

## Preserving local railways

The railways grew up fast across Great Britain during the 19th and early 20th Century. Train was a popular mode of transport and allowed many, for the first time, to explore other towns and cities.

There are three locally run steam railways near to Crowborough that are worth exploring. Most are run as charities and use local volunteers to restore and maintain the rolling stock and track.

### Lavender Line

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The Lavender Line is part of the former Lewes to Uckfield Railway, opened on 18th October 1858. Between 1859 and 1922, the line was operated by the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway and passed into the ownership of the Southern Railway in 1923. In 1948 it then became part of the nationalised British Railways Southern Region.



In its heyday, the line saw extensive use by local, London, Brighton, Tunbridge Wells and Dover services. However, due to a combination of factors including financial cuts and the unsafe bridges on the approach to Lewes, the line was closed on 22nd February 1969.

Isfield station has now been restored to early Southern Railway colours and looks very much as it would have done in the 1920's and 30's.

The Lavender Line is located in Isfield, just off the A26 between Uckfield and Lewes.  
Tel: 01825 750515 24hr info service on 09068 800645

### Spa Valley Railway

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Surrounded by the unspoilt beauty of the Kentish Weald, the Spa Valley Railway lies at the heart of one of England's most beautiful regions.

Visitors can take a trip by steam train for three and a half miles from Royal Tunbridge Wells through High Rocks to the village of Groombridge.



Tunbridge Wells had two stations built by rival companies. Tunbridge Wells Central was opened by the South Eastern Railway in 1845 (this is now the main railway station). Tunbridge Wells West was opened by the London Brighton & South Coast Railway in 1866 and is now the place where the Spa Valley Railway runs from.

In 1876, these two stations were linked by a tunnel enabling connections between the London to Brighton and the London to Hastings lines. From Tunbridge Wells West, there were direct services to the South coast at Brighton and Eastbourne and north bound to London Victoria.

SPA VALLEY RAILWAY, West Station, Tunbridge Wells, Kent, TN2 5QY.  
Tel: 01892 537715. It's worth asking about special offer tickets that combine a visit to some of the other attractions in the area.

## Bluebell Railway

The volunteer run Bluebell Line was the UK's first preserved standard gauge passenger railway, re-opening part of the Lewes to East Grinstead line in 1960. Vintage engines and coaches run through 5 miles of glorious Wealden Sussex scenery.



The Bluebell Railway has the UK's largest and most comprehensive collection of ex-Southern Railway locomotives.

All steam locomotives require a complete strip-down, for a boiler overhaul and insurance inspection, after every ten years of operation. With some of the oldest locos at the Bluebell Railway now 130 years old, there is a fair amount of work required to keep them in working condition.

At Sheffield Park station, there is a museum of historic railway relics and refreshments are available.

BLUEBELL RAILWAY, Sheffield Park Station, East Sussex, TN23 3QL.  
Tel: 01825 722370 (talking timetable), 01825 720800 (general enquiries).  
Open every weekend, Easter week, daily May to September and through half term weeks in February and October. Ample free parking at Sheffield Park station on the A275 between East Grinstead and Lewes. There is also a car park at Horsted Keynes station.

### The Beeching Cuts

40 years ago Britain's railway network underwent a massive programme of change. This would be forever known as the 'Beeching Cuts'.

The blueprint, drawn up in 1963 by the chairman of the British Railways Board, Dr Richard Beeching, shut down almost a third of the railway system.

Five thousand miles of track and 2,000 stations were closed. This had wide ranging effects in Sussex with the Lavender Line and the Spa Valley Railway amongst the victims.

The Cuckoo Trail near Hailsham also runs along a railway that was closed by Beeching. It was called the Cuckoo Line because of the tradition of releasing the first cuckoo of spring at the nearby Heathfield fair. The single track railway used to carry passengers, milk, livestock and animal feedstuffs between Eastbourne and Eridge.

Dr Beeching's idea was to put the railways on a sound financial footing by abandoning hundreds of loss making branch lines and concentrating on more profitable InterCity routes instead.

But a recent report indicates that some of Dr Beeching's closures were mistakes and there are routes that could now be re opened. This will give people a public transport alternative to using the car, especially in rural areas.

Ironically, Dr Beeching would have been affected by his own policies because he lived on one of the Sussex railway lines that he closed. This ran between East Grinstead and Royal Tunbridge Wells and part of the Line has now opened as the Spa Valley Railway.



**The railway house of this disused station can still be seen at Withyham, close to where Dr Beeching lived.**