A Brief History Of
The Scarborough Spa Cliff Lift

The UK’s Oldest Funicular Cliff Lift

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The Scarborough Spa Cliff Lift

The Scarborough South Cliff Tramway Company Limited was created in 1873, with the business objective of constructing a cliff lift that would link the South Cliff Esplanade to the Scarborough Spa, which at this point was the most popular music venue outside of London. The Spa Buildings, at the foot of South Cliff were the inspiration for building the first seaside cliff lift in Great Britain.

The lift was designed by a Mr Lucas, a consulting engineer of Great George Street, Westminster and built by the Crossley Brothers of Manchester. The Metropolitan Railway Company of Birmingham supplied two cars designed to run on a Funicular system, in which a cable attached to both cars on the rails would move them up and down a very steep gradient, the ascending and descending vehicles counterbalancing each other. Each car was capable of carrying 20 passengers. The covered-body carriages of the cars were mounted on a triangular sub-frame that housed a water tank.

The original hydraulic operating system pumped water through the central pipe by two gas engines, filling the water tank of the upper car. With the weight of this car now much increased, when the brakes were released gravity ensured that the upper car descended, whilst at the same time the lower car with the empty tank ascended. On reaching the bottom, the car’s water tank would be emptied, and the process would begin again with the car now at the top.

The gas engines did not prove satisfactory and were replaced in 1879 by coke-burning steam pumps which remained until a major refurbishment in 1934-35 by Hudswell, Clarke & Company. These works included the replacement of the two 19th century cars, with new cars that have changed very little to this day, and the installation of a 90hp electric winding motor replacing the hydraulic system.

The Spa Cliff Lift was completed in 1875 having cost in the region of £8,000. On 6th July 1875 the lift was opened to great success with 1400 passengers paying the fare of one old penny for the novelty of using a cliff lift for the very first time.

The Scarborough South Cliff Lift attracted wide interest and served as a model for others being built in Britain. This included four others built in Scarborough at North Cliff, Queens Parade Cliff, St Nicholas Cliff and the Central Cliff Lift.

Only 14 months after the lift opened, a fire ravaged the beautiful Spa Saloon. This affected user numbers on the lift until the Spa Grand Hall was rebuilt and opened on the 2nd August 1880.

By 1888 the Cliff Lift was carrying 250,000 passengers per year. In the 1945-46 season the lift hit its peak with a total of 1.2 million people travelling. Scarborough Borough Council purchased the Cliff Lift from its owners in 1993. In 1997, the lift was modified to be completely automatic.

In April 2007, the cliff lift was closed for a nine week period for essential maintenance and repairs. During this period the rails and sleepers to both tracks were renewed and the two carriages were modified to provide easier access for users.