

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF RAILWAYS AROUND ASHDOWN FOREST BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The 19th century has been called the age of the railway. What is the history of railway development in the Ashdown Forest area, and what impact did it have on its communities?

Railways came late to the Ashdown Forest area. In Britain, in the short time between the opening of the Liverpool and Manchester railway in 1830 and the Great Exhibition of 1851, over 6,000 miles of railway were built. In a frenzy of *laissez-faire* capitalism, unconstrained by any central plan to determine what should be built where, virtually all Britain's trunk railway system, connecting together the great industrial cities, the major seaports and London, was put in place. But, as the 1844 map below, the south-east corner of England was largely devoid of railways apart from two main lines from London to Brighton and Dover. Why was this? Simply put, the area's sparse population and lack of industry made it unattractive to profit-seeking investors.



*Railways in South-East England, early 1840s*

*(Whishaw, Francis: The Railways of Great Britain and Ireland Practically Described and Illustrated. Second edition, 1842. London: John Weale)*

The railways that were to link the communities of Ashdown Forest to the wider world arrived only between the 1850s and 1880s, after the peak of national railway building had passed. They were the product of a later phase of consolidation when the bigger railway companies were rounding out their empires with lines that in some cases were not necessarily profitable but served to define and defend their turf.

The key players were the two companies that built the main lines to Brighton and Dover, respectively the London & Brighton and the South Eastern Railway (SER). They had both grown rapidly to become dominant players. They were bitter rivals, and their rivalry was to influence railway development around Ashdown Forest.

The London & Brighton company regarded Brighton and its coastal region as its greatest asset and fiercely resisted the SER's covetous attempts to break into this lucrative market with its own railways. By the late 1840s the companies had agreed to a territorial division: the area south of the Dover main line between Reigate Junction (now Redhill) and Tonbridge and west of an imaginary line drawn between Tonbridge and Hastings was recognised as the exclusive domain of the Brighton company while the area to the north and east was SER's.

The Brighton company (renamed the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway Company – LBSCR – in 1846) nevertheless remained vigilant to ward off infiltration by other railway companies. Its key tactic was to expand its network throughout its 'territory', and to this end it was prepared to support and if necessary take over railway projects promoted by local companies, and this was largely the case around Ashdown Forest.

The first branch line to reach into the High Weald close to Ashdown Forest arrived in 1845, when the South Eastern Railway built a line to Tunbridge Wells from its main line at Tonbridge. This reinvigorated the famous spa town's status as a favoured resort for London society, but it also threatened the north-eastern flank of LBSCR's territory, a threat which soon became all the greater when the line was extended to the south coast at Hastings in 1852.

About this time, East Grinstead had come tantalisingly close to securing a railway. Rival proposals by the London & Brighton company and the SER for branches to the town from their respective main lines had been presented locally and the former's option – a line from Three Bridges – favoured, only for it to be shelved when the Railway Mania – the notorious speculative bubble that ruined many a middle-class investor – collapsed in 1847.

The old market town was now facing a bleak future. It had benefited from 18<sup>th</sup> century turnpike building, when it had become an important staging post for coaches between London, Lewes and Brighton. But the coaching trade had gone into decline when direct turnpikes between London and Brighton were opened. Now it was losing trade to places that had railways – its cattle market was suffering from competition, for example – while local townspeople were travelling miles to Godstone and Three Bridges to catch the trains to London Bridge.

The town's worthies therefore decided to build the railway from Three Bridges themselves. This was not in fact unusual: in other communities across England landowners, gentry, local trades people and others who were concerned about lack of access to railways and the benefits they would bring took similar courses of action. With the support of the LBSCR's directors, Parliamentary approval was obtained and the railway built. The LBSCR agreed to run the line, with an option to purchase. The single-track branch opened in 1855 with a public holiday and much local festivity. The initial service was 6 weekday trains a day each way, rising to 9 the following year, an indication of increasing traffic.

In 1865 the East Grinstead company was acquired by the LBSCR. The following year an extension was opened down the Upper Medway valley from East Grinstead to Tunbridge Wells. Promoted by an independent company led by the leading local landowners, the Sackville-Wests, with Lord West as chairman and Earl de la Warr as a major shareholder, it was acquired by the LBSCR before it opened. The line remained single-track – an indication of the traffic that was anticipated – but at least it gave the northern parishes of Ashdown Forest their first railway connections. Stations were built at Forest

Row, Hartfield (pictured below) and Withyham. Forest Row proved to be one of the busier stations, but the last two were built less for commercial reasons than because the railway's Act of Parliament stipulated them, as it did a private siding near Withyham for the use of the Earl de la Warr.



*Hartfield railway station, opened in 1866*

The 1850s and 60s also saw important parts of the future railway network built on the south-east side of the Forest. In 1858 a line was built between Lewes and Uckfield, a small but significant agricultural town, linking the latter to Brighton. It was extended ten years later as a single-track to Tunbridge Wells, merging with the line from East Grinstead for the final leg beyond Groombridge. Construction proved difficult as the railway had to wind through the High Weald, including a long tunnel near Crowborough. The line passed through the Forest parishes of Maresfield, Buxted and Rotherfield, with stations at the last two (Rotherfield station changed its name to Crowborough in 1880). Crowborough was growing rapidly, attracting people because of its healthy climate and proximity to Ashdown Forest, which local estate agents fancifully likened to the Scottish Highlands. Now it was a stop on the route between Brighton, Lewes, Tunbridge Wells and London. The whole line was made double-track in 1894, while Crowborough's station was comprehensively rebuilt in 1905-6, both reflections of increasing traffic.

The 1870s saw a lull in railway development, but another surge during the 1880s turned East Grinstead into an unlikely railway hub. In 1882 the Lewes & East Grinstead Railway, the ancestor of today's Bluebell line, was opened, providing railway connections for a number of Forest parishes with stations at West Hoathly, Horsted Keynes and Fletching. The railway was promoted chiefly by local landowners led by the Earl of Sheffield, who had an extensive estate at Sheffield Park, with support from gentry in Lewes and East Grinstead. The line had scant commercial justification, passing as it did through sparsely populated countryside with little prospect of attracting much

traffic between the two towns. Unable to raise sufficient funding, the Earl, its principal financial backer, was forced to go cap in hand to the LBSCR, which duly took over the company.

Lord Sheffield's grand scheme had a second aspect, a continuation of the railway northwards from East Grinstead to London. However, the LBSCR, mindful of its territorial pact with the SER, resisted this and instead built the line itself jointly with the SER. This railway, running from the Brighton main line at south Croydon through Oxted to East Grinstead, was opened in 1884. It was double track from the outset, an indication of higher traffic expectations. Construction costs were kept down by taking advantage of engineering works left behind by an abandoned railway project of the mid-1860s, including a long tunnel through the North Downs at Oxted and a brick viaduct at Woldingham.

The new railway merged with the Lewes & East Grinstead railway at a low-level station at East Grinstead. Above, the west-east Three Bridges to Tunbridge Wells railway crossed at a high-level station. Spurs connected these north-south and east-west axes. This was the town's third station in less than 30 years and, notwithstanding its rural location, East Grinstead had now become a mini railway hub with a most unusual double-deck station.

For the LBSCR the most valuable feature of the Lewes & East Grinstead railway was the double track section between East Grinstead and Horsted Keynes, and its continuation westwards via Ardingly to the Brighton main line at Haywards Heath. Taken together with the new railway from Croydon it now had an important diversionary route to relieve the Brighton line and the capability to run a variety of train services between London, East Grinstead and Brighton.

South of Horsted Keynes, however, the rest of the railway – dubbed the 'Sheffield Park line' by the LBSCR – was merely single track. It was engineered to take two tracks, with double-width bridges and tunnels, but they were never required. This twisty, hilly rural line was always going to be very lightly used, and inevitable measures to cut costs through rationalisation began well before the First World War.

The final piece of this complicated historical jigsaw was put in place in 1888 with the opening of a double-track line between Oxted, Edenbridge and Tunbridge Wells. LBSCR could now run services between London and Tunbridge Wells by a more direct route, rather than via East Grinstead. As with the railway from Uckfield, beyond Groombridge it used the last few miles of the East Grinstead line to reach the LBSCR's terminus at Tunbridge Wells.

This completed LBSCR's railway network in this area, with Tunbridge Wells the focal point of its train services. The town represented the company's north-eastern bulwark against any encroachment into its territory by the South Eastern Railway. Its grandiose Italianate terminus near the Pantiles stood just half a mile away from the SER's less elegant though more conveniently located station. It may surprise modern-day travellers to learn that, because the LBSCR focused its train services on Tunbridge Wells, before the Great War no direct trains operated between London and stations on the Uckfield line such as Crowborough or Buxted. Passengers were obliged instead to change at the isolated rural station of Groombridge. A short single-track railway line that could have been used for direct trains did exist, but it was only used to store redundant locomotives. A double-track line was finally opened for through services in June 1914, but these were almost immediately halted by the outbreak of war.

## Conclusion

The railways built in the Ashdown Forest district in the 19th century arrived after the peak of national railway building had passed. Built during the 1850s-1880s in a sparsely populated rural area they were always likely to be hard-pressed to generate sufficient traffic to be commercially viable. Mostly promoted by independent companies formed by local people eager to secure the benefits of a railway connection, they survived largely because they were taken over by a regional monopoly, the LBSCR, which wanted to control railway activity in an area that it regarded as part of its “territory”, and which wished to deter encroachment by rival companies. As a large company deriving most of its revenue from lucrative train services between the south coast and London, it was able effectively to cross-subsidise these marginal and uneconomic railways.

After the Great War Britain’s railways, hard hit by competition from motor transport, fell into decline. The deterioration of the system during World War II and the mounting losses following nationalisation on 1 January 1948 made the need to tackle the country’s many uneconomic lines ever more urgent. Over 2,000 route miles – 11 per cent of the total – were closed between 1948 and 1962, even before East Grinstead’s most famous resident, Dr Richard Beeching, had produced his fateful report, *The Reshaping of Britain’s Railways*, in 1963; this included the closure of the line between East Grinstead and Lewes, which was only carrying 20 passengers a day, in 1958 (happily, the northern section has since been re-established as the popular Bluebell Railway).

In the wake of Dr Beeching’s report, the railway between Three Bridges, East Grinstead and Tunbridge Wells closed in 1967. Today it has been replaced by a cycle path and, at the eastern end, by a heritage railway, the Spa Valley, whose single-track line runs between Eridge and Tunbridge Wells, where it terminates at an old engine shed. The LBSCR’s former station still stands nearby, but the imposing Italianate Grade II listed building is now a Smith & Western pub. The Lewes to Uckfield line closed in 1969, though a short stretch at Isfield has since been revived as the Lavender line, another heritage railway.

By contrast, the two railways radiating from London to East Grinstead and Uckfield have survived and prospered as important commuter lines, while Network Rail is protecting the alignment of the dismantled railway between Lewes and Uckfield to allow the possibility, in the long term, of installing additional rail capacity between London and the south coast because of likely continuing strong growth in demand for train travel in the south-east.

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The above photograph shows part of a mural to be found in one of the entrances to London's Victoria railway station. It depicts the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway company's network in central Sussex. The map probably dates from just before the First World War, and clearly predates the opening in June 1914 of the 'chord' west of Groombridge that enabled train services to be run directly to and from London along the Uckfield line, avoiding Groombridge and Tunbridge Wells.

The green inverted triangle of Ashdown Forest is prominent. The horseshoes signify race courses while the "V" symbols denote golf courses. Two important early golf clubs were Royal Ashdown near Forest Row and Crowborough Beacon, where Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, was club captain in 1910. The railways around Ashdown were important in enabling recreational visitors to reach the area.