lartigue, as President

After much work and fundraising by the committee, work started on the building of the new Lartigue on the site on John B Keane Road in November 2000. The construction work was carried out by an excellent team of FAS employees under the direction of members of the restoration committee and the train went in to operation in June 2003.

The railway has about 1000 metres of monorail track, three switches, two turntables and three platforms representing Listowel, Lisselton and Ballybunion. There is one engine, which is an exact reproduction of the original engines, save that the present engine is diesel driven. There are two third class carriages, which are as closely modelled on the originals as is possible using photographs and the memory of those who travelled in them. The engine, carriages, switches, turntables and the track A-frames were built by Alan Keef Ltd of Ross on Wye in Monmouth. Alan Keef are the builders of many theme railways in Britain and round the world and they have surpassed themselves on this occasion in producing these stunning Lartigue replicas.

The final touch of authenticity is the site itself, the present journey on the Lartigue starts less than 100m from the point where the original Lartigue commenced its journey to Ballybunion. The site of the original Lartigue Listowel Terminal is preserved in a park adjacent to the new Lartigue, the bases of two switches are preserved and the foundations of the Engine House. Lartigue President Jack McKenna most generously presented this park to the Lartigue Company.

There are many historical photographs of the original railway on the railways website and in various books including "The Irish Narrow Gauge – a pictorial history (volume one) by Tom Ferris". The current operation is daily during the summer months departing on the hour. For such a short length of line the hour between each departure is needed for the use of each of the turn tables and switches. Most of the train crews will show you how the loco sits on the track when they turn it round at the far end of the line. Just like most Irish preservation/recreation schemes the people that run the railway make you feel that you are part of their extended family.