

South Eastern Scene

By H. P. WHITE



Photo]

[N. Craig

The 5.10 p.m. Hastings to Charing Cross train, headed by "Schools" class 4-4-0 locomotive No. 30927, "Clifton," entering Crowhurst

EVEN after the era of nationalisation had dawned on the railways, it was possible to see cards bearing the legend "S.E. & C. R. Carman please call" placed in the windows of business premises in the City of London. It was a testimony to the stubborn survival of pre-grouping railway names more than a quarter of a century after their owning companies has passed into limbo. That they have been so persistent implies that they serve some practical purpose and convey some meaning to a much larger section of humanity than the die-hard railway enthusiast. "South Eastern" is more convenient, more descriptive and less cumbersome than "London East District, Southern Region, British Railways." The writer is acquainted with at least two licensed premises with the former on the sign, but with none bearing the latter title.

It is also right that these individual names should persist, for, in spite of standardisation over a long period, most sections of British Railways preserve some of their individuality, though it may fade year by year. Because of this, and because of the tradition that lies

behind the name, each section attracts its quota of particular admirers, generation after generation of them. This is attested by numerous articles and photographs in any of the periodicals catering for enthusiasts.

It is noticeable that certain sections attract a greater following than others. Judging by the number of articles portraying the peculiar features and spirit of Scottish railways, of Irish railways, of Welsh railways and occasionally of the North Eastern Railway, we tend to migrate to the peripheries of these islands for our enthusiasms. There have been, for example, few literary pictures of the South Eastern scene.

It is true that in pre-grouping days the South Eastern, which together with its former rival, the London, Chatham & Dover, amalgamated for operating purposes in 1899 as the South Eastern & Chatham, had little glamour. It had neither the fastest trains, the largest locomotives nor the heaviest traffic. But since then it has suffered from the effects of standardisation much less than most other sections. On the contrary, it has gained interest with the passing years.

It is easier to be aware of the personality of a railway than it is to analyse what contributes to the making of that personality. It is a compound, among other things, of the trains and their locomotives, the stations and their traffic, and not least of the countryside through which the trains run. The more individual these things are, the stronger is the personality of that section of railway.

the "Britannias" have appeared since 1948. There are only two "Britannias" and the others offer no more than pleasant variety, up to date. For the rest, this exceptional variety is a working museum of the development of the steam locomotive over the last seventy years, ranging from the Stirling class "O1" 0-6-0s, of which a few examples remain, to the Bulleid Pacifics.



Photo]

[H. P. White

A typical South Eastern wayside station, Pluckley, between Tonbridge and Ashford on the main line to Dover

Unlike many others, the South Eastern scene has tended to gain rather than lose in variety through the years. York, Carlisle and many other centres, formerly so full of interest from the locomotive viewpoint, now suffer from a seemingly endless procession of "Black Fives," "B1s" or the doubtless efficient, but rather ugly, standard types. The writer would be the last to deny all these are very fine engines, it is only that they pall when repeated *ad nauseam*.

On the other hand, Tonbridge and Ashford, small though they be in comparison, still reward the observer with, for these days, a bewildering variety. On a Saturday afternoon in high summer up to twenty types can be recorded at either station. Of these, only the L.M.R. and British Railways 2-6-4 tanks, and the standard class "2" 2-6-2 tanks, class "4" 2-6-0s, class "5" 4-6-0s and

Of the older locomotives, the "L" class 4-4-0s, usually referred to as "Germans," whether or not they belong to the Borsig-built batch, are outstandingly conspicuous. Not only do they handle many of the locals, but also the through inter-Regional trains *via* Redhill, which may load up to twelve coaches. In summer they are also to be seen on relief coast trains from London. In 1954 they regularly took the 2.15 p.m. (Saturdays only) from Charing Cross to Ashford with its nine heavily-loaded coaches.

The "King Arthurs" and the various Moguls are mostly used, as far as passenger turns are concerned, on the Chatham line, though there are a few regular "Arthur" turns *via* Tonbridge, including the 5.40 p.m. from Cannon Street and the 7.34 p.m. from Charing Cross. They are also to be seen on relief boat trains.

Of all these, a special word is necessary

for the ubiquitous "Schools." Theirs is an epic story, the apotheosis of the 4-4-0 in Britain. Their fame has spread far and wide. I well remember the driver of a Union Pacific 4-8-8-4, who had invited me on to the footplate at a service stop in the middle of the Great Plains, waxing lyrical on their merits, as a result of driving one while on war service.

To see a "Schools" at work anywhere is a rewarding sight, but a particularly good viewpoint is from Chislehurst platform as a down eleven-coach train rounds the curve from Elmstead Woods, its "Schools" steadily breasting the long gradient up to Knockholt. But best of all is their performance on the road for

pre-grouping stock, a sight seldom seen on other sections. The Southern built no non-corridor steam stock and, so far, no British Railways non-corridor stock has found its way on to the section. All is therefore of South Eastern origin, made up for the most part into the characteristic three-coach sets with raised guard's lookouts, invariably referred to as "bird-cages." Local trains usually consist of one or more of these sets which are, as often as not, hauled by an S.E.C.R. locomotive, either a 4-4-0, "L," "D1," "E1," and sometimes even one of the graceful unrebuilt "D" class, or an 0-4-4 tank.

Standardisation of coaching stock has



Photo]

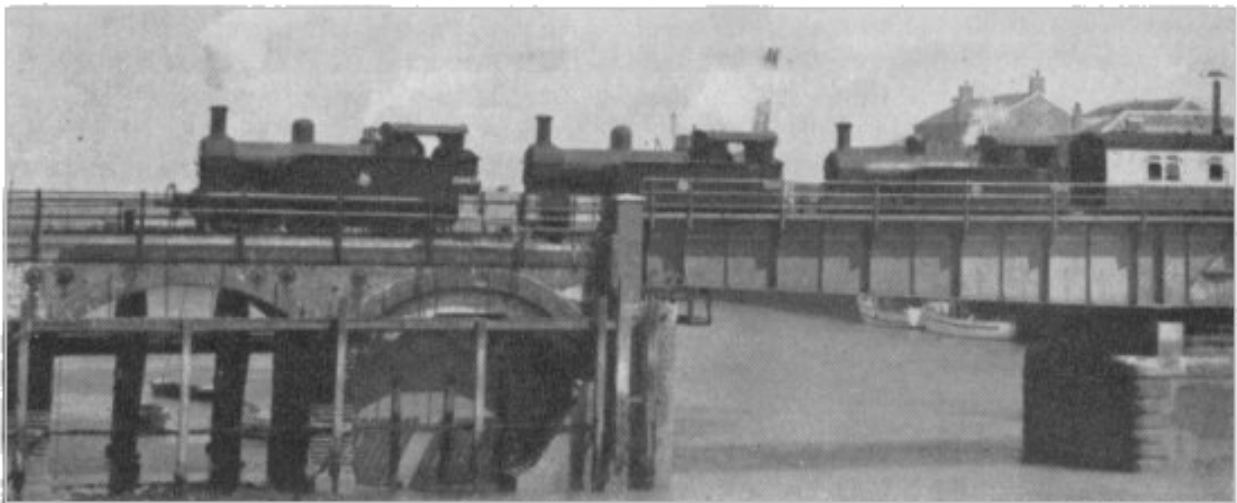
[H. P. White

Scene at Tonbridge in July, 1955. "King Arthur" class 4-6-0 No. 30799, "Sir Ironside," heading the 12.50 p.m. (Saturdays only) Deal to Charing Cross train on the through road, overtaking "C" class 0-6-0 No. 31272 on the platform line with a local goods

which, after all, they were designed—that to Hastings. Any trip on this difficult line, with its heavy gradients and sharp curves, is worth while and glimpses of hard-worked engines on the 1 in 47 of Southborough Bank or the 1 in 97 between Stonegate and Wadhurst are never to be forgotten parts of the South Eastern scene.

The South Eastern local train, by a happy combination of circumstances resulting in the survival of coaches and locomotives, is often entirely formed of

left the Hastings line untouched, for the restricted loading gauge precludes the use of any corridor stock other than the flat-sided steel-panelled coaches built by the Southern. Rather than build new stock these coaches have recently been completely renovated. On the Dover line, there is still much variety, and the British Railways stock in use here represents a greater continuity of tradition than on most lines, for it owes much of its inspiration to the Southern post-war steam stock.



Photo]

[W. A. Corkill

Three "R1" class 0-6-0 tanks, Nos. 31047, 31340 and 31154, heading an up Continental express out of Folkestone Harbour Station



Photo]

[S. Creer

Down "Golden Arrow" passing Tonbridge hauled by "Britannia" class Pacific No. 70004, "William Shakespeare"



Photo]

[J. Head

Pull-and-push train from Dunton Green arriving at Tonbridge, with "H" class 0-4-4 tank engine No. 31554 at the rear

As if they epitomise the South Eastern scene, the roadside stations are neat and unpretentious, harmonising with the other buildings of the countryside. The usual type is a single-storey wooden structure, of "clapboard" to give it its local name. It is a plain and functional style, but in one of the traditions of Kentish domestic architecture. Most of these stations have subsequently developed platform awnings with elliptical roofs and deep fascias, but several examples, Edenbridge, Headcorn and Pluckley among them, remain in their original form. Variety is provided by the Elizabethan, tall twisted chimneys and all, of Yalding and Watlingbury, the simple, but effective, Italianate of Rye and Wadhurst, and above all the superb Gothic confection of William Tress' Battle. Penshurst, as a result of a fire in the early 1930s, has acquired a modernistic station building, unusual in a country station. The S.E.R. was in the frugal habit of staggering its platforms and dispensing with a footbridge. Even today several stations on the main Dover line are without one.

Many of the larger stations have been rebuilt by the Southern in that company's usual compound of steel, glass, red brick and concrete. These include Tonbridge, Dover Priory, and Ramsgate, and all of that air of cleanliness and modernity that distinguishes Southern stations from those of other Regions. In North Kent pleasing examples of early Victorian functional simplicity remain at Greenwich, Erith and Gravesend. As for the London termini, it would be difficult in a few words to do justice to the opulence of Charing Cross or the impressiveness of the single-arch roof of Cannon Street, soon to come down.

Of the road itself, it is true that the soft South Country scenery means that none of the major topographic "lions" of Britain's railways are found on the South Eastern, no Beattock, no Drumnachdar. But the South Eastern is not without its moments of interest and even excitement, though, strangely enough, comparatively little has been written about them.

How often do we hear of the horse-shoe curve by which trains mount at 1 in 69 and 71 the barrier of the Downs between Dover Priory and Martin Mill, situated high on a windswept plateau?

Where else, apart from the Lickey, is it possible to see regularly four locomotives on one train, save on the 1 in 30 incline up from Folkestone Harbour? It is true they are only elderly and diminutive 0-6-0 tanks, but this does not diminish the exuberance of their herculean efforts. These are best appreciated from the only overbridge. From there can be seen the cavalcade slowly coming into view round the bend, headed by perhaps three tanks noisily dragging their heavy train of ten coaches, two Pullmans and two vans. The procession is completed by a fourth blasting away in the rear.

Almost unknown is the South Eastern's "mountain" branch which leaves the main line at Paddock Wood and climbs at 1 in 65 and 80 for the most part into the Wealden Hills along valleys filled with hop gardens to terminate at Hawkhurst Station, set on a high, lonely ridge. To start from noisy Cannon Street on the crowded 6.18 p.m. and end up there, almost the sole passenger on a pull-and-push set, is a rewarding experience for any connoisseur of rail travel.

At the other end of the scale are the 26 miles of all but dead straight track between Tonbridge and Ashford with gentle gradients, an open invitation to the enterprising driver. So much so that "even time" on this section is quite common. Similarly, though much less frequently, very fast runs can be recorded on up trains from Knockholt on the descent to Hither Green.

The traffic, for such a comparatively small district, is of great variety. At the top of the scale of prestige are the Dover and Folkestone boat trains, chief of which are the "Golden Arrow," maintained since its reintroduction as an all-Pullman train in 1946 as a symbol of the smartness all trains and locomotives should aim at, and the heavy "Night Ferry," made up as it is to five or six Wagons Lits, four Southern Region vehicles and various vans.

Next are the numerous coast expresses, which proliferate in summer until the aged "long sets" of nine S.E.C.R. non-corridor coaches and a variety of Moguls and pre-grouping 4-4-0s are pressed into service. On one occasion I was startled by the sight of a W.D. 2-8-0 lumbering along the Wealden straight at the head of a boat train. Among these coast expresses is one named train, the "Man of Kent," with which the classic 80-min.

timing for the 70 miles from Charing Cross to Folkestone Central was reintroduced in 1951. This is much better than it appears, for at least $6\frac{1}{2}$ min. are consumed on the 1 mile 69 ch. to London Bridge, leaving $73\frac{1}{2}$ min. for the 68 miles which include the $11\frac{3}{4}$ miles, mainly at 1 in 120, up from New Cross to Knockholt, and the severe restriction on the curve into Tonbridge.

It is among the group of rather peculiar semi-fast trains that straggle up and down from the London termini that the multiplicity of routes made possible by the internecine struggle between the S.E.R. and the L.C.D.R. is shown best. It is said there are ninety ways of reaching Dover from London without reversal; there may even be more. One of these possibilities is the original, pre-1868, S.E.R. route *via* Redhill, traversed by four passenger trains a day. Two of these are the up and down "South Eastern T.P.O.s," which have passenger accommodation. Before the war it was unadvertised and it was said a certain amount of influence was necessary to travel by this service. There is also a time honoured up train, the "Surrey" as it is sometimes dubbed, the 2.42 from Margate (3 p.m. Ramsgate on Saturdays). But the most interesting of all is the 4.50 a.m. from London Bridge to Margate *via* Redhill and Canterbury, which stops at all stations, save two, beyond Purley.

The inter-Regional trains provide a study in themselves and are fully a part of the South Eastern scene. These range from the regular Margate-Birkenhead service *via* Reading to summer Saturdays' curiosities, such as Margate to Leicester, *via* Canturbury West, Maidstone East and Kensington. It is on these days that the station announcer at Tonbridge can be heard to say that the next train from platform 4 will call at (among others) Gobowen.

As can be expected in an area with only four coal mines and no heavy industry away from the Thames, freight traffic is thoroughly subordinated to passenger. Except on the North Kent line, where goods trains compete on level terms with electric trains, freights which wander on to main lines in daylight hours do so with an apparently shamefaced air and sneak quickly from siding to siding. There are exceptions, for there is a hierarchy even among freight trains.

Thus the vans for the train ferry's day crossing brazen it out. So does a goods from the Hastings line which steams blatantly into Tonbridge about 7.30 p.m. on the busiest of Saturdays, hauled by a class "Q1" 0-6-0 as powerful as it is ugly.

Recently it has been decided that the electric line, now left behind at Sevenoaks, should be extended to Dover and beyond, and multiple-unit diesels run to Hastings. This is as it should be, for the South Eastern is still a vital part of the Kentish scene and progress is better in the end to watch than stagnation and decay. But for some years yet it will be possible to enjoy the sight and sound of a Bulleid Pacific hauling the "Man of Kent," or a boat train thundering through the hop gardens and orchards of the Wealden vale, or to observe the steam-propelled activities of Dover Marine, Ashford and Tonbridge on a summer Saturday.