

STRATHFIELD STATION STORY

THE FIRST STATION - 1876

The railway line through what is known as Strathfield was opened in 1855. The whole line between Sydney and Parramatta was sparsely populated and remained that way for most of the 19th century. There was no thought of a railway station at what was then known as Redmyre until the late 1870s. Up to that time, the history of Strathfield station was consistent with those other stations on the line that were not located at an important cross road or near to Parramatta Road. The then Railway Commissioners did not have to be told about opening and enlarging railway infrastructure at those locations which could and did take freight traffic from the road freight industry. If a station were located in the areas between or distant from important roads, there was little likelihood of capturing other than local traffic. For these areas, the Railway Commissioners had little interest in providing and enlarging facilities at stations.

In 1855, those stations that were opened at the time of the line opening were those places where the Commissioners thought there would be an increase in freight traffic. These were Newtown, Ashfield, Burwood, Homebush and Granville. It is noteworthy that the Commissioners' judgments proved correct as all these locations developed moderately sized goods yards. Apart from Petersham and Lidcombe, which were opened in 1857 and 1858, no other goods yards were ever opened between Sydney and Parramatta from the time of line opening.

At all other stations, it was local politics rather than the potential for freight traffic that was the explanation for the opening and development of additional stations. In this group are Stanmore, Summer Hill, Lewisham, Croydon, Strathfield, Flemington, Rookwood, Auburn, Clyde and Harris Park. None of these stations ever had a local freight yard. In essence, there were two types of stations. The first group, which stations were all opened in the 1850s, were freight and passenger stations and the second group, which were opened from the 1870s, were purely passenger stations.

Strathfield station was within that group that developed from political rather than financial criteria. The Railway Commissioners were reluctant to open stations where it considered that there was insufficient return from coaching business. In such circumstances, the Commissioners asked the petitioners to provide not only the initial capital funds but also a guarantee of revenue, usually for three years. This was the case in the opening of Petersham and Lidcombe stations. It also occurred in 1885 when the Commissioners demanded and received private capital to rebuild Stanmore station in its present form.

The Commissioners were reluctant to provide any station at Strathfield. Similar to other locations, local residents petitioned for a station but, in this case, no money was requested. Why was this location different? The answer lies in its political origins. Dr Michael Jones has written the local history of Strathfield. He says "the people of Strathfield were most fortunate that powerful and influential public servants, especially those connected with the Railways, lived in Strathfield from early in its history."¹ Donald Vernon was one of those people. He 1873 he was appointed Traffic Manager

¹ M. Jones, *Oasis in the West – Strathfield's First 100 Years*, Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1985, p. 51

and, not too surprisingly, the Railway Commissioner opened a “halt” not too far from Vernon’s private residence. Jones continues with the story. He writes that “the people of Croydon had asked him (i.e. Vernon) for a station at Croydon when he was Traffic Manager, but had been refused on the grounds that it would interrupt the passage of trains. They had been annoyed to find a platform opposite Vernon’s land at Strathfield.”²

A station is opened at Redmyre on 9th July, 1876. While the station’s political origin was different from other Sydney suburban stations, its platform development was consistent with all other stations between Sydney and Parramatta. It was one of ten stations opened on the line in the 1870s. It progressed through the three stages of station status of a halt without platforms in 1876, to staggered side platforms in 1877 and to a station with parallel platforms in 1885 when the name was changed from Redmyre to Strathfield.³ This name change was another expression of local political power and recognition of that power by the Railway Commissioner and his staff. The 1877 staggered platforms at Strathfield, along with Auburn and Newtown in the same year, were the last to be built on the NSW rail system. A new station at Burwood in 1878 had parallel platforms.

Strathfield was still a fairly sparsely populated area in the early 1880s, as reflected by the appointment in 1883 of a Porter-in-Charge as the senior staff member at the station rather than the more senior position of Station Master.

THE SECOND STATION - 1885

The 1877 platforms were situated roughly in the position the station is today on the west side of The Boulevard and the 1885 station was located on the east side of The Boulevard. The number of platforms was increased from two to four and a subway was built roughly in the position as the up end subway is today. This subway was amongst the first built on the NSW rail system together with one at Bathurst to reach the new down platform. There was one island and two side platforms and this arrangement was chosen to facilitate cross platform change of trains from up services from the West to down services on the North Coast, now the Main North. The platform arrangement was a duplicate of the changes that were implemented at Redfern in 1884 to provide for the construction of the Illawarra line to Hurstville. In 1891, a second subway was opened at the down end of the platform.⁴ Apart from minor alterations to the signals and interlocking, no other changes were made to accommodate the major line quadruplication that took place in 1892 between Illawarra Junction and Homebush. In all the time between 1885 and the present, there has been a subway open to the general public connecting the two sides of the rail corridor.

The period between 1878 and 1889 is often called the railway “boom” period because so many miles of new lines in rural areas were added to the system.⁵ While that is correct, the demand for capital was so great for all aspects of railway operations that sufficient money was simply unavailable for all the projects. Even in key projects, money was in short supply. For instance, when the Great

² *ibid*

³ Some sources say the name change and new station was in 1886. E. Dunlop, *Harvest of the Years – The Story of Burwood 1794-1974*, 1974, Municipality of Burwood, p. 56 is incorrect when he writes that platforms were not provided until 1885

⁴ R. Preston, *125 years of the Sydney to Parramatta Railway*, Burwood, NSW Rail Transport Museum, 1980, p. 85

⁵ For example, see R. Lee, *The Greatest Public Work*, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1988, pp. 88 and 97

Southern Railway reached Albury in 1881, the platform building was incomplete for over one year and the goods shed was used for that period as the first station. In 1884, some of the gatehouses on the line to Hurstville were of timber construction and, more importantly, were visible from the platforms with their high-class structures. When the buildings were planned for the Hornsby-Hamilton line in 1886 and 1887, not one platform structure was over 55 feet in length and all were of timber construction. Similarly, the platform buildings on the line south of Waterfall to Bomaderry and Kiama between 1886 and 1892 were all timber, except for Helensburgh, Wollongong and Kiama. In 1885, the lattice bridge over the Georges River at Como held only a single track despite the formations of the lines on side of the bridge being built for duplicated tracks. There was simply insufficient capital funds to address all the competing needs of the rail system. Strathfield was very fortunate to get its large station, even though the platform buildings were of the utilitarian design, without the large amounts of decoration that had been applied to buildings at Summer Hill and Petersham stations in 1885 and 1886.

In the 1880s, the common style of platform buildings had large, open-fronted waiting areas, as is the case with the 1880s buildings extant at Stanmore and Lidcombe today. At Strathfield, smallish brick buildings were located on the side platforms while the centre, island platform was too narrow for a building and featured a long, timber awning.

Although the 1885 Strathfield station buildings were functional and without decoration, they proved to be an important evolutionary phase of NSW station design. The pattern of the platforms was applied to the 1892 quadruplication, as was done two years earlier at Redfern. Unlike Redfern, all ticket sales and parcels business was conducted off-platform. This arrangement meant that only public toilets, shelter and a small office for platform staff were required. Although Chief Commissioner, E.M.G. Eddy, had little time for his predecessors, he did apply the same pattern of off-platform booking and parcels offices that Commissioner Charles Goodchap had done in the previous decade. From 1885, the station at Strathfield looked somewhat different to other stations.

Chief Commissioner, E.M.G Eddy, did a lot of good things in the 1890s but one bad thing is his decision to re-number the platforms of the stations between Redfern and Homebush. He abandoned the individual numbering of platforms at all stations between Redfern and Homebush. Instead, he allocated the numbers 1, 2 and 3 to the platforms at Strathfield but in the reverse order.⁶ Even though that decision was inconsistent with departmental policy that had existed from 1855, there was no problem so far as the two side platforms were concerned. There was, however, substantial confusion with the island platform, where platform No. 3 served both the up West and down North Coast lines. In 1900, platform No. 3 similarly became a puzzle when a Back Platform Road and platform was provided. It appears that the 1892 numbering of the platforms lasted at least until World War 1 and possibly until the closure of the site in 1927.

Another interesting feature introduced by Eddy was the change of the title of what is today known as the Main North between Strathfield and Hornsby. When the line opened in 1886 to Hornsby, Commissioner, Charles Goodchap, called it the Main North. Eddy did not like Goodchap and one of

⁶ The numbering of NSW platforms is right to left standing facing Sydney station at the country end of the station. Eddy numbered the platforms right to left.

the policy changes Eddy enacted to reflect his displeasure was to change the name of the line to Hornsby from the Main North to the North Coast line. The new title lasted to at least 1900, after which NSW Railway officials realised Eddy was not in office anymore and changes could be made. Life member, Geoff Lillico, reflects that the title, North Coast line, was an unusual selection as the branch between Milsons Point and Hornsby was physically closer to the coast than the Strathfield-Hornsby line.

All four station sites at Strathfield were built with what is known as constructability as the primary strategy. Constructability basically means the ease of construction. The traditional NSW Railway practice is to build a station at one end of the existing buildings. At Strathfield, all the four stations were built either one side or the other of The Boulevarde.

The 1900 structure was located between the western side of The Boulevarde and extended to the present road underbridge on the down side of the station. Planning was underway in 1899 and involved a station of two island platforms and one side platform. There was no other station building on the NSW system like the 1900 Strathfield station. Everything was different about it from the overall strategy to the detailed design. Eddy had introduced the concept of off-platform ticket sales with the buildings he had erected at the 11 stations between Redfern and Homebush.⁷ By so doing, Eddy avoided providing staff and facilities for ticket sales on each platform. However, he still placed a very long (in excess of 100 feet) building on the centre, island platform. At Strathfield, the strategy was adopted to virtually eliminate platform buildings. Only awnings and small boxes for porters to wave flags to departing trains were provided on the platforms.

THE THIRD STATION 1900

With the new station, the name in timetables was changed for the third time, on this occasion from Strathfield Junction to Strathfield. This action was related to an overall change in departmental naming policy as Hornsby Junction was changed to Hornsby also in 1890.

At Strathfield, a three-arch, Monier style, concrete road overbridge was built at the down end of the station and John Forsyth says that the roadway was located about 30 feet on the down of the present curve in Everton Road.⁸ The use of the Monier system of re-inforced concrete for the bridge was new. It was the first such application on the NSW rail system and, along with a road bridge at Reads Gully near Tamworth, was the first such bridges of this type in NSW. It must be stated that the Tamworth road bridge was tiny in size compared to the Strathfield bridge.

Above the tracks, the NSW Railways built an enormous structure measuring 127 feet long. The outstanding feature was the use of large, Romanesque windows, similar in style to what appeared on many Sydney shops at the time. The NSW Railways did not favour large areas of glazing because Junior Porters were well-known to throw missiles, otherwise officially called parcels, with a minimal of care. The greater the amount of glazing, the more likelihood of broken glass. The large windows at Strathfield were not a problem as the structure did not contain a Parcels Office. This facility,

⁷ The example at Katoomba did not have off-platform ticket sales but a ticket window in the end of the building, which was also a revolutionary concept in the design history of NSW station buildings.

⁸ J. Forsyth, *Station Information N to Z*, State Rail Authority, unpublished manuscript, pp. 175-177

measuring 27 by 10 feet, was located on The Boulevard at the bottom of a ramp to the overbridge. Although functional in design, it looked classy. It had the less common Flemish bond brickwork, with the mortar tuck-pointed to match main building. On the roof was the “best purple Bangor Countess slates” with lead ridge capping. It was a very early example of the use of cement for the mortar. The internal walls were kalsomined. Stone was used for the window sills and there were “special plinth bricks”. Clearly, local residents would feel that their Parcels Shed reflected the high status of their locality.

The main structure on the overbridge had a slate roof, ornate iron sliding gates and rough-cast concrete on the gables and chimneys. The roof ended in Dutch gables, this being the first use of this design feature.⁹ There were two bands of stone around exterior of building positioned above and below the windows. The station was lit by gas from the outset. Interestingly, the Ladies’ Waiting Room and toilet and the male toilet were located in the building, rather than on the platforms. The Railways even built a shelter on Everton Road for people waiting for “cabs”.

The new building and station was opened on 22nd August, 1900¹⁰. Apart from the most impressive and atypical design, there were other features that made it special. The use of overhead booking facilities was extremely rare. Only Redfern and Newtown had received similar structures above the rails. Together with the building at Strathfield, these three structures remained the only brick overhead station buildings on the NSW rail system until a small building was planned in 1979 for Carlton. Even the use of timber for overhead buildings started slowly with Waverton in 1892 and the next example being at Arncliffe in 1905.

On the platforms were full-length, Edwardian style awnings with wide fascias using vertical boarding. This was the second time a station in NSW had full-length awnings, the other being at Milsons Point. The awnings were similar in appearance to those used on the other stations where buildings were erected in 1892 for quadruplication between Redfern and Homebush. With the opening of the new Strathfield station, all stations had a similar appearance on that part of the rail network. That was also the case for the Illawarra line between St. Peters and Hurstville, though the architectural style was different. In the 1890s, work commenced on rebuilding the platform structures on the Milsons Point-Hornsby line to a similar design beyond Chatswood. Even the Belmore branch had buildings of a uniform design erected in 1895.

The platforms at Strathfield were planned and built to a high standard. There were small waiting rooms under the stairs on platforms 3 and 4. These were no open-fronted waiting rooms as found elsewhere on the Sydney-Parramatta line. The doors were fitted with “fancy brass handles”. Below the windows, vertical Kauri boarding was used and above them timber shingles were applied to the walls. There was an 11 foot ceiling height. All platforms were asphalted – another innovative feature. The dominant feature was the use of vertical boarding to form a striking valance. The awning roof was supported on ornate, cast iron columns that were cast in Sydney. The maker’s name is still visible on some columns, being “Pope Maher & Co Sydney Darlington Ironworks”.

⁹ All future overhead booking offices adopted this design up to 1940.

¹⁰ Some other sources say the opening was on 23rd September, 1900.

By 1899, the North Shore of Sydney was slowly overtaking Strathfield as the place where Sydney's elite people lived. In the year in which the new station at Strathfield was planned (i.e. 1899), new, high-quality brick platform buildings were approved at Epping, Chatswood and Turramurra. The Belmore branch had been opened in 1895 with some of the Colony's most beautiful and expensive platform buildings. These were built at locations where the patronage was so low that all staff was withdrawn from the three stations in the very year that they opened. There is a good case for arguing that substantial pressure was placed on the NSW Government by the elite residents of Strathfield for a new pace-setting station. They got it. It was big, highly visible, and innovative and different to anything that had come before it.

Between the planning for the Strathfield station in 1899 and the opening of Cronulla station in 1939, only one station received what could be considered an extraordinary design, apart from the 1906 Sydney terminal. That was Gunnedah station, planned in 1914 and built during World War 1. Interestingly, the design for the Gunnedah building featured Romanesque windows, which were based on the design of the 1899 Strathfield building. No further examples were built, identifying both Strathfield and Gunnedah as locations of significant political power.

The subway access that had served the third station was closed off to the platforms in 1900 but remained a public thoroughfare for pedestrian access between the two sides of the rail corridor.

MOVING TOWARDS THE FOURTH STATION – 1900-1927

The station that opened at Strathfield in 1900 marked the turning not only of the century and not only of the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia. It marked, with a very few exceptions, the end of a time until 1989, when local political power was a key factor in the input of the station design process.¹¹ After 1900, it was the NSW railway bureaucracy that decided what and when to provide in terms of station buildings.

The station was connected to the local sewerage system in 1902 at the same time as Burwood station was connected. This was a major work and involved considerable alterations to the station toilets less than two years after the new Strathfield station was opened.

There was tremendous population growth after 1900 in both urban and rural areas of New South Wales. At Strathfield, this was manifested by the need to lengthen platforms to accommodate longer trains, additional platform access and the need to duplicate all the trunk routes leading to Sydney. At the same time, there were two factors that hindered the efficient management of the NSW Railways. These were the increasing power and muscle-flexing of trade unions and the increasing wage levels. In 1907, plans were prepared to increase the number of platforms from five to eight in much the arrangement that exists today. Nothing happened because of the unavailability of capital funds. Passenger usage kept increasing. In 1912, an additional ticket office window was opened, making three windows selling tickets. Still, patronage increased. In 1915 an additional stepway was built on the northern side to provide access between the overhead booking office and the adjacent street. The platforms were lengthened in 1915 and 1918, the latter involving a 100 feet extension of the Up Main platform. In 1923, additional access was provided to platform No. 2, which was the centre,

¹¹ The exceptions are Gunnedah in 1917, Cronulla in 1939, Broken Hill in 1957 and Guildford in 1965.

island platform serving the Down Main. This was achieved by linking the up end subway with the platform. Of course, a good proportion of the additional business came from passengers changing trains between the lines and between local and express services. It is also in this period that a Railway Refreshment Room was established. It was taken over from private enterprise by the NSW Railways on 1st December, 1917.

The NSW Railways got some help to amplify the number of tracks in 1916 when Dr. John Bradfield submitted his plan for Sydney's metropolitan rail network to the NSW Government. A shortage of money plagued railway expansion in NSW generally, as reflected in the 1915 Agreement between the NSW government and Norton Griffiths to supply capital funds and takeover construction of all new lines. It too was unable to attract capital funding and the relationship ended in mid 1917. Nevertheless, when the NSW Government did obtain funds in the 1920s, the NSW Railways succeeded in obtaining funding for the expansion of Strathfield station in its present form.

THE FOURTH STATION - 1927

The first plan for buildings at the new station were approved by Robert Ranken, the Engineer-in-Chief for Existing Lines on 11th May, 1926. Overall, Ranken moved the station location about 300 feet towards Sydney. For the four island platforms, he continued to adopt the design philosophy of off-platform ticket sales, which he placed on both sides of the rail corridor. Firstly, Ranken approved the off-platform structures, starting with the brick Booking Office on the up side facing Everton Road. He then approved of the plans for the Parcels Office on the down side, including three dog kennels. Next came the single-storey Booking Office on the south side. It had three ticket windows and, like the platform canopies at Central in the same period, had a flat, concrete roof.

Ranken decided to build the new station in two stages. The first stage involved the construction of platform Nos. 5 and 6 and 7 and 8. When these were completed, he started on the other platforms. On each of the four island platforms, Ranken approved two buildings which were constructed under the platform awnings. Thus, they had flat, concrete roofs. The roofs were covered with Ormonoid, which is a bitumous, waterproofing agent that is still on sale today at Bunnings. From the outset, the main or most important platform was designated to be platform Nos. 3 and 4 so far as the placement of platform buildings was concerned. From the perspective of train operations, platform No. 3 was the most important part of the station. It was used by all the important, long-distance passenger trains on both the Main West and the Main North. It is still the important platform today so far as down, long distance trains are concerned.

Platform Nos. 3 and 4 provided an office for the Station Master, where he continues to reside. Also on that platform at the up end was and is a Parcels Shed co-joined with a "transferring enclosure". Toilets were provided on all platforms, except platform Nos. 1 and 2. On platform Nos. 3 and 4, 5 and 6 and 7 and 8 he provided Railway Refreshment Rooms (RRR).

Adjoining platform No. 8 is a small platform on the down side. This is today often referred as the mortuary platform. This is incorrect. It was originally labelled at different times as the Luggage Platform or the Parcels Shed. However, there was "a mortuary bench" two feet eight inches above floor level in the space "with brass rollers".

An important design feature was the use of two ramps serving each platform from the centre subway with a gradient of 1 in 8. This was perhaps the first use of ramps serving the paid area of a station, though ramps were used twice previously for access between adjacent streets and railway footbridges as at Gordon in 1910 and Banksia in 1923. While there were no ticket outlets in the subway, there were two tobacconists operating from the time of opening.

The only element of the 1927 station that was original and decorative were the standards for the incandescent lights that were located at the entrances on the south side. Some remain. The 1927 station nameboards used concrete for the posts and two of these remain, one each at the extreme ends of platform Nos. 3 and 4.

The fourth and present station was opened on 7th March, 1927. By November 1927, *The Staff* magazine reported that “all traces of the old station have been removed.”¹² It also presented an optimistic opinion that the fourth station would suffer less from cold winds which were channeled under the arches of the 1900 structure. Well-known railway historian, Bill Bayley, also wrote about the poor conditions at the station. He wrote that the 1899 station was “dark! dreary! and black from engine smokeand, perhaps more to the point, draughty!”¹³ It seems that the draughts along the platform were a long-term problem. In 1903, John Fitzpatrick, the M.P. for Rylstone, asked the Premier if it was intended to “provide any shelter on the platforms for passengers exposed to the bitterly cold winds of winter”. The Premier, Thomas Waddell, agreed that the platforms were exposed to the westerly winds but argued that they were “under cover”.¹⁴

There was a fundamental difference in the departmental thinking between the 1899 and the 1927 stations. Whereas the former featured innovative materials and design, there were lacking in the latter structure. Although the 1899 building did not suffer from any shortage of funds, the 1927 station was not spared the penury that afflicted other new station buildings in the 1920s. This was most evident in the re-use of 18 of the cast iron columns that was used in the 1899 station. These were used on platform Nos. 5 and 6 and 7 and 8. All the vertical boarding that formed the platform fascias in the previous station was re-used in the 1927 station. Conservation Architect, David Sheedy, has remarked that the present station is a facility with a design 30 years out of the Edwardian time period. He has called the station design “old fashioned”.¹⁵ The reason being that it was largely a station using a recycled design and recycled materials. The boarding retains its attractiveness. The pressure of limited funds was mirrored in an examination of the 1927 plans, which show a different style of fascia. It would seem that the decision to recycle the 1899 plan for the 1927 fascia is another measure of the tightness of capital funds in the second half of the 1920s.

There was another feature that marked the 1927 Strathfield station as an exercise in departmental frugality. That feature was the use of pre-cast concrete units for the platform walls. This product started being used in rural and regional areas from 1920 and continued to be used, though far from exclusively, until 1932. From the available evidence, concrete units in the Sydney metropolitan area were restricted to the years 1926 and 1927. Before 1926, brick was used in Sydney, such as the

¹² *The Staff*, 22nd November, 1927, p. 670. There are excellent photographs of the demolition of the 1900 building in this issue.

¹³ W. A. Bayley, *Sydney Suburban Steam Railways*, Bulli, *Austrail Publications*, no date, p. 64

¹⁴ NSW Parliament, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 10, 16-28/7/1903, p. 837

¹⁵ D. Sheedy, *Strathfield Railway Station Conservation Plan*, unpublished manuscript, 1994, p. 9

1924 line between Regents Park and Cabramatta Junction and the quadruplication through Flemington and Lidcombe in the same year. After 1927, the Bankstown to Regents Park line used brick walls as did the East Hills line, which was planned in 1929. There is a photograph showing the concrete unit construction of the platform walls in R. Merchant, *Railway Album No. 5*, Burwood, RTM, 1998, p. 33.¹⁶

As an adjunct to the use of concrete at the station, asbestos cement was used for signal ducting. It was an early application of this material, as reflected in the semi-circular profile of the top covers unlike the later and more common square profile.¹⁷

Politics and money are the two themes that dominate NSW railway station construction. When capital money is in very short supply, money overcomes politics design standards. This was the case at Strathfield, which unfortunately was opened at a time of severe capital pruning for all types of structures. Note that the underground City Circle terminated at St. James in 1926 until the remainder was opened in 1956. The original concrete units were replaced progressively in the 1980s and 1990s with standard, pre-cast concrete wall units.

Other minor aspects demonstrated financial restraint in the station's construction. All the urinals were concrete and the platforms were not asphalted, both representing a downgrading of facilities at the 1899 station. The brickwork was laid in 1927 and, as a cost-saving measure, the mortar was not tuck-pointed.

As was usual at the time, the station name was displayed in the lower window sashes of those structures on the platforms. All have now been removed but there is evidence of their existence. At the up end subway, those sections under the tracks were exposed and people got wet when it rained. It was not until 1931 that "lanterns" {coverings} were built at the ends of platform Nos. 3 and 4, 5 and 6 and 7 and 8.

Perhaps the only item of innovation was the brick signal box that opened in 1927 at the down end of platform no. 8. The external features of this type of signal box are the brick construction, verandah with full-length windows on the rail elevation and a "Dutch" roof profile, which mirrored the roof design of the 1900 overhead station building. All the examples had tiled roofs. The signal box featured power operation of the points and signals, which was a feature of Sydney metropolitan signal boxes built in the 1920s, with other nearby examples at Homebush and Ashfield. Concurrent with the new signal box was the replacement of all semaphore signals with double-light colour light signals. The signal box remained in use until 1982.

THE YEARS OF PASSENGER NEGLECT 1928-1979

¹⁶ There are also photographs of the concrete units in M. Morahan, *The 34 and 35 Classes*, Burwood, RTM, 1998, p. 96. And in J. Sargent (Ed.), *RailScene NSW*, Vol. 12, p. 79

¹⁷ For a photograph, see Craig Mackey, *Classic Steam in the 1930s*, Strathfield, Orion Fine Arts, 1999, p. 11

Like all railway stations built before 1980, no facilities were provided for staff. No meal rooms. No staff toilets. The only concession provided to the platform staff were change rooms to allow the RRR women to put on their uniforms. What happened to Strathfield station reflected the prevailing departmental staff amenities policy. The railway unions in the 1920s gradually gained strength. As Mark Hearn wrote, the election of the Lang Labor Government to office in NSW in 1925 gave a boost to railway unionism. Hearn wrote that “Lang intervened in the running of the NSW railways to directly assist the Australian Railways Union.”¹⁸ He restored the seniority rights of the 1917 strikers and legislated to introduce a 44 hour working week for all Government employees.¹⁹

It is of no surprise that virtually all improvements at the station between 1927 and 1984 favoured staff rather than passengers. In 1928, meal room and toilet was planned for ticket collectors adjacent to Everton Road. At the up end of the subway another meal room was planned and built. It was World War 2 that gave the great leap forward to the power of the railway and other unions. Patriotism took a distant second place to the desire of the railway unions for power. At virtually every staffed station in NSW between 1940 and 1945, concession after concession was provided to keep the unionists from direct action, which ranged from strikes to sabotage. At Strathfield, in 1943 the porters got a meal and locker room on platform Nos. 3 & 4 as well as 40 steel lockers and a pie heater. It was built in stretcher bond brickwork in 1944. Also in 1943, a locker room was added to existing porters’ meal room on the Everton Road side. In 1944, a toilet for female booking clerks was planned on the Everton Road side. In 1945, the platforms were asphalted to benefit the porters pushing their barrows. After the war, the focus on staff continued. On platform Nos. 3 and 4, a women’s change room was provided, with a staff toilet in former waiting room. In 1950, the Department of Railways thought that the easiest and least costly was of providing space for a Traffic Inspector on platform Nos. 1 and 2 was to convert the existing waiting room into office space. All the other platform alterations were similarly implemented using the original public waiting rooms.

Harry Jackett was the Member of State Parliament between 1935 and 1950 who covered Strathfield station. During that time, he asked only one question in Parliament about the station. In 1948, he complained about the inadequate number of ticket windows and the insufficient staff to sell tickets at Strathfield and Burwood. Maurice O’Sullivan, the Minister for Railways replied that “the same thing is experienced at many other suburban stations”. In 1951 came the only initiative taken to improve facilities for the travelling public. In that year, the “tea room” on platform Nos. 3 and 4 was “modernised”. There were two only customer-focussed initiatives in the 60 year period between the opening of the new station in 1927 and 1984. The second was in 1972 and involved the “modernisation” of the toilets on platform Nos. 3 and 4 and 5 and 6. A number of offices were air-conditioned, starting in 1978. Tender closed in July 1978 for the first set of bus shelters on each side of the station.

Perhaps the best quote to convey the appearance of the station in this period of passenger neglect is one by John Stinson in 1956. He described the subway as having a “cell-like dullness”.²⁰

¹⁸ M. Hearn, *Working Lives*, Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, 1990, p. 41

¹⁹ *ibid*

²⁰ J. Stinson, *Railway Architecture*, unpublished manuscript held in the former State Rail Authority Archives, 1956, p. 40

Tragically, the then Station Master, Frank Thompson, was killed on duty on 20th September, 1972. A plaque is affixed to the external wall of the Station Master's room on platform No. 3.

DEVELOPMENT TOWARDS SYDNEY'S URBAN RAILWAY 1980-1988

It was the State Rail Chief Executive, David Hill, who accelerated the focus on suburban stations. He implemented the explicit and specific instructions of the Wran Labor Government to improve Sydney's rail system. Unlike the previous Public Transport Commission of the 1980s, Hill received large amounts of capital funding. In 1982, a new signalling complex opened that replaced the 1927 brick signal box at the down end of platform No. 8.²¹ It had been a massive project that had begun in 1980. The work continued in stages until 1988 when the section between Strathfield and Ashfield was transferred to the new Strathfield signalling complex.

Starting with the 1981/82 budget, money was expended on the upgrading of Strathfield station. Luckily, the station fitted in to Hill's plan to focus initially on improvements on the major stations.

By 1983, the Architects Section of the State Rail authority had prepared two artists' images showing the proposed improvements. The first showed a bus/rail interchange on the south side and a second storey added to the booking office. Arched glazing was also proposed over pedestrian station entrances. The second image was of the concourse and showed new, bright floor and wall tiles, an information bureau as well as showers for the staff.

On 7th March 1984, the Minister for Transport, Peter Cox issued a Ministerial Press Release stating that the work would be undertaken as part of the *Western Suburbs Station Improvements Programme*. Cox listed new entrances, ramps, the resurfacing of the concourse walls and floors, refurbished booking office, new turnstiles and barriers, drop-panel ceilings, new PA system and indicator boards for concourse and platforms. All these works were implemented. The floor and wall tiles remain as the most visible aspect of this 1980s station treatment. The ramps are covered with reconstituted motor vehicle tyres and have been used at a number of CityRail stations.

In 1988, a formal approach was made to the State Rail Authority to develop the air-space above the station, with a promise of a new, modern station an elevated concourse was proposed, together with the elimination of all existing, below-level structures. Nothing came out of the approach.

THE CITYRAIL PERIOD - 1989 TO THE PRESENT

There were two initiatives that launched the Sydney metropolitan rail system on the way to becoming a modern, urban, world-class rail system. The first initiative was the splitting up of the freight and passenger components of the State Rail authority into two distinct entities. The passenger rail network was further divided into a country organisation, called CountryLink, and an urban network called CityRail. For the first time in the history of the NSW railways, the money making component, namely freight, was separated from the political component. CityRail was created in 1989 to solely address the politics of urban rail in Sydney and its related regional network. No longer was it necessary for CityRail managers to consider frugality into the passenger planning process.

²¹ The 1927 signal box is still in use as an electrical depot.

The second initiative that marked the 1990s as the decade of the birth of urban rail in Sydney was the passing of by the Commonwealth Government of the Disability Discrimination Act. This legislated mandated the universal access for all people to the rail system, including those people in wheelchairs. The legislation was responsible for the creation of CityRail's Easy Access programme in 1993 and accelerated the installation of lifts at Sydney railway stations.

The first major alteration to Strathfield station by CityRail was in 1990 and involved the conversion of the down side parcels office into a Countrylink Travel Centre. This space had remained vacant for a few years following the cessation of parcels traffic on the entire rail system. At the same time, improvements to the stairs were made on the south side Booking Office.

Two years later, the next round of physical changes got under way. In 1992, on platform Nos. 3 and 4, a toilet, shower and meal room was provided for drivers and guards adjacent to Station Master's office on up side of centre building. New doors and windows were provided to match the existing heritage elements. In the same year, planning started for the installation of lifts to all platforms. It is noteworthy that the installation of lifts at Strathfield station commenced before the start of the Easy Access programme. There was an initial push in some CityRail quarters for the replacement of the existing ramps with stepways and also the elimination of all platform buildings that provided customer facilities, such as the refreshment facilities and remaining toilet on platform Nos. 5 and 6. Between 1992 and 1994, considerable debate continued about the best way to implement the Easy Access programme. The present Easy Access arrangements were implemented in 1998. At this time, separate accessible, male and female toilets were built at the Everton Road end of the subway within the paid area. The male toilet features a urinal, which was a rare occurrence in the 1990s and are used only at the largest CityRail stations, such as Blacktown and Liverpool. The only other extant toilets are those on platform Nos. 5 and 6.

In 1998 and 1999, improvements included the CCTV coverage, the provision of a CCTV Control Room at the down end on platform No. 3 and 4 and the installation of standard workstations in all the Booking Offices.

In 2006, the present platform indicators were installed and Station Platform Indicator Equipment Rooms were built on all platforms using existing structures.

In 2010, Strathfield station had a "makeover" as part of the then newly-introduced CityRail Makeover Programme. The toilets on platform nos. 5 and 6 have been refurbished. The gardens on the south side have been replanted and new bike racks installed. Graffiti was removed and the station thoroughly cleaned. CityRail says that the Station Makeover Program is improving the appearance of stations and upgrading facilities to make the journey more comfortable and enjoyable.

Stuart Sharp

25th April, 2012