

# THE GHOSTS OF CLAYTON TUNNEL.

## BY JOHN MARKS.

Clayton Tunnel is a railway tunnel located between the villages of Pyecombe and Clayton, West Sussex Between Hassocks and Preston Park railway stations on the Brighton to London Main Line.

At 1 mile 499 yards' long (2065 meters) the Sussex Clayton Tunnel is the longest on the route. The tunnel was designed by David Mocatta, architect to the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway.

It was completed in 1841 after 3 years of work.

It would not be an exaggeration to call the little house that nestles between two Gothic-inspired towers at the north entrance to Clayton Tunnel the most unusual dwelling in Sussex. The first remark people usually make is that it must be frightfully noisy. Surprisingly the answer is no. The noise of the train is pushed into the tunnel and only a slight vibration reaches the house above. Nor does the house become enveloped in clouds of smoke and smuts as it must have done in the days before electrification.

The story is that when the land was sold to the railway company, the landowner stipulated the tunnel entrance must be made distinctive and not be merely a black hole in the hillside, hence the Gothic folly. Tunnel House was built in the 1830's and served as a wages office for workers toiling on the railway cutting. After that it became a glorified mess room where gangers brewed up in their break time. Lastly it became a dwelling house and although only tiny with just two bedrooms, it seemed to attract large families. Mr. Russell head ganger, and his wife brought up a family of nine children and the third occupants, the Attmeres, had six children. The latter come to live there in 1956, renting it from British Rail.

Mrs. Muriel Attmere, later Mrs. Greenwood, loved living there because it was so peaceful and rural- in spite of the place being haunted. She said the ghosts were not frightening or she would not

Have remained for nigh on 38 years. One ghost was nicknamed Charlie although nobody knew his real identity. In one of the towers there is a sealed-off entrance to an inspection tunnel leading to ventilation shafts. It was in this inspection tunnel that footsteps were heard as well as eerie noises like screams or sighs. People have thought that, because of the location, it might be the ghost of an old ganger. When the entrance was doubly sealed Muriel often found herself thinking, Poor old Charlie,

Now he's stuck there.'

The sceptics would say the sounds were nothing more than wind playing tricks in the tunnels but that does not explain noises Muriel heard inside her home. She was sometimes aware of drumming sound on the table in her living room, just as though some man were sitting there, tapping his fingers impatiently.

Then there was the glow spotted on one of the towers, which Muriel saw more than once.

It was not a will o' the wisp light, but the outline of a man of medium height, seen both at dusk and later at night. Although the sounds did not disturb her, the glow certainly did. When she saw it she would never investigate but would turn round smartly and go back indoors.

There was also a White Lady. Although Muriel could sense her presence at times, she never saw the ghost. But two of her grandchildren (she had eleven) certainly did and called her to their bedroom to make it go away.

In part of Muriel 's garden there was an orchard of apple, pear and plum trees. Although it was a Lovely place, she did not care to linger there after dark because it had a powerfully sad atmosphere. This was not

surprising when you realize that corpses of people who had met an untimely end in Clayton Tunnel were formerly brought out and laid on this stretch of grass. Indeed, it was a marvel that the Tunnel House should have turned out to be such a happy home when so many tragedies have occurred close by.

#### ACCIDENT.

The Clayton Tunnel rail crash which took place on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> August 1861, five miles from Brighton On the south coast of England, was the worst accident of the British Railway system to that time. Two trains collided inside the tunnel, killing 23 and injuring 176 passengers.

The disaster scenario actually involved three successive northbound trains on the same track, which all left Brighton station within a few minutes of one another. The signalman at the south end of the tunnel tried to stop the second train from entering the tunnel before the first one had left it, but wrongly thought his red flag had not been seen, and then misinterpreted a telegraph signal from north end of the tunnel as referring to the second train instead of the first, assuming that both train had cleared the tunnel, he signaled the third one to proceed, but in fact the second train was trying to reverse out of the tunnel.

#### CIRCUMSTANCES.

Signalman Henry Killick had an alarm bell linked to a signal, a needle telegraph and a clock in his signal box, close to the south entrance of the tunnel. He could control the signal by a wheel in the cabin, but it would normally be at "danger" unless he approved a train to enter the tunnel. When a train passed, the signal returned automatically to "danger", but if it did not, the alarm bell would ring. The telegraph was linked to the north signal box, and would show there was train in the tunnel if the signalman at the other box activated it by pressing and holding down a switch. Otherwise the needle would hang vertically. Except for Clayton Tunnel, the line was worked on the time-interval system, requiring trains on the same track to be separated by 5 minutes. Despite this, the three trains actually left Brighton within 7 minutes:

- Portsmouth Excursion left at 8:28 am.
- Brighton Excursion left at 8:31 am.
- Brighton to Victoria left at 8.35 am.

At the tunnel mouth, the first train passed the signal at "clear", but he alarms bell rang to warn Killick that it had not returned to "danger". He sent a "train in tunnel message to Brown in north signal box, but did not return the signal to "danger" in time to stop the second train from passing the signal and travelling to the tunnel. It was only 3 minutes behind, and may well have caught up with the first train. Realising that the first train was still in the tunnel, he rushed out of the cabin waving his red flag to stop the second train just as it was passing. He could not be sure that the driver had seen the flag, however. He telegraphed **Brown "is tunnel clear?"**

**At that moment, the first train cleared the tunnel, so Brown signaled back "tunnel clear" To kellick. But unfortunately, kellick thought that Brown was referring to the second train and not the first. In fact, the**

**Second train's driver had seen the red flag and stopped about half a mile into the tunnel, and was reversing back to return to the south end. Meanwhile, Killick saw the third train approaching and stopping at his signal; thinking that the tunnel was clear, he waved his white flag for it to proceed.**

**The seconded third trains then collided in the tunnel with great force. The second train was pushed forward, and the locomotive obliterated the guard' van at rear before smashing into the last carriage.**

**It then rode up over the carriage roof and smashed its chimney against the tunnel roof before stopping.**

**Many of the 23 deaths were in this last carriage, where passengers were burnt or scalded to death by the**

Broken engine. The bodies of a number of the victims were stored temporarily in the cellar of The Hassocks Hotel.

A nine-day inquest was held at Brighton town hall into the deaths of the 23 victims. It concluded with the jury giving a verdict of manslaughter against Charles Legg, the assistant stationmaster of Brighton station, finding him negligent by starting three trains so close together (against the rules of the company). The jury did not find any negligence by either signalman Killick or Brown. Legg was committed for trial for manslaughter, but found not guilty.

The catastrophe publicized the problem of trains travelling too close together, with signalmen having to apprise the situation too quickly for safety's sake. A simple communication mistake

Between the two signal boxes caused havoc that Sunday. But the telegraph was also blamed for the tragedy because it did not register without continual pressure on the switch. The signal, too was also at fault for not returning to "danger" immediately after the train had passed. The accident encouraged the

Use of the block system (rather than the time interval system) for the remainder of the railway system.

One other aspect of this accident was that Signalman Killick was working a continuous 24-hour shift that day, rather than the regulation 18 hours to gain a complete day off duty. In his report on the accident Captain Tyler stated that "it was disgraceful that a man in so responsible a position as Signalman Killick should be compelled to work for twenty-four hours at a stretch in order to earn one day of rest a week.

There was another accident in the tunnel in 1926 and in 1973 three Territorial Army soldiers were killed there while taking part in map reading exercise. Muriel gave evidence at the inquest.

In 1994 Muriel was devastated to have to leave her unique home because of ill health. She moved to a modern flat in Burgess Hill and died less than a month later.

People have claimed to hear shrieks and screams from the tunnel, and the terrible crunching of trains colliding as metal scraped against metal. A nearby field where the bodies were laid is also reported to be haunted. This is a classic example of how a major tragedy can imprint its pain onto a place. With so many deaths it not surprising that the place is haunted.

The Gasworks adjacent to Hassocks Station were originally built for the purpose of lighting the clayton tunnel for a number of years, how many it is impossible to ascertain, the tunnel was lit by gas. The clayton tunnel signal boxes were removed in about 1975 or 1979, until then its official log was said to be kept in the box showing among its entries the log of the famous tunnel disaster.

#### A GOTHIC MYSTERY.

Built in 1841, with the cottage added in 1849, the exact origins of this grade 2 listed building remain a mystery. Was it a monument to the six thousand men who, for three years, dug for a mile-and-a-quarter beneath 270 feet of chalk? Was it built to reassure nervous Victorian train passengers that they weren't entering into the darkness of Hell? Or was it built to satisfy the local landowner, who would allow a tunnel on his property as long as it had a grand entrance? Nobody knows for sure.

The portal's beautiful gothic architecture, finished in white Caen stone, is a fitting testimonial to David Mocatta, the innovative Victorian architect who also designed the Ouse Valley viaduct further up the line.

The little cottage perched between the towers, cool in the summer and cold in the winter, has been occupied by a number of railway families, many of whom raised six or seven children there. While it seems ordinary enough inside, the view through the living room window and the octagonal rooms tell you that this is no ordinary dwelling. Despite the trains clattering below, it is surprisingly quiet and peaceful inside the cottage like being in the eye of a hurricane. The terraced gardens and woodland are home to a variety of plants, birds and wild animals, birds of prey, foxes, deer, badgers, lizards, slow worms and lots of rabbits.

You can hear strange sounds at night, but that could equally be the local wildlife trying to get in or a sudden subterranean draft echoing through the portal's long-forgotten secret passage and hidden chambers.

A popular land mark for tourists and train spotters alike, the portal was also the inspiration for Charles Dickens' classic ghost story "THE SIGNALMAN" owing to the serious accident in the tunnel in 1861.

You can hear strange sounds at night, but that could equally be the local wildlife trying to get in or a sudden subterranean draft echoing through the portal's long-forgotten secret passage and hidden chambers.

This tranquil corner of the Sussex downs area of outstanding natural beauty has a host of nearby attractions including: Wolstonbury Hill, butcher's Wood, Jack and Jill Windmills, Clayton Church and Jack and Jill inn. Close by lie the sleepy hamlets of Clayton and Pyecombe together with the quaint Sussex villages of Hassocks, Ditching and Hurstpierpoint and to the south, the vibrant city of Brighton. Today trains can run through at an average speed of 80 M.P.H. (track speed 90 M.P.H.) and take just 56 seconds to travel the one and quarter mile tunnel, with 100% safety record so far. The singling is control at Three Bridges Control Center.



The northern portal of West Sussex Clayton Tunnel

THE END