



The Development of Railways around Ashdown Forest 1850-1914

*A collation of text and images from the Group's exhibition
Ashdown Forest in a Time of Change, 1850-1914
which was held at the Ashdown Forest Centre
from 5 July to 31 August 2017*

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Preface

In July and August 2017 the Ashdown Forest Research Group held its second exhibition at the Ashdown Forest Centre, Wych Cross.

Entitled “Ashdown Forest at a Time of Change: 1850-1914”, the exhibition covered a diverse range of topics that illustrated some of the profound changes that were taking place to the Forest and its communities in the period from the middle of the 19th century through to the outbreak of the First World War.

We have now collated the text and images from the exhibition into a series of booklets based around these topics. They comprise:

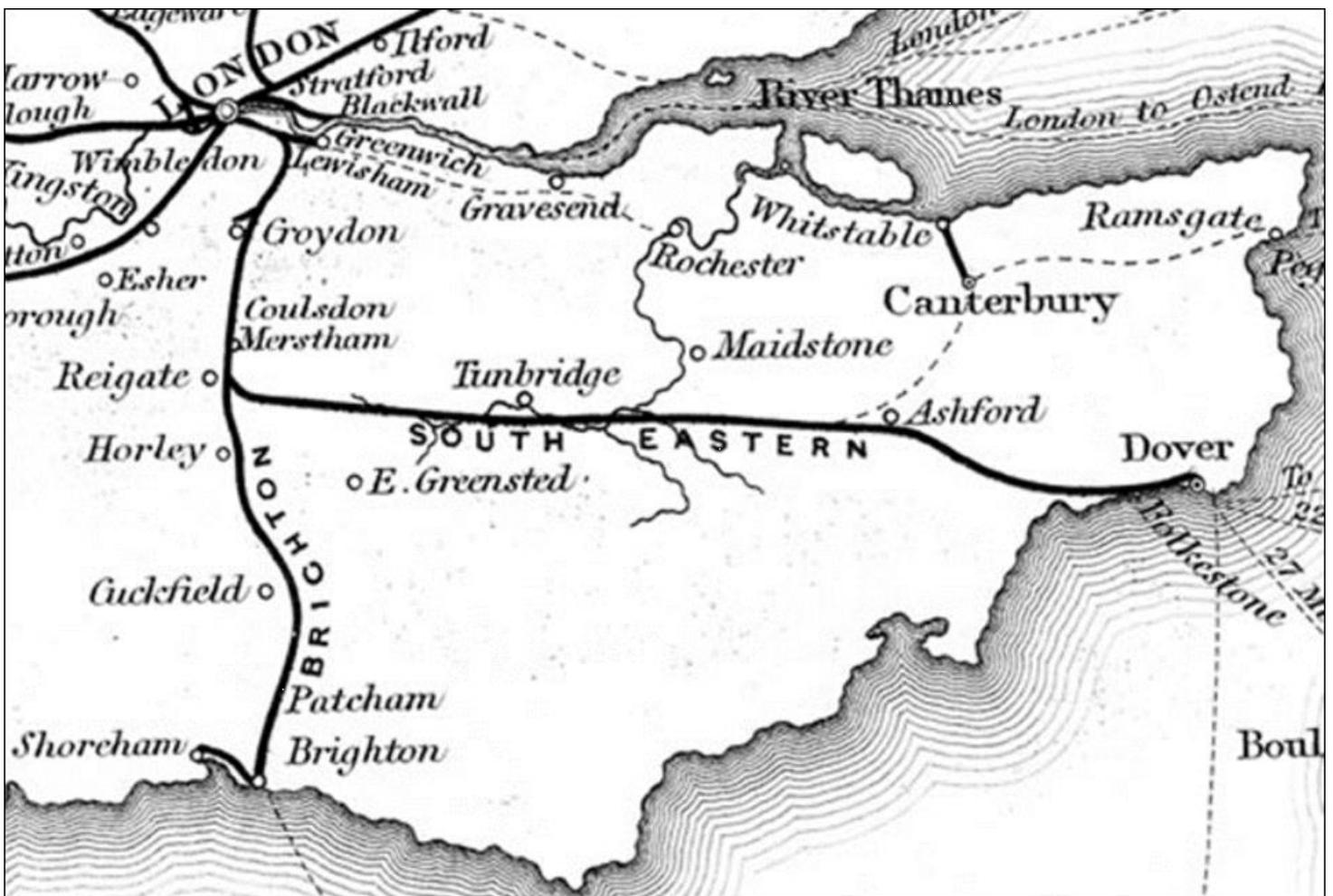
1. Ashdown Forest at a Time of Change: A Timeline
2. Aspects of Change in Forest Occupations
3. Life and Leisure on the Forest
4. Changing Architectural Styles on the Forest Edge
5. The Development of Railways around Ashdown Forest

These booklets are being made available for download as PDFs from the website of the Conservators of Ashdown Forest – the address is on the back page.

If you wish to contact the authors of any of these booklets, please get in touch via the group’s email address – also given on the back page.

Overview

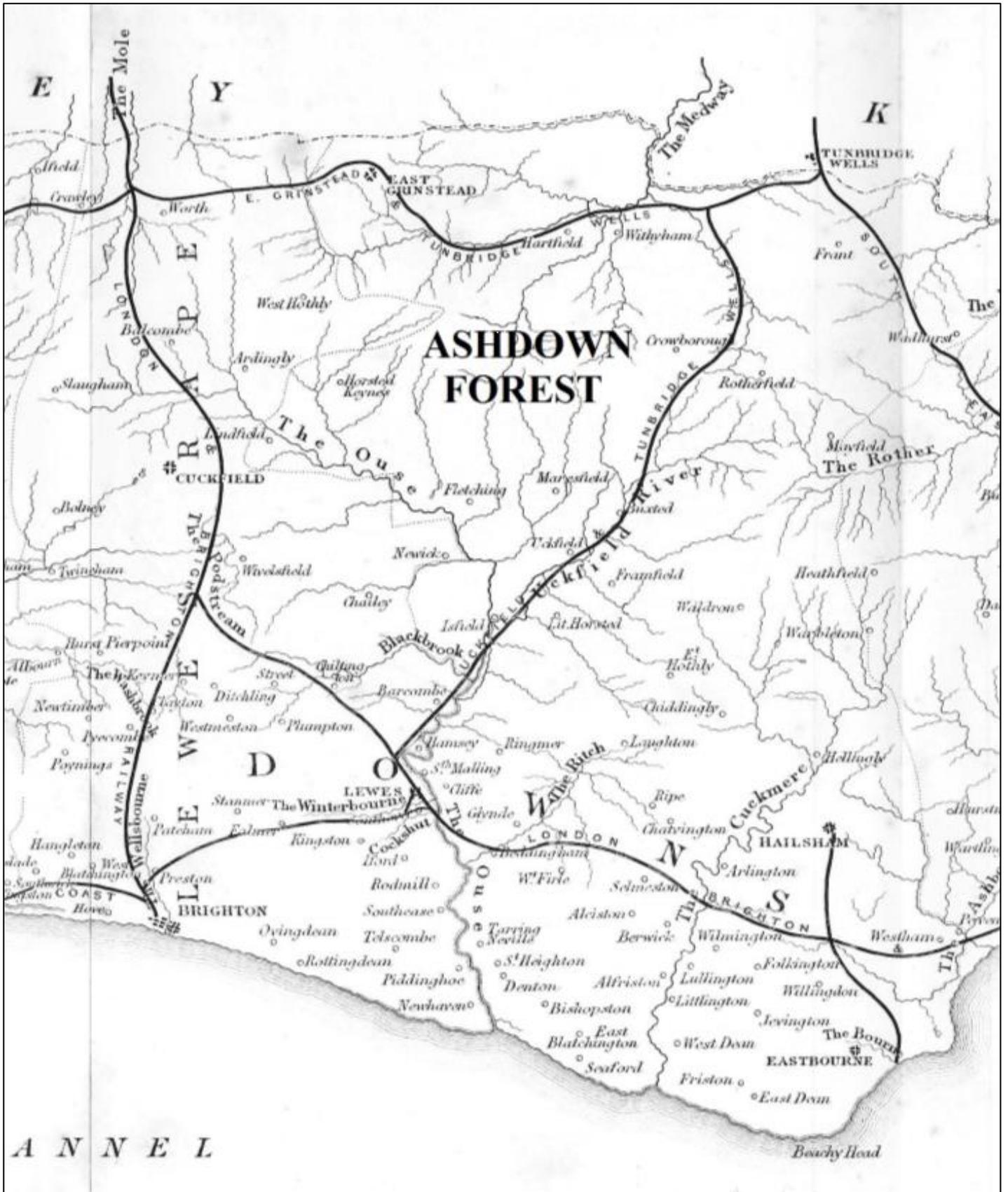
Railways were slow to reach Ashdown Forest's isolated towns and villages. The main lines from London to Brighton—the largest town in Sussex and England's pre-eminent seaside resort—and the key Channel port of Dover opened in 1841 and 1844 respectively. But it was only in the period from the 1850s to the 1880s that Ashdown's rural communities secured access to the national railway network.



The map above shows the railways that had been opened by 1844. It is dominated by the two mainlines running from London Bridge to Brighton and Dover.

(Source: Francis Whishaw (1842), *Railways of Great Britain and Ireland*.)

The map below, published in 1864, shows railway lines beginning to spread into the Ashdown area. More lines arrived in the 1880s.



The early railways around Ashdown were initially promoted by independent local companies backed by local landowners and other interests.

In 1855 a branch from the London to Brighton main line was built from Three Bridges to East Grinstead; in 1866 a company extended it to Tunbridge Wells. In 1858 a railway was built from Lewes to Uckfield, and extended in 1868 to Tunbridge Wells. In 1882 a railway was built from East Grinstead to Lewes and in 1883 from East Grinstead to Haywards Heath.

However, they quickly ended up – in some cases even before opening – in the ownership of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway.

Headquartered in Brighton, the LB&SCR company saw local railways as a useful way of asserting its monopoly of train services across its 'territory', which ran southwards from Guildford and Redhill in the west and Tunbridge Wells in the east to the south coast.

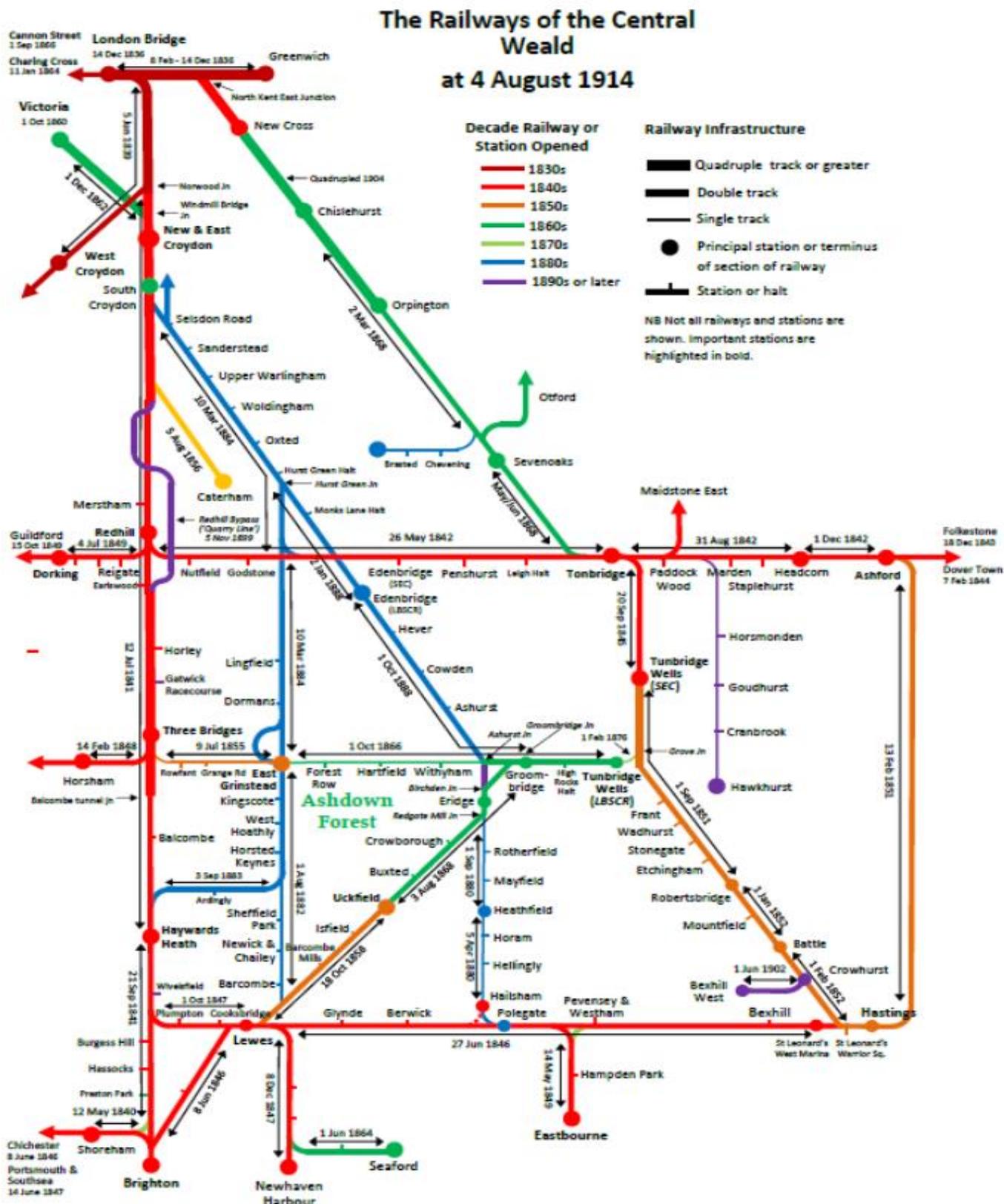
By the end of the 1880s the railway network around Ashdown was largely completed when two new lines promoted by the "Brighton Company" arrived from Croydon via Oxted and Edenbridge to East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells respectively, providing greatly improved access to London.

The following two maps show the extent of the railway network around Ashdown at the beginning of the First World War.

Below is a photograph of a wall map, composed of ceramic tiles, in one of the entrances to Victoria station in London. It shows the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway's railway network.



Below is a diagram of the railways in and around the central Weald, highlighting the decades in which the lines opened.



East Grinstead

East Grinstead was a stagnating rural borough on the north-west fringes of Ashdown Forest when, in 1855, a single track branch line was opened to it from Three Bridges on the London to Brighton main line. In 1866 the line was extended down the upper Medway river valley to Tunbridge Wells, passing through the communities of Forest Row, Hartfield and Withyham and Groombridge on the northern fringes of Ashdown. By the 1880s East Grinstead had become a rural railway intersection with, unusually, a double-decker station. High level platforms on the Three Bridges to Tunbridge Wells line lay across the low level platforms that handled trains steaming up and down the busy double track line to London via Oxted and Croydon, opened in 1884.

The low-level railway continued south to Horsted Keynes, where it split into a line to Haywards Heath, and a minor twisting single-track line that passed through Ashdown's western and southern parishes on the way to Lewes.



(Above) An aerial photograph of East Grinstead station taken around 1925 showing the two-level station. The railway running across the picture from left to right is the Three Bridges to Tunbridge Wells line, with its high level platforms.

The railway from London (running from the top left hand side to the bottom centre of the picture) is seen passing beneath the high level station into the low level station. The adjacent goods yard is now the site of a Sainsbury's supermarket.



Pictured above is East Grinstead “low-level” railway station, opened in the 1880s. This fine building in a local vernacular style was demolished in the 1970s, and replaced by an ugly system-built concrete building. This in turn has recently been replaced by a more impressive building. The station ceased being a through station in the 1950s; it now serves only as a terminus for trains to and from London.

The “high-level station” was demolished following the closure of the Three Bridges to Tunbridge Wells railway in the 1960s.

Royal Tunbridge Wells



The fashionable spa town became the hub for train services around Ashdown Forest in the period before the First World War.

The terminus building (pictured above just before the First World War) came into use in 1866 when the single line from Three Bridges to East Grinstead was extended to the town. The main building was designed by the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway company in a grandiose Italianate style. It still stands (it is now a restaurant) but most of the other infrastructure disappeared following closure of the railway over the period 1967-85.

This was the second rail terminus in the town. The first was opened in 1845 by the South Eastern Railway company at the end of a branch line from Tonbridge built to provide train services to London Bridge (extended to Hastings in 1852).

Both termini were called “Tunbridge Wells” by their respective owners. Travellers, not surprisingly, were often bemused and confused. In due course the new station became known as “Tunbridge Wells (LB&SCR)”. After both companies disappeared into the *Southern Railway* under the government’s railway ‘grouping’ of 1923, it was re-named “Tunbridge Wells (West)”.

In 1867 the stations were linked by a single track that passed through a tunnel under the town. But it was infrequently used until the grouping—not surprising, as the two companies were bitter competitors.

The Upper Medway Valley

When the railway was extended in 1866 from East Grinstead to Tunbridge Wells it followed the upper Medway valley along the northern fringes of Ashdown Forest, passing through Forest Row, Hartfield, Withyham and Groombridge. It provided these communities with access to London via Three Bridges on the Brighton main line.

The line was single-track and not heavily used. Presumably this is why the station staff at **Hartfield** in this photo were able to have their picture taken without being in any danger of being run over by a train!

A similarly quiet scene is pictured below at **Forest Row**.

In 1884 improved services to London were made possible along this line when the double-track railway from East Grinstead via Oxted and Croydon was opened, and a spur was built to connect the Three Bridges-Tunbridge Wells line to it.

Railway Station, Martfield.



Uckfield

This small market town on the southern fringes of Ashdown became a railhead when the railway from Brighton to Lewes was extended to it in 1858, then a through station in 1868 when the line was extended to Tunbridge Wells, passing through Rotherfield (Crowborough) and Groombridge. This photograph of the station was taken after the line was made double track in 1894.



Crowborough

Railways first reached the sparsely populated parish of Rotherfield, in which Crowborough was situated, when the Brighton to Uckfield railway was extended as a single track through to Tunbridge Wells in 1868. The line was difficult and costly to build. It had to navigate through the sandstone ridges and river valleys of the High Weald, and it included a long tunnel near Crowborough.

Crowborough subsequently grew rapidly, aided by its location adjacent to the wild heathland of Ashdown Forest and a burgeoning reputation as a healthy place to live.



As the line became busier with goods and passenger traffic the infrastructure was improved. The railway was made double track in 1894 and the station, pictured above, was substantially rebuilt and improved in 1905-1907.

In addition to passenger traffic the railway also stimulated the local agriculture and horticulture industries as fresh produce could now be transported readily to the Metropolis.

Although Crowborough's rapid development towards the end of the 19th century was undoubtedly spurred on by the opening of the railway in 1868, there were other, perhaps more important, factors: its beautiful location, at almost 800 feet above sea level, in the heathland wilderness of Ashdown Forest; and its healthy—albeit often wet and windy—climate.

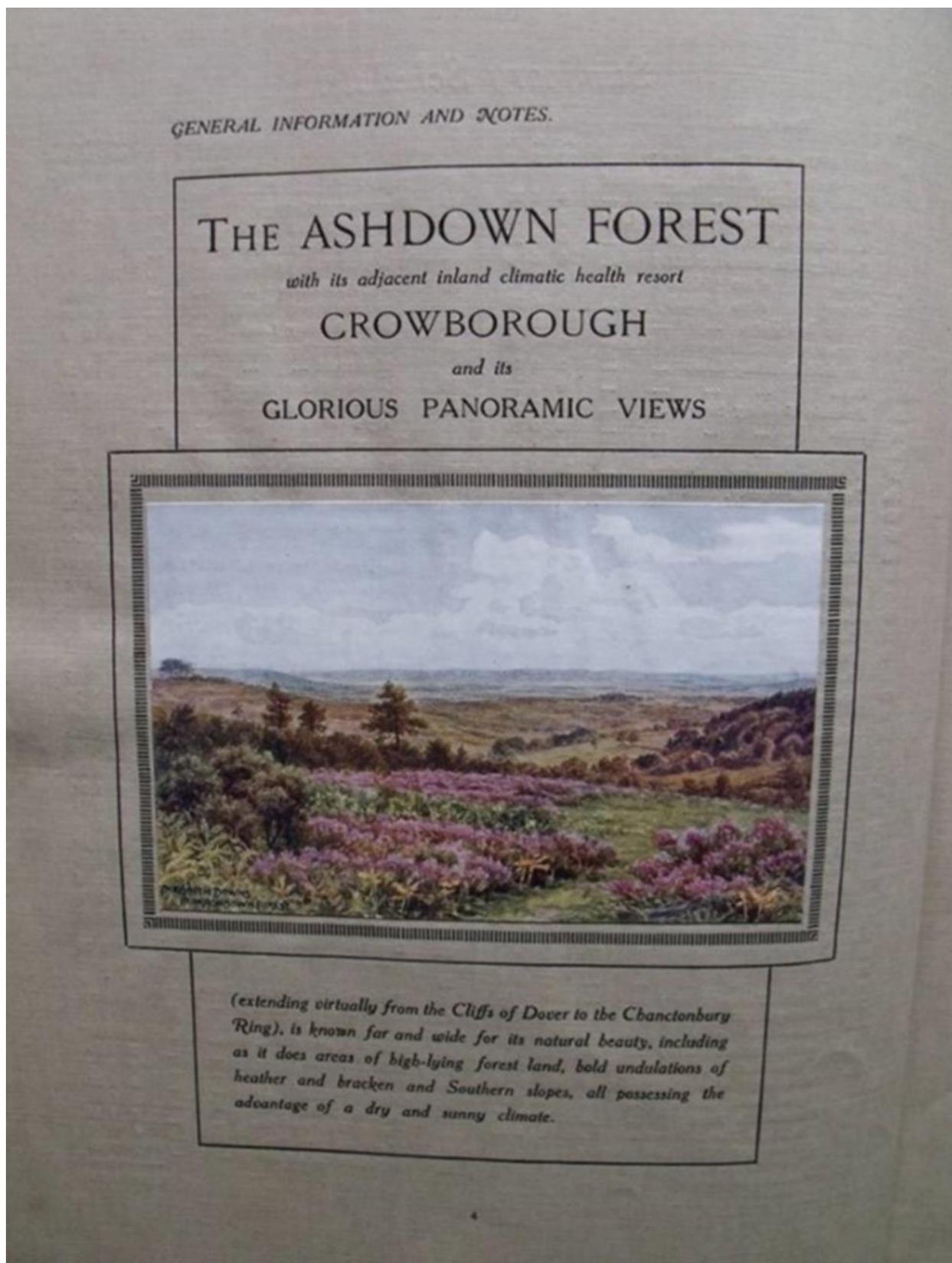
Crowborough's reputation as a place for healthy living was greatly enhanced by the publication in 1885 of '*Observations upon the Topography and Climate of Crowborough Hill, Sussex*'. It was written by **Dr Charles Leeson Prince**, an eminent meteorologist who maintained an observatory here. He distributed free copies of his treatise far and wide.

The following extract illustrates Prince's emphatic message to the world at large about Crowborough's natural advantages—one which many found difficult to resist.

“The climate appears to be more especially applicable to many diseases of the respiratory organs, as well as to those arising from nervous depression, general languor and debility of the system, whether arising from dyspepsia, hysteria, residence in foreign climates or remittent and typhoid fever. In all these cases it will be found, for the most part, that the delightful and extensive scenery, the open, airy, and vivifying atmosphere, abounding in ozone, together with a numerous retinue of natural attractions in the vicinity, all contribute to secure to the visitor that measure of health which generally follows the due co-operation of an active body with a cheerful and contented mind.”

Observations upon the Topography and Climate of Crowborough Hill, Sussex (Charles Leeson Prince, 1885)

Developers and estate agents seized on Crowborough's climatic and landscape qualities, and its improving accessibility, to promote it as an inland climatic health resort' and as a 'Scotland in Sussex', as in the developer's brochure below.



New residential roads close to the Forest in Crowborough Warren were given names with Scottish associations, such as Rannoch Road, Glenmore Road and Aviemore Road.

Hotels were built, including the luxurious Beacon Hotel (pictured below). Invalids came to the area to restore their health.

Residential schools opened.



Recreational and sporting activities flourished, particularly golf, at Crowborough Beacon (one of two golf clubs given leases on Forest land), and weekend shooting, which was mainly organised by the Goldsmiths' Company, a wealthy City Livery Company that owned large amounts of land at Beacon Hill and elsewhere in the Crowborough district. Many of the visitors attracted by these activities would have arrived by train.

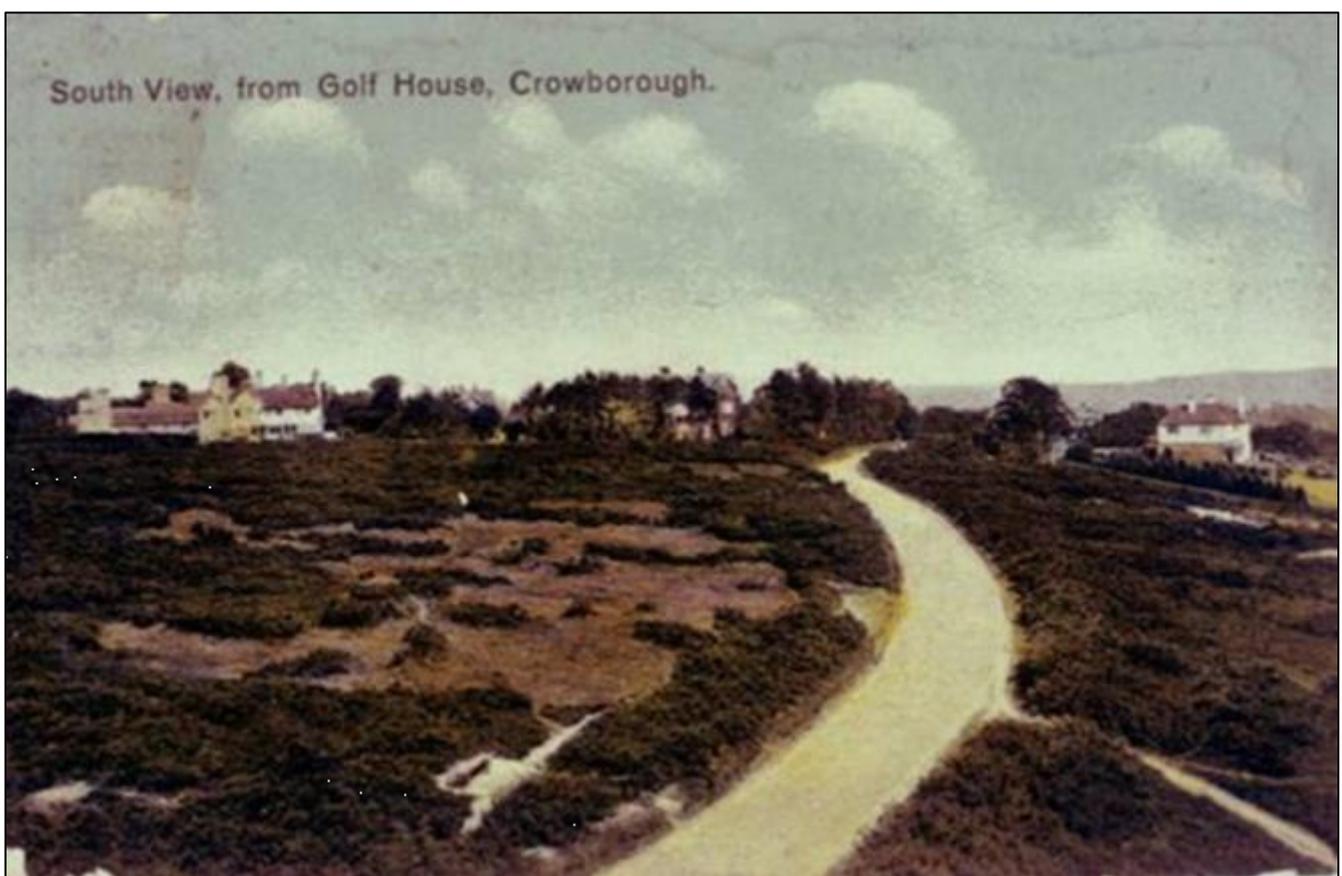
Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle



Sir Arthur Conan-Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, was one of many well-to-do who were attracted to Ashdown Forest from the London metropolitan area. He moved from South Norwood to Crowborough after staying with friends there in 1906 following the death of his first wife.

A keen and able sportsman, in 1910 he became captain of Crowborough Beacon golf club (photo below). From his house, Windlesham, he could walk to the golf course via his garden back gate.

Sir Arthur died of a heart attack in 1930, seated in a chair looking at his favourite view across Crowborough Common, clutching his heart with one hand and holding a flower in the other. A keen spiritualist, he was buried in his back garden, upright, close to the summer house he used for writing. His second wife—the daughter of the friends he stayed with in 1906—was similarly buried after her death in 1940. On the sale of the estate in 1955 their bodies were exhumed and re-interred in a churchyard at Minster in the New Forest.



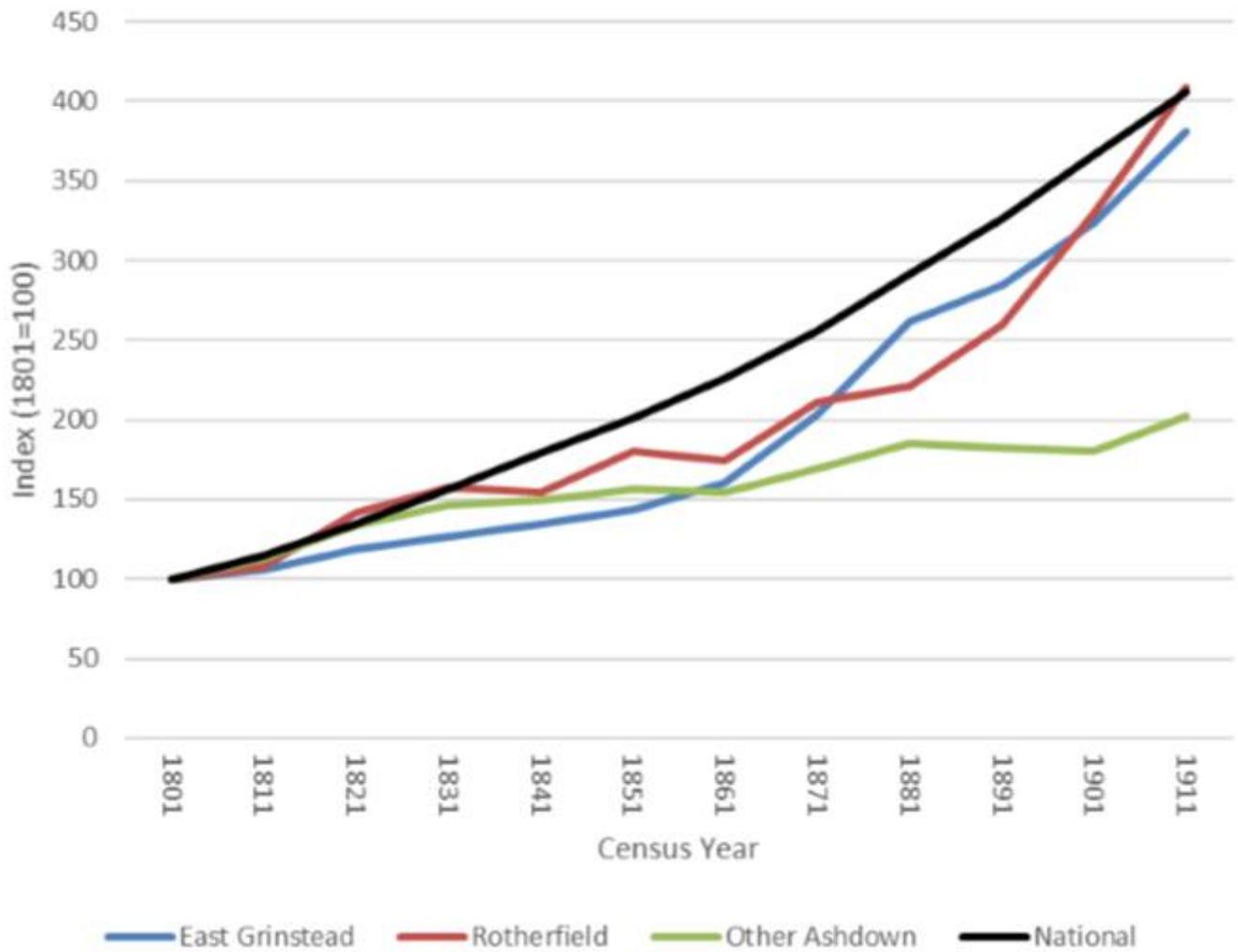
The Impact of Local Railways

By the mid-18th century, East Grinstead, a Wealden market town that had benefited from the 18th century coaching trade, had been stagnating for decades, while Crowborough was merely a small hilltop settlement sitting on a minor turnpike road within the sparsely populated parish of Rotherfield.

But, as the graph illustrates, the population of the parishes of East Grinstead (including Forest Row) and Rotherfield (including Crowborough) began to grow rapidly in the second half of the 19th century. By contrast, the other Ashdown parishes continued to grow only slowly, and well below the national average.

Although all the parishes had railway stations and facilities for handling goods, it is arguable that the railways played a significant role in the growth of only a handful of the settlements around Ashdown Forest.

Ashdown Parishes: Population Growth 1801-1911



The Ashdown Forest Research Group is a group of enthusiastic volunteers who research the historical geography of Ashdown Forest. We focus particularly on the people who have lived and worked on the forest, and their impact on it, and the impact that the forest has, in turn, had on them.

Articles based on this research have been published in Ashdown Forest News and elsewhere. We also give talks and hold exhibitions of our work.

For more information about the group, a list of its publications, and contact details, please visit our page on the Ashdown Forest conservators' website:

<http://www.ashdownforest.org/enjoy/history/AshdownResearchGroup.php>

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