

The Foreign Goods Depots of South London

By EDWIN COURSE



Photo]

[R. C. Riley

The former Midland Railway coal sidings at Walworth Road in 1954

IN Victorian times, the great railway companies had very definite ideas on what they regarded as their territory, and any attempt at violation by another company was hotly contested. However, where it was felt to be mutually advantageous, or where Parliament insisted, it was usual to allow "foreign" trains to use the "home" lines and terminal facilities. The terms under which these running powers were exercised were usually carefully defined in legal agreements or Acts of Parliament. There was something of unique interest in these foreign trains, whether they were represented by a Great Eastern express at St. Pancras or a Great Western local at Victoria.

There was a considerable increase in the number of "foreigners" to be seen in London after the completion of the various lines linking the north to the south. Of importance to the present subject were the West London, completed in 1863, the Metropolitan route of 1866, and, to a lesser extent, the East London line

of 1876. Running powers were granted for various types of traffic, but it must be stressed that this article is not concerned with through coaching services or with foreign freight trains using terminals operated by the southern companies. It is confined to the various goods depots which the northern companies operated in South London, with their own staffs, who, for instance, showed the Midland uniform in Brixton. The predominant traffic was coal, a one-way traffic, much of which originated in the North Midlands. Competition was keen, for the railways competed with the coasting vessels bringing coal from the North-East Coast, while the Midland, the London & North Western, and the Great Northern companies all competed with each other. As the lines of the southern companies were only used for a small proportion of the haul, it was the northern companies which were especially concerned with the development of this traffic.

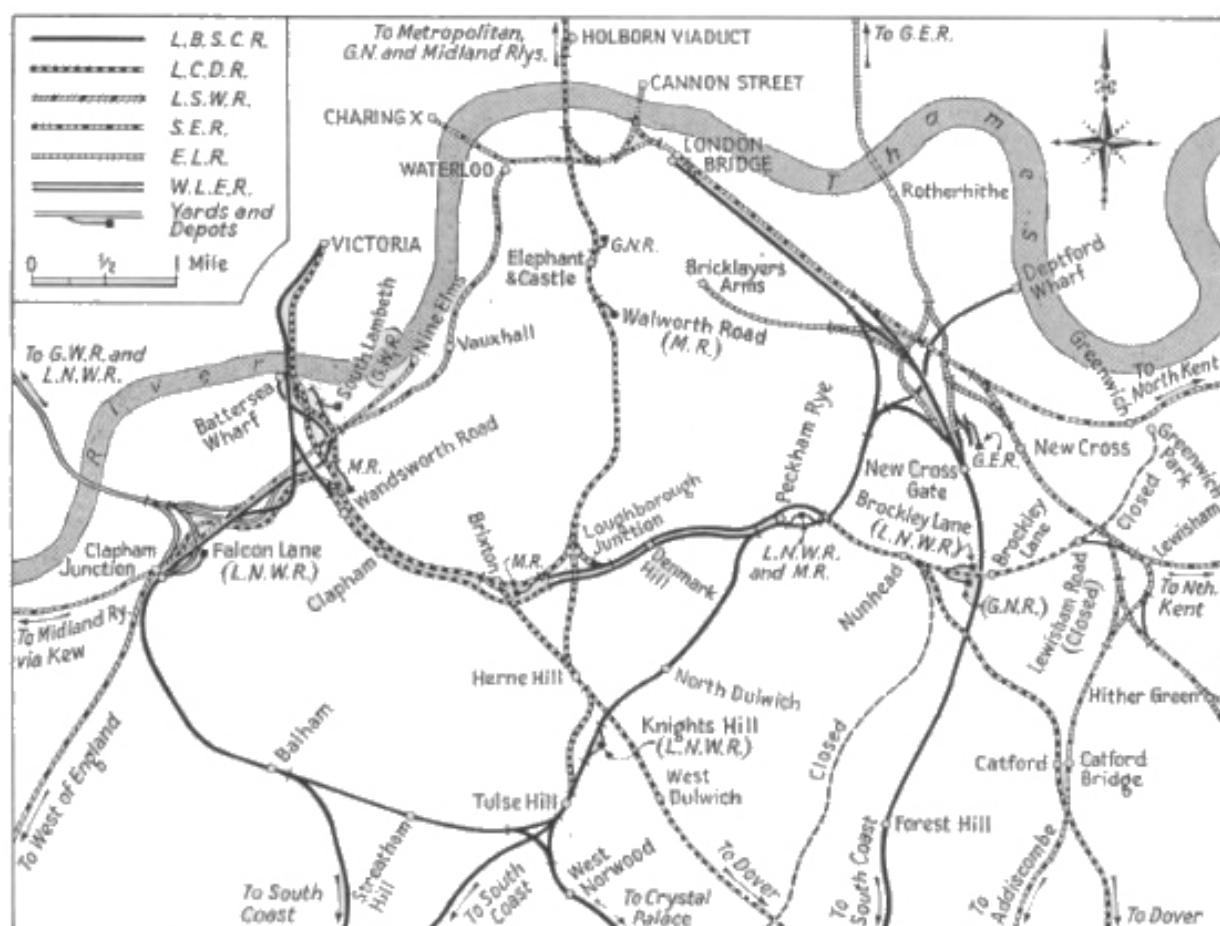
Normally the wagons would have been handed over to the southern companies

for unloading at their goods yards, and with the London & South Western and the South Eastern railways this was always the practice. But the impecuniosity of the London, Chatham & Dover gave one of the northern companies a chance to establish its own stronghold in South London. In 1864, the Great Northern subscribed £300,000 towards the completion of the L.C.D.R. Metropolitan Extension, and in return received running powers for coaching traffic to Victoria and the Crystal Palace, and for merchandise and coal to a number of points within about 15 miles of Ludgate Hill [L.C.D.R. (City Undertaking) Act, 1864].

The G.N.R. decided to operate a terminal of its own, and in 1871 leased a coal depot north of Elephant & Castle Station. (It was owned by Samuel Plimsoll, a coal merchant well remembered for his work for sailors, who had taken out patents for elevated coal drops in 1859, 1866 and 1868.) At the time, this was a well-placed depot from which coal was taken by horse and cart to the large new houses of the surrounding district. For many years, entry to the reception

siding was controlled by Elephant & Castle Signalbox, but since its demolition following air raid damage, the points from the down main line have been operated by a ground frame. The siding, which was level with the main-line viaduct, served a row of short stubs, on which the wagons were placed by a traverser. The coal could be dropped through holes in the decking and stored in hoppers before weighing and distribution. Coal drops of this type became a feature of the Victorian railway scene in London, but while they facilitated the handling of the coal, they also caused more breakages.

By 1873, the G.N.R. was using its running powers to operate five trains a day to Elephant & Castle. They started from Holloway, running at night, or in the early hours of the morning. By 1954, however, the yard was being served off one train a day—the 11.55 p.m. from Ferme Park to Herne Hill Sorting Sidings. For many years, trains were worked by class "J52" 0-6-0 saddle-tanks and class "N1" 0-6-2 tanks, fitted with condensers, but at the time of writing class "J50"



Map showing coal depots in South London, and former ownerships of railways serving them. Lines now closed are dotted

0-6-0 tank engines are almost invariable.

The Midland Railway was also anxious to develop its London coal traffic, and in 1871 opened a large coal depot at Walworth Road Coal Sidings, a quarter of a mile south of Elephant & Castle Station. These sidings had a single reception road, used for both arrivals and departures, with accommodation for 23 wagons. The 30 stub sidings, each taking two or three wagons, were served by a traverser. There were 113 coal chutes connecting the sidings to ground level. The timetable for 1873

from the London Midland to the Southern Region on May 1, 1950. As the depot was a wooden structure with iron and timber supports, its condition had deteriorated, and in 1958 it was closed for reconstruction in steel and concrete, with a temporary diversion of traffic to the old G.N.R. Elephant & Castle Depot. It was reopened on September 21, 1959. The new design is based on an estimated traffic of 70,000 tons a year being delivered by road within about 10 miles radius. The delivery area covers about 50,000 South



General view at rail level of Walworth Road Depot after reconstruction in 1959, showing the traverser in action

shows six through trains each weekday from Kentish Town *via* the Metropolitan Widened lines. By 1954, this had dropped to two trains—the 4.3 a.m. and the 10.22 a.m. from Brent. The need for two trains reflects the restriction of train lengths on the Metropolitan Widened Lines—in March, 1946, average traffic was down to 32 wagons per day. Tonnage fell from 73,265 in 1938 to 64,854 in 1945, rose to 71,443 by 1954, but had dropped to 66,947 by 1956. The revival reflects the post-war recovery of South London but the new decline is the result of less coal being used in flats and modern houses.

Walworth Coal Sidings were transferred

from the London Midland to the Southern Region on May 1, 1950. As the depot was a wooden structure with iron and timber supports, its condition had deteriorated, and in 1958 it was closed for reconstruction in steel and concrete, with a temporary diversion of traffic to the old G.N.R. Elephant & Castle Depot. It was reopened on September 21, 1959. The new design is based on an estimated traffic of 70,000 tons a year being delivered by road within about 10 miles radius. The delivery area covers about 50,000 South

London homes, and it is anticipated that the handling of domestic solid fuels will be ultimately concentrated at the new depot. There are now two sidings—reception and departure—each able to hold twenty 16-ton wagons. Access to the traverser and to the cripple siding is provided by three hand-operated turntables. The original 30 bays, most of which held three wagons, have been replaced by 50 unloading bays arranged on either side of the traverser. These take single wagons, thus eliminating the possibility of empty wagons being trapped beyond others awaiting unloading. For many years, the

through trains from Brent to Walworth Road have been worked by "Jinties" (class "3F" 0-6-0 tanks), with condensing apparatus for use on the Metropolitan Widened Lines.

About $2\frac{1}{4}$ miles further on, in the Victoria direction, the L.C.D.R. constructed a depot at Brixton, which was leased to the Midland for 999 years, and opened by the latter company in 1876. It consisted of an arrival road for 15 wagons, a departure road for 13 and the usual stub sidings serving 36 chutes. The traverser was horse drawn. (The

third Midland depot, that at Wandsworth Road.

This was opened in 1874, and was reached from the L.C.D.R. low-level line near Stewarts Lane Junction. Unlike the other Midland yards, which handled coal traffic with coal drops, Wandsworth Road was a conventional yard for general traffic with 15 sidings. In 1946, in addition to the early morning train, shared with Brixton, Wandsworth Road was served by the 10.55 a.m. from Brent, the traffic averaging 20 wagons a day. Comparing 1938 with 1945, there was a



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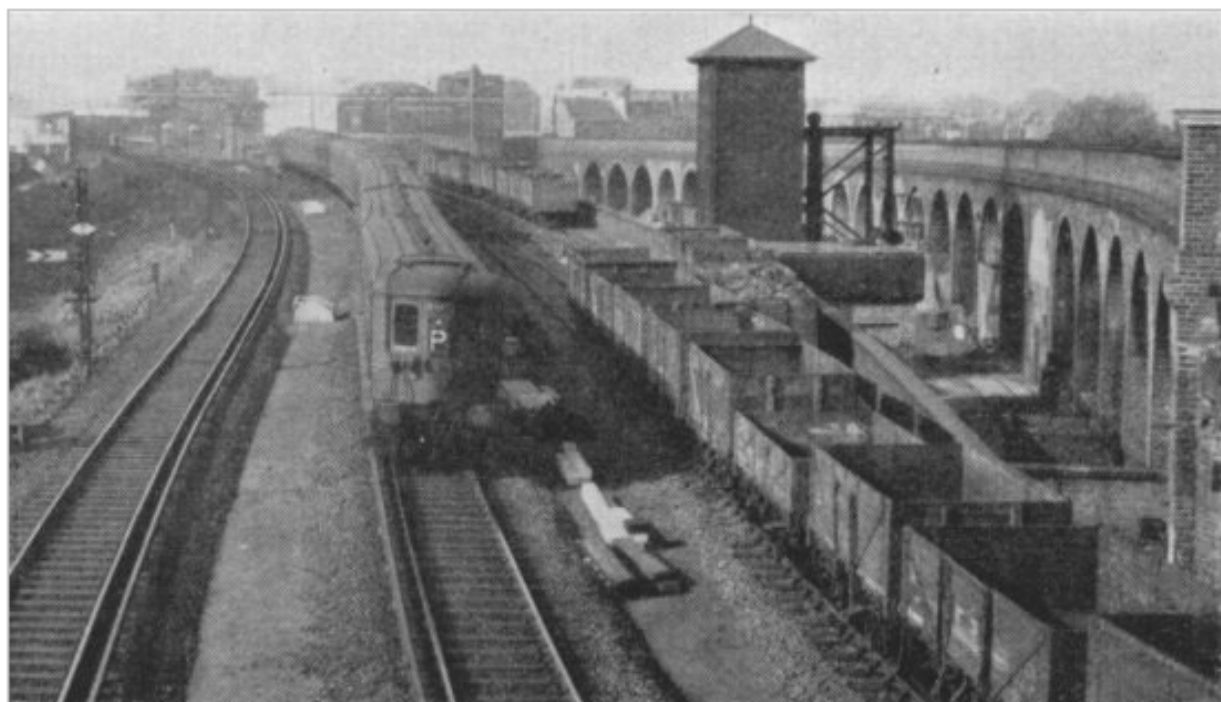
[R. C. Riley

Rosendale Road, Dulwich, in May, 1952. The bridge in the foreground carries part of Knights Hill sidings; the London Bridge-Tulse Hill line crosses the adjacent girder bridge; and the Herne Hill-Tulse Hill line is in the distance

staff in latter days consisted of a foreman, a scotcher, a trimmer, a watchman, and a driver for two horses.) Brixton Coal Drops were damaged in the second world war, but as the yard was used by three coal merchants, traffic was maintained (15,703 tons in 1939, and 15,695 tons in 1945). However, the quantity was not sufficient to justify repairs, and after arrangements had been made with the coal merchants, closure followed in 1947. In November, 1953, tenders were invited for demolition, and the contract was awarded to the Demolition & Construction Company. In 1946, the last full year of operation, average traffic was five wagons a day, and this was handled by a through train from Brent which ran on to the

decline in coal (from 25,445 to 18,192 tons), a considerable decline in other minerals (45,654 to 22,337 tons), and an increase in merchandise (20,735 to 21,130 tons). The increase was mainly attributable to the activities of a motor company which had a factory in the depot. During the war, a new goods shed was constructed in case of the need for decentralisation.

At present, Wandsworth Road is one of the two South London depots which have remained with the London Midland Region. It continues to handle a considerable quantity of merchandise, much of which is distributed by railway-owned vehicles. Other traffics include builder's materials, coal, and milk which arrives in tank wagons. For a period, in accord-



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The coal sidings at Peckham Rye from Cow Lane bridge, on the Catford Loop line, in October, 1953. A train from Crystal Palace to London Bridge is passing on the left. The depot was closed in 1958

ance with its Midland parentage, traffic reached the depot *via* the Widened lines and Herne Hill, but now the normal route is *via* Barnes and Battersea Wharf.

Since L.M.S.R. days, the staffing of the Midland Wandsworth Road Depot has been combined with that of the nearby L.N.W.R. depot at Falcon Lane, opened in 1869. Although south of the Thames, this was not really a "foreign" depot as it was situated on the West London Extension Railway, which was jointly owned by the G.W., L.N.W., L.B.S.C. and L.S.W. companies. Lacking access to the Metropolitan Widened Lines, L.N.W.R. through traffic used the West London route, and by 1946 Falcon Lane was being served by one train a day from Willesden.

In some respects, it was more elaborately equipped than Wandsworth Road, having a cattle dock, a crane in the yard, and a goods shed containing another two cranes. There were ten sidings with capacity for 123 coal wagons and 98 goods wagons. Traffic in coal and building materials continues to be dealt with at Falcon Lane, but the principal user is now the United Glass Bottle Company. Special trains bring in its products, mainly from works in Lancashire, and the bottles are forwarded by road as required. The cattle dock is now disused, and the goods shed has been replaced by

a warehouse for the use of the bottle company. Some of the sidings have been lengthened and the decline in coal has been more than compensated by the growth of the glass traffic.

The spread of London was reflected in the opening, in 1892, of a second L.N.W.R. depot which penetrated quite deeply into L.B.S.C.R. territory between Tulse Hill and North Dulwich. The site was on the down side between Knights Hill Tunnel and Rosendale Road; in fact the junction at the London end was on the far side of the road, and was reached over a bridge with an ornamental balustrade dated 1891. The yard was a flat one, consisting of five sidings with accommodation for 78 wagons, 55 wagon lengths being allocated to particular coal merchants. There has been the usual decline in coal traffic, from 21,909 tons in 1938 to 18,050 tons in 1945, so that by March, 1946, the yard handled on average eight wagons a day. Merchandise traffic was negligible.

For many years the wagons for Knights Hill have been collected from Lillie Bridge Sidings on the West London Extension Railway. (It is probable that this arrangement goes back to L.B.S.C.R. days as that company's Appendix for 1922 gives instructions for the working of the yard by "Brighton" locomotives.) In 1946, there was one train a day

leaving Peckham Rye Depot at 10.35 a.m., working Knights Hill from 10.46 a.m. to 12.5 p.m., and reaching Lillie Bridge at 1.5. It returned at 2.10 p.m., called at Knights Hill from 3.12 to 3.35 and reached Peckham Rye at 3.45 p.m. At present the number of trains varies with the season, and last summer fell as low as two a week. Locomotive power varies, but L.B.S.C.R. 0-6-0s and 0-6-2 tanks have been typical.

The "foreign" depot at Peckham Rye, opened in 1891, was of unusual interest, because it represented an unlikely partnership of the L.N.W. and Midland companies. At this point, the L.B.S.C.R. is on a viaduct, and arrival and departure roads each accommodating 20 wagons were provided at viaduct level. Access at the station end was controlled by Peckham Road "A" Box, and at the Queens Road end by a ground frame. It would have been quite possible to follow the pattern of the Midland yards of the 1870s, and to have provided coal drops from viaduct level, but instead a turntable was used to place wagons on a hoist which lowered them to ground level. This was worked hydraulically, the water pressure of 750 lb. per sq. in. being generated by a steam engine. The last boiler to be provided was of the locomotive type, and was overhauled at Crewe before being sent to Peckham in 1908. About 1925, the steam engine was replaced by an electric motor. Down in the yard, there were five more turntables and four sidings to accommodate 73 wagons.

Peckham Rye handled coal only, the tonnage for 1945 being 15,573, and in March, 1946, an average of five wagons a day were received. As mentioned above, the coal from the L.N.W.R. was worked by the daily train from Lillie Bridge. The Midland coal was collected from Battersea, which it reached either *via* the Metropolitan Widened Lines or *via* Kew and Barnes. In latter days, the working of the yard was carried out by an L.M.S.R. staff of three (foreman, capstanman and rope runner), electricity being used to operate the capstans. Peckham Rye Depot was closed in 1958.

On the down side of the L.C.D.R. Greenwich Park branch at Brockley Lane, and dating from 1885, was Martin's private siding, leased from a Mr. Martin by the L.N.W.R. It had accommodation

for 36 wagons. The L.N.W.R. (and later the L.M.S.R.) sub-let 26 wagon lengths for the exclusive use of Charrington, Warren Limited (now Charrington, Gardner & Locket), the well-known coal merchants. The coal wagons were conveyed from Willesden to Hither Green Yards and from there to Brockley Lane by the Hither Green to Herne Hill Service. In March, 1946, there was an average of three wagons a day, traffic having declined from 8,514 tons in 1938 to 6,434 tons in 1945. In L.M.S.R. days no staff were provided, supervision being carried out by the L.N.E.R. staff on the other side of the line.

This L.N.E.R. depot was a former goods and coal depot of the G.N.R. opened on the up side of the line in 1882. It was a flat yard with a rather greater capacity than Martin's siding; it could hold about 40 wagons. Originally it was worked by extending G.N.R. trains from Elephant & Castle, but for many years its normal traffic has come *via* Hither Green. In addition to its originating and terminating traffic, which is virtually confined to full wagon loads and coal, the reception roads are used for reversing certain trains from Hither Green to North Kent.

While the only "invaders" of Victorian times were the L.N.W., Midland and G.N. railways, they were joined by the Great Eastern and the Great Western in the present century. The G.E.R. opened a terminal at New Cross, L.B.S.C.R., in 1904, which was reached through the "home" company's yard. It was later absorbed into the S.R. depot. It differed from all the other depots in being served by the East London line. The G.W.R. depot at Battersea was unique in its incorporation of a large warehouse. It was reached from the L.C.D.R. low-level lines on the Victoria side of Stewarts Lane Junction, entry being controlled from South Lambeth Goods Box. The premises, with their emphasis on merchandise rather than the traditional coal traffic, were first completed on January 1, 1913 (after a partial opening in 1911), but there have been subsequent extensions. They are served by Western Region trains from Old Oak Common. To avoid confusion with any other establishment, the G.W.R. depot was named South Lambeth.