

Reinstating the Canterbury Loop Railway Line

By Richard West

Founder of The Chaucer Education Project, Chaucer University

The Canterbury Loop railway line was a junction extending over several hundred yards, which linked the London, Chatham and Dover Railway with the South Eastern Railway to provide a shorter supply route for military traffic in wartime to Port Richborough and the train ferry to Calais and Dunkirk.



Overhead map of the area showing the location of the Canterbury loop. Photo courtesy of Google maps

The South Eastern Railway line running through The Warren, between Folkestone and Dover, encountered several serious landslips after it opened, the first being in 1877 which closed the line for three months through having destroyed over one hundred yards of the Martello Tunnel.



*The 1915 landslip in The Warren
Photo published in the public domain*

The second substantial landslip in The Warren occurred in the early evening of 19th December 1915 and had considerably escalated by the following morning, putting the double track line out of use for the foreseeable future and which proved to be until the year after the first world war ended.

In January 1917 the scheme to build two British and three French roll on and roll off train ferry terminals was brought before the War Cabinet and approved. In the case of Sandwich Haven, which the War Department renamed Port Richborough, the scheme added to capacity already being

constructed there to build barges for towing across the channel and then onwards via the French canal network. The large volume of supplies needed to be sent over to France necessitated a second port facility locally, to reduce the existing traffic passing through the busy naval base at Dover. The second train ferry terminal constructed was Southampton, which was the first of the two British terminals to open, in November 1917, with a service to Dieppe. Port Richborough train ferry terminal services began on 5th February 1918.

The Canterbury Loop railway line opened on 5th May 1918. The line enabled trains from munitions factories, such as the Royal Arsenal at Woolwich, to run via the North Kent line to Chatham and Faversham and then crossover via the Canterbury Loop on to the South Eastern Railway line from Ashford, to run through to Minster junction where they branched right towards Sandwich before entering Port Richborough by then branching left into what the Army had named “Weatherlees Siding & Junction”.



Port Richborough train ferries conveyed trains and road vehicles to France. Photo published in the public domain

The Kentish Gazette and Canterbury Press newspaper's May 11th 1918 edition reported the opening of the Canterbury Loop railway line under LOCAL INTELLIGENCE:-

“NEW JUNCTION AT WHITEHALL. The new line connecting up the South Eastern and the London and Chatham systems at Whitehall was opened for traffic on Sunday last. It may be of interest to mention that practically all the untechnical work in connection with the construction of this half-mile of line has been done by soldiers

stationed in the district. Any anticipation that the new junction systems will mean an increased passenger service for the district is not, we understand, likely to be justified – at all events, in the immediate future.”

The opening of the Canterbury Loop shortened the journey time of trains from Port Richborough to London by eleven percent, compared to previous routes used. The Times newspaper January 15th 1919 edition reported “The work of reinstating the railway line between Dover and Folkestone, which was blocked by the landslide in the Folkestone Warren in December 1915, is to be begun at once, with a view to providing temporary connection between the two towns. It is proposed to run a light railway, and it is hoped that the line will be available for summer traffic.” The line through the Folkestone Warren re-opened in August 1919.

The Canterbury Loop had been reduced to single track when it was closed on 21st November 1924. However, track remained in place until 1935. This strategically important line was reinstated, for military use only, between 2nd March 1941 and 21st October 1951.

The Canterbury and Whitstable Railway closed to goods traffic on 1st December 1952, having already closed to passenger traffic on 31st December 1930. The Canterbury and Whitstable Railway was quickly reopened, in less than a week, on Friday 6th February 1953, following severe flooding caused by the strong winds of the north-easterly gale blowing the North Sea onshore on the night of Saturday 31st January. Train services on the Canterbury and Whitstable line finally ceased on 28th February 1953, following the re-opening of the Canterbury Loop line the week earlier on 22nd February. The Kent coast railway line from Faversham to Herne Bay, which had been washed away by the floods, re-opened on Monday 2nd March 1953 but with a very low speed restriction as repair work had not been completed.

The Canterbury Loop continued in use for passenger services until 21st May 1953, by which time the severely flood damaged coastal line between Faversham and Herne Bay had been fully repaired. The Canterbury Loop line remained usable until 4th March 1956, although some track lifting had started in October 1955. The double track embankment continues to remain intact, enabling practical reinstatement.

The video pinned to the top of The Chaucer Education Project's Twitter account @ChaucerUniv shows, at the two minute fifteen second mark onwards, for fifty seconds, the Canterbury Loop in action, during what was likely to have been the temporary re-opening in spring 1953 to enable an extended period of coastal flood relief train running to and from Thanet via Faversham when the line through Herne Bay was out of action.

The hyperlink is twitter.com/ChaucerUniv/status/517053096254390272 .

Canterbury "B" signal box controlled the Canterbury Loop and can be seen at the beginning of the part of the archive video which shows an express passenger train from Thanet branching right at the lower junction onto the Canterbury Loop incline, which leads to the upper junction where a train from Faversham can be seen descending the extended junction line. The beginning of the video shows trains running on the Canterbury and Whitstable Railway, including through the Tyler Hill Tunnel and at Whitstable Harbour station.

To read more articles from The Chaucer Education Project, go online to chaucer.university and scroll down the right column of Latest Articles.