



Photo: J. Head

Bluebell Railway train, comprising former S.E.C.R. 0-6-0 tank engines "Bluebell" and (trailing) "Primrose," and the "Chesham" stock, arriving at Sheffield Park on July 29, 1961. In the up platform is L.S.W.R. 4-4-2 tank No. 488

The Bluebell Line

By R. C. RILEY

THE Bluebell Line consists of 4½ miles of single track between Sheffield Park and Horsted Keynes, originally part of a branch promoted by the Lewes & East Grinstead Railway Company and opened by the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway in 1882. Unlike the similar branch from Groombridge, through Mayfield, to Polegate and Eastbourne which has been known as the "Cuckoo Line" since its earliest years, the name of the Bluebell Line is of quite recent application. It owes its origin to an imaginative newspaper reporter a few years ago, when the threatened closure of the branch was prominently featured in the national press, and it was variously described as the "Bluebell Line" and the "Bluebell and Primrose Line." It has been suggested that the title of Bluebell Line properly belongs to the single-track portion of the branch, nearly 11 miles in length, from Culver Junction to Horsted Keynes,

while that of Primrose Line refers to the 6½ miles of double track thence to East Grinstead.

The branch as a whole was described by the present writer in *The Railway Magazine* for October, 1954, but it is appropriate to recapitulate briefly its history before bringing the story up to date. The line was incorporated by an Act of 1877 and absorbed into the L.B.S.C.R. the following year. Construction was carried out by Joseph Firbank, a well-known railway contractor, and it was opened on August 1, 1882. It diverged from the Lewes-Uckfield line at Culver Junction, 3½ miles north of Lewes, and passed through Barcombe, Newick & Chailey and Sheffield Park before reaching Horsted Keynes. At this point the short branch from Haywards Heath came in. This line, of double track throughout its 4½-mile length, was authorised in 1880, and opened on September 3, 1883, with one intermediate station at Ardingly.



Photo: Pamlin Prints

"Bluebell" entering Sheffield Park on July 15, 1961, with the Adams tank (on its inaugural journey) at the rear of the train



Photo: A. D. M. Baker

"Stepney" at Sheffield Park Station on July 23, after arrival from Horsted Keynes with the "Chesham" set

North of Horsted Keynes, the Lewes & East Grinstead Railway continued through West Hoathly, and Kingscote to East Grinstead, where connections were made with trains for Oxted, Three Bridges and Tunbridge Wells.

The original service of 1882 provided only five trains a day in each direction between Lewes and East Grinstead, but this was augmented two years later when the line thence to Oxted was opened, permitting the introduction of through trains between London and Brighton by this route. Although the service continued to be sparse, in the latter years of the last century it proved a useful alternative route for through excursion traffic, *via* Haywards Heath. With the opening of the Quarry route avoiding Redhill in 1900 and completion of the quadruple track as far south as Balcombe Tunnel in 1907, congestion on the main line was reduced, and the East Grinstead route became progressively less used as an alternative route, excursion traffic being largely confined to Lingfield race specials. Meanwhile, the single-track portion of the line had seen none of this activity, and it was not until 1909 that an economical means of augmenting the service was brought about by the introduction of what the L.B.S.C.R. described on its tickets and timebills as a "Motor Car Service," in fact a pull-and-push train consisting of a Stroudley "Terrier" and a single coach.

So far as the intermediate stations were concerned regular passenger traffic never can have been very significant, although freight traffic was of greater importance. Milk traffic was heavy at one time, but had been lost to road haulage by the late 1930s. In Southern Railway days, a whole host of economies was carried out. When the line was built, Saxby & Farmer had been over-generous in providing signalling installations. There were no less than eleven signalboxes between Culver Junction and East Grinstead inclusive, Newick & Chailey, Sheffield Park, and Horsted Keynes each having two! The L.B.S.C.R. rationalised this state of affairs to some extent and the Southern Railway finished the job. At Newick & Chailey, and Sheffield Park, platform ground frames operated by a porter-signalman, and with access from the booking office, were provided. Newick also lost its

crossing loop and up platform, while the signalbox at Barcombe was abolished. Kingscote box was used for freight shunting only.

In 1935, the short branch from Haywards Heath to Horsted Keynes was electrified as part of the extension of electrification to Seaford, Eastbourne and Hastings. This was partly to serve the needs of local business travellers at a time when Haywards Heath was a rapidly - expanding London dormitory town, but more perhaps to reduce shunt movements at that busy station. Horsted Keynes Station is more than a mile from the centre of the village it serves; only one line is electrified and the platform so used is completely devoid of any shelter.

In the last years of the line, much of the old Brighton atmosphere remained. The daily freight was hauled by a former L.B.S.C.R. engine—usually a "Vulcan" 0-6-0, or sometimes a "Radial" 0-6-2 tank. Two of the London through trains regularly were worked by L.B.S.C.R. engines, an Atlantic on the 5.40 p.m. London Bridge to Lewes, and a Mogul on the 3.28 p.m. Haywards Heath to London Bridge. The class "I3" 4-4-2 tanks were also to be seen, but, towards the end, 2-6-4 tanks of B.R. and L.M.R. design had largely taken over the services.

The line was a delightful one, passing through unspoiled pastoral country, and this very fact led to its closure, as it was no longer an economic proposition to maintain. The S.R. post-war electrification plans included the Oxted line, through East Grinstead, to Horsted Keynes, there linking up with the branch to Haywards Heath, so providing an alternative route to the main line. However, the bottle-neck on the London-Brighton line is the double-track portion from Balcombe Tunnel to Preston Park, and use of the East Grinstead route would not avoid much of this. Therefore the plan was shelved, and is unlikely to be resuscitated so far as the line south of East Grinstead is concerned.

Closure of the Lewes-East Grinstead line officially was to have taken place on June 13, 1955. In fact, because of the footplatemen's strike, the last trains ran on May 28. The usual objections to the closure had been lodged, and there was a spate of protest meetings, but the service was withdrawn and nobody, least of all



Photo: R. C. Riley

Worked by four locomotives, the first Bluebell train to use the British Railways station at Horsted Keynes approaching there on October 29, 1961

the Southern Region, expected it ever to be resumed. But among those who had protested was a Miss B. E. Bessemer, a prominent resident of Chailey, and through her efforts a flaw was found in the closure, which under the original Act could only be effected by Government authority, and not by the independent action of the railway.

In consequence, the line was reopened on August 7, 1956, the S.R. providing the minimum service of four trains each way daily as specified in the Act, although these did not stop at Barcombe or Kingscote, neither of which was specified when the line was first authorised. Previously Barcombe had been the most lucrative source of revenue among the intermediate stations, so the omission of the stop there was an act widely considered unworthy of the Southern Region. The trains ran at two-hourly intervals, and passengers from intermediate stations could not book tickets beyond Lewes or East Grinstead, so invalidating the usefulness of the connections at the latter station. Traffic was worked by a variety of engines filling in time from other duties, a single L.B.S.C.R. third class brake coach forming the train.

The outcome was inevitable, and figures showing heavy losses were produced in the course of a public hearing at Lewes. Although certain of these figures were brought into disrepute, and had to be

hurriedly revised in the course of the hearing, the Central Transport Consultative Committee found the case for closure proved, and advised the Minister of Transport accordingly.

If the Bluebell Line had received some publicity in 1955, this was nothing to the widespread coverage by the national press, radio and television services at this later stage. When the last train ran on March 16, 1958, nine coaches were required to accommodate all those who had come from far and wide to pay their last respects to the dying line. Appropriately, the engine was B.R. 2-6-4 tank No. 80154, the last steam engine built at Brighton Works.

The single-line section from Culver Junction to Horsted Keynes was to be abandoned, and the double track thence to East Grinstead was to be retained temporarily on a "care and maintenance" basis for use in emergency as required. In fact, the down line was used from time to time for Lingfield race specials, and the up line was used for stabling condemned goods wagons. The latter were removed when all maintenance ceased at the end of 1960. The sidings at West Hoathly and Kingscote were lifted in October of that year, but the rest of the track remains.

Meanwhile, efforts had been made privately to reopen the entire line. Three students, all railway enthusiasts, came to

the conclusion that what had been done for the Welsh narrow-gauge lines might also be done for the Lewes-East Grinstead line. In March, 1959, at a public meeting at Haywards Heath, the idea for a preservation society was put forward, as a result of which an approach was made to the authorities at Waterloo. The S.R. did not take the idea seriously at first, but eventually offered that part of the line from Horsted Keynes (exclusive) to Sheffield Park for £34,000, and pending efforts to raise this sum, allowed the use of the booking office at Sheffield Park for a nominal rent. In June, 1959, the Bluebell Railway Preservation Society was formally constituted. By this time older and more experienced men had joined the students on the committee, and at last they were able to see some reward for their efforts.

Shrewd publicity at this stage—and indeed ever since—kept the Bluebell Line in the public eye, there was a constant stream of visitors to Sheffield Park, society membership steadily increased, and a host of volunteers restored the track throughout its length and repaired the station buildings. While all this activity was going on, a firm of demolition contractors was engaged in lifting the track from Culver Junction as far as the main road underbridge south of Sheffield Park Station, a task which occupied the first nine months of 1960.

In December, 1959, the society had been successful in negotiating a lease of the line for a five-year period, which, including a hiring charge for the permanent way and other equipment, amounted to £2,250 a year. It still had the option to purchase the line for the agreed figure of £34,000 at any time during the continuance of the lease. The next step was to obtain a Light Railway Order to allow the society to operate the line, and this was granted in July, 1960, after an exhaustive inspection had been carried out by Col. J. R. H. Robertson, Ministry of Transport Inspecting Officer.

This was indeed a memorable achievement for the society, but to many an event of even greater significance had taken place on May 17, when the former L.B.S.C.R. "Terrier" 0-6-0 tank No. 55 steamed into Horsted Keynes with two coaches, and the society's own crew took over for the run to Sheffield Park.

Eastleigh Works had done a good job on the engine, latterly B.R. No. 32655, which was painted black, lined out in red. A copper-capped chimney from another member of the class was fitted, and new L.B.S.C.R. "Brighton Works 1875" plates provided. Choice of the two coaches had been left to the S.R., and they consisted of a lengthened London & South Western-type coach on S.R. underframe, and an early S.R. corridor third class brake.

Authority to operate the line was given on the understanding that an engine was provided at each end of the train, as there was no run-round loop at the point on the single line outside Horsted Keynes where the Bluebell Line was abruptly terminated. Hence a second engine was required, and the former South Eastern & Chatham "P" class 0-6-0 tank No. 323 (B.R. No. 31323) of 1909 vintage, arrived on June 27.

The following weekend, trial runs were made, with an engine at each end of the two-coach train, in preparation for the Ministry of Transport inspection on July 9. The society's rules for operating the line were approved, and the report was favourable, so that all was set for the formal opening of the line under its new management on August 7. This was a light-hearted affair, with most of the operating staff and many visitors of both sexes appropriately attired in Victorian costumes. The guests included two ladies who had witnessed the passage of the first train on the line 78 years before. The Brighton "Terrier" had its original name of *Stepney* restored, and the S.E.C.R. tank was named *Bluebell*. There followed a successful short season, when patronage exceeded all expectations, some 15,000 passengers being carried before the line closed for the winter on October 30. Among the many prominent personalities who visited the line in this period were the Prime Minister and Lady Dorothy Macmillan.

The Bluebell Line was now established, but could not rest on its laurels. Throughout the winter months there was much routine maintenance work to be carried out by a loyal nucleus of the volunteer operating staff. The engine shed was completed—it had been providing cover for two engines before the opening. The society took possession of the whole of the station house at Sheffield Park,



The L.S.W.R. Adams tank engine, No. 488, at Sheffield Park on the "Chesham" set



Photos: R. C. Riley

L.B.S.C.R. "Terrier" tank No. 55, "Stepney," restored to Stroudley livery by the Bluebell Railway

which was rewired and repainted, improved refreshment facilities and office accommodation being provided. The former waiting room on the up platform, which had been adapted as a museum for small railway exhibits, was also much improved. *Stepney's* big-end brasses

had to be renewed, a job which was carried out under the supervision of Mr. O. G. Hackett, now Consulting Engineer of the line, who before his retirement in 1947 had been Manager of Brighton Locomotive Works. When this job was done, the engine was painstakingly

restored, as nearly as possible, to Stroudley's yellow livery.

Meanwhile, the Southern Region was approached for another "Terrier" to provide a spare engine. This request could not be met, as no further engines of the class were to be withdrawn for at least three years. Instead, a second "P" class 0-6-0 tank was acquired. This proved a practical proposition, because the class was obsolete on British Railways, and a stock of spare parts could be obtained. This engine, formerly B.R. No. 31027, arrived in March, partly repainted but predominantly rust-covered after a period of open storage at Dover. It was patched up and named *Primrose* in readiness for the new season. In addition, four Metropolitan Railway coaches of 1898/1900 vintage, displaced by the electrification of the Chesham branch, were acquired. These were to prove a great boon in meeting demands for increased seating accommodation in the 1961 season.

This was inaugurated on April 1 by the President of the B.R.P.S., Bishop Geoffrey Warde. On this, and on other special occasions, the train was double-headed out of Sheffield Park by *Stepney* and *Primrose*, with *Bluebell* at the trailing end. The newly-restored condition of *Stepney* attracted favourable comment from visitors. The naming of the "P" class tanks received some unfavourable criticism from enthusiasts, but the society's view was that these were engines of no particular historical merit, acquired merely for their capacity to work, and the names gave them some character which previously they had lacked. It is not without significance to record that the station bookstall sells a dozen post cards of *Bluebell* to every one of *Stepney*, so the general public, the major source of the society's income, approves the idea. Eventually the tanks will be restored to S.E.C.R. livery.

In 1961, too, the line was discovered by the film companies, and was in great demand in connection with full-length feature films and documentaries for the cinema and television, and even for commercials on the latter medium. A preservation fund was established to obtain two more historic locomotives, the first of which reached the line in July, L.S.W.R. No. 488, an Adams "Radial" 4-4-2 tank, latterly B.R. No. 30583, and

from 1919 to 1946 East Kent Railway No. 5. This type of engine had been associated with the Lyme Regis branch for 45 years, but realignment of the curves on that line had at last enabled larger engines to be used. Although No. 488 was not repainted it had received light repairs in Eastleigh Works, and arrived in good condition.

For some time, the future of the electrified branch line to Horsted Keynes had given cause for concern. Since 1958, the down line thence to Ardingly had been used for stabling coaches, single-line working being carried out over the up line. Now, however, there seems to be cause for optimism, for the Southern Region provides through bookings from certain stations to the Bluebell Line, and this has undoubtedly brought increased traffic to the branch. On the last day of the season, October 29, this was recognised, for after lengthy negotiations Bluebell trains were allowed to work into Horsted Keynes B.R. station. The occasion was marked by the five-coach trains having two engines at each end. Use of the Southern Region station will be a permanent feature of future Bluebell Line workings. Bluebell Halt, outside Horsted Keynes, remains open, and an additional platform has been constructed at Holywell (Waterworks) on a road served by Southdown omnibuses. There is another halt at Freshfield. During 1961, more than 91,000 passenger journeys were recorded on the line.

Once again, the winter months have been busy for those actively engaged in operating the line. Apart from the inevitable maintenance work, the engine shed has been enlarged, and the open ground frame at Sheffield Park encased by a representation of a former L.B.S.C.R. signalbox, so allowing the hard-worked signalling staff some much-needed privacy. The Adams tank has been repainted in L.S.W.R. green livery, and the Chesham set has also been restored to its original livery of varnished teak with cream waist and roof panels.

Another historic locomotive to arrive is the last survivor of the North London Railway 0-6-0 tanks, B.R. No. 58850. The L.M.R. has turned this engine out in fine condition following an overhaul at Derby Works. As the engine carries a chimney of London & North Western type, it has reverted to the number 2650,



Actress Deborah Kerr with Bluebell operating staff while filming "The Innocents" last year

which it received when absorbed in that company's stock in 1909. The engine was built as N.L.R. No. 76 in 1880, and rebuilt in 1897. Another arrival (on loan) is the former G.W.R. "Dukedog" 4-4-0 No. 9017, saved from scrap by a privately-sponsored preservation fund. It is intended to steam this engine on the first Sunday of each month.

The stock also includes two industrial locomotives—*Baxter*, a Fletcher Jennings 0-4-0 tank of 1877 from the Dorking Greystone Lime Company, and No. 25, a diminutive 0-4-0 saddle-tank built in 1896 to work into the retort houses at Beckton Gas Works*. The latter engine has been preserved by the Industrial Locomotive Society. *Baxter* will be used for training apprentices, and it is hoped to obtain permission to steam the Beckton engine. Two more coaches have been acquired recently, a former London, Chatham & Dover six-wheel third class brake, and an S.E.C.R. "birdcage" third class brake. A buffet car and a former L.B.S.C.R. coach are also due.

The 1962 season opened on March 31, and continues until October 28, including six weeks of daily running during part of July and August. The timetable is arranged, as far as possible, on a regular-interval basis, and connections are provided with S.R. trains. An interesting working arranged for April 1 was a through excursion from London Bridge

to Sheffield Park hauled by Great Northern Railway 0-6-0 saddle-tank No. 1247 (B.R. No. 68846), which is preserved privately by Captain W. G. Smith, Chairman of the Railway Preservation Association, the advisory body with which the B.R.P.S. has been actively connected since its inception.

Mr. Horace May, whose legal experience was of great value when the Light Railway Order was obtained, has been appointed to the salaried post of General Manager, after working voluntarily in the capacity since 1960, so that his organising ability can be used full-time to the benefit of the line. There are two other paid employees, a locomotive fitter and a permanent way man. It would be invidious to single out for mention any of the numerous volunteers who give up their time to operate the line so successfully, but an exception can be made in the case of two former B.R. drivers, who with "steam in the blood" enjoy the opportunity given them by the Bluebell Line to get back on the footplate. They have given freely of their technical knowledge in training other footplate crews to a high standard. Their example is typical of the keen spirit of those who regularly give up their weekends to work on the line, whatever the weather. Thanks to their efforts, and to the co-operation of British Railways, the future of the Bluebell Line is assured.