

# The Westerham Valley Branch

By D. W. WINKWORTH



*Photo]*

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**Westerham train about to leave Dunton Green Station. The junction with the main line is in the background**

**T**HE steam-operated branch nearest to London on the Southern Region of British Railways is that serving Westerham, albeit this distinction is achieved somewhat narrowly, as the branch to Gravesend West runs it a close second. There is, in fact, a difference of only one mile in the distance from London to the points of which these branches diverge from their respective main lines. The interest of the Westerham line (referred to in the working timetable as Westerham Valley Branch) goes beyond this, however, in its pleasant situation in the Weald of Kent, the historic associations of the district it serves, and in the operating details of the line itself. Originally sponsored under private auspices, the Westerham Valley Railway was authorised on July 24, 1876, and opened on July 7, 1881, shortly after the local company had been absorbed by the South Eastern Railway.

The branch leaves the main line at Dunton Green, 20½ miles from Charing Cross, the connection in a trailing direction to the up line being made at the northern end of the station. A separate platform serves the branch, and there is also a run-round loop, and a three-road goods yard. The line immediately turns south-west on a wide curve and falls on gradients varying from 1 in 294 to 1 in 73

into a slight cutting to pass under a bridge carrying the main London-Hastings road. The cutting gives way to an embankment and a gradient post shows the line to be level for a short distance until, at mile-post 21, an up gradient of 1 in 491 is encountered. At this point, the main line to Tonbridge and beyond may be seen on a high embankment to the south-east. The branch is now following the course of a valley bounded to the north and south by two ridges of the North Downs with the River Darent flowing in the basin to the south, as it makes its way to the Thames. On the northern ridge of the Downs the Pilgrims' Way may still be traced, while, to the south, a large sand pit marks Riverhead.

The course of the line is now straight, and continues through alternate shallow cutting and embankment. After crossing the first of four streams swelling the Darent, a recently reconstructed brick bridge carrying the road to Chevening (a charming small village to the north, and seat of the Stanhope family) is reached, and just beyond this is Chevening Halt, 1 mile 24 ch. from Dunton Green. This halt consists of a concrete platform and shelter; as there are no office buildings, and consequently no staff, the guard carries out the duties of issuing and collecting tickets, carrying a ticket

rack on the train for the former purpose.

On leaving Chevening Halt, the line makes a slight turn to the north, crosses a stream, and enters another long straight stretch. The country now becomes more wooded, and away to the south-west the church spire of Sundridge can be seen. The line continues to climb on gradients varying from 1 in 76 to 1 in 148 and 1 in 74, and passes under two more brick bridges which are separated by a cutting. After the second of these bridges, the house known as Coombe Bank, with its extensive grounds and Lebanon cedars, comes into view on the southern side of the line. Today it is

on leaving the station by a bridge and, to the south, the grey stone tower of Brasted Church rises from among the trees, while, further away, the village nestles in the lee of Ide and Toys Hills. To the north a white gash marks a chalk quarry, and in the valley there is another sand pit.

Before making a last turn to the south-west for the straight run into Westerham, a change in gradient, to 1 in 2,176 rising, occurs. Another road is crossed by a brick bridge, and one of the ever familiar buildings of the Kentish scene—an oast house—peeps out from behind some trees. Westerham Church spire can be seen on a



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#### Train from Dunton Green to Westerham entering Brasted Station

used as a school, and the history of this house goes back to Roman times. The summit of the line is reached as the line passes through a coppice.

The railway now makes a slight turn to the south on a falling gradient of 1 in 217, passes under another brick bridge on to an embankment and reaches Brasted, 3 miles 6 ch. from the junction with the main line. The station here consists of one platform on the southern side of the line with a wooden building providing the usual accommodation. There is also a small three-road goods yard entered from the Dunton Green direction.

Another straight stretch is traversed on a falling gradient of 1 in 515 which eases to 1 in 1,438. A road is crossed

small hill as the station is approached on a down grade varying from 1 in 532 to 1 in 1,888. The terminus is 4 miles 56 ch. from Dunton Green. The platform and station buildings are situated on the northern side of the line, with a goods shed and yard on the opposite side. There is also a run-round loop, a signalbox and a pit for cleaning out engine fires. After negotiating a short rise from the station, the traveller finds himself in the small town of Westerham with monuments on the green and in the church to one of her illustrious sons—Major-General Wolfe.

The present weekday service (summer 1952) consists of 21 up trains and 22 down on Mondays to Fridays, with two less down on Saturdays. The trains run at

approximately hourly intervals, with extra services during morning and evening peak periods. On Sundays, there are 15 down trains and 14 up. The journey time on the branch is 11 min., all trains calling at the two intermediate stopping places. Through connections to and from London Bridge give a running time of about one hour from Westerham, although one of the down main-line steam trains enables the journey to be made in 43 min. (Saturdays excepted). The fastest up journey is 46 min., to Cannon Street, again by steam train. Goods traffic on the branch is not heavy, and one train a day in each direction meets the needs of the district adequately.

allows tickets to be issued by the guard, and now offer only third-class accommodation. Originally these vehicles were S.E.C.R. railcars, and worked on the Westerham Valley line, but they were converted for pull-and-push working in 1924. Motive power is supplied by "R" and "R1" class 0-4-4 tank engines, and occasionally by the larger "H" class 0-4-4s, all from Tonbridge shed. Engines of these classes also work the goods train.

Local journeys between Tonbridge and Dunton Green are operated when two trains are required on the branch at busy periods, or when one set has to be relieved. In past years, class "D1" 0-4-2 tank engines of the former London, Brighton &



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#### Westerham Station and goods shed from the buffer stops

The branch is worked on the electric tablet system, which is so arranged that two trains can be on the line at one time during peak hours. Signalling is confined to Dunton Green and Westerham. An overhead ropeway was installed to pass the tablet from the signalbox at Dunton Green across the main line to an elevated stage on the branch platform, but this is no longer used. The single line instruments are now in a small enclosure on the platform, to allow the necessary operations to be carried out without entering the signalbox.

Two-coach pull-and-push sets, of South Eastern & Chatham Railway origin, are used on the branch. The coaches are connected by a central gangway, which

South Coast Railway have worked pull-and-push trains on the branch. A Sentinel-Cammell railcar also was used, but was found inadequate when traffic was heavy.

On more than one occasion, it has been proposed to extend the railway for some four miles beyond Westerham to join the line from Croydon to East Grinstead, Edenbridge, and Tunbridge Wells at Oxted. Although this would have established a useful cross-country connection, nothing has come of these schemes. The country through which the extension would have passed is hilly, and the gradients would have been severe, and the engineering works distinctly heavy.