

THE KENT TRIP 2015

A brief jaunt round a corner of England that I knew very little about, in September 2015. I had a free return rail ticket to London to use before the end of the month, so it had to be somewhere in the Southeast. Though I've travelled through the area, heading for ferries to France and Belgium and, more recently, regularly on Eurostar, I had never stopped in Kent since my student days forty (ugh!) years ago. It was also an excuse to take in some railway lines I'd never been on (there is not that many of them left in the UK), so Kent (and a bit of Sussex) it was.

Uckfield and Maidstone

Day one began with the journey to Kings Cross, then on to East Croydon on an extremely slow and extremely empty train to East Croydon (the traipse through Tulse Hill, Crystal Palace and so on, while the route via London Bridge is unavailable, takes ages). From there it was via Redhill to **Edenbridge** (the first stretch of line I'd never travelled on). I walked through the town, which was scruffy, full of traffic, and seemed to be suffering as a shopping centre. I had a pint in the Old Eden Inn, which at

that time of day was more for eating than drinking, then back through the town, this time to Edenbridge Town station – yes, Edenbridge boasts two stations. From there it was off to Uckfield through Hever (I'd been as far as Hever many years ago on a day trip to escape from a London full of some Royal marriage). Again the train was virtually empty, though they are lengthening the platforms on this route to allow more commuters off to London and back – presumably a few trains each day are busy.



The Alma Arms, Uckfield, from www.pubsandbeer.co.uk

Uckfield had a bit more life to it than Edenbridge. The town centre was livelier, though it was another High Street, ruined by the dominance of car traffic. My break was spent in the Alma Arms with a nice pint of Harvey's - though the pub was quiet at three in the afternoon it looked as though it would be a decent pub. Buses to elsewhere were few and far between, but there is a regular Brighton – Uckfield- Tonbridge Wells service and I caught that into Kent. Some unfortunate kids on

board were worrying about the eleven-plus – the area must be caught in a time warp. Some pleasant wooded southern countryside followed by the very dreary suburban sprawl of Crowborough. From upmarket **Tonbridge Wells** on to **Tunbridge** by train, where I had enough time for a quick pint (in the Wetherspoon's, which looked like the best option in another town centre that looked quite down at heel and car-ridden). Then on to **Maidstone**, my base for the night, via Paddock Wood to Maidstone West, this time on a local train through some pretty countryside by the River Medway.



The Flower Pot, Maidstone, from www.pubsandbeer.co.uk

The first impressions of Maidstone were not favourable – the area between the station and the river is a maze of roundabouts and underpasses worthy of Birmingham (and no sign of them getting rid of them here). However, the evening perked up in the course of a wander round town. A pint in the Swan, in a handsome area next to the County Hall and the Prison, then on to the highly recommended (by me!) Flower Pot, with umpteen handpumps with ales mainly from local breweries.

Sheppey and Thanet



In the morning it was back to Maidstone West and then to the photogenic **Isle of Sheppey** via Strood and Sittingbourne. The first train continued down the Medway valley, the second past Rochester and some hop-fields, and the third over the bridge on to the island past a former steelworks and into Sheerness.

Welcome to Sheerness – you'll have a blast



To see what **Sheerness** had to offer, I went for a walk along the prom, looking out at a very grey Thames estuary. The main sight was a large mural of a mermaid about to blow up the town. I spent a happy half hour reading a selection of safety notices put up by Swale Borough Council to win a Safe Beach award, and to dissuade me from being shipwrecked by hitting a hidden groyne with my inflatable.



After that pleasant pastoral interlude, once more Wetherspoon's came to the rescue and I was able to join the living dead of Sheerness for a pint, before catching the next train back to Sittingbourne and the main line to the far Southeast.

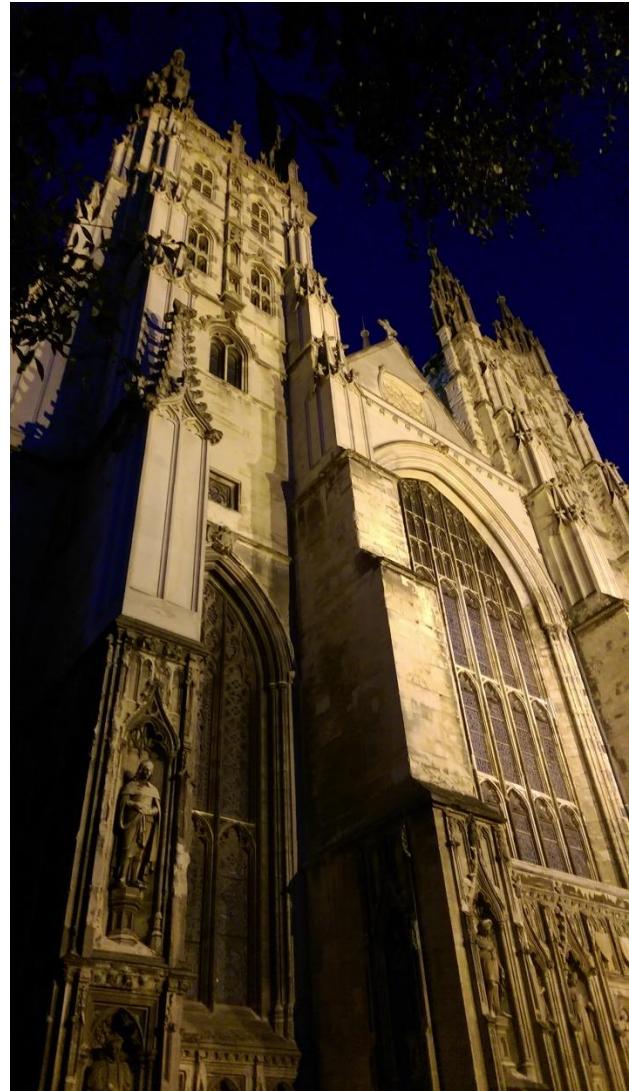
Onwards to **Thanet**, where the next stop was **Birchington on Sea**, which looked like the genteel end of the Margate agglomeration. The reason, led as usual by the Good Beer Guide, was to call in to the Wheel Ale House, a micropub in a former shop on the High Street. Tiny, friendly and good beer - the sort of place I like.

The next train took me onwards through Margate, Ramsgate and Sandwich to **Dover** and a second micropub, the Mash Tun. Another pleasant boozer, this time full with a small crowd of old farts on a gentlemen's excursion – the conversation of the old bores seemed just a little bit too familiar and close to home (they were train buffs as well). I remember Dover as a miserable place to wait for the cheap overnight ferry to Ostend, the station to open in the morning after arriving at some ungodly

hour on the said ferry, or to find a decent place to hitch. And it was always raining. Today the weather was good, the centre of town was quite spruce and it was quite a passable place to spend an hour or so.

Back on to a train – this time to **Ramsgate**. The station is miles from the town centre and the only pub I found nearby was the nothing special Flying Horse, (but the beer was OK). Then another bit of track-bashing to Canterbury, taking in more of the countryside away from the coastal strip.

Canterbury was my second overnight stop, with a much more metropolitan atmosphere (it's all relative), I guess because of the University, and the number of tourists and language school students. First stop was the Unicorn, a fine old pub near Canterbury East station, followed by a walk through the pedestrianised city centre to my hotel. In the evening I ventured out again, to the Foundry, which brews its own beer, and round the back streets to the Dolphin, a bit foody but a good pub. All three pubs are worth a visit. I even managed to take a look at the cathedral (pictured). Lovely town. A final one somewhere unremarkable near the hotel and that was it for the night.



The Romney Marshes and Rye

From Canterbury to **Ashford** by train along the valley of the Great Stour, via Chartham, Chilham and Wye. Ashford station is a miserable place with no facilities on the town side. Not quite enough time for a look around the town centre – it looked like a grim walk from the station. I was travelling by bus for most of the day and fortunately most buses call at the station. The first bus was to Hythe and, like many bus journeys, included the added bonus of side trips off the main road, in this case round back streets, through small villages and diversions to a hospital and a deserted wildlife park.



I changed there to a bus for **Dungeness** – Stagecoach run a frequent service along this stretch of coast from Folkestone to Hastings – and managed to bag the front seat upstairs. The journey was a strange mixture of prohibited military land, a couple of nature reserves and endless caravan sites – some with no access to the sea (military land) and many with no sight of it (sea walls). Through bungalow Dymchurch, New Romney

and Lydd on Sea to the Pilot Inn, the nearest bus stop to Dungeness (I would have liked to take the light railway right to the point, but the train times didn't work out this late in the season). Time there for a look around – a strange but peaceful area of shingle beach with odd bits of rusting machinery, wooden shacks and old railway carriages that have now become desirable residences, and the nuclear power stations lurking in the background. Warm enough for a pint in the beer garden of the Pilot Inn, where I was twenty years younger than the other customers.

Then on to **Lydd** to change buses for Rye (and a diversion into Sussex).....but decided to pause for a pint. A quick walk round suggested quite a nice village but I chose the wrong pub - the George Hotel by the bus stop was depressing. Then on to Rye along the coast, past more military stuff (including one place that looked like a mock up town to train people to deal with urban terrorism), and the shuffling holidaymakers at Camber.

We had been to **Rye** on a day out from London twenty-odd years ago and it was much as I remembered it, though this time it was full of day trippers...it was mid-September, the caravan sites were full and the weather was good. A pint in the Ypres Castle beer garden in a lovely situation by the town walls with a view over the marshes.

Then a train back to Ashford where the station was still as miserable. This time the toilet on the platform was out of order, though a staff member let me use the staff toilet. Back to London on a high speed Javelin train. (I'd already been on a couple of these, as they trundle slowly round the Kent coast at the extremities of their routes). This time it's via the HS1 line from the Channel Tunnel and I'm back at St Pancras in less than forty minutes. Then over to Kings Cross and home to Durham.

I know I missed out on some of the best places in Kent...and even on some of the best pubs, but there is a limit to what you can do in a short time. I'll treat it as a recce, and maybe explore some more sometime.