

The Dartford Loop railway

Opened in 1866, the Dartford Loop is 9 miles 5 furlongs in length and runs from near Dartford to Hither Green.

A "loop" is a railwayman's word for a line that takes a short cut. The story of the Dartford loop originated in railway politics but one has to go back further - to the opening of Kent's first main-line railway, the South Eastern Railway (or SER). This reached Dover in 1844 by an ingenious route from London Bridge via Redhill and then along the 'grain' of the country. There were branches to Maidstone, from Ashford through Canterbury to Ramsgate, Margate and Deal, to Hastings from Tonbridge and Ashford and a North Kent line through Lewisham along the Thames to Strood and on to Maidstone again. The directors were satisfied with the network and in 1856 resolved to close the capital account. However, when the value of the new form of transport had become clear, people in East Kent felt out of things and wanted a line up to Strood. To prove their point, they even built one, called it the East Kent Railway (EKR) and opened it from Faversham to Strood in 1858. Now for the politics.

At the time, NW Kent was a delightful landscape on a poor soil, with woods, lanes, poor farms, some villages and hamlets and a few pleasant country houses. When the new EKR reached Strood the SER said their North Kent line was too busy to take the EKR's trains. So the EKR built its own towards London through St. Mary's Cray, changed its name to the London, Chatham and Dover Railway (LCDR) and finally reached Victoria (in the West of London in 1862 and the City (Blackfriars) in 1864. In the other direction, it had already worked its way to Dover in 1861 and so to a share of the SER's valuable continental traffic. By now the SER were roused so they extended their system too and, at ruinous expense, built a terminus in the heart of the West End (Charing Cross, 1864) and another one in the city (Cannon Street, 1866). Countrywards, they extended their lines across (instead of along) the grain of the landscape - to Chislehurst in 1865 and so to Sevenoaks and Tonbridge (by a shorter route) in 1868. Part of all this huge construction was simply to keep the Lcdr away from this part of the NW Kent: but we must go back again.

If (as it had originally wanted) the EKR had come up to Dartford along the North Kent line and then by its own route to London, it would still

have needed something like a 'Dartford Loop' of its own and plans were indeed drawn up and presented to Parliament. But things were not to be. The SER, having bestirred itself, drew up plans for the present line and presented them to Parliament (along with a Bill) in February 1862. Parliament granted a First Reading three days later and in May a Committee heard objectors (they included a racehorse breeder at Middle Park Farm, Eltham). In June Queen Victoria assented to the use of Crown lands at Eltham and on 30 June 1862 she gave the Bill the Royal Assent - so it became an Act of Parliament.

The SER had already been planning the line from New Cross through Chislehurst to Sevenoaks etc. so, for our purposes, all they had to do was build a line from near Dartford to Hither Green, using the valley as much as possible, missing any parklands and avoiding much demolition - and that is what they did. Having got their Act, they ran the two plans into one and split things into three contracts (building the Loop was part of Contract No. 2.).

The contracts were placed in the spring of 1863, the land was bought during the summer and next summer (1864) most of the navvying was done (the line was probably built from both ends simultaneously). Being only a 'political' line it was built cheaply - to the annoyance of all later engineers.

The route leaves the North Kent line in a chalk cutting west of Dartford, makes for the Cray valley at Barnes Cray, cuts off a corner by going through the chalk again to Crayford, follows the side of the valley to Bexley, crosses from East to West on a brick viaduct, climbs steeply up the valley side partly 1/100 - still a severe test for locomotives - to a plateau of 'Blackheath Beds' at about the hundred-foot contour line, then cuts through the watershed as best it may until the slight valley of the Quaggy is reached and finally the junction with the Tonbridge cut-off at Hither Green. The parklands of Eltham Lodge and Lamorbey Park were both neatly avoided and demolition was minimal - maybe 2 or 3 cottages. Double-track throughout, equipped with the electric telegraph, with five intermediate stations, (all with goods sidings) at Lee, Eltham, Sidcup, Bexley and Crayford, it was finally opened in pouring wet weather (and the beginnings of a national commercial crisis) on Saturday 1 September 1866. Considering the empty landscape, the service of steam trains was good - every two hours or so and a few extras for businessmen. Most of the trains went to Maidstone.

The effects were varied. Some of the poor farms could now import manure from London and produce better crops but, with the Agricultural Depression, some poor land was used for a New Town at Sidcup: Lee grew up out of Blackheath: Eltham, Bexley and Crayford expanded a little: industry and commerce benefited at Crayford where gravel pits and brickworks were also later opened: merchandise came in to all the goods yards (the railway carried nearly everything) and animals, fruit, milk, farm and nursery produce were carried about, while coal became cheaper.

In 1899 the SER amalgamated with the rival LCDR to form the SE&CR; the (rather bleak) stations were improved with gas lighting and new signboards and a few staff houses were built. In 1926 (following the formation of the Southern Railway) local passenger trains were electrified and their frequency improved: stations, too, were refurbished. Farm leases were no longer renewed and many new housing estates were developed, though not all their new occupants worked in London or travelled by train. In 1935 a new station (without goods yard) was opened at Albany Park (New Eltham - with a yard - had been opened in 1878 and Hither Green in 1895). The main-line electrification of 1959-62 only indirectly affected the 'Loop' but steam traction was completely withdrawn by summer 1959.

On the freight side, goods yards became busier in the thirties but more traffic was moving by road and they were gradually closed and replaced by car parks in the sixties (the Reception Sidings at Eltham/Mottingham, laid in during the 1914-18 war, fell into disuse about 1960). But the line continues to be used for freight including aggregates, bitumen, cement, coal, gypsum, household fuel, oil products, scrap metal - and mail.