

Ups and Downs of an Elevated Line

H.P. White



The South London Line is best known for the LBSCR's pioneer a.c. electrification. This horse-shoe shaped line between Victoria and London Bridge has been somewhat neglected in recent years but new initiatives by Network SouthEast show that attempts are now being made to win back passengers.

Radial rail routes in Greater London have had an almost universal history of development, though that might have been distinctly patchy in some cases. The history of the comparatively few peripheral services has been much more patchy. The so-called 'Middle', 'Outer' and even 'Super-Outer' Circles via Addison Road (now Olympia) have all disappeared, while the North London Line (now North Woolwich-Richmond) after a long period of running down has taken on a new lease of life in recent years. The story of the South London Line between London Bridge and Victoria reveals even more mixed fortunes since it opened throughout in 1867.

On 30th June 1862 the London Brighton & South Coast Railway (LBSC) obtained its South London Act to build a link between London Bridge and Victoria. The 8.75 miles of line were never more than four miles from the City but traversed an area rapidly undergoing suburban development, much of it of high quality, and to serve this was its prime function. The scheme included four new platforms on the south side of London Bridge and three new tracks on the approaches, all opened on 13th August 1866. The approach tracks were the first entirely owned by the LBSC, all tracks as far as Corbett's Lane Junction hitherto being South Eastern Railway (SER) owned.

Participation by the London Chatham & Dover led to considerable modifications beyond Queen's Road, Peckham. As finally completed, at the Victoria end the new line began at Battersea Pier Junction, on the south bank of the Thames, 72 chains from the terminus. Here connection was made with the original low-level route of the West End & Crystal Palace Company's line to Clapham Junction. From Battersea Park Junction the South London Line diverged from the new high level

main line to Clapham Junction, so that it had its own platforms at the station. The line then crossed over the low-level routes in the Stewarts Lane area to arrive on the south side of the LCD lines at Factory Junction.

Meanwhile the LCD, which also originally approached Victoria over the West End & Crystal Palace, had opened its direct route from Penge Junction (Beckenham) via Herne Hill on 1st July 1862. The curve from Loughborough Junction to Canterbury Road Junction to join the main line at Brixton opened on 1st May 1863, allowing the Elephant (later Ludgate Hill)—Victoria service to avoid reversal at Herne Hill.

The LBSC's South London Line was now planned to pass under the LCD's new line from Canterbury Road Junction to Crystal Palace High Level east of Peckham Rye and to run parallel to the LCD all the way to Factory Junction, rising over the Herne Hill line at Brixton. Under the LCD's New Lines Act (1864) parallel lines from Factory Junction to Barrington Road Junction (3 ch west of East Brixton station) were LCD property and from there to Cow Lane Junction (18 ch east of the LCD platforms at Peckham Rye station) were that of the LBSC.

The LCD service to Crystal Palace High Level began on 1st August 1865 with trains from Victoria. The Ludgate Hill service via the east facing spur up from Loughborough Junction to Cambria Road Junction began on 1st July 1867. From Nunhead Junction the Greenwich Park branch opened on 18th September 1871 (as far as Blackheath Hill). Later, Nunhead was connected with the main line at Shortlands by the Catford Loop, opened on 1st July 1892. This provided an alternative route for long-distance trains from Victoria and Ludgate Hill.

Above Peckham Rye Junction in 1957 looking west. The line to Tulse Hill diverges to the left. The original LBSC electric depot is in the background. The site of the whole depot is now built over. A 2EPB (Class 416) passes on a South London service. R.C. Riley



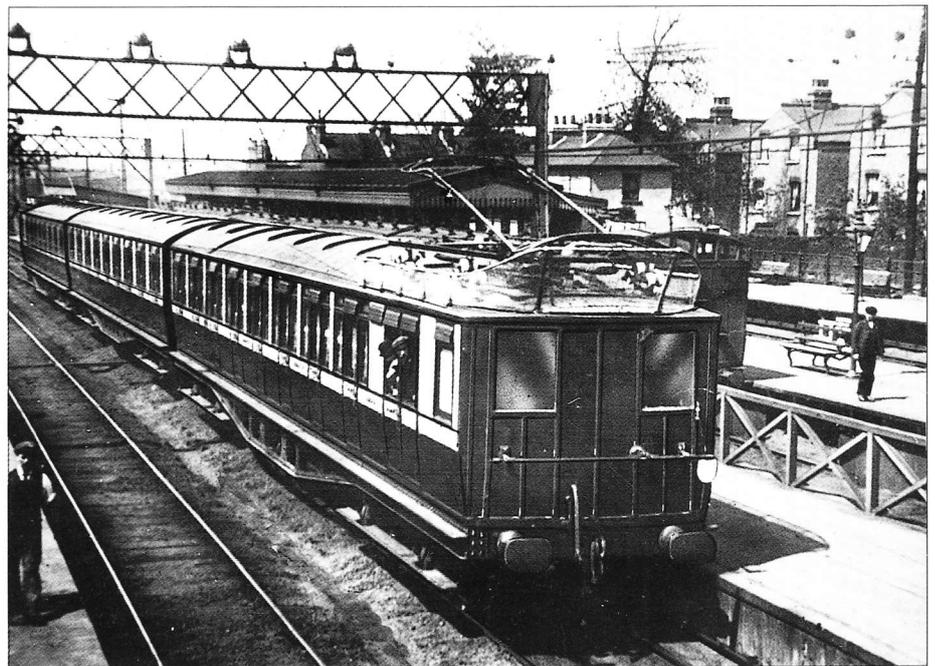
Above Repainting Battersea Park Station in the run-up to the 1909 electrification. These are the South London Line platforms looking towards Wandsworth Road. A train for London Bridge of LBSC four-wheeled coaches has been diverted to the Victoria bound platform. The station building, now restored, is in the right background. R.C. Riley

Right One of the LBSC a.c. sets in its original form calls at Wandsworth Road Station. The LCD side is still open and the 'Birdcage' brake of a Victoria bound train can be seen behind the LBSC one. R.C. Riley Collection

The LBSC opened their line from Corbett's Lane Junction to Loughborough Park (East Brixton from 1st January 1894) on 13th August 1866, while trains began to run through to Victoria on 1st May 1867. The system was completed by the opening of the line from Peckham Rye Junction (13 ch west of the station) to Tulse Hill and on to Mitcham Junction on 1st October 1868. A spur was also provided by the LBSC from Old Kent Road to the East London Line opened on 13th March 1871.

The LBSC provided an intensive service between the two termini in response to suburban development, the whole area becoming built up during the 1860s and 1870s. Much of it was high class and the demand for first class travel was sustained. Denmark Hill station, for example, was surrounded by large villas in large gardens. In October 1872 the first of William Stroudley's famous Class A1 0-6-0Ts, the 'Terriers', went into service. Designed specially for the East London Line and the SLL, they were used to haul sets of close-coupled four-wheelers in trains of up to ten or eleven vehicles.

The South London service settled down for a long period with little change. But at the turn of the Century dissatisfaction with the LBSC's Brighton service was at its height and there were schemes for a rival electric line as well as an unorthodox monorail. In response to this threat, the LBSC's Chief Engineer, Sir Charles Morgan, visited electric railways in Italy and reported in January 1902, recommending electrification on the overhead system. Powers were obtained by Act of 21st July 1903. Sir Philip Dawson had been appointed Electrical Engineer in 1894 and in July 1904 he recommended to the LBSC Board single phase a.c. at 6,700 volts. They autho-

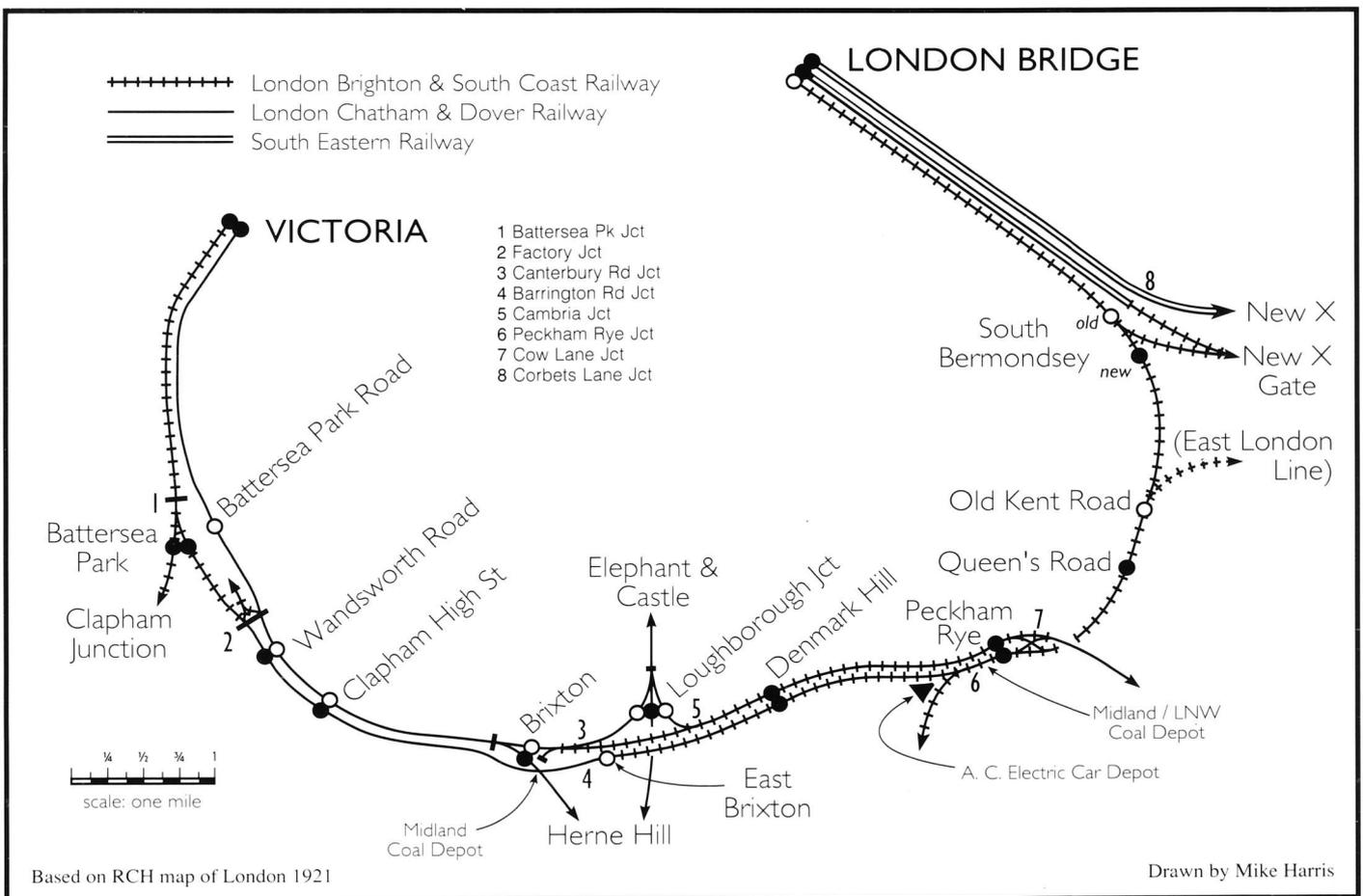


rised conversion of the section of the SLL between Peckham Rye and Battersea Park, this being the section over which only SLL trains ran on the southern pair of tracks. This route was chosen for trial purposes as it was fairly short but had varied physical features — cutting, embankment, tunnel, etc. Tenders were received in 1905 and the contract awarded to the Berlin firm of AEG.

It was during this period that the line, whose passengers were essentially short-distance ones, began to suffer from competition from the London County Council's electric tramways. After 1903 routes were opened both parallel to the SLL and also offering direct routes to central London. The City & South London Tube was also extended to Clapham Common in 1900 with a station at Clapham North, two hundred yards from the South London station. This threat of competition led to the LBSC pressing on with electrification even after the death of the rival schemes to Brighton. But tramway competition was not, as frequently averred, the original motive for conversion.

The first experimental train ran between Battersea Park and East Brixton on 17th January 1909. After several postponements of opening dates, the full service between London Bridge and Victoria was inaugurated on 1st December. The basic service at 15 minute intervals was essentially the same as had been provided in steam days, but journey time was cut from 36 to 24 minutes. For marketing purposes the title of 'Elevated Electric' was adopted.

At first eight 3-car units were provided, being stabled at a depot in the V at Peckham Rye Junction. The end motor cars had bow collectors and had guard's accommodation and eight third class compartments. The trailer coach had nine first class compartments, the sets seating 132 third and 56 first class passengers. All vehicles had side gangways between compartments to improve passenger flow, and were considerably better appointed than most stock running on the Brighton main line at the time! The opportunity was taken to abolish second class, which disappeared from all suburban services in 1911.



Left The London Bridge end of the carriage depot built at Peckham Rye to house and maintain the SLL electric trains. In the foreground is a petrol driven vehicle purpose-built for the maintenance of the overhead wires. All LBSC carriage stock was formed in numbered sets, the electric units being identified by E suffixes. Lens of Sutton

Right A re-formed 2-car a.c. unit calls at the original South Bermondsey in 1928 in the last days of the overhead. H.C. Casserley

Below In early Southern Railway days a down Boat Train passes Wandsworth Road, hauled by a rebuilt Wainwright 4-4-0 No.A179. The LCD platforms, closed in 1916, have already been removed. Lens of Sutton

Shortly after opening, these sets were found to be unsatisfactory. Already first class accommodation was excessive and overall there was excess capacity off-peak and overcrowding at peaks. The sets were re-formed into 2-car units (running in pairs at peaks). The original motor coaches were retained coupled with driving trailers converted from bogie suburban steam stock and provided with six third and two first class compartments. The first class trailers were withdrawn and equipped for use on steam trains on the main line to Brighton, but in due course were converted again for the West Croydon and Wimbledon electrification.

Electrification of the South London Line reversed the downward passenger trend. In 1902, 1,213,281 passengers had been booked at Peckham Rye but by 1909 this figure had fallen to 526,373. In the first year of electrification patronage had risen to 1,051,263. On the whole South London Line passengers dropped from 8 million in 1903 to 3.5 million in 1908, but the following year, the first after electrification, they had risen to 8 million and by 1920 to 12 million.

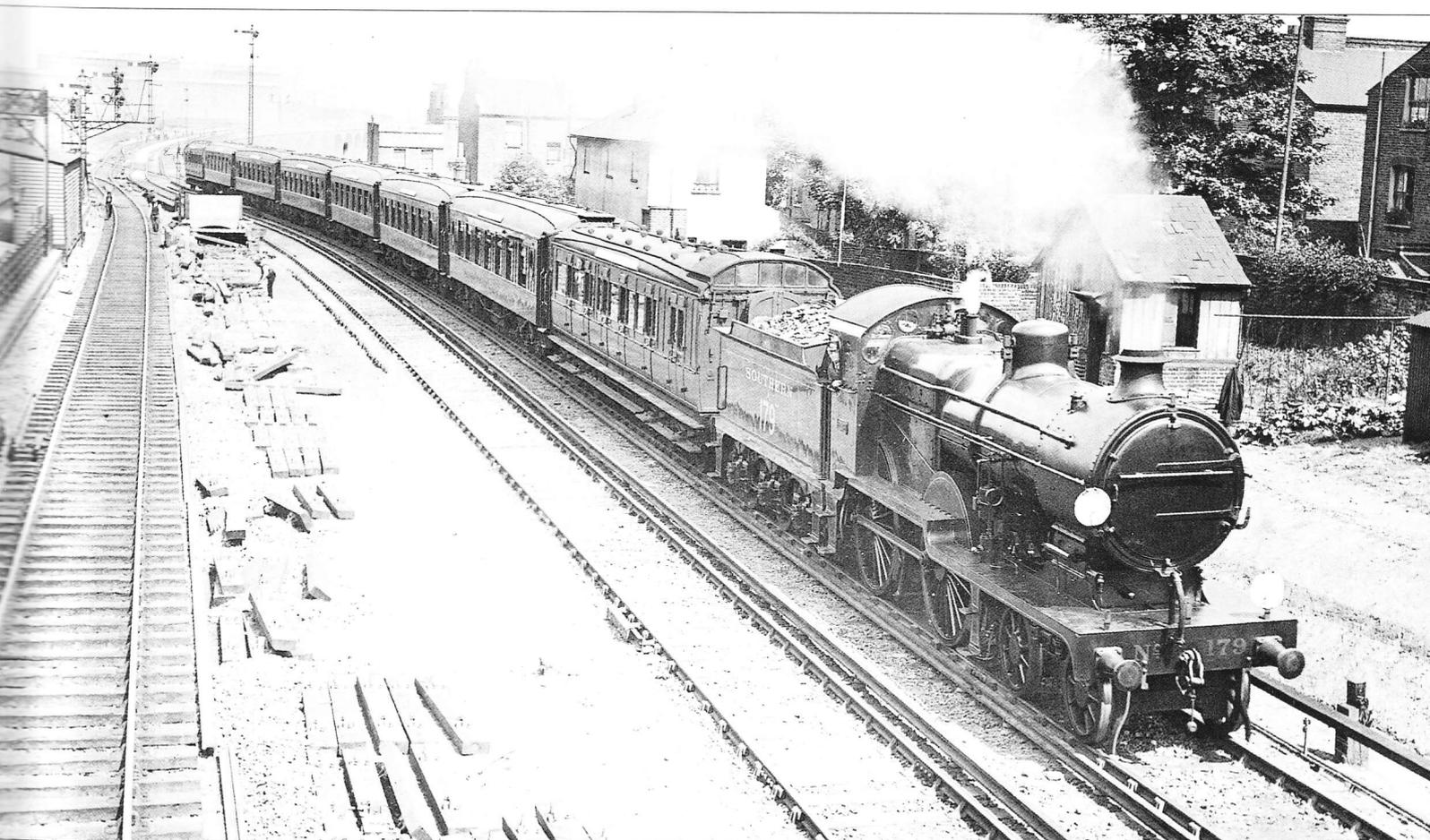
All this contrasts with events on the LCD (South Eastern & Chatham from 1899). Suffering the same tramway competition, the



SE&CR made no attempt to improve their services. In the 1880s there had been some 80 trains each way between Ludgate Hill and Victoria. But the war provided a good excuse for withdrawing the service and closing several stations. Trains ceased to call at Battersea Park Road (just south of Battersea Pier Junction), Wandsworth Road and Clapham on 3rd April 1916, the platforms on their lines at the last two being later removed.

In 1921 there were 67 South London departures from London Bridge between 4.58am and 10.34pm. They were not at regular intervals, for example they left at 12.02, 12.15, 12.32, 12.47 and 12.58pm. The SE&CR had

abandoned the Greenwich Park service and had concentrated all the Crystal Palace and Catford Loop departures on St Pauls and Ludgate Hill. The Southern, though they completed outstanding a.c. electrification schemes, intended in the long term to concentrate on d.c. third rail. Following a short period during which both a.c. and d.c. units were in use, d.c. trains took over the South London service on 17th June 1928. Sixteen motor coaches from the original South London Line a.c. stock were converted to d.c. and formed into two-car sets. They ran until replaced by 2EPB (Class 416) units, initially of the BR standard variety, in the mid-1950s.





The LCD lines on the north side were also electrified, the full new service being inaugurated on 12th July 1925, though none of the closed stations were reopened. An important link between the South London lines and the lines from Charing Cross/Cannon Street was later provided. The derelict Greenwich Park branch from Nunhead was connected near the closed Lewisham Road station to Lewisham in 1929. Originally intended for freight transfer, peak hour electric services to and from St Pauls (now Blackfriars) began on 30th September 1935. But these improvements were for the benefit of middle and outer suburban services. No attempt was made to revive the inner suburban services on the former LCD lines.

By 1930 the weekday departures for Victoria from London Bridge had fallen to 45, there now being only the 12.19 and 12.48 in the hour after midday. The long decline of the service had already begun after temporary withdrawal during the Miners' and General Strikes between 18th May and 20th September 1926. By 1938 offpeak services had fallen to two per hour, though four-coach trains of two sets were still being used at peaks.

Over the South London service the long period of stagnation and neglect continued after the war and there is little to record. In 1955 there was still the basic thirty minute service, augmented to twenty minutes at peaks. The 1965 and 1975 timetables show virtually no change, though a single set now sufficed for peak period trains. It was true that Queen's Road was rebuilt, but otherwise stations were allowed to decay.

The ex-LCD lines continued to be used as a through route by relief Continental, holiday and excursion trains and also for freight, mainly to and from Hither Green. In 1981 peak period trains via Lewisham began to run to Victoria as well as Blackfriars. The Class 416 units on the line were replaced from the early 1980s by the slightly newer type with SR-style bodywork. These were all 'facelifted' in the mid-1980s, when they were given fluorescent lighting, new flooring and brighter upholstery.

In 1976 the ex-LBSC line lost its Sunday service and the Saturday ones in 1981. From 1984 trains ran between London Bridge and Victoria only in the peaks.



Top The LBSC side of Peckham Rye in its original form but after removal of the up fast track. In 1962 the original platforms were demolished and replaced by an island platform.

Centre and Left East Brixton station, with its simple wooden buildings perched against the side of the viaduct, closed to passengers in 1976, use of the station having always suffered from its inconvenient siting. G. Larkbey/Lens of Sutton



Above In October 1953 a former a.c. unit converted to d.c. third rail emerges from the mist to call at Clapham High Street. The station building was built in a much simpler style by the LCD than were the LBSC ones and is no longer in railway use. R.C. Riley



Left Queen's Road, Peckham on 4th March 1954, before rebuilding as an island platform. A newly delivered 2EPB unit forms the 13.48 London Bridge-Victoria. R.C. Riley

Let us now take a trip on the line, starting at London Bridge. Platforms 19-23 were closed in 1978 and replaced by a car park. The southern pair of lines on the viaduct (the 1866 widening) are unchanged. South Bermondsey (1¾ miles) is an island platform on the viaduct of the 1880 loop. It was resited on 17th June 1928. The 1866 station (Rotherhithe to 1869) was located on Rotherhithe New Road. The new station is approached from the latter by nearly 400 yards of badly lit, shelterless footpath. The shrub-covered embankment of the East London spur can be seen on the left just before crossing Old Kent Road, where there was a station (closed 1st January 1917).

Queen's Road Peckham (2¾ miles) is also an island platform, but this is a somewhat recent rebuild (1977). The original wooden station had two side platforms, but the elimination of

the third line made space during the 1970s for the island. The line then passes under the line from Nunhead which swings round parallel on the north side. The space between the two viaducts was formerly occupied by the London & North Western and Midland coal yard opened on 23rd March 1891 and closed in August 1961¹. Ground-level sidings were connected by a wagon hoist. In 1945 three men dealt with 15,000 tons of coal.

The two viaducts remain sufficiently far apart for the large station building at ground level to be built between. It is in the rather flamboyant 'Brighton Baroque' and in recent years has been restored after long years of neglect. Unfortunately it cannot be appreciated because of newer building of the Southern Railway period on what was the station forecourt. Side platforms remain on the

ex-LCD side, but those on the LBSC side with a west facing bay on the up side, were replaced in 1962 by an island on the space left by the third line. Until 1911 the East London service from Old Kent Road Jct terminated here.

This is the last station to be served by trains to and from the Tulse Hill direction in addition to the Victoria ones. Off-peak frequency has tended to decline in recent years, but in 1990 there were four an hour each way. On the LCD route there were three trains an hour each way via the Catford Loop, two Thameslink from Luton to Sevenoaks via Swanley or Petts Wood and one from Blackfriars to Orpington. One of the two trains per hour from Victoria to Ashford via Maidstone East was diverted by this route after the withdrawal of the off-peak South London service, calling at Denmark Hill and Peckham Rye.



Just another suburban station? The restored 'Brighton Baroque' glory of Denmark Hill in 1989. Restoration has also been undertaken at platform level. A.C. Mott

Below The nearly derelict Clapham High Street station in process of restoration. G. Larkbey

Immediately beyond the station the two sets of lines converge and at Peckham Rye Junction the line reaches the higher ground of Denmark Hill and the long viaduct section ends. Short tunnels are traversed on either side of Denmark Hill station, situated in a cutting. The large station offices at ground level, suffered heavily from a fire in 1980. Pressure from the Camberwell Society led to excellent restoration and the building now serves as a public house (in the one-time station master's quarters) as well as the booking hall with its magnificent ceiling. It has gained a Civic Trust award.

Beyond King's College Hospital the line again enters another long viaduct section extending all the way to Grosvenor Bridge, interrupted only briefly by a short ground level section through Clapham High Street. At Cambria Junction the spur down to the line from Herne Hill curves away to the north and the latter is immediately crossed over. The western spur up to Canterbury Road Junction is still much in use for stock transfer. Connected with the LCD lines was the Midland's Brixton Coal Depot, closed in 1947¹.

East Brixton station served only the LBSC lines. Its wooden platforms were high above the junction of Coldharbour Lane and Barrington Road. Declining traffic, a rather inconvenient site and decay led to closure on 5th January 1976. A traffic count in 1960 had shown that only 71 passengers joined Victoria bound trains between 07.00 and 09.00, with 46 boarding London Bridge trains. In that year comparable figures for Queens Road were 54 and 606, but other trains stopped there in addition to those on the South London service.

Brixton station (LCD), ¾ mile beyond the site of East Brixton, now has only platforms on the Herne Hill lines and these are immediately under the ex-LBSC line, which has climbed steeply to pass over it and descends again to the same level. The arched lattice girder bridge carrying the South London Line over the platforms at Brixton was replaced by a stronger but less distinctive structure in 1990, in readiness for future heavier use as a route to the Channel Tunnel.

Clapham High Street station (renamed in 1989) is 6¼ miles from London Bridge. Built by the LCD, it is a much simpler structure than the former LBSC stations. It was allowed

to get into a ruinous condition and in 1989 was joint 'winner' (with Hunts Cross, Liverpool) of the *Daily Telegraph* award for the worst BR station. The building, now in non-railway use has since been restored with the help of a grant from the Borough of Lambeth. It was the only station with goods facilities, provided by the LCD, and closed on 10th June 1963. At one time the present subway entrance ran the full width of the embankment and had a booking office at the north entrance, but this was closed and the station de-staffed in the 1970s.

Wandsworth Road (6¾ miles) is the other station on the LCD section. The building was even simpler than Clapham High Street and is now a derelict shell, though the platforms have been improved in Network SouthEast style. During 1990 the dingy and disliked subway was replaced by a footbridge from Mitcham on the West Croydon-Wimbledon line. At both stations the LCD platforms were removed soon after the end of World War 1.

Immediately beyond is Factory Junction where the two lines split onto separate viaducts and between them the low level lines

drop away into the Stewarts Lane complex. The two lines rejoin under the wrecked skeleton of Battersea Power Station, architectural joy of the 1930s. The ex-LBSC viaduct joins the main line just beyond Battersea Park station. There are therefore separate platforms for the South London Line (7½ miles), which allows some trains to terminate. Platform 1, all wooden and projected from the viaduct on cast-iron columns, is the last survivor of its type on the line. The listed street level buildings are in the same style as Peckham Rye and Denmark Hill and like them, after years of neglect, have been well restored. On the ex-LCD viaduct immediately to the east was Battersea Park Road, which disappeared in the 1916 closures. Grosvenor Bridge is now crossed and the line descends steeply into Victoria, 8¾ miles from London Bridge.

Alarmed by the rundown, the South London Line Travellers Association (SoLLTA) came into being in 1987. Its formation was timely for it seemed the London Bridge—Victoria service was in terminal decline.





Looking towards Brixton on 14th February 1991. A down train for Bromley South and beyond passes a new connection being put in between the LCD lines to the left and the LBSC ones to the right.
A.C. Mott

Below The new look. The special train of two refurbished 416 units provided on 8th May 1991 to publicise the restored all-day South London service stands at a refurbished Clapham High Street.
H.P. White

In June 1988, due to train-crew shortage, at a few days notice the peak service was reduced to hourly. It was even strongly rumoured BR were considering total withdrawal for the time being, but were dissuaded by the London Regional Passengers' Committee. The last train of the day was again withdrawn at short notice, though SoLLTA managed to get this restored. SoLLTA have also given practical assistance in publicising the South London service. Leaflets were distributed to passengers entering Clapham North to join the overcrowded Tube and leaflets informing of the restoration of the half hourly service put through hundreds of letter boxes around the stations.

Pressure from SoLLTA and the Local Authorities, together with a change in policy by South Central Division of Network SouthEast, led to a restoration of the half hourly all day service between 05.54 and 19.24 from London Bridge (Mon-Fri) and 08.24 to 18.24 (Sat) from 13th May 1991. Initially this was provided by 416 units on weekdays and otherwise surplus '319' Thameslink units on Saturday, the new Class 456 DOO 2-car units with sliding doors being promised for later in the year.

To publicise the re-vamped service, on 8th May BR provided a special train of two face-lifted 416 units for invited guests, including the Public Transport Minister, Roger Freeman MP, civic dignitaries, SoLLTA Committee and media representatives. Leaving Victoria at 13.22 there were calls at Clapham High Street and South Bermondsey for the unveiling of commemorative plaques before proceeding to Denmark Hill where in the Victorian tradition of line openings there were speeches and a collation.

And what of the future of the South London Line? One thing is certain, that its strategic importance and the density of occupation will greatly increase. Operationally, the hitherto rigid distinction between the two pairs of tracks is breaking down and new crossovers are being installed. In May 1991 the author caught the 16.44 Victoria—Barnhurst via Lewisham. It crossed over to the LBSC lines at Wandsworth Road, and was still on them when it called at Denmark Hill.

It is to be hoped the expected patronage of the South London Link will materialise. But

its fuller local potential will not be realised until high level platforms are provided at Brixton, which is the most important shopping centre and therefore traffic generator along the route. An opportunity was lost when the bridge was renewed in 1990. At little more cost, sufficient width for platforms could have been provided. In the longer term a great many travel opportunities would open up if the service were diverted at the eastern end to Lewisham (the extant bay at Blackheath would make a convenient operating terminal) and at the western to Clapham Junction and the West London. In this way a large number of important interchanges would open up, including the Docklands Light Railway extension to Lewisham. These schemes have been the subject of several reports².

But most important of all, from 1993 it will form part of the approach to the new Waterloo International terminal from the Channel Tunnel, being used by trains routed over the Herne Hill and the Catford Loop lines. Already the spur down to the Waterloo line at Queenstown Road is taking shape.

Finally, reference must be made to the importance of the line for through freight working emphasised by the fact that BR is renewing many bridges on the route to take heavier trains. All this in addition to the line's potential for revivifying public transport in south London. After more than a century the South London Line is more important than ever.

The author acknowledges with gratitude assistance freely given by Graham Larkbey of SoLLTA. Anyone interested in the Association should contact Mr Graham Larkbey, Secretary, South London Line Travellers Association, c/o CPTG, 13/15 Stockwell Road, London SW9. Thanks are also due to the Public Relations Section, Central Southern Division, Network SouthEast.

¹See the article *Keeping London's Fires Burning* by John N. Young, pp 2-9.

²These include *Towards 2000*, Lambeth Public Transport Group, and *South Circular Assessment Study — Stage 2, Options*. Report by Travers Morgan to the Department of Transport, December 1989.

