

The Ouse Valley Railway

By MICHAEL ROBBINS

IN the middle years of the 1860s, there was a wave of speculation in railways and promotion of new lines that recalled, if it did not quite rival, the better-known "mania" of 1845 and 1846. As in the 'forties, the boom of the 'sixties collapsed in spectacular fashion, with the failure of the important banking house of Overend & Gurney, in 1866. The aftermath of the financial crisis that followed involved the London, Chatham & Dover, and the North British in special investigations made by committees of shareholders, forced many of the weaker companies to amalgamate with their neighbours, and made even the strongest railways retrench their proposals for expending capital.

Many new projects, some valuable in themselves, others conceivable only in the exhilarating competition of a boom, were abandoned in 1866 and the next few years. Some of these were carried out later; the Surrey & Sussex Junction Railway, for example, a line authorised in 1865, to run from Croydon to Groombridge, reappeared in the 'eighties as the Croydon & Oxted joint line and its continuation. Others were never begun; a few were partly built and then abandoned, never to be carried through to completion. Of this last class were the intended northern extremity of the Manchester & Milford Railway, whose remains lie between Llanidloes and Llangurig, in Montgomeryshire, and the subject of this article, the Ouse Valley (or Eastbourne Direct) Railway.

The history of this line has been alluded to more than once in *The Railway Magazine*, most recently in a note on a photograph by Mr. L. T. Catchpole, published in May, 1935 (vol. 76, page 373), and in an article "Abandoned Lines of the L.B.S.C.R.," by G. A. Sekon in November-December, 1946 (vol. 92, page 346). The present notes bring together the historical references, and indicate where the surviving physical evidences of the line are to be found. For a half-finished work abandoned and overgrown for 85 years, there is a good deal more to be seen than one might expect.

The Ouse Valley Railway, sanctioned by the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway Act of June 23, 1864, was to run from the Ouse Viaduct, between Balcombe and Haywards Heath, on the Brighton main line, to Uckfield and Hailsham, with junctions at both places to existing or proposed lines, as shown on the accompanying map. This railway, 20 miles long, would have given the L.B.S.C.R. a line from London to Eastbourne a mile or two shorter than the original and present route by Keymer Junction and Lewes, but it still left it with a longer route to Hastings than the South Eastern's line *via* Sevenoaks (due to be opened in 1868) and Tunbridge Wells. In the L.B.S.C.R. Act of May 26, 1865, therefore, the St. Leonards Railway was authorised to continue the Ouse Valley line from near Hellingly to St. Leonards, another 18 miles, through country that was both difficult (for Sussex) and unremunerative.

Both these schemes were undertaken less on their own merits than as moves in the complicated manoeuvres of the long battle for railway control of East Sussex. It was fought between the Brighton and South Eastern Companies, and for a short time even the London, Chatham & Dover was involved by its joint participation in the London, Lewes & Brighton scheme of 1866. The Surrey & Sussex Junction Railway, already mentioned, was another promotion of this period, undertaken less for the sake of what it could do for its owners than in order to spoil another railway's chance of getting into the territory it was to run through.

By 1868, however, the railway scene was changed; the Brighton proprietors were very reasonably scared about their capital commitments, and the Ouse Valley and St. Leonards schemes were abandoned by Act of that year. In February, 1869, an agreement for pooling of traffic between London and Hastings and other competitive points was made with the South Eastern, and the Ouse Valley scheme, already dead, was buried. These transactions are recorded in more detail by C. F. Dendy Marshall in the

ancient building now used as a farmhouse. In front of the house are two well-marked sections of cutting; the one to the east is now filled with water. A prominent embankment, mostly covered with trees, continues across the next depression of the ground, is lost, and then reappears on both sides of the road from Haywards Heath by Lindfield and Ardingly to Turner's Hill (B.2028), just north of Lindfield village, between the church and a bridge over the Ouse. The remains of a brick abutment can be seen on the west side of the road, about half-way down the hill. The embankment continues for a few more yards, on the north side of a wooded enclosure, and then comes to an end a little north-west of a house called Hangman's Acre.

Work was probably never begun from this point almost as far as Uckfield—certainly no traces can be seen; but those who are inclined to pursue their walk in that direction can discern here and there the remains of an earlier, and long defunct, transport undertaking. The River Ouse Navigation, established under an act of 1790; improved the river, already used for barge traffic, by building locks up to Lindfield; traces of the first of these can be found between Dean's Mill, close to where the railway works end, and Paxhill Park, north of the river.

Near Sheffield Park Station, the East Grinstead and Lewes line, opened in 1882, crosses the intended route of the Ouse Valley line. From the Uckfield end, an embankment may be seen diverging to the west from the line to Lewes about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from Uckfield Station. Abutments for a bridge over a stream lie close to the junction point, and there is a brick underbridge a little further on. (Both these were illustrated on page 365 of *The Railway Magazine* for November-December, 1946). The works continue across the Uckfield-Isfield road, and come to an end in Darvel Wood, west of the road, pointing towards Sheffield Park.

Such, briefly described, are the visible traces of a project that the Brighton Company undertook in a spirit of optimism and relinquished without regret. The reason for the existence of these curious earthworks is more than half forgotten locally; on the 1 in. Ordnance Survey map they do not appear at all. They are, however, well indicated on the new 1:25,000 sheets, with the westernmost portion inscribed "Abandoned Railway"; it would, perhaps, be more accurate to write "Intended Railway." After another 85 years, these remains may look little changed from what they are today.