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*Early photo of the station staff. Arthur Price is standing second from the right
Photograph courtesy of Winnie Wells*

THE RAILWAY “ROOTS”

By 1894 the railway, sitting on its high embankment and viaduct between the two villages, was already thirty years old. The viaduct, 120 feet high, was built in 1858 two years before “Farningham and Sutton” station was opened by the London, Chatham and Dover Railway Company. Although not actually in the parish, the station has been part of South Darenth and Horton Kirby’s modern development and was originally constructed to serve

the paper mills. At that time it was the only station between St Mary Cray and Rochester Bridge. Before being named “Farningham Road”, the station was called “Farningham Road and Sutton-at-Hone”. In addition, older residents remembered the sign “Station for Homes for Little Boys Farningham” on the platform.



*Farningham Road station in 1910. The sign for the Homes for Little Boys can just be seen
Photograph courtesy of Lens of Sutton*

Originally there was a small signal box to the west of the down-line platform and an engine shed and goods siding to the west of the up-line platform. There was also a water tower on the down side just by the footbridge. In recent years this was converted into a waiting room but was eventually demolished. The line was electrified in 1939.



A new "Homes for Little Boys" sign is on the down line platform by 1938

THE LIGHT RAILWAYS

South Darenth has always had a stormy relationship with the railway companies. Even before the railway and its viaduct were built there were proposals for light railways to run through the Darent Valley. Although this was before the Parish Council was first elected, it is worth noting the concern these proposals aroused and the subterfuge used by the originators to persuade people living in the valley that railways were good for them.

Steam train on the viaduct c 1910
Postcard courtesy of Malcolm Scott



Signal Box in 1975
Photograph courtesy of John Scrace



These quotes from 1852 are typical:

"The obvious advantages which such a project (The Darenth Vale Light Railway) is calculated to produce are of no mean value. The mills upon the Darenth stream are each to have sidings to facilitate the transport of goods ... and inhabitants will have quicker and cheaper transit to London via Dartford. The capitalist will be benefited by the erection of villas at good rentals. Farm produce will get to market for lesser freight, coals will be sold for little more than pool price -one penny per ton per mile. The rail is to be completed at such small cost that the promoters ... will receive a good yearly dividend for their capital."

At public meetings the promoters were more eloquent:

"The growth of London is so rapid ... (that) within twenty years ... there will be no means of getting a mouthful of pure country air at a nearer point to St Pauls in the direction of Kent than, Darenth Vale."

All was not well, for the landowners refused to donate a third of the expenses, but Light Railway plans were resurrected in 1897. On 18th January that year the Parish Council had two plans laid before them. One of these was the "Darenth Valley Light Railway" and the other the "Dartford and District Light Railway".

The "Darenth Valley Light Railway" was planned to start by Dartford Central station and run through our villages to Eynsford. It was to pass beneath the viaduct with a station proposed at Riseley (now Saxon Place). Riseley was the home of George Burvill Rashleigh, the Parish Clerk and Chairman of the Council at that time. Strangely, he does not appear to have objected to the proposals because this was the route the Parish Council favoured.

The “Dartford and District Light Railway”, which was the plan preferred by Dartford Urban District Council, was to have started at a station in Dartford Park and ended at White Post Lane, Farningham. It was to run to Farningham Road main station where it would turn parallel to the main line down to the Paper Mills. It would then proceed beneath the viaduct to run south east of Horton Kirby, passing Eglantine Farm. Neither of these plans came to fruition.

THE CHAOTIC SERVICES

In 1900 there were complaints to the Parish Council about the “chaotic state of the services”. Over the years the Parish Council made many complaints, ranging from the cancellation of services to overgrown footpaths on Station Road and the problem of rabbits from the railway embankment eating allotment holders’ plants. Nothing has changed, these complaints are just as much a part of life today. As recently as 1993 allotment holders have complained about the rabbits, and the footway along Station Road is often hazardous from overgrowing brambles!

THE “ACCIDENT”

In 1902, a major accident on the line above Station Road Cottages was avoided by the prompt action of the signalman at Farningham Road station. On a cold and wet January night an up-line goods train was derailed resulting in wreckage being thrown across both tracks and down the embankment. The wheels of one truck eventually came to rest in meadows near the watercress beds below the viaduct. All this, however, was unknown to Signalman Bailey, who was alerted only by a “curious noise”. Having sent a porter down the track to investigate, the alert signalman contacted his counterpart at Swanley asking him to stop a Dover express passenger train which was due to pass through Farningham Road at any minute. The express was instructed to proceed cautiously and then stop at the signal at the station.

In his own words, Bailey explained that “if the express had come on through the station and dashed into the trucks near the viaduct, nothing would have saved her. She must have been hurled over the embankment”. This event was reported in *The Times*.

“PUFFING BILLY”



“Puffing Billy” in 1938
Photograph courtesy of H C Casserley

Apart from the main line through the parish, mention must be made of the Gravesend West line which was very much used by local people. The track began at Pinden which was part of this Parish until the major boundary changes of the 1950s and it provided a well-remembered railway service to our villages. It ran from Bromley South, through Farningham Road to Gravesend West and the Thames ferry services.

In 1909 the service was six trains each way per weekday, with seven on Saturdays and two on Sundays. The return first-class fare to Bromley South was 3 shillings. By 1925 there were twelve trains each way per day.

In 1939 electrification passed the Gravesend West line by, reducing its role to a rural branch line from Swanley to Gravesend. During the 1930s and 40s the Saturday shopping excursion on the “Puffing Billy”, as it was affectionately known, was very popular. There was also the “Gravesend Flyer” boat train to Gravesend Pier which was timed to connect with the paddle steamer *Royal Daffodil* taking



The station in 1953 Photograph courtesy of R C Riley



*A good view of the coal yard as class 5 4-6-0 no 73080 Merlin entered the station in 1956
Photograph courtesy of A E Bennett*

people to various coastal resorts and even France. Ivan Dunmall recalled using “Puffing Billy” to go to Hearn’s, the wholesaler, in Swanley to get supplies of snuff and tobacco for Broad’s Post Office.

In 1953 British Rail proposed to close the line, despite strong protestations headed by Frank Tanner, then Parish Council Chairman and Dartford Rural District Councillor. In August of that year it was closed as a passenger line although it continued to be used for freight until 1968. According to Dolly Mills the loss of the line was a terrible blow to the villagers.

The disused line now awaits resurrection. It is part of the Union Railways plan, in conjunction with the Channel Tunnel Rail Link, to get trains into London’s Waterloo International Station.

THE CHANNEL TUNNEL RAIL LINK

Just as the details of the Light Railway proposals in 1852 and 1897 caused consternation, so did the first rumblings, in 1974, of the coming of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. In October of that year, at a meeting of the Parish Council, rumours of a possible link were first discussed. The clerk was instructed to write to British Rail asking if the proposals were likely to affect the village.

Everything went quiet until, in 1988, British Rail announced that “Route 2”, one of its four proposals for the Rail Link, was planned to come through South Darenth. It was to be built hard up against the north side of the existing track.

Having notified villagers of the problems of such a proposal, an Action Group was set up and the first public protest meeting was held on 15th December 1988. People flocked to join, taking out £5 subscriptions for themselves, their children and, in some cases, even their pets! A month later the villagers’ anger was vented on British Rail’s representative, Mr Moss, at a meeting in the Village Hall. The story that British Rail did not possess up-to-date maps of our village made the national press and for the next three years barely a month went by without reference to South Darenth somewhere in the national newspapers, radio or television.

During the early months of the campaign the area was a sea of fluorescent green posters announcing from almost every home - “SOUTH DARENTH AND HORTON KIRBY - NO - TO THE HIGH SPEED RAIL LINK”.

The lowest point came on 8th March 1989 when the announcement was made that Route 2 had been finally chosen to carry the 150 mph TGV trains. The same day British Rail offered to buy properties



The first march on 22nd January 1989 in Maidstone Photograph courtesy of Mike Medlen

from those who lived within a 240 metre corridor following the proposed line. This was to lead to severe hardship for those left outside the “corridor”. People who had lived as members of a quiet community would see friends, relatives and long-standing neighbours moving away. The effect was to snowball over the coming months.

As a final insult on that day, John Welsby, the British Rail Director in charge of the project, presenting the proposed route to the national press, discovered that South Darenth had been omitted from his map. When questioned, he managed to describe the village as a “very special place”.



This Easter Saturday march was organised at 36 hours notice Photograph courtesy of John Woodhead

It turned out to be very special indeed, certainly in terms of the resilience and determination of its inhabitants. The following Saturday 3,000 people came out onto the streets in a spontaneous demonstration. A march from Devon Road, up New Road and down East Hill, culminated in a rally at The Jolly Millers where, amongst others, local MP Bob Dunn spoke. Community spirit was clearly evident, as was the fact that British Rail would have problems.



The Dartford March Photograph courtesy of Mike Medlen

In April 1989 a march from Sutton-at-Hone to Dartford attracted 5,000 people. Regular newsletters and Sunday evening “Newsnight” meetings in the Village Hall (or on the grass in summertime) kept residents informed. Action Group leaders Larry Becker, Ivan Wilson, Mary Martin and Mike Medlen ensured that our community was better informed than many others along the line. Jumble sales, quiz nights, sponsored events, auctions, art competitions as well as the sale of T-shirts, sweatshirts, caps and badges helped raise cash for the fighting fund. Tony and Jackie Marriott-Smith offered the Granary at Giffords to the Action Group for its headquarters. There, worried villagers would arrive to discuss the latest news and their problems whilst press reporters and radio interviewers were also welcomed. Ian Whittingham and Colin Sisk fuelled the fires of the Action Group’s publicity machine whilst villagers signed endless petitions and wrote thousands of letters to Government Ministers and Directors of British Rail.



*At the Imperial War Museum 5th November 1989
Photograph courtesy of Fred Ellis*

During June 1989 British Rail informed residents that the new line was to be switched to the south side of the existing track. Details were also made available as to what the Darent Crossing would look like against the 130 year old viaduct. Throughout the year Councillors and Action Group leaders were in continuous discussion with the British Rail engineering team.

By November 1989 one hundred people had sold their houses to British Rail and three hundred more were waiting to hear whether or not their applications had been successful. Those residents who remained were beginning to describe South Darent as a ghost town. Three quarters of New Road was eventually to be owned by British Rail. A conscience-stricken British Rail encouraged the setting up of a Community Group to deal with the problems. British Rail matched the funding of the Sevenoaks District and Dartford Borough Councils and gave the Group the tenancy of 1 New Road for its office.

Another march and rally, this time from the Imperial War Museum to Trafalgar Square, was held on 5th November 1989, only a few days after the government had announced a postponement of its final decision for a year.

By May 1990 the numbers of children attending Horton Kirby Primary School had fallen to such a low level, because families had moved from the area, that British Rail gave the school £3,500 to help balance its budget.

In June a further delay to the final decision was announced. In October BBC2 TV broadcast a thirty minute documentary on South Darent and the effect the threat of the Link was having upon the community.

A further year of doubt and rumour passed and many people involved in the campaign were becoming convinced that the Rail Link, when finally announced, would by-pass the villages.

It was 9th October 1991 before the communities along the line could breathe a sigh of relief. The announcement that the government had rejected British Rail’s plan was immediately posted outside 1 New Road. The feeling of relief was tempered, however, by the knowledge that the damage done to the community would take years to repair and that elsewhere other communities were being threatened.

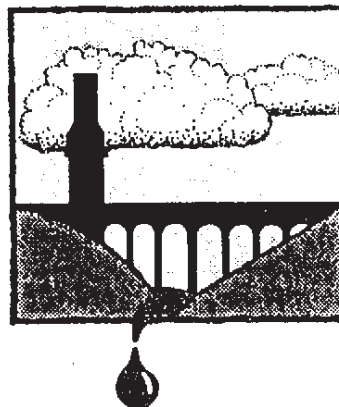
For others, the graffiti painted in large letters on the railway bridge at the top of Station Road summed up their feelings. It said simply: "SOUTH DARENTH 6 BR 0".

At the time of writing the villages are in the process of returning to normality. The British Rail offices in East Lane are still staffed to deal with tenancy problems and houses are slowly but steadily returning to private ownership. The railway is once again starting to be regarded as both a friendly feature and an integral part of village life.

Daily Mail, Tuesday, March 23, 1993



SOUTH DARENTH & HORTON KIRBY ACTION GROUP



British Rail serving the public 1994 style. Compare this with the photo at the start of this chapter. Photograph courtesy of Ken Allart