

The S.E.R. and Prize Fights of 1859

By G. R. MAHON

IN 1859 the South Eastern Railway came under the attention of the Home Office in connection with complaints that it had afforded facilities for prize fights at Headcorn (Kent) and Etchingham (Sussex), and so had assisted "large bodies of persons whose avowed intentions were to commit a breach of the public peace."

The first prize fight took place on April 3, when it would appear that a special train was run to Headcorn (on the Tonbridge-Ashford line) conveying a large number of persons who wished to watch the contest. The event was referred to in the quarterly report of the Chief Constable of Kent and as a result the Home Office wrote to the S.E.R. and drew the company's attention to the report. The Secretary of the railway, Dr. Samuel Smiles (well-known as the author of "Self Help" and "Lives of the Engineers"), replied on behalf of the directors. He stated that they had ascertained that the train arrangements for the prize fight had been made by an official without their knowledge or authority, and that they had taken steps to prevent any such facilities being granted in future. Dr. Smiles concluded his letter by pointing out that the matter had already been brought to the notice of his Board by a director who was a magistrate for Kent.

All went well until September, when further correspondence was entered into regarding two prize fights which took place on the 25th of that month in a field near Etchingham Station (on the Tunbridge Wells-Hastings line). A local magistrate, Mr. G. C. Courthope, wrote to the Home Secretary and made allegation that, despite the assurances given in April, the South Eastern Railway had granted facilities to the contestants and spectators and, either deliberately or otherwise, had hindered the police in attempts to stop the fights. It was pointed out that prize fights attracted to the neighbourhood "a large concourse of persons of a very questionable character to the annoyance and disgust of the respectable inhabitants."

Mr. Courthope claimed that a special

train of 30 carriages left London Bridge carrying the combatants and a large number of prospective spectators and stopped, "not at any regular station," but between Ticehurst Road (now Stonegate) and Etchingham stations, near the field in which the fights took place. It was also claimed that, when the two local sergeants of police (who had heard accidentally of the fights) applied to the stationmasters at Etchingham and Wadhurst stations to dispatch telegraph messages to other police stations to enable an adequate force to be collected, they were informed that the telegraph would be occupied for some hours.

On hearing from the Home Office, Dr. Smiles once again took up his pen and submitted the railway directors' version of the events complained of. He claimed that the "special train" was, in fact, a second portion of the 6.30 a.m. train from London Bridge and its running was "an absolute necessity" as the number of persons wishing to travel to Etchingham was very considerable, and the company considered that when it advertised trains it must be prepared to carry all who presented themselves and purchased tickets. It was denied that the train stopped between stations, but it was explained that when it stopped at Etchingham its length of 300 yd. meant that a considerable part of it was on the London side of the station platform ("but within the protection of the signals . . .").

In explanation of the complaint about the police requests for the despatch of messages by telegraph, Dr. Smiles stated that the company's servants had instructions to transmit all messages in the order in which they were received, and at the time of the police application there were no less than 37 messages awaiting despatch at Etchingham. Rather naively it was added that any messages tendered by the police "would have been transmitted in their due course." Apparently it was not considered that police messages should have any priority and the absence of any further letters in the published correspondence would suggest that the Home Office did not think differently.