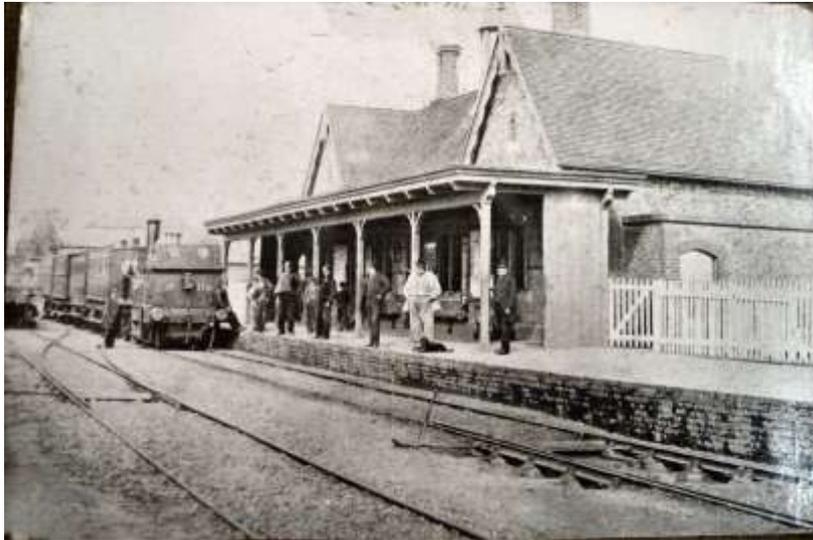


140 YEARS OF THE CUCKOO LINE

Or it would have been, if it had not all closed down by the end of 1968.

It all began when the Act of 1846 was granted in Parliament to build a branch line from Polegate to Hailsham by the London and Brighton Railway Company in the days when railway companies were expanding with 'the transport of the future'. Even the Duke of Wellington spoke out for the railways at the proposal for the Brighton to Hastings line with the theory that the country needed a direct form of transport along the south coast in case of war or invasion.

Hailsham was opened on the 14th May 1849 with all the festivities held on the Common near the newly built station. For the grand opening all the railway officials came up from Eastbourne in the afternoon. (Eastbourne station was opened in the morning of the same day) and the day was proclaimed a holiday, banners were hung in the streets and means were taken to ensure that all classes enjoyed the celebrations. A dinner was supplied for the young and old no matter how poor. Local traders supplied the food, among them were:-



Mr. E. Davey of Brighton, Butcher 100 lbs of beef.
Mr. Sanders of Hailsham, ingredients for plum puddings
Messrs. Wigney of Brighton,
Messrs. Wood of Lewes,
Messrs. Harvey of Lewes,

Each supplied a barrel of ale. With all that ale about it was thought proper to separate the sexes. The men and boys enjoyed their feast in a large tent and the women and girls had theirs in the school room of the National Boys and Girls School that was sited near the station.

A free train ride to Eastbourne for all the children and as many of the less well-off adults as there was room for was supplied by the directors of the railway company making it a day they would not forget. A public dinner was held at 4.30 p.m. in the Crown Hotel seating about 60 people. Dr Cunningham, one of our local doctors, took the chair. He was unfortunately called away when a young railwayman, John Hield was killed on the new branch line at Mulbrooks crossing. When the doctor returned to the dinner the after dinner speeches began.



The chairman ended his speech with a toast 'to the prosperity of the South Coast Railway Company, for unless the company prospered he was afraid the Hailsham branch would be worked by a horse'. This was received with laughter and cheers. It was followed by a toast to the Chairman and Directors of the London and Brighton and South Coast Railway for their

kind gesture in giving the poor a free trip to Eastbourne. Also toasted were 'the navvies and the labouring classes of England.'

Many more toasts were given that evening as you can well imagine. The evening continued with much merriment helped along with an excellent band from Hastings, and lasted till 10 o'clock when visitors started to return home

Hailsham was a terminus for 31 years. The line was extended northward and opened in 1880 to serve the towns and villages of Hellingly, Horam, Heathfield, Mayfield and Rotherfield and this we will show in an exhibition of the line in the Hailsham Heritage Centre this year.

Jim Hillman

Originally published in the 'Hailsham Historian & Naturalist', May 1989