Railways at Lewes, by Robert Cheesman

Introduction

This article came about as a result of a request from a member of Friends of Lewes after one of our talks in January, 2017. Two managers from the BAM-Nuttall team who had completed a year-long renovation of the station’s listed buildings came to describe the challenges they had faced and this was preceded by a short history of railways in the town by Robert Cheesman, Chairman of the Friends of Lewes. Afterwards it was suggested that it would be interesting to have a more detailed account.
After some speculative schemes had been put forward, the first railway from Brighton opened on 8 June 1846, having bisected the Priory Remains to reach Lewes. The station was in Friars Walk and had an ornate Italianate frontage on to the street. This station survived until it was demolished without permission over the Easter weekend in 1969.
On 27 June 1846 services were extended to St Leonards (Bulverhythe), but this meant that services from Brighton to St Leonards had to reverse out of Lewes station as it was a terminus. The following year (1847) the London line from Keymer Junction, which tunnelled for some 370 yards under the castle precinct, and the branch line to Newhaven opened.

Many of these trains used the station in Friars Walk, although to make operating easier platforms were provided at Pinwell (from 1847) so that some through trains could stop in Lewes without having to reverse out of the station. In addition, a ticket collecting platform was provided from 1846 to 1848 at what was described as Southover, but in fact was underneath the bridge the railway had to provide to enable access to Leighside.

These arrangements were far from satisfactory, and so in 1857 a new station in a kind of Swiss chalet style was built on a site overlapped by the present station, in the V between the London and Brighton lines. The track alignment provided for straight platforms from Brighton but sharply curved ones from London.

![Frontage of the second railway station at Lewes](image)

*Edward Reeves image (detail) by kind permission of the Sussex Archaeological Society/Sunday Times*

The frontage of the second station at Lewes accessed down a ramp from Station Approach.
This is shown on the map below, which also shows that the line to St Leonards still took the original route through what subsequently became the marshalling yard.

![Map of Station arrangements at Lewes 1846-1857](Image © Railway Magazine *]

Although the existing station and Pinwell platform were closed for passenger traffic at that time, the adjacent goods yard remained open until it was eventually closed in 1968.

![The track into the Goods yards behind Pinwell Lane](Photo by J. J. Davis, 1957 *)
In 1858 a further branch line was opened to Uckfield. This left the London line at a point just short of Hamsey Crossing. As this meant that trains from Brighton needed to reverse at Lewes, and partly to deter the South Eastern Railway from building a Beckenham, Lewes and Brighton railway, for which they had parliamentary powers, a new line was built in 1868 by way of a bridge over the lower High Street.

This line then crossed the river, went over Malling Brooks on an embankment and a cutting through Old Malling, crossing the Ouse again and on through a cutting close to Hamsey Church to join the existing line to Uckfield just north of Hamsey. Once this line was opened the original 1858 line was closed.

Meanwhile in 1864 the line to Newhaven had been extended to Seaford, whilst in 1882 a further line which branched off the Uckfield line at Culver Junction, about half a mile short of Barcombe Mills station, was opened to East Grinstead.
To reduce the sharp curvature of the line from London into the 1857 station and the subsequent curve past the former Pinwell platform which would have been difficult for the bogie coaches being introduced at the time, a new station was built in 1889 on the same site as the 1857 one.

![Plan showing railway lines after the 1889 station had been built](image.png)

New lines were also built from this new station towards Southerham Junction whilst the ramp to the bridge over the High Street used by Uckfield and East Grinstead trains had to be moved.

![The 1889 station, as shown on a Cheetham’s postcard, dated 1906](image.png)
The new station was a large building and incorporated ironwork from the local Every’s foundry. There were 8 platforms, with one track being served by a platform on both sides (4 & 5) and facilities for the loading and unloading of horses.

The existing line from London to what had become the goods yard on the site of the first Lewes station was retained, together with the onward line to a point where it was joined by the new line mentioned previously, which was known as Lewes East junction. Just before the new and existing lines joined, a marshalling yard was developed alongside the old line. Its purpose was to break down incoming goods trains from major centres into separate local goods trains for the small stations on the various lines radiating from Lewes. Similarly it made up larger goods trains from wagons collected from these small stations to go to the major centres.

With the decline of wagon load traffic and the closure of goods facilities at the smaller stations, this marshalling yard closed in the 1960s and has since become part of the Railway Land Local Nature Reserve.

The aerial photo below gives a view of the former marshalling yard which ran from the bend in the railway line in the bottom left of the picture almost to the river before curving back close to the present Greyfriars building (top centre).

Aerial photo of Lewes Railway Land © Chris Drury/Nicholas Sinclair
http://chrisdrury.co.uk/heart-of-reeds/
The line to East Grinstead closed on 28 May 1955, but following a legal challenge it reopened on 7 August 1956 and eventually closed on 16 March 1958. The line to Uckfield closed in 1969 to enable the construction of Phoenix Causeway; part of the embankment from the station is still visible in the Railway Land Nature Reserve but the embankment, bridges and viaduct towards Old Malling have gone. However the cutting through Old Malling is now a footpath owned by the District Council where the bridges over it are still extant. It extends as far as the former bridge over the River Ouse at Hamsey, which was demolished.

Bridge carrying Church Lane over former 1868 line to Uckfield
Image © Barbara Merchant

After the closure of these lines the number of platforms at the station was reduced with the former down London loop line (Platform 1) being reduced to a short engineers siding, so that a secondary entrance into the station could be made from the car park which had been established by then, over the site of the original lines from London which had previously been used to access the goods yard.
In addition the track with a platform on each side was filled in and the remaining platforms numbered 1 to 5.

The lines to London, Brighton, Seaford and Hastings were electrified in 1935, but in order to extend the down London platform to take the longer trains, the junction near the tunnel with the old line to the goods yard had to be modified, a new Lewes West signal box provided, and the Southover Road bridge raised and widened.

In addition the former movable bridge at Southerham was fixed with the railway apparently agreeing to transport coal to the cement and gas works at a reduced rate, rather than having to open the bridge to allow a collier to pass.
It was also agreed to retain gas lighting at the station, something which existed until the 1960s. At Southerham a tramway linked the cement works to the main line to enable materials to be taken in and out, and this did not close until the 1980s.

Regarding signalling, the main box was situated beside the junction just outside the station. In addition a Lewes South box was at the end of the Brighton platforms. There was also a shunt box in the marshalling yard. When the East, South and West signal boxes were closed their functions transferred to the Junction box. This subsequently closed in 2015 when signalling at Lewes came under the control of the Three Bridges signalling centre.

A sympathetic restoration of the station buildings took place in the 1990s and they were listed by English Heritage in 1996. However the buildings on Platform 1 were showing signs of subsidence and were removed. At an earlier date the lengthy awning over the up London platform (2) was cut back to finish at the Station Approach bridge.
Due to its low lying nature the station has suffered in the Lewes floods of both 1960 and 2000. In 1960 the London lines were completely submerged, and part of the rear wall supporting the canopy shown above had to be cut away to allow the large amount of water that had built up behind it to flow through. As a result of this, an enlarged tunnel under the railway was subsequently provided for the Winterbourne stream.

Despite water being up to the level of the conductor rail on the Brighton side of the station which made it impossible to run electric trains, a service of steam trains continued between Brighton and Eastbourne in 1960. The 2000 flood was not quite so severe at the station but many cars were submerged in the car park and train services were suspended until the water had subsided.

In 2015-16 the road bridge over the tracks was strengthened and repaired – a process taking many months – and this was followed by a comprehensive restoration of the station by BAM Nuttall Ltd., involving replacement of rotten timbers and re-glazing of the extensive glass canopy. That this was accomplished on schedule whilst the station remained in operation throughout was a remarkable achievement.

Whilst many of the railways had been promoted by independent companies, they all eventually became part of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway until 1st January 1923, when it was incorporated into the newly formed Southern Railway.

The LB&SCR crest in Lewes Station shows symbols representing the extent of its network – London at top, left, then clockwise, Brighton, Portsmouth & Hastings.
The Southern Railway was then transposed into British Railways on nationalisation on 1st January, 1948. The railway infrastructure was privatised in 1997 to Railtrack and subsequently Network Rail took on this responsibility.

Since the line to Uckfield closed in 1969, there has been a campaign to reinstate it by altering the route into Lewes to be close to the original 1857 route at Hamsey. The campaign is now pressing for the route from Hamsey to cross the valley and tunnel through Offham hill to join the Brighton line near the Ashcombe roundabout, so as to provide an additional route from London to Brighton, which will also serve the universities and stadium at Falmer. A spur off this line would be provided at Hamsey to give access to Lewes.

Although Government consideration has been given to this, no decisions have been made. However a recent (2017) recommendation to Government to provide overhead electrification on the line between Hurst Green and Uckfield has been accepted in principle.

**Services**

Passenger services were quite sparse in the early days but gradually increased with demand. A limited express service ran from both Victoria and London Bridge to both Eastbourne and Hastings, with the train being divided at Polegate. Local services were often provided by what were described as push-pull trains, which were two carriages where the steam engine could be controlled from the leading coach when it was pushing. There were also steam services to both Uckfield and East Grinstead. During the inter-war period a through service was also provided to Ashford and to Maidstone and Gillingham.

Electrification provided a dramatic increase in service provision. There was an hourly electric service to Victoria, many with a Pullman car included, with peak hour and Saturday extras.

There were also at least four trains an hour to Brighton, three to Seaford, including some through services from London, three to Eastbourne and Hastings and an hourly stopping train to Horsted Keynes via Haywards Heath. Regrettably the practice in steam days of
splitting a train at Polegate into Eastbourne and Hastings portions did not continue and practically all Hastings trains went in and out of Eastbourne. Although it had been electrified, this ultimately led to the closure of the direct line between Polegate and Stonecross Junction.

On the Uckfield and East Grinstead lines, some services went forward to London whilst many of the Uckfield trains continued to Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge. During the Second World War there was a reduction in service provision and the Seaford line was reduced to one train an hour. Whilst most of the reductions were reinstated, it was many years before Seaford regularly had two trains an hour. The local service to Horsted Keynes was cut back to Haywards Heath when Horsted Keynes shut in 1963, and subsequently discontinued when stops at the intermediate stations were transferred to the London trains. Prior to the closure of the Uckfield line most trains were operated by diesel electric multiple units on an hourly service between Lewes and Oxted with connections to London, or at Eridge to Tunbridge Wells and Tonbridge.

Practically all passenger trains stopped at Lewes and even the few that did not were restricted to 10mph because of the curvature of the line. The boat trains to or from Newhaven Harbour did not stop and neither did the weekday train between Hastings, Brighton and Birkenhead. During the short period when a Brighton Belle set ran to Eastbourne on Sundays it did not stop. Similarly in the short period since privatisation, when there were inter-regional trains to Eastbourne or Newhaven, most did not stop.

All of these services have since been discontinued. Similarly, special trains for meetings at Lewes racecourse are no longer operated.

In the 1990’s a limited through service was introduced between Brighton and Ashford. This became an hourly service in 2004. Because the line is not electrified beyond Ore, it is provided by two car diesel units which are often full to overflowing. Various suggestions have been put forward for dealing with this, and in May 2018 the intention is to truncate the Ashford service to start from Eastbourne but provide an additional electric service from Brighton to Hastings.
Since privatisation, services on the London line have been increased to half hourly, and some 5 trains an hour are provided to Brighton, with a proposal to increase this to 6 in 2018. Eastbourne has also seen an increase to 4 trains per hour off-peak, whilst a peak hour through service from London to Seaford survives. At one point in the 90’s there were regular through services on to the West Coastway line at Brighton, including one that ran all the way to Bournemouth. The services were subsequently discontinued because they caused operational problems at Brighton station.

Much has changed in the railway scene at Lewes in the last 50 years. Passenger services now start earlier than they did and also run later. Usage of trains at the station has increased dramatically in recent years whilst facilities such as automatic gates, ticket machines, and an extensive car park that includes charging points for electric cars and provisions for bicycle storage have all been provided.

*The bicycle park in 2018. Image © Marcus Taylor*
However the provision of refreshments on London trains has now ceased. Similarly freight services through Lewes have all but ceased, the only remaining regular working being the weekly one of incinerator ash from Newhaven. But the train will clearly remain a key method of passenger transport in the future.

Notes

* Image from the Lewes History Group website

Friends of Lewes Society, January 2018