

Railway 150 - The Direct Portsmouth Railway and The Battle of Havant

Havant Station, 13th April 2009

Ladies and Gentlemen,

2009 marks the 150th anniversary of rail travel between Havant and London via Petersfield.

The railway arrived in Havant in 1847 with the Coastway line from Brighton, but at that time, if you wanted to get to the capital you had to go either by Chichester or by Eastleigh.

Construction of the line through Petersfield was started in 1853 as a speculative venture. Fortunately by the time it was ready for use in 1858 the London and South Western Railway had agreed to run the services. This was not welcomed by the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway and when the LSWR tried to run its first train on 28th December 1858 it was prevented from passing through Havant by the LB&SCR whose navvies removed rails and chained an engine to the track. The resulting confrontation has gone down in railway folklore as the 'Battle of Havant' – although in reality there was probably little physical violence.

Whilst the matter was sorted out in the Courts, an arrangement perhaps all too familiar to us today was put in place. Buses (or in fact, at that time, stagecoaches) replaced trains between a temporary station at Denvilles, and Portsmouth. A limited service eventually started on 24th January 1859 but legal action continued until the 8th August before agreement was reached and the full service operated after that date. Originally operated by steam trains, the line was electrified in 1937.

Today we again have two separate companies – South West Trains and Southern - who operate the two routes running into Portsmouth over track owned by Network Rail.

We are standing in the third Havant Station. The first was built in 1847 to the east of North Street with a level crossing to Leigh Road, and was rebuilt in 1889. This was replaced in 1938 by the present station.

Over the past few years we have seen a large investment in rail in the Havant area. The track and signalling systems have been upgraded, and a new train control centre has been built in the old goods yard in Centenary Gardens, bringing jobs to Havant. The Borough Council has played its part in encouraging this investment, and contributing time and resources where it is able.

This year we have seen yet more improvements courtesy of Network Rail with the building of new lifts to provide step-free access between the platforms. All

this recognises the key interchange position that Havant occupies on the rail network – last year over two million passengers started journeys from, or changed trains at, this station. Putting that into context, that's four times more than Portsmouth Harbour with its attractions of Gunwharf, the Dockyard and the Isle of Wight ferry.

Today a fleet of modern electric trains provides the services with which we are all familiar, whisking us to London in 80 minutes at prices which in real terms are less than those which applied 150 years ago. It provides a vital link between many towns and villages along its route, and historically has been the reason why many of those towns and villages are the way they are today. The value to our local economy of our rail link to London is enormous.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are here today to celebrate 150 years of progress. The visionaries who brought the Direct Portsmouth Railway to Havant couldn't imagine how we live today. Likewise the next 150 years will doubtless see changes we can't foresee. But what is certain is that rail travel is one of the safest and most environmentally friendly ways to travel, and the presence of the railway in the Borough will continue to directly contribute to our economic prosperity and the quality of our environment.

I want to thank South West Trains for the work they have done in organising today's event, and wish to recognise the continuing commitment of the whole railway community to this Borough. I also want to extend my appreciation to Honorary Alderman Ralph Cousins who has done so much to further the cause of local history and who has produced a leaflet about the Direct Portsmouth Line's history which is available today.

I now unveil this plaque commemorating 150 years of rail travel between Portsmouth and London via Petersfield. Thank you.