

## An Alternative Way into Folkestone Harbour

The South Eastern had got to Folkestone in June 1843 and crossed the Foord viaduct to Folkestone Junction in December that year. The company acquired the harbour in 1844 and immediately set about improving it. The well-known swing bridge was constructed in 1847 though track was not taken across it until December 1848 when the Harbour station and the branch were opened following Board of Trade authorisation for the latter's use by passenger traffic that month. Still tidal at this time the harbour entrance was kept clear of the west-east shingle drift by a massive stone groyne along which track was extended in 1863 to the 'Pier' station. But 'tidal' services continued until 1865 when further improvements permitted steamers to berth at any state of the tide. (One of the last 'tidal' workings was involved in the Staplehurst disaster of that year. Charles Dickens was among the passengers.)

However, very early in the Harbour's history working the branch was proving a trial, not simply the need for sufficient motive power on the sharp gradient but time consumed in reversal and shunting at the junction. Worse, by 1861 the Chatham had got into Dover, travelling a route twelve miles shorter than the South Eastern's thence through the Warren. At least Folkestone was theirs alone but the Chatham was proving a real threat to the SER's domination of Continental traffic that it had enjoyed up to this time.

To counter the Chatham's distance advantage and eliminate the reversal at the junction the SER proposed a more direct line to the harbour. This followed introduction in 1861/2 of new, faster steamers for the Boulogne service. The plan was to put in a new line from a junction west of Shorncliffe, falling on the north side of the main line on a gradient of about 1 in 250, then to curve round and pass under the Foord viaduct to join the Harbour branch almost at the water's edge. But even before the Company got around to putting together a Bill for Parliament's consideration local opposition stifled it.

Ten years later the SER looked a little further west for relief, opening the branch from Sandling Junction to Sandgate on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1874. (Branch trains actually terminated at Westenhanger until Sandling Junction station opened in January 1888.) On the face of it this line was of little importance and, indeed, was described as such by one railway historian. But the briefest of glimpses at a map will illustrate the South Eastern's longer-term thinking. An extension of about two miles along the coast would have reached the harbour, providing a direct route into it with none of the faffing about at the Junction. As a further indication perhaps of the longer term plan that may have been in Watkin's head, both Hythe and Sandgate stations were rather remote from their towns as the branch sought the most direct route eastwards.

It never came about for, perhaps, two reasons. By 1868 the South Eastern had opened the 'Sevenoaks Cut-off' throughout, lopping more than twelve miles off its London-Dover route. This made the distance to Folkestone Harbour 4½ miles less than the Chatham faced to Dover over a much more difficult route and, indeed, put the SER directly on a par with the Chatham to that port. Secondly, in 1874 Watkin was returned to Parliament as the member for Hythe. He must have realised quite early on any line along the coast that cut off the land from the sea, as Brunel had managed to do in South Devon, would make the SER, and himself in particular, even more unpopular than they already were. Held in rather low esteem by virtue of money being

spent unnecessarily chasing the Chatham about Kent rather than on improving train services in general, Watkin, for all his self-confidence, could not afford to act against his instincts or, indeed, his self-interest.

It seems the extension, despite rumours, was never seriously mentioned by the SER Board except perhaps in muted tones in the privacy of the Company's offices. But much later a tremendous local *furor* broke out when the idea did become known. From a practical and economic point of view it made absolute sense to have carried this scheme through. The savings accrued from abandoning the expensive working of the harbour branch that persisted for more than a century until the Channel Tunnel swallowed Continental workings, would surely have justified the initial cost of construction. Of course, we'd have been deprived of the sight and sound of three or four 'R' class 0-6-0 tank engines blasting their way with a heavy Boat train up the near mile of 1 in 30 through the Folkestone terraces. And like the Harbour branch now its closure would surely have followed the tunnel's opening. But what a route it might have been!

Just to wrap things up and tie in the loose ends, Hythe-Sandgate closed on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1931, the Sandling Junction-Hythe section being singled at the same time. And if any doubt on Watkin's long term plans still lingered 'singled' is further evidence of them. Services were suspended during the last two years of WW2 but the branch closed completely on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1951. On the same date Sandling Junction was renamed 'Sandling for Hythe' though the suffix no longer appears, not in 'Southeastern' timetables anyway.

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