

The Bexhill West Branch

By P. J. NORRIS



Reproduction of a coloured postcard issued by the South Eastern & Chatham Railway showing the exterior of Bexhill Station soon after it was opened

SUSSEX has lost another of its few remaining steam-operated branches now that the Bexhill West line of the Southern Region has been taken over by diesel traction. Since the introduction of diesel trains between London, Tunbridge Wells and Hastings in the autumn of last year, the branch had been worked by connecting pull-and-push steam trains.

Bexhill was first served by rail in 1846, when the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway was opened from Lewes to St. Leonards. Six years later the South Eastern Railway also reached St. Leonards and Hastings—*via* Tunbridge Wells and Battle. At this time Bexhill was a small coast town with under 2,000 inhabitants, but towards the end of the nineteenth century it began to develop into a watering place.

The South Eastern Railway was anxious to reach the town, and supported the nominally-independent Crowhurst, Sidley & Bexhill Railway, authorised on July 15, 1897. The Act was for a 4½-mile branch from a new station on the South Eastern line at Crowhurst, between Battle and St. Leonards, to Bexhill, with one intermediate station, at Sidley. Work proceeded smoothly, though the lofty viaduct south of Crowhurst slowed progress to a certain extent, and on June 1, 1902, the branch was opened to traffic. It was worked from

the outset by the S.E.C.R. and reduced the mileage from Bexhill to London from 72 *via* Lewes (78 if *via* Eastbourne) to 62.

During the first world war, on January 1, 1917, the branch was closed as an economy measure, but it was re-opened on March 1, 1919. Following the grouping, it became for some years the policy of the Southern Railway to concentrate traffic on Bexhill West rather than the Central Station, but the position was reversed later—particularly after electrification of the coastal route.

Crowhurst Station is built of typical South Eastern grey brick and the rather plain buildings are on the up side. The main line is quadrupled through the station and the platforms (connected by a footbridge) flank the up and down slow roads respectively. At the southern end of each platform is a bay—the Bexhill West branch train arrives in the up bay and then shunts across into the down bay to await the connecting main-line train. A signal cabin at the south end of the station and two sidings complete the arrangement.

The double-track branch curves away southwards at the south end of the station and runs on a banked down gradient gradually losing sight of the main line. It crosses an undulating wooded countryside before emerging into



Photo]

[H. A. Vallance

Sidley Station, from the south, in 1936

the flat marshy Crowhurst valley, which it crosses on a handsome seventeen-arch brick viaduct. The only real engineering feature on the line, this structure reaches a maximum height of seventy feet above the valley floor and forms a prominent landmark.

Reaching higher land to the south, the line turns west and, running again through undulating country, begins the long sharp descent into Sidley Station. This serves a northern suburb of Bexhill and consists of an up and down platform, connected by a footbridge; it is reached from the main road, which crosses the line at this point. A small goods yard with covered shed and coal dock is

situated on the up side adjacent to the station. Leaving Sidley the line continues southwards through Bexhill's residential suburbs and, after crossing the main Eastbourne road, enters the quite extensive precincts of Bexhill West Station. A goods yard of some size, with a covered goods shed, a timber yard and several carriage sidings are found here. Formerly there was an engine shed, but this has long been let out as a warehouse. The station itself has one long platform with two faces. The buildings are quite modern, grouped round the covered concourse and include a refreshment room and large booking hall with a high open beamed roof and



Photo]

[Denis Cullum

Crowhurst Station, looking towards Tunbridge Wells, in 1954, showing the bay platforms for the Bexhill trains

a vast fireplace reminiscent of some baronial hall. The station has that clean spaciousness so typical of the south coast seaside termini. A disused signalbox is adjacent to the concourse; the newer one is at the north end of the station.

From June '59, when diesel-electric trains took over completely the passenger service between London and Hastings *via* Tonbridge, two-car diesel trains have displaced the steam trains between Crowhurst and Bexhill West. They run hourly in each direction, connecting with the semi-fast part of the Hastings trains, with additional peak-hour workings. The present service comprises about 22 return journeys daily.

Trains formerly consisted of two *ex-*

South Eastern compartment coaches and were run as pull-and-push sets, the locomotive being at the Crowhurst end. Wainwright's useful little 0-4-4 tanks of the "H" class were the motive power, supplied from the allocation of six at St. Leonards (74E) shed.

Freight is catered for by one train each way. This comprises the 5.17 a.m. from Tonbridge to Bexhill West, usually worked by a "Q" class 0-6-0 from Tonbridge depot, and the 10.45 a.m. return from Bexhill West which is also a "Q" turn, but often from the St. Leonards shed. Finally, I would like to thank the Stationmaster at Bexhill West for certain information used in this article.