



Train from Wimbledon climbing the 1 in 44 to the junction with the Sutton-Epsom line

Photo: Alan A. Jackson

## The WIMBLEDON & SUTTON RAILWAY

A late arrival on the South London suburban scene

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**S**UTTON, situated on the Portsmouth main line of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway, 13½ miles from London Bridge and 12 from Victoria, was still a quiet little country town in the early 1880s, but it was already within the London sphere of influence. Its population was growing fast and the 1,387 of 1851 had become 10,334. Railway communication had been established on May 10, 1847, with the opening of the Croydon and Epsom line, and the shorter route to London, via Mitcham, followed on October 1, 1868.

From the 'eighties onwards there were many schemes to break the Brighton company's monopoly of the traffic of this expanding town, first in the form of a branch from the London & South Western Epsom line at Worcester Park (1882) and later as direct lines from Wimbledon to Sutton (1883, 1888, 1890, and 1891). All these failed, as did an 1882 proposal to connect the planned Kingston & London Railway to the Croydon, Oxted & East Grinstead, with a line which would have passed north of Sutton. The Committee on the 1882 Sutton and L.S.W. Junction Bill pontificated, "Sutton has to grow into greater importance before it ought to ask for the amplification of its railway accommodation".

And grow it did. By 1901, its population, together with Cheam, was 20,627, and in "Black's

Guide Around London" of that year, A. R. Hope Moncrieff wrote: "... its antiquity is all overlaid by the commonplace smugness of a residential suburb, the fine country round has been much cut up by schools and other institutions". Sutton was now virtually joined to Cheam in the west, and encroaching upon Carshalton and Beddington in the east and Banstead Downs in the south. Only the north, between Sutton Common and Merton, clay land without railways, was undeveloped.

Some local landowners were discontented with this, and sought to alter things, hoping to increase the value of their land and encourage the intensive building of houses for the middle classes, a process well advanced elsewhere on London's fringes. They knew that a railway might well prove the key to such development.

A meeting to consider a new scheme to connect Wimbledon and Sutton was held at the Westminster Palace Hotel on October 7, 1908, presided over by Sir George Smallman and H. D. Searles-Wood, and a committee was formed. The *Railway Gazette* thought the promoters "peculiarly optimistic" and observed that there had been no negotiations with either the District or the L.S.W.R., whose line it was proposed to join at Wimbledon.

No Bill emerged from this activity, but another meeting of property and land owners at Merton



Sutton train entering Wimbledon Chase Station in August 1963

Photos: Alan A. Jackson

South Merton Station showing in foreground the unused base for the station buildings at road level

in December 1909 was followed by the deposit of a Bill for the 1910 session. This envisaged a 5½-mile line with ten stations, from a junction with the L.S.W.R. at Wimbledon to a junction with the L.B.S.C.R. at Sutton. Train service was to be provided by the Metropolitan District Railway, which already had running powers over the L.S.W.R. from Putney to Wimbledon. The Bill was promoted by a syndicate of land and property owners, including Sir Henry Smallman, H. D. Searles-Wood and W. E. R. Innes, who were prepared to subscribe some, but not all, of the £350,000 capital.

From the evidence given by Sir George Gibb, Chairman of the Underground Company, and Albert Stanley (later Lord Ashfield), Managing Director of the District Railway, it seemed that, although the District was ready to run over the line, the board had not committed itself to advancing any money. The L.S.W.R. showed little enthusiasm, considering the Putney and Wimbledon line already overloaded and unable to accommodate any extra District trains for Sutton, nor did they like the proposed junctions at Wimbledon.

The L.B.S.C.R. was in open opposition to a line which would extract traffic from its station at Sutton. William Forbes, the General Manager, said the line would be a "constant source of irritation". As some evidence of the lack of traffic potential, the Brighton company put up a Miss Mary Pochin, who stated that she once hailed a bus that used to ply between Wimbledon and Sutton, but the conductor was so astonished at being hailed that he omitted to signal the driver to stop.

Forbes described the L.B.S.C.R.'s own scheme for Sutton, electric trains to Victoria in 18 min., to London Bridge in 20, compared with the promoters' estimate of 32 min. for Sutton to Waterloo. All in all, suggested Forbes, it was "a nice little move on the part of the District Railway, first to get to Sutton, then to Epsom, and afterwards on to Brighton". This was permissible hyperbole, but the Brighton company



took the threat seriously, steam-hauling an electric train to Sutton to test clearances in January 1910.

The Bill was passed, without the proposed junction at Sutton, it being stipulated that there should be a convenient means of access for passengers between the two stations there. The Act, which received Royal Assent on July 26, 1910, gave powers for the District to run over the line, via an end-on junction with the Putney-Wimbledon line in Wimbledon Station. Passing under Wimbledon Hill Road, and the shops on the other side, the new railway was to run parallel with the main line on the north-west side as far as the Elm Grove footbridge, just before which would be a junction with the L.S.W.R. up slow line, facing London. Here would be the first station, to serve the then site of the All-England Tennis Ground.

Next the tracks swerved sharply south, to pass under the main line, on the other side of which they would receive a connection from the down slow. The new line then proceeded south to reach the second station, Cannon Hill, and skirting the west side of the Merton Park Estate, it ran into Merton Park Station. Beyond here, it went south-east to a station serving Morden village



The Wimbledon & Sutton Railway and neighbouring lines, showing their pre-grouping ownerships

and beyond that, another, at Elm Farm, on the south side of Love Lane.

Sutton Common was next reached, with another station. Thence there was a wide sweep towards the west to avoid the already built-up west side of Sutton as far as possible. A station at Collingwood Road (end of Sydney Road) was followed by another to serve Cheam (just north of Cheam Road, Sutton). Finally curving eastwards, to run parallel to the Sutton and Epsom line, the new railway terminated alongside the L.B.S.C.R. at Bridge Road, Sutton, by the Post Office, with a footpath from the station on to the L.B.S.C.R. up platform.

In spite of Forbes' insinuations, the promoters were pretty much on their own. They were unsuccessful in their attempts to raise capital, and the Brighton and South Western companies gave them no encouragement. In March 1911 they sought the assistance of Albert Stanley and he approached the South Western to see whether they would help the M.D.R. build the line if the landowners guaranteed to bear part of the losses for a limited period.

This met with no response, but in October 1911 the District agreed to build the line if the promoters guaranteed about £20,000 a year. There was some haggling over the terms, and the guarantee was finally agreed at £6,000 a year for ten years, with the District shouldering the balance of any deficiency below 4½ per cent on the capital.

In December 1912 the landowner interests withdrew from the board and were replaced by Underground nominees, most of the issued shares passing to Underground representatives or shareholders. From December 5, 1912, all meetings were held at Electric Railway House.

While this take-over was going on, the District, by agreement with the South Western, promoted a Bill for the quadrupling of the Putney and Wimbledon line to accommodate the Sutton traffic. The Act of August 7, 1912, provided that the main-line company build the tracks and the District would pay the interest on the capital.

In 1913 the District obtained powers to widen its own line between Eel Brook Common (just south of Fulham Broadway) and Munster Road (about a quarter of a mile south-west of Parsons Green), with two island platforms at Parsons Green. (A third track had been added at Putney Bridge in 1910.) This widening was intended to facilitate the working of non-stop trains on to the Sutton line.

The proposals were a practical compromise instead of quadrupling throughout, which would have entailed a costly widening of the sinuous viaduct between Munster Road and Putney Bridge and enlargement of the covered way at West Brompton. The extra tracks were put in south-west of Parsons Green, but have never been used other than for stabling. The other widening work was not even started.

In the Sutton area, the Brighton company was active in improving its facilities. In 1911 the main line had been quadrupled between Sutton and Cheam, with a handsome new station at Cheam, and in January 1913 the company announced plans to extend electrification to Cheam, part of a big scheme of suburban electrification which in the event had to be postponed because of the first world war.

Towards the end of 1913 alterations were begun on the north side of Wimbledon Station in preparation for the Sutton line, and a new platform was laid down. Negotiations with the L.S.W.R. about alterations and junctions at Wimbledon had delayed the main construction, but land was acquired and fenced. Wartime conditions caused further delays. An Act of 1913 increased the Wimbledon & Sutton capital to £550,000 and incorporated the guarantees already mentioned. Another Act two years later gave the District powers to guarantee W. & S. dividends and interest as a working expense.

The construction powers were kept alive, but immediately after the war the financial position of the Underground company did not permit large capital expenditure. An opportunity presented itself in the form of the Trade Facilities Act of 1921, which, in an attempt to mitigate the



Morden South Station in August, 1963. Express Dairy bottling plant and private siding on right



Photo: Alan A. Jackson

serious unemployment problem, offered a Treasury guarantee of capital and interest on approved public works. The Underground Company produced a big scheme of new works, including the construction of the Sutton line (now estimated, with rolling stock and depot, to cost £1,700,000). The Treasury guaranteed a £5,000,000 loan for the complete scheme, which also included the modernisation of the City & South London tube railway and its connection to the Hampstead and Highgate tubes at Camden Town. Additionally the City & South London was to be extended from Clapham Common to join the Wimbledon & Sutton at Morden, where there would be a large depot for both tube and District trains. Bills for these works and the additional capital required for the Sutton Company were deposited in November 1922.

The prospect of tube as well as District trains at Sutton was too much for the newly-formed Southern Railway. Sir Hugh Drummond, the chairman, spoke of it as "a very serious matter", and Sir Herbert Walker, General Manager of the South Western section, talked of an "invasion" of the Southern's territory as defined in the Grouping agreement.

In Parliament, Sir Herbert said the Southern would have no objection to a tube as far as Tooting, and would even offer to accommodate the tube trains at Wimbledon (via the Tooting & Wimbledon loop). If this meant the Underground would drop the Wimbledon & Sutton, the Southern would build it instead. But the Underground Company maintained that a line to Morden was essential as it was the only suitable site for a depot for both lines; it was all or none. Taking this assertion at its face value, the Lords Committee rejected the whole extension from Clapham to Morden.

This caused an outcry among the M.P.s who

wanted tube service south-west of Clapham, and they blamed the Southern for obstructing it. Negotiations were started between the two parties in July 1923 and a compromise was reached. The Southern agreed that the tube could be taken to the north side of Morden, but there was to be no junction with the Wimbledon & Sutton, which they would build themselves. They would allow the District to run over the Sutton line and provide the necessary junctions at Wimbledon and the required facilities at Sutton. Furthermore, they undertook to restore passenger services between Wimbledon and Streatham which had been withdrawn at the end of 1916.

With the Southern opposition removed, the Morden tube was sanctioned, and the Wimbledon & Sutton powers passed to the Southern in an Act of 1924. This Act dissolved the Sutton Company, altered the junctions at Wimbledon to the south side of the main line (the District had shown no interest in using the line) and added a junction at Sutton to the Epsom line. Altogether it was a remarkable concession on the part of the Southern, no doubt made under very strong political pressure, and, one suspects, on the promise that there would be no more unilateral activity by the Underground in south London.

As soon as the Morden tube opened in 1926, the Underground established feeder bus services to supplement existing routes and establish new ones. Traffic was culled from a wide sector of Southern territory—Sutton, Cheam, Mitcham, Banstead, Wallington, Worcester Park, Epsom—and deliberately cheap fares, combined with road-rail through bookings, sucked the whole area pretty dry. In February, 1928, Southern shareholders were told that the Morden tube had deprived the company of about four-million passengers a year. Around the tube terminus, building of small houses proceeded apace, and in

1929 the London County Council began work on a new town of 10,000 dwellings just to the south.

In contrast with the tube extension, progress with the Wimbledon & Sutton line was slow indeed. Property had to be acquired and demolished at Merton and Sutton and negotiations for acquisition dragged on until the summer of 1928. In October, 1927, Southern Railway engineering staff started work on the embankment at the Wimbledon end, but Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons, the main contractor, was not able to begin until July, 1928, at the Sutton end. Work then continued day and night, except Saturday afternoons and Sundays, and such was the noise, dust and vibration that a resident of Tate Road, Sutton, was driven to the Vacation Court, successfully obtaining, on September 27, a restraint on the night work.

The northern end was sufficiently far advanced to permit the opening of Wimbledon Chase and South Merton stations on July 7, 1929, and the Holborn Viaduct-Wimbledon service (via Tooting and Haydons Road), which had been electrically worked since March 3, was extended to South Merton. Although the double track existed, the section was temporarily worked as a single line, with train staff. The remainder of the line was not ready for opening until January 1930. Electric trains began to run on January 1 for staff training, and public service started on Sunday, January 5. Before that, *Camelot*, and other 4-6-0s, had tested and ironed out the track to make sure that all was well (some embankments at the Sutton end had slipped during construction).

The work had been far from easy. Extensive drainage was needed in a vein of blue clay near Sutton, and further south the engineers had to cut through much chalk and demolish Victorian villas. The large number of bridges (24 on the 5½-mile line), high embankments, considerable drainage works and property compensations forced the building cost up to £1,000,000. It was a line designed for electric traction, with only

35 chains of level from one end to the other and gradients up to 1 in 44. The general level rose from about 50 ft. above sea at Wimbledon to about 200 ft. at Sutton.

All the intermediate stations were of an economical standard design at rail level, with a 520-ft. island platform for eight-car trains, partly covered with glazed roofing carried on steel stanchions at 38-ft. centres. Each station had a passimeter booking office either on the platform or at road level, and South Merton, Morden South and Sutton Common had no other buildings. The first Southern line to be signalled throughout with upper quadrants, the Wimbledon & Sutton was divided into two block sections, Wimbledon "C" to St. Helier, and St. Helier to Sutton. Wimbledon "C" had opened on April 28, 1928, partly to deal with the new line.

In the peak hours, eight-car trains ran every 20 min., and the basic service was provided with three-car trains every 30 min. The service (head-code "H", now "06") was the Holborn Viaduct-Wimbledon one, previously mentioned, extended over the new line to Sutton and thence to West Croydon. There were connections to Waterloo at Wimbledon, to Victoria at Sutton, and to London Bridge at West Croydon and Sutton. Some of the weekday trains worked through to London Bridge via West Croydon and others continued from West Croydon to Victoria via Crystal Palace L.L. The last two trains at night ran only to St. Helier and returned to Wimbledon. Traction current came from Durnsford Road Power Station after conversion to 660 V d.c. in the substations at Raynes Park and Wimbledon. Current is now taken from the national grid and converted at a new rectifier sub-station at St. Helier.

From a junction with the Wimbledon-Mitcham-West Croydon line just south of Wimbledon Station, the new line ran between the main lines and the large yard and signal works. About half a mile south-west of Wimbledon it turned south on a 12-chain curve to run for about 1½ miles on



St. Helier Station building still displaying "Southern Railway" in 1963

Photo: Alan A. Jackson

a spoil embankment through Wimbledon Chase Station to South Merton Station. A long siding ran parallel to the double track round in the direction of Wimbledon Chase. At Wimbledon Chase, the roadside buildings, well-sited on the main Kingston road, were of white glazed blocks, but the effect of the wide curving entrance was spoiled by an ugly luggage lift which has never been used. This station was actually in Merton and the choice of name is an interesting example of railway suburban snobbery.

At South Merton there was sufficient space left above the tracks for a roadside building, but this has not been provided. Just before Morden South Station, the line, still on a bank, crossed over the main London-Epsom-Worthing road on a 120-ft. skew span of steel lattice girders. A subway through the embankment gave access to the Morden South platform. Beyond, there followed a cutting and a half-mile curve of 25-ch. radius, bringing the line into St. Helier Station. This was the only station not on a site decided in 1910.

All the land the railway needed in the St. Helier L.C.C. Estate (some 12 acres) was conveyed by the County Council free of charge in return for the provision of a station at this point. The goods yard here was the only one on the line and had two roads, with room for expansion if required. The station building on Green Lane, 20 ft. above the platform, was an ugly concrete box. Only the south-western fringes of the immense estate were served.

For almost a mile beyond St. Helier, the line was on a bank, until it reached the north end of Sutton Common Station, where the arrangements were similar to those at South Merton. Then followed a short cutting and a half-mile embankment, ending at West Sutton Station. This was situated at the beginning of a long and deep cutting through the chalk to a junction with the Epsom line. West Sutton's roadside building was a concrete blockhouse like St. Helier. The last part of the line was sinuous and steep, with three reverse curves of 15-, 20- and 13-ch. radius and gradients of 1 in 90, 1 in 49 and finally 1 in 44. The presence of houses did not permit a suitable angle of slope for the chalk cutting, and some of it had to be lined with concrete.

### Junction stations rebuilt

Concurrently with the construction of the line, the Southern rebuilt the stations at Wimbledon and Sutton. New road-level buildings at Sutton were completed in 1928 and Wimbledon was wholly reconstructed in 1927-9, with a new through island platform provided for the Sutton and West Croydon lines.

Between 1930 and 1939 the erection of small houses in the area of the line by speculative builders continued without interruption, notably west and south-west of South Merton on the former Merton Park Golf Course (1933-35) and west of the line at Lower Morden (1936-39). Ordinary tickets issued at Morden South rose from 9,840 in 1930 to 50,817 in 1938 and season

tickets from 235 to 2,019. The L.C.C. Estate was completed in 1936, but most of the traffic it produced was handled by buses and the tube at Morden.

The hopes of the original promoters were never fully realised, and as built by the Southern, the line was something of a flop. Large areas adjacent to the railway were saved from building to become parks and recreation grounds, but the main causes of failure lay in the fact that the line's only through service was to the City (and that circuitous and rather slow) and that most of its catchment area was already drained by the excellent road-rail facilities of the Underground via Morden. Today, rush-hour trains are hardly crowded, and off-peak loadings average some 20 or so.

The passenger service has suffered some reductions in recent years. Morden South has been closed on Sundays since November 8, 1959, and from June 17, 1963, the three night trains were withdrawn. These were steam-hauled and comprised the 1.35 Herne Hill-Sutton—connecting at Herne Hill with the 1.20 Holborn Viaduct-Orpington (also withdrawn)—the 3.40 Sutton-Wimbledon-Victoria, and the 0.19 Holborn Viaduct-St. Helier.

The goods yard at St. Helier was served by a daily freight train until it was closed on May 6, 1963. Goods traffic is still seen, in the form of milk tank wagons and coal, in trains to the Express Dairy Bottling Plant at Morden South, opened in 1954. This plant receives milk in bulk from both road and rail tankers and is served by a two-road private siding which has a junction towards Sutton at the Sutton end of the station. Within the depot, the Express Dairy's blue Ruston & Hornsby 4B 0-4-0 diesel locomotive shunts the tankers and wagons. The dairy trains arrive from Clapham Junction and the B.R. locomotive then pulls the empties forward to St. Helier, where it runs round and returns with them via Wimbledon. The injection of these dairy trains into the regular-interval electric service was facilitated by moving the Morden South home signal and installing a colour-light distant near South Merton. This enabled a following electric train to be accepted while the milk empties were still between Morden South and St. Helier.

Suburban linking lines such as the Wimbledon & Sutton assume new importance with the construction of large office blocks on the periphery of London. Some of these blocks have recently been erected at Wimbledon, Morden and Sutton, and when fully occupied should provide a useful addition to the traffic. It is difficult to contemplate improvements in the routeing of the line's service without large capital expenditure or undue interference with existing services, and one cannot help a feeling of regret that the original scheme was never carried out.

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