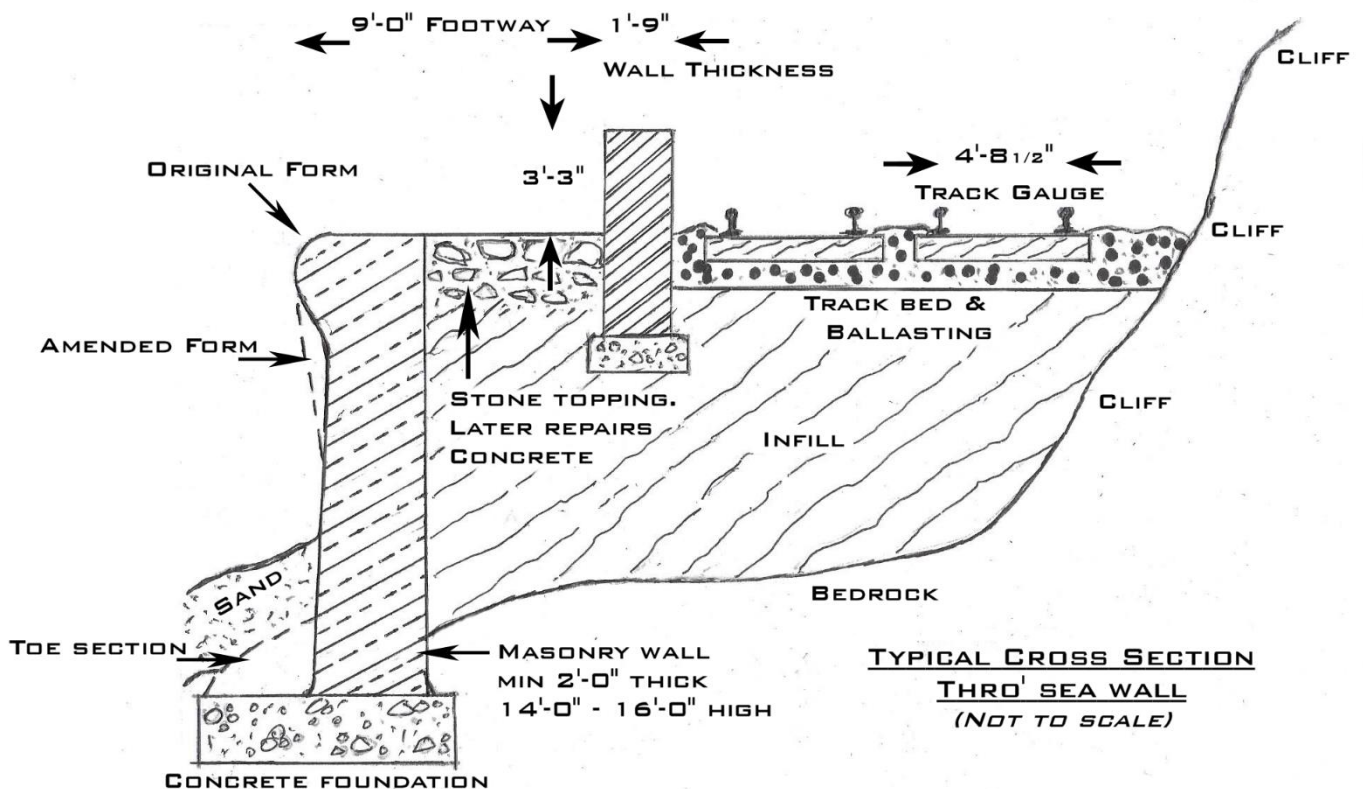


Teignmouth – Sea Wall

The Teignmouth section of the sea wall runs from Parsons tunnel at the eastern end to the skew bridge, Eastcliff at the western end and is around 1.1 miles in length. Most of the wall is still as it was built in 1845 but some sections have been rebuilt at some point or other over the last 179 years.

Our old friend I.K. Brunel was of the opinion that a sea wall rather than an inland route would be cheaper to maintain due to it not being washed by a high tide thanks to the breakwater effect of the beach. In reality this assumption has been proved wholly incorrect and this part of the rail line along with the remainder of the wall at Dawlish and beyond has been one of the most expensive in the country to maintain.

None of Brunel's sketches are available but below is a typical diagram of the sea wall construction.



Roughly halfway along this stretch of the sea wall is Sprey Point which was created from a rock-fall by Brunel while building the coastal railway at Teignmouth. With a slipway and breakwater at either end it allowed the railway contractors to bring in supplies by sea. The breakwater on the eastern side was damaged by storms in the early 20th century, and has virtually disappeared.

Soon after its opening, a storm in September 1846 meant repairs were necessary to the wall at Parsons Tunnel/Breeches Rock which closed the line.

Following this there were several cliff falls which required attention including one in 1852 which closed the line for seven days and a major incident in 1855.

On Monday 12 February 1855 large areas of the sea wall were washed away. Repair work was started four days later by which time more of the sea wall and a 70 yards (64 m) section of line were also washed away. Passengers had to leave their train and carry their luggage some distance to join another train. A temporary bridge was constructed by the resident engineer, Mr. Margery, and was in operation within a couple of weeks which allowed the through operation of

coaches pulled by hand and rope, although some passengers still alighted and walked around this section, not wanting to trust the bridge.



1855 breach after a violent storm.

Sketch by F.W.L. Stockdale, London Illustrated News



View at Parsons Tunnel.

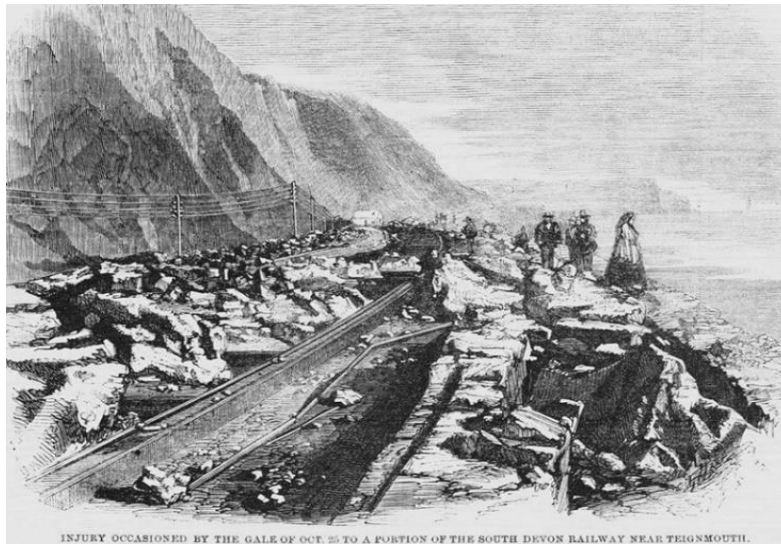
We can date this to pre-1875 as the rail track is single line broad gauge.

A second track was laid along the wall to Parsons Tunnel after 1875 but due to problems with signal interlocking of the rail line to avoid crashes, the second rail line was used as a long siding for storing wagons and coaches. The second rail was bought into use as a regular running rail in 1884.



Last broad gauge train on the wall. 1892.

The night of 25 October 1859 saw the largest storm to hit Devon in 35 years. At Teignmouth the top of the wall was damaged and the sea flooded through Eastcliff tunnel into the station.



1859 damage at Eastcliff.

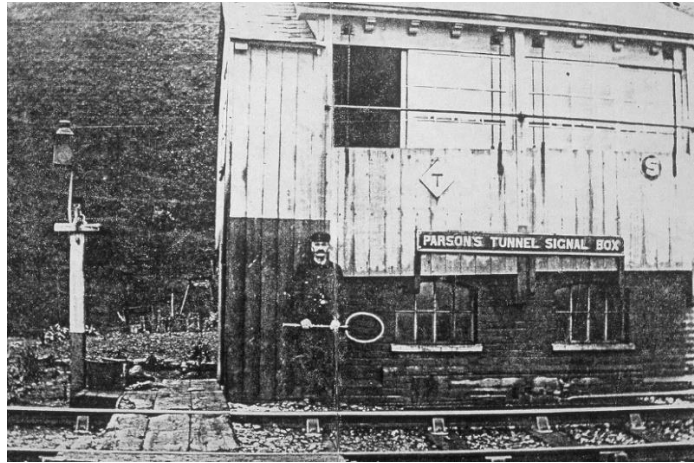
Chart of major blockages and closure of the sea wall rail line:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Days out of use</i>	<i>Reason</i>	<i>Location</i>
1846	3	Damage to wall	Breeches Rock
1852	7	Rock fall	Breeches Rock
1855	12	Damage to wall	Smugglers Lane
1859	3	Damage to wall	Teignmouth
1923	3	Rock fall	Sprey Point
1986	6	Damage to wall	Sprey Point
2014	See page 12	Cliff slip	Adj. to Smugglers Lane

For a number of years from 1860 onwards and 1986 onwards no major work was required to keep the sea wall intact.



'Orange Army' on repair duties at Smugglers Lane.



Signal Box at Parsons Tunnel. Early 1900's.



1908 damage.

During GWR days a permanent gang of was employed to carry out any works along the cliffs including drainage and vegetation removal to ensure the rail line along the wall would not be troubled by a long closure due to fallen materials.

Some preventative work was started in 1918 to reduce the likelihood of cliff falls near Sprey Point. There followed a cliff fall which blocked the line near Sprey Point on 12 March 1923. One track was reopened on the 14th and the second on the 22nd.



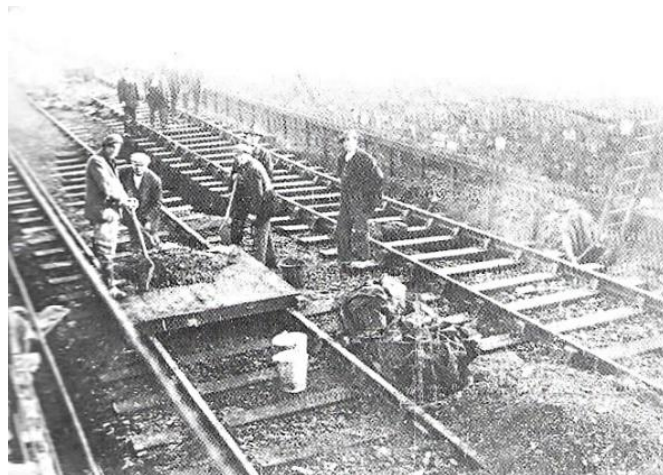
This gang would have been lowered by rope from the cliff top to remove loose material. They would throw it down the cliff face to be collected and disposed of by the other half of the gang along the sea wall. 1920's.

Image: Peter May collection.



Another view of the cliff gang in action.

Following more use of diesel engine trains this cliff gang was lost as the vegetation was not prone to catching fire as it would have been when steam engines were running along the line.



Repair work being carried out in 1930.

Image: B Chapman collection.

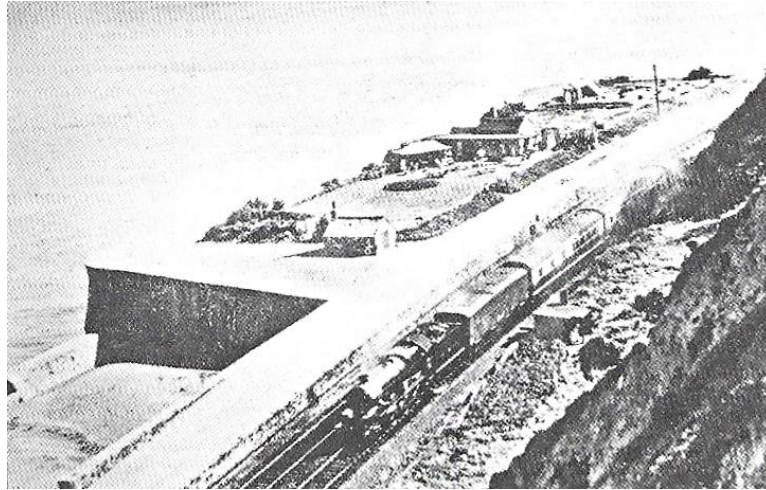


Cliff gang at work helping to stabilize the cliffs. 1961.

Image: David Weekes collection.

Sprey Point

There are various theories of how Sprey Point got its name One theory is that it derives from the Old English word "spræc," which means "a place for watching or looking out." This would be consistent with the headland's use as a lookout point over the centuries. Another theory is that the name comes from the Old Norse word "spraka," which means "to crackle or fizz." This may refer to the sound of waves breaking on the rocks at the base of the headland. There is also a possibility that the name is a corruption of the word "splay," which means "to spread out or widen." This could refer to the shape of the headland, which widens as it reaches the sea. It is worth noting that the spelling of the name has varied over time, with different maps and documents using different spellings such as "Spray" or "Spra Point." However, the current spelling of "Sprey Point" has been in use since at least the mid-19th century.



Sprey Point between the first and second world wars showing the 'Halfway Café' and tea gardens. Unfortunately the owners were forced out by the military when the beach defences were placed for WW2. The stone hut to the eastern end was used for the sea wall gangs tools and equipment.

Image: Peter May collection.

The Boyce family that ran the tea rooms up to the outbreak of WW2 were given very little notice of having to leave and as a result several hundred pounds worth of stock and equipment was left to rot. The site was left a ruin and never re-opened. The Boyce family were given the princely sum of £25 as compensation.

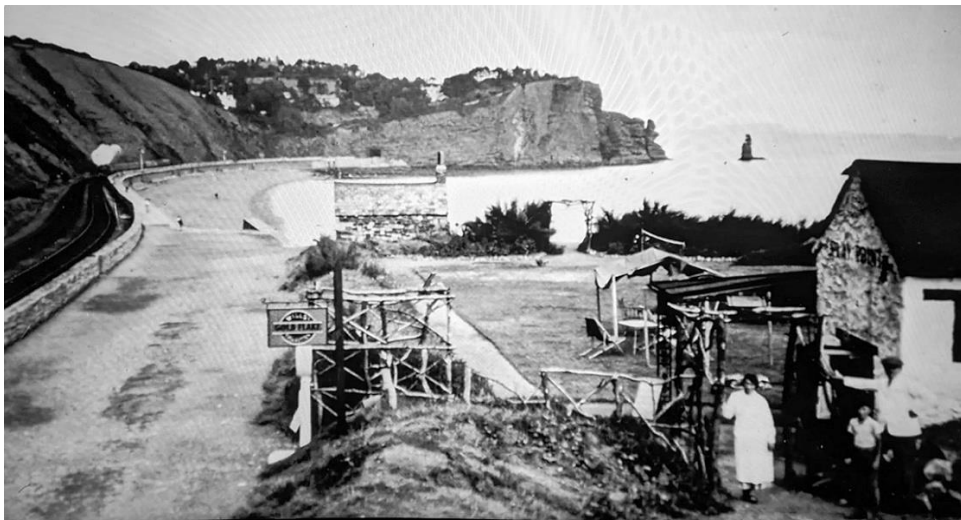


Viewing platform on Sprey Point, complete with stereoscopic viewfinder.

Also on the point was an 18 hole novelty golf course.



Mid 1930's view of the marquee and café.



Sprey Point tearooms.

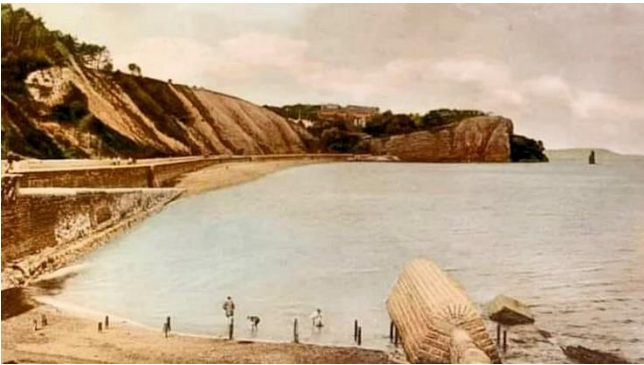


The sea wall gangs tool hut in later years. It is a protected building so will not be demolished.



'Orange Army' carrying out repairs. March 2021.

The breakwaters at Sprey Point has long been the subject of attack by the sea and very little remains of the original structures.



Eastern breakwater in good condition.



Eastern breakwater at Nov 2023.



A familiar landmark on Sprey Point.



Western side of Sprey Point as it is at June 2024.

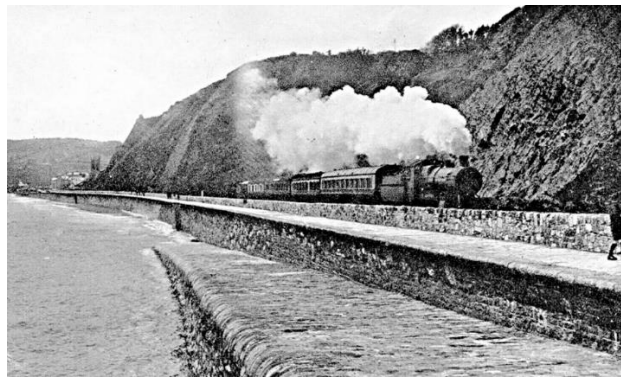


Promenading on the wall at Eastcliff in the 1900's.

As mentioned in the material for Teignmouth Pier, a lot of work was carried out to make it difficult for any invasion by German forces during WW2. Pretty much all the sea wall was protected by the same type of barrier used at the pier which was formed using scaffolding tubes.



WW2 Beach defences at the sea wall.



The 'Riviera Express' thunders along the sea wall at Sprey Point. 1945.



Great Western Castle Class 7000 Viscount Portal passing Parsons Tunnel signal box. Post-war.



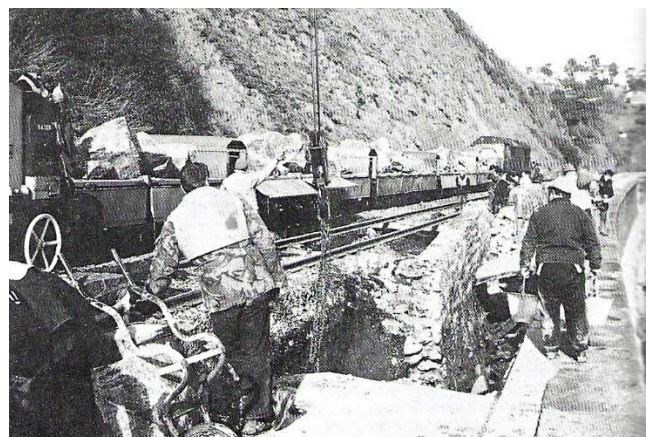
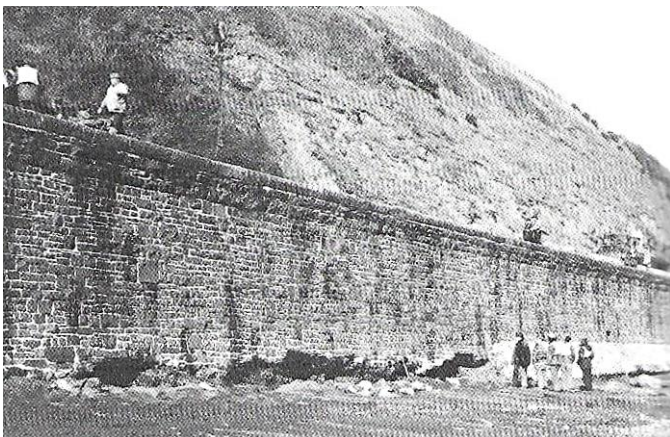
A down freight train on the seawall. 2800 2-8-0 No. 2869. 1954.



The 'Torbay Express' headed by 'Castle' 4-6-0 No. 5079 'Lysander' (built 5/39 as 'Lydford Castle', renamed 11/40, withdrawn 5/60) on the seawall. 1950's.

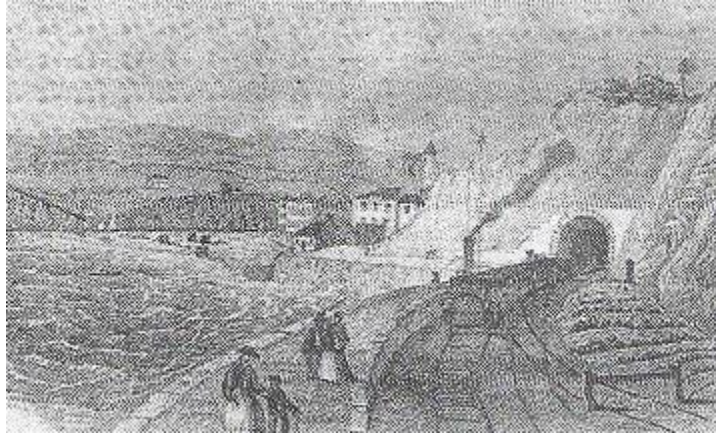
Images: Ben Brooksbank.

1986 Saw a fair amount of damage to the wall during a severe storm. Apart from special engineers trains no trains would be allowed to use the wall for around 6 days which was quite a blow for businesses that relied on trains for incoming goods and moving perishable foodstuffs to other parts of the country. Large rocks from Meldon Quarry were moved in by rail to fill this hole and cement was transported in special wagons from Teignmouth to bind them together to provide a solid repair to the wall.



1986 damage to the wall.

Both images: Peter May



Sketch showing the sea wall at Eastcliff. c 1854

No skew bridge and tunnel through the cliff! Note the gated siding up from the tunnel. This siding ran up to Sprey Point and was required to be gated as it was privately owned by a Mr George Hennet, a well-known local businessman who paid out the sum of £363.13s.0d to build it.



Eastcliff end of the sea wall in 1985 with diesel train heading east.



Eastcliff end of the cliff wall in 2024 with GWR diesel train heading west.



Early view at Eastcliff. Features a whalebone arch.

Whalebone arches can be found around the world and Teignmouth was no exception. A local ship owner and merchant trader, Pike Ward, who was proud of his home town, its history and his connection with the fishing trade had two whalebone arches erected along the Eastcliff stretch of the promenade called "Old Maids' Walk". According to the book 'History of Teignmouth' this was done in 1924; however, there is a postcard of one of the arches reputedly dated 1922.

Return to the 'good old days' ... a 'Steam Dreams' day trip runs along the rail line on the sea wall.



61306 'Mayflower' leaving Parsons tunnel.



And on the return journey.

In February 2014 a violent storm hit the Devon coast and alongside the more well-known washout along the coast at Dawlish, there was a significant slope failure on the stretch of track between Holcombe and Teignmouth below Woodland Avenue. This was a large failure, which would by itself have shut the main line for several weeks. There were also 18 smaller failures related to the stability of the cliffs as a result of the storms in this area. The through line was closed for some 2 months and this meant a great deal of lost business for the south west economy.



Slope failure adjacent to Parsons Tunnel February 2014.

Repairs and stabilization of the cliff was carried out using anchors and meshing.

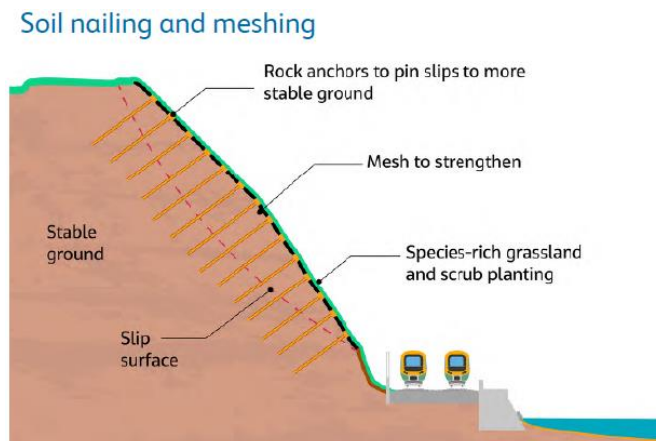


Diagram to show how slip surfaces can be controlled.

With the rock anchors and active meshing in place this can help to prevent movement along the cliff. The mesh has to be tight to the cliff face to do its job so the rock anchors hold it in place and fix into the stable rock beyond the unstable soil.

It is possible that some preventative works at Eastcliff may take place similar to that which has been done further along the cliff towards Parsons Tunnel in order to provide safety measures and protect the rail line.



Eastcliff as it is.



Eastcliff with meshing installed.



Eastcliff as it may appear after several years vegetation growth.

Images: Courtesy of Network Rail.

We turn full circle!

So, what of the future?

Plans for a 1.1-mile redesign of the sea wall between Parsons Tunnel and Teignmouth that would involve the line being moved towards the sea were proposed in 2020.



2020 Proposals

- Reclamation up to 40m from existing alignment
- Impact on Holcombe and Teignmouth beaches
- Marine and terrestrial environmental impact
- 10 year construction programme
- Very high capital cost
- 100 year resilience delivered in one go

• Environmental Impact	↑
• Community Impact	↑
• Cost/schedule	↑
• Geotech resilience	✓
• Coastal resilience	✓

Courtesy of Network Rail.

The proposals are designed to protect the railway from the cliffs with some land reclamation to allow a buttress to be built. An enhanced sea wall is also needed to absorb wave energy and allow the railway to be moved away from the cliffs.

The design includes better leisure access, cycling and walking routes and a new amenity area.

As part of a review for this stretch of the wall it was suggested that major improvements should be required as part of the Network Rail resilient programme. Due to the high costs involved with this idea it seems most unlikely that it will be going ahead in the near future.



Digital artists impression of the upgraded sea wall at Parsons Tunnel.

Images: Courtesy of Network Rail.

..... and finally one of the few remaining A4 Pacifics in action on the sea wall:



A4 Pacific 4-6-2 'Union Of South Africa' No. 60009 with the 'Torbay Express' at Parsons Tunnel in 2019.

Image: © Paul Barlow

Union Of South Africa's mainline certification expired in April 2020. As the locomotive is subject to a boiler inspection, it was moved to the East Lancs Railway as the original plan was to keep it running there until the end of boiler certificate and then send it somewhere else for static display, but a cracked boiler tube forced it into retirement prematurely. It was briefly renamed 'Osprey' during part of the 1980s and 1990s due to political opposition against apartheid in South Africa at the time.

Collated from: Exeter-Newton Abbot, A Railway History by Peter May; Wikipedia; Network Rail; Cornwall Railway Society; Teignmouth In Verse;