

The Bexleyheath railway

The opening of the Bexleyheath Railway in 1895 was the culmination of 14 years' effort by its promoters.

The first mention of support for a line is in 1881 when Squire Jones, of East Wickham House, led a petition to the South Eastern Railway for a railway to Bexleyheath. The South Eastern professed interest but did nothing, so a company was formed the following year with the intention of building a line between Blackheath and Slade Green, connecting at each end with the North Kent Line of the South Eastern Railway. At the South Eastern's request the western end of the line was diverted to Lee on the Dartford Line and an Act for this line received the Royal Assent on 20 August 1883.

The South Eastern then changed its mind and wanted the Western connection to be made at Blackheath. Relationships between the two companies fluctuated over the next few years but finally in 1887 an Act was passed allowing the Blackheath connection. Included in this Act was the provision of a tunnel near Blackheath, formed by a shallow cutting with a brick arch over, on top of which an earth embankment was built. This was so that Mr. Cator, who lived nearby and caused many problems for the railway, should not be bothered by the trains. Mr. Cator was soon afterwards certified insane!

Despite supporting the 1887 Act while it was passing through Parliament the South Eastern Railway then informed the Bexleyheath Company that they could not proceed with the line, as capital was difficult to raise. After six years of frustration, in desperation, the Bexleyheath Company prepared two Bills; one for a line connecting with the South Eastern's bitter rivals, the London Chatham and Dover Railway, at Farningham Road and Blackheath Hill; the other for the abandonment of the line. The possibility of the line falling into the rival camp prompted the South Eastern to enter an agreement with the Bexleyheath Railway to operate the line and assist with raising the capital.

In 1890 a contract was let to a Mr. Rigby for the construction of the line and work commenced in 1891. The rural peace of the area was soon disturbed by workmen and steam navvies and a foretaste of things to come was given by the contractor's temporary railway laid along the

route. The railway was completed in 1894 but a bad earth slip near Blackheath, the site of which is still clearly visible on the down side of the line between the tunnel and the junction, delayed the opening until 1 May, 1895. There was no great ceremony to open the line but the Temperance Band played at Barnehurst and Bexleyheath stations during the evening.

It is important to remember how rural this area was in the 1890's. Newspaper accounts of the opening describe the orchards and glass houses to be seen from the train and a haystack was made annually in Bexleyheath Goods Yard with hay from the lineside. The district of Barnehurst even takes its name from the station. The station was built in the middle of the woods on land owned by Col. Barne, hence its name. The nearest settlement to it in 1895 was Northumberland Heath.

The original stations of Kidbrooke, Well Hall, Welling, Bexleyheath and Barnehurst were all wooden structures of minimal accommodation and, with the exception of Kidbrooke, rebuilt in 1932 ready to accommodate the suburban sprawl of London. Kidbrooke had to await the 1970s for the dubious privilege of reconstruction in glass and concrete. Eltham Park, the grandest station on the line, was opened in 1908 to cater for the first-class season-ticket holders of the developing Eltham Park Estate. Falconwood, opened in 1936, reflects the rather more utilitarian approach of the '30s.

Platforms were extended to accommodate ten-car trains in the early 1950's following the failure of the double-decker experiment and in 1970 colour lights replaced the semaphore signals, following which the signal boxes were demolished.

The first train service comprised nine trains each way on weekdays. Trains were made of four-wheel oil-lit carriages, only gradually to be replaced with electrically-lit six-wheel and bogie vehicles. Motive power was a succession of small tank locomotives, supplied by Slade Green shed after its opening in 1902, until 1926 when the line was electrified by the Southern Railway. Many of the early carriages received a new lease of life by having their bodies joined together on new underframes for the electric services and lasted until the early 1950's. Commuter traffic built up quite quickly and the line now carries traffic undreamed of by the inhabitants of Bexleyheath and the promoters of the original railway.