

LSWR M7 0-4-4T No.30052 propels a three-coach push-pull train through the countryside between Peasmarsh Junction and Bramley & Wonersh. (Mike Esau)



A WASTED OPPORTUNITY

ALISTAIR F. NISBET reflects on the neglect and demise of the Horsham to Guildford route.

Readers may recall that in April 1999 *Backtrack* included a good history and description of the Horsham & Guildford Direct Railway. After re-reading this and some earlier histories published in *The Railway Magazine* 30 and more years ago, together with various official documents such as public and working timetables, it seems inescapable that the way in which the line was run for most of its existence was a sheer waste of an opportunity. Let us examine the evidence for this sweeping statement and then it will be up to you to decide for yourselves whether you agree with me or not. With the Editor's indulgence I propose also to include a few snippets of information about the closure of the branch which have come to light in the National Archives at Kew. First, however, it will be as well to recap a little on the history of the line and its topography.

Horsham was at the time of the Guildford line's inception a largish town on what later became the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway's (LBSCR) Portsmouth route while Guildford was, and still is, the county town of Surrey. Railway-wise it lies on the London & South Western Railway's (LSWR) Portsmouth Direct line.

The branch itself was built by a nominally independent company, the Horsham & Guildford Direct Railway (H&GD), although it is often regarded as being an LBSCR-inspired creation which should have formed part of a very useful cross-country route between Brighton and Surrey, albeit without the opportunity for direct through running

for most of its existence. Indeed, the original vision had been for it to form part of a through route from the Midlands to the South Coast — the villages along its route were to be served more because they were there rather than by any real desire to be a local railway.

The promoters had to keep in with both the LBSCR and LSWR because they needed running powers over both companies' Portsmouth lines but relations between these two were less than friendly at this time, mostly on

account of the opening of the LSWR's Portsmouth route. There were other irritations for the LBSCR, however, these all being connected with the LSWR's desire to reach the Sussex coast which had included its support for a doomed project to build a direct railway from Dorking to Shoreham-by-Sea. The LBSCR did not want its rivals anywhere near Horsham and 'its' territory while the South Western was certainly not prepared to have the Brighton Company in 'its' town of Guildford.

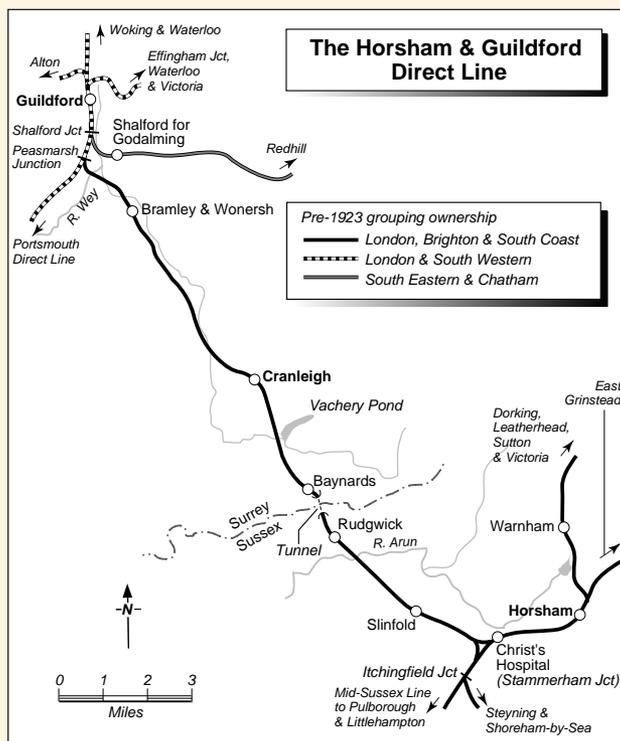
The railway was authorised to run from Stammerham, just to the south of Horsham, to meet the LSWR Portsmouth main line at Peasmarsh, with running powers from there for almost two miles to Guildford. Stammerham was then just a point on the Horsham to Pulborough and Petworth branch, the Portsmouth main line not having been completed yet. The Guildford branch itself was a fraction over 15 miles in length and, after much delay, opened on 2nd October 1865. It was built as single track throughout except for passing places at some stations. The intermediate stations were at Slinfold, Rudgwick, Baynards, Cranleigh and Bramley & Wonersh.

Many of these stations served very tiny populations — Baynards, for instance, seems to have been built mainly to serve the owner of Baynards House. Rudgwick station was only three quarters of a mile from Baynards and had been built to serve the villages of Rudgwick and Bucks Green. By the 1930s a competing bus service ran the whole length of Rudgwick village; the station was at the least populated end and it was therefore not unknown for the booking office to sell no more tickets all day after the departure of the first train to Horsham. At Slinfold there were some picturesque old cottages but they produced very little passenger traffic; the same applied to the hotel which had been built beside the station but did not prosper.

A second branch had been built from Horsham, or rather Stammerham, and this went southwards via Steyning to Shoreham by Sea, trains via this route terminating at Brighton. It had already been in operation for some four years by the time that the Guildford route

actually opened for traffic but no consideration seems to have been given to the possibility of combining the two branches, either by ensuring through running (albeit with a reversal at Stammerham) or even by ensuring that connections there were good and practical. With 20/20 hindsight, of course, the most sensible thing to do would have been to ensure that the Guildford route started from Horsham in the opposite direction, looping round to reach its built alignment from a different direction. This would have allowed through running between Guildford and Brighton, something which was never achieved on a daily basis — in the 1950s and early 1960s there was provision in the Working Timetable for Sunday excursions to work through from the Western Region to Brighton but only on a few high summer weekends.

Interestingly, although the original intention had been to serve Horsham, when the LBSCR's Chief Engineer (Robert Jacomb-Hood) prepared his drawings it was found that the junction



at Stammerham had become south-facing instead of towards Horsham — perhaps he had also thought it madness not to provide a through route to the coast. Nevertheless he confessed to the board on 28th March 1862 that he had overlooked the Horsham section but agreed to amend the final plans accordingly. It seems that the H&DG's Engineer, Edward Woods, was blamed for this 'oversight' and was summarily dismissed at the same meeting. Strangely, in view of this, when the line was built a spur line had actually been built to create a triangle which permitted through running to the south but this was closed as early as 1st August 1867, the spur having had almost no use made of it. In 1864, even before the line had been completed, the Horsham company was absorbed by the LBSCR. As a matter of interest the contractor managed to lose £30,000 on the works, his estimate having been rather inaccurate, perhaps a symptom of the way in which the line was conceived and operated.

One factor which killed off the idea of a through route, however, was the good relations between the LBSCR and the London & North Western Railway which meant that through services were worked over the West London Railway and thence down the Brighton Company's main line. On the face of it, therefore, there was no reason for the Horsham & Guildford to be other than a purely local branch. However, the LNWR was not the only company serving the North and Midlands, for the Great Western Railway also ran services to Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Birkenhead via Reading and Oxford. With some encouragement it could perhaps have been persuaded to run through services from those parts to the South Coast via Reading, Guildford and Horsham and then Brighton via the Sussex Coast, or indeed to Bognor, Littlehampton and Portsmouth, but instead those that they did run went via the SECR route from Guildford to Redhill.

Also with that famous hindsight it is clear that so much more could have been done to ensure that the Horsham & Guildford Direct was a really useful railway but, as was the way of these things, the original politicking seemed to bedevil the line for the whole of its existence and so it was run very much in isolation, hardly even having any connection with the Horsham to Brighton service. Thus it never reached the status it could have done with more imaginative management. Even when the Southern Railway went ahead with its massive electrification schemes of the 1930s, no effort was made to improve things on the Guildford line — even if the business case was not there for laying conductor rails, surely some sort of effort could have been made to ensure that there were useful connections at both ends of the line? Possibly a better service would have attracted custom from a wider area.

Now let us look at some of examples of the services actually provided over the line. It would be tedious to list every change in service pattern so a few sample years are related. Once the railway opened there were about six trips in either direction between Guildford and Horsham on weekdays with two each way on Sundays. Each called at all stations and took about 50 minutes to complete the journey. Right from the beginning the connections at Guildford were poor; the LSWR claimed that the station was already overcrowded



Leaving Bramley & Womersley for Horsham LMS-designed Class 2 2-6-2T No.41299 is in charge of the 18.05 from Guildford in June 1965. (Author)

as its excuse and the situation did not change until the station was rebuilt and extended. Even then connections did not improve substantially, it not being unknown for lengthy waits at Cranleigh and Bramley & Womersley to ensure that a path would be available from Peasmarsh Junction.

Between 1917 and 1919 the Ministry of War Transport constantly demanded reductions in train services in order to save coal and train miles to supply the Fleet and the LBSCR's contribution to this economy drive was to withdraw all (ie both) Sunday services on the Guildford line.

The line had been very busy during the earlier part of World War I when many troop trains were routed this way to Littlehampton and Newhaven, but the occupation of France in 1940 prevented a repetition and instead an emergency timetable was introduced which saw a reduced level of service. By May 1943 the passenger service from Horsham was 7.59, 9.30am, 12.42, 1.40SO, 3.23, 4.53, 6.00, 7.12 and 9.30pm (this latter only ran until 2nd October) plus 7.19 from Cranleigh. On Sundays there were two journeys at 10.19am and 8.23pm. Weekday Guildford departures were at 8.05, 9.18, 10.34am, 1.09 SO to Cranleigh, 1.42, 5.04, 6.07, 6.34 to Cranleigh only, 7.34 and 8.34pm. The only Sunday services were at 8.54am and 7.22pm and generally the pattern of services did not alter much thereafter except to be reduced even further.

The connections between services on the Steyning and Guildford lines have never been particularly good; in fact, to make some of them

at Horsham one would need to be very agile, assuming there were no delays en route. Changing at Christ's Hospital (as Stammerham became with the opening of the Bluecoats School there) should have given a better chance of making it but not all trains for the Steyning line called there. The fact that there were fewer journeys on the Guildford route than on the Steyning one meant less choice immediately and ensured that one could wait for two or three hours for a connection. For instance, in July 1922 the 9.44am from Brighton reached Horsham at 10.48 but the Guildford service had already left at 10.20 and the next was not until 1.05pm. Going south the first train from Guildford with any sort of connection for Brighton was the 8.08am with a mere 70 minutes to kill at Horsham.

In the last year of the Southern Railway one could, if lucky, make a four-minute connection at Christ's Hospital from the 3.57pm from Brighton into the 4.53pm from Horsham for Guildford. Late running, however, meant a wait for the 6.16pm from Horsham. The last train from Brighton by which one should have been sure of reaching the Guildford line the same day was the 4.58pm because the 6.15pm gave only a three-minute change at Christ's Hospital.

At the end of the 1950s the Steyning line boasted almost an hourly service with seventeen daily departures but the Guildford line still had its same old infrequent random selection with lengthy gaps between trains. Even though some connections improved a little, most still gave lengthy waits between trains at the junction or at

No.41287 arrives at Slinford with a service from Guildford on 4th May 1963. (D. W. Winkworth)



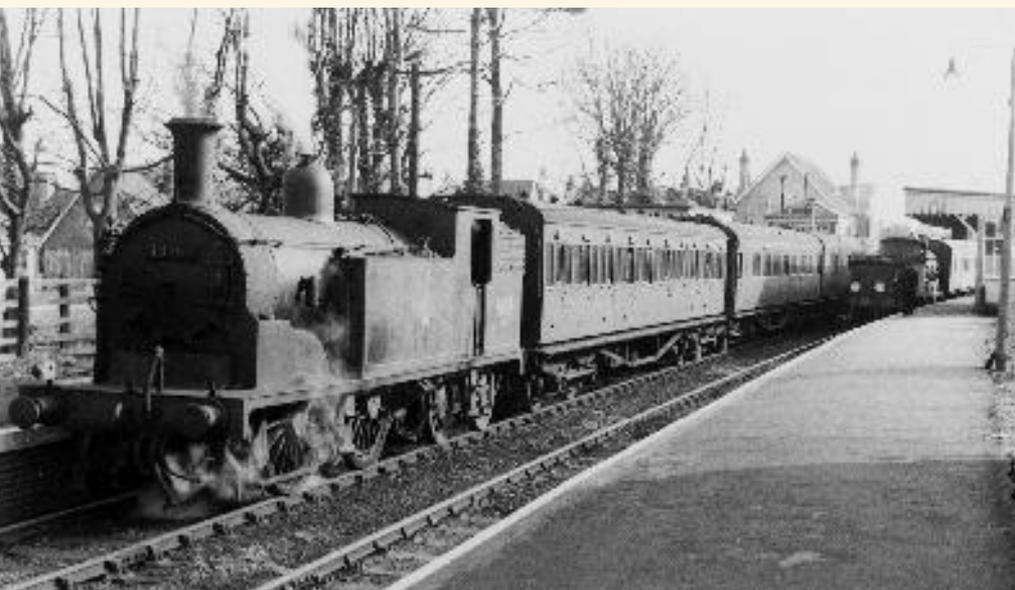
Horsham. Connections on the Mid-Sussex line were still not wonderful although the repetitious pattern of main line service meant that even if, for instance, the 05 minutes past the hour service to Bognor had gone on arrival at Horsham there would be another at the same time past the next hour. The same applied to the XX.15 to Portsmouth and the XX.35 for Littlehampton.

Throughout much of the line's history few services were run which would have encouraged regular use by commuters to London — for instance, in 1959 the only one which would have allowed arrival at Waterloo at a time suitable for starting a working day was a 6.51am from Baynards, which enabled any passengers to admire the delights of Cranleigh station for thirteen minutes before ambling northwards.

Neither the Southern Railway nor British Railways did anything to improve the service on offer. For many years a parallel bus service had run at hourly intervals serving all stations and villages en route apart from Slinfold and this had a separate direct service to Horsham anyway. The result was inevitably that traffic continued to ebb away. Bus competition after World War II had threatened the survival of the branch and the enterprising station master at Cranleigh, a Mr. Goodsell, had suggested building new halts at Butley, south of Bramley, and Elmbridge Road in Cranleigh but nothing came of this any more than of his other suggestion — the use of diesel units. There had been an earlier proposal to try the ACV railbus on the branch but that never came about. Management inertia?

Services were again reduced with the September 1962 timetable change, both the 9.22am from Guildford and the 9.30am from Horsham being replaced by a Guildford to Cranleigh working although this was extended to Baynards three months later. The last Saturday working was withdrawn, leaving the latest departure for Horsham as 6.00pm. Sunday services had only run in the summer for some years and these were discontinued permanently. Even more surprising was the closure of the line at Christmas and Easter and on all Bank Holiday Mondays, just when it could have been promoted for rambles in the Surrey and Sussex countryside as was happening on lines in other parts of the Southern. This, of course, was all slightly prior to the publication of the infamous *Reshaping of British Railways* report but still signalled the authorities' intention to make the line as

M7 No.30110 propelling the 1.34pm Guildford–Horsham meets '700' Class 0-6-0 No.30700 on the 1.40pm Cranleigh–Guildford at Bramley & Wonerish on 27th February 1960. (D. W. Winkworth)



M7 No.30124 has arrived at Cranleigh at the head of the 1.09pm from Guildford on 22nd March 1958. (D. W. Winkworth)

unattractive as possible to ensure a quick closure with little hardship to consider.

As mentioned previously, the line could be used on Sundays for excursions and in summer 1962 there was an outward excursion path booked to leave Guildford for Brighton at 9.45am or thereabouts depending on the origin of the train — this varied from week to week and included 7th July Great Malvern, 14th July Stratford-upon-Avon, 28th July Kidderminster, 4th August Warwick, 11th August Hungerford and 8th September Oxford. The return paths from Brighton to Reading left Horsham at 7.56 and 8.42pm, again depending on the destination.

Both the Brighton and Guildford branches from Horsham tended to be run as separate operations with little interchange of locomotives or coaching stock between the two although by 1946 some rationalisation had taken place. Nevertheless the push-pull sets were not used intensively — indeed, one made only a single return journey each day.

When the Southern Region announced on 2nd September 1963 that it intended to close the line, this sparked off many objections, both by individuals and by local councils. Whether these individuals actually travelled on the line very frequently is a moot point although there were by then a few London commuters. The Surrey County Surveyor told BR that if the line closed it would be necessary to bring forward into the next five year programme two road improvement schemes — one at Shalford and a bypass for Bramley at a total cost of £850,000. There was already

insufficient parking space at Guildford station and the County would need to construct numerous bus bays alongside the A281 and B2128. What would it have cost to continue to keep the railway open (ie 'subsidise' in Ministry of Transport speak)? A fraction of the sum spent (ie 'invested') in the local roads, no doubt.

The Transport Users' Consultative Committee held an inquiry and, although it was recognised that there would be some hardship, the Minister agreed to closure once a few additional bus services had been provided. Within six months these were proving to be almost worthless for on 4th November 1965 the MoT told the British Railways Board that, as the additional buses between Baynards and Cranleigh were carrying an average of one passenger in either direction between 14th June and 28th August (and in no case had there been more than three), these services could be discontinued. Within two years almost all the extra buses had been discontinued because of lack of custom.

A file at the National Archives reveals how BR had tended to approach such closure hearings. It seems that a senior civil servant in the Treasury had attended the inquiry, presumably as a resident and objector, and had written down his impressions of how their case had been presented. "The Chairman asked the BR representative if he had any comments on the evidence given. He was an unimpressive little man who, from the first, adopted a hostile and querulous attitude... He said bluntly that BR, because of the small numbers in the small community near Barnards (!) station, did not propose to offer any alternative arrangements. This decision may be perfectly justified but it was exposed with a degree of malicious glee which roused most of the audience to fury." The BR representative had obviously not been well briefed for he shot himself in the foot a number of times through lack of knowledge of facts and when he started to say how the Aldershot & District Bus Company could improve its services the chairman told him to "mind his own business and not the bus Company's". Such behaviour only infuriated the general public but ultimately the BRB had its way, complete closure coming on 14th June 1965.

All the goods yards were disconnected from the through lines when the freight service was withdrawn (while passenger services were still in operation) but the connection at Baynards had to be hastily reinstated when it was realised that block trains were still running to a chemical factory there! They finally ceased when the branch closed completely.