

# The Croydon, Merstham & Godstone Iron Railway reaches Reigate at last – about two centuries late

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Now on display in Reigate at a terminus that never was are 23 of the three-foot-long cast iron 'tram plates' or rails of and/or similar to those of the Croydon, Merstham & Godstone Iron Railway (CMGIR), which operated from 1805 to 1838 between Croydon and Merstham. They had been stored in Croydon for some decades, before which they had formed part of a tramway system in the underground quarries at Godstone.

Although, oddly, Reigate was not included in the company's name, the east Surrey town was the intended main destination of the CMGIR, authorised by its Act of 1803. This horse-drawn tramway was in effect an extension of the Surrey Iron Railway, opened from Wandsworth to Croydon in 1803. The extension, however, was built only as far south as its terminus at the chalk pits, lime works, and underground building-stone quarries at Merstham, where the junction was to have been for the branch to Godstone, and whence the main line was to have continued to Reigate. These two Surrey plateways are now recognised as the world's second and third public railways (the Lake Lock Railroad near Wakefield being the first), although the first and second authorised by Parliament. Funds ran out when Merstham was reached, and so did the time limit within which the continuations to Godstone and Reigate were authorised to be built.

When the CMGIR closed and was dismantled, making way in places for parts of the London & Brighton Railway between Coulsdon and Merstham, the three-foot-long iron tram plates and the stone sleeper blocks were sold. Some of these second-hand tram plates were later laid as a tramway in the underground building-stone quarries below Godstone Hill. Thus the railway, or at least some of its rails, reached Godstone, presumably in the late 1830s

or 1840s. They are known to have been in place by the 1860s. The quarries are below the A22, almost 2 km to the north of the village centre, whereas the originally intended terminus was to have been about ½ km to the south at Godstone Green.

Some of the iron tram plates from Godstone quarries came into the care of the Croydon Natural History & Scientific Society Ltd (CNHSS) some years ago, and have been stored in the town from which the line started in 1805. Two of them, along with four stone sleeper blocks, have been on long-term loan to the Amberley Working Museum in West Sussex, where they are on public display. As the Society has been unable to make satisfactory arrangements for any of the plates or sleepers to be publicly displayed at Croydon, and has lost the tenancy of the storage facilities there, 23 plates have been removed to Reigate for storage and public display, where they are on long-term loan to the Wealden Cave and Mine Society (WCMS).

At least five different patterns of tram plate are represented in this collection, as discussed by Bruce Osborne in 1982 (*Proc. CNHSS* 17(3)) and Peter Burgess in 1984 (*Proc. CNHSS* 18(4)).

The intended Reigate terminus, which might have been reached in or shortly after 1805, would have been at Bell Street, opposite Reigate Priory. The tram plates that have at last reached the town are now in the 'caves' at Tunnel Road, about ½ km north of where the end of the line would have been. Similar plates are on public display opposite *The Feathers* in Merstham village (not on the original line of the tramway) and (on the original line) in the Rotary Club Field at Brighton Road in Purley. More are at Wallington Library. Further plate rails once

displayed at the top of Merstham Hill on the A23 (not on the original line) were stolen in the 1970s.

The 'caves', the property of Reigate & Banstead Borough Council, are currently operated under licence as a low-key public visitor attraction by WCMS. There are four public 'cave days' each year; on these days WCMS conduct guided public tours (for which a charge is made) of the two sets of 'caves' on the east and west sides of Tunnel Road, and also of the Baron's Cave in the Castle Grounds. WCMS members also provide guided tours for pre-booked groups on other dates by arrangement (these private tours do not usually include the west side 'caves' as these are leased to another group).

The east and west 'caves' are in fact mines for silver-sand, which was taken to the Thames-side glass furnaces of the 1st half of the 19th century. They were commenced shortly after Reigate's road tunnel was opened in 1824 (the oldest surviving tunnel on a public road in the British Isles). They fell into disuse as mines in about 1860 and were later used as stores for beer, wines, and spirits; military stores in WWI; a rifle range; and air raid shelters and a control centre in WWII. Since the last war, the east side caves have been used as a corporation store, and included for some years public lavatories (now closed) entered from Tunnel Road.

WCMS is now creating a museum in the east side caves, displaying aspects of sand-mining and subsequent uses, and aspects of other local mineral industries. Items in display include the CMGIR tram plates, and (also on loan from CNHSS) some large pieces of worked Reigate stone from a medieval undercroft at Surrey Street, Croydon.

Further information about 'cave days' and group visits to the Reigate 'caves' may be had from Andy Belcher (01737 213 287).