

The Saint Helena Railway

Keith Downing

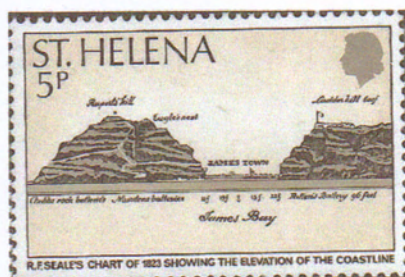
Saint Helena is a volcanic island located nearly 2,000 km from Namibia into the South Atlantic with a resident population of 4,800. Some 500 of these have come to the island to construct the airport which will open in Spring 2016. Prior to this the only connection with the outside world has been the Royal Mail Ship sailing from Britain to South Africa also serving Ascension and Tristan da Cunha en route.



The island has always been of strategic importance since Oliver Cromwell granted the East India Company a charter in 1657 to govern the island and fortify it to protect their shipping links to India. Captain John Dutton erected the first fortification on the island, marking the date with a commemorative stone dated 4 June 1659.



The company founded a settlement called Jamestown, named after the Duke of York who later became King James II, which is located at the bottom of a narrow gorge flanked by two hills on which two forts defended the city, Ladder Hill Fort and Rupert Hill Fort.



It was the difficulty of supplying the forts as well as fertilising the flat agricultural land and getting the crops in that made the island consider the one of the world's first funicular railways. It was designed by J.W.Hoar and built in 1828-9 by G.W.Melliss under the direction of the Honourable East India Company's Governor, Brigadier General Dallas. The 900 foot long line rose 600 feet at a 40 degree angle from Jamestown to the summit of Ladder Hill. It was built of granite blocks which had two parallel lines mounted on wooden sleepers either side of a central staircase which had 699 steps. A railway wagon ran on each track counterbalanced by a chain passing around a drive pulley at the top of the incline which was driven by three mules. A complex braking mechanism was designed to prevent derailments or wagons plummeting downwards in the event of the rope breaking. It does not appear that there were any disasters which befell the line.



The railway was built by the St.Helena Railway Company but in 1832 it was purchased by the island's government for £882 and 10 shillings. The line continued in use until 1871 when it fell into disuse because the timber sleepers had been eaten by white ants. The track was then dismantled and by 1875 an iron ladder had been erected on the staircase although some of the steel pins from the sleepers can still be seen in the granite either side of the staircase.

After the removal of the railway, the staircase became known as Jacob's Ladder. It dominates the hillside behind Jamestown and is now a tourist feature in its own right. Occasional races are held to climb the ladder with the record being set at 5 minutes 16.7 seconds.



The funicular railway was not the only railway on St. Helena however. During the Boer War the island was used as a prison camp and water supplies were insufficient to meet the demands of the increased population.

To fulfil the need, a desalination plant was built to distil seawater using heat from coal-fired furnaces. A short two foot gauge tramway was built for mules and donkeys to haul fuel from the harbour. A contemporary photo of the plant was used as the basis for the stamp issued to mark the war but the rails shown in the photo have been replaced by the donkeys used to draw the wagons.

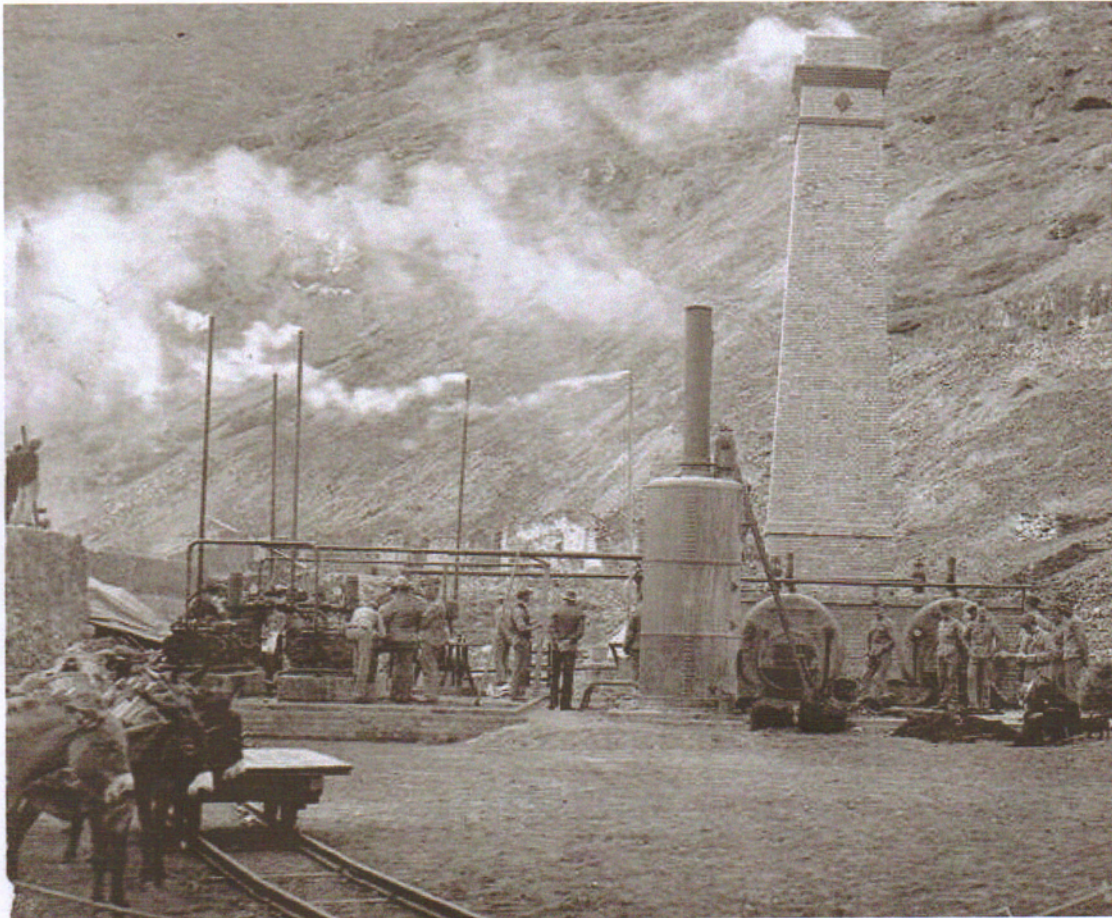


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