

£80 million Dawlish sea wall opens to public

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The transformation of Dawlish seafront is complete as 415m of new promenade, along with other fully accessible public areas, opens to the public ahead of the summer season.

The second section of the new Dawlish sea wall, which will help protect the railway from extreme weather and rising sea levels for generations to come, opened on Thursday (25 May).

Stretching between Coastguards and Colonnade breakwaters, it is linked to the first section at Marine Parade by a new footbridge, running parallel to the railway viaduct.

Completion of the £80m Government-funded project means the community and visitors to Dawlish can now enjoy the accessible high-level promenade all the way from Boat Cove to Coastguards footbridge, where it then joins the original sea wall. The beach between Colonnade and Coastguards breakwaters will also reopen to the public now that construction is complete.

Construction began on the second section in November 2020 following completion of the first phase, which runs for 360m alongside Marine Parade and opened to the public in July that year.

An innovative eight-legged, self-contained walking jack-up barge, known as a 'Wavewalker', was used

during the construction – the first time this type of barge was used to upgrade the UK rail network. It allowed the team to work across high tidal ranges that particularly impact the south Devon coastline.

The wall itself was substantially completed in July 2022, when all 164 front panels, 203 pre-cast blocks and 189 recurve units which return waves back out to sea were in place for the second section. This milestone gave the iconic stretch of railway line immediate greater resilience against waves that flood the track, leading to potential closures and delays.

Since then, Network Rail's contractor BAM Nuttall has been working to complete the link bridge, promenade, seating areas, ramped access to the beach and a new stilling basin, where Dawlish Water runs under the viaduct into the sea.

The new section of wall wraps around Dawlish station, where work is continuing to build an accessible footbridge with lifts for passengers.

Although it offers 21st Century protection and full accessibility, the new sea wall features many nods to the town's history; the footprint of the old Coastguards boathouse is shown on the new promenade, while the wall in front of the station features outlines of the alcoves that previously provided seating. Reclaimed stone from the old wall has been used to create new benches.

The design of the 8m high sea wall, which is 2.5m taller than the previous one, followed years of detailed studies, designs and joint working between world-leading marine, coastal and railway engineering experts. It was developed as part of the South West Rail Resilience Programme, put in place to improve resilience between Exeter and Newton Abbot, after the major storm of 2014.

The entire sea wall project has given the local economy a £15million boost through Network Rail and BAM Nuttall's commitment to using local labour, materials and accommodation, wherever possible.

Ewen Morrison, Network Rail senior programme manager, said: "We are absolutely delighted to be opening this new section of sea wall and would like to wholeheartedly thank the community of Dawlish for their patience and support while the construction took place close to their homes and businesses over two-and-half years.

"The project has not been without its challenges, including the Covid-19 pandemic, the discovery of an uncharted gas main and some particularly wet, cold and stormy conditions over the past winter. It is testament to the efforts of the teams involved that they have worked around the clock, whatever the weather, to deliver this huge feat of engineering.

"The project is vital not just for Dawlish but for the whole of the south west peninsula as the railway connects communities in 50 towns and cities with the rest of the UK. The railway is now better protected and we hope the new wall, promenade and footbridge will be used and enjoyed by generations to come."

Anne Marie Morris, MP for Newton Abbot, said: "It has been an incredible journey since that fateful night when the sea wall came down to what we now have in Dawlish. The new wall, the promenade, rockfall shelter and the footbridge provide the additional resilience this essential piece of infrastructure needs to

ensure the long-term viability of the line. Network Rail have been hugely impressive in their dedication to the task at hand. I look forward to continuing to work with them as the work further up the line to Teignmouth continues.”

Councillor Andrea Davis, Devon County Council Cabinet member for Climate Change, Transport and Environment, said: “Peninsula Rail Task Force was formed in the wake of the terrible damage at Dawlish in 2014, we are now very relieved for our lobbying to have fruition for Dawlish and the South West Peninsula.

“Network Rail has not only delivered a future-proof solution, enhanced public realm and improvements to the station, they have protected the economy of the wider south west. We are truly grateful to the Government for listening to us and for the support of the Department of Transport to see this phase of the overall project through to completion.”

Alan Cox, Managing Director, Transport, BAM Nuttall, said: “Through a spirit of collaboration and resilience, BAM and Network Rail have transformed adversity into triumph at Dawlish. Guided by a shared vision, our dedicated team has demonstrated ingenuity throughout, defying the physical challenges that beset the site. Whether it was the use of stone-filled containers to protect the area following the initial failure in February 2014, the use of the Wavewalker to install the new piling or the development of a bespoke low-carbon structural concrete, innovation has paved the way for remarkable achievements.

“I’m incredibly proud of our team’s problem-solving prowess but our success in Dawlish extends beyond just completion of this vital infrastructure project. Recognising the major impact on the local community, our team’s commitment to open communication and transparency has been truly exemplary. We have forged a lasting bond with our neighbours, ensuring they were well-informed and engaged throughout the process.

“Looking back, this project will forever be a source of immense pride and satisfaction for our team. The legacy we leave behind in Dawlish exemplifies the power of determination and collaboration and will resonate with the town, the Great Western Railway, and its valued passengers for generations to come.”

Photo credit: Network Rail