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日本考古学協会

The Japanese Archaeological Association

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Japanese Archaeological Association statement calling for the full preservation of the Takanawa-Chikutei (maritime railway track embankment) site

In 1872, Japan's first railway line was built between Shinbashi and Yokohama. This was the beginning of Japan's world-famous railway culture. It was literary the first major project in the modernisation of Japan, known as the "Bun'mei-kaika (opening of civilisation)". As the first railway in East Asia, it was also of immense significance from a world-historical perspective and for the understanding of the modernisation of a nation on the eastern fringe of the expanding colonisation by the West.

The railway embankment ¹⁾ was discovered during preliminary excavations for the 'Shinagawa Development Project', comprising the construction of several high-rise office-apartment-shopping complex buildings, which is currently underway in the Takanawa area of Minato Ward, Tokyo. The 2.7 km section of the railway embankment, parallel to the old Tokaido highway connecting Edo, the Tokugawa Shogunate capital and Kyoto, the imperial capital, was built using the extremely unique method of maritime embankment construction, combining traditional Japanese techniques with advanced British civil engineering. Land reclamation has extended the former coastline out to sea and buried the embankment beneath the surface. However, until 2019, the Tokaido, Keihin-Tohoku and Yamate line services of the East Japan Railway Company ("JR East") had run on it for a century and a half.

The railway embankment is the historical embodiment of Japan's railway development. This time, a 1.3 km stretch of the embankment from the northern to the southern end of the proposed project site was miraculously discovered in almost its original state. JR East, which is responsible for the redevelopment of the site, has announced that it will only preserve a tiny fraction of the embankment and relocate it. In response, the Japanese

Archaeological Association (“JAA”) submitted a letter of request to JR East and other relevant organisations and public bodies including the government of Japan and other relevant municipal governments to preserve the entire stretch of the excavated embankment, as the partial preservation and relocation would fundamentally undermine its significance and historical values. However, as far as we can see from their response dated 15 February, they have not changed their original policy. The Takanawa Chikutei railway embankment site is an extremely rare site in world history, showing the process of the modernisation of a nation on the eastern fringe of the expanding colonisation by the West, that was carried out by combining imported technologies and indigenous building techniques.

JR East should recognise the importance of this site, the birthplace of its company, and as the first railway site in East Asia. It has a responsibility to the world to preserve it in its entirety. As the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, who visited the site on 16 February, stated that there should be no conflict between the development of the site and the preservation of the embankment, we believe that a solution can be found by combining modern technology and wisdom. The embankment, without doubt, has the historical value worthy of being designated as the National Special Historic Site. The embankment is a direct continuation of the old Shinbashi railway station, the designated national historic site. The embankment site should be integrated into the core of Takanawa's new townscape, with the idea of combining the two as a single modernisation heritage site in the future. By doing so, Takanawa will become a new and attractive place for everyone to visit, just like the Meiji era Ukiyoe paintings depicting a train running on the embankment. We believe that to preserve this site is our duty to our predecessors of the Meiji era, who worked for the modernisation of a newly-born nation-state, and to the people of the future. The Japanese Archaeological Association urges the East Japan Railway Company (JR East) and other related organisations to work together to preserve this irreplaceable historical treasure for future generations, and we will spare no effort to cooperate in this effort.

Hideto TSUJI

President of the Japanese Archaeological Association

Notes

1) The Takanawa-Chikutei railway embankment and its excavated sections in photographs (Photographs and Caption sentences from a pamphlet by Minato Ward Board of Education distributed on 4 April 2021)



The Chikutei as it looked c. 1907 (40th Year of the Era of Meiji)

The Takanawa-Chikutei railway embankment is a railway structure that was built in 1872 to lay tracks across the sea when Japan's first railway was constructed. In 1869, the Meiji government decided to build a 29km railway connecting the capital Tokyo (former Edo) with the port city of Yokohama. However, the Ministry of War refused to hand over the land around Takanawa to the railway authorities on the grounds that it was needed for national defence, so it was decided to build a 2.7km section from Honshiba to Shinagawa Station via the Takanawa coast and run trains on the embankment.

The construction of the embankment was carried out under the supervision of the British engineer Edmund Morrell, and was carried out by the Ministry of Civil Affairs' Railway Department and later by the Ministry of Works' Railway Department. The construction was difficult, as the earth and sand that had once been reclaimed was washed away by the waves and the embankment collapsed, and it was not completed until September 1872, just before the official opening.



View towards Shinagawa from the northern part of the site. Takanawa Gateway Station is on the left. You can see the linear extension of the well-preserved Chikutei embankment and wooden pile lines in front.



The protrusion of what appears to be a signal box