

From Tunbridge Wells to Eastbourne via Heathfield

By C. F. WELLS



Photo]

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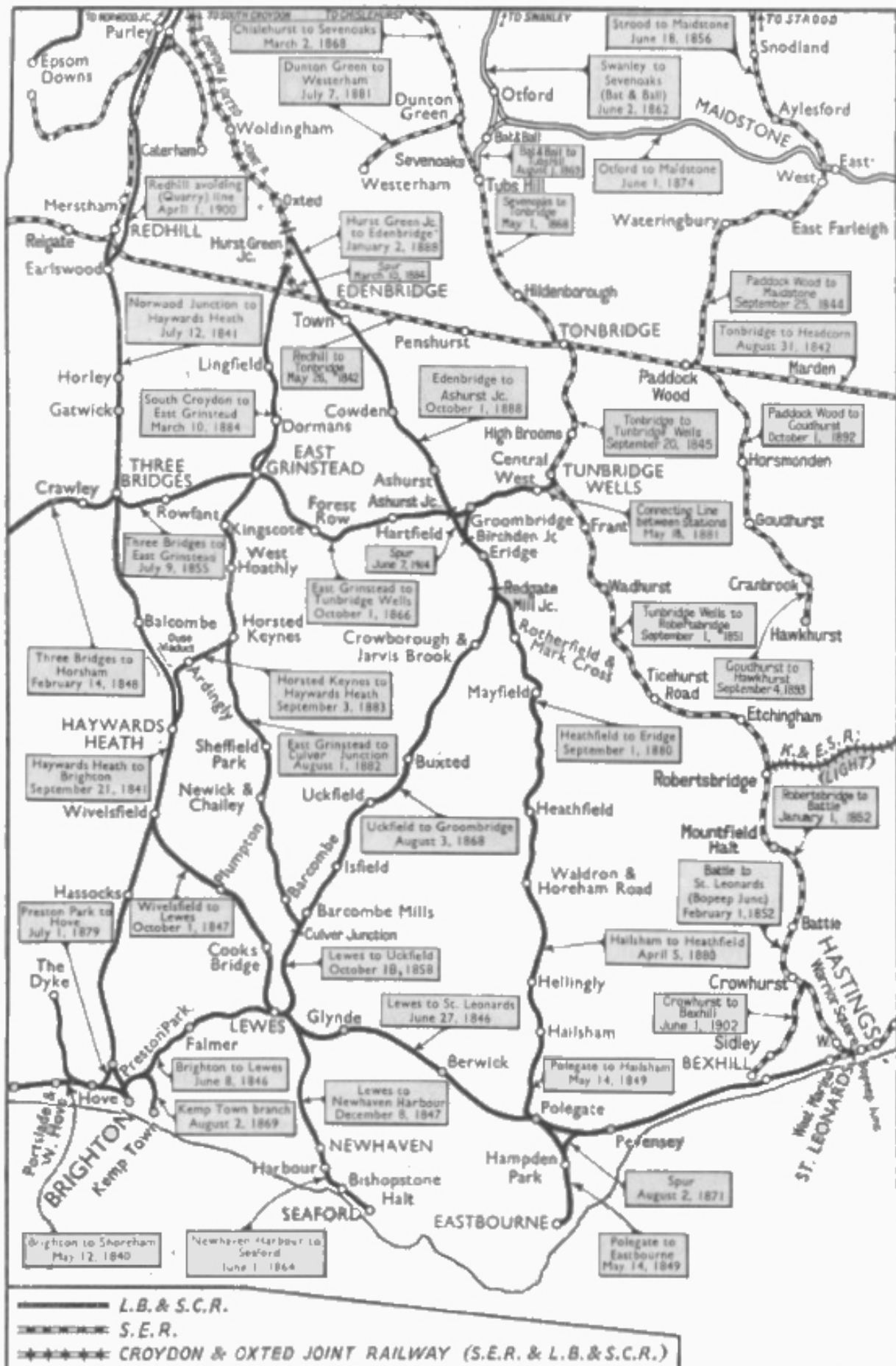
Pull-and-push train from Tunbridge Wells entering Groombridge Station

MANY of the lesser known lines of the former L.B.S.C.R. in Sussex pass through country which is picturesque in the extreme, and the 30 miles from Tunbridge Wells West to Eastbourne, *via* Heathfield, are certainly no exception. From Birchden Junction (near Eridge) to Polegate this line forms part of the most direct route from London to Eastbourne, $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles shorter than that *via* Haywards Heath and Lewes; but the Heathfield line is single track, and its steep gradients and sharp curves make it quite unsuited for sustained high speed. Its picturesque local name, the "Cuckoo Line," is derived from an old legend that the cuckoo is released from winter captivity on Heathfield Fair Day, April 14.

The first section of the Heathfield line, the three miles from Polegate to Hailsham, was opened, together with the branch from Polegate to Eastbourne, on May 14,

1849 but the remainder of the route was projected many years later, when the South Eastern Railway was seeking access to Eastbourne. On August 5, 1873, the Tunbridge Wells & Eastbourne Railway (a nominally independent concern under S.E.R. auspices) was authorised from Hailsham to a junction with the L.B.S.C.R. near Tunbridge Wells. The necessary capital was not forthcoming, and no construction was undertaken.

In 1876, the undertaking was vested in the L.B.S.C.R., and the northern end of the line was amended to join the Lewes-Groombridge line of the L.B.S.C.R., at Redgate Mill Junction, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of Eridge. The railway was opened in 1880—from Hailsham to Heathfield on April 5, and from Heathfield to Redgate Mill Junction on September 1. At Polegate, the junction was altered, and the station rebuilt on a new site, to enable trains to run between Eastbourne and



Map of Southern Region lines in East Sussex, showing pre-grouping ownership

the Heathfield line without reversing. The new connection and station were brought into use on October 3, 1881.

Although the railway from Eridge to Polegate passed into the hands of the L.B.S.C.R., the S.E.R. claimed a share in the Eastbourne traffic, and it was agreed that 50 per cent. of the London-Eastbourne receipts was to be divided between the two companies, subject to an allowance of 25 per cent. to the company providing the trains. This arrangement came into force on July 6, 1879, and continued until the grouping. On April 1, 1884, the S.E.R. put on two expresses in each direction between Charing Cross and Eastbourne *via* Tunbridge Wells and the Heathfield line. These trains were allowed 51 min. between Charing Cross and Tunbridge Wells (S.E.R.) and 65 min. between Tunbridge Wells (L.B.S.C.R.) and Eastbourne. Although Eastbourne was thus brought within 65 miles of Charing Cross, the service did not prove popular, and was withdrawn on December 31, 1885.

Tunbridge Wells West Station, situated some way from the centre of the town, is of moderate size, and has one westbound island platform, and a single eastbound platform, connected by a subway. The station buildings and offices are on the eastbound platform, which has a bay at each end. The layout immediately to the east of the station is rather restricted by the tunnel (carrying the single-line spur to the central station) to which all roads converge somewhat abruptly. This line also has to serve as a shunting neck. A fairly large goods yard parallels the station on the south side, and at the west end, again under rather congested conditions, owing to a narrow underbridge carrying only three lines, is a locomotive depot with four roads. The station area is controlled by two signal boxes. Although the station is a through one, to all intents and purposes it is a terminus for trains arriving from the west by the four routes which converge in the Eridge-Groombridge district. An occasional through service works through the tunnel to or from the central station and beyond.

To the west of the station, the line falls gently through well-wooded country alongside a small tributary of the Medway, as far as Groombridge. High Rocks Halt, about half-way, has staggered

platforms on either side of a road overbridge. Close by is Adams Well signal box, controlling a level crossing, and with distant and home signals in each direction.

Groombridge, the first station (3 miles from Tunbridge Wells), has a single eastbound platform and an island westbound platform. There is a small goods yard on the north side. The signal box is of unusual construction, with windows and roof of double height, although the upper part of the windows is painted out. A short distance farther on, at Groombridge Junction Box, the main line to London forks sharply to the right, to join the direct line from Eridge at Ashurst Junction, the third apex of the triangle. The east side of the triangle is straight and is still on a falling gradient as it skirts Birchden Wood, with its rocks popular among climbers, on the left, and with hop-fields on both sides. The Medway and several of its small tributaries converge near the western corner of the triangle. At Birchden Junction the main London-Uckfield-Lewes line is joined. The signal box here is opened as required to work trains over this route. Eridge Station, 1 mile farther on, has two island platforms and a small yard. It is a scene of considerable activity when the connections between the various services are made.

A short rise at 1 in 176, steepening to 1 in 80, brings the train to Redgate Mill Junction, where the staff is taken for the Heathfield line, which diverges immediately to the left, and enters the characteristic well-wooded country in which this part of East Sussex abounds. Steam is now applied vigorously for the line climbs first at 1 in 88, and then at 1 in 56, to Rotherfield & Mark Cross, the first station, situated midway between these two villages. Trains can be crossed here, and there is a small yard on the down side. The sleepers in both lines through the station have been renewed in concrete. From the platform end, the railway rises for $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles at 1 in 50, and passes through a short tunnel to the first summit, close by Argos Hill. The remains of the windmill to the right form a prominent landmark. Almost immediately, the line begins to fall equally steeply towards Mayfield, and beyond another short tunnel, a wide view opens up to the right. The station is approached round a long reverse

curve on an embankment. It has a passing loop signalled both for normal running, and for working up trains into the down platform or goods yard, with special staff instruments. Signals and points are controlled from a railed-in frame on the down platform. The distant signals are workable, and not fixed as is usual on the line. Formerly, a heavy milk traffic was hauled at Mayfield, but this now goes by road. Concrete sleepers are again in evidence at the station.

The line falls again at 1 in 50 with frequent and sharp curves, to the valley of the Rother. Shortly after leaving the station a lofty overbridge is passed, and immediately afterwards there is a glorious view southwards over miles of densely-wooded countryside. At the bottom of the bank, some $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles farther on, the valley of the Rother is crossed on a high embankment, commanding wide views on both sides. For the greater part of the next $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles to Heathfield, the railway rises at 1 in 50, and speeds are low. More widespread views to the west are obtained during this long ascent. For the $3\frac{3}{4}$ miles from Mayfield 12 min. (working time) are normally allowed. The gradient reverses just short of Heathfield Tunnel (265 yd. long), the longest on the branch, which opens on to Heathfield Station. The platforms are quite long, and there is a fair-sized goods yard and two sidings for stabling trains. Traffic is controlled by two signal boxes, although that at the north end is really a ground frame. The line here is about 450 ft. above sea-level, and the South Downs are visible on the horizon. A small natural gas compressor and holder adjoins the southern portal of the tunnel, and this gas was used for the station lighting for several years.

A $2\frac{1}{2}$ -mile run, mostly downhill, at 1 in 50, brings the train to Waldron & Horam (formerly Horeham Road) a small passing place with station buildings and frame on the up platform, and, in addition to the usual yard, a long siding to the depot of the Express Dairy Company, some way from the line and at a lower level. This depot deals with a considerable milk traffic. The line now becomes comparatively straight, and runs through pleasant undulating country, although the gradient is falling continuously down to the coastal plain.

Between Waldron and Hellingly, the Marle Green brickworks (almost the only sign of industrial activity on the line) are seen on the left, although, strangely enough, they have no rail access. Just before Hellingly, one of the two principal streams forming the Cuckmere River is crossed. This station, in contrast to all the others, has no passing loop or signals although there are interchange sidings with an overhead electrified line leading to the mental hospital, the tower of which can be seen about half a mile away on the left. This line is, however, rusty and grass-grown, and appears to be in disuse, although the overhead equipment is still intact. Between Hellingly and Hailsham the line rises and falls at 1 in 80, although these banks are short. Hailsham Station has the usual facilities, with two signal boxes, as at Heathfield, and handles a number of local trains to and from Eastbourne. A short distance south of the station, is the only level crossing on the line, protected by distant signals. There is also an isolated siding on the up side, which leads into the middle of a field. The ground frame controlling the points is still in place, but the siding is out of use. Approaching Polegate, the line enters a cutting, and curves very sharply to the left. Few traces can be seen of the original curve which gave a connection towards Lewes until the station was rebuilt in 1881.

Polegate, the junction with the electrified main line to Eastbourne and Hastings, has two island platforms, of which the Heathfield line trains are able to use only the outer faces. At the eastern end of the station, the Eastbourne line diverges to the right. There are extensive yards and sidings on both sides of the main line, the station area is controlled by three signal boxes. From Polegate to Hampden Park and Eastbourne the line proceeds practically straight across the western edge of the Pevensy Marshes, and is devoid of any scenic beauty, except for the views of the South Downs away to the right. From Willingdon Junction (controlled remotely from Hampden Park Box) the line carries an intensive traffic in and out of Eastbourne. There are remote-controlled intermediate home and distant signals in each direction between Hampden Park and Eastbourne.

Eastbourne Station has four platform faces, all capable of accommodating a 12-car electric train. There is a wide roadway between platforms 3 and 4, and a centre siding between numbers 2 and 3. The circulating area is spacious and is of wedge-shaped design, with the offices grouped around it, and booking hall beyond. The station suffered considerable war-damage, but much of it has now been repaired. On the up side of the line are, a fair-sized goods yard, electric and steam carriage sidings, and, at a considerable distance from the station a locomotive depot. A very long siding on the down side gives access to the local electricity and gas works, about 1 mile away to the east. The siding continues beyond to a shingle plant on the foreshore but this portion is now derelict. The station has one large manual signal box.

The service, Tunbridge Wells and Eastbourne, consists of nine through trains each way on week-days, and two on Sundays, taking about 1 hr. 30 min. for the journey. There is also quite a frequent service from Eastbourne to Hailsham provided by a pull-and-push unit, and two of these workings are extended to Heathfield on Sundays. All except one of the Tunbridge Wells services give quite good connections at either Eridge or Groombridge to or from London; there are through coaches to and from Victoria, *via* Eridge, at 7.52 a.m. from Eastbourne and at 11.8 a.m. and 3.52 p.m. from Victoria. During the summer, of 1948, a Sunday excursion ran from Tunbridge Wells to Eastbourne and back. Locomotive power is provided by Tunbridge Wells or Eastbourne and consists usually of Class "IIX" or "I3" 4-4-2 tank engines or Class "E5" 0-6-2 tank engines. The latter often have a hard struggle up the long 1 in 50 banks when hauling the heavier trains. Occasionally a "Q" class 0-6-0 appears on these services, and rare visitors are the Maunsell "Moguls" and 0-6-0 tank engines. A 2- or 3-coach set normally suffices for the traffic.

Mileposts from Tunbridge Wells West to Groombridge Junction are measured from London Bridge *via* Oxted; and thence to Redgate Mill Junction from Brighton *via* Lewes and Uckfield. The remainder of the line is mile posted from Brighton *via* Lewes and Polegate. The three short

tunnels, and all overline bridges, are constructed to take a double line, and until the recent war there were, in fact, two tracks through Heathfield Tunnel, one of which was used as an up siding. All single-line sections are worked on the electric train staff system. Until recently the special facilities at Mayfield were not in regular use and trains were crossed in the normal way; but they are now used on weekdays. Some quite fast running takes place on the straighter parts of the falling gradients, but there are numerous speed restrictions north of Heathfield. These restrictions formerly were notified by large notice boards, which have now been removed.

For those who prefer some variety from the fast hourly electric services from London to Eastbourne, here is a delightful change to a route which, except for detail improvements, has seen little alteration during nearly 70 years. The line is, of course, among those from which the Southern Railway had decided to banish steam in favour of diesel-electric traction; a progressive scheme, no doubt, but one which many cannot help awaiting with mixed feelings.

From Tunbridge Wells to Eastbourne

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The east end of Polegate Station, showing the junction of the Eastbourne and Hastings lines



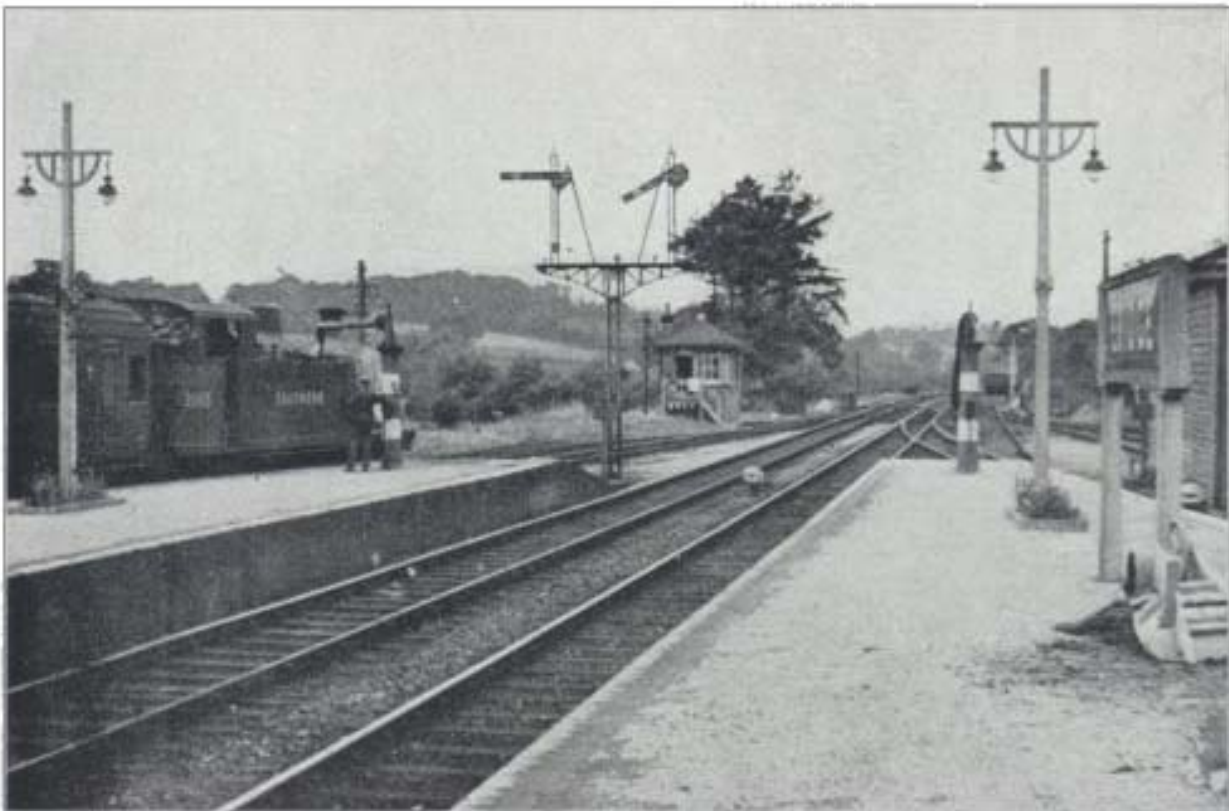
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[C. F. Wells

Heathfield Station from the north



The east end of Tunbridge Wells West Station, looking towards the tunnel



Photos]

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Local train to Tunbridge Wells in the up loop platform at Eridge