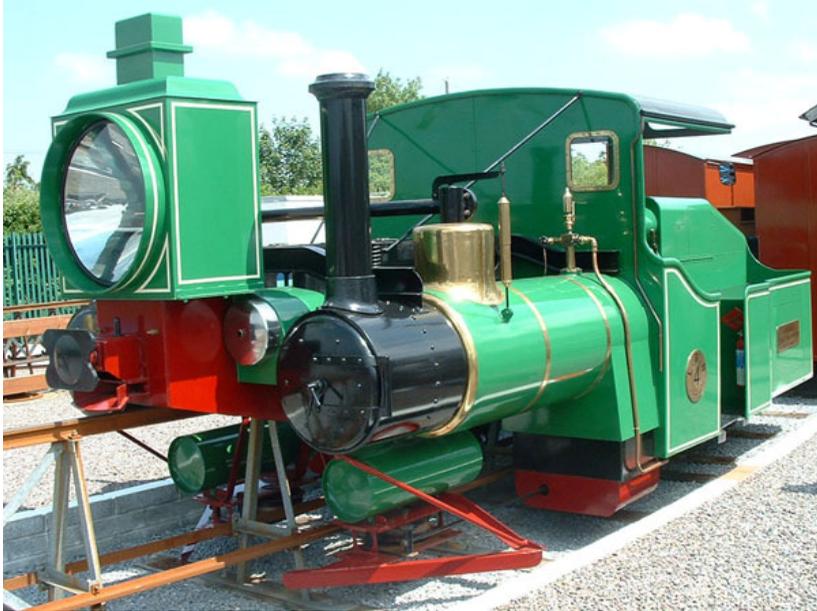


Following the presentation of a video of the Listowel and Ballybunion reconstructed monorail some members asked for further information. Hopefully the following short article will be of interest. Much of the content exists elsewhere and references are provided.

In June 2003 a 500 metre stretch of the Lartigue Monorail was opened for passengers in Listowel.



Reconstructed locomotive and carriages in the station.

Mo Stephen

A new double sided locomotive and two carriages were constructed by Alan Keef Ltd in England. The project was developed by the Lartigue Monorail Restoration Committee, a voluntary organisation from Listowel. The railway is open daily from May to September from 2 pm to 5pm and it is well worth a visit. It is located on the John B. Keane Road, Listowel, Co Kerry, Ireland.

The reconstructed section of the monorail is a great piece of engineering considering that none of the original drawings were available. The locomotive and carriages run on the metre high monorail and the reversing and turning of the carriages and locomotive is very unusual since it uses turnstiles, switches and manual labour.

A visit to the monorail is recommended. Visitor numbers are low and there is a risk that funding for the monorail could run out.

The Lartigue Monorail system was the development of an idea by Charles Lartigue who had seen camels carrying heavy loads balanced in panniers on their backs. This inspired him to design a single rail system which ran at waist height being held in place using A shaped trestles. Specially made wagons sat astride the rail trestles like panniers. By 1881 Lartigue had built a 90 kilometre monorail to transport esparto grass across the Algerian desert with mules pulling trains of 'panniers'. The theory was that that a monorail system should be lighter, easier and cheaper to build and operate than the conventional twin track system.



Smoke box(es) view of locomotive on turntable Mo Stephen

Only two Lartigue Monorail systems were built, one in France - which does not seem to have been much used - and the other in County Kerry, Ireland. The Irish monorail was 14.4-km (9-miles) long and it linked Listowel and Ballybunion. Opening on 29 February 1888 it was the world's first passenger carrying monorail. The Lartigue Monorail system carried freight, cattle, tourists

and passengers. It also brought sand from the Ballybunion beach which was a far cry from the prototype in the African desert.

The railway operated for 36 years but there was never enough traffic to fully support the route. The line was badly damaged during the Irish Civil War and the railway closed in 1924. A short section of the track was saved but everything else was scrapped.

The locomotives were of the 0-6-0 type (strictly speaking, 0-3-0), constructed by the Hunslet Engine Company. They were specially built with two boilers in order to balance on the track, and consequently two fireboxes, one of which had to be stoked by the driver. They were also fitted with powered tenders for auxiliary use on hills. The tender wheels were driven by two cylinders via spur gears. Two small chimneys were fitted to each tender to discharge the exhaust steam from these cylinders.



Turning the locomotive

Mo Stephen

Loads had to be evenly balanced which could be a time consuming job. If a farmer wanted to send a cow to market, he would have to send two calves to balance it, which would travel back on opposite sides of the same freight wagon, thereby balancing each other. The railway had a reputation for rolling, being noisy, not punctual and slow. The journey time would typically be 40 minutes to travel the distance between Ballybunion and Listowel.

Passengers could not pass from one side of a carriage to another while the train was in motion. A kind of footbridge was built into one end of some of the passenger coaches, while at least one such bridge was carried on a separate wagon. This allowed passengers to cross from one side of the line to the other while the train was stopped at a station.



Passenger access to the other side of the carriages

Mo Stephen

Another problem with using the Lartigue Monorail system in populated areas was that, due to the track's design, it was not possible to build 'level' crossings. In order for a road to cross the track, a kind of double-sided drawbridge had to be constructed, which required an attendant to operate it. Where farmers' tracks crossed the line there were level crossings based on the principle of a turntable. These were locked and the farmer in question provided with a key. Once unlocked the track could be swiveled to one side to allow the crossing to be used. Both the swiveling and drawbridge type crossings were automatically linked to signals which stopped any approaching trains; road traffic was always given priority under this system.

Conventional railway points could not be used, so a similar function was fulfilled by a large number of turntables.

One interesting use of the railway concerned the development of wireless telephony transmitters by the Marconi Company. Ballybunion station was chosen as a site because of its flat land area, the nearest mountains being twenty five miles away. It also had a direct line of sight across the Atlantic Ocean to the USA. The Company bought seventy two acres of land from the landlord, Mr. George Hewson, and the construction work began in April 1912. Material for the construction came by train from Listowel, some fourteen kilometres from the site, using the Lartigue Monorail to Ballybunion, where it was then transported some 1,000 yards by horse and dray to the station site. The big engine for the power house, which came in sections, had to be brought by road, hauled by steam engine from Listowel because the Lartigue Monorail could not cope with the immense weight and bulk of this engine. It took three weeks to travel the fourteen kilometres from Listowel to Ballybunion, and in places the road had to be steel-plated to cater for the load. The contractors of the station building were Humphrey's Limited of London, who employed over 100 people on site and the workforce was actually paid in gold sovereigns.

The opening of the Lartigue railway in 1888 was instrumental in the development of the Ballybunion golf club. The forty minute trip at 15mph connected Ballybunion to Listowel, and thus to the extensive rail network spanning the country. Special rates for golfers ensured a steady stream of visitors which helped the town grow into the famous sea-side resort of today.

The golf in Ballybunion is claimed to be amazing, challenging and rewarding. The smallest change in weather can funnel the winds through the dunes and changes the course from one day to the next hence ensuring surprises. The club boasts an extremely modern clubhouse, with a three bars, a restaurant, well equipped changing facilities, pro-shop, and caddy hire (for lazy sods who can't carry their own bags). The new course, the Cashen course, is open all year round, and is quite demanding. The Old course, ranked in the top ten links in the world, is open from mid-March to mid-December, however unless you have the very best rain gear, you may be better visiting in the milder months of the summer.

The Lartigue Monorail is also open then!

*References:- Lartigue Monorail information leaflets.
2MT Writtle - The Birth of British Broadcasting by Tim Wander.
Ballybunion Golf Club publicity.*