

# The Tonbridge-Hastings Line and its Traffic

By H. P. WHITE



Photo]

[J. A. Colley

A Hastings train, headed by "Schools" class 4-4-0 No. 30913, "Christ's Hospital," between Tunbridge Wells and Frant

ONE of the most interesting of the secondary main lines near London is that between Tonbridge and Hastings. It is particularly associated with the brilliant work done by the "Schools" class of 4-4-0 locomotive, which for long held the monopoly of express haulage over this particularly difficult route. This monopoly came to an end recently with the introduction of diesel traction, and it is expected that steam-hauled passenger services will have disappeared from the line within twelve months.

The first railway to reach the neighbourhood of the ancient Cinque Port of Hastings was the coast line of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway, which was opened as far as the original West Marina Station in the newer resort of St. Leonards on November 7, 1846. Construction of rival routes, both from Ashford and from Tunbridge Wells, by the South Eastern Railway soon followed. Deposited plans show the original intention was to bring the Tunbridge Wells line directly into Hastings from the

north, with branches from Battle to Rye, and Crowhurst to St. Leonards. In the event, Rye never got a direct route from London and the St. Leonards branch became the approach to Hastings.

The three lines, from Lewes, Ashford and Tunbridge Wells, met at Bopeep Junction, just east of West Marina; the Ashford line was opened on February 13, 1851, and the direct line from Tunbridge Wells on February 1, 1852. The L.B.S.C.R. was thus deprived of its own access to Hastings, which led to considerable trouble.\*

The S.E.R. route from London Bridge *via* Redhill and Tunbridge Wells was 73½ miles as against the 76½ miles of the L.B.S.C.R. *via* Cooksbridge and Polegate, but it was considerably more difficult. The company, therefore, did not reap the full advantage of its direct route until the opening of the main line *via* Sevenoaks in 1868, which reduced the distance to 63¾ miles.

\* See "The Railway Battle of Hastings," by R. A. H. Weight, in *The Railway Magazine* of June, 1951

A railway southward from Tonbridge, in common with all north-south lines in Kent, Surrey and Sussex, had to be built across the "grain" of the country. In this part of the Kent-Sussex border the parallel east-west Forest Ridges of the Central Weald rise to 600 ft. in places and are separated by deep valleys. It is thus a difficult road with long heavy gradients and numerous severe reverse curves. The consequent difficulties of locomotive work, together with the

through road while a stopping train from Hastings enters the station, or two stopping trains can be brought into the north and south faces of the up island platform simultaneously.

The start of the Hastings line is difficult, for the branch curves southward very sharply, with a restriction of 30 m.p.h., before entering on a six-mile bank with the first few chains at 1 in 53 and 47. Thus, starting a heavy train from Tonbridge can be no easy task in bad



Photo]

[R. K. Taylor

**Tonbridge-Hastings train leaving Robertsbridge, with "L" class 4-4-0 No. 31777. These engines formerly worked principle services on the line**

beautiful wooded scenery of the High Weald and the severely-restricted loading gauge, combine to give the direct line to Hastings its peculiar interest.

A description of the line properly starts from Tonbridge, 29½ miles from Charing Cross and an important railway centre, even though few trains actually start from or terminate at that station. The Hastings line diverges from the main line to Dover at Tonbridge B Signalbox, immediately east of the station. It is a flat junction, but some relief is to be had at peak periods by a layout which enables an Ashford-bound train to be started from the down platform while a non-stopping Hastings train is passing on the through road. Similarly an up Ashford non-stop can pass on the other

weather, and non-stopping trains cannot rush the bank.

The gradient eases to 1 in 103 before entering the short Somerhill Tunnel. Just short of this the formation of the original 1845 line to Tunbridge Wells, which made a trailing junction with the Dover line, can be seen coming in from the left, making the third side of a triangle (in which the motive power depot is situated).

Emerging from the tunnel the train is on the Southborough Bank, winding sinuously upward at 1 in 100-72-97. But it is the lack of acceleration rather than the rapid but soft chatter of the exhaust from a "Schools" which betrays the difficulty of the climb. If the train is a local with an older 4-4-0 at the head.

however, the echoes will be truly roused. Half-way up is the 254 yd.-long Southborough Viaduct of 30 arches, and the intermediate colour-light signals which replaced the semaphores worked by the former Southborough Viaduct box.

At High Brooms Station (Southborough until September 21, 1925), which serves a suburb of Tunbridge Wells and is  $3\frac{1}{4}$  miles from Tonbridge, the worst of the climb is over and the gradient eases to 1 in 103. Soon the extensive sidings of Tunbridge Wells Central Goods Depot are passed on the left, before the 823-yd. Wells Tunnel is entered. The Central Station is in an opening between this tunnel and Grove Tunnel, and has neither sidings nor signalbox. The signals at the platform ends are controlled by the Central Goods box to the north and Grove Junction box to the south. Platform lengthening and re-signalling have been carried out to allow two six-car diesel-electric sets to be joined or divided there. The station already had been extensively rebuilt by the Southern Railway.

Immediately beyond Grove Tunnel, the single-track connection (opened in 1881) to the West Station diverges to the right; the signalbox is located in the "V." In June, 1956, an interval service between Tonbridge and Brighton was inaugurated, while many of the Oxted-Tunbridge Wells West pull-and-push trains were extended to Tonbridge. The Tonbridge-Grove Junction section is thus busier than it has ever been, with about 100 trains in an ordinary day. Trains now ascend Southborough bank at 5-min. intervals at certain times, and there are 58 trains a day using the spur (as against 28 previously). For a short period the latter must have been the busiest single-line section worked by staff and ticket. Electric token instruments have now been installed.

Strawberry Hill Tunnel, 258 yd. long, is traversed on an up gradient of 1 in 115. Between its southern portal and Wadhurst Station, four miles beyond, are two sharp dips in the generally upward profile. The line descends at 1 in 100 for nearly a mile and then ascends at 1 in 115-140 past the small wayside station of Frant ( $7\frac{1}{4}$  miles from Tonbridge), now nearly devoid of traffic because of its inconvenient position. The signal cabin is rarely switched in,

even on the busiest day, and is to be demolished when colour-light intermediate signals are installed between Grove Junction and Stonegate.

After another dip, Wadhurst Station ( $9\frac{1}{4}$  miles) is reached. The station platforms, some 400 ft. above sea level and over 300 ft. above those of Tonbridge, are at the summit of the line. From the operating viewpoint Wadhurst has a considerable importance, though less so than in the past. Because of the lack of facilities at Tunbridge Wells, passenger trains cannot be terminated there, nor can pilots be detached conveniently, and Wadhurst is the first point these can be done easily. In 1956, three trains terminated there and four, including the ten-coach 7.54 a.m., commenced their journeys, though no stock is now stabled there overnight as has been done in the past, the balance being made up by empty stock workings. In spite of the isolated position of the station, nearly two miles from the village, it is one of the busiest intermediate stations, with a large season ticket traffic, as it is the railhead for a popular residential area.

Wadhurst is on the watershed between the rivers Medway and Rother, and immediately beyond the platforms there begins the nine-mile descent of Wadhurst bank, as big an obstacle to up trains as Southborough bank is to down trains. The gradients vary between 1 in 75 and 1 in 132 the whole way. Soon the 1,166-yd. Wadhurst Tunnel is entered. Like both the others south of Grove Junction, it is built to a very restricted loading gauge and inspection must be carried out at regular intervals to see none of the rails have shifted, for inches could be vital.

The line winds downwards through thickly-wooded country, still remarkably isolated considering it is less than 45 miles from Charing Cross. At  $14\frac{1}{2}$  miles from Tonbridge, the roadside station of Stonegate is passed at high speed by non-stopping trains. Traffic is very light here as it is most inconveniently situated. Until 1851 it was named Withernden, after a nearby farm. Then, until July 16, 1947, it was Ticehurst Road; the village of Ticehurst is  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles away, however, and in latter years has been connected with Wadhurst Station by a good bus service. The name was finally altered to the more realistic one of Stonegate,

though it is an uphill walk of a mile to the small village.

Soon after passing Stonegate the line descends to the floor of the Rother valley and reaches Etchingham (18 miles). Gradients are now easy for the next two miles to Robertsbridge. Half-a-mile before that station is reached the single track of the former Kent & East Sussex Railway comes in from the left and parallels the main line to end in a bay in the down platform. Though regular passenger services ceased on January 2, 1954, freight traffic as far as Tenterden still calls for at least two trips a day by one of the "Terriers" stationed at St. Leonards Shed. During the hop-picking season both of these diminutive machines are used to work, one at each end, special trains of up to six corridor coaches as far as Bodiam.

The line now leaves the Rother valley and down trains face the climb up to Battle. First there is a mile at 1 in 86 before Mountfield Tunnel is reached. It is 526 yd. long, and again built very closely to gauge—the train, itself of specially-narrow stock, seems to fit the bore like a piston in a cylinder.

Emerging from the tunnel, two sidings are seen on the up side. They are used to exchange traffic with the Mountfield Tramway, 1½ miles long, which curves sharply in from the right, and serves a gypsum mine which is the chief source of freight traffic on the Hastings line. A mile beyond, the main Hastings road is crossed on the level where it is straight though undulating for a considerable distance. Battle Road Crossing gates are, therefore, distinctly unpopular with road traffic and cause long delays. The crossing keeper's hut and dwelling are on the north side of the road and on the other are the wooden platforms of Mountfield Halt. Tickets are obtained from a window in the hut which opens directly on to the road (so that intending passengers are apt to get a practical demonstration of it being safer by rail!).

The gradient is now 1 in 100, and after easing slightly steepens again through Battle Station. The yard here is always congested with the overflow of wagons from Mountfield Sidings. In the deep cutting beyond the station the final gable summit is passed and the line descends at 1 in 400-218-440 and 100 to Crowhurst (28 miles).

This is the junction with the 4½-mile double-track branch to Bexhill West and is something of an oddity. The branch was opened on June 1, 1902, and with it the junction station, built in open country, for Crowhurst was then little more than a church and an inn. Even now the district is very badly served by buses, and local traffic is larger than the casual visitor may be led into thinking.

The impoverished Managing Committee of the S.E.C.R. seems to have been in a very spacious frame of mind, for Crowhurst Station is laid out on the Ashford plan, with two central through roads and loops serving the platforms, each of which has a long bay facing towards Bexhill. The through roads are little used. All but one or two of the Hastings trains make connection with the branch. Before the war there were some through coaches, but now the branch service is entirely self contained, requiring two pull-and-push sets, each powered by an "H" class 0-4-4 tank engine. Only the unadvertised school train leaving Bexhill at 4.26 p.m. ventures onto the main line, as far as Etchingham, from whence it returns at 8.11 a.m. next morning.

Soon after Crowhurst, the down grade steepens to 1 in 100 as the line descends the side of a valley, at the mouth of which a glimpse of the sea can be caught—the only one. The line then turns sharply left through a cutting in which West St. Leonards Station, devoid of sidings or crossover, is situated. Immediately beyond the platform ends is Bopeep Junction (31¼ miles from Tonbridge), with the electrified line from Lewes coming in on the right. St. Leonards Locomotive Shed is just west of the junction and is the former L.B.S.C.R. depot. Most of the London steam trains are powered from here, though Tonbridge supplies locomotives for some of the local turns. Further west along the coast at St. Leonards West Marina, out of sight of the line over which they work, is a four-road inspection shed for the new diesel-electric trains.

The combined lines enter Bopeep Tunnel immediately and continue in tunnel as far as Hastings, 1½ miles, save for a short opening at Warrior Square Station. Hastings Station was completely rebuilt, with two island platforms, by the Southern Railway just before electrification in 1935.

Architecturally the stations of the Tonbridge-Hastings line are of great interest. Wadhurst, Robertsbridge and Stonegate are of simple Italinat style, unspoiled by that necessary evil of a platform awning. The first two are in red-brick and the latter in stucco. Frant and Etchingam are more flamboyantly gothic and are built of ragstone. But best of all is William Tress' masterpiece of Battle. Built no doubt in keeping with the nearby abbey, it is perhaps the

common arrangement on the S.E.R.

Passenger traffic over the line is quite heavy. Basically there is a large residential traffic, mainly to and from London. Holiday traffic fills the trains during the summer months and calls for extras. Finally, thanks to the convenient situation of many of the stations and the reasonably frequent service, station-to-station traffic is heavy for these days of frequent bus services.

The direct line to Hastings was



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[H. P. White

**The exterior of Wadhurst Station**

finest example there is of a Victorian gothic roadside station. It has been little altered over the years save for the addition of a platform awning which rather obscures the arcaded entrance to the booking hall\*. West St. Leonards is an example of the South Eastern Railway's plain wooden station, while the more recent Crowhurst is in what may be called "Managing Committee" style of plain brick and rounded tops to the sash windows. Many of the wayside stations have staggered platforms, a

scheduled for electrification after 1935, but the Southern later rescinded the decision on the grounds that the benefits from interavailability of stock could not be obtained, because of the restricted loading gauge. Therefore it was considered that electrification would not have been economic.

The Hastings service in 1939 perhaps was at the best it has been. It consisted basically of 14 down expresses, eight of which included Pullman cars. The best down train was the 3.25 p.m. from Charing Cross, running non-stop to Crowhurst, where a Bexhill portion was detached, in 81 min. Hastings was

\* The painting by C. Hamilton Ellis reproduced in *The Railway Magazine* for January, 1955, shows the station in its original form

reached in 95 min. These times seem ample enough until the difficulties of the road are recalled. It was also much better than the standard time of electric trains (*via* Eastbourne) of 115 min.

During the war the number of trains was drastically reduced, mainly by the expedient of stopping the London trains at all stations below Tunbridge Wells and withdrawing the Tonbridge locals. The wayside stations thus gained, perhaps, but traffic between the larger stations

services to Tunbridge Wells and Wadhurst are distinctly meagre.

Matters slowly improved over the years since the nadir reached during the war, but no more than two Pullman buffet workings in each direction were restored. A number of the former local services were put back and a late train added as far as Wadhurst. In September, 1954, a new up business service from Tunbridge Wells was inaugurated and the following year this was altered to



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[H. A. Vallance

**Robertsbridge Station, looking towards Tunbridge Wells in 1932**

suffered severely. Post-war recovery was slow, and in the early years of British Railways it became difficult to avoid the suspicion that the route was being deliberately run down in favour of its electrified alternative. Strong representations from the town councils of Hastings and St. Leonards and of Tunbridge Wells were constantly made—with much justification, for the latter town had easily the worst service of any place on the Southern Region of equivalent size and distance from London. Even today there is no train from London after 7.32 p.m. for stations below Wadhurst (except on Saturdays), and the late evening

start from Wadhurst at 7.54 a.m. In June, 1956, the 3.25 Charing Cross to Wadhurst was extended to Hastings and the 10.50 p.m. ran through on Wednesdays.

In the summer of 1956, there was a basic down service of 13 expresses (with extras on Saturdays). In addition there were two early morning services from London Bridge, in effect van trains with passenger accommodation. There were also five locals from Tonbridge. Up services were on an equivalent scale, though not exactly balancing.

The freight working timetable for 1956 showed on an ordinary weekday

five down and seven up trains, all starting from or terminating at Tonbridge West Yard. There were also trips thence to Tunbridge Wells Central Goods. Coal and general freight are conveyed southward, but most of the up traffic is from the gypsum mine. In 1955 over 400,000 tons of raw gypsum and plaster were forwarded, requiring an average of 140 wagons a day. The gypsum was carried in open wagons mainly to works in North Kent, and the plaster in "shocvans" to a variety of destinations.

Only "restriction O" steam passenger stock is allowed south of Grove Junction. This is either the former S.E.C.R. "birdcage" non-corridor stock (the wooden-sided, end-door stock built in later S.E.C.R. or early Southern Railway days for Continental services) or the flat-sided, steel-panelled corridor coaches built by the Southern for this route, but never rigidly confined to it.

Built specially to conform with the loading gauge, the "Schools" class locomotives, apotheosis of the 4-4-0, have monopolised the haulage of the heavier trains ever since the early 1930s. As a result, piloting has virtually disappeared. The last time the writer travelled in a train needing to be piloted was in 1946. An "E" class 4-4-0 was attached to the "L" class train engine at Tonbridge and detached at Tunbridge Wells Central; this resulted in a long wait while the pilot ran forward to Grove Junction and crossed over to the up line. Class "L" 4-4-0s and occasionally "U1" 2-6-0s share the local turns with the "Schools," while in their last years "D" and "E" 4-4-0s were often seen. Freight is most efficiently handled by the ugly but powerful "Q1" 0-6-0s.

Now diesel-electric multiple-unit sets are with us (but will not completely displace the steam trains until next summer). Still the narrow loading gauge, preserver of individuality on the line, has dictated special stock, and the first appearance of diesel-electrification in the London area. Would it have been too much to have expected something as aesthetically satisfying as the "Schools" and the passenger stock the new order is displacing? But though the end of the old order means regrets for the enthusiast, progress is necessary to cope with the steady growth of traffic on this interesting and highly-individualistic line.

The new diesel-electric trains make nine through journeys each way daily, and form five down and three up stopping trains between Tunbridge Wells and Hastings. The diesels provide hourly services from Charing Cross at 20 min. past the hr. from 9.20 a.m. to 2.20 p.m. inclusive (except 12.20 p.m., which is steam worked), calling at Waterloo, Sevenoaks, Tonbridge, Tunbridge Wells, Crowhurst (with a Bexhill connection), West St. Leonards, and St. Leonards Warrior Square, and taking 96 min. to Hastings, which is about 20 min. less than with steam. In the reverse direction, midday diesel departures from Hastings are at 11.20 a.m., 12.20, 1.20, 3.30 and 4.17 p.m., and the gaps are filled by steam departures in such a way as to provide an hourly service in each direction throughout the day until 7.20 p.m.

Businessmen benefit particularly by the new diesels, which provide an amplified morning and evening service. Up in the morning there are diesel trains from Hastings to Cannon Street at 7.8, 7.30 and 7.45 a.m. (the last-mentioned, the only train of the day to miss Tunbridge Wells, in 90 min.), and to Charing Cross at 7.15 a.m., together with the steam 8.8 a.m., with restaurant car, to Cannon Street and the 8.25 a.m. to Charing Cross. Down in the evening there are the steam 5.5 p.m., with restaurant car, from Cannon Street, and diesels at 5.14, 5.39, and 6.5 p.m. (the last in 90 min.) from the same station and 5.25 p.m. from Charing Cross. In all, the 25 daily trains of the former timetable, averaging 119 min. in time between the London terminal and Hastings, have been replaced by 32 trains averaging 107 min., or 12 min. less. The only deficiency of the new timetable is that the last train of the day from Charing Cross to Hastings by this route is as early as 7.20 p.m.