

The North Kent railway

The first proposal for a railway in North Kent was issued as early as 1824, for a line to be called the Kentish Railway.

It was to run from London through Woolwich and Erith to Canterbury and Dover but the scheme was ahead of its time and came to nothing. A more extraordinary proposal for a railway from London to Dover came in 1832. This line was to run from Limehouse to a point on the Essex bank of the Thames below Woolwich, cross the river by means of a steam railway ferry and continue over the marshes to Erith and on to Greenhithe. It seems to have been intended to be more of a plateway than a true railway but the project met only apathy and opposition and was never attempted.

The first railway to operate out of London was the London and Greenwich Railway, whose first section from Spa Road to Deptford was opened on 8 February 1836. The line was rapidly extended to Greenwich and this remained a terminus for over 40 years. Much of the line was laid over a long viaduct of brick arches, many of the original ones being still in use. In early days they were improbably advertised as desirable residences, but were later taken for warehouse space. The London and Greenwich Railway immediately proved to be busy and popular and in 1845 was leased by the South Eastern Railway, whose line through North Kent to Gravesend was authorised the same year.

The Admiralty and the Astronomer Royal refused to sanction an extension of the original London to Greenwich line on the grounds that the tunnelling and other works necessary would upset the instruments in the Royal Observatory. The original North Kent route therefore ran via Lewisham to Woolwich, and the two-mile gap between Greenwich and Charlton was not finally closed until 1878, when the objections seem to have been disregarded and the required tunnel was constructed.

The North Kent Railway, including the station at Erith, was opened for traffic on 30 July 1849. At that time Plumstead marked the outer limit of suburban development, the first villas arising there being described as "pretty". The stations at Abbey Wood and Belvedere did not open until 1859 but by the 1860s, out of 34 daily weekday down trains only

15 proceeded beyond Plumstead. The Railway soon facilitated further suburban growth and helped to promote a rapid rise in Erith's population, which doubled in twenty years from 2082 in 1841 to 4143 in 1861 and doubled again during the following decade to 8289. The North Kent line was the South Eastern Railway's only route through the district until they opened the Dartford Loop line in 1866.

The greatly increased traffic anticipated by the South Eastern in 1845 necessitated the extension of the London and Greenwich Railway's original terminus at London Bridge. The architect for this and all other buildings on the line, was Samuel Beazley, a man of some standing in his day, and Erith station is a surviving example of his work. In 1851 he was responsible for laying out the new town at Ashford built to accommodate the employees of the South Eastern Railway's new locomotive works there. The terminus of the North Kent line was extended from London Bridge to the new station at Charing Cross in 1864, followed by Cannon Street in 1866.

In 1899 the South Eastern Railway combined with the London Chatham and Dover Railway under a joint committee of management as the South Eastern and Chatham Railway. Upon its formation the new company built the sidings and locomotive sheds at Slade Green (then called Slades Green) and a new suburb for railway workers grew up nearby. At the groupings in 1923 the Southern Eastern and Chatham became part of the Southern Railway, which in turn became the Southern Region of British Railways in 1948.