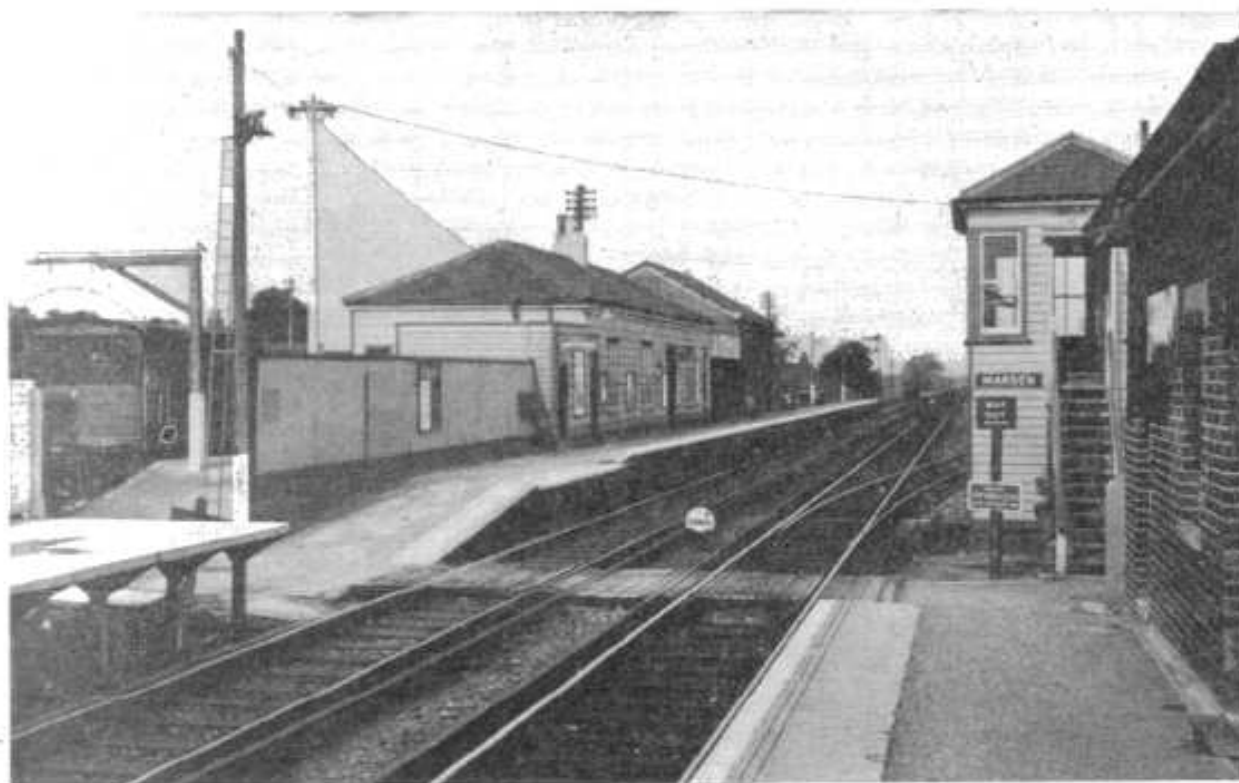


Early Days on the South Eastern Railway

By H. P. WHITE



[Photo]

[H. P. White

Marden Station, looking towards Tonbridge, shortly before the line was electrified from Sevenoaks to Folkestone and Dover

SO closely meshed is the present network of communications in Britain that the closing of a railway or the building of a road, whatever the local effects may be, has little fundamental effect on the main traffic flows. It is therefore difficult to imagine details of the revolutionary results brought about by the early trunk lines, when first-class travel at 30 m.p.h. replaced carriages and post horses or infrequent stage coaches averaging 12 m.p.h., and when third class travel at 15 m.p.h. replaced the carrier's wagon or, more likely, the wayfarer's own feet, while at the same time the cost of travel was greatly reduced.

In May, 1842, the first portion of the South Eastern Railway's new trunk line, the 19½ miles from Redhill to Tonbridge, was at last nearing completion. The company had been incorporated by an Act of June 21, 1836, but there had been delays in starting work, and it was not until the general meeting held on

November 27, 1837, that shareholders were informed that construction had begun between Folkestone and Dover. Another year elapsed before it was reported that work had started in the Tonbridge area. The delay was caused partly by uncertainties as to the route west of Edenbridge, uncertainties which were finally settled in the London & Brighton Railway Act of 1837, when a junction with that company's line at Redhill was authorised. It also arose from protracted negotiations with the Central Kentish Company, with a view to taking over a proposed route from London to Dover *via* Maidstone, Ashford and Folkestone. Eventually this scheme fell through, and Maidstone was avoided by the trunk line.

The report to the shareholders of May 26, 1841, states that "from Tunbridge to the Brighton Line not a single spot is unoccupied with Workmen and Contractors" and that rails were being delivered at Tonbridge by the Medway

Navigation. On November 20 it was reported that three miles of track had been laid between Edenbridge and Tonbridge "on which locomotive engines of Messrs. Betts (Contractors for ballasting and permanent way) are at work night and day."

Meanwhile the road transport system, which the new railway was to affect so profoundly, was functioning normally. In the South Eastern Company's prospectus of February, 1836, is an estimated income based on existing road transport figures. It is as follows:—

	£
Stage coach passengers now travelling by 100 coaches	112,299
Parcels by stage coach	18,365
Posting	45,576
Goods by ten common carriers	14,214
Goods by private conveyance	30,849
Half of goods by water (coastwise)	14,124
Sheep and cattle (hitherto driven on the hoof)	6,012
Half of passengers now travelling by water	18,995

Advertisements in the *Maidstone Journal* in the early part of 1842 mention five coaches, operated by as many owners, running between Maidstone and London daily and making the round trip in the day. The fares on the "Balloon," which left at 9 a.m. for Charing Cross, were 10s. inside and 5s. outside. In addition to the coaches, the "Vanguard" omnibus left Maidstone at 8 a.m. on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, returning from London the following day in time for "the omnibus to Lenham, Charing and Ashford." Five buses a day left for Gravesend, connecting there with the London steamers, and there was a coach thrice weekly for Brighton.

Then came news of the opening of the railway to Tonbridge. "On Thursday next (May 26, 1842) will be a most memorable day in the life of the town, being the opening of the South Eastern Railway. The Directors were down on Thursday last to arrange the opening." But it was a pity, continued the *Maidstone Journal*, that Tonbridge itself had made few preparations for celebrating the event.

Nevertheless, 300 people came down from London on the first day of public working. Initially, there were four trains in each direction and two on Sundays. Down trains left London Bridge at 9.30, 11.30, 2.30 and 5.30, taking exactly two hours for the 40½ miles. Carriages for Tunbridge Wells met every train,

and for those with their own carriages, post horses were hired at 10s. 6d., or at 1s. 6d. a mile for other destinations. On the other hand, the fares from London were only 10s. first and 6s. 6d. second, while the rate for a four-wheel carriage was 20s. Passengers for Hastings were booked through by the first two trains, and for the Wealden towns of Cranbrook and Tenterden by the 2.30.

The effect on property was immediate. On June 21, a "Mansion at River Hill" (Sevenoaks) was advertised as being "four miles from the Tunbridge Station." There were other consequences. On June 28, a correspondent in the *Maidstone Journal* complained of traffic from the Weald of Kent being diverted from Maidstone to the new railhead. On July 5, it was reported that the Prime Minister (Sir Robert Peel) had travelled to Penshurst by the 2.30 p.m. on a private visit.

On Wednesday, August 31, 1842, the line was opened to Headcorn with six trains a day, and Maidstone was firmly drawn into the sphere of influence of the railway. On September 13, B. Kennett & Son, who had obviously read the signs of the time correctly, were advertising "By coach and railway to London in 3½ hours." Coaches left four times a day to connect with the up trains at Maidstone Road (now Paddock Wood). Fares were 9s. 6d. inside and first class, or 6s. outside and second, so already rail fares had come down. Incidentally, Kennetts raise a minor mystery. They advertised regularly until the opening of the Maidstone branch, yet from September 27, 1842, onwards they state they are "determined to meet every up and down train at the Paddock Wood Station," two years before the name was officially changed. There was no settlement of any kind when the station was built on a copse known as Paddock Wood, and one must assume that was the popular name from the beginning.

Other firms were not so long-sighted as Kennetts, but they were forced to cut their schedules. That of the "Favourite" coach was now 3½ hours instead of four. The "Vanguard" omnibus was now advertised as "Competition with Steam—Safety, Economy, Expedition without change of Conveyance—6s. inside, 4s. outside." Buses now left Ashford for

Maidstone to connect with coaches to Paddock Wood. Coaches from Rye and Cranbrook connected with trains at Staplehurst, and from Goudhurst at Marden.

Although it was $23\frac{1}{2}$ miles distant, Staplehurst Station became the railhead for the old town of Hastings and the new resort of St. Leonards. But long though the journey to Staplehurst was, it was seven miles less than the previous route to Tonbridge, and that was the prime consideration. Indeed, the Chairman's report of September 10, 1846, complains of the loss of revenue suffered after the opening of the Brighton, Lewes & Hast-

Up trains left at 6.15, 9.45, 12.40, 4 and 7.30. Coaches from Canterbury connected with all but the first train, from Ramsgate and Margate with the 12.40 and the 7.30, from Deal *via* Canterbury, with the 12.40, and from Dover, Folkestone, Sandgate and Hythe with all trains except the 6.15. The Boulogne and Ostend steamers arrived at Dover in time for coaches to connect with the last up train at Ashford and the journey from Boulogne to London now took nine hours.

On Saturday June 24, 1843, came the official opening of the line on to Folkestone. This was done with due ceremony,



Photo]

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Exterior of the down side station buildings at Paddock Wood, still in their original condition, in the summer of 1960

ings line to Bulverhythe, near the present St. Leonards (West Marina).

The *Maidstone Journal* reported that on November 28, 1842, a special train left London Bridge taking General Pasley of the Board of Trade to inspect the Ashford extension. The special consisted of one third and six first class coaches, and was hauled by *Havold*, a Sharp Roberts 2-2-2, No. 20 in the stock operated by the Joint Committee of the Croydon, Brighton and South Eastern railways. Public traffic began on December 1, and at once Ashford became the railhead for the whole of East Kent.

for, after all, the Channel ports and the Continental traffic were the main objectives of the South Eastern. A special train left London Bridge with the directors at 6 a.m. for Folkestone. There they boarded a steamer which left at 9.19 a.m. "with 300 respectable persons." Boulogne was reached at 12.25, where the Chairman presented his astonished French hosts with copies of the London morning papers, tangible proofs of the transport revolution. After refreshments the party left at 2.40 p.m., reaching Folkestone at 6.30 and London Bridge at 10.5 p.m., after what was presumably

the first day trip to France from London.

Public traffic began on Wednesday, June 28. *Bradshaw* in September shows eight trains each way, three conveying third class passengers. The fastest trains covered the 91½ miles in 3 hr. 5 min., an average speed of 29.6 m.p.h. But the journey to the Continent was still something of an ordeal. The terminus at Folkestone was only temporary, and those who recall the permanent station, now Folkestone Junction, can visualise how primitive the accommodation must have been. Moreover, the steamers could only enter the harbour at the highest of tides, passengers and mails being rowed ashore at other times. (The long mole now in use was completed in 1863.)

Conditions were so chaotic the Chairman was unable to cover them up in his report of November 15, 1843. "The arrangements at the Temporary Station requiring the utmost exertions on the part of the company's servants—those at the Boat Builders' Shed, converted into the South Eastern Pavilion—the unfinished state of the Harbour, and the unavoidable inconveniences attending the first establishment of the Customs Department, have been submitted to with much consideration and good humour by those who travelled. . . ."

But, spectacular though all this may have been, of more significance was the increased speed and reliability of rail and steamer. The *Illustrated London News* of July 6, 1844, graphically describes the progress of the monthly Indian Mails. Carted across the Suez Isthmus, they were shipped to Marseilles where abstracts of news items were made and telegraphed to Paris. The abstracts were sent to Boulogne by horse post and by steamer to Folkestone. Brought ashore by rowing boat, they were rushed up to the station in a horse bus and taken up to London by special train. Apparently there were several trains, hired at £25 apiece by newspapers, the Government and by stockbrokers.

Hythe, which was then as large and important as Folkestone, was served by bus connections from Westenhanger Station, at fares of 1s. inside and 6d. outside. In those days, the station was known as Westenhanger & Hythe, and its early importance accounts for its large (by South Eastern standards)

buildings. Incidentally, Hythe has reverted to this method of access to rail, buses connecting with all trains at Sandling Station.

On Saturday, January 27, 1844, the engine *King Lear*, a Sharp Roberts 2-2-2, No. 37 in the joint stock, brought a train with General Pasley, the Inspecting Officer, into Dover Town Station. Then on Tuesday, February 6, came the official opening. The *Maidstone Journal* of February 13 says: "the town can be exonerated from accusations of lukewarmness," which appears to be a masterly understatement. The directors' special, consisting of four coaches behind No. 36, *Shakespeare*, left London Bridge at 9.30 a.m. and stopped at Folkestone Junction, where a board meeting was held. Then, "at five minutes to four o'clock the special train, drawn by the *Shakespeare* engine, decorated with evergreens and flowers, left the Folkestone station amidst the cheers of a considerable number of persons who congregated on the spot."

Under the cliffs, lined with townspeople cheering "deafeningly" and saluted by gunfire from Archcliffe Fort, came the train to draw up in Dover Town Station, where three or four thousand people were gathered with flags, banners and bands. Among them were the Mayors of Dover and Calais, the Belgian Consul, military bands from Canterbury, and that of the National Guard of Boulogne. Three-hundred persons sat down to dinner in the theatre at 5 p.m., the ladies, in those far-off days of male supremacy, being allowed to look on from the gallery; and at 10 p.m. the special returned with "some of the directors." Public traffic began next day.

At last it was the county town's turn to welcome the railway. The single-line branch, doubled in 1846, from Paddock Wood to Maidstone was officially opened on September 24, 1844, and publicly next day. Unfortunately, the relevant issue of the *Maidstone Journal* has been missing from the files of the Maidstone Library since the floods of 1953, and the writer has been unable to trace a contemporary account of the arrival of the first train, behind the Rennie 2-2-2 No. 27, *Man of Kent*.

The timetable of September 29, 1844,

shows eight trains for Dover from London Bridge at 8, 11.30, 1.30, 4.30 and 8.30, and from Bricklayers Arms at 9.30, 3.30 and 5.30. There were a similar number of up services, and five Sunday trains each way. The fastest time for the 88 miles from London Bridge was 3 hr. 31 min. by the 11.30 a.m. This represented an average speed of 25.1 m.p.h., inclusive of five stops, at Reigate (now Redhill), Tonbridge, Staplehurst, Ashford, and Folkestone.

On the Maidstone branch there was one through train, which left Bricklayers Arms at 12.30 p.m., and connections at Paddock Wood off five other down trains. There were balancing up services, and three trains each way on Sundays. The best time was of 2 hr. 23 min. by the 3.30 from Bricklayers Arms, while four of the other services had a standard time of 2 hr. 36 min. This compares with the 3 hr. 15 min. by the road-rail route.

But the enterprising Kennetts were not out of business. On September 29, four days after the public opening of the Maidstone branch, they were advertising coaches to and from Sittingbourne in connection with trains at Maidstone. The next month they had extended their route to Faversham, charging 4s. inside, and 2s. 6d. outside. In addition, they were operating a bus service from Week Street, Maidstone, to the station (now the West Station) at a fare of 4d., or 6d. with baggage.

At this time, the S.E.R. was quoting through fares from London to such places as Tunbridge Wells and Sevenoaks *via* Tonbridge; Sittingbourne and Faversham *via* Maidstone; and Canterbury, Ramsgate and Margate *via* Ashford. Marden, Staplehurst and Headcorn had connecting road services to various places over a wide area between Maidstone and Hastings. For many years, Staplehurst was one of the most important intermediate stations. In the 1850s and 1860s, mail to and from the whole surrounding area was concentrated there, and the night mail trains made it their only stop. A large water tank on the down platform still bears witness of its former importance.

It might be thought the Maidstone-London coaches would have disappeared completely, but on December 3, 1844, "the Road Coach as usual" was adver-

tised, and on February 3, 1846, the "Tally Ho" coach and the "Eagle" bus. But these were the only ones apparently now running, and presumably were to cater for the local traffic along the London road, which runs *via* Wrotham.

The S.E.R. did not consider itself a common carrier of goods, dealing only with a few authorised carriers. On October 12, 1844, it was announced that Simmonds & Johnson, in connection with Chaplin & Horne, "have arranged with the South Eastern Railway to run a separate goods train from Maidstone to London and back, stopping at all stations." In the same newspaper, Pickfords, Kennetts and John Larking were also advertising as goods agents.

At first, goods traffic was very slow to develop. In 1843 passenger revenue amounted to £74,837, but the goods only to £5,667, while in 1844 the figures were £99,660 and £6,440. Much of the capital for the line had been subscribed in Liverpool and the *Maidstone Journal* of September 4, 1844, reported that a special meeting of shareholders had been convened in Liverpool to express concern at the slow development of freight traffic. Though a few years later goods revenue began to reach a more satisfactory level, the S.E.R. never became an important freight carrier.

But passenger revenue developed to a degree probably unexpected. The Continental traffic was regarded as being the most important branch. Because it controlled the steamers through a subsidiary company, the S.E.R. concentrated on Folkestone, and Dover did not become the premier port until the coming of the L.C.D.R. in 1861. On September 14, 1849, the Chairman reported that, between February and July, 23,243 passengers crossed *via* Folkestone, and only 8,724 *via* Dover. However, the local traffic was greater in volume. The complexity of this early attempt at co-ordination of road and rail transport is not widely realised; perhaps it has some lesson for present-day conditions.

In concluding this review of early days on the first main line in Kent, the writer would like to express his thanks for facilities for research given by the Archivist of the British Transport Commission, and the Librarian of Maidstone Library.