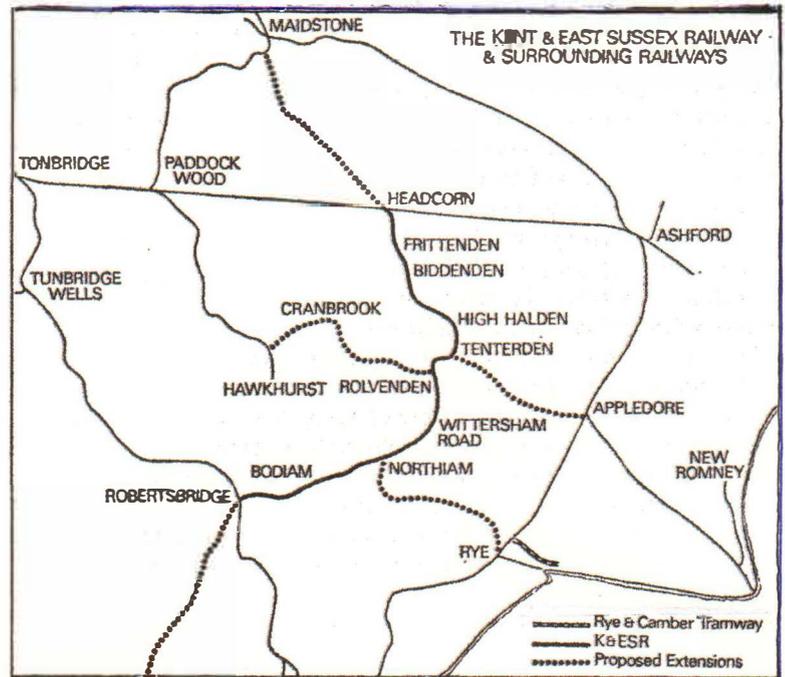




TENTERDEN BOROUGH COUNCIL – ITS EFFORTS TO HAVE A RAIL CONNECTION

During the 2012-13 season, a talk was given by Jack Gillett and Glen Peacock, aided by Alan Brand, about the Kent and East Sussex Railway line to Bodiam, along similar lines to those used by Michael Portillo for his television series about Bradshaw in Victorian times. At that talk, my memory was jogged regarding some papers I found whilst turning out the loft prior to moving to a new address. These papers revealed the attempt to obtain a railway line through the town a few years before the Rother Valley Railway came here in 1900. Soon after the South Eastern Railway (SER) had opened the route from London to Dover via Paddock Wood, Headcorn and Ashford in 1842, thoughts were given by that company for a more rural line from Paddock Wood via Hawkhurst to Tenterden, thence to either Hythe or Rye.



In the next 50 years, several schemes were mooted including those shown below, but all failed through lack of finance.

- a line from Tenterden to Maidstone via Cranbrook and Headcorn in 1855
- the Weald of Kent Railway, with the SER's blessing, planned a line from Paddock Wood to Hythe via Hartley, Tenterden and Appledore in 1864
- part of this line was envisaged in 1871 to be built as the Cranbrook and Paddock Wood Railway being extended to Goudhurst in 1892 and Hawkhurst in 1893

On August 11th 1894, the Kentish Express reported that a correspondent had sent them the following statement. "The SER, having abandoned their powers of making a railway to Tenterden, it is now proposed to proceed independently. A meeting of landowners and others interested in the scheme has therefore been summoned by the Corporation of Tenterden with a view of taking the necessary steps for carrying the project into effect. It is proposed that in order to obtain the cooperation of not only the SER but also of the London Chatham and Dover Railway (LCDR), the proposed line should commence with junctions with both systems at Maidstone, thence to Headcorn, Tenterden and Appledore." There would also be junctions with the SER both at Headcorn and Appledore.

It was anticipated that there be no opposition to the new line from any landowner but there might be some from the SER. If a Parliamentary Bill was sought, it would no doubt have the support of not only the Corporation of Tenterden, but also the Maidstone Corporation, the Corporation of New Romney and the landowners and inhabitants along the line. The benefits of such a route would include:-

- The line would form a direct route from Chatham to Dungeness where it was envisaged a large harbour of refuge would be established by the Government
- It would also allow a direct route to Littlestone when it would naturally assist in developing that place as a seaside resort and golfing centre
- It would afford a direct route from London to Hastings and Eastbourne via the LCDR

The Kentish Express of December 22nd that year duly reported on a meeting held on the previous Friday of "a large and representative gathering of landowners, ratepayers and residents in Tenterden Town Hall."

It was presided over by the Mayor of Tenterden, Cllr H S Norton. After the Town Clerk had confirmed that he had received a very large number of letters promising support for the scheme, Col Dampier Palmer MP addressed those present at length. He outlined the past history over 30 years of the SER attempting to construct a suitable route through the area and now thanks to the admirable management of the Town Clerk, they (the Corporation) found the ground free for them to proceed. Turning to a map for the meeting to peruse, he pointed out that the line would not go through the town, to avoid certain valuable property, and the proposed station would be a little lower than Homewood, opposite the Fat Ox. At this stage a sort of informal committee was formed of a certain number of gentlemen within the district. There followed many contributions of mainly support for the project at the end of which Col Dampier Palmer made a formal proposal that the meeting endorse the scheme and that it pledges itself to use its strongest endeavours to carry it to a successful issue. Mr Obadiah Edwards seconded the proposal which was put to the meeting and carried with acclamation.

In its edition of 30 March 1895, the Kentish Express stated the Tenterden Railway Bill came before the Parliamentary Committee on Monday. All the interested parties were represented by QCs and other counsels. Counsel for the promoters, i.e. Tenterden Borough Council, outlined the plan to have a line from Maidstone to Hastings by way of Appledore, stating that the authorisation of capital of nearly £1 million was sought from Parliament. Great play was made of the local inhabitants' repeated disappointments and their resolve to have the proposed railway constructed, prompted solely by local interests. There was neither specialist contractor, nor specialist solicitor, nor specialist engineer concerned in it, but a group of gentlemen determined to have the railway. Counsel then pointed out that Tenterden was 9 miles from Headcorn Station, 7.2 miles from Appledore and 9 miles from Cranbrook Station, therefore was in a very neglected and unsatisfactory position. He later referred to the opposition from the LCDR from which the new line would start and the natural reluctance on the part of the SER to accept the competitive route to its Tonbridge to Hastings line. Evidence of support from the various landowners and beneficiaries followed, after which an engineer from the Metropolitan Railway gave an independent view of the scheme, in general praising it and reassuring those present that the extra trains could be dealt with satisfaction at Hastings.

The Committee met again on the following day when various counsel spoke on behalf of those organisations opposing the proposal. The first speech was made on behalf of the Turkey Paper Mill when one of its owners gave evidence by exhibiting specimens of the paper produced by its mill located near the proposed route. Being the lightest class of machine made paper, it was dried on stays of wires in lofts opened at the sides, with shutters or Venetian blinds to allow the air to pass freely. The construction of the required viaduct and embankment would prevent this system of drying. A railway should certainly not be located within at least one mile of the mill. Lengthy discussion followed about the possibility of rerouting the line between Tovil and Loose. The next representative spoke for the SER when it stated that the history of projects in the area not being finalised was entirely due to the lack of finance for such schemes. The proposed Maidstone to Hastings line would require to be worked either by the SER or the LCDR and the former objected to running powers to be allowed for the latter.

The third day was taken up by the General Manager of the SER speaking at great length about the financial position of the company, where losses had been made operating several branch lines in Kent. He could not envisage the proposed line being any different. There followed a lengthy discussion as to whether Hastings Station could cope with the likely increase in traffic arising from trains coming from Maidstone.

After a review of past experiences with other proposals, the Committee discussed the points made by all concerned and adjourned the meeting, deciding to meet again on April 23rd. The report is sketchy as to the eventual decision on that day but it would seem that the Committee would agree only to back a line between Headcorn and Appledore. Although it was not stated as such, their refusal to allow the section between Maidstone and Headcorn would appear to be based on the case put by Turkey Paper Mill. The refusal regarding Appledore to Hastings arose from (a) not allowing running powers over the existing SER line and (b) the objection by the LB&SCR for the combined use by a third party (together with the SER) of Hastings Station.

Thus the attempt to get a railway through Tenterden failed before the Rother Valley Line arrived in 1900 and the extensions to it in 1903 and 1905.

Alec Laurence