

# Contexts: The Crab and Winkle Line

Xavier Edwards traces a little-known chapter in transport history

SOME EVENTS IN HISTORY are part of our common knowledge. The battle of 1066 is one example; the Stockton-Darlington railway, the first railway in the world, is another. In the history of transport, the death of the former minister and the contemporary Liverpool MP, William Huskisson, in 1830 at the time of the opening of the Liverpool Manchester railway, is widely known. What is less widely known is that the first passenger railway in the world was not in the industrialising North but in the garden of England, in Kent. The Canterbury and Whitstable railway, affectionately called the Crab and Winkle Line from the seafood for which Whitstable was famous, was the third railway line in world history and the first to take passengers regularly and the first to issue season tickets.

## Rail replaces water

Canterbury was a substantial community and relied, for the transport of bulky goods, on the River Stour as far as Fordwich, and, for the rest of the journey, the cart, but the Stour, a small waterway, easily silted. Enthused by the prospect of railway transport, the Canterbury and Whitstable Railway Company was formed and possible routes considered. The plans included the expansion of Whitstable harbour, undertaken by Thomas Telford, which would be one end of the railway, the Canterbury West station was the other.

Construction of the railway, 7 miles (11.3 km) long, under the supervision of George Stephenson and Robert, his son, started in 1825 and included the 828 yard (757 metres) Tyler Hill tunnel, the world's first passenger railway tunnel. The line was opened in 1830. Until the South Eastern Railway acquired the line in 1846, because of the gradients, most of the moving power for the carriages over the route was provided by stationary steam winding engines. The



The Invicta as seen latterly in central Canterbury



The bricked up Tyler Hill tunnel entrance

exception was the run in from the delightfully named Bogshole Brook to South Street, Whitstable, where Stephenson's Invicta locomotive was used.

The Invicta has a good deal of resemblance with Stephenson's better known Rocket, used on the Liverpool Manchester line and in action at the time of Huskisson's death (although it was the locomotive called 'Dart', possibly travelling at up to 10 mph, that did it for Huskisson). The Invicta produced 12 horse power: by comparison, a Honda 'Jazz' small/medium family car with a 1399cc engine, produces 83 horse power. After only six years, the Invicta was replaced by a third winding engine and it was offered for sale in 1839 but the one enquiry did not lead to a sale. For many years the locomotive stood, gently rusting, outside the Canterbury city wall, near Riding Gate.

## Road replaces rail

With relaid rails and stronger locomotives after 1846, the Crab and Winkle line continued in use. Goods train schedules were not rigorous by contemporary standards: it is said crew had time to check pheasant traps and to pick mushrooms. With the growth of road transport after the First World War and the use of omnibuses, passenger numbers declined. The passenger service was withdrawn in 1931 but goods

trains continued until 1952, some 10 years before the decimation of the railway network under the Beeching plans, plans which accepted that road travel would be the dominant means of surface transport in Britain.

Even after the closure of the line the railway had impact on the lives of those near its route. When, in 1974, students at the University of Kent at Canterbury had a sinking feeling, it was not a consequence of poor exam grades but the partial collapse of the Tyler Hill tunnel over which the university, contrary to advice, was built after 1965.



1851



1921

The railway network. It is easy to underestimate the importance of railways in economic and social history. Roads have replaced them as the dominant surface transport

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