



THE LAST TRAIN (THE KENT & EAST SUSSEX RAILWAY IN 1954)

The Kent and East Sussex Railway, which was opened in 1900, was closed for passenger traffic on Saturday 2 January 1954. On the day, to “celebrate” the occasion a special train of six coaches – one of the largest in the history of the line – was advertised to make a hail and farewell journey. Leaving Headcorn at 3.40 pm it was due to arrive at Robertsbridge at 5 pm and then return to Headcorn where there would be a connection to London. After Saturday, the Headcorn-Tenterden section would be closed completely and the Tenterden-Robertsbridge section would be used only for goods traffic. The line was being closed by British Railways as an “economic measure” allegedly saving £20,000 a year. However, only the week before, stoves had been installed at Biddenden and High Halden Road stations. Would these be for the benefit of passengers waiting for a “ghost” train?

On the day the 11 tiny stations along the 21.5 miles of single track resembled busy termini as crowds of excited passengers jostled on the platforms for the privilege of travelling on “The Last Train” – as it was labelled. A long queue formed at Headcorn booking office for tickets specially printed for the day. The sentimental journey from Headcorn to Robertsbridge was a sad affair for many but overall there was an air of gaiety.

The heavy engine 31064 left Headcorn, having first been hung with two evergreen wreaths, with sightseers and railway staff waving and cheering as the six carriage train rolled away to Frittenden. Someone had chalked “R.I.P” on the paint flaked door of the tiny waiting room and sightseers and railway staff waved and cheered as the six-carriage train rolled away towards Frittenden. More passengers joined the train at Frittenden Road but it was at Biddenden Road that things began to heat up. The banging of a shot-gun and a squeaky motor horn greeted the train’s arrival and parties in coloured paper hats and throwing streamers swelled the ever growing numbers on board. Keeping a benevolent but watchful eye on the proceedings was a uniformed constable who made the complete journey but never once was the majesty of the law invoked. Also travelling was the Hon Mrs Diana Robson (from Hales Place, Tenterden) a representative of the Cranbrook and Tenterden Bench.

The next stop at High Halden Road provided the most hilarious scenes. Dressed in deep Victorian mourning, Mr George Freeland and his party from St Michaels were on the platform bearing a black draped coffin and carrying wreaths. Black topers for the men and black lace for the ladies was the order of the day. Something like a civic reception was waiting in Tenterden station after a brief stop at St Michaels Halt where it was alleged no halt had been made for years. Resplendent in silk topper and black coat was the Mayor of Tenterden, Mr Stanley Day. His chain of office gleamed in the fading light and he was attended by the chief sergent-at-mace, Mr Alec Fuggle, in buff and red uniform. With Tenterden Borough councillors, Mr Day had for at least a year been concerned about the closing of the rail facilities but the council decided there was little point in protesting. They had been told how, in a test week only 118 people used 90 trains, many of which ran empty. Mr Day autographed time-tables of this final run and chatted with passengers.



A coffin and wreaths carried aboard by Mr George Freeland and his party of mourners at High Halden



The Mayor of Tenterden, Mr Stanley Day, autographing souvenir time-tables

At the next stop, Rolvenden, there was activity to gladden the hearts of the railway enthusiasts who came in force to witness the demise of yet another treasured example of steam transport. Old 31064 – too heavy for the line from now on – was uncoupled and two “Terrier” tank engines – light but powerful – were brought into use (one in front and the other at the rear). On through Sussex the train rumbled in the darkness at never more than about 25 miles an hour, the maximum allowed. Wittersham Road, Northiam and Bodiam came and went and at every stop there were cheers and waving lights. Television camera-men filmed some of the scenes and their magnesium flares provided a brilliant canopy of light as passengers crowded round the engines at the Robertsbridge terminal. The train was 30 minutes late but nobody cared. No-one bothered to ask about tickets, but everyone had one for its souvenir value.

On its return journey, only a small number of people welcomed the train back to Headcorn, where a string of hurricane lamps lit the side-platform with unaccustomed brightness. The London connection waited impatiently as 31064 ambled in over an hour late. The enthusiasts who had come from afar dashed for their train and local people moved slowly away as 31064 backed into the night. The Rother Valley railway, the K & ESR, the Farmer's line and The Bumper – all the same – was dead.

Reference

Kent and Sussex Courier

THE SILVER TROWEL THAT LAID THE FOUNDATION STONE OF THE CHURCH AT ST MICHAELS

St Michaels church was consecrated on Saturday 1 August 1863 by Dr Longley, the Archbishop of Canterbury and dedicated to St Michael and All Angels. The building had commenced twelve months previously with Mrs E J Eyres (nee Parker and from 1865 the wife of Admiral Gordon of Ingleden), the widow of Captain H Eyres CB laying the foundation stone. What happened to the ceremonial silver trowel that was used to lay the foundation stone?

The Kentish Express dated Thursday 5 August 1993 stated the following:

“A silver trowel that was used to lay the foundation stone of St Michaels church was on view for the 130th anniversary of the dedication of the church. The ceremonial trowel had been lost in the intervening years, but was rediscovered by chance when church treasurer John Farthing and his wife Hilary were in Suffolk. After a service there, they met the great-great niece of Admiral Gordon, whose wife had laid the stone on 31 July 1862. Ann Marriott of Wilby in Suffolk lent the trowel for the dedication service on Sunday.

The Rev Michael Barrow was welcomed as guest preacher at the festival Eucharist. It was attended by the Mayor and Mayoress of Tenterden, John Link and his wife Jill, and town councillors. Kent author and historian John Vigar gave an illustrated talk on Monday about Victorian churches and St Michaels in particular.

The Kentish Express recorded the consecration of St Michaels church and its burial ground in great detail in the edition of 8 August 1863. It explained that the ‘hamlet of Bore’s Isle (one of the names of the area at the time) contains a population of about 600’ most of whom live within two miles of the church.

The Rev Tress Beale who was to become the first vicar had commenced his ministrations at Bore’s Isle in a wheelwright’s shop about three years previously, there being no other place of worship in the hamlet.”



[The Church Burial Register at St Michaels has the following information about the brother and sister who were descendants of Dr Longley, the Archbishop of Canterbury

Entry No 364

Lottie Longley

Buried 11 October 1983 aged 90 of 30 Homewood Road

Entry No 372

Allan Gearren Longley

Buried 14 July 1984 aged 85 of 30 Homewood Road]

Jack Gillett