

Through the Wealden Hills to Hawkhurst

By H. A. VALLANCE



Photo]

[D. Cullum

The east end of Paddock Wood Station, showing the main line to Dover in the centre, the Maidstone branch diverging to the left, and the single-track Hawkhurst branch passing under the signalbox

AT Paddock Wood, five miles east of Tonbridge, two branches leave the main line from London to Dover. By far the older is that running northwards, through the Medway Valley, to Maidstone, where it joins the extension of the North Kent line from Strood. With its double track and easy gradients, it is in contrast to its younger neighbour, a steeply graded single line running south from Paddock Wood, through the Wealden Hills, to a terminus over a mile north of Hawkhurst, on the borders of Kent and Sussex.

The earliest proposal for a branch running southward from the main line between Tonbridge and Ashford was made in 1844, when the South Eastern Railway projected a route from Headcorn through Biddenden and Tenterden to Hastings, but this was rejected by Parliament in favour of a line along the Sussex coast from Brighton, promoted by the London & Brighton Railway. When the South Eastern entered Hastings, in 1851, it was by a line from Ashford, through Rye. The alternative route from Tonbridge, *via* Tunbridge Wells, was completed some twelve months later.

In the years following the opening of the two S.E.R. routes to Hastings, some

rather half-hearted attempts were made by local landowners to obtain railway facilities for the Cranbrook and Tenterden areas, but it was not until the early 1860s that a definite scheme was promoted. By that time, the London, Chatham & Dover Railway had established a route from London to Dover that was far more direct than the circuitous S.E.R. line *via* Redhill, and was working the nominally independent Sevenoaks Railway, which extended from what is now Swanley Junction to Sevenoaks (Bat' & Ball).

In 1862, the Sevenoaks Company proposed to extend its line southwards from Sevenoaks to Tonbridge. The S.E.R. countered this threat by promoting its shortened main line from Tonbridge to London *via* Sevenoaks, and negotiated an agreement whereby the Sevenoaks Company was to limit its Tonbridge extension to a short connecting line at Sevenoaks, in return for facilities for through bookings to S.E.R. stations south of that town. The new S.E.R. main line was completed in 1868, and the connection between the two railways at Sevenoaks in 1869.

Although the S.E.R. warded off this threatened invasion of its territory, the danger of a renewed attack, with Hastings as its ultimate objective, was by no

means removed. The company therefore felt obliged to support the local land-owners who desired to open up the Cranbrook and Tenterden districts, and on June 23, 1864, obtained powers for a branch from Paddock Wood to Hartley, about two miles from Cranbrook. Four weeks later, on July 25, the nominally independent Weald of Kent Railway was authorised to extend the line from Hartley to Tenterden.

Lack of capital prevented the local company from exercising its powers, and, ostensibly for that reason, the S.E.R. did not undertake the construction of the line from Paddock Wood to Hartley. It is significant, however, that the financial collapse of the L.C.D.R. in 1866 removed, for the time being, at any rate, the need to occupy that district as a defensive measure.

Several years elapsed before local interests were able to promote another line to serve the district, and it was not until August 8, 1877, that the Cranbrook & Paddock Wood Railway was authorised. From Paddock Wood to near Hartley the line was approximately the same as that authorised in 1864, but it then turned north-east to a terminus in the outskirts of Cranbrook. The gradients at the southern end of the route were exceptionally severe, and included a rise at 1 in 38 for over a mile from Hartley, and a fall at 1 in 40 for more than half a mile near Cranbrook. The S.E.R. agreed to subscribe towards the construction of the railway and to work it.

Substantial financial support from local residents was not readily forthcoming, and it was stated at the half-yearly meeting on April 28, 1878, that only about £11,000 had been subscribed. The Chairman added that construction would be begun as soon as £25,000 had been subscribed in the district, and that the S.E.R. would then contribute £25,000, and would provide another £25,000 on similar terms. It was also stated that the railway would be constructed as an ordinary single line, and not as a light railway as had originally been intended.

Construction was begun in February, 1879, but was later suspended, pending negotiations with the S.E.R. Quite apart from the value of the railway as a feeder to the main line, the interest in the undertaking displayed by the S.E.R.

probably was stimulated by the competitive policy of the L.C.D.R., which had again become a dangerous rival.

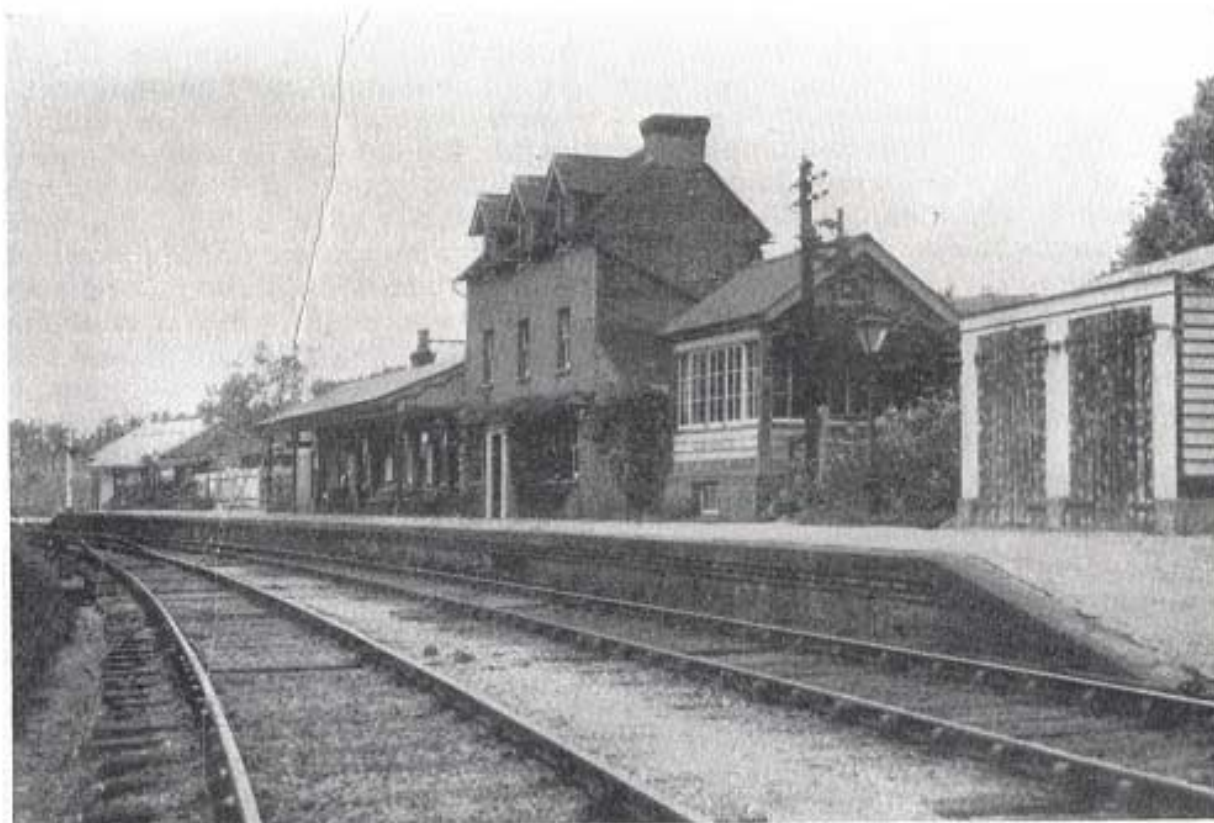
No substantial progress with the construction of the railway appears to have been made for the next three years, but by 1882 the S.E.R. was in control of the local company, and had bought most of the land required. On July 12 of that year, an extension of time for the completion of the work was granted, and a branch from Hartley to the northern outskirts of Hawkhurst was authorised.



The gradients on the new line were severe, and included more than a mile at 1 in 40, falling towards Hawkhurst.

Lack of capital continued to delay construction, and between 1884 and 1890, further extensions of time were granted, and deviations in the line sanctioned. Construction then went ahead, although powers were obtained in 1892 to divert the Hawkhurst extension to a less severely graded line. This alteration placed the terminus well over a mile north of Hawkhurst.

The railway was opened from Paddock Wood to Goudhurst on October 1, 1892, and to Hawkhurst on September 4, 1893, but the section from Hartley to Cranbrook was not built. The S.E.R. worked the line from the outset, and absorbed the local company in July, 1900. Some 18 months earlier, the years of rivalry between the S.E.R. and the L.C.D.R. had



Cranbook Station, looking towards Paddock Wood



Photos]

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View of Goudhurst Station from the level crossing at the south end

ended with a working agreement that outwardly constituted amalgamation, and the setting up of a managing committee to control the two systems.

Known as Maidstone Road until the opening of the branch to the county town on September 24, 1844, Paddock Wood Station serves a small town that has grown up since the coming of the railway in 1842. Its isolation in the early days is said to have so impressed Charles Dickens that he had it in mind when describing the terrible death beneath the wheels of a train of the fugitive Carker, the villain of "Dombey and Son."

on easy rising gradients, to skirt a series of hop-gardens and orchards. As the branch leaves the wide valley of the Weald of Kent, through which the main line passes, the country becomes hilly and the gradient steepens to 1 in 66 for nearly a mile.

A deep wooded cutting is followed by a short tunnel (86 yd. long) and another picturesque cutting, which extends almost to Horsmonden Station, $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Paddock Wood. There is a crossing loop, but the station has only one platform, on the up side of the line. The village, with its houses fringing a broad green, lies a



Photo]

Horsmonden Station, looking towards Hawkhurst

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The station is of typical early South Eastern design, and the layout includes centre roads for through traffic between up and down platform loops. There is a bay for branch trains at the eastern end of each platform. Immediately beyond the station, the Maidstone line curves sharply away to the north, and has direct running connection with the up and down main lines. The single-track Hawkhurst branch begins as an eastward extension of the up platform loop. Trains from the branch can run direct to the up platform, or to the adjoining bay, but a double reverse is necessary to reach the branch from the down line.

As it leaves Paddock Wood Station, the Hawkhurst train passes under the signalbox, which is raised above the track on brick piers. It then runs beside the main line for nearly half a mile before diverging in a southerly direction,

short distance to the west of the railway. The name Horsmonden is pronounced with the accent on "den."

A two-mile fall on fairly easy gradients brings the train to Goudhurst Station, which has a crossing loop with two platforms, and a level crossing at its southern end. Named Hope Mill until January 1, 1893, the station is over a mile west of the pleasant old-world village of Goudhurst (pronounced Gowd-hurst) standing on the slopes of one of the highest ridges of the Weald. The lofty square tower of its fine old church, set on the summit of the hill, is a prominent landmark. From this point of vantage the view extends over a magnificent expanse of heavily-wooded country, part of the ancient forest of Anderda, which stretched for over a hundred miles from Winchester to Ashford.

From Goudhurst, there is an almost

unbroken climb, on gradients as steep as 1 in 85 and 1 in 60, for $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles to Cranbrook Station, where there is a passing loop but only one platform, on the down side of the line. The village of Hartley adjoins the station, but Cranbrook is nearly two miles distant. The town is ringed by hills, and has an air of isolated remoteness, but its spacious church, and several fine old buildings, recall its former importance as a centre of the cloth weaving industry established by Flemish immigrants in the fourteenth century. A prominent feature in the outskirts is the windmill, erected in 1814, and still in use, said to be the largest in England.

The summit of the line is about a quarter of a mile beyond Cranbrook Station, and the succeeding descent at 1 in 80 extends almost to the terminus, $11\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Paddock Wood. A short distance beyond the summit is Badgers Oak Tunnel (178 yd. long) whose sylvan surroundings are in keeping with its delightfully rural name. Hawkhurst Station has a single platform, on the down side, and stands in an isolated position, on a hillside, at Gills Green, more than a mile north of the town. It would have been a matter of considerable expense to carry the railway across the intervening valley to a more conveniently situated terminus, and even with heavy engineering works, steep gradients would have been unavoidable.

For more than 20 years after the branch was opened, a quite liberal weekday service of nine or ten trains in each direction was provided; the number of Sunday services varied from two to four. The trains called at all stations, and were allowed 27 to 30 min. for the journey of $11\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Despite the rather inconvenient connection for down traffic at Paddock Wood, a morning train from Hawkhurst included through coaches for London, which returned on a late afternoon train from Cannon Street.

For some years, another through service from London was given by coaches slipped at Paddock Wood from a fast train for Folkestone and Dover leaving Charing Cross at 4.25 p.m. Latterly, this train, which did not survive the first world war, ran on Fridays only. If the number of passengers for Paddock Wood exceeded the accommodation in the slip portion, the train was stopped at that station to set

down passengers, and to detach the Hawkhurst coaches.

On January 1, 1917, the weekday services were reduced, and the Sunday trains withdrawn, as a wartime measure of economy. The services were improved after the war had ended, although they never quite regained their 1914 level, and the Sunday trains were not reinstated. Alterations on the branch during the second world war were of a comparatively minor character. The present (winter, 1954) service consists of about six pull-and-push trains in each direction.

A variety of motive power has been used on this branch. Cudworth 2-4-0s of the "118" class worked the passenger service for some years, but were succeeded by Stirling class "Q" 0-4-4 tank engines early in the present century. Stirling class "F" and class "B" 4-4-0s were to be seen occasionally, usually on hop-pickers specials, but the larger Wainwright 4-4-0s were rare visitors. For many years, goods traffic was in the hands of Stirling's numerous class "O" 0-6-0s, but, later, the special trains to London for hop traffic usually were hauled by the Wainwright "C" class 0-6-0s. The older tank engines and the Stirling 4-4-0s have been withdrawn from service, and the passenger trains are now worked by the Wainwright "H" class 0-4-4 tanks, fitted for pull-and-push working, and "C" 0-6-0s are used for goods and special traffic.

With the exception of Horsmonden, the stations on the branch are not conveniently situated. It is, indeed, ironical that Cranbrook, whose name took pride of place in the title of the local company promoted to build the line, eventually was left nearly two miles from the railway. In the early years of the present century, an attempt to remedy this deficiency by extending the Kent & East Sussex Railway from Tenterden, through Cranbrook, to join the Hawkhurst line near Hartley, also ended in failure.

Despite its awkwardly-placed stations, which inevitably have encouraged the development of extensive bus services in the area, the branch carries a fair amount of traffic, especially during the hop season. In this connection, it may be recalled that the Cranbrook & Paddock Wood Railway Company made a most appropriate choice in selecting a hop as the device on its seal.