

ABOUT THE CUCKOO LINE

Even before its main line had been completed the London & Brighton Railway had received authorisation to build branches to Lewes and Newhaven, and to Shoreham though only the last, opened 12th May 1840, was constructed at the time. It was left to the Brighton, Lewes & Hastings company, a Brighton 'front', to open the coast line to Lewes on 8th June 1846, and through to St Leonards (Bulverhythe) two weeks later. At the end of the following month the L&B and the London & Croydon along with several other local companies, including the BL&HR, amalgamated to form the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway.

Three branches were authorised that year, Southerham junction to Newhaven , opened 8th December 1847, and to Hailsham and Eastbourne, both brought into use on 14th May 1849. These two single line branches made their junction with the Hastings line at Polegate. Hailsham, three miles distant, was confidently expected to provide the greater traffic. The four small and closely-grouped fishing villages that eventually comprised Eastbourne obviously could not compare with the centuries old town north of it, granted Charter Market status in 1252 and having well-established open and cattle markets and a thriving rope-making industry. The reverse came to be true, for as elsewhere along the Sussex coast the railway brought vast change and prosperity to Eastbourne. In the four decades from 1851, as the town developed into a fashionable seaside resort under the influence of William Cavendish, later Duke of Devonshire, the population rose from about 4000 to more than 35000.

The LBSCR was forever at loggerheads with the South Eastern. Despite agreements made in 1848 and 1864, convenient at times of financial difficulty, that neither would trespass on the other's 'Sphere of Influence' the Brighton was not above making prods east of its main line. One of these joined Three Bridges to East Grinstead from 9th July 1855, the first of several local openings over a period of almost thirty years. East Grinstead to Groombridge and Groombridge to Tunbridge Wells opened together on 1st October 1866, while a line to Uckfield from Groombridge was commissioned on 3rd August 1868.

The *status quo* to the south was maintained until 5th April 1881 when the Hailsham branch was projected north to Heathfield, a distance of almost eight miles, with intermediate stations at Hellingly and Waldren & Horeham Road, the latter having a passing loop. Five

months on a further extension of 8¾ miles was made to Eridge (Redgate Mill junction) on the Groombridge-Uckfield line. Stations were built at Mayfield and Rotherfield & Marks Cross, both with passing loops. Though these extensions were principally to keep the South Eastern at bay they completed the 'Cuckoo Line', so named from the annual Cuckoo Fair at Heathfield, and provided a route to Eastbourne avoiding the main line. (It has to be remembered that the South Eastern still owned the track between Coulsdon and Redhill and the parallel Quarry Line did not open for passenger traffic until April 1900.)

Traffic on the Cuckoo Line north of Hailsham was never that heavy and fortunately so, for by the nature of the countryside and the need by the Brighton to build as economically as possible, steep gradients and sharp curvature were the norm rather than the exception over that near-seventeen miles of the route. The two principal summits were at Heathfield tunnel and Argos Hill, Mayfield, in both cases approached by long climbs as steep as 1 in 50. Nevertheless, this was predominantly a tank engine line mainly worked by locos shedded at Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne. Most journeys were confined between those two points or intermediately, but there were until the latter years odd workings to and from London in which Battersea took an occasional interest. Connection to the Capital had been made possible by the opening of the Croydon, Oxted & East Grinstead Railway on 10th March 1884 (using much of the route of the Surrey & Sussex Junction Railway, authorised 1865, objected to by the SER, awarded to a reluctant Brighton by arbitration but abandoned in 1870 after some construction and payment of a penalty) and from Hurst Green Junction on that line to Groombridge (Ashurst Junction), completed in two stages by 1st October 1888.

Both before and immediately post-World War Two and up until their withdrawal the Marsh 4-4-2T of various classes as well as the two 'J' class 'pacific' tanks were to be regularly seen. Inevitably Brighton-built 'standard' class 4MT 2-6-4T and LMR 2MT 2-6-2T appeared as these Brighton engines were withdrawn. Freight traffic was generally in the hands of Billinton 'radial' tanks. Coaching stock, usually of three-coach sets sometimes strengthened, was made up mainly of ex-SECR 'Birdcage's or Maunsell 59-footers of 1929-1933 vintage.

Inevitably the line came under Dr Beeching's scrutiny and did not survive. Passenger trains were withdrawn north of Hailsham in 1965 though freight traffic survived until the whole line closed on 8th September 1968, by which time three-car diesel units worked Eastbourne-Polegate-Hailsham. That section had always been well patronised so, unsurprisingly, strong

protests were registered before this event, particularly as much new housing was being built in and around Hailsham at the time and more was planned. Despite this the enquiry upheld the closure decision because the population would, supposedly, have had to be at a certain figure before the route became viable. Closure thus went ahead, the track subsequently being removed with indecent haste. Within two years, as predicted, that 'certain' population figure had been reached and surpassed, but too late!

BY JEREMY CLARKE