



THE HISTORY OF THE LINGFIELD RAILWAY STATION

The railway arrived late in Lingfield, relatively speaking. The London to Brighton line opened in 1841. By 1857 the South Eastern Railway was operating services from London to Hastings, Dover and Folkestone. East Grinstead was connected to the London Brighton and South Coast Railway by a branch line from Three Bridges, which was extended to Tunbridge Wells in 1866. But travel out of the village of Lingfield remained horse-drawn and difficult until 1884 when the Croydon, Oxted and East Grinstead Railway was opened. Suddenly it was possible to travel easily to London, and to the south coast via Lewes. Moreover, Londoners discovered the bucolic charms of a second home in the countryside surrounding the villages of Oxted and Lingfield.

Much of the finance for the various lines south of London came from property speculators and the directors of the railway companies recognised the necessity of providing attractive rail services if new developments were to be successful. By comparison with the branch lines serving East Grinstead, the COEGR was double track with plenty of scope for handling goods traffic, particularly domestic coal and house building materials. Many of the houses which 'infilled' the gap between the Old Town and the conservation area around Gun Pit Pond were built as speculative ventures coincidentally with the arrival of the railway. The railway prompted the development of Dormans Park and the racecourse, which opened for National Hunt racing in November 1890. Four years later the Jockey Club gave permission for flat racing. The inaugural meeting in May 1894 was graced by the presence of HRH The Prince of Wales for whom a red carpet was laid for the walk to the course from the railway station. The effect of the railway can be seen in the increase between 1881 and 1901 in the number of households the in the Lingfield and Dormansland area which rose from 486 to 716.

The LBSCR built with an eye to the future and Lingfield station was no exception. The station building is of a style which had been widely used on the company's network - decorative brick work and hung tiling with plenty of passenger accommodation and a station house. Elegant canopies on both the 'up' (to London) and 'down' (from London) platforms protected passengers from inclement weather. There were two footbridges between the platforms, the southern one designed to give racegoers easy access to the

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racecourse. This is now at Sheffield Park on the Bluebell Line. The track work included crossovers and a loop around the down platform and an exchange siding giving access to the goods yard. Operations were controlled from a signal box at the north end of the up platform, very similar to the one now at Kingscote Station.

The station opened with 4 return services each weekday to and from London and East Grinstead (with 2 on Sunday) plus 3 weekday services terminating at Oxted. These connected with SER services. Through a quirk of railway history the line north the Crowhurst junction was owned by the SER although the LBSCR had running rights over the SER's 'metals'. With the 1923 railway groupings this became academic as both companies were absorbed into the Southern Railway. One effect of the grouping was the abandonment of the SER's plans for electrification of their portion of the Oxted line. This resulted in the line being one of the last bastions of steam locomotion in the country. Nevertheless the SR inherited a timetable which, because of local population growth, provided Lingfield with 14 trains a day, 7 of which went on to London. The timetable was progressively enlarged during the pre-war period so that Lingfield had trains running throughout the day most of which continued beyond East Grinstead to Tunbridge Wells, or Lewes and Brighton. The London trains often included a two-door milk van (an example of which can be seen on the Bluebell Line). Many arable farmers had switched to dairy farming with the advent of the railway. Full milk churns would be loaded and the empties taken off in a flurry of activity so as not to delay the departure of the trains. Special trains from London and Brighton were regular arrivals on race days, to the extent that extra storage sidings had to be provided. As Lingfield did not have a turntable the specials' engines were coupled together and run down to East Grinstead where they would reverse through the extensive goods yard (now Sainsbury's) and return to Lingfield via the St Margarets spur and thus be facing the right way for their departure.

On days prior to race meetings horses would be offloaded from rail horse boxes and walked to the course. The Lingfield yard also handled other livestock, building materials, salt and ice. But the major traffic was coal, with two sidings lined with coal staites, where the varieties of coal were stored prior to being carted up to the village. The favoured route was via Bakers Lane to avoid the steep pull up Town Hill. On weekdays Lingfield was served by the morning 'pick-up' goods from Norwood Junction to East Grinstead which would spend 50 minutes shunting the yard before proceeding south with the 'empties'. The afternoon return service would call at the Crowhurst brick works siding with coal to fuel the kilns and to collect bricks for onward delivery. Coal sidings were also provided at Dormans Station, for the College of St Barnabas, and just north of the Cook's Pond viaduct, for Dormans Park. When the Geest banana ripening sheds were opened after the Second World War Lingfield had a daily train from Avon docks of up to thirty refrigerated vans. Sadly after the war the railway, with its dependence on local agents and delivery carters, could not match the speed and flexibility of door-to-door delivery by road, and apart from coal, general goods traffic declined markedly. Eventually

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even the local coal market gave way to alternative fuels for domestic heating. The goods yard closed in 1968 and three years later the Geest banana traffic ceased to be carried by rail. It is now the busy station car park.

When Dr Beeching closed the branch lines serving East Grinstead in 1967, Lingfield lost its southerly connections and found itself on what is now a branch line. Steam gave way to diesel and for many years the growing commuter traffic enjoyed(!) a variety of ageing, discarded stock for the daily journey to and from their London and Croydon offices. In 1987 the SER's plans came to fruition and the line was electrified. The basic hourly service was replaced by a half-hourly service. Journey times were improved since electric traction was better able to operate over the considerable gradients which are a feature of the line. In recent years Arena Liesure has contributed to the refurbishment of the station where one is invited to alight for 'Lovely Lingfield'.

More recently the rolling stock has been upgraded and the station redecorated in line with the upgrading of the racecourse infrastructure by the racecourse operator.

Further reading:

The Oxted Line by R W Kidner: published by The Oakwood Press, 1981

The Croydon, Oxted & East Grinstead Railway by David Gould, published by the Oakwood Press, 2003

Various railway albums published by The Middleton Press

The Lingfield I Knew by Gordon Jenner

Memories of Twentieth Century Lingfield by Alfred Oliver and Michael Dyke

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