

## 1 Arriving in Brighton

*Brighton, Tuesday September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1841*

This day had been a long time coming. Arguments about which route the railway should take had dragged on for years, with public meetings and pamphlets and debates in Parliament. There had been opposition from landowners, whose estates would be crossed and scarred, and from clergy, who saw trains as the Devil's invention. Five thousand navvies brought in to build the railway had caused merry hell as they swore, drank and womanised their way across Sussex. Engineers had struggled with the challenges of building a railway across undulating countryside, boring tunnels and laying more than eleven million bricks to build a viaduct across the Ouse Valley. Yet today, at last, the first train would run from London to Brighton.

In the town, there had been great excitement since dawn. The *Brighton Herald* reported that: 'No event, since Brighton has assumed the rank of one of the principal towns in the south of England, has caused so much interest as the opening of the railroad throughout to London.'

Flags flew from church steeples, bells pealed, shops were decorated, and 'the whole place was in a bustle'. A heavy morning mist lifted, and 'by noon every road leading to the terminus was thronged by well-dressed pedestrians and vehicles of every description.'

Excitement was not confined to the town. One of the paper's correspondents walked to the hills north of Brighton and found a field with a sweeping view of the railway. 'The day was remarkably fine,' he wrote, 'the air clear, balmy and pure, and the prospect on every side delightful. So gently has autumn assumed her sway that scarcely a leaf has fallen from the trees, and the downs are as fresh and as green as

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Commented [DW2]: This is very intriguing. Could you add something explaining why?

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in spring. The people were spread in every direction where a view of the line could be obtained. It was indeed quite a gala-day. Parties of ladies and gentlemen were formed on every brow, and every field and meadow had its mass of human life. It was along these elevated points that the approach of the train was first perceived, and at about 20 minutes after 12 it was announced by a thousand cries of "Here they come." The first indication was the cloud of steam that poured forth from the mouth of the Patcham Tunnel, and the next moment a long dark object was seen swiftly gliding along the line and rapidly increasing in size and distinctness as it approached, till, after being lost for a short time behind a curve, the first train from the metropolis came thundering along, and, receiving the hearty salutations of the crowds on the hills as it passed, rattled over the viaduct, passed the engine-house, and turned round the rails to reach the terminus.'

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Brighton Station, an elegant, new, glass-roofed building at the top of the town, was filled with people, and many more had gathered outside. The passengers alighted, the Band of the Scots Greys played the National Anthem, twice, and celebrations continued into the evening, with cut-price admission to the summer music concerts and a display of fireworks at the Royal Gardens. The inhabitants, at all events, hailed the opening of the line as the commencement of a new era.'

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They were right. The opening of a direct rail link with London transformed Brighton, both economically and socially. For years, scores of visitors had come daily by coach, but soon many hundreds were arriving by train, and with them came new job opportunities. In just ten years, the town's population increased by fifty per cent and within fifty, it had more than doubled. A building boom began and would continue until the start of the Second World War.

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Economic prosperity brought social change. In 1841, the self-styled Queen of Watering Places was an exclusive preserve of the wealthy, basking in the patronage of the Prince Regent and the young Queen Victoria, but over the next fifty years a combination of cheap rail fares, lengthening holidays and rising wages allowed an ever-widening circle of people to visit. The Council wanted to preserve the town's veneer of genteel respectability, so as not to deter rich patrons, but its hopes were swamped by a tidal wave of new, less affluent visitors. They didn't spend as much per head, but there were so many of them. Brighton had been accustomed to receiving about 2,000 visitors per week, but on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1846, more than twice that number arrived on a single train of forty-four carriages. Old timers derided the visitors' Cockney accents and deplored their tendency to get royally drunk, but plenty of landlords were happy enough to sell them alcohol. By the end of the century, Brighton had more than 600 pubs and the town had acquired a rather different reputation, as cheap, risqué and slightly vulgar.

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Caught between these social tensions and competing commercial interests was the town's fledgling police force, which had been established in 1838 and was, therefore, barely three years old when the first train arrived. The police were expected to clamp down on behaviour that lowered the tone of the town, but the resulting prosecutions for hawking and begging actually had the opposite effect, by demonstrating that Brighton was not quite as prim and proper as it liked to appear.

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To make matters worse, the force was hopelessly unequal to its task, inefficient and undisciplined, and it had a high turnover of constables. Policemen were not popular among the town's working-class residents, who felt the force was out to spoil their fun, and attacks were not uncommon. The policeman's lot was not a happy one, and by 1866 Chief Constable George White was finding it almost

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impossible to recruit men. To ease the problem, he persuaded the Council to approve a ten per cent pay rise for all ranks.

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One young man attracted by the new terms was a farm labourer called Henry Butler.

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