

The Merton Abbey Line

By EDWARD TREBY



Photo 1

[Edward Treby

Merton Abbey Station in 1960. It was closed to passengers in March, 1929

THE Merton Abbey line, now closed to passenger traffic, was originally part of the Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon Railway, promoted by an independent company, authorised in 1864 to build a line from the Peckham to Sutton line of the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway at Streatham to the main line of the London & South Western Railway at Wimbledon. In 1865, it was transferred to the L.S.W.R. and the L.B.S.C.R. jointly, and opened on October 1, 1868. The joint line started at Streatham Junction, and ran westwards to Tooting, where it divided into two separate lines to Wimbledon, the northern *via* Haydons Road, and the southern *via* Merton Abbey. The northern loop joined the L.S.W.R. main line on the London side of Wimbledon Station, and the southern loop joined the West Croydon to Wimbledon branch of the L.B.S.C.R. (opened in 1855) at Merton Park, and thence approached Wimbledon Station from the south. The joint ownership extended to the Merton Park-Wimbledon section of the line from Croydon.

The Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon remained under joint ownership until the formation of the Southern Railway in 1923. The loop lines between Tooting and Wimbledon became known locally as the "pear," an apt name, as reference to the accompanying map will show. At Wimbledon, the Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon trains worked into two platforms, which were under joint ownership, the remainder of the station being owned by the L.S.W.R.

Two main services operated over the Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon line—the L.S.W.R. from Wimbledon to Ludgate Hill, and the L.B.S.C.R. from Wimbledon to London Bridge, both services ran *via* Haydons Road or *via* Merton Abbey. The service to Ludgate Hill commenced on January 1, 1869, in return for the L.S.W.R. having advanced £316,000 to the London, Chatham & Dover Railway. There were considerable operating difficulties in running over the tracks of different companies: these difficulties were mainly between Streatham Junction and Tulse Hill, over which portion of line the L.S.W.R. had running powers from

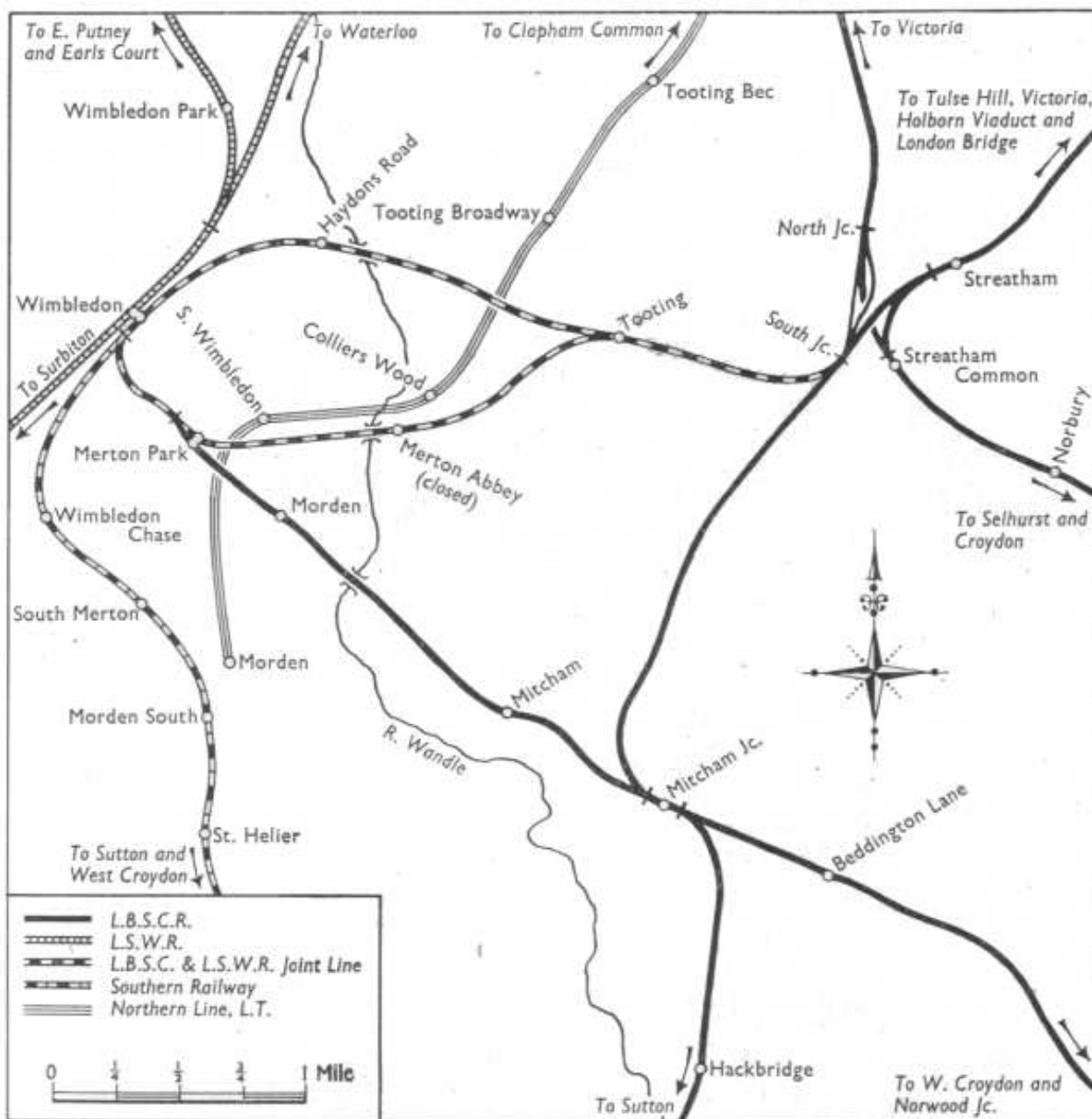
the L.B.S.C.R. for passenger train traffic only. From Wimbledon to Tooting, the journey time was 6 min. *via* Haydons Road and 8 min. *via* Merton Abbey.

At the close of the century, and during the years before the outbreak of war in 1914, there were approximately 15 L.B.S.C.R. trains in each direction daily between Wimbledon and London Bridge, compared with about 13 L.S.W.R. trains in each direction between Wimbledon and Ludgate Hill. Certain services between Wimbledon and Streatham only were worked by L.B.S.C.R. rail motors. Before the first world war the Merton area was quite rural.

In the early years of the century, both the South Western and the Brighton

Railways were faced with competition from the newly-electrified tramways. Haydons Road and Merton Abbey Stations were close to the L.C.C. tramway route to Wimbledon, where there was an end-on connection with the London United Tramways.

In 1910, the Wimbledon & Sutton Railway was authorised from Wimbledon, through Merton, Morden and Cheam, to Sutton. It was to be electrically operated by the Metropolitan District Railway, and would have allowed an extension of that company's service over L.S.W.R. metals from East Putney to Wimbledon, the first section of the L.S.W.R. to be electrified. Although a subsequent Act authorised the raising of further capital,



Map of the railway from Streatham to Wimbledon and its associated routes, showing former ownerships and the Northern Line of London Transport

construction had not started when the war began in 1914. The services on the Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon line were withdrawn on January 1, 1917, as a wartime economy measure, but were restored by the Southern Railway in 1923.

After the first world war, the Underground group of companies promoted a Bill for the extension of the City & South London Railway (now part of the Northern Line of London Transport) from Clapham to Morden, and onwards to Sutton over the line already sanctioned. The scheme was opposed by the Southern Railway, but a compromise was reached, whereby the tube would end at Morden, and the Southern Railway would reopen

The through services to the London termini were somewhat fewer, but the rail motors were maintained and these gave connections. The restored services provided Haydons Road and Merton Abbey about the same number of trains. As these trains came under the Central Section of the Southern Railway, it was easier to find paths for them than it had been in pre-grouping days. When the line was reopened in 1923, electrification was contemplated.

The City & South London Railway was closed for reconstruction, and was re-opened in 1924—from Moorgate to Euston on April 20, and from Moorgate to Clapham Common on December 1. The extension to Morden was brought



Photo]

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The Haydons Road line at Tooting, looking south-east. On the left is the original Tooting Station, now a private residence; on the right is site of the junction where the northern and southern Wimbledon loops joined; and beyond the overbridge is the present Tooting Station

the Streatham, Tooting & Wimbledon section, and proceed with the construction of the Wimbledon to Sutton Line, which it took over by an Act of 1924.

The services from Wimbledon to Ludgate Hill and London Bridge *via* both Haydons Road and Merton Abbey were restored on August 27, 1923. In the early 1920s, local residents often complained that the Tooting area was without rail facilities, and the reopening of the Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon line was widely acclaimed. As was the case before the war, there were no Sunday services.

into use on September 13, 1926. The opening of the new tube took a considerable number of passengers away from the Tooting, Merton & Wimbledon line, and electrification of all surface lines in the area became imperative, if traffic was to be regained. The tube to Morden intersected the core of the "pear," the southern loop being more prone to competition than the northern. Colliers Wood Station had taken most of the passengers away from Merton Abbey Station, and South Wimbledon was close to Merton Park Station.

Among the lines included in the later

stages of the Southern Railway's suburban electrification scheme was that from Wimbledon to Tooting *via* Haydons Road, the northern half of the "pear," and onwards to Streatham Junction. The new electric service over this line from Wimbledon to Holborn Viaduct began on March 3, 1929. On the same date, passenger services were withdrawn from the Merton Abbey line. Thereafter, Merton Park Station was served only by trains on the Wimbledon-West Croydon

cation of the suburban area, many of these engines were transferred to country lines.

The new electric service over the Haydons Road line was a great improvement on the steam service, and was an immediate success. The electric trains, which ran on Sundays, also worked to Victoria, *via* Brixton, for the first four months. Ludgate Hill Station was closed on March 3, 1929; it was unable to accommodate eight-coach multiple-



Photo]

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Merton Park Station, showing the Merton Abbey line and (on extreme right) the platform used by Wimbledon-West Croydon trains

(*via* Mitcham) line, which was electrified in 1930. On March 10, 1934, the junction at Tooting was severed, and in 1935 the section from Merton Park to Merton Abbey was singled by the removal of the former up line.

The last passenger train to call at Merton Abbey Station left Ludgate Hill at 1.50 p.m. on Saturday, March 2, 1929. A photograph which appeared in the *Southern Railway Magazine* for April, 1929, shows a solitary passenger on the up platform at Merton Abbey: the photographer added, in jocular vein, "A circumstance, I am given to understand, unknown for several months."

Before the electrification of the Haydons Road line, and the withdrawal of passenger services from the Merton Abbey line, former L.S.W.R. Drummond 0-4-4 tank engines were generally used to haul the trains, often of only two coaches, over both sections. On electrifi-

unit electric trains. The new Wimbledon to Sutton line was opened as far as South Merton on July 7, 1929, the Holborn Viaduct to Wimbledon trains being extended to that station. On January 5, 1930, construction of the new line to Sutton was completed, and the trains from Holborn Viaduct thereafter ran through to West Croydon *via* Wimbledon and Sutton.

At the approach to Merton Park Station from Wimbledon is one of the comparatively few level crossings in the London area. Merton Park must be among the most rural stations in the Southern Region suburban area. In summer, when the trees of adjoining gardens are in blossom, hiding surrounding buildings, the station has a rural, almost rustic appearance; it is still gas-lit. The station building is on the Merton Abbey line up platform, and as there is neither overbridge nor subway,

passengers must cross the single track of the closed branch to gain access to the short length of platform used by the Wimbledon-West Croydon trains in both directions; Merton Park is the train staff station.

The station building at Merton Park typifies the simple but sturdy style of L.B.S.C.R. country stations. On the former down side, at the apex between that platform and the West Croydon line platform, is an old semaphore signal. Here, and elsewhere along the Merton Abbey branch, there is still much evidence of the original joint ownership of the line; in fact the South Western and the Brighton Railways almost vied with each other in proclaiming their respective interests. One Brighton style station nameboard remains at Merton Park. Along the branch today can also be seen Southern Railway and Railway Executive notices, in addition to those of the original co-partners.

On the single-track section between Merton Park and Merton Abbey Stations, the scenery is still semi-rural, with trees and shrubs beside the railway, although there are factories nearby. Part of the roadbed of the up line is now overgrown. Midway between these two stations, the line runs alongside a large toy factory which has its own private siding. At the approach to Merton Abbey Station, the line crosses the River Wandle, a tributary of the Thames, but little more than a brook at this point. An adjacent footpath crosses the line and leads to a silk printing works. This crossing is classified as an occupation crossing, and on both sides of the line are a plethora of notices of L.S.W.R. and Southern Railway vintage.

Adjoining the crossing, in Station Road, is an old gateway in a fair state of preservation and a short length of wall about two feet thick, which originally formed part of the boundary of the Priory Grounds. Merton Priory, founded in the twelfth century, in the reign of Henry I, from whom it received much patronage, suffered dissolution at the time of the reformation, and was finally demolished after 1680. No trace of the buildings remain today, although a garden adjoining a nearby factory is on the site of part of the foundations of the church and the high altar.

The name Merton Abbey for the station and district is really a misnomer,

for ecclesiastical and secular records invariably refer to Merton Priory. Some of the buildings, such as the cloister, completed in 1136, and chapter house, were sited where Merton Abbey Station now stands. The station building is used partly as a private residence and partly as goods offices. The nameboards, long since removed, were of L.B.S.C.R. style. On the former down platform, old L.S.W.R., and one of the rare L.B.S.C.R. cast-iron, notices remain. An extensive goods and coal yard adjoins the station.

The line now ends at Tooting Goods Yard, the buffer stops being a few feet from the Haydons Road line, close to Tooting Station. On the fishplates on the final stretch of line, the initials L.S.W.R., S.W.R. and L.B.S.C.R. were observed during a recent visit. The distance from Wimbledon to Tooting *via* Merton Abbey was about 2½ miles; *via* Haydons Road it is two miles, milepost two coming under the bridge which carries London Road, Mitcham, over the line by Tooting Station. Coal and general goods traffic are handled at the yard. Tooting Station was named Tooting Junction until March, 1938, although the junction had been removed nearly four years previously. To the west of the present station stands the original station. Its building, now a private dwelling, and a short length of platform, are along the Haydons Road up line, inside the Wandsworth Borough boundary; the present station lies just within the Borough of Mitcham.

The daily goods workings over the Merton Abbey branch are 4.40 a.m. from Norwood to Tooting, calling at Merton Abbey and returning at 9 a.m.; 1.5 p.m., Mondays to Fridays from Norwood to Merton Abbey due 3.2 p.m., and returning at 7.40 p.m.; and 1.35 p.m., Saturdays only, from Hackbridge to Merton Abbey, due 4.31 p.m., and returning at 6.15 p.m. Although thirty years have passed since the line lost its passenger service, it has continued to play a useful role for goods traffic, and new industrial development in the area augurs well for the future of such traffic.

The goods trains are hauled by class "C2X" 0-6-0 locomotives, originally built between 1893 and 1902 for the L.B.S.C.R. by R. J. Billinton. In 1908, it was decided to rebuild this class by

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using a "C3" type boiler, and extended smokebox. It was not until 1940 that the rebuilding of the class was completed. With the rebuilding, the boiler pressure was increased to 170 lb. per sq. in., and the tractive effort to 19,175 lb. After modification, these 0-6-0 locomotives were reclassified "C2X."

On December 31, 1959, and also on January 1, 1960, diesel locomotive No. D3669 worked the afternoon goods train from Norwood to Merton Abbey. The first appearance of a diesel on the branch had been on May 2, 1959, when No. D8402 worked a railway enthusiasts'

special. Another variation in motive power occurred on October 3, 1959, when another enthusiasts' special traversed the branch, in charge of former S.E.C.R. Wainwright class "H" 0-4-4 tank No. 31193 in immaculate condition.

In conclusion, the author wishes to express his thanks to the Archivist of the British Transport Commission, to officers of the Southern Region, to Dr. E. A. Course, and to the Librarian of Merton & Morden U.D.C., all of whom have given valuable assistance in the preparation of this article.