

MEMORIES

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High speed? First commute took four hours!



William Cubitt, resident engineer of the South Eastern Railway

On Friday, February 6, 1846, a special South Eastern Railway train containing the chairman and other directors of the company and their friends departed from the Bricklayers' Arms terminus in London for Ashford, 67 miles away.

This was the inaugural service on the company's branch line from Ashford to Canterbury and when subsequently completed, Ramsgate and Margate.

The new line was approved by parliament during the 1844 session, authorising running rights over other companies' lines and powers to cross roads, where trains wait, at Wye and Canterbury.

The train departed from the Bricklayers' Arms terminus at 10.30am, hauled by two locomotives - Mars and Orion.

The locomotives, with their five feet six inch diameter driving wheels, were built by Sharpe, Roberts and Company at their Atlas Works in Manchester.

On arrival at Ashford at 1.35pm, the train was met by the Canterbury brass band playing and a crowd of well-dressed people on the platform.

The train had to be greatly extended in capacity, to 18

The inaugural London to Canterbury service pulled in more than 170 years ago. Richard West, founder of the Chaucer Education project, tracks the long and winding journey...



First train crossing St Dunstan's Street in 1846

carriages, to cater for the large number of additional passengers at Ashford boarding for Canterbury, resulting in a gross train weight of more than 90 tons on departure.

The new line being opened branched left from the mainline, south of Ashford, on a half mile radius curve, at the beginning of its 14.5 mile journey to Canterbury.

Two-and-a-half miles later, Eastwell Park, the seat of the Earl of Winchelsea, was passed on the west side of the line.

A short curve then took the line past the attractive village of Wye, where the company intended to build a station, four miles from Ashford.

A mile later, picturesque Godmersham Park was passed, where the line entered the heaviest cutting, 53 feet deep and a quarter of a mile long, immediately followed by the heaviest and mile long embankment and then a thirty feet deep cutting.

A half mile radius curve on a shallow embankment brought the line into Chilham, nine miles from Ashford, six miles

from Canterbury and 76 miles from London, which together with Wye were envisaged becoming the only intermediate stations before Canterbury.

The train then passed Shalmesford Street on the left and Chartham village on the right, as it continued through a 28 ft deep cutting and then under Milton Chapel Bridge viaduct. Just two weeks before, one of the three arches carrying the Ashford to Canterbury road over the River Stour collapsed, resulting in a fatal accident and necessitating repairs to the viaduct which were completed before the opening of the line.

A slight curve in a 15ft deep cutting brought the inaugural train to St Dunstan's Street in Canterbury, which it crossed to arrive at the four line station between St Dunstan's Street and the Canterbury and Whitstable railway line's crossing to its North Lane terminus, at 2.30pm.

The engineer for the Ashford to Canterbury branch line was 35-year-old Joseph Cubitt, son of resident engineer for the South Eastern railway line into Kent,

William Cubitt.

Canterbury was the end of the branch line from Ashford at that time, as the extensions to Ramsgate and Margate were still under construction.

The story of the South Eastern Railway begins with the London & Greenwich Railway which, together with the London & Croydon Railway, enabled South Eastern Railway trains to have running rights from London Bridge to Redhill, before branching off on to the South Eastern Railway company's own line built on an almost straight route to Ashford.

The cheapest method of constructing a new railway line was to obtain running right powers over as much of an existing railway as possible, even if that meant deviating quite considerably from the most direct route.

That was to become an increasingly contentious issue with several Kent landowners.

■ Feeling nostalgic? Send your pictures of Canterbury gone by to kentishgazette@thekmgroup.co.uk

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Bricklayers' Arms Terminus on the Site of a Coaching Inn, Old Kent Road, in 1844
Pics: Illustrated London News