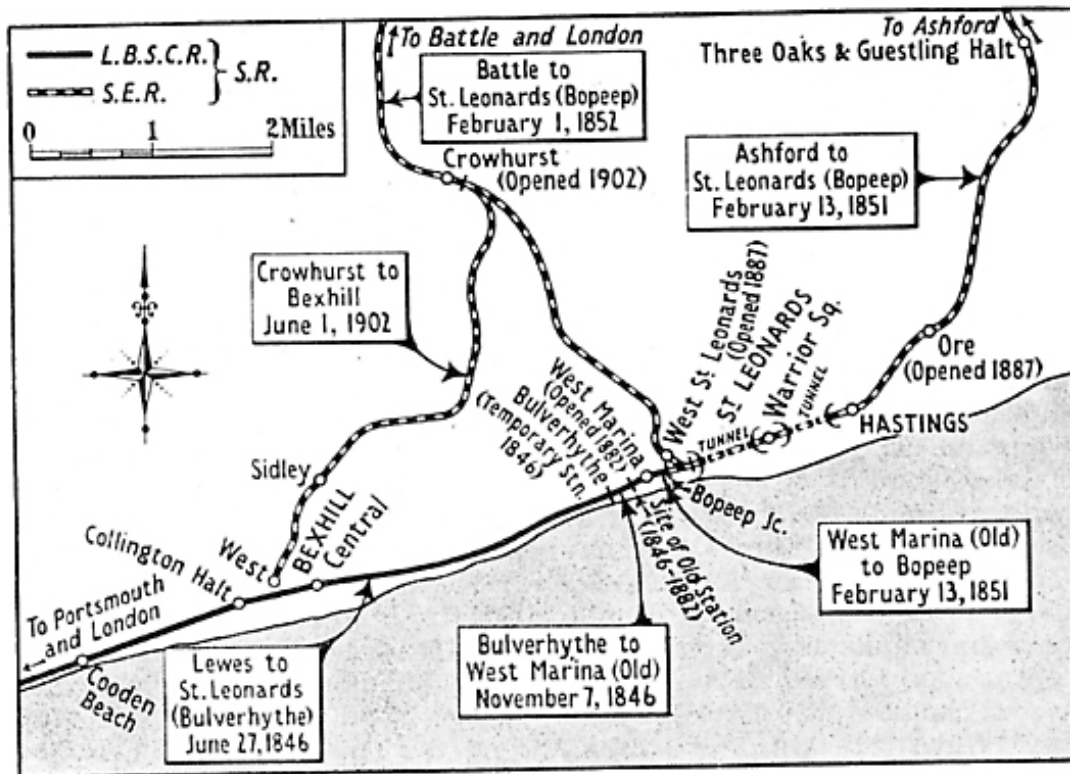


# The Railway Battle of Hastings

By R. A. H. WEIGHT



Chronological map of the railways in the Hastings area, showing pre-grouping ownership

THE East Coast Line of the London Brighton & South Coast Railway was opened from Lewes to a temporary terminus at Bulverhythe (on the western outskirts of St. Leonards) on June 27, 1846. Some twelve months earlier, an extension of the line from Hastings, through Rye, to a junction with the South Eastern Railway at Ashford had been authorised, but these powers had been transferred to the S.E.R. before any construction was undertaken. The S.E.R. also was to complete the railway into Hastings, as part of the extension of its Tunbridge Wells branch to Bopeep (a short distance east of Bulverhythe) and to provide accommodation for the trains of the Brighton Company at Hastings.

In November, 1849, the S.E.R. entered into an agreement to construct the railway from Bopeep to Hastings as quickly as possible, but relations between the two companies soon became strained. The trouble originated in August, 1850, when the L.B.S.C.R. sought to restrain the S.E.R. from altering the authorised levels of the line. The Court did not grant this injunction, and the works

were completed by the end of that year.

The L.B.S.C.R. then opposed the opening of the railway, first on the grounds that Hastings Station was incomplete (inasmuch as there was no room for its traffic) and then on the pretext that the railway, nearly all of which was in tunnel, could not be worked with safety. These objections appear to have been withdrawn as the result of a sharp reminder from the S.E.R. that the L.B.S.C.R. was entering Hastings by virtue of running powers, and not as owners of the line. Arrangements were then made to open the whole railway from Ashford, through Hastings, to Bopeep Junction on Thursday, February 13, 1851.

Although this day is quoted officially as the date on which the L.B.S.C.R. gained access to Hastings, the S.E.R. made every effort to impede the passage of the Brighton trains, and at least a week elapsed before the service was working smoothly. A graphic account of these events is to be found in the contemporary columns of the *Hastings & St. Leonards News*. On the opening day, an incoming train was held for so long at the signal at the western end of

Bopeep Tunnel that the driver eventually pushed back to St. Leonards (West Marina). An hour later, a second attempt to work a train through to Hastings also had to be abandoned.

It was, perhaps, rather more than a coincidence that P. D. Finnigan, the S.E.R. Superintendent of Line, was in Hastings at that time. Appeals to him by Brighton representatives appear to have been met with decidedly flimsy excuses, such as a statement that the agreement for running powers had been made with the Brighton, Lewes & Hastings Railway, and that the S.E.R. had no legal proof that the company's successor, the L.B.S.C.R., had a right to implement it. It also was stated that the L.B.S.C.R. had not furnished the S.E.R. with a timetable of its proposed services to and from Hastings, and that if the Brighton trains ran beyond St. Leonards (West Marina) the S.E.R. could accept no responsibility for them. The timetable was soon forthcoming, and on Saturday and Sunday (February 15 and 16) a few L.B.S.C.R. trains did run in and out of Hastings, although their movements were uncertain.

Heartened by this success, the L.B.S.C.R. sent two engines, and 17 passenger coaches and vans through the tunnels on the Sunday evening, in readiness for the next morning's traffic. These engines and vehicles were placed in a siding in the terminal part of Hastings Station, which had been described as the "Brighton Section" while the railway was under construction.

A few hours later, the excitement started! The S.E.R. tore up a section of rail at the west end of Bopeep Tunnel, and laid blocks of stone across the tracks. At Hastings, the Brighton rolling stock was hemmed in by an engine and some wagons filled with earth. The S.E.R. men were constantly on guard, ready to repel an attack by the rival company. Physical violence was avoided, but the L.B.S.C.R. Agent was marooned in his office for some time, and his gas supply was cut off.

The L.B.S.C.R. arranged for an omnibus to convey its passengers between Hastings and St. Leonards (West Marina), but the S.E.R. erected a barrier at the entrance to the station approach at Hastings, and refused to allow the omnibus to pass. After various officials of

the rival companies had appeared on the scene, the S.E.R. intimated that, if the Brighton would remove its rolling stock, and undertake not to send any more into Hastings until the dispute was settled, the track would be restored, and the obstructions removed. For the moment, these terms were rejected, and the deadlock continued for several days.

A settlement eventually was reached, and the L.B.S.C.R. trains were admitted to Hastings, although it was not until December 5, 1870, that they called at the intermediate station at St. Leonards (Warrior Square). For many years, however, each company maintained its own staff at Hastings, and it seemed to be a point of honour with some of these men never to give information about the services on the "other line."

The reluctance of the S.E.R. to admit the Brighton trains to Hastings is not far to seek. The circuitous route of 93 miles from London Bridge, *via* Redhill, Tonbridge, and Ashford, was 16½ miles longer than the L.B.S.C.R. route of 76½ miles, *via* Redhill, Lewes, and Polgate. It was not until the line from Tunbridge Wells to Bopeep Junction was completed, on February 1, 1852, that the S.E.R. secured a route of 73¼ miles to London Bridge, *via* Tonbridge and Redhill. This slight advantage was increased by 12¾ miles in 1868, when the direct line from Tonbridge to London *via* Sevenoaks was completed.

On the other hand, the reasons for the L.B.S.C.R. objection to the opening of the railway from Bopeep Junction to Hastings are not obvious, unless it was feared that the S.E.R. would seek running powers into Eastbourne and Brighton. That the L.B.S.C.R. was not slow to take advantage of its entry into Hastings, and its materially shorter route to London, is shown from an advertisement which appeared on March 14, 1851. This announced fast excursion trains from Hastings and St. Leonards to London by the direct route in two hours. The day-return fares charged for these excursions were 15s. (first class), 12s. (second class), and 9s. (third class), a reduction of 25 per cent. on the ordinary return fares. Two of the trains did the journey in slightly less than two hours, which was considerably faster than anything that the S.E.R. could then offer.