

The Brighton and South Eastern Grouping Proposal, 1888

By MICHAEL ROBBINS

THE long story of the unneighbourly relations of the South Eastern and the London, Brighton & South Coast companies is one of the most curious and complex in British railway history. In an article contributed to *The Railway Magazine* in February, 1955, I examined one aspect of the story under the title "A Railway Treaty: the Brighton and South Eastern Agreement of 1848," on the basis of a pamphlet publication of 1860 entitled "Relations of the Brighton and South Eastern Companies." The tangle of ownerships and rights on the lines forming the approach to London Bridge Station from the south was the cause of most of the unpleasantness that continually arose between the two parties; and when I recently came upon a printed pamphlet, foolscap size, comprehensively entitled "Historical Notes in Reference to the Lines of Railway between Redhill and London by means of which the London, Brighton and South Coast and South Eastern Railway Companies obtain access to the London Bridge stations of both Companies," by Fred. D. Banister, M.Inst.C.E., and dated March, 1888, I guessed that history was, as so often happens, being appealed to in order to support some particular contention that was not upheld by both the parties named.

F. D. Banister was the Brighton railway's "resident engineer" from 1860 to 1895. His selection of references to Acts of Parliament and correspondence going back to the original London & Greenwich Railway Act of 1833, accompanied by nine diagrams of the Corbett's Lane area and the lines out to Redhill, was designed to show that powers being sought by the South Eastern in its 1888 Bill for a new junction from the Bricklayers Arms branch to the up side of the London & Greenwich lines at Corbett's Lane would, if granted, create a situation unfavourable to the Brighton, impeding the proper handling of its trains; it would also, in the Brighton's view, be contrary to the spirit in which the line—the up Croydon—had been left exclusively to

Brighton trains for nearly thirty years (it had not been until 1878 that the South Eastern had first raised the contention that it also was entitled to use this line). The junction proposal seemed to show that the S.E.R. was determined to press its view; and the Brighton pamphlet was launched to counter it. The copy I have used is inscribed "W. M. Acworth Esq., with F. D. Banister's compliments" (Mr. Acworth was already writing, in *Murray's Magazine*, articles on railways which in 1889 appeared together in his book "The Railways of England," in which there is a reference, neutral in tone, to the dispute); the production was evidently distributed to persons believed to have influence in the Press, and probably in Parliament also.

What was the situation underlying this sharp outbreak of warfare? There is a brief reference in Dendy Marshall's "History of the Southern Railway" to the quarrel (on pages 316-7); but when one turns to the contemporary railway press, and to the archives of the companies, now made available by the courtesy of the Archivist (Historical Records), B.T.C., a much more interesting condition of things is seen to have existed: no less than a serious move to create a working union of the two railways. Other matters discussed in January and February, 1888, included a five-year truce between the companies, and a proposal that the Brighton should lease or purchase the South Eastern's interest in all the lines concerned as far as Redhill. Yet in March the hostilities were as bitter as ever. What had happened?

This particular episode in the long story appears to begin with the despatch of a letter dated December 27, 1887, from William Abbott, of Tokenhouse Yard, E.C., to the London, Chatham & Dover and the Brighton chairmen, proposing a "working union" of these companies with the South Eastern, on the following basis: termination of disputes and rivalries; the pooling of

traffic at competitive points; opening of the sixteen metropolitan stations of the three companies to all the passengers using the lines of any of them; and improvements in cross-country communication. Mr. Abbott, a shareholder in all three companies, claimed to speak for a substantial but undisclosed section of the proprietors; he did not like Sir Edward Watkin, Chairman of the South Eastern, and Sir Edward did not like him; but when it came to a straight vote at a general meeting Mr. Abbott could not prevail. He was an example of a familiar type, the "shareholders' advocate" who knows he can manage the business better than the directors do; he was credited, indeed, with much of the responsibility for the fusion of the weaker Isle of Wight railways in 1887. The fact that at his death in March, 1888, his own affairs were found to be hopelessly embarrassed, although it gave rise to some natural remarks at the time, cannot be taken to mean that his ideas on railway management were always wrong.

In its early stages, the affair advanced in the full glare of publicity. It seems strange to find daily reports in the Press, accompanied by copies of the correspondence passing between the parties, about a negotiation which would normally require quite private and confidential handling; the reason probably is that none of the three railways then believed that there was anything serious in it, and they enjoyed scoring points off each other in public. Some of the points were trivial, even babyish; the South Eastern generally scored most, and this did not make its neighbours love it any more. On December 30, 1887, James Staats Forbes, Chairman of the Chatham, replied to Abbott, agreeing in principle to discuss a working agreement but referring to a similar attempt, made two years previously, in respect of the Chatham and the Brighton, which the latter would not proceed with. On January 4, 1888, however, Samuel Laing, the Brighton Chairman, generally agreed to the proposals, though he stated that he could not see his way to work with Sir Edward Watkin. This did not sound very promising, but apparently nobody was surprised. On January 9, W. R. Stevens, Secretary of the South Eastern (formerly its solicitor), wrote to Abbott, Forbes, and Laing observing that earlier proposals

for fusion of the interests of the three companies had been put forward by Watkin in 1878, when he states Abbott had managed to get them defeated, and in 1885, when the Brighton declined. This letter was rejected by the Chatham on the ground that it was written without the authority of the South Eastern board. Stevens was a master of the biting epistle—at any rate he signed plenty, though people thought they detected his master's hand in some of the phrasing; but a later one in the series from Morgan, Secretary of the Chatham, apparently left him without an answer. "Mr. Forbes receives with pleasure," it runs, "your disclaimer of any intended discourtesy to him. His experience of you did not lead him to believe that you would willingly act discourteously or indulge in unprovoked innuendo; but he also remembers the saying that 'evil communications corrupt good manners'." Forbes was referring not to the South Eastern's train services but to Stevens' Chairman, Watkin; Forbes also did not like him.

The Chatham quickly made it clear that it was not prepared to go on; but the terms of a five-year truce between the South Eastern and the Brighton were drafted by January 20—there was some reason to act quickly, if anything was to be done, so that announcements might be made at the half-yearly shareholders' meetings. At this stage Lady Watkin fell ill at her home, Rose Hill, Northenden, Cheshire, and Watkin was at her bedside throughout almost the whole of the period until her death early in March. In consequence events can be traced from the letters and telegrams exchanged between him and Laing at this critical stage, when it appears the two men did not actually meet.

On January 22, Watkin raised some points on the draft agreement in a pencilled letter written in the sick-room at Northenden; next day Laing replied, evidently not willing to be pushed along as fast as Watkin wanted to go. On January 29, however, Laing was writing that a settlement was so nearly agreed that it would be ridiculous if it were not achieved; he emphasised that this was his personal view. This gave Watkin what he was waiting for: on January 31 he wrote a letter to Laing, marked "Private," with the words "No one shall

know of this note or the enclosure but myself," proposing that the South Eastern grant the Brighton a half user of the up Croydon line (which was to be connected with its own line by a burrowing junction) and that it should drop all its other claims; and—this was the crux—in the following November the two companies should seek Parliamentary powers to work as one system, while retaining the two boards of directors (precisely the arrangement adopted in 1899 when the South Eastern and the Chatham at last buried the hatchet). Urging that he could hardly keep these personal negotiations confidential from his board for more than a few days longer, Watkin asked for an immediate answer of yes or no. Laing telegraphed on February 1, not surprisingly, that the matter was too complicated for yes or no. The same day he wrote, from Brighton, to say that there could be no agreement to a joint board or committee—"No one wants it but Abbott," he observed. He had explained to his own shareholders that in his view Parliament would sanction any such arrangement only at the price of an unacceptable control by the Railway & Canal Commissioners over rates and charges. He wanted the specific questions at issue put back to the respective general managers, Allen Sarle and Myles Fenton, to thrash out.

In another letter, on February 6, Laing made an important suggestion: the Brighton would be willing to lease or buy the whole South Eastern interest in the lines between London Bridge and Redhill, as well as the line from Tonbridge to Reading. (He broached the idea at the Brighton shareholders' meeting on January 25 and said then that he had once made the suggestion to Watkin; but this is the first mention of it in the correspondence.) Laing was evidently ready to pay a price—and it would certainly have been a stiff one, with the South Eastern bargaining on the other side—for a clean physical segregation from the S.E.R. After all, the route *via* Croydon and Redhill had become, since the opening of the direct line through Sevenoaks to Tonbridge in 1868, merely of secondary importance to the South Eastern, whereas it was part of the Brighton's main line. But Watkin was after the very reverse—getting the two companies so closely associated that the

South Eastern could align itself with the Brighton's enviable stability as a profit-earner, and also no doubt that he himself might in time secure effective control of the whole.

At this point, however, the whole negotiation, such as it was, collapsed. On February 8 Laing wrote again, stating that a clause in the South Eastern's Bill for the forthcoming session permitting the Metropolitan Railway (also a Watkin company) to run trains over the lines between London Bridge and Redhill made it quite impossible to continue. Watkin professed himself puzzled by this, and indeed it looks like a convenient excuse for breaking off; Laing seems to have felt that he had been swept along too fast and was not likely to carry his board with him. So on February 10 the Press had an official statement from the Brighton that negotiations had been broken off; and some rather dreary recriminations of bad faith and so on were thrown out by the South Eastern.

Discussions on the narrower issue of the Croydon line went on through March, however, and the S.E.R. withdrew the clauses complained of by the Brighton. In the end, the two general managers agreed that the matter should go to an arbitrator, and in 1889 Sir Henry Oakley, General Manager of the Great Northern, found for the South Eastern on one count—that the rent paid by the Brighton for user of the Corbett's Lane to London Bridge section should be increased from some £14,000 to £20,000 per annum, in view of its greatly increased suburban traffic using the lines.

The Brighton's case, even when it was made skilfully, as in Banister's publication, was a weak one, and the South Eastern, as so often, would get the better of the argument; the Brighton had already in 1883 sought an injunction before Mr. Justice Kay and been refused. It was the South Eastern's maddening way of doing business that irritated its fairly pacific Brighton neighbour. Laing evidently felt that he was being unfairly pressed for a quick answer by Watkin's rapid succession of letters and telegrams; even though the proposals might have a good deal of merit, he did not care for the way they were forced on him. He was, it is clear, an extremely honourable man; and though there is nothing in this series of transactions to suggest in any way that

Watkin was anything else, it seems that Laing felt the pressure on him to be extremely distasteful. This reserve can be perceived underlying the polite phrases of the correspondence. The feeling that, in Victorian language, Sir Edward was "not quite a gentleman" may help to explain why, with all his brilliance and his dashing *coups*, his career as a railway magnate did not really come off. Unhappily, as his personal papers were all destroyed during the last war, full insight into this remarkable man will probably never be attainable. This episode may, however, furnish one important clue.

There are also some other points of special interest for the student of railway history. First, the alignment of the railway press: *The Railway News* was consistently anti-Watkin and pro-Abbott; *The Railway Times* was suspicious of Abbott (indeed it suggested that nobody had cost the "small investor" more) without entirely approving of Watkin's methods; *Herapath's Railway Journal* was perhaps the most outspokenly critical of Watkin's policies, but it did not think much of Abbott. It is well to remember these "party lines" when considering their assessments of the situation. Next, the story as told above from January 22 to the break is based almost entirely on the South Eastern board minutes, which

at this period are exceptionally full and detailed, containing long extracts from the correspondence. The Brighton minutes, on the other hand, are terse in the extreme, usually doing little more than recording approval of draft letters, without their texts (the appendix volumes containing these have not survived).

Finally, it is idle but pleasant to speculate what "might have been" if either the working union or the sale of the Redhill lines to the Brighton had gone through. Certainly the "Quarry Line" of 1900, constructed by the Brighton at great expense to avoid Redhill altogether with its fast trains, would not have been built in that form; the Tattenham Corner extension of 1901 would have had, at least, a different terminus; the South Eastern Crowhurst-Bexhill branch of 1902 would not have been built. Probably the Chatham would have had to join the new grouping within a year or two, and there would have been a "London, Brighton & South Eastern Railway" in the early nineties. Would Brighton-built Atlantics have hauled the Dover boat trains? Who knows? But one thing is certain: so long as Sir Edward Watkin was in the South Eastern chair, it was going to be very difficult to get any agreement. When he came to call, his neighbours locked up their silver.