

Expansion of the Railways

The expansion of the railway network into South Essex was, to say the least, very timely, and the siting of the railway stations ended up dictating exactly where the New Town would be sited. It is highly unlikely that a new town would have been built in this area at all, if the necessary infrastructure wasn't already in place, but getting a railway to be built was anything but straightforward. The London Tilbury and Southend (LT&S) line that we know today started life in a very piecemeal fashion, and evolved over a period of time, dictated by a series of unforeseen and unexpected events.

The mid-1800s saw a flourishing trade in passenger steamboat trips along the Thames from London to coastal resorts in South East Essex and North Kent. Southend was a popular spot due to visits by royalty in the early 1800s. Along with the steamboats, stage coaches would also run there from London via a network of stopping points across South Essex. But the journey was anything but quick, cheap or comfortable.



Pictured left, an Essex coaching map from the mid-1850s showing just how difficult it was to get from London to Southend by stagecoach. An overnight stop was generally required.

The first passenger railway service was actually opened along the North Kent coast in the 1840s by the London and Blackwall Railway Company, travelling from London Bridge to Gravesend for its pleasure gardens and botanical gardens. Consequently, it was highly likely that a railway would open along the South Essex coast shortly afterwards. However, it wasn't the Essex coastal attractions that the railway companies were keen to promote – it was Kent!

To be fair, the South Essex coast in the mid-1800s had little to offer visitors in terms of tourist attractions, apart from Southend and Leigh-on-Sea. However, the terrain was flat, firm marshland which, unlike Kent, was ideal

for laying railway tracks. Furthermore, its coastline could provide some ideal stopping points along the estuary for passengers to cross over into Kent by steamboat, with Gravesend being an obvious destination along with Herne Bay and Margate.

After a number of failed attempts, the Eastern Counties Railway Company started to promote their new 'London, Tilbury and Southend' line which would run from Forest Gate, down to Tilbury, and eventually onto Southend, via Pitsea hugging the coast. However, after irregularities were found in their submissions, they withdrew their bid. The plans were resurrected by The London and Blackwall Railway (L&BR) in 1851, but without the Southend extension, which meant that trains would terminate at Tilbury.

After some extensive negotiations, the L&BR collaborated with the Eastern Counties Railway and, in 1852, finally started building the first part of the track. The initial route was from Forest Gate to Tilbury (as previously planned) with stops at Barking, Rainham, Purfleet, Grays and Thurrock but trains also started to run from the Eastern Counties own terminus at Bishopsgate, and London and Blackwall's terminus at Minories/Fenchurch Street.

The line was then extended from Tilbury to Stanford-Le-Hope and Thames Haven in 1855, for onward steamboat connections to Margate and the Continent, and the following year it was extended again, this time through to Pitsea, Benfleet and Leigh-on-sea along the coast. It eventually reached Southend in 1856 and, shortly afterwards, the whole line was upgraded from single track to dual-track.

Just two years later, in 1858, a new section of track was opened, which ran from Fenchurch Street through Bromley-by-Bow, Plaistow and East Ham and onto Barking, which meant that trains would no longer run through Bishopsgate or Forest Gate. However, it still didn't provide a successful passenger service at that time. It had poor signalling, bad quality rolling stock and poor access to central London. Its route was still via Grays and Tilbury and the journey times to Southend were far too long to make that trip attractive. The railway therefore seemed to provide no real benefit to South Essex for the first 25 years or so of its existence. Instead, a now vastly reduced network of stage coaches continued to operate between the major Essex towns, and steamers still called at Southend.

But the late 1870s saw a whole new demand for transportation to the Essex and Kent coastal resorts, and this demand came mainly from working-class people living in North and East London, many of whom had never had a holiday, or even a day trip, before. The lure of a genuine seaside resort such as Southend, which was, and still is, the nearest one to London, was simply too much to resist.

By timely coincidence, in the early 1880s, the East and West India Dock Company decided to move its main operations downstream from London docklands to Tilbury. This was a risky and radical move, but it meant that it could upgrade its ageing docks and compete with their rivals for a fraction of the budget they would have needed had they remained upstream. However, this now meant that the railway line between Barking and Tilbury would be needed for goods coming in and out of Tilbury Docks for onward transport to London. Therefore, that stretch of track, which by now was carrying hundreds of passengers, became heavily congested. Something had to be done to resolve the problem.

Thames Haven

It was originally intended to develop Thames Haven, which was then a small lobster fishing village, as a 'continental' port for the import and export of fish, cattle and passengers but this never really proved to be profitable for all sorts of reasons, including political instability abroad and several bans on livestock due to fear of diseases.

The rail passenger service did provide a connection with paddle steamers which took people to resorts in Kent, Essex and further afield on the continent but, after the sinking of the Princess Alice in 1878, when over 700 people died, that side of the business also started to decline. The passenger service to Thames Haven from Fenchurch Street finally ended in 1880 when Tilbury Docks were built, and that part of the railway line became, primarily, a goods service.

After seeing railway passenger numbers continue to grow, some fairly swift deliberation took place and an Act of Parliament in 1882 allowed the London, Tilbury and Southend Railway Company to build a faster, more direct line to Southend via Upminster, Laindon and Pitsea. This would have two major benefits; it would take the excess load from the overstretched

with the coastal resorts but, more importantly, with the countryside retreats such as Laindon and Pitsea.

Pictured right around 1900; the new railway stations at Laindon.

Like many things in life, timing is everything, and the expansion of railway links from London into South Essex was a perfect example of that. The new railway stations at Laindon and



Pitsea in 1888 were a major factor in promoting land speculation in the region, as their construction coincided ***exactly*** with the agricultural depression of the late 1880s. The stations provided direct access to an abundance of unused land which was now being 'repurposed' with the potential for huge profits.