

The Reading-Redhill Line

By I Jones (BRS Newsletter No. 9 Jan/Feb 1964)

“If anyone desired to sample the South-Eastern in it’s palmiest state, I should have recommended him to try the Reading line. Reading to Redhill is $46\frac{1}{4}$ miles and the fastest train appeared to average about four miles an hour with occasional spurts to five. I know that this is not far from the mark because I once tried it myself and decided to walk if I ever had to go that way again”.

That is how the famous railway historian E.L.Ahrons described this most interesting line. O.S.Nock in his book *The South Eastern and Chatham Railway*, states quite firmly that the line has improved since Ahron’s adventures in the 19th Century. I have been familiar with the line for the past four years and whilst suspecting Ahrons of exaggeration I would draw this reader’s attention to the following running times:

Saturday January 11 th 1964		Sunday January 12 th 1964	
4-6-0 class ‘5’, 75075		2-6-0 class ‘U’ 31800	
dep. Reading (Southern)	12:05:30	dep. Redhill	19:28:00
arr. Guildford	12:56:00	arr. Dorking	19:42:00
dep. Guildford	13:04:00	dep. Dorking	19:43:00
arr. Dorking	13:41:00	arr. Guildford	20:06:00
dep. Dorking	13:43:00	dep. Guildford	20:12:00
arr. Redhill	14:03:00	arr Reading (Southern)	21:03:00

If the reader wishes to pursue the matter and consults the timetable, he will find therein some interesting differences to the times stated above and some simple calculation will provide rather amusing average speeds.

The line, which was sponsored locally and as Nock states “With the ill-concealed intention of selling out to a larger company” was worked by the South Eastern Railway from 1849 and purchased outright by them in 1852. The South Eastern has been described as one of the worst railways in the Kingdom at this time and one can imagine the engine crews on the South Western hurling unrepeatable remarks at the South Eastern men when they met side by side at Guildford and Wokingham. The aristocratic London South Western regarding the intrusion of the rather lesser company with the utmost contempt as would the London Brighton and South Coast at Redhill and the noble Great Western at Reading. In fact the South Eastern was bombarded on all sides by the more prosperous companies.

Unfortunately, I can find no information relating to the types of locomotives used in the earlier years. However, it appears throughout most of its history the line has been a refuge for older locomotives and rolling stock before peaceful release in the scrapyard. This being so, what an enthusiasts paradise it must have been at the turn of the century. Indeed the only locomotives I know of that were designed for use on the line, were the ‘P’ class 0-6-0 tank engines, built in 1909, (of which 2 survive on the Bluebell Railway). They were intended for rail-motor sets working between Ash and Reading but were found to be too small for these duties and were relegated to the yards for shunting work.

In recent years the locomotive variety has been most interesting. At the beginning of my acquaintance with the line, which incidentally extends to Tonbridge, it was being worked by the aging 'L1' 4-4-0's and 'Birdcage' sets and my 'school train' was inevitably worked by an 'L1' or an occasional Mogul. As the pretty little 'L1s' faded away the Moguls and Standard 2-6-4T's appeared to have exclusive rights to the line for some months until the monotony was ended by the appearance of the handsome 'Schools' class at the head of the train to Redhill. I noted a 'Schools' several times although they seemed out of place and robbed of their dignity on the line. Perhaps the most comical and even a little tragic was the sight of one of Bulleid's magnificent Pacifics gliding gracefully into Reading with four shabby coaches clattering in behind.

During the past two or three months the Moguls have been sharing the traffic with class 5 4-6-0's and the somewhat rarer 2-6-4T's not forgetting the undaunted visitor from the Western, usually a 'Manor'.

The proposal of closure leaves me with mixed feelings. Apart from a personal inconvenience it would dispense with a direct East-West passenger route from Reading to the Kent ports. I think you will agree with me, that whilst the line may not be remunerative under present conditions, a complete re-thinking could make it so. Why not the new idea of diesel sets with conductors and unmanned stations? Passenger operated signals were in use on the Highland Railway sixty years ago. Surely these points could be considered and indeed on many other lines scheduled for 'axing'. The slackness of operation throughout most of the railway's life has tended to obliterate the obvious usefulness as an East-West route. Perhaps if more publicity and a general smartening up had been forthcoming in earlier times, the route would almost certainly have attracted the cross-country traveller.

Nevertheless, the loss of the line would surely be a tragedy. Even with the frustrating delays and poor stock existing today, a sense of humour can often dismiss the faults and the railway becomes a source of mild amusement, particularly to the enthusiast.

In conclusion, perhaps a reply to Ahron's statement would be fitting. If anyone desires to sample the Southern Region in it's palmiest, but delightfully antique and most interesting state I would recommend him to try the Reading line.

(Editor's note: To compare the timings given in the above article here are the timetable times:

dep. Reading (Southern)	12:05	dep. Redhill	19:06
arr. Guildford	12:54	arr. Guildford	19:52
dep. Guildford	12:57	dep. Guildford	19:54
arr. Dorking	13:26	arr Reading (Southern)	20:48
dep. Dorking	13:26		
arr. Redhill	13:46		

The figures given in the above article produce average speeds as follows:

Outward: Reading-Guildford 30.89mph, Guildford-Dorking 19.46mph, Dorking-Redhill 24.00mph.

Inward: Redhill-Dorking 34.28mph, Dorking-Guildford 31.30pmh, Guildford-Reading 30.59mph.)