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World's oldest railway tunnel hidden by a rockery for 36 years is discovered 10ft underground in a back garden

- The tunnel was nearly lost forever when the previous homeowner built a rockery in 1977
- Tunnel can be traced back to 1793 and was used by industrialists to transport limestone to an ironwork factory

By [James Drummond](#)

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Archaeologists have discovered a 220-year-old railway tunnel believed to be the oldest in the world.

The historic Fritchley Tunnel, in Crich, Derbyshire, can be traced back to 1793, two years earlier than the previous record holder.

The discovery was made after they linked the tunnel to a now-defunct railway, used by industrialists to transport limestone to an ironwork factory.



© Derbyshire Archaeological Society/RPP

Hidden away: The historic Fritchley Tunnel, in Crich, Derbyshire, can be traced back to 1793, two years earlier than the previous record holder

The tunnel was nearly lost forever when a previous land owner sealed up the passage in 1977 to build a rockery.

But after a chance meeting between the current owner, John Midgley, 55, and archaeologists, they won funding to excavate the site.

The dig began in January using heavy machinery to dig down three metres underground to re-open the sealed 18 metre passage.

They have since discovered that the tunnel connected to the Butterley Gangroad, a horse-operated railway built in 1793, by the Butterley Company, a large local engineering firm.



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Unearthed: Local resident Tony Frearson takes a look down the two century old railway tunnel



Lost: The tunnel was sealed up 1977 by a previous land owner to build a rockery. The dig began in January and used heavy machinery to re-open the sealed passage



Waiting: Two figures in the foreground look on as a train approaches. The tunnel is connected to the Butterley Gangroad, a horse-operated railway built by the Butterley Company, a large local engineering firm

The railways' purpose was to link the Cromford Canal with their limestone quarries in the area.

It pre-dates a 1795 tunnel on the Peak Forest Tramway, also in Derbyshire, by two years and was thought of as the world's oldest.

'We know that the Butterley Gangroad railway was operating in 1793 - because that is documented,' said project manager Trevor Griffin, of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society.



Historic: The tunnel is connected to the Butterley Gangroad, a horse-operated railway built in 1793, by the Butterley Company, a large local engineering firm



It's behind you: Local resident Tony Frearson stands on the embankment that leads down into 'the world's oldest railway tunnel'

'The route has changed but all the mapping evidence shows that the tunnel was always on the route so it is older than the one currently known as the world's oldest.'

The £17,900 Heritage Lottery-funded investigation involved laser scanning to create a three-dimensional computer model of the inside.

But when the work is completed in September 2014, the group plan to seal up the tunnel again to preserve it for future generations.

'The story goes back to 1977 when this tunnel was there on the abandoned railway,' said Mr Griffin, 66.

'The owner of the cottage on the land wanted to build a rockery on the route. He contacted the owners of the railway and they said "no".

'So he paid £400 for a 700 yard stretch of the railway. It didn't include the tunnel but the tunnel was accessed from his land.

'He then filled up that whole area so the tunnel got blocked.'



© Illustrated History of the Railroads/Geoffrey Allen

Horsepower: An example of a horse-drawn 'train', this one was used on the Little Eaton Gangway, also in Derbyshire. It was built by the same company that constructed the Butterley line

A HISTORY OF THE BUTTERLEY GANGROAD

The Butterley Gangroad was built in 1793 and is the oldest Derbyshire railway of which substantial remains survive.

It was engineered by Benjamin Outram, one of the original founders of the Butterley Company, a large ironworks and engineering firm in Ripley, Derbyshire.

Sadly, the firm went into administration in 2009 but it provided the ironwork for some of Britain's most iconic buildings, including Vauxhall Bridge and the roof of St Pancras station.



Construction: Butterley's went into administration in 2009 but provided the ironwork for some of Britain's most iconic buildings, including Vauxhall Bridge and the roof of St Pancras station (pictured here in the 1860s)

In the early years, the railway was horse-worked and carried limestone down from the quarries at Crich to the Cromford Canal at Bullbridge.

From there the limestone was taken by boat to a tunnel under the Butterley Works and lifted up into the works for use in making iron.

Like the early railways of the eighteenth century, the Butterley Gangroad featured horse-drawn carriages.

But there was a limit to the load a horse-drawn system could carry and a typical 'train' moved between two and twenty tons at a speed of about four miles per hour.

Amazingly, the line was also the location of one of the first ever trials of a steam locomotive.

In 1813, William Brunton, an engineer at the company, used a 'Steam Horse' with 'legs' to propel itself along the track at 2.5 mph.

The railway was then modernised in the 1840s and turned into a narrow gauge railway, which was used by steam engines until 1933.

In the Second World War, the tunnel was used as an air raid shelter.