

From Swanley to Maidstone and Ashford

By H. A. VALLANCE



Photo]

[Derek Cross

Down boat train, diverted via Maidstone, passing the unopened station at Lullingstone on Sunday, April 24, 1960, headed by "Battle of Britain" class Pacific No. 34067, "Tangmere." Eynsford Tunnel is in the background

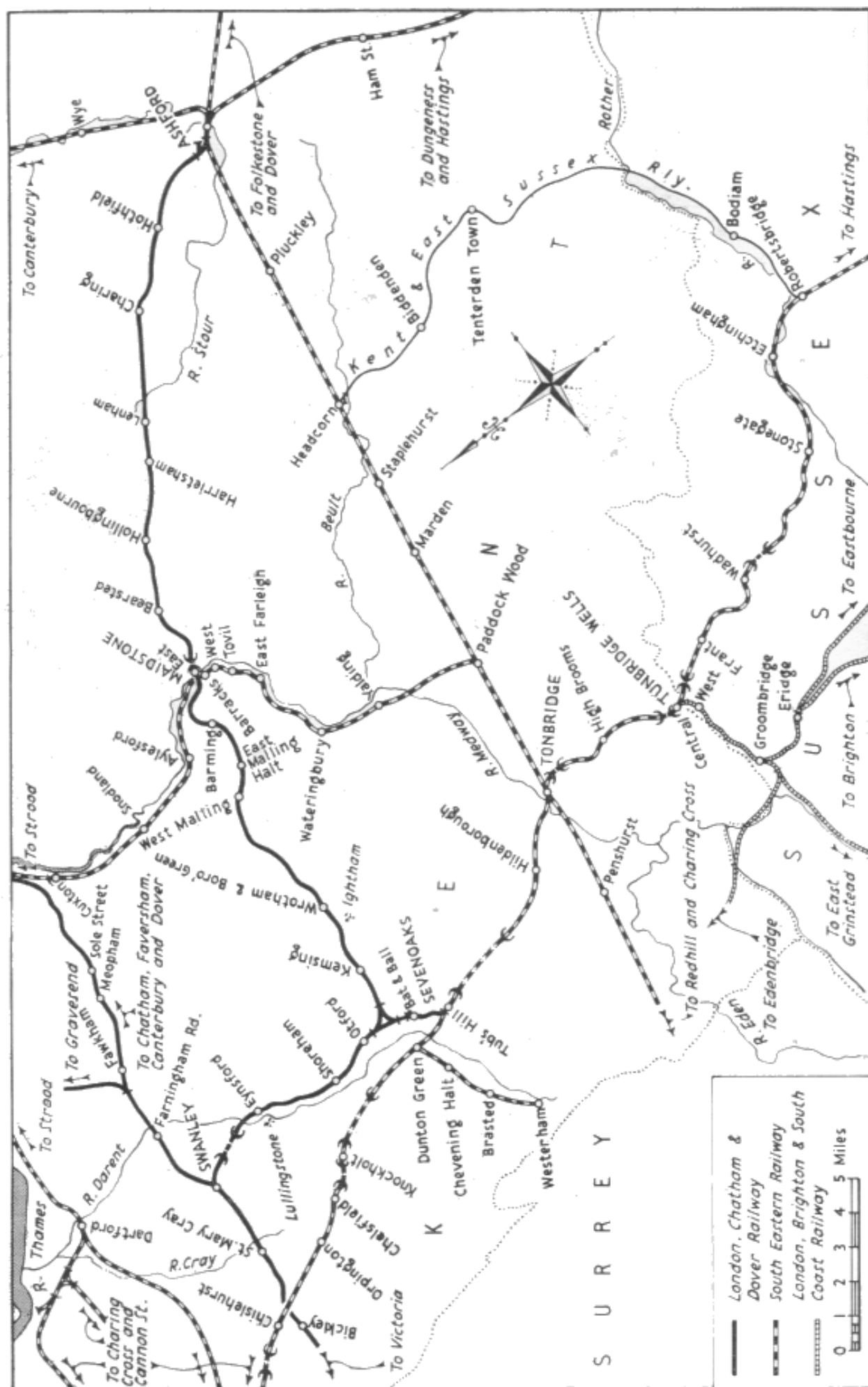
FOR more than half the distance between London and the Channel ports of Folkestone and Dover, a useful alternative to the main lines *via* Tonbridge and *via* Chatham is provided by the route through Central Kent from Swanley to Maidstone and Ashford. Built by companies closely associated with the London, Chatham & Dover Railway, this line became a serious threat to the rival South Eastern Railway; indeed, its extension from Maidstone to Ashford was intended to be the first step towards a competitive route to Folkestone. Opposition proved too much for the remainder of this scheme, and it was not until the South Eastern and the London, Chatham & Dover had entered into the working agreement of 1899 that trains from London to the coast ran *via* Maidstone.

Any thought of reaching the Channel ports probably was far from the minds of those who promoted the first section of

the line, a century ago. This was the Sevenoaks Railway, authorised on August 1, 1859, from a junction at Swanley with the main line of the L.C.D.R. (then under construction) to a terminus in the northern outskirts of Sevenoaks. The line, which was single-track, was opened on June 2, 1862, and was worked by the L.C.D.R.

For the first few weeks, the Sevenoaks trains made connection with the main-line services at St. Mary Cray, and the only intermediate station was at Shoreham. However, by July 1, stations had been opened at Eynsford, and at the junction with the main line. The latter, which had separate platforms for the main and Sevenoaks lines, was known as Sevenbaks Junction until 1871, when it was renamed Swanley Junction. Powers to double the line were obtained in 1862, and the second track was brought into use on August 1, 1863.

Serious rivalry between the S.E.R.



Map of the railway from Swanley to Ashford and its associated routes, showing ownership of South Eastern and London, Chatham & Dover lines before the working union of 1899

and the L.C.D.R. began in 1861, when the latter company reached Dover and established a route to London that was materially shorter than the circuitous line of the S.E.R. *via* Redhill. To overcome this disadvantage, the S.E.R. promoted its direct line from Tonbridge to London *via* Sevenoaks and Orpington. At the same time, extensions of the Sevenoaks Railway were projected to Tonbridge and Maidstone. To avoid a parliamentary contest, it was agreed that the Sevenoaks Company should seek powers only for a line from Otford to Maidstone and a short connection to the

in 1866 was reflected in the fortunes of its associated company, and four Acts granting extensions of time for the completion of the works were necessary before the 15 miles of single track from the junction with the Sevenoaks line at Otford to Maidstone could be opened on June 1, 1874, and worked by the L.C.D.R. Intermediate stations were provided at Kemsing, Wrotham, Malling, and Barming. The trains from Swanley were diverted to Maidstone, and a local service worked between Sevenoaks Tubs Hill and exchange platforms at Otford. Passengers were not booked to or from



Photo]

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Otford Station, looking towards Swanley

S.E.R. in Sevenoaks. In return it was to be granted through booking facilities to stations south of that town.

Authorised on June 30, 1862, the shortened S.E.R. route to London was brought into use in sections, and was opened throughout on May 1, 1868. Powers for the extensions of the Sevenoaks Railway were obtained on July 17, 1862, and the Act also made provision for changing the name of the undertaking to the Sevenoaks, Maidstone & Tunbridge Railway.* The line connecting the two railways at Sevenoaks was about one mile long, and was brought into use on August 1, 1869. The station on the new S.E.R. main line was named Tubs Hill, and the older station on the line from Swanley was named Bat & Ball after a nearby public house.

The financial collapse of the L.C.D.R.

these platforms, which were at the junction of the two lines, more than half a mile south of the present Otford Station. Powers to double the line were obtained in 1875, but this work was not completed until July 3, 1882.

The L.C.D.R. absorbed the local company on June 30, 1879, and proceeded to complete a triangular layout at Otford by constructing a double-track spur, about a quarter of a mile long, which allowed through running between Kemsing and Sevenoaks. With the opening of this line on November 1, 1880, all trains between London and Maidstone began to work in and out of Sevenoaks Bat & Ball, and the third side of the triangle was closed for through traffic, although part of it continued to be used as a siding.

The exchange platforms at Otford also were closed in November, 1880, and the local Sevenoaks trains then ran only between Bat & Ball and Tubs Hill. This

* The spelling "Tonbridge" was adopted in 1893, to avoid confusion with Tunbridge Wells.



Bat & Ball Station, Sevenoaks, from the south

traffic was far from heavy, and one of the frequent disputes between the S.E.R. and the L.C.D.R. resulted in the withdrawal of the service on July 1, 1885. More than 13 years elapsed before it was restored, and during that period the connection between the two railways was used only for exchanging a limited amount of goods traffic. A passenger station at Otford, on the site of the present station, was brought into use in August, 1882.

When the working agreement between the S.E.R. and the L.C.D.R. came into force on January 1, 1899, the direct line from Otford to Kemsing was re-opened, and almost all the Maidstone trains were diverted to it. There remained, however, one morning up train, and an evening service from London, which still ran *via* Bat & Ball. The morning train was

diverted to the direct line a few years later, but the down train continued to serve Bat & Ball until September, 1912. Thereafter the Sevenoaks-Kemsing spur was used only for occasional special traffic. Soon after the grouping of 1923, the connection with the main line at the eastern end was removed, and the tracks became two long sidings for the storage of spare rolling stock. These sidings were closed and dismantled in 1933.

A local service between Otford and Tubs Hill was resumed on January 1, 1899, and continued without a break until January 1, 1917, when it was suspended as a measure of wartime economy. Some twelve months later, however, a very limited service (which did not appear in the public timetables) was provided on Saturday evenings only. These trains did not call at Bat & Ball,



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Maidstone East Station, looking towards Week Street Tunnel

which remained closed until normal advertised services were restored, on weekdays only, on March 1, 1919.

The 19-mile extension of the railway from Maidstone to Ashford was undertaken by another nominally independent company, and was authorised on August 12, 1880. Unlike the remainder of the line, this section was constructed with a double track. It was opened throughout on July 1, 1884, with intermediate stations at Bearsted, Hollingbourne, Harrietsham, Lenham, Charing, and Hothfield. The terminus was on the western side of Ashford, nearly half a mile from the S.E.R. station. The

the L.C.D.R. trains had to stop to attach or detach these coaches at the junction with the connecting spur, a little more than a quarter of a mile from their terminus. It was continued only until the working agreement between the two companies came into force on January 1, 1899, when all passenger traffic on the Maidstone line was diverted to the S.E.R. station.

On June 27, 1881, while the railway from Maidstone to Ashford was under construction, the L.C.D.R. obtained an Act for a line from Lenham to its main line at Faversham, a distance of $9\frac{1}{2}$ miles. These powers were never exercised, and



Dover to London train crossing Eynsford Viaduct in March, 1948, when Polhill Tunnel was closed for engineering works

Maidstone & Ashford Company was vested in the L.C.D.R. as from the day that the line was brought into use.

The threatened attack on Folkestone was launched in 1884, when the L.C.D.R. promoted a line from Ashford parallel to that of its rival. Opposition from the S.E.R. secured the rejection of the Bill, and the scheme was never revived. A connection between the two railways at Ashford had been authorised by the Act of August 12, 1880, but was not brought into use until November 1, 1891, when the L.C.D.R. began to run coaches to and from the S.E.R. station. This arrangement was inconvenient in that

eventually were allowed to lapse. The line would have followed a steeply-graded course across the North Downs, and appears to have been projected as a "blocking" measure, to keep the S.E.R. out of the district.

The high ridge of the North Downs is the dominant scenic feature of the journey from Swanley to Ashford. Swanley is on the northern edge of the downland country, and is reached after a run of $17\frac{1}{2}$ miles from London, through the south-east suburbs and Bromley. The present station, opened on April 16, 1939, has two island platforms, and is a short distance west of the junction of the



Wrotham & Borough Green Station, looking west



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**Lenham Station, at the highest summit (390 ft. above sea level) on the L.C.D.R.,
looking towards Ashford**

Ashford line with the main line. The original station, now largely demolished, was immediately east of the junction. The word "junction" was dropped from the name when the new station was brought into use.

Diverging from the main line past the platforms of the old station, the line to Ashford runs through rolling country for a short distance, and then into a deep chalk cutting leading to Eynsford Tunnel (823 yd. long) which pierces a spur of of the North Downs. In the cutting beyond the tunnel are the remains of Lullingstone Station, built in 1939, but never opened. The land in the vicinity was not developed for building, and now forms part of the Green Belt. The railway emerges from the cutting into the valley of the River Darent, over which it is carried on a viaduct of nine arches of 30 ft. span at a maximum height of 70 ft. The river passes through a gap in the downs to join the Thames near Dartford.

Between the picturesquely-situated roadside stations of Eynsford and Shoreham, which serve old-world villages that still retain their charm, the railway passes through a deep chalk cutting and reaches more open country. To the east of the line, the downs rise steeply, and on the other hand are the grounds of Lullingstone Castle, and beyond them the hills on the opposite side of the valley. A prominent feature on the west side of the downs above Shoreham is a war memorial in the form of a huge cross cut in the chalk.

From Shoreham, a run of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles brings the train to Otford, another place of great antiquity, with a history extending back at least to Saxon times. The old village, and the ruins of the Tudor palace, a residence of the Archbishops of Canterbury, contrast sharply with the modern housing development on the outskirts. The station, which was largely rebuilt in the early years of the present century, has a bay at the southern end of the platform, formerly used by the local trains to and from Sevenoaks.

The site of the original exchange platforms can still be identified about half a mile south of Otford Station, and immediately before the junction of the Ashford and Sevenoaks lines. The latter runs first through open country, and then in shallow cutting, for a mile to Bat &

Ball Station, whence a further mile through the residential outskirts of the town brings the train to the sharply-curved approach to the junction with the main line from Tonbridge to London at the north end of Sevenoaks Station. The suffix "Tubs Hill" was dropped from the name of the former S.E.R. station in 1950.

The line to Maidstone and Ashford leaves the valley of the Darent at Otford Junction and, turning from south to east on a sharp curve which necessitates a severe speed restriction, enters the wide open valley between the downs and the hills bordering the northern side of the Weald. A run of nearly five miles from the junction, past the rather isolated stations of Kemsing, brings the train to Wrotham & Borough Green, in the heart of a particularly beautiful stretch of country, which embraces the village of Ightham (pronounced "Eye-tam"), with its ancient moated house.

For many years, the villages of West and East Malling were served by one station, known as Malling. A halt was opened at East Malling in May, 1913, but it was not until May, 1949, that the older station was given the more appropriate name of West Malling. Originally constructed almost wholly of timber, East Malling Halt has recently been rebuilt in reinforced concrete, and with longer platforms. As the train approaches West Malling, the line of the downs is broken by the wide valley of the Medway, down which the view extends towards Rochester.

Between East Malling Halt and Barming, the railway passes through two short tunnels, 33 yd. and 54 yd. long respectively. These tunnels have only a shallow covering, and were built to placate the owner of the Preston Hall Estate, who claimed that the railway would cause serious damage to his woodlands. Beyond Barming, the line makes a wide sweep round the hillside as it descends towards the Medway, and runs almost parallel to the extension of the North Kent line from Strood to Maidstone, opened by the S.E.R. on June 18, 1856.

As Maidstone is approached, the Ashford line is carried over the North Kent line on a high brick arch, and then crosses the Medway at a height of 38 ft. on a girder bridge of 113 ft. span. The

present bridge, which carries a public footpath in addition to the railway, replaced a bowstring girder structure of much lighter construction in 1927. Maidstone East Station (known simply as Maidstone until July, 1899) is a short distance beyond the bridge, and has two through platforms, each with a bay at its western end. The station buildings are at street level, over the tunnel which immediately adjoins the eastern end of the platforms. As befits its position as the County Town of Kent, Maidstone is a thriving business and commercial centre, with a population of 54,000.

Throughout the 22 miles from Swanley to Maidstone, the railway is severely graded. For some 12 miles from the junction to Wrotham, there is a series of sharp undulations with a rising tendency. Some of the rises and falls are at 1 in 101½, an inclination which occurs on other sections of the L.C.D.R. From a summit beyond Wrotham, there is a fall at 1 in 132 and 101½ for nearly four miles to West Malling, followed by three miles of easy gradients to Barming. The descent from Barming to the Medway at Maidstone is unbroken for 2½ miles at 1 in 165 and 101½.

On leaving Maidstone East Station, the railway is carried under part of the town in two short tunnels—Week Street, 98 yd. long, and rather sharply curved, and Wheeler Street, 358 yd. long. About half a mile beyond the tunnels is Turkey Mill Viaduct of seven brick arches and 210 ft. long, which for many years was something of a curiosity. The nearby paper mill specialises in the manufacture of high-quality drawing paper, and to protect it from soot and sparks from locomotives, the railway was screened by a solid brick wall on the up (south) side, and covered by a slated roof on an iron framework. On the down side, which was furthest from the mill, the screen-wall was perforated with openings for ventilation. In 1951, the British Transport Commission obtained powers to remove the roof and lower the screen-walls, and this work was carried out in 1953.

Beyond the viaduct, the climb out of the Medway Valley, which begins at 1 in 100, steepens to 1 in 60 for 1½ miles to Bearsted, the first of five stations on this section of the line serving villages and small towns at the foot of the downs. The ascent continues through open

downland country past Hollingbourne and Harrietsham on generally easier gradients, although there are some stretches as steep as 1 in 80 and 1 in 100. The summit, 390 ft. above sea-level, and the highest on the lines of the L.C.D.R., is reached at Lenham Station, nine miles from Maidstone.

Throughout the ten miles from Lenham to Ashford there is an almost continuous fall, as steep in places as 1 in 100, but with many stretches of easier gradients. Beyond Charing, the line of the downs is breached by the gap through which the Great Stour River passes to Canterbury and the sea, and the railway approaches the flatter country surrounding Ashford. The 6½ miles between Charing and Ashford formerly were broken by the isolated station of Hothfield, which was reduced to the status of a halt in August, 1937, and closed completely in November, 1959.

In the outskirts of Ashford, the train passes close to the L.C.D.R. station, now used only for goods traffic, and a short distance further on joins the main line from Charing Cross to Folkestone and Dover. The S.E.R. station is about half a mile east of the junction, and is a traffic centre of considerable importance. The layout consists of centre roads for non-stop trains, and two through platforms, each of which has a bay at its eastern end.

The early train services between Swanley and Ashford call for little comment. With few exceptions, the trains called at all stations, and ran to decidedly easy schedules. However, after the working union between the S.E.R. and the L.C.D.R., there was a gradual improvement in the speed and frequency of the trains, and advantage was taken of the Chislehurst-St. Mary Cray loop (opened in 1904) to run some fast trains between Charing Cross and Folkestone and Dover *via* Maidstone. Relief boat trains also were diverted to this route.

Another service using the Chislehurst loop was an evening train leaving St. Pauls (now Blackfriars) at 5.15 p.m., which ran *via* the Union Street spur to London Bridge, and thence non-stop to Swanley. Suspended in the autumn of 1915 as a measure of wartime economy, this train was restored in the summer of 1922, as the 5.15 p.m. from Charing Cross, but was finally withdrawn three

years later. There was no corresponding up service.

Electrification of the Swanley-Ashford line has been undertaken in stages, and is not yet complete. On January 6, 1935, the electrified services which had been inaugurated in the suburban area in 1925, and had reached St. Mary Cray in 1934, were extended for 12 miles to Swanley, Otford and Sevenoaks. The 16-mile section from Otford to Maidstone East followed on July 2, 1939, and after a long delay caused by the second world war, the 19 miles from Maidstone to Ashford have been included in the second phase of the electrification in Kent to be undertaken as part of the railway modernisation plan. This work has been scheduled for completion by June, 1962.

When the first section of the line was electrified, a frequent service was provided by extending to Sevenoaks the suburban services which originally had worked between St. Pauls and Shortlands. Bat & Ball Station at Sevenoaks was re-opened on Sundays. For the electrification to Maidstone, an entirely new service was arranged. These trains, which ran to and from Victoria at hourly intervals throughout the day, apart from some modifications in the morning and evening, had portions for Maidstone and Gillingham, and were divided in the down direction

(and combined in the up) at Swanley. Between London and Swanley, they called only at Bromley South. Beyond Swanley, the Maidstone portion stopped at all stations except Eynsford and Shoreham. The general pattern of the electrified services to both Sevenoaks and Maidstone has remained unaltered since their introduction.

At the present time, the stations between Maidstone and Ashford have about a dozen trains in each direction on weekdays, and half that number on Sundays. These trains connect with the electrified services at Maidstone, and most of them work to and from Ramsgate or Dover. The motive power for these services includes "H" class 0-4-4 tank engines of South Eastern & Chatham Railway origin and 2-6-4 tanks of British Railways design. Additional variety is provided by the appearance of Bulleid Pacifics when boat trains are diverted to the Maidstone route, and, more recently, of diesel locomotives.

In conclusion, I must express my thanks to Mr. L. C. Johnson, Archivist of the British Transport Commission, for granting access to records and timetables in his charge, and to Messrs. H. V. Borley and M. D. Greville for their assistance in tracing the opening and closing dates of stations on the line.