

# ROCK AND RAIL

## The Dartmoor Granite Railways

*by Richard Tufnell*

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**O**n Dartmoor are a number of stone curiosities. Dartmoor is an area of south-western

Britain formed from a major ancient granite intrusion, and is designated an area of outstanding natural beauty and a National Park. The granite has been exploited in countless ways since the area was re-populated after the last ice age approximately 8,000 years ago. Interesting structures are numerous, including clapper bridges, barns incorporating rows of pigeon holes and ash houses—small corbelled buildings similar to the shepherds huts found throughout Europe - used to store hot ashes away from thatched dwellings. The stone is of a high quality, and hence has been quarried for use as a building material in other parts of the British Isles.

Among the oddities alluded to above are the granite railway lines that were constructed at a number of quarries in the early part of the 19th century. They fulfill at least some of the criteria for dry stone, and hence warrant our attention. According to Stephen Woods, author of *Dartmoor Stone* who spent a lifetime photographing his subject, an unknown engineer designed the railway, or more accurately, tramway, sometime after 1800. Granite was used as it was by far the cheapest and most accessible material, and the skills to work it were readily available. In addition, we know a new form of splitting stone had been devised at this time, namely the use of plug and feathers, which was somewhat faster and more accurate than the old pick and wedges method. The Haytor Granite Tramway shown above is a splendid example of one of these. It first rises 150 feet, then gently descends nearly 1300 feet to a canal terminus. Although mainly single line, there are sidings and connecting tracks to individual quarry faces. Embarrassingly, we omitted to measure the width, so we are not certain if it is the standard 4 feet 11-1/2 inches, but if not, it is close.

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