

REPORTS OF SOCIETY MEETINGS

THE EPPING ONGAR RAILWAY

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

by Simon Hanney, General Manager EOR

A Report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House on Tuesday 9 July 2013

The history of the Ongar branch is linked with the Eastern Counties Railway which opened a single-track line from Stratford to Loughton in 1856, the oldest part of the current London Underground system. An Act for an extension to Ongar was passed in 1859 and the line was completed in 1865. Ongar was designed as a through station on a planned route to Dunmow. There were seven trains daily in the early years. Signal boxes opened at Ongar, Blake Hall and North Weald in 1888 and the service increased, with doubling of the tracks 'south' of Epping in 1892, to 14 into Fenchurch Street and later to Liverpool Street in the 1890s to 1930s. Bridges had been built to accommodate a double track line through to Ongar and beyond, but this was not to be. Agricultural and coal traffic was always important to the branch, and special milk trains ran from 1911 using the 1891 Ongar milk dock. North Weald also supported troops and carried weaponry for the nearby airfield through both World Wars.

With transfer of the branch to London Transport in 1949, steam services continued to shuttle between Epping and Ongar until 1957. A 20-minute interval service required a passing loop at North Weald where a second platform was constructed. Trains also needed to pass at Ongar where there was only one platform. This was achieved by the departing train waiting at the western end of the long platform whilst the arriving train passed it on the run-around road and then crossed over behind it to the eastern end of the same platform. These trains were usually operated by Holden F5 engines fitted for push-pull working, and a group has been formed to build a working replica.

Branch electrification was finally commissioned in November 1957 with a single-end feed from Epping substation to keep costs down. This limited available train power, and was the reason for the shuttle service of short trains rather than working through trains to London.

Early photos showed locomotive sheds at Epping and Ongar, being sub-sheds of Stratford. Station buildings remain basically unchanged today, but station goods yards closed in the 1960s. That at Epping is now the second largest LU station car park, and is usually full by 07.00 on weekdays. The highest point on former GER lines is again between Epping and North Weald, since closure of the Thaxted branch which held that distinction from opening in 1913.

Blake Hall was the quietest station on the Underground with only six passengers daily. The standard LU automatic telephone was finally installed only three weeks before station closure in 1981 in an economy measure. However, trains continued to unofficially call by arrangement with the train crew until Head Office found out and had the platform demolished. The station house is now in private ownership, but the platform is to be reinstated for authenticity, although trains will not normally stop. Some stabling sidings are to be relaid in the former goods yard area there to store spare rolling stock. It was also noted that the up platform at North Weald had been resurfaced two weeks before it became disused in 1976 as an economy measure.

After unsuccessful attempts to close the branch in 1970-72, in 1981 and again in 1994 the service was finally suspended on 30 September 1994 before transfer to a private operator. Pilot Developments bought the line. The volunteers' society operated a limited diesel shuttle service from 2004 to 2007, when Pilot sold the Ongar Goods Yard for development. The remaining line was then saved for preservation, and extensive infrastructure works have been undertaken to permit locomotive-hauled train operations from May 2012.

In addition to new track and points, new signalling systems have been installed at both North Weald and Ongar to permit operational flexibility and a higher frequency service. There are now bay platforms at North Weald and planned for Ongar, and the station buildings have been restored to their original period colours. Work has been done on a number of bridges and structures. The track bed has again been lowered at platforms since tube stock will no longer be used, and lowered beneath the 1977 M11 road bridge to provide sufficient clearance. The North Weald signal cabin

includes a king lever to minimise future staffing when using a diesel shuttle and if a through shuttle service is ever operated. Efforts have been made to improve local knowledge and interest in the branch line and in transport heritage, and to establish the line and its locality within the heritage and tourism sectors. A heritage bus service operates on the former 339 route between Epping and North Weald stations which is inclusive in the ticket and connects with Central Line trains for London.

Ongar station building has been restored to its original layout in GER colours of brown and cream. A GER signal box from Spellbrook has been installed and fitted with Ongar's original lever frame. The former engine shed is to be rebuilt in similar style on the original footings when funds become available. All distances on the LU rail system continue to be measured from the zero point at the Ongar buffer stop, transferring to the sub-surface railway at Mile End and so on.

North Weald station building has been restored to its original layout in LNER green and cream colours. The crumbling LT concrete footbridge has been replaced with a GER lattice one from Woodford. GER crossing gates have been re-installed. This was the only level crossing on a London Transport passenger line until it closed in 1968 when the road was diverted under the line. A two-road rolling stock maintenance facility has been constructed, and additional siding capacity laid. A new unloading pad was built to receive rolling stock and so allow operation of visiting locomotives. This was once used for Central Line access by an LU maintenance contractor, who provided some track maintenance to the EOR in consideration.

At Epping it is hoped to eventually construct an EOR platform north of the LU station with a connecting path through the spare arch of the road overbridge. It is planned that this station will reflect the London Transport era on the branch. Until then a shuttle service operates from North Weald past the small village of Coopersale with no exit available from the train. Local residents have suggested a station there, which is a long-term possibility if grant funding becomes available.

There are a number of steam and diesel locomotives now on the line, together with three multiple-units to provide varied experiences of rail travel. Mk1 BR coaches of both open and compartment layouts and Mk2 coaches are used. There remain three suburban coaches, of a similar type used on the branch, to be restored. There is also a Gresley 1936 restaurant car which may one day serve light refreshments along the line. Various engineering vehicles include inspection units, a 5-ton crane, ballast hoppers, Macaw & Rectank flatbeds and an operational tamper-liner. These machines can save much volunteer labour.

The railway has a classroom for training and school parties, provides apprenticeships, is used for both commercial and student filming, and is used for testing and demonstration projects. These provide a further stream of income. The EOR has recently achieved success as the National "Heritage Railway of the Year", received the "Volunteers Award" for restoration of Ongar Station, and the Heritage Railways Association award for "Large Groups". Volunteers are welcomed in a wide range of occupations, and are currently between 14 and 87 years of age.

John Hawkins