

HISTORY OF RAILWAYS IN THE LEATHERHEAD AREA

The railways moved out through our area beginning with connections out of London to Epsom and then heading down to Leatherhead and beyond to Fetcham and Bookham as well as on to Dorking to the south. This essentially took place in the second half of the nineteenth century as the whole nation was swept up with the desire to be reached by the railway network and in so doing the transport infrastructure of the country changed forever.

The railway officially came to Ashted and Leatherhead in February 1859 as part of a line that would eventually pass through the Mole Valley gap in the North Downs. London connections had reached Epsom in 1847 as part of the London Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR). In 1857 work began on the Epsom and Leatherhead Railway and the first trains reached Ashted on 1st February 1859, by then operated by the London and South Western Railway. Construction had been relatively slow when compared with other railway developments of the time but there were various difficulties to overcome. One factor was the routing as the more wealthy residents insisted on the line being well away from the main part of the village to avoid any problems of noise and dirt for them. Thus the station was on its present site well to the north of Ashted village.

The railway ran through to Leatherhead but not to the station of today. The terminus was at a point adjacent to the Kingston road out of Leatherhead just where there is now a bridge over the railway almost a mile north of the town centre. The station was superseded by two, one on the present station site closer to the town centre and another adjacent to it and to the south west, while the old one was then used variously as an infants' school and home for an engineering firm before finally being demolished in the 1980's. It could be that flats on the site today were marked as being in Buffers Lane as a tribute to the railway history. The move to the new stations took place as of 11th March 1867 at the time that connections from Leatherhead to Dorking were completed.

Leatherhead's two stations were operated separately by the two companies that used the Epsom to Leatherhead line. The LBSCR used the station still standing and ran into London Bridge while the London and South-Western Railway (LSWR) connected from Waterloo through Epsom and into Leatherhead's second station. The LSWR station remained a terminus until 1885 when the link to Guildford through Bookham and Effingham was completed. It was on 2nd February of that year that the first trains used the line.

In the same way as in Ashted the Lords of the Manor of Fetcham and Great and Little Bookham were insistent that the route of the railway should be a long way away from the village centres, proposing the Manorial Waste as the preferred location. In addition, immediately to the east of Bookham Station a short tunnel was constructed to provide uninterrupted access to Bookham Common for other forms of travel. Initial proposals had been for the line to pass through the centre of Bookham, crossing East Street and the High Street.

Railways served to carry both passenger and goods traffic and to aid with the latter sidings were constructed at each of the district's stations to enable wagons to be loaded and unloaded without holding up the flow of trains.

It was in the twentieth century that the railways through the district were electrified, this following the creation of the unified Southern Railway in 1923. Although pioneering work was done by both LSWR and LBSCR as early as 1903 and 1904, the first world war intervened and our district was not converted until after unification. Goods traffic was still hauled by steam through to the 1950's but it was from 1925 that passenger trains were electric.

Once reliable passenger services were in place it was possible to commute to London and our area became a desirable place to live, away from the clamour and grime of the capital, and the logic remains valid today.

As a footnote, railway developments continued between the world wars with a line planned from Motspur Park to Leatherhead through Tolworth. Chessington South was reached on 28th May 1939 but with the outbreak of war the connection to Leatherhead was never completed. There is evidence of a railway embankment through land to the east of Chessington World of Adventures towards the Epsom side of the Malden Rushett crossroads. Following the proposals of Dr Beeching in the 1960's our local railways were unaffected, commuting having secured a continuing role for the infrastructure developed in the nineteenth century.