

RAILWAYS



INTRODUCTION

Every railway in the UK has attracted authors, sometimes many, and those in the Battle area are no exception. This study is merely an introduction to a topic that can be (and often is) taken to very considerable detail – history, geology, architecture, locomotives and rolling stock, accidents, finances, individuals involved and other matters.

HASTINGS TO LONDON

The first English railway planned south or south east of London was in Kent, when a prospectus was published in 1824. Like so many others it attracted such opposition that it was not built, even though it would have connected the military and naval depots of Woolwich, Chatham, Sheerness and Dover, and would also have facilitated transport to and from the rest of Europe.

Things were different after the success of the Liverpool and Manchester line of 1830, though in fact the Canterbury and Whitstable railway preceded it by some months, using steam locomotives from the start; it survived to 1953. But it was the Lancashire project that caught the public eye. Competing speculators had surveyors draw up plans in almost every county for submission to Parliament, the approval of which was required if the new line was not entirely on land sold to a company by willing owners, a long and complex process.

Railways obtained approval in Surrey and Sussex, down to Brighton. The latter allowed a connection from Redhill to Tonbridge, along which South Eastern Railway (SER) boat trains ran to Folkestone from 1843. This line was extended southwards to Tunbridge Wells by an Act of Parliament of 1845. It was the intention of the South Eastern Railway to reach Hastings from Headcorn on its Dover line, through Tenterden, but the authorised plan of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR) to reach St Leonards and Hastings suggested that that company would expand to take almost all of Sussex, sealing off a wide area that the SER would want for its own. This was a very common nineteenth-century practice. If a company put a line down somewhere, then its rivals would find it hard to get Parliamentary approval to build in the same area. The need of the railway companies to protect their own territories and to try to invade those of others led to enormous efforts: for example, the short and now-abandoned line to Brighton Kemptown was an attempt to keep the South Eastern Railway out of town.

The SER therefore changed its plan to the more expensive alternative that we use today. An Act of 1846 authorised the extension from Tunbridge Wells to Bo Peep Junction at the western end of St Leonards. The new line southwards ran to Robertsbridge on 1 September 1851 and to Bo Peep on 1 January 1852. There it joined the coast line opened by the LBSCR on 13 February 1851. (An additional station – Mountfield Halt – was opened in 1865, just to the east of the level crossing on what is now the A2100; it closed in 1969.) The junction at Bo

Peep was not without its troubles. The two companies did not agree on the use of the junction or of the two stations to the east, which delayed the actual opening for a month, but an agreement was finally reached.

Further north the position was unsatisfactory. At first the line between Tonbridge and London ran via Redhill, so that travel from London to Hastings remained time-consuming and not much faster, if at all, than the LBSC line through Lewes. A new line was built through Sevenoaks and opened in 1868. This meant that the shortest and therefore quickest line between London and Hastings was now by way of Tunbridge Wells, and this remains the position today. It would lead to a Victorian heyday for Hastings, which expanded enormously.

The main line had been a difficult line to build. The nature of the countryside required the digging of tunnels, which were necessarily expensive. From Tunbridge Wells southwards there are tunnels at Grove Hill (262 m), Strawberry Hill, (also 262 m), Wadhurst (1102 m) and Mountfield (481 m). There were already two substantial tunnels between Tonbridge and Tunbridge Wells. The 1868 line added more, at Sevenoaks, Polhill, Knockholt and Elmstead.

On the 1846 line some of the tunnels were badly built, the contractors saving money by lining them four bricks deep instead of the specified seven (some say six) and by the time this came to be noticed it was too late to take the lining down and make more room for seven bricks. The three extra courses of brick were added on the inside, meaning that the tunnels were now too narrow for a double line of ordinary rolling stock to be able to use them. Special slimline rolling stock had to be used.

There are also steep gradients: the maximum is 1:47 by the Medway valley north of Tonbridge – difficult for steam unless the locomotive had a good run-up. Things could have been easier had the South Eastern Railway not been anxious to complete the line quickly. Even so the line cost some £500,000 in real terms then.

The results of opening any railway were dramatic. They greatly reduced the cost of transporting goods and increased the speed of delivery. Coal, building materials, food and livestock, newspapers – everything in fact – had had to arrive by water or by horse-hauled road vehicles at considerable cost and delay. Now they came swiftly and cheaply. This meant a major assault on local independence and individuality, as regional and then national companies were able to take over local businesses or open their own, a process almost finalised by road traffic in the next century. But local industry could grow too: the Mountfield gypsum mine, opened in the 1870s, today remains linked to the main line.

To paraphrase the Duke of Wellington, railways also meant that people could move around. The expansion of Hastings and St Leonards and other seaside towns was rapid. Battle began to receive more tourists rather than just travellers, especially with the growing interest in mediaeval times expressed by writers and artists and evidenced in the changes in names given to children: Arthur and Edith, for example, were revived.

Two things stand out on the line. The most obvious is the staggering of station platforms, most noticeably at Wadhurst. This seems odd until one realises that it was sensible to have a siding at each end, rather than to delay traffic by passing through a station and shunting back. Sometimes, as sidings closed, the platforms were lengthened over them: the obvious

example is at Battle, where a brisk study of the structures supporting the platforms will demonstrate the change.

The other is the architecture of the stations. This varies, presumably according to the importance of the station, and the most impressive is that of Battle: a stone-built Victorian Gothic structure with a clerical air about it. It has been extended (most unsympathetically) but the main part of the building is the original, if rather careworn, and listed Grade II. The architect was William Tress of Finsbury Square, London, who built many stations for the railway, including those on the Tunbridge Wells/Bo Peep line and Rye. A report to Rother District Council states:

Battle Station is a virtually intact example of the relatively plain early gothic style originally associated with the small rural railway stations and, as such, is a relatively rare survival as many suffered demolition or conversion post-Beeching.¹

Tress designed most of the stations on the main line, and several others elsewhere in the SER network. He was not confined to railway work: he also built churches and schools. He was a Faversham man, born in about 1801; he died at Reigate in 1859.

FURTHER PLANS

In the 1860s the SER promoted lines to towns yet unserved such as Tenterden and Cranbrook, and the LBSCR to places like Warbleton. They probably had no intention to build: they were getting their feet in the door first. In 1863 the SER planned a line from Battle down to Wartling and on to Pevensey and Eastbourne, with a branch to Bexhill (and apparently one to Ashburnham) that may have been serious in respect of Bexhill and Eastbourne but otherwise must have been to stop the rival Brighton company from further invading the areas west of Battle: in 1865 it planned a line from Tunbridge Wells to Eastbourne, presumably to kill the SER proposal. Again, in 1898 the LBSCR submitted plans for a line between Bexhill and Rotherfield (and then to join its Lewes/Uckfield/Tunbridge Wells line), which would have run through Ninfield, Ashburnham and Dallington. It obtained approval but the plan was abandoned in 1902.² (That company's line from Hailsham to Eridge had been open for decades, which suggests that the new proposal would not have been economic.)

THE KENT AND EAST SUSSEX RAILWAY

From 1900 the Kent and East Sussex Railway (K&ESR) slowly made its way from Robertsbridge to Tenterden by way of Salehurst and Bodiam and from Tenterden to Headcorn on the SER main line to Dover. It was a light railway, built under the 1896 Act which much reduced the cost of building but restricted speeds.

It will be seen from the map below that the line as built was only one of several contemplated by its owners and marked in blue: Tenterden to Appledore, Tenterden to Cranbrook, Northiam to Rye, Headcorn to Maidstone and Robertsbridge to Pevensey.

This last would have meant some difficult engineering, at some cost, as it was to go by Darwell Hole, Penhurst and Ashburnham. The station at Robertsbridge lies between 20 and 25 metres above sea level, and Pevensey at less than five metres; between them the highest

point on the 24 km proposed line would have been at about 70 metres. A lot of cutting and embanking would have been required, and in 1899 the total cost was estimated at £87,320, or somewhere between eight and nine million in 2017 purchasing power. One would think that its income would be insufficient to cover the costs, let alone the debts incurred. There were very few settlements along the proposed line, and none of them substantial;³ there would have been intermediate stations at Bodle Street and Wartling. It appears that despite much official support and extensions of the time permitted the required funds were not available.

CROWHURST TO BEXHILL

The Bexhill branch from Crowhurst waited until 1902. By then Bexhill was attracting a large holiday traffic, with through trains from London run by the LBSCR; but the length of their line through Lewes meant that trains took much longer to reach the town than the new line would. The SER could offer as an alternative only coming to the coast at Warrior Square and then changing, again on to the Brighton line.

The new line branched off at Crowhurst, running across a long viaduct, through Sidley and into Bexhill south of the main road through the town. It was closed in 1964. The viaduct was demolished in 1969; and much of the trackbed is now taken up by the new (2015) link road. An impressive video of the demolition can be viewed at <https://www.britishpathe.com/video/blowing-up-viaduct>

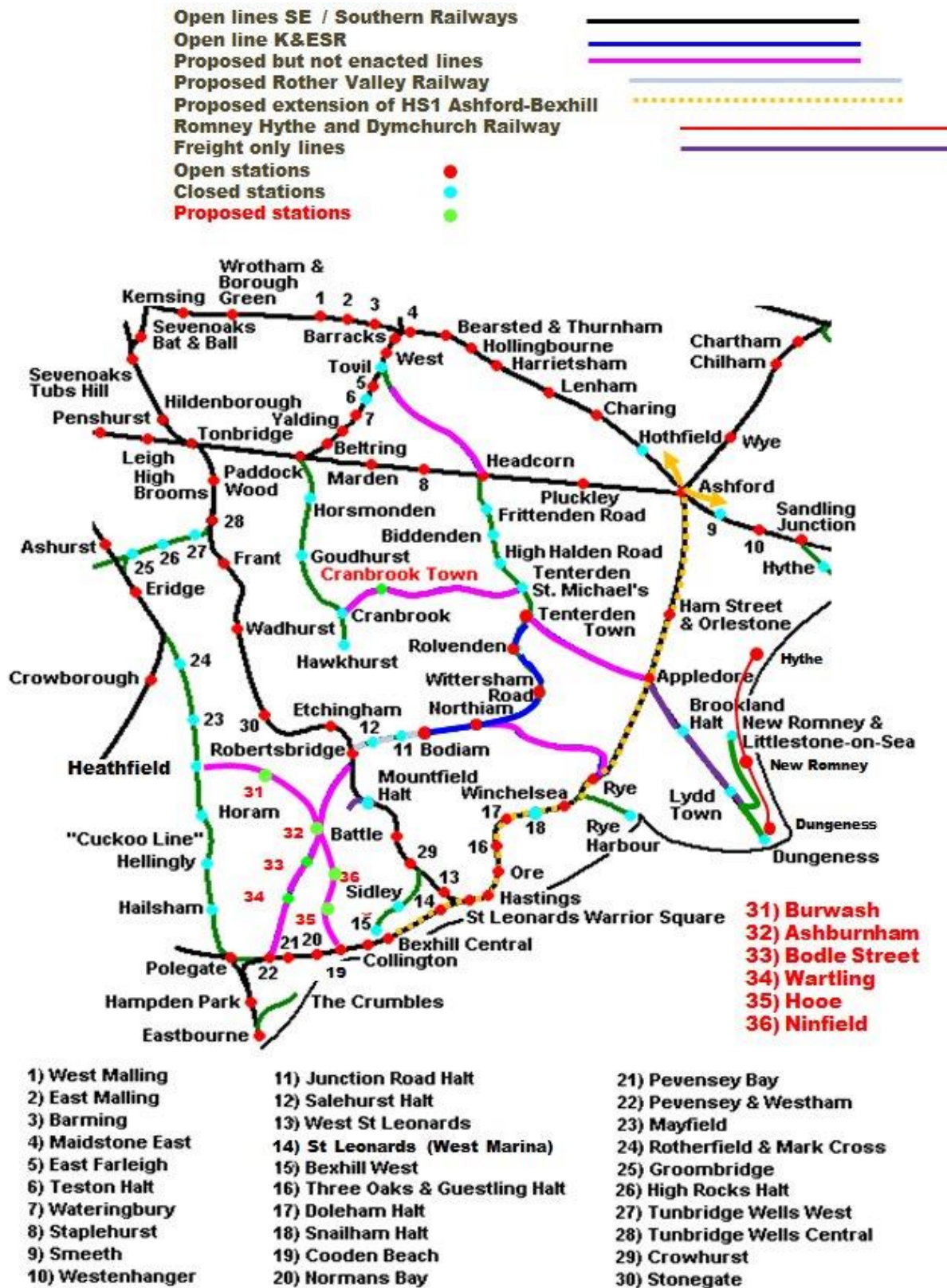
FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

It should not be thought that everything about the railways was received with pleasure. The Marley Lane crossing in Battle was a constant source of complaint, largely because the principal sidings at the station branched off the main line on its Marley Lane side; they were where the car park now stands, which proved to be very convenient for the gasworks established in Lower Lake in 1839. When the line was built Marley Lane was not a through road and led only to Marley Farm, so road traffic would have been minimal. Any shunting to and from the main line necessarily caused the gates to close, and there was a lot of it.⁴ This road crossing, like all others on the line, has been much improved by the closure of the sidings and the installation of automatically operated gates.

All British railways had heavy traffic in both world wars but after 1945 things were different. They were nationalised in 1948 before the major shift towards road transport, and British Railways began a major modernisation programme a few years later. But the financial position of BR was growing worse. Some lines were shut. Regular passenger services on the K&ESR ended as early as 1954, and the line was finally closed in 1961.

The 1959 government (in which a major road contractor served as Minister of Transport) set up an inquiry entitled *The reshaping of British Railways* under Richard Beeching, which reported in 1963. It envisaged no serious change to the main Hastings/London line but proposed the closure of the Crowhurst branch and of the line between Hastings and Ashford. Further west it also proposed closing lines between Crowborough and Lewes and Eridge to Polegate. Given present-day traffic volumes it is good that at least the Ashford line remains open, as well as part of the line south of Crowborough.

The railways of the Battle district, actual and planned



Modernisation continued, particularly after 1970. The line from Eastbourne to Ore was electrified in 1935,⁵ though that from Tonbridge to Hastings had to wait until 1986 despite the fact that plans to do it were first made in 1903. The opportunity was taken to single the tracks in the relevant tunnels so that modern, wider rolling stock could use them. Speeds

had gradually increased anyway: in 1911 trains from Battle to Charing Cross took well over 2½ hours⁶ where they now take nearly an hour less.

Those of us who travel cannot but be impressed not only by the increased traffic on the roads but also by that on the railways. The reopening of some Network Rail lines surely cannot be delayed much longer, or even the building of new ones, despite the costs inflated by caution and an insistence on not seeing the possibilities of new traffic when stations are built, or perhaps by those who have interests elsewhere. Reopening is unlikely to affect any settlement nearer to Battle than Uckfield, where pressure continues to reopen the line to Lewes. K&ESR are confident that they can join the existing Tenterden–Bodiam stretch with that built by the Rother Valley Railway at Robertsbridge. There is currently a campaign to improve and electrify the line from Ore to Ashford for high-speed trains to London.

As a footnote it may be observed that three serious accidents have occurred on the line – those near Sevenoaks in 1927 and at Lewisham in 1957 both involved trains making for the Kent coast. The accident at Hither Green on 5 November 1967 involved a train from Hastings to Charing Cross. The diesel-electric multiple unit train derailed at about 70mph (112 kmh). 49 people were killed and 78 injured, 27 of them seriously. The cause was a broken rail, and the inquiry thought that it had been affected by the raising of the speed limit on the line earlier in the year.

Among the dead were a woman from Catsfield Stream and a man from Cripps Corner. He was James Turner (born at Dartford in 1907) of Laurel Bank, Battle Road, who had been awarded the Empire Gallantry Medal for his actions on the cargo ship *SS Manaar* on 6 September 1939.

The citation in *The London Gazette* reads:

The KING has been graciously pleased to approve the Award of the Medal of the Civil Division of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire, for Gallantry, to the undermentioned:

James Gordon Melville Turner, Radio Officer, S.S. "Manaar" (Messrs. T. & J. Brocklebank).

When the S.S. "Manaar" was attacked by an enemy submarine there was no summons to stop. About ten shots were fired before the ship was abandoned after twenty or thirty minutes. Three shells were fired, one of which took away the fore part of the wheelhouse and probably the wireless aerial. Rapid shrapnel followed. Some of the men in the boats were injured by gunfire.

The Radio Officer was inadvertently left behind in the ship with two members of the native crew, one severely wounded and the other injured. His shipmates called to him to come down and join them in the Master's boat, but he refused to leave the ship until the two other members of the crew could be rescued. He tried to lower a lifeboat, but the falls jammed and then suddenly ran out, so that the boat crashed into the water and filled. He carried the severely wounded Lascar to another boat, and was about to lower it when the boat was blown to pieces, with the wounded man inside. He then swam out to the waterlogged boat and pulled her alongside. The injured Lascar then went down the rope into the boat, which was cut adrift, and joined the Master's boat. All this was done under fire.

Seven of the 62 crew died. It appears that in a later incident Turner lost a leg and spent the rest of the war in a prisoner of war camp. His EGM was changed for a George Cross in 1943.

¹ http://planweb01.rother.gov.uk/OcellaWeb/viewDocument?file=dv_pl_files%5CRR_2015_1616_L%5CRR_2015_1616_L-R.pdf&module=pl

² Roger Davey: East Sussex Parliamentary deposited plans 1799-1870 (Sussex Record Society, 2003).

³ Robertsbridge and Pevensey Light Railway: estimate of expense (Light Railways Commission, May 1899), kindly loaned by Alan Judd.

⁴ Minutes of the Battle Urban District Council, various dates.

⁵ C F Dendy Marshall: The story of the Southern Railway (Ian Allen, 1963).

⁶ Bradshaw's April 2010 Railway Guide