



## RAIL, RISK AND REPASTS – THE DINING CULTURE OF THE LONDON, CHATHAM & DOVER RAILWAY, 1888-1899

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It was clearly a most convivial occasion. In January 1891 the *South Eastern Gazette* gave its readers its regular and (by then) extensive report on the annual dinner of the Maidstone employees of the London, Chatham & Dover Railway (LCDR). Staff from several different grades were joined by the political and commercial elites of the town, including the borough coroner and town councillors, for a ‘very excellent repast’, which was followed by a series of toasts and speeches. It all ended with songs at the pianoforte rendered ‘in capital style’.<sup>1</sup>

But the dinner was much more than a pleasant social occasion. Councillor (and subsequently mayor and alderman of the town) Joseph Barker, in proposing the ‘Success to the LCDR’ toast, was lauded as he voiced the no doubt widespread view amongst local traders that demanded further improvements to the Kent rail network, in particular to ‘the seaside and the continent of Europe’. As significantly, Mr [William] Rose, stationmaster at Barming near Maidstone, responded by expressing his hope that the recent ‘railway strike in Scotland would not in any way disturb the ... Company; he thought where there were any supposed grievances the proper plan for the men to adopt was to approach the heads of departments, and not to listen to paid agitators’. His comment was also greeted with applause.<sup>2</sup>

At one level, this dinner represents yet another paternalistic example of the contemporary ritual dining culture which was so prevalent in late Victorian England. So this article will examine what additional light the function, which was held every January until 1899 and which was attended by up to 100 employees, shines on that particular culture. On another level, as will become apparent, this broader review will reveal a hitherto unrecognised extra dimension to the LCDR dinner. This is that the Company adapted existing banqueting culture in order to present itself in the best possible light to its guests, both traders and employees. Specifically, it wished to create in their minds a reservoir of goodwill towards it, as it sought to obviate or minimise some of the very considerable business risks the Company faced at the end of the nineteenth century.

Two of the most pressing issues surfaced during that single toast in 1891, firstly the opinions of an important customer base, Maidstone businessmen, about the shortcomings of the network, that implied criticism of the LCDR and which could in time have significant regulatory and cost implications for the Company. Secondly, it reveals the company’s attitude to the prospect of its employees taking

industrial action, in particular seeking to dissuade them from aping their Scottish counterparts in what could have proved a prolonged, costly stoppage.

Late Victorian public banquets were examples of highly ritualised performances that were ‘centrally concerned with the delineation of the boundaries of gender, status and class’, all three factors being prominent at this male-only function.<sup>3</sup> Middle class guests had long enjoyed an established dining culture, since their political, church, charity and other dinners, and the toasts and speeches they made afterwards, were regular features of polite local society in provincial English towns such as Maidstone. They were covered extensively in the main (but not the only) source for this enquiry, the local newspapers of the period.<sup>4</sup> These occasions could ‘highlight the importance of exclusivity and exclusion in the performance of bourgeois identity’ such that ‘the excluded “other” was as important as the member or subscriber in giving meaning to the meal’.<sup>5</sup> That ‘other’, historically, included working class men. But by the later nineteenth century skilled workers (including railwaymen) were benefiting from significantly increased disposable incomes and leisure time. Eating out, both at formal dinners and at restaurants, was very much part of this development as it ‘became associated with leisure, pleasure, entertainment and holidays’ and was ‘integral to the pleasure of the occasion’.<sup>6</sup>

The trend is seen in how those lower orders, too, attended the LCDR dinners. But these were never democratic occasions, since they represented another aspect of Victorian workplace ‘top-down’ paternalism. Some of the more junior employees may have been physically present but they were still ‘excluded’, since they were never invited to propose a toast, nor had they any right to speak. Such disarticulated exclusion was a common phenomenon within contemporary Kentish (and national) dining culture generally.

Additionally, the LCDR dinners challenge current understandings of the late Victorian industrial workplace in general and paternalism in particular. There, any paternalistic generosity (such as invitations to these dinners) was, we are told, balanced by sectionalism and extraordinarily levels of military-style discipline in the rail industry, especially, where ‘order, duty and respect were all reinforced at every opportunity, to leave little space for an alternative perspective on the world’.<sup>7</sup> But, one might reasonably ask, if its workers were so regimented into behaving as the LCDR wanted, why did it allow an annual event to take place at which some of its employees, at least, could – and sometimes did – receive messages from the commercial and political elites of the town which had the potential to harm the Company’s financial interests? And why did it simultaneously provide a platform from which that elite could – and sometimes did – criticise it, in stringent terms? And why was the company prepared to compound that risk by allowing local journalists to report on the dinners, as lengthy accounts of the proceedings disseminated to a county-wide readership?

There was no mistaking the powerful ritual element that permeated the dinners, which is seen most clearly in the traditional sequence of toasts that was followed. After the Queen, the Army, Navy and Reserve normally featured but the most important were those celebrating the success of the LCDR and the town, trades and corporation of Maidstone. This is because they provided opportunities for speakers

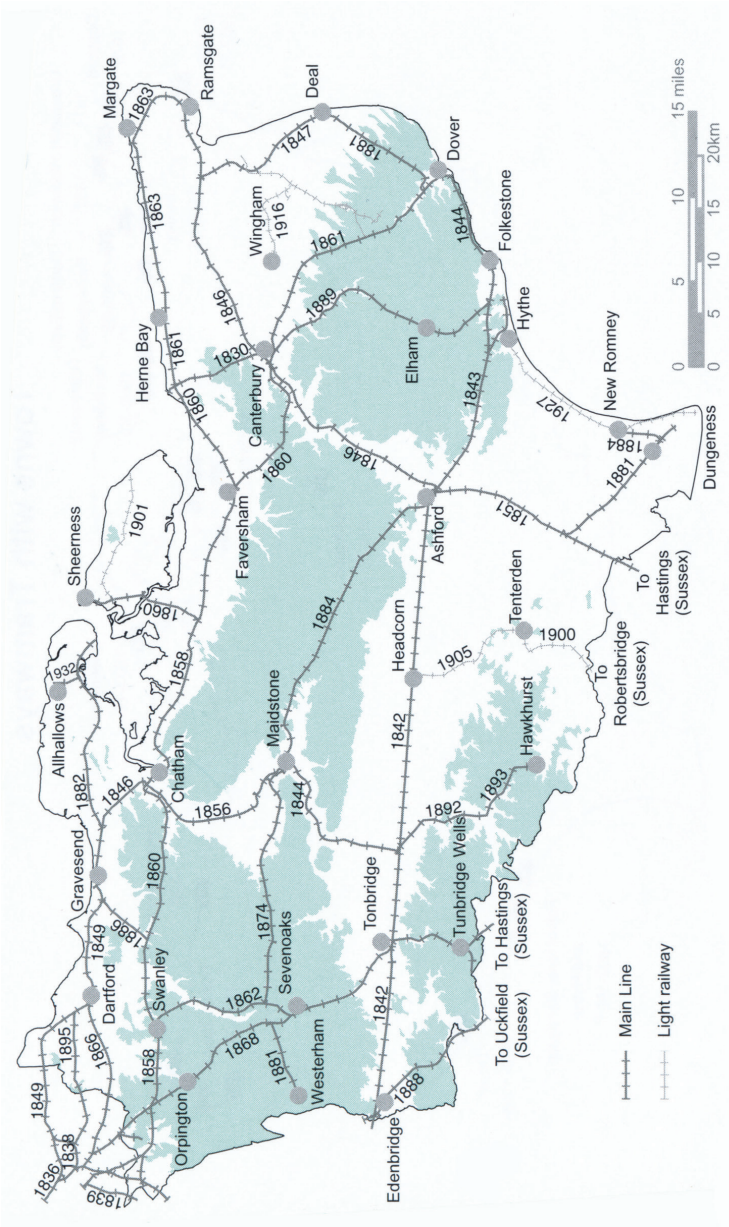
to vent their opinions about the states of both the county's rail service and the town itself, chiefly, but not always, its current economic position. The other toasts included the visitors, the subscribers, the chairman and the hosts. Every event concluded with singing.<sup>8</sup>

All this was revealed in the press reports, together with occasional details about the luxurious ambience of the event, such that 'the spacious dining room was specially decorated for the occasion and the many miniature table lamps on the tables had a very pleasing effect'.<sup>9</sup> However, readers were never told what was on the menu, presumably because the editors believed they were more interested in the toasts and, especially, the speeches. Other railway function menus have survived, however, and they illustrate how keen provincial middle class diners in late Victorian England were to copy the tastes and manners of Metropolitan civic banquets.

British rail operators, generally, faced three main types of risk in the later nineteenth century. Failure to deal successfully with any was likely to increase costs and/or decrease revenues, leading to reduced profitability and/or adverse cashflow. This would in turn impact both on present shareholder value and even, ultimately, the future survival of the company.<sup>10</sup>

First was *competitive risk*, which was a major concern for the LCDR in particular. Both it and its rival South Eastern Railway (SER) ran lines from London through Kent to the coast and both had stations in Maidstone (**Map 1**), so local passengers and freight customers generally had a viable choice of carrier. Both companies ran boat services to Belle Époque Paris, too. Although the competitive instincts of most rail operators 'remained vigorous' until 1914, the LCDR and SER's rivalry 'attained legendary proportions' before the companies effectively merged in 1899. Not only did they fight hard for every customer on the revenue side but those competitive pressures meant that much of their capital expenditure, in terms of additional track mileage constructed, was not commercially viable and the LCDR in particular suffered further financial weakness as a result.<sup>11</sup> As its chairman told shareholders in August 1887, it 'was a very small railway as regarded length, but enormously large as regarded actual cost'. Competition also came from steadily increasing 'omnibus and tram traffic', which in 1891 he blamed for causing 'a declension in their passenger returns'.<sup>12</sup> So bad had the LCDR's finances become by the early 1890s that it regularly had to impart bad news to its shareholders. In August 1891 it announced that 250,000 fewer passengers had been carried compared to the same half-year period in 1890, with obvious implications for the revenue account; two years later trading was 'so unsatisfactory' that 'a balance of £30,000 less [had been] carried forward'.<sup>13</sup>

Second was *regulatory risk*, for whilst the later Victorian period might be seen as the apogee of *laissez-faire* capitalism, the central position of railways in the national economy meant that the 'industry was monitored by and bound into state institutions'. It thus became heavily regulated, at least by the standards of other industries of the period, bearing in mind that government regulation is itself an attempt to manage industry-wide risk.<sup>14</sup> From its inception, the new lines the LCDR wanted could only be delivered via statute, so companies needed to maintain good relations with parliamentarians. But regulatory pressures could



Map 1. The dates of construction of the main railway lines of Kent. The LCDR lines serving Maidstone run east-west while those of the SER are north-south.  
 (Reproduction of map in *An Historical Atlas of Kent*, 2004, p. 125.)

affect revenues as well as the capital account. Most relevant was the setting up of the Railway Commission in 1873, since that quasi-judicial body functioned mainly to hear grievances against train operators by traders, who ‘stood a fair chance of getting something’, i.e. concessions, when they did.<sup>15</sup> The LCDR’s often highhanded attitude to its customers, such that it was ‘frequently deaf to numerous complaints about many of [its] ... trains’, would not have endeared it to them either and would have made complaints to the Commission more likely.<sup>16</sup> Regulation hit a high point in the early 1890s, with the long campaign to reduce railway rates, since traders felt that the charges of what they believed were, to all intents and purposes, monopolies should fall in line with other prices in that deflationary period. Rates were frozen and operators needed the permission of the (renamed) Railway and Canal Commission before they could be raised. Needless to say, in the eyes of the industry ‘Regulation was seen as interference and was opposed on this basis alone’.<sup>17</sup>

This meant that it was wise for the LCDR and other train operators to court politicians, who had their own motives for returning the favour, too. Were a local MP seen to be frustrating a company’s expansion plans, its employees might well vote against him, *en bloc*, at elections, a prospect rendered more likely after the extensions of the franchise in 1867 and 1884.<sup>18</sup> It comes as little surprise, therefore, that a Maidstone MP would regularly be willing to speak at LCDR dinners, that he would say positive things about the company and its workforce (especially given that the Kent railway companies ‘were large employers of labour’), and undertook to assist it operationally wherever possible, by for example ‘using his official position to get the train service between London and Maidstone accelerated’ – or influencing the Commission, in other words.<sup>19</sup>

But regulation was a regional issue as well as a national one, for local councils could and did refer rail operators to the Commission. Councils were largely representative of the local business community, many of whose members were major customers of and suppliers to British train companies and a local trader could easily lose sales if he complained too vociferously about their freight rates, for example. But the local business interest could combine to exert pressure on operators through local government; unsurprisingly in such circumstances the LCDR developed complex and multi-faceted relationships with Kent councils, especially those in larger towns such as Maidstone. Its council took an active interest in railway issues and was quite prepared to refer the LCDR and SER to the Commission whenever it deemed it necessary. Although in November 1887 the Council supported the LCDR’s application ‘for running powers over the SER from Ashford to the seaside’, in March 1890 it submitted a complaint to the Commissioners, seeking to obtain ‘improved facilities and arrangements between Maidstone and Canterbury and Dover’. This was granted and in January 1891 the LCDR’s Board was forced to resolve ‘that the next steps be taken for complying with the order of the Commissioners’.<sup>20</sup>

The LCDR’s poor financial situation largely dictated how it dealt with such imperatives and extensive press reports revealed how costly such compliance might be. In June 1894 the Commission oversaw two separate applications, by Maidstone and Folkestone councils, against the LCDR and SER jointly. They demanded better co-operation over joint running arrangements, through ticketing, faster trains, more efficient timetabling and more. Local traders, such as ‘Mr.

Jones, a fruiterer and newspaper proprietor at Folkestone' gave evidence alongside the mayors of Folkestone and Chatham against the companies. Although the SER's responses to such pressure could be somewhat belligerent, the LCDR's financial weakness made it much more willing to compromise, for example proposing 'to run, as an experiment, an express train between Maidstone and London, as has been promised to the Maidstone Town Council'.<sup>21</sup>

Although on both occasions the Commission thought the evidence insufficient to make an order in the councils' favour, hoping instead to solve issues through self-regulation, such that 'the Companies would do their utmost to meet the demand', those legal processes must have taken up a large amount of management time. And even if they did not lose their case at Tribunal they could still face the vexed issue of costs. Here, the Commission ruled that Maidstone ratepayers should bear the entire financial consequences of their Council's failed action, but although the Folkestone 'applicants had failed on the main points ... having obtained substantial concessions, the fair order would be that each side should bear its own costs'.<sup>22</sup>

The prospect of falling revenues from increased competition and regulatory constraint pressurised the LCDR to control its costs, which included wages. This implied possible industrial action, so the final area to be considered is *employee risk*. The 'large scale vertical integrated structure, commercial size and geographical extent' of the late Victorian rail industry differentiated it from other sectors. It was distinct too in imposing ultra-strict codes of discipline (many managers wielded 'near-military control' – revealingly, the total labour force was often called the 'railway army') which included 'an elaborate system of fines and punishments', uniforms, hierarchical career structures, weighty rule books and 'endless exhortations to comply ... for the sake of safety and efficient operation'. This in turn led to a distinct brand of paternalism that was 'distinguished by its comprehensiveness and complexity'.<sup>23</sup> Its more positive side, however, included the provision of housing and welfare measures such as friendly societies, savings banks and hospitals; pensions were available for long serving employees.<sup>24</sup>

However, the strength of and loyalty to that paternalistic industrial model was severely tested in the late 1880s, as concerted industrial action became commonplace across many sectors of the British economy. This was the so-called 'New Unionism', or a 'broader movement advocating more positively aggressive ... policies [that] sought to appeal in *class* terms to all grades of labour'.<sup>25</sup> Legendary examples (all from London, so not lost on the LCDR) included the Annie Besant-led match girls' strike at the Bryant & May factory in 1888. The following year, gas workers at Beckton won the eight-hour day and London dock workers successfully struck for higher wages. Furthermore, rail unions were recruiting heavily in this period. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (ASRS), for example, 'opened a new section in the early 1890s for the less skilled and lower paid grades', clearly seeking to boost its membership.<sup>26</sup>

This was a clear and present danger to the rail industry in general and the LCDR in particular. The eight-hour working day, for example, had serious potential operational and financial implications, where the standard train company response to increased traffic volumes was not to employ more staff or to invest in better equipment, but simply to lengthen its employees' hours. In February 1893 a shareholder made precisely that point to the LCDR's directors, drawing their

attention to the company's Faversham Junction workplace, where amongst '269 signalmen – men having more responsible duties than the others – there were nineteen instances of men being employed as long as eighteen hours'.<sup>27</sup>

Had the LCDR's Faversham signalmen, or any other over-worked and disaffected group of its employees, downed tools in furtherance of an eight-hour day the cost to the Company would have been huge. It is within this crucial context that we must see the LCDR's dinners, since their enhanced importance and profile (from 1889 onwards) coincided almost exactly with this increased union militancy. The SER, too, might have been concerned about radical industrial views within its Maidstone workforce, since it held an annual supper for them from 1851, although there is no record of it continuing after 1887.<sup>28</sup>

However, the LCDR responded by successfully 'checking the rise of operating costs' (including wages); being 'particularly mean' it proved able to 'stave off a serious wage escalation until the 1890s at least'.<sup>29</sup> This was not achieved through confrontation, for both its Board and Finance & General Committee minutes show that the Company received relatively few wage demands and tended quickly to acquiesce to those they did receive. So it conceded a rise of 3*d.*, to 3*s.* 9*d.* a day (or just over 7%) to its platelayers in October 1889, together with providing great-coats for the 'men whilst fog-signalling'; the following March its signalmen were 'granted the concession of Sunday pay'. In June 1890 shareholders were told of 'the advance in the cost of coal, materials and labour', but the Board was generally far more concerned with increased taxes and rates than wage demands.<sup>30</sup> In August 1896, for example, it complained about '£3,500 of additional taxation ... which had now become a very serious burden'.<sup>31</sup>

Even though there were 'few industrial disputes on the LCDR', the possibility of labour unrest nevertheless remained very real, especially at militant Maidstone.<sup>32</sup> During the National Railway strike of 1911, the first ever such dispute in Britain, whilst 'all the men remained loyal' to the LCDR elsewhere, those at the county town proved far more resistant.<sup>33</sup> The ASRS's *Railway Review*, which unsurprisingly portrayed the strike in heroic terms, reported that the whole works withdrew their labour to attend a 'magnificent mass meeting' on 18 August. Intriguingly, the following day the town's Mayor gave the ASRS the use of a meadow for another meeting, which attracted 'an attentive and sympathetic audience'.<sup>34</sup> It is however unclear whether the political and commercial establishment of the town supported the strikers out of principle, fear - or self-interest, dreading lost sales to rail workers were they perceived to be opposing legitimate industrial action. Whatever the reason, this provides yet another illustration of the complex web of economic, political and social relationships that prevailed in the town in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries.

Running a Victorian railway therefore involved assuming a substantial burden of actual and contingent risk, with large concomitant financial penalties for getting it wrong in the eyes of its various audiences. The most serious were its workforce, if it took exception to the wages and conditions it was expected to labour under, and local traders and councils, should they feel that prevailing operational arrangements were not up to the mark, thus prompting them to refer them to the regulator or to choose an alternative carrier. Overcoming, or at least neutralising, such risks was clearly essential – but how could that be done?



Effectively ‘excluded’ many of its staff might have been, but in 1888 the LCDR guests all ‘dined together’, implying at least the fiction of an egalitarian assembly of senior staff, plebeian workers and middle class traders; this was emphasised in 1892 when a speaker drew attention to ‘the value of gatherings of this description ... they did much to unite all in one common bond or feeling’.<sup>35</sup> Diverse ranks of white and blue collar employees attended, from long-serving (and senior) Locomotive Superintendent G. Winnell (who had joined the company in 1875) to various grades of clerk to the two foremen, Mancktelow and Relf, who appeared in 1897.<sup>36</sup> Booking clerk T. Matthews and passenger foreman J. Smith served as vice-chairs for the 1889 event.<sup>37</sup> The event must also have served as a motivational exercise, since invitations aimed to promote future or (more likely) reward past good behaviour in the workplace. Not every employee was deemed respectable or safe enough to be part of the gathering, too, because even lower ranking worker-guests had to act as ambassadors for the LCDR to the others. This meant they were obliged to display something of the ‘restraint, uprightness and ... mastery of the composite range of gestures which designated respectability’, since they were in the presence of both important customers of their employer – and their immediate bosses.<sup>38</sup>

Those present also had an example, or role model, to aspire to. The LCDR dinner was first reported in 1883 but the 1889 event was chaired by the recently-appointed Maidstone stationmaster, Edward Gratwick, and was marked by a decisive change in the *Gazette’s* reporting of it, since it suddenly merited an entire column rather than a single short paragraph, as before. This was largely due to the presence of a high-profile guest of honour for the first time, Fiennes Cornwallis, the newly-elected MP for Maidstone and Gratwick may well be behind the decision to invite him. A rapidly rising star in the LCDR firmament, Gratwick was born in Camberwell, Surrey in 1849 and the 1881 census records him as a junior stationmaster at Bat & Ball station, Sevenoaks, on the LCDR’s branch line from Swanley. His duties there included giving evidence in court against some men caught stealing coal from a station siding. From Sevenoaks he went to Maidstone via Gravesend and when the LCDR and the SER merged in 1899 he ran all four stations in the town, before moving to the Great Western Railway in 1906 as superintendent of Reading station. He died in Camberwell in 1928.<sup>39</sup>

Gratwick either chaired or held senior positions at every dinner he attended and they undoubtedly gave him, as he propelled himself up the corporate hierarchy, the opportunity to proclaim and cement his higher status within the Company, as well as his burgeoning middle class credentials. Organising a successful event such as this would have done his future job prospects no harm at all, either. But his career path, and its subtle celebration at the dinners, also sent out an important corporate statement to those LCDR employees who attended. They had reached at least the second to bottom rung of the rigidly hierarchical ladder of the contemporary rail industry (for even someone with Gratwick’s abilities was aged in his late fifties before he made superintendent, and he had to change employer to achieve that) and his very public new status may have inspired them to set their sights on their own career progressions. The *implicit* message they received was, therefore, that hard work would, in time, pay off for them, too, in terms of better pay and enhanced social status. Instilling ambitions such as that in its workforce was far preferable,

in the LCDR's eyes, to them seeking to make names for themselves as agitators within the ASRS or other rail unions.<sup>40</sup>

One of the main reasons why the LCDR held its annual dinners was to help generate a store of goodwill towards it, in the minds of both local traders and its Maidstone employees, encouraging both groups not to worsen its financial position by supporting its rival or complaining to the regulator, or by withdrawing their labour, respectively. That goodwill would be magnified both by allowing a diverse group of guests to rub shoulders with the town's MP or other commercial and political dignitaries (such as, on one occasion, local Conservative agent Mr C.W. Hardy) and by the dinner being covered extensively in the press.<sup>41</sup> This would further heighten its importance and serve to confer select status and respectability upon those present, including those workers deemed worthy enough to receive invitations.

It may, however, be objected that nowhere in the company's extensive extant records does any director or manager explicitly state that the dinners were held with the particular purpose of disseminating those messages to those audiences in that way. In fact, the only evidence for these functions taking place at all is the various press reports. Against that, however, rail operators such as the LCDR undoubtedly sought to exert strict control over every significant aspect of their employees' working lives. It is therefore inconceivable that an event of this scale and stature, that became a high profile annual event in the town and which was covered extensively across the regional media, could have taken place without company approval, even if its most senior managers did not take part and the LCDR neither funded nor subsidised it directly. Moreover, the company's strong *imprimata* is also visible in how middle managers delivered corporate information directly to the diners, for example in 1891 when stationmaster Rose revealed the schemes the company already had 'in hand ... as to the improvement of the communication between Maidstone and London'. It beggars belief he did so without the full, if tacit, approval of his superiors.<sup>42</sup> 'Old servant' Rose (1842-1900) was regularly asked to respond to the toasts. He had worked for the Company since 1860, and his privileged status would have resulted as much from his long service record and his senior position as his concern to promulgate approved corporate lines on both industrial relations and customer care. The previous year, for example, he had reminded his audience that the LCDR's 'employees had always been taught from the first to be civil and courteous to the public'.<sup>43</sup> Sadly, nothing else may be gleaned about the life of this employee who was so hostile to trades union activity.

Taking competitive risk first, preventing strikes and referrals to the regulator sought to reduce costs. But the LCDR did not ignore the revenue implications either for – in an early example of what is now called corporate entertainment – the positive perception of the company the dinners (hopefully) generated could also persuade guests to use the LCDR, as passengers or freight customers, as opposed to the SER. Getting this message across required some subtlety, however, so it would doubtless have approved of how borough coroner R.T. Tatham (a regular guest, presumably because he was such a fulsome apologist for the company) stressed the competitive advantage of the service offered by its employees: 'It might be that the London, Chatham, and Dover servants were better than others but he could speak

of their general courtesy'.<sup>44</sup> The importance of this reason for holding the dinners may also be seen in how they were ended in the same year the merger with the SER took place. They were no longer required because there was, by then, no challenger railway operator to worry about.

From customers to suppliers, from at least 1877 Maidstone traders had thanked the town's railway workers by paying for their annual treats. By 1888 the subsidy had become institutionalised, for 'the cost of the feast [was] defrayed from a fund principally subscribed by the tradesmen of the town and others using the line'.<sup>45</sup> And it was reasonable that those paying the piper should call the tune, or at least share in the feast. Kent firms represented included carriers Harry Tyrer & Co and cherry brandy makers Thomas Grant & Sons in 1893; suppliers also came from further afield, such as (in 1888) Hyde, Archer & Co, a London firm of leather saddlers.<sup>46</sup> The dinner also was a major opportunity to court and/or reward its suppliers; by inviting them the LCDR was making it clear that it was ready to do business with them, or some of them. So Tyrers was awarded cartage contracts in March 1893 and January 1894 and Grants sold the company almost £20 of brandy in 1893, but there is no record of Hyde Archer in the Company's bought ledger account.<sup>47</sup>

The company also needed to deliver appropriate and compelling messages to Maidstone Council as it sought to neutralise or obviate the regulatory risk. One way to do this, positively, was to ensure it recognised the economic benefits the LCDR brought to the town. So in 1895 it would have welcomed Mayor George Baker's 'approval at the action of the London, Chatham, and Dover Company in running their line into Maidstone, and said that he did not know that there had been anything more conducive to the town and trade of Maidstone, or a greater boon to the inhabitants'.<sup>48</sup>

But the concomitant danger of allowing councillors and traders the floor was that it let them relay their own messages back to the company on rail operations in general, and their regulation in particular. Not only could the LCDR then find itself on the receiving end of some pointed criticism, even if some of it was cloaked in humour, to any perceived deficiencies in the service, but such censures were also communicated to a much wider public, or customer/passenger, sphere through the newspaper reports. So in 1898 the radical Liberal Mayor Barker (doubtless with his own political agenda and constituency in mind) sarcastically remarked that 'it was a Company which endeavoured to serve the public well, and he had no doubt they would, in future, try and serve the Maidstone people a little better than they had in the past'.<sup>49</sup>

Loose resident Barker (1841-1931) was 'closely identified with the municipal and political life of Maidstone' for many years, being lauded in the press as 'A true economist ... [who] studied the reduction of the rates in the borough'. Originally in the family brewing business (which made him 'a man of independent means' after it was sold), he served as a County magistrate for 35 years, sat on the Maidstone Board of Guardians for four decades and was elected Mayor of Maidstone in both 1895 and 1897. Revealingly, he said 'railway facilities' were first on his to-do list when he was first elected.<sup>50</sup>

During his second term in office he was confronted with the largest ever typhoid epidemic in the UK, when 132 of Maidstone's 34,000 population died and outsiders 'were afraid to come to the town'. Containing that 'unprecedented calamity' required building ten emergency hospitals with 400 beds and 140 nurses;

afterwards Barker wrote to *The Times* to launch a special fund ‘to mitigate the sufferings of the afflicted’ and which raised over £30,000 (a huge sum then) for the survivors and the victims’ families.<sup>51</sup>

Their speeches also reveal that the council was more than prepared to prod the LCDR and the SER into doing this, since in 1891 ‘the corporation had done what it had done without favouring any railway company’. This had meant a referral to the Commission, which made an order ‘under which the two companies were to give better facilities, and the inconvenience so long experienced at Ashford was to continue no more’. That was not the end of it, however, for if the companies failed to ‘do all they could to carry out the undertaking ... the representatives of Maidstone would have to take another journey up to London to learn the reason why’, a statement which was greeted with ‘laughter and applause’. The threat was clear: if the operators’ performance did not improve, the Council would go back to the Commission, risking them both suffering potentially heavy compliance costs which, to the LCDR in particular, would have been a most unwelcome extra financial burden.<sup>52</sup>

Two years later, at the height of the railway rates controversy, speaker after speaker rose to take aim at rail operators generally and the LCDR by implication. Even the normally supportive Tatham iterated a widespread feeling that the companies ‘were taking advantage of the tariffs allowed to them’, whilst ‘Mr. Clark took the opportunity of thanking, on behalf of those whom he represented, the Corporation of Maidstone, for the energetic way in which they acted in obtaining the necessary powers from the Commissioners in relation to the through connection at Ashford’. Since that had happened two years previously, Clark’s subtext is clear – we took you to the regulators before and we will do so again, if needs be.<sup>53</sup>

In an unusual move, for he normally only mouthed platitudes, Gratwick responded by pinning the blame firmly on government and regulators for the rail industry’s contemporary problems of perception:

Railway Companies at the present time were not in very good odour with the public, but he ventured to think ... that it was a good deal the fault of ill-advised legislation ... [they] had done their very best under the old regime to serve the districts through which they passed. Certain restrictions had been put upon them now which had rendered necessary to some extent the state of things that had come to pass.<sup>54</sup>

The message to the council here was clear – don’t blame us, it’s not our fault. But the more important question is why the LCDR provided the traders of Maidstone with this open forum in the first place, one where they were so free to criticise the performance of the company – and in such lively terms. That might in turn have prompted another expensive referral to the Commission, or its customers to depart to its rival operator.

It seems strange because it represents the antithesis of the top-down, controlling hierarchy which, we are led to believe, was the prevailing mindset within rail operators of the period. By contrast, this evidence points to a much more nuanced approach from the LCDR to its key audiences. Its message to its trader-guests was instead one based on *active* trust. It said, in effect, that the Company both appreciated their contribution and commitment to the prosperity of the town and acknowledged their select status as existing or potential customers and suppliers.

So it was happy to provide them with a platform from which they might freely say what they believed to be most important at the time, even if that enabled them to criticise its operational performance, in public. The LCDR's broader cost-benefit calculation (if it was as premeditated as that) was that the upside, in terms of the goodwill generated from the event, more than made up for any potential downside. The format of the event was, in other words, well worth the risk.

The final audience was the LCDR's workers and the dinners disclose the full extent of its three-pronged industrial relations strategy. This might be described as a velvet fist in an iron glove, since the company sometimes talked tough at these events but otherwise acted in a far more conciliatory manner. Firstly, unlike the traders, the workers were never allowed to express their opinions. They may have been privileged to have been invited but, once there, they were subjected to a series of subtle and not-so-subtle – and this time very *explicit* – industrial relations messages from various different speakers over the years, all of which aimed to reinforce Gratwick's implicit counterpart analysed earlier. Rose favoured the iron glove. In 1891 he urged them not to 'listen to paid agitators', or imitate the Scottish ASRS members' failed strike, since that would 'disturb' the LCDR – and their jobs, too, potentially, was his subtext. Instead, anyone with any '*supposed* grievances' (author's italics) should instead 'approach the heads of departments', such as himself, for redress. That sentiment had been echoed, the previous year, by Tatham who warned them – again in an unsubtle tone – that it 'would ill become them that evening ... to say anything but good of the company' and 'they must realise that everyone employed must do his best'.<sup>55</sup>

Gratwick, secondly, normally took a less confrontational approach. His velvet fist was to tender 'his thanks to the staff ... employed at Maidstone, from the highest to the lowest, for the manner in which they had co-operated with him during the past year'.<sup>56</sup> Although gentler in tone, the intention was the same, to discourage them from striking and to be content with what they were paid, although the company's weak financial position was such that those workers who did complain tended to be bought off, piecemeal and quickly, which was the third part of its strategy. The Chairman also sometimes imitated Gratwick's approach, for example showing his appreciation of their efforts at the August 1897 shareholders meeting by emphasising 'how much was owing to the devotion of every grade of servant they employed, who worked at all times, in all weathers ... in conducting the traffic'.<sup>57</sup>

The Company did not mind, therefore, whether glove or fist was used as long as its workers were encouraged and/or browbeaten not to strike. What was totally unacceptable, however, was for a leading light in the Maidstone business/political community to suggest improved terms and conditions for the workforce, since that might encourage them in very much the wrong direction, from the Company's perspective, of requesting – or even agitating – for them. That was a rare event, but it did happen, for example in 1893, when Barker neatly and humorously conflated regulatory and employee risk, wondering:

why such a great increase had taken place in railway rates. It had struck him ... that the Railway Companies must be beginning to see what excellent men they had in their staff and were going to nut up their rates in order to give better wages to their employees.<sup>58</sup>

Encouraging, even jokingly and implicitly, the LCDR's workers to press for more money proved too much for Gratwick. So, speaking on the Company's behalf and giving the clearest possible put-down to any incipient wage ambitions, he too unequivocally pulled on the iron glove of dismissal, for:

if no alteration took place in the present state of affairs, and he hoped there would be, he thought instead of getting an increase of wages, as suggested by Mr. Barker, they would get the other thing'.<sup>59</sup>

In a similar way to its trader audience, therefore, the LCDR took a risk when it exposed its employees, even the better-behaved ones, to financially-subversive remarks such as these. They were especially unwelcome when espoused by the mayor, since his high social and political status made it highly likely they would both be taken seriously at the dinner – and receive widespread media coverage, as they did. Again, however, the Company was delivering, both implicitly and explicitly, a nuanced set of messages to its workers. On the one hand it said – work hard, don't complain, be content and (by implication) don't join a trade union. Those who did as they were urged could, as Gratwick did, enhance their social standing and their economic benefits, although it could well take them their whole working lives to do so. On the other, those who refused to abide by those strictures, by proving difficult to work with or – worst of all – by going on strike, were threatened with losing their jobs.

Another dimension was that those workers had, as had the traders, not only been invited by the LCDR but had also been permitted to hear a range of potential viewpoints, some of which – such as Barker's whimsical call for higher wages – were not approved by the company. This suggests that they too were trusted (but only *passively*, unlike the traders, since they were seen at the event but were never permitted to contribute to the debate), neither to echo those sentiments in their own wage demands nor, perhaps worse, to encourage their less respectable and possibly more militant absent colleagues to do the same. It all represented a level of maturity and openness of discourse in the 1890s that illustrated a somewhat different (and much more flexible, even open) approach to paternalism in general and industrial relations in particular than is often appreciated.

By contrast, this series of dinners had a meaning far beyond an annual free meal. The velvet fist approach also allowed some, at least, of the LCDR's workers both to participate in Maidstone's middle class dining culture and, as they did so, to listen to (if not to engage with) a range of opinions potentially far removed from the normal range of industrial relations messages they might expect to receive from their managers. Importantly, too, it indicated a degree of trust in (that part of) its workforce and makes it hard to describe these functions as merely another example of a systematic strategy of workplace domination. It instead formed part of a different approach entirely, whereby its industrial relations effort sought to combat the potentially disastrous consequences of militant behaviour by generating such goodwill towards it, from its employees, that they would forebear from striking or otherwise compromising the LCDR's operations. Trusting its employees, as well as its customers, was also well worth the risk, therefore.

Coinciding at the start exactly with the rise of New Unionism and terminating

exactly with the SER merger, the high profile (i.e. post 1888) variant of the LCDR's January Maidstone employees' dinners adds to our knowledge of how it sought to present itself to and manage its relationships with both its workers and the town's business community. It also reveals a new dimension to late nineteenth-century English dining culture. Beyond that, however, the final question is: did the dinners succeed in their aim of reducing – to whatever degree – the risks the company faced from those audiences, in particular from higher wage demands or from an increased regulatory burden?

It is impossible to quantify, from the evidence available, the extent to which the latter was defrayed. However, traders (and councillors) not only enjoyed the hospitality but were prepared to pay for it. Partly it gave them another opportunity to burnish their respectable credentials, by participating in the town's established middle class dining culture, which also featured its business and political elite. Partly, too, it gave speakers a public platform, from which they could air their views both to the other guests and also to a county-wide audience, via the media. They were free to use those opportunities however they chose, within reason, either to congratulate the LCDR's efforts to improve its network, or to criticise or be sarcastic about its performance. Occasionally they might even elect to disseminate messages (such as suggesting further regulation or increased wages) that the company was none too keen to have broadcast. Either way, it is reasonable to conclude that the trust shown in them by the company generated a measure of goodwill towards it from the trader-guests.

And this goodwill may have played a small part, at the very least, in encouraging its customers to choose it over the SER, in local councillors referring it to the Commission only when it was absolutely necessary and – from their particular perspective – in its workers choosing to be quiescent. Again, it is impossible to quantify exactly what difference 'soft' welfare capitalism, such as these dinners, made to restraining wage demands. But it may be important that, throughout the 1890s, the LCDR kept their wage costs, as a percentage of gross revenue, to roughly the same levels as those of the SER, even though the company was an inherently more expensive operation to run.<sup>60</sup> On balance, therefore, they seem to have served their purpose well.

#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> *South Eastern Gazette*, 20 Jan 1891 (henceforth *SEG*).

<sup>2</sup> *SEG*, 20 Jan 1891.

<sup>3</sup> Simon Gunn, *The Public Culture of the Victorian Middle Class – Ritual and Authority in the English Industrial City 1840-1914* (Manchester, 2000), p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> The (recently digitised) *South Eastern Gazette* is the main source for this article, together with the LCDR's records at The National Archive, grouped under heading RAIL 415.

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Rich, *Bourgeois Consumption – Food, Space and Identity in London and Paris, 1850-1914* (Manchester, 2011), pp. 187, 189.

<sup>6</sup> John Burnett, *England Eats Out – A Social History of Eating Out in England from 1850 to the Present* (Harlow, 2004), pp. 51, 63.

<sup>7</sup> Mike Richardson and Peter Nicholls, *A Business and Labour History of Britain: Case Studies of Britain in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Basingstoke, 2011), p. 19.

<sup>8</sup> See for example *SEG*, 18 Jan 1890. At the SER dinners, the Company was the 'toast of the evening' (for example on 24 Jan 1881).

- <sup>9</sup> *SEG*, 18 Jan 1890.
- <sup>10</sup> For the sake of simplicity, reputational risk has been ignored in this discussion, since it has implications for almost every area of corporate activity.
- <sup>11</sup> Henry Parris, *Government and the Railways in Nineteenth Century Britain* (London, 1965), p. 221; Gerald Crompton, 'Transport', in *Kent in the Twentieth Century*, ed., Nigel Yates, (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 123. The 'calamitous feud between the companies' is explored in more detail in H.P. White, *A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain*, vol. 2, *Southern England* (London, 1964), chapter 3.
- <sup>12</sup> *SEG*, 15 Aug 1887; 8 Aug 1891.
- <sup>13</sup> *SEG*, 8 Aug 1891; 8 Aug 1893.
- <sup>14</sup> George Revill, 'Liberalism and Paternalism: Politics and Corporate Culture in 'Railway Derby'', 1865-75, *Social History*, 2, 1999, 196-214 (204); Bridget Hutter, *Regulation & Risk: Occupational Health & Safety on the Railways* (Oxford, 2001), p. 4.
- <sup>15</sup> Parris, *Government and the Railways*, p. 222.
- <sup>16</sup> T.R. Gourvish, 'The Performance of Railway Management after 1860 – the Railways of Watkin and Forbes', *Business History*, 2, 1978, 186-200 (193).
- <sup>17</sup> Hutter, p. 34.
- <sup>18</sup> In Derby, for example, the Midland Railway's 'station constituency' rose from under 100 to over 1,000 after Disraeli's Reform Act, or 12% of the town's electorate. Revill, *Liberalism*, p. 200.
- <sup>19</sup> Terence Lawson and David Killingray (eds), *An Historical Atlas of Kent* (Chichester, 2004), p. 125; *SEG*, 15 Jan 1889.
- <sup>20</sup> RAIL 415/18.
- <sup>21</sup> *SEG*, 23 June 1894.
- <sup>22</sup> *SEG*, 23 June 1894.
- <sup>23</sup> Revill, *Liberalism*, p. 197; Richardson and Nicholls, *Business and Labour History*, pp. 18, 20, 21, 24.
- <sup>24</sup> Revill, *Liberalism*, p. 197.
- <sup>25</sup> Keith Burgess, *The Challenge of Labour – Shaping British History 1850-1930* (London, 1980), p. 65.
- <sup>26</sup> Alastair Reid, *United We Stand – A History of Britain's Trade Unions* (London, 2004), p. 205.
- <sup>27</sup> Revill, *Liberalism*, p. 201; *SEG*, 14 Aug 1893.
- <sup>28</sup> *SEG*, 15 Jan 1877; 10 Jan 1887.
- <sup>29</sup> Gourvish, 'Railway Management', p. 197.
- <sup>30</sup> RAIL 415/70; 415/18; 415/3.
- <sup>31</sup> *SEG*, 8 Aug 1896.
- <sup>32</sup> Adrian Gray, *The London, Chatham & Dover Railway* (Rainham, 1984), p. 187.
- <sup>33</sup> *Whitstable Times*, 26 Aug 1911.
- <sup>34</sup> *Railway Review*, 25 Aug 1911.
- <sup>35</sup> *SEG*, 23 Jan 1888; 19 Jan 1892.
- <sup>36</sup> RAIL 415/110; *SEG* 19 Jan 1897.
- <sup>37</sup> *SEG*, 15 Jan 1889.
- <sup>38</sup> Gunn, *Public Culture*, p. 77.
- <sup>39</sup> <http://www.theweald.org/P2.asp?Pid=Se.BatBallS> (accessed 15 Nov. 2015); *Sevenoaks Chronicle*, 21 Oct. 1881; *SEG*, 7 Nov 1905; <http://www.freebmd.org.uk/cgi/search.pl>. (accessed 15 Nov 2015).
- <sup>40</sup> Another good example of how railway companies rewarded talent was the LCDR's Chairman and General Manager James Staats Forbes, who began his career as a manual worker on the Great Western Railway, aged 17.
- <sup>41</sup> *SEG*, 1 Feb 1898.
- <sup>42</sup> *SEG*, 20 Jan 1891.
- <sup>43</sup> *SEG*, 18 Jan 1890; [www.familysearch.org](http://www.familysearch.org); *SEG*, 15 Jan 1889.
- <sup>44</sup> *SEG*, 20 Jan 1891.



- 45 *SEG*, 15 Jan 1877; 23 Jan 1888.
- 46 *SEG*, 17 Jan 1893, 23 Jan 1888.
- 47 RAIL 415/74; Kent History and Library Centre, U2749/B23.
- 48 The link to Maidstone ran from Swanley via Otford and Borough Green; *SEG*, 22 Jan 1895.
- 49 *SEG*, 1 Feb 1898.
- 50 *SEG*, 2 Sept 1930; *Maidstone Journal*, 14 Nov. 1895 (henceforth *MJ*); *Loose Ends – the Journal of the Loose Area History Society*, vol. 13, 2013; *MJ*, 14 Nov 1895.
- 51 *The Times*, 10 Nov. 1897; *The Nursing Record and Hospital World*, 14 May 1898.
- 52 *SEG*, 20 Jan 1891.
- 53 *SEG*, 17 Jan 1893.
- 54 *SEG*, 17 Jan 1893.
- 55 *SEG*, 20 Jan 1891, 18 Jan 1890.
- 56 *SEG*, 19 Jan 1892.
- 57 *SEG*, 7 Aug 1897.
- 58 *SEG*, 17 Jan 1893.
- 59 *SEG*, 17 Jan 1893.
- 60 Gourvish, 'Railway Management', p. 197.