### The History Story of the Railway at Charing

Part 1 - Have you ever thought of why trains from Charing go to Victoria, but if you go down the road to Pluckley, they still go to Charing Cross – then read on.

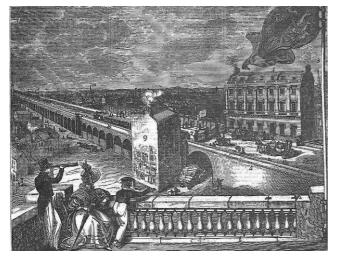
The history of the arrival of the railway in Charing is quite a complex story and owes much to a fierce intercompany rivalry between the two competing Kentish railway companies at the time, and particularly their respective warring Chairmen.

If you look at the railway map of Kent today, many towns still have duplicate stations and routes with the lines criss-crossing one another – something almost unique for our County – and it was this race to reach every major conurbation in Kent by each of the two companies that lead to the line passing through Charing. This aspect is explored in greater detail towards the end of this work.

While this not intended to be a comprehensive history of the railways in Kent, some historical background to the two companies involved and their respective routes is needed so as to set the scene.

#### The South Eastern Railway (SER)

If we put to one side the Canterbury and Whitstable railway (opened in 1830), then the first railway to link Kent to London, in fact the very first railway at all in London, was the London and Greenwich (L&G), which was of course in Kent in those days. This company was the initial seed that eventually became the South Eastern Railway. This little line from Greenwich terminated at a rather inconsequential station, high on a viaduct at Tooley Street quite near to one of the only river crossings at the time – London Bridge. The station was, therefore, not surprisingly called – London Bridge. The two pictures below show the station as opened in 1836 and now in 2020 – if you look carefully you may spot a slight difference!





London Bridge Station, 1836 (2 platforms)

London Bridge Station, 2020 (15 platforms)

In 1836 the South Eastern Railway Company (SER) was formed and shared the terminus with the L&G, who it later took over. Shortly after, they were joined there by the London & Croydon Railway (L&C) whose aim was to construct a line to Croydon, and later by the London & Brighton (L&B) who's aim was to extend to the south coast. However, the principal aim of the SER was to reach the Kent coastal ports of Dover and Folkestone, then becoming lucrative crossing points to the continent. It must be remembered that at this time there were no regular cross-channel ferries as such, just mail boats run on contract to the Royal Mail, called "Packet Boats". The SER's ambition was to own their own boats to make a seamless regular mail service from London, across the Channel and on to Paris. Connecting the people of Kent appeared not to be their top priority at the time, but the channel crossings were.

So, with the aim of reaching Folkestone and Dover, they used the partnership of the L&C and later L&B to jointly share tracks to Redhill, where the SER branched to the east towards Tonbridge and Ashford. By 1842 they had completed the route as far as Ashford, with what still is probably the longest dead straight railway line in the country - some 46 miles from Redhill to Ashford. By 1843 they had reached Folkestone, and 1844 Dover [Dover Town], with ambitions to then expand to many other Kent towns.

Further lines soon followed, branching off from Paddock Wood to Maidstone (1844) [now Maidstone West], a branch from Ashford to Canterbury [now Canterbury West] and on to Ramsgate and Margate [Margate Sands where the Dreamland site is situated today] (1846). The North Kent lines to Dartford, Gravesend and Strood followed in 1849. Strood was linked to Maidstone [West] in 1856, with many more in the south eastern suburbs of London. In 1864 the line to London Bridge was extended westwards to two new termini to the north of the river at Charing Cross (for the West End) and Cannon Street (for the City).

#### The London Chatham & Dover Railway (LC&DR)

With a single monopolistic railway company in Kent, and a route already opened through Tonbridge to Ashford and on to Dover, it is unlikely that Charing would ever have had a railway, but the seeds were sown in a new line in north Kent that soon appeared. Initially starting off life at the East Kent Railway (EKR), a new line was proposed through northeast Kent, feeding into and connecting with the SER at Strood, extending eastwards to Faversham and on to Canterbury (1860) [now Canterbury East] with ambitions to extend to Dover.

Cooperation between the SER and EKR soon deteriorated, the new line was renamed as the London Chatham & Dover Railway (LC&DR), was extended eastwards reaching Dover (1861) [now Dover Priory] and then under the noses of the SER, westwards via its own route through Swanley, Bromley South and Crystal Palace to a new station at Victoria in London (1860). Further expansion then followed with a new branch from Swanley along the Darenth Valley to Sevenoaks Tubbs Hill (1862), their own new direct route into Victoria through Penge Tunnel (1863) [the current route] and a branch from Faversham to Margate and Ramsgate Harbour (1863).

In 1874 a further branch was built from Otford, on their Sevenoaks line, to their own new station in Maidstone [now Maidstone East] which heightened competition further as the new direct LC&DR route to London Victoria was shorter and quicker than either of the two SER routes via either Paddock Wood or Strood.

However this still left a large gap in the county with several prosperous villages between Maidstone and Ashford devoid of a railway. This was the next stage ripe for a new line.

## **Further Inter Company Rivalry**

Rivalry between the newly formed LC&DR and the longer established SER, and particularly between their two respective Chairmen, Sir Edward Watkin of the SER and James Staats Forbes of the LC&DR, was fierce and bitter and resulted in many Kentish towns and cities gaining two separate stations and separate routes, competing for business to Rochester, Canterbury, Dover, Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Margate and Ramsgate, all with separate stations and via separate routes to their own respective London termini.

Once the LC&DR route had been opened from London Victoria via Faversham to Dover, some 11 miles shorter than the SER's original route that ran via Redhill, the LC&DR secured the lucrative Royal Mail contract in 1862 and the rivalry heightened. In 1868 the SER retaliated by building a cut-off line from London, direct to Tonbridge via Sevenoaks, avoiding the long roundabout route via Redhill and saving about 13 miles to the coast, albeit a very costly and difficult route with three long tunnels, and steeply graded with a 400 ft climb up to Sevenoaks and the two-mile long Sevenoaks tunnel, the longest in southern England.

By the early 1880s, then if you include the London suburbs, there were duplicate and competing services and routes provided by the two companies to London from :

Catford, Beckenham, Greenwich, Bromley, Rochester, Chatham, Maidstone, Sevenoaks, Margate, Ramsgate, Dover and Canterbury.

However there was one major growing market town that the LC&DR had not managed to reach – Ashford.

#### The Maidstone and Ashford Railway comes to Charing

The first mention of a line between Maidstone and Ashford, that most probably would have included Charing, appears to date from as early as 1845 with another scheme proposed in 1850, but neither came to fruition. In 1864 detailed plans were drawn up to connect the two towns with a line following the foot of the Downs, and even an Act of Parliament was passed on 10<sup>th</sup> August 1866 to build the line. However nothing happened immediately with a further proposal to build the line in 1877, but it wasn't until 12<sup>th</sup> August 1880 that a second Parliamentary Bill, the Maidstone and Ashford Act, was passed to allow it to be built, the company being the Maidstone and Ashford Railway Company.

The proposal was to build a new line to join end on to the existing LC&DR line at Maidstone, and broadly follow the old Folkestone Road as far as Ashford where a new terminus station would be built, called Ashford West [roughly where the Elwick Road car parks are today] but also with a connecting spur to the SER line and their station to allow through running.

The line was constructed by the company Lucas and Aird, and work started in April 1882 with a total cost for the whole 19-mile route of £420,000. The line was relatively simple to build with no major physical obstacles, running exclusively through open farm land and passing through several prosperous villages, which we must assume Charing was one. It required two short tunnels under Maidstone but little else in the way of major earthworks. One feature of the line was, and obviously still is, is that it climbed continuously for 9 miles from Maidstone rising about 350 ft to a summit at Lenham, then falling all the way to Ashford. In fact the first 3 miles out of Maidstone climbs at up to 1:80 up to Bearsted, one of the steepest sections of main line in Kent.

The line opened throughout to the new station at Ashford West on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1884, and included six intermediate stations at Bearsted, Hollingbourne, Harrietsham, Lenham, Charing and Hothfield (Hothfield closed in 1959). Immediately upon completion, the line was transferred to the LC&DR who continued to operate it until 1899.

The rivalry between the SER and the LC&DR eventually came to an end in 1899 when the two companies amalgamated to form a joint managing committee and although generally known thereafter as the South Eastern and Chatham Railway (SE&CR), legally both companies still existed in their own right until 1923.

The conclusion is that had it not been for the rivalry between the two companies, the line from Maidstone to Ashford may well have never been built and Charing would never have had a station or a railway.



Royal train carrying the Shah of Persia passing through Charing in Nov. 1919 on his way home after a state visit.

SE&CR "D" Class locomotive No 737, built at Ashford in 1901, now preserved in the National Railway Museum in York

(CDLHS Digital Collection)



Very early and rare view of Charing Station, circa 1910s, taken from the goods yard looking towards Ashford.

Note the original LC&DR Signal Box and lower quadrant signal of the period.

(CDLHS Digital Collection)

#### Rival and Competing Routes in Kent – even in 2020.

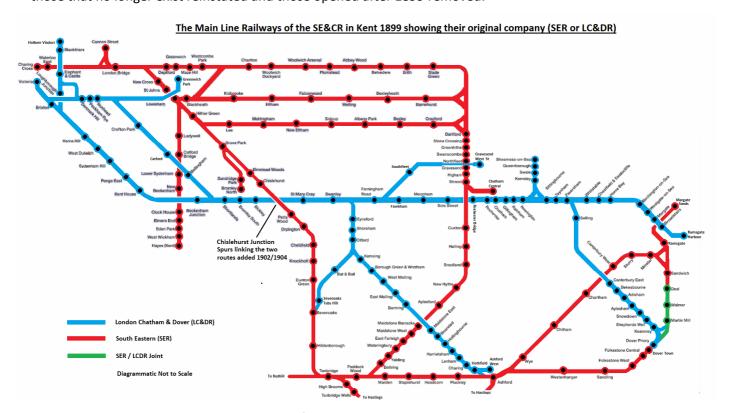
At the beginning the question was posed as to why trains from Charing go to Victoria, but if you go down the road to Pluckley, they still go to Charing Cross – then this is all a quirk of history, nothing else.

It is worth exploring this further, and the following table and accompanying map shows the pre 1899 situation in some detail. There are some fourteen towns and cities in Kent (or what are now suburbs of south London) where this duplication of routes existed pre 1899, and amazingly twelve of these still exist today. Only two towns have lost this duplication – Gravesend and Greenwich, all the rest still have duplicate services even in 2020, mostly operated by Southeastern Trains, but some now by Govia Thameslink. These towns are:

Town(s) Served	SER route (from Charing Cross / Cannon St.) via:	Date opened	LC&DR route (from Victoria) via:	Date opened
Catford	Lewisham to Catford Bridge	1857	Nunhead to Catford	1892
Beckenham	Lewisham to New Beckenham	1849	Herne Hill to Beckenham Junction	1871
Greenwich	London Bridge to present station	1836	Nunhead to Greenwich Park (1)	1888 (c 1917)
Gravesend	Dartford to present station	1849	Swanley to Gravesend West St. (2)	1886 (c 1953)
Bromley	Grove Park to Bromley North	1878	Herne Hill to Bromley South	1858
Rochester & Chatham	Dartford to <b>Chatham Central (3)</b>	1891 (c 1911)	Swanley to present stations	1858
Maidstone	Tonbridge & Paddock Wood to Maidstone West also Dartford & Strood to Maidstone West	1844 / 1856	Swanley and Otford to Maidstone East	1874
Sevenoaks	Chislehurst to present station	1868	Swanley and Otford to Tubbs Hill (1862), present station (1868)	1862/ 1868
Margate & Ramsgate	Tonbridge & Canterbury to present Ramsgate and <i>Margate Sands (4)</i>	1846 (c 1926)	Chatham & Faversham to present Margate and <i>Ramsgate Harbour (4)</i>	1863 (c 1926)
Dover	Tonbridge & Folkestone to <b>Dover Town (5)</b>	1844 (c 1914)	Chatham & Faversham to present station	1861
Canterbury	Tonbridge & Ashford to Canterbury West	1846	Chatham & Faversham to Canterbury East	1861
Ashford	Tonbridge to present station	1842	Maidstone to <i>Ashford West (6)</i>	1884 (c 1899)

- (1) Greenwich Park branch closed 1917, line from Nunhead diverted with new flyover into Lewisham,
- (2) Gravesend West St. branch closed to passengers in 1953,
- (3) Chatham Central closed 1911, route diverted to present Rochester and Chatham stations,
- (4) In 1926 the railways around Ramsgate and Margate were remodelled by the Southern Railway to link the ex SER & LC&DR lines (as they are today) and both Ramsgate Harbour and Margate Sands were closed. The site of Ramsgate Harbour station is still visible, and Margate Sands station became Dreamland.
- (5) Dover Town closed 1914, trains ran to Dover Priory,
- (6) Ashford West closed 1899, route was diverted to present Ashford station.

The main line rail routes in Kent, ignoring several branches now long gone, have changed little over the last 120 years, surviving two world wars and the axe of Dr Beeching in the 1960s, so that the 1899 map is so similar to the current 2020 Southeastern Trains map that the latter has been used and recoloured to show what was SER (red) and what was LC&DR (blue). It has been changed slightly to additionally show Ashford West, Ramsgate Harbour, Margate Sands, Gravesend West St, and Greenwich Park. Also the High-Speed line has been deleted as this obviously did not exist in 1899. Some stations have been renamed to their original name, those that no longer exist reinstated and those opened after 1899 removed.



The SE&CR Main Line Railway routes in Kent as of 1899 showing the ex SER and LC&DR lines, based upon the present 2020 Southeastern Trains Route map recoloured and altered to suit

So to go back to the original question – why do trains from Charing go to Victoria, but if you go down the road to Pluckley, they still go to Charing Cross – then there is no real reason at all, except that is where they went pre 1899 when the two competing lines were originally opened by their respective companies, and despite adding new spurs at Chislehurst Junction in the early 1900s to link both lines (see map), eight changes of ownership and 120 years of joint operation, (more about that later in Part 2) none of the subsequent railway companies ever recast the timetables!

This not only applies to Charing, but the vast majority of stations in Kent, south London and east Sussex where the trains still go to their pre 1899 London destination – old railway habits die hard.

The second part will complete the story of the line through Charing up to the present day and include why the first electric train from Charing departed 18 years late.

In the first part we left the story at the opening of the Maidstone and Ashford Railway in July 1884 and the following amalgamation of the South Eastern and the London Chatham & Dover Railways in 1899 to form the SE&CR. We also explored the rival and competing routes in Kent up to the present day. This part continues the story with the goods services, two World Wars, electrification and changes made since.

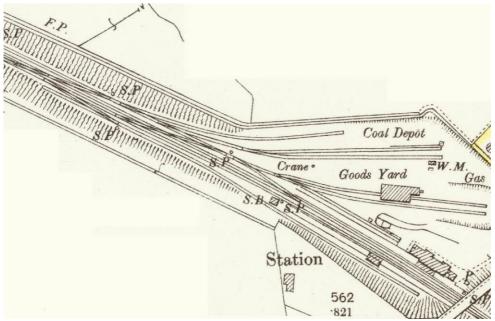
## **Goods Traffic at Charing**

Like all the other original five stations on the line, and indeed most other rural stations throughout the country, Charing was built with an extensive set of sidings and a shed for goods traffic. The map below, taken from the 1897 25" to the mile O.S. map shows the extent of the goods yard, most of which is now Hither Fields. Apart from general merchandise and agricultural produce, cattle seemed to feature as well as coal for both domestic use and the local Gas Works. During the Second World War, it was largely taken over for military use. After the war, freight services to local stations slowly declined in favour of road transport and as a result of the 1955 Modernisation Plan and the Beeching Report of 1963, virtually all of



Charing Station late 1950s with local Maidstone bound train, note the large number of cattle wagons in sidings (CDLHS Digital Collection)

these local goods yards throughout the country were closed and replaced by far fewer larger freight yards in major towns, and now even these have gone. Charing lost it freight services on 16<sup>th</sup> May 1964, although the goods shed remained for some time until all was demolished as the Hither Fields estate was built.



Charing Station circa 1897 showing the Goods Sidings and Gas Works

Note – what was the Goods Yard then is now Hither Fields.

(From 25" OS Map)

However, other than the goods traffic to the local stations, all of which had gone by the mid-1960s, the line through Charing has always been an important through route for international freight trains to and from the Continent, initially via the Dover – Dunkirk train ferry, until it ceased operation in 1995, and via the Channel Tunnel from 1994 onwards and this is still the case today. More locally, the line through Charing is still used for many aggregate trains to and from Brett's depot and sidings at Hothfield.



Charing Station, circa 1950s, showing goods wagons in the sidings



Charing Goods Shed, disused in 1976

(CDLHS Digital Collection)

## The First World War and the coming of the Southern Railway

At the outbreak of the First World War, all of the 120 or so railway companies in Britain were put under Government control with a Railway Executive Committee under Section 16 of the 1871 Regulation of Forces Act. Out of all of the railway companies, the SE&CR handled far more "special" military traffic and troop trains than any other company, and for the duration of the war, they run over 102,000 additional trains, often with temporary staff, quite usually women for the first time in many roles, and with very little in the way of any proper maintenance or investment. One route that saw more than its fair share of additional traffic was that through Charing, both in troop trains bound for the coastal ports for men going to the "Front", returning troops and ambulance trains carrying the wounded back. In fact from January 1915 until February 1919, Dover handled 7,781 ambulance trains carrying 1,260,000 wounded troops, many passing through Charing, and quite possibly accounted for some of the patients admitted to the VAD Hospital set up in the Parish Hall.

(CDLHS Digital Collection)

At the end of the war, the railways were quite literally "worn out" and despite pleas from many of the companies for help to rebuild their networks, the Government of the day refused, effectively telling them that it was just "the luck of the draw". Such was the state of the whole rail network, with some companies on the brink of collapse, that the Government eventually decided to wind up all 123 separate railway companies and form four larger ones under the Railways Act of 1921. These "big four" were:

London Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS), London North Eastern Railway (LNER) [NOT to be confused with the present day LNER company], Great Western Railway (GWR) [again NOT to be confused with the present day GWR company],

Southern Railway (SR).

The "Southern" was the smallest and subsumed the three original railway companies in the south of England. From east to west these were the South Eastern & Chatham (SE&CR), London Brighton & South Coast (LBSCR) and London South Western (LSWR).

All of the routes of the old SE&CR then came under the Eastern Section of the Southern Railway, including our line here. The Southern set about many changes, some affecting the line through Charing, and one was as a result of the concentration of all Folkestone and Dover Boat Trains at Victoria using the newly laid spurs at Chislehurst Junction (1902 / 1904) that allowed trains out of Victoria (ex LC&DR route) to access the main line via Sevenoaks and Tonbridge (ex SER route). Chislehurst Junction is where the four ex LC&DR tracks between Swanley and Victoria pass underneath the four ex SER tracks between Sevenoaks and Charing Cross — a very busy junction even today (shown on the map on page 5).

So as the allow a secondary diversionary route to the ports, the line via Maidstone East was strengthened and improved so to allow faster running for the heavier Boat Trains to use, for when the ex-SER main line through Tonbridge was closed. One major piece of work was the replacement of the original 1874 bridge over the Medway at Maidstone with a far more substantial one, still in use today. This work paid dividends later on during the Second World War.

During the inter-war years, both passenger and freight traffic rapidly picked up to post war levels and these improvement works resulted in the line through Charing seeing greater use than ever before.



Charing Station circa 1930 – Men Returning from an Armistice

Day Parade in Ashford

(CDLHS Digital Collection)

#### The Second World War

By mid-1939, once the looming war was inevitable, then under the Defence of the Realm Act, the Government took control of all the four Railway Companies again under the auspices of the new Railway Executive Committee, controlled by the Ministry of Transport. This gave the wartime Government overall control of the whole network, although all day-to-day operational control remained with the four companies. It also abolished all competitive practices and allowed cooperative working, sharing of routes and rolling stock.

After the outbreak of the Second World War, the Southern found itself in the front line again, running many additional troop and military materiel trains, trains for the evacuation of some 22,000 children as well as its own regular services. One particular major wartime effort really does need mentioning as it affected the line through Charing, and this was the railway operation to clear the channel ports of the 338,226 personnel of the British Expeditionary Force and French First Army evacuated from Dunkirk.

Exactly 80 years ago, from 27<sup>th</sup> May to 4<sup>th</sup> June 1940, over 300,000 men, and some women, were hurriedly evacuated by the vast flotilla of small boats off the beaches at Dunkirk – Operation Dynamo. They were nearly all landed at Folkestone, Dover, Ramsgate, Margate or Sheerness and all had to be moved away from these ports by train as quickly as possible and dispersed to stations in close proximity to the British Army's major depots and camps, generally Reading, Aldershot and Salisbury. Whilst the story of the evacuation off the beaches is well known, the movement of the troops away from the channel ports is less so.

This was all handled by the Southern Railway using a total of 620 special trains, 186 of them on 27<sup>th</sup> May alone, and totalling over 6,000 carriages. The entire operation was controlled by telephone by Railway Liaison Officers provided by the Southern Railway and the Army working together to coordinate all train and troop movements. Almost nothing was written down in the form of orders.

All these "specials" ran as empty trains to the ports to be filled up as rapidly as possible and then depart fully laden with troops. So as to regulate the number of trains and to get them to the right port at exactly the right time to load up with returning soldiers a large proportion of these empty trains were held temporarily end to end on the "down" [coastbound] line between Hothfield and Ashford. All other trains then had to use the "up" [London bound] line, as a single track between Charing and Ashford for the duration of the evacuation.

Most of the empty trains then via Canterbury West to Minster, then to either Ramsgate or Margate returning loaded via Chatham, or to Dover or Folkestone, retuning loaded via Tonbridge and Redhill, then on to their destinations. The whole of Kent's railway was turned into a "one-way system", and in this way the empty

trains to the ports, most of which had passed through Charing, did not have to cross the paths of loaded trains of troops coming away from the ports, minimising what's called a conflicting movement. It also had the advantage of allowing each train a "head on run" without wasting time in having to change direction, and detach, turn, and couple the locomotive to the other end. This allowed far more trains to be run in a short time and clear some 319,116 personnel in just nine days.

The Blitz also caused more than its fair share of damage to the Southern Network, with many routes temporarily blocked by bomb, and later flying bomb damage, however there does not appear to have been much in the Charing area, although Ashford, and particularly the Railway Works, were heavily bombed.

Charing station also played its part with the movement of troops to and from the various billets in the surrounding area. The goods yard had a tank loading ramp installed, most likely for the large number of Churchill tanks of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion Royal Tank Regiment stationed in Longbeech Woods. There is also records of drums of petroleum for the RAF at Egerton being brought in by train to Charing.

The Second World War undoubtedly had a greater destructive effect on the railways than the First World War did. Not only were there the same shortages of manpower, additional military traffic, and shortages of materials for repair, there was very considerable bomb damage that required constant, often temporary, repairs so as to keep the trains running. Once the Blitz started, the railway network, and junctions and marshalling yards in particular, were considered as prime targets. This left its mark, and by 1945, the railway system in Britain was "shot to pieces" both literally and metaphorically, and probably in a sorrier state than after the earlier war.

#### Transport Act of 1947 and the Charing Route up to the present time.

One of the early actions of the new 1945 Labour Government was to nationalise the entire railway system and this came into being on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1948 under the auspices of the Railway Executive of the British Transport Commission. What was the Southern Railway became the Southern Region of British Railways. Little more will be said about this era, but there were three major events that need mentioning. The first was the 1955 Modernisation Plan that recommended the phasing out of steam traction in favour of diesel and electric, and more significantly as far as Charing is concerned, it recommended the recommencement of the electrification of the lines in Kent, and is explained in greater detail in the next section. It also recommended closure of small country station goods yards, as mentioned earlier.

The second event was the publishing of the report in 1963 entitled "The Reshaping of British Railways" [commonly known as "The Beeching Report"]. This deprived many villages throughout the country of their rail service, and many towns and cities of any duplicate and competing routes. In all about 2,400 stations and over 5,000 miles of railway were closed, but apart from the closure of the goods yards, and several small branch lines, Kent escaped almost intact and this included all the duplicate routes identified in Part 1.

The final stage was the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 and you may wonder what this has to do with the line through Charing. As explained earlier, the route through Charing had been improved in the 1920s for use as the diversion for the Dover and Folkestone Boat Trains, but when these ceased around 1993 and the Eurostar service to Paris and Brussels started, initially running from London Waterloo via Tonbridge, a diversionary route to Ashford was needed, which was via the Maidstone line and Charing. Track improvements were made, extra passing loops installed for the freight trains and, more importantly the third rail traction supply was extensively upgraded to cope with the very high-power demands of the new Eurostar trains.

Additionally, to cope with international freight trains, in particular container traffic, the gauge clearance [the space the trains need under bridges etc.] had to be increased. Who remembers the work carried out in 1992 to replace the Pluckley Road bridge at Charing station? – some photos from our digital archives of this being reconstructed are included below. The old 1884 brick bridge was demolished and replaced by a reinforced concrete bridge in pre-cast sections, solely to allow higher and wider freight trains to pass through.



Replacing Pluckley Road Bridge 1992 to allow Channel Tunnel Freight Trains to pass (CDLHS Digital Collection)

There is also another "quirk" at Charing station that probably everyone has seen and nobody has ever asked why. If you look at the small canopy over the shelter on the "up" [London bound] platform, the decorative edge of the awning has a section cut out where it passes over the platform edge. Early photos of Charing station do not show this. It was cut out for the same reason, to allow the larger freight containers to pass through.

Interestingly, up until 1961 there was no footbridge at Charing Station and passengers had to cross the line by way of a foot crossing at the Lenham end of the station. Electrification made this unsafe, so a concrete footbridge was added, later to be replaced with the present steel one. After 100 years in use, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1984 saw the closure of the original 1884 Signal Box when the line between Maidstone and Ashford was



Another view of replacing Pluckley Road Bridge 1992

(CDLHS Digital Collection)



Charing Station "Up" Platform Shelter showing the cut out in the awning made to allow larger Freight Trains to pass through (CDLHS Digital Collection)

re-signalled, controlled from Maidstone East signal box, and more recently transferred to the new Ashford Signalling Centre.

## Electrification of the Charing Line – and why the first electric train was 18 years late

Before we go into the story of this, some background is needed, but this is only a very brief summary, not a detailed history of the electrification of the Southern – that is a complete book in itself.

As early as 1903 the joint board of the SE&CR saw the advantages of electrifying their inner London system so as to eliminate steam on suburban trains and to compete with the new electric trams, and were investigating using their own system. The outbreak of the first world war delayed any further development and by the time they were dissolved in 1923 they had not started any work. Both the London Brighton & South Coast Railway (LB&SCR) and the South Western Railway (L&SWR) had already started to electrify their inner suburban lines and once the Southern Railway took over in 1923, they became a great supporter of using electric trains and

immediately standardised all future schemes on the ex L&SWR third rail 660V DC system copied from the New York Subway – the system we still have [but nowadays its 750V].

The Southern Railway started rapidly expanding the routes, starting off with all the London inner suburban lines, and by 1930 the ex-SE&CR suburban lines as far as Orpington and Gravesend had been electrified, and by 1935 Otford and Sevenoaks had been included.

After completing the electrification of all the lines from London to the Sussex coast from Hastings in the east to Portsmouth in the west by 1937, the Southern then turned their attention back to Kent and created a rolling programme to encompass all of the ex - SE&CR lines. The first stage was the extension of the third rail from Gravesend and Swanley to Gillingham, Strood to Maidstone West, and Otford to Maidstone East. Generally known as the "Gillingham and Maidstone Scheme" this opened for full electric working on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1939. At this point all through services from Charing to London were replaced by a shuttle service to Maidstone East only, where passengers had to change into the new electric trains.

The Southern Railway's rolling programme originally envisaged immediately continuing the work to convert all the main lines in Kent, which would have most likely given us, here in Charing, electric trains in around mid-1943. However the Second World War was looming and once war became inevitable, one of the first actions of the Government was to again take control of the four Railway Companies as explained earlier, and all future electrification and modernisation schemes were postponed for the duration. At the end of the war, the Government relinquished control back to the original companies, and at a board meeting in 1946 of the Southern Railway Executive, they decided to recommence the previously postponed electrification work in Kent and East Sussex in stages.

Stage 1 was to extend it from Gillingham to Faversham and then to Ramsgate and Dover, completion probably around mid-1951. Stage 2 was to extend it from Sevenoaks to Ashford and then on to Ramsgate via Dover. Stage 3 consisted of Maidstone East to Ashford then to Ramsgate via Canterbury. Completion of Stage 3 would have probably been around mid-1953 at which time, again, we should have had electric trains from Charing, some 10 years after originally planned. However before they could start the work, the railway system was nationalised as described earlier and this delayed the work for a second time.



Charing 1960 just prior to Electrification, local train for Ashford, BR Standard 2MT 2-6-2T locomotive with a five-coach set (CDLHS Digital Collection)

After Nationalisation in 1948, there was not the money for any investment of this nature, so again, nothing further transpired. It was not until the 1955 Modernisation Plan that railway electrification was back on the agenda. One of the first major investment projects was to resurrect the conversion of the main lines in Kent, and the original 1940s Southern Railway plans were "dusted off" and formed the basis for the work, again undertaking it in the similar phases.

Work eventually re-started in Kent in 1957 on phase 1, lines via Faversham, opening throughout in June 1959. Phase 2, all lines via Ashford, then followed and was completed two years later, and so on the 9<sup>th</sup> October 1961 the first electric trains started running from Charing, at the third attempt, albeit in the old steam train schedules, but some 18 or so years after they should have, had it not been initially for the war and then the subsequent nationalisation. On 18<sup>th</sup> June 1962 the full new electric timetable came into use and Charing had faster through trains to London once more.

### **Changes in Train Company Ownership and Operation**

Over the last 136 years, the trains here at Charing have been operated by eight separate companies:

1884	London Chatham & Dover Railway (LC&DR) [when it opened]
1899	South Eastern & Chatham Railway (SE&CR) [after SER & LC&DR amalgamation]
1923	Southern Railway, Eastern Section [after the Railways Act of 1921]
1948	Railway Executive of the British Transport Commission, [after Transport Act of 1947]
1962	British Railways Board, Southern Region, South Eastern Division [after BTC was dissolved]
1994	Connex South Eastern [first franchised operator after Rail Privatisation]
2003	South Eastern Trains Ltd [temporarily re-nationalised after Connex franchise taken away]
2006	Southeastern Trains, part of the Govia Group [the current operator today]

Ownership and operation of the infrastructure [track, signals, bridges, electrification etc] was vested in Railtrack in 1994 at Privatisation until being relieved of its responsibility, and now from 2002, Network Rail.

# **Train Services and Staffing at Charing over the Years**

One may well imagine that a small village station such as Charing has had its railway "heyday" and that passenger numbers would be in decline, but nothing could be further from the truth. If we ignore the present unforeseen exceptional circumstances, then the station sees more people now using the trains than at any time in the past. The "footfall" in 2018/19 was the highest on record at an estimated 86,140 per year. This is almost entirely due to the rise in London commuting, something that was virtually non-existent in the earlier days. Looking at the timetables over the years is also very informative. One might imagine that trains were more frequent in the past than now — again not so. Taking a snapshot of the typical Weekday and Sunday timetable of trains from Charing towards London in 1922, 1950 and today we see that:

Year	Weekday trains to London	Sunday trains to London
1922	9 trains	4 trains
1950	16 trains*	7 trains*
2020	29 trains	16 trains

<sup>\*</sup> In 1950, it was a shuttle service to Maidstone, with a connection by electric train to Victoria. Also of note is that up until 1962, trains ran at completely irregular and "ad hoc" times. It was not until the start of the full electric train service in 1962 that the hourly interval timetabling was first used.

Staffing at Charing station has changed dramatically over the years. According to the 1891 census, the establishment appeared to be 1 Stationmaster and 2 Porters at the station, 2 Signalmen, and 3 Labourers (Platelayers) to look after the track in the area. There would also have probably been 2 Clerks, but as these were not on the census, they probably did not live here. A total of around seven staff working at the station, covering both the passenger and goods traffic is quite typical for a country station with a goods yard at that period. Nowadays we have just one person in the ticket office for a few hours a day, despite there being far more trains than in the past, but, of course, no goods traffic.

The future ? – Who knows, assuming we rise out of the current situation, nothing is expected to change much except that from some future date, Maidstone should see regular new Thameslink trains to Cambridge and some coming through Charing on the way to Ashford in the mornings and evenings.

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