Further Reflections on The Hawkhurst Branch

I was much interested in Neil Cameron’s piece on the last days of this line in the March eNewsletter because its history reads rather sadly from the start. Authority for the section from Paddock Wood to Cranbrook, at one time the centre of the Wealden cloth industry, was obtained in 1877 by local interests under the title ‘The Cranbrook & Paddock Wood Railway’—note which end the promoters considered the more important!—and built in the charge of a very young Resident Engineer, one Holman F. Stephens. This followed a number of abortive schemes including one sanctioned to the SER between Paddock Wood and Hythe via Cranbrook to counter a similar proposal by the Chatham, quietly dropped once the threat faded.

Construction started in 1879 but ever short of funds, work came to a standstill shortly afterwards. The railway didn’t reach Goudhurst until 1892 but got to Hawkhurst the following year, Acts of Parliament having to be obtained in the interim for changes to the route and financial arrangements. Hawkhurst was constructed as a ‘through’ station rather than a terminus. Even before completion of the line there were requests by local business interests at Tenterden for extension there. Another proposal saw it as part of a line from Maidstone to Dungeness, while a third wanted extension to Rye. None of course came to fruition.

The Light Railways Act of 1896 was a boon to Stephens who had long held the view that standards required of main lines were unnecessary for those exclusively serving rural areas. There is no doubt he practiced what he preached when constructing the Hawkhurst branch. It largely and conveniently followed the ‘lie of the land’, creating some steep gradients, 1 in 60/66 for example being quite common. And that also meant stations were usually some way from the places they purported to serve. Goudhurst, for example was a mile distant from the station while both Cranbrook and Hawkhurst were further away still. In fact Cranbrook station was actually located in Hartley, some two miles to the south west.

Hops were among the major commodities carried though this was obviously seasonal. But passenger traffic was light apart from the hopping season when the pickers and their families arrived from London in special trains. With the mechanisation of hop-picking this gradually faded and road transport increasingly took the harvest. Closure was proposed in March 1961 and the last train ran on Saturday 10th June. Perhaps as a sign of its relative lack of importance the words ‘Dismantled Railway’ are few and far between on O/S maps of the area. (1:50000, Landranger no 188.)

By Jeremy Clarke