

Redhill's first station opened 175 years ago

A new era for local travellers dawned exactly 175 years ago on July 12 this year . For on that day in 1841 the first passenger-carrying trains started running on the partially completed London to Brighton railway line, *writes John Capon*.

Just how many passengers were waiting for the first trains to arrive that morning at the station with the rather over-long – but strictly accurate – name, "Red-Hill and Reigate-Road", is not known. And how many of them, one wonders, were aware how fortunate they were to have a station there at all?

When a railway line from London to Brighton was first proposed in the 1830s no fewer than six routes were suggested, only two of which came through the [Merstham](#) gap north of what is now Redhill. One of them, Sir John Rennie's route, won an unexpected victory over the others in the Parliamentary enquiry.



HUMBLE BEGINNINGS: One of the London and Brighton Railway's locomotives

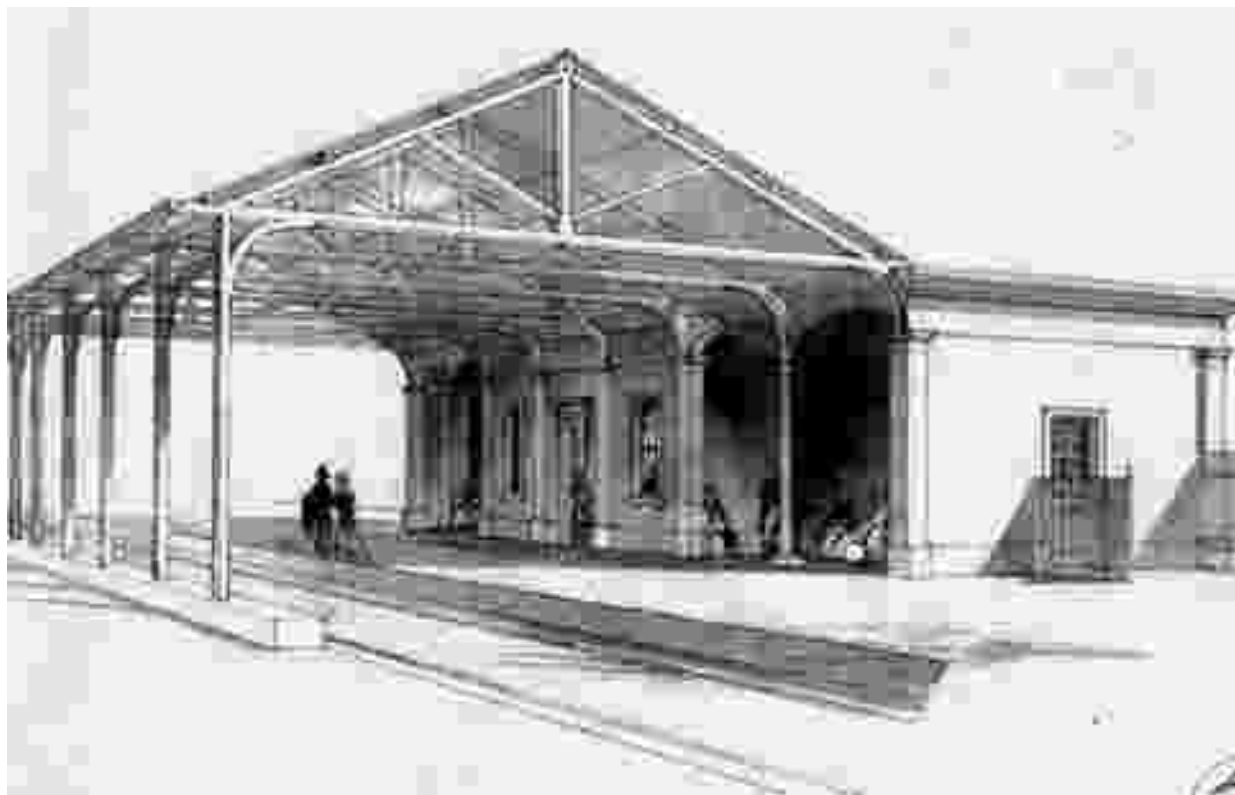
Even then, the line should have gone through or near the historic town of [Reigate](#) rather than two miles to the east of it. According to one account, opposition from local landowners prevented it doing so, but it is more likely that the topography of the area was the cause. The route chosen followed that of the new Brighton Road, opened in 1818 through the gap between Redstone Hill and Redhill Common.

At that time Redhill as a town did not exist. The area now occupied by the town centre was empty marshland devoid of any buildings. There were a few farms in the vicinity and a cluster of cottages and a tannery in the Linkfield Street hamlet, but that was about it.



FLYING THE FLAG: London and Brighton Railway banner with an artist's depiction of a typical train

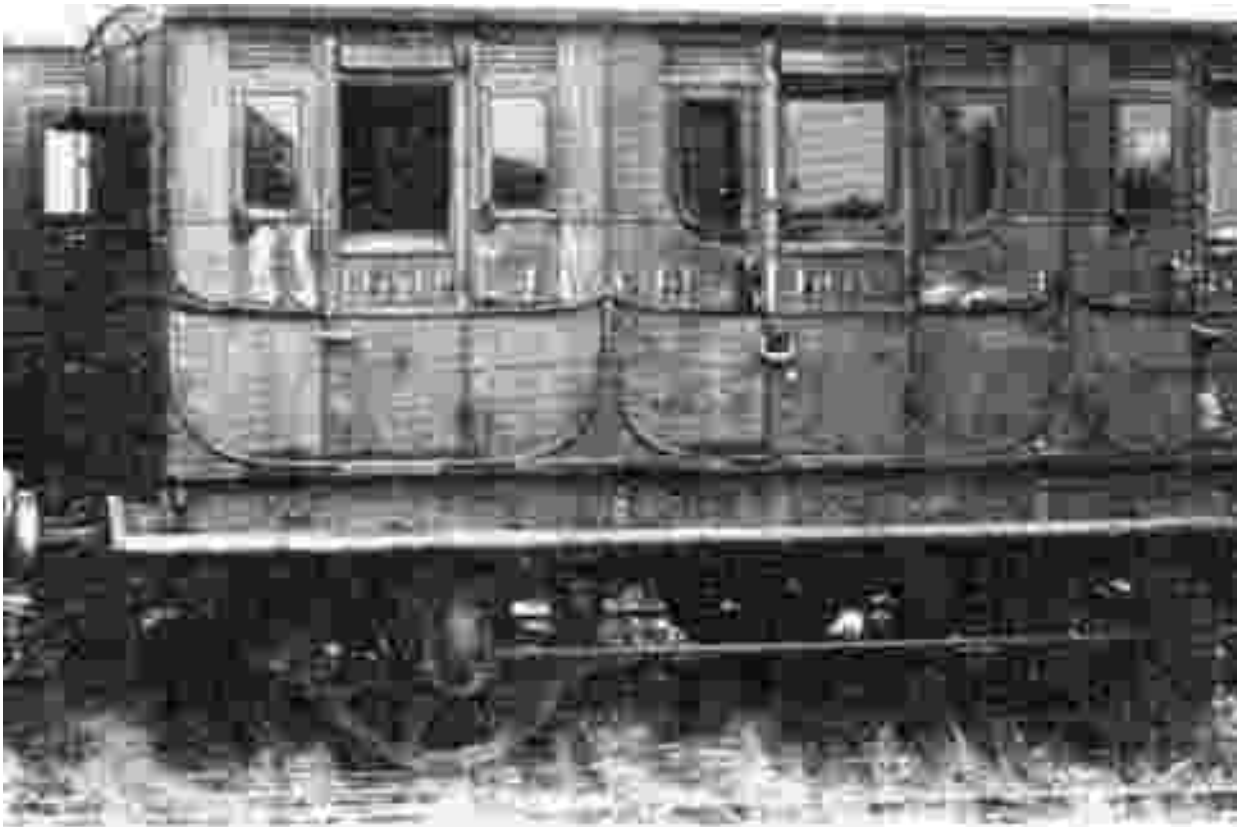
Until two years before the Brighton line was due to open, the only station intended to serve the area was where the line crossed Battlebridge Lane, near Merstham. It is said that its purpose was to suit the convenience of Lord Monson, who lived in nearby Gatton Hall, but it could also have served the residents of Reigate, some three miles away. However, in June 1839 it was decided that Reigate deserved to have a closer station than the one at Battlebridge Lane (though there is a suggestion that local landowner Lord Somers may have influenced the decision). The obvious place for it was where the new line crossed Hooley Lane, which was at that time the only east-west route linking Bletchingley and Reigate – hence the name "Red-Hill and Reigate-Road".



175 YEARS AGO: The platform and canopy of David Mocatta's Red-Hill and Reigate-Road station at Hooley Lane in the early 1840s

So what awaited those passengers as they stood on the platform admiring the stylish architecture of David Mocatta's handsome station buildings? The first train which arrived at 9.55am was London-bound. What did it look like? The locomotive was not much more than a steam boiler on wheels, with little if any protection for the driver. The coaches were all four-wheelers, first and second class ones looking a bit like three stage coaches welded together.

Train guards sat uncomfortably on top of the coaches. The fare to London Bridge (Victoria station was not opened until 1860) was 5s 0d (25p) first class and 3s 6d (17½p) second class, which today would be the equivalent of £18 and £12.70, and the train was due to arrive in the capital at 11am, a journey time of one hour and five minutes.



EARLY DAYS: An old London and Brighton Railway first and second class coach

Passengers wanting to travel to Brighton would have had to wait another half hour before the first train out of London Bridge arrived at 10.36am. Because the line had only been completed to Haywards Heath, passengers had to leave the train there and transfer to a horse-drawn coach to take them on to their destination, arriving at 1.30pm.



IMPOSING: David Mocatta's entrance to Red-Hill and Reigate-Road station, off Hooley Lane

The fares to Brighton were twice what they were to London. There were three more trains daily in both directions, and such was the popularity of the line that at the end of the first week 2,483 passengers had travelled on it, which was surprising, considering that there were still many concerns about safety and security on this new-fangled invention.

And with good reason. One incident which did nothing to dispel such concerns happened very close to the new Red-Hill and Reigate-Road station just a few days before the opening of the line through to Brighton on September 21, 1841.

Transport writer Muriel Searle describes it thus, in her entertaining book *Down The Line To Brighton*: "News came through that a train had failed to reach its destination. An hour elapsed, during which tales of multiple casualties circulated. The truth was that one engine with one single carriage containing an inspector and his wife had been sent out to deliver to railway policemen at wayside stations new signal flags for use on the opening day. The special ran into a line of earth-moving wagons under horse power engaged on final work near Hooley Lane, smashing the trucks and derailing the locomotive. There were no injuries, but the line was blocked with mangled wreckage."

Hooley Lane had already caused problems during the construction of the railway. The architect of the bridge carrying the track over the lane got the angle wrong. The railway company was given two options to put it right – demolish the bridge or re-route Hooley Lane so that it fitted the angle of the bridge.

The former was the cheaper alternative, but the company needed the bridge to stay in place as it was in constant use by trains ferrying soil from the cuttings and tunnel north of Merstham to sites to the south where it was needed for the huge embankments which carried the tracks beyond [Earlswood](#), so they chose to straighten Hooley Lane instead.

The alignment still isn't perfect, as can be seen by the heavily chipped sides of the bridge to this day. The opening of the completed line on September 21 was a time of great celebration, with crowds lining the route to cheer the first train from London that day, which is variously described as having 12, 13 or 18 carriages to accommodate the great and the good.

Most of the stations were festooned with flags and bunting and in Brighton itself there were parades, fireworks and a banquet for the directors of the railway.

As it turned out, Red-Hill and Reigate-Road station had a very short life. Less than three years after it opened, the London and Brighton Railway reluctantly closed it. And all that remains today is one of the old railway buildings which is now part of the Hockley Industrial Estate. Even the stationmaster's old house was demolished a few years ago. So what caused the closure?

It was the building of the London to Dover line in 1842-44 by the South Eastern Railway (SER) which was required by Parliament to use the tracks of the London and Brighton Railway until they reached Redstone Hill, then heading due east to Tonbridge, Ashford, Folkestone and Dover. Much against the wishes of the Brighton Company the SER built a new station just north of the junction in 1844, leaving them with no alternative but to close their own station. But that, as they say, is another story.