

OATLEY RAILWAY STATION

STATION OPENING

The line from Hurstville to Sutherland was opened on 26th December, 1885 and continued to Waterfall on 6th March, 1886. How was it that the Railway Department determined that a station would be provided at Oatley? A deputation of residents from the area met the Minister for Public Works in January, 1886, and proposed that stations be provided near Hurstville (i.e. at Penshurst) and at Oatley. The Minister, Jacob Garrard, acknowledged that, in relation to Oatley, the “gradient is very great, which is a serious objection”. Notwithstanding this problem, Garrard acknowledged that a station would “meet the conveniences of the residents” and he, therefore, resolved to submit the idea of a station at Oatley to the officers of the Railway Department for report.¹ No Railway official seemed to question the Minister’s wisdom, notwithstanding the problem of the gradient. Voila! A station appeared.

In 1886, the total population of Oatley was nine people who lived in two houses.² Was the station opened for the “convenience” of just nine people or was there another motive. Was one of those nine people an influential person who was able to direct the Minister to approve the provision of a station? The Minister’s remarks dismiss what author, William Bayley, states as the reason for the construction of the station. Bayley wrote that the station was provided for tourism.³ The reason for the provision of the station remains a mystery.

The station at Oatley opened in 1886 but the press and the public called it Oatley’s. The Railway Department changed the name to Oatley’s Platform in 1889 and back to Oatley in 1890. The earliest description of the line made no mention to any buildings at the station and probably there were no buildings on the platform in 1886.⁴

The single line platform was 240 feet by 12 feet wide and was located on the eastern side of the track between Oatley Parade and Oatley Avenue, opposite Mulga Road.⁵

TRACK DUPLICATION 1890

On 23rd March, 1890, John Forsyth, the former State Rail Archives Officer, wrote that a second platform and buildings were constructed on the western or “up” side. This second platform was brick-faced and built for duplication.⁶ For the first six months, there was no building on the new and the existing platform. On 19th September, 1890, the Commissioners authorised construction of the building costing £365 for the new,

¹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 20th January, 1886, p. 7.

² Norman Windred, *The Old Railway (1885 – 1905) Before, During and After*, Oatley Heritage Group, 2010, no pag.

³ W. A. Bayley, *Sydney in the Steamtime*, Bulli, Austrail Publications, no date, p. 38.

⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1st March, 1886, p. 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ J. Forsyth, *Illawarra Main Line*, Vol. 1, 1976, p. 23.

Sydney-bound platform. Toilets were authorised on 29th October, 1890, at a cost of £22 – obviously, only a small male, off-platform toilet constructed of corrugated iron sheets was provided. John also notes that “cheap” fencing was provided at the station on 14th October, 1891. It was not until 7th December, 1891 that a residence was authorised for the Station Master. It is assumed that a gatehouse had existed at the time of the line opening. That was the practice on the Illawarra line at the time.

The timber buildings at Oatley, Penshurst, Heathcote, Parkville and Burbong were the first stations to receive the new style of timber platform buildings with skillion roofs in 1890. The major difference from the previous standard was the reversal of the direction of the single-pitched roof. After 1890, the standard arrangement provided for roofs to slope towards the rails. By so doing, this provided a three feet wide awning over the platform by extending the roof rafters. The narrow awning width eliminated the need for additional expenditure to construct any supporting struts or braces. While the awning was clearly too narrow and mostly inadequate, it was better than the previous arrangement under which there was no awning. This style of structure was used at many stations in rural areas and also at some urban locations until 1917.

A telegraph office was established at the station in 1890.

TRACK DEVIATION 1905

The main line in 1905 was deviated approximately 100 yards westward. The new line opened on 7th July, 1905,

The existing timber building at Oatley received the same treatment as those at Penshurst and Waterfall, with the roof being converted from a single to a double-pitch, as exists at present. Eight feet wide platform awnings were cantilevered from the building on each side, being supported by four-inch by three-inch timber struts. Old materials were used and the awning braces in the former structure were re-used to support the existing, symmetrical awnings. The Station Master received a lower cost, cast iron stove in one corner of his office, thereby saving a few dollars. The old cast iron stove was refixed in his office with a sheet three feet square of galvanised iron behind the stove. The public waiting rooms had brick fireplaces with hearths of the standard railway width of three feet wide. This arrangement explains why there was only a single, double chimney penetrating the roof line. On the gables were small finials cut out of six-inch by two-inch Redwood. The ceiling was height was ten feet six inches. What is interesting about the plan is the notation “Waterfall built similar to this but Station Master’s office larger”.

It was a shock for the residents of Oatley to see that their station building on the new duplicated platform in 1905 was the same structure that had been erected in 1890 when the second platform was provided at the station. Apart from the roof conversion, the other major change was the lengthening of the roofline at the Sydney end to cover an interlocking frame. Some local residents argued that the Railway Commissioners had paid too much money for land acquisitions for the duplication of the entire Illawarra

line, which Oatley residents claimed was to maximise the profits of the owners of coal mines on the South Coast.⁷ The allegation was that so much money had been paid for land purchases that there was none left to provide a better class of platform building.

The platform building measured 82 feet by 11 feet (24,980 mm x 3,320 mm) with awnings eight feet (2,400 mm). The narrow width of the building was typical of New South Wales standard design policy.

PLATFORM EXTENSION 1912

On 1st July, 1912, the Commissioners authorised the extension of a platform but which platform, which direction and to what extent are factors unknown.

When the duplicated line opened on the new gradient in 1905, the interlocking frame was located at the Sydney end of the building. While the roofline of the structure had been extended over the frame, there were no side walls, though there was a two-rail fence around the facility. As indicated, there was only one double chimney protruding from the roof of the building.⁸

The railway corridor was always the boundary between Kogarah and Hurstville Councils but, when the corridor was relocated westward in 1905, the boundary remained on the old alignment until 1930 when the deviation became the new boundary point.⁹

A separate signal box existed between 19th February, 1891 and 9th July, 1905. After that time, the signal box was integrated into the Sydney end of the platform building. Although the roof of the main station building had been extended at the Sydney end to cover the interlocking frame, walls were not provided to enclose the frame until 1923.¹⁰ Automatic signalling was introduced south of Oatley in 1918 and extended to the north in 1926.

The electricity supply was extended to the area in 1923 but it is unknown whether the station received electric power at that time.

THE NEW BOOKING OFFICE 1927

In 1927, a small, timber booking and parcels office with a gabled roof was built at the extreme Sydney end of the platform. The Oatley West Progress Association complained that the ticket window was too high for children and short people and requested it be lowered. The Department replied that it had received advice from

⁷ *The Daily Telegraph*, 11th October, 1905, p. 10.

⁸ Photograph number 510285 at ARHS Archives.

⁹ E. Howard, *Oatley – The Working Man's Paradise*, Lyons Club of Oatley, 1979, p. 12.

¹⁰ Information supplied by Dr Bob Taffe on 28th November, 2017.

Hurstville Council that there was no issue.¹¹ The small size of the new booking office was reflected in the minimal expenditure of £164.

While the booking office was planned with a gabled roof, photographic evidence reveals a hipped roof in 1964.¹² The structure had disappeared by 1971.¹³

NEED FOR A NEW STATION 1937

One correspondent in a letter to the Editor of the local newspaper in 1937 stated "recognition (by Hurstville Council) of the fact that Oatley is sadly in need of an improved appearance surrounding the railway station is a hopeful sign, and indicates that eventually your correspondent will realise that Oatley requires more than an "improved appearance" at the station. What is required is an entirely new station and decent facilities for the travelling public".¹⁴

Support had been given to the East Oatley Progress Association by the Kogarah Council to a move to have a larger awning placed on the 1927 booking office at Oatley railway station. Alderman Moore stated at the Council meeting that, at that time, there was an awning only about two feet wide and, when people lined up to buy tickets, they had to stand in the rain. The Association asked the Railway Commissioners to provide an awning six-feet wide on both sides of the booking office.¹⁵

The construction of a new railway station between Oatley and Como was urged in 1937 by the Gungah Bay Progress Association. The support of Hurstville Council for this project was sought. It was considered such a station was warranted, as it would also be the means of bringing about "rapid development of the district". Alderman Mallard said the Gungah Bay area was isolated between two stations, and all that was wanted was a "small siding to allow residents to board and alight from trains". Such a station would also serve people in the Neverfail Bay area, in Kogarah Municipality. Hurstville Council decided to support the proposal.¹⁶

The South Oatley Railway League in 1938 asked Hurstville and Kogarah Councils to raise a loan to build an island platform between Oatley and the Georges River. The League was prompted to make this suggestion following an offer in 1929 by Sutherland Shire Council to pay for the construction of the station at Jannali. Unfortunately, there was not a similar level of support and the two Councils declined to act.¹⁷

¹¹ *The Propeller*, 7th October, 1927, p 8.

¹² Photograph number 053815 at ARHS Archives.

¹³ Photograph number 053815 at ARHS Archives.

¹⁴ *The Propeller*, 4th February, 1937, p. 3.

¹⁵ *The Propeller*, 10th June, 1937, p. 2.

¹⁶ *The Propeller*, 2nd September, 1937, p. 1.

¹⁷ *The St George Call*, 1st April, 1938, p. 1.

THE PROBLEM OF ACCESS - 1937 TO FOREVER

In January, 1937, correspondence went to-and-fro between the Railway Department and Kogarah and Hurstville Councils about the provision of road overbridge with a stepway to replace the existing subway access to the platform. Assistant Commissioner Garside ruled out the Department paying entirely for the provision of a bridge and stated that at least 50% of the cost of the project should be borne by the two Councils. He explained that, until those Councils agreed to meet half of the cost involved, no further consideration would be given to the matter.¹⁸

By March, 1937, the Department of Railways' preferred option was to provide a booking office on an elevated concourse adjacent to the proposed footbridge. However, at that time the Department considered that the existing booking office and access arrangements were satisfactory, and it did not intend to undertake any further work on these two issues.¹⁹

Hurstville Council in 1941 once again protested about the inadequacy of the entry/exit arrangements at Oatley railway station. Since 1937, there have been sustained requests to the Railway Department for an overhead road or overhead pedestrian bridge to improve access, calling the present entry/exit an "antiquated subway". The Department replied that the existing subway arrangements were adequate, and any expenditure could not be justified.²⁰

"THE MOST ANTIQUATED STATION" - 1940

In 1940, the local newspaper published an article naming Oatley station the "most antiquated in State". It stated:

"This station is hundreds of years behind the times, and the most antiquated in the State," said Alderman Gifford at the last meeting of Hurstville Council. Co-operation was given to the Oatley District Improvement Association in its advocacy for a new railway station at Oatley. The Association pointed out that the present buildings were erected in 1904 but, although they were probably quite adequate to meet the needs at that time, they were now unsuitable for present-day requirements. They were antiquated, and had no comfort or convenience for the travelling public, being infested with white ants, while the waiting-rooms were too small. The platform awnings were not wide enough to protect people in wet weather, and the old-fashioned entrance through the subway was too narrow, being a continual source of danger.

With increased activity and heavier loads being carried over the subway, residents feared that the existing dangers of the subway were being seriously enhanced. The booking office accommodation was most unsatisfactory, and

¹⁸ *The St George Call*, 15th January, 1937, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26 March, 1937, p. 6.

²⁰ *The Propeller*, 12th June, 1941, p. 1.

the levels of the platforms were too far away from the train entrances. Another danger was caused by the curve in the platform, as the guards could not see the full length of trains before giving the all-clear signals. The Association also complained that the platforms were quagmires in wet weather, and that the station was understaffed. The Commissioners seem to be able to find money to build modern stations on the new Cronulla line, but will not do anything, to improve the obsolete buildings at Oatley station,' said Alderman Gifford. "I was amazed at the lavishness of the new Cronulla station, and nearly asked officials if they were taking in boarders, as they had all the modern conveniences of the latest hotels.

The people of Oatley have put up with great inconveniences for many years with their station, yet new residents can go to Cronulla and have the very latest systems installed immediately." Alderman Mallard said that in a report it was stated that the revenue from Oatley station was £14,000 annually, yet practically nothing had been spent on the buildings since they were erected nearly forty years ago. The ticket box nearly fell over recently, owing to being infested with white ants. Other out-of-date buildings on this station were long overdue for replacements. Alderman Cross said it was unfair for money to be spent so lavishly on the Cronulla line while agitation had been going on for years for improvements to Oatley station. If the department could find money for the erection of stations in sparsely-populated areas along the Cronulla route, it should be able to make urgent and necessary improvements to Oatley station. If the Department could find money for the erection of stations in sparsely populated areas along the Cronulla route, it should be able to make urgent and necessary improvements to Oatley station, which had heavier traffic than many of stations on the Cronulla line".²¹

The Railway Department finally responded to the 1937 request for a wider awning over the two ticket windows in the 1927 booking and parcels office. It extended the existing awning from three to nine feet and extended it around the side. The awning was covered with corrugated asbestos cement sheets and used recovered roof sheets and timber for the ceiling and battens. The work was completed on 8th June, 1944. Possibly as an act of departmental revenge, at the same time, the Department erected additional advertising hoardings eight feet high opposite the ticket and parcels office.

THE BIG PERIOD OF NOTHINGNESS 1945-1970s

As was typical of most stations, the State Government did not support public rail transport greatly in the second half of the 1940s, the 1950s and the 1960s. The almost total absence of improvements to many stations reflected the Government policy, which was focused on road improvements and road motor vehicles.

²¹ *The Propeller*, 18th April, 1940, p. 1.

Two decades had passed since the first protests had been made about the subway entrance. In 1950, the press reported that:

“A well-attended public meeting was recently held in the Oatley School of Arts to discuss plans for a campaign to have a new entrance constructed at Oatley railway station. the existing railway; station entrance was quite out of date, unsafe, and totally unsuited to the conditions of to-day. Mr. W. H. Macdonald stated that residents were much concerned with the completely useless type of railway station entrance at Oatley. It was a death trap and a menace to health. It was the cause of most winter ills of those who travelled in trains as, after journeying in a comfortably warm train, people often had to wait about in the draughty subway for buses or other conveyances. The subway, in fact, had little use except for drainage. The long range of steps leading to the entrance was not in keeping with modern requirements. It was tragic to see mothers trying to carry children with strollers up and down the many steps, laden with other parcels. There should be a new approach to Oatley station worthy of the natural beauty of the surroundings.

Mr. Williams said he was heartily in accord with the people and their efforts to improve the antiquated railway station which existed at Oatley. The Railway Department had a responsibility to the people to provide an efficient railway service, and an efficient station, and should provide beauty not ugliness in their structures. there was not one person in a hundred satisfied with the approach to Oatley Railway Station. There were many difficulties, however. For example, the proposed quadruplication of the railway line, the proposed new bridge at Como, and other improvements. Mr. Williams, M.L.A., should introduce a deputation to the Minister, and let him know in no uncertain manner what was wanted.

Alderman Davis also supported the proposal, and the following resolution was proposed by Alderman Dean: "That this meeting, representing all sections of the community and the various organisations in Oatley, hereby records its dissatisfaction with the existing entrance to Oatley Railway Station. We hereby declare that we consider the station entrance to be dangerous, antiquated, and unsightly, and totally out of keeping with the rapid development of the Oatley district in recent years. We urge that the Commissioner of Railway should take the necessary action to construct a suitable entrance to the station".²²

Veteran observers of New South Wales railway history will not be surprised to learn that nothing significant happened in relation to the station entrance in the 20th century.

²² *The Propeller*, 2nd February, 1950, p. 3.

The only improvement at Oatley in the next 25 years was the connection of the station to the local sewerage scheme and the provision of one additional closet in both the male and female toilets.

THE 1970s

In 1971, there was a small cabin for the ticket collector at the Sydney end of the platform where it sloped down to head towards the stepway. It was still there in 1976.²³ At that time, the standard length of a suburban platform was 520 feet. Those at Oatley were and are 518 feet on the Sydney-bound side and 526 feet on the Sutherland bound side.²⁴

In 1977, the St George District Local Government Boundaries Commission was unkind in its remarks about the role of the railway corridor through Oatley. The Commission said that the line dissected the shopping centre, affected the construction of car parks and interrupted local government development codes “curtailing cohesive town planning and community life”.²⁵ There was no response from the Public Transport Commission.

SUBWAY IMPROVEMENTS 1985

After over 50 years of agitation by the local community for improvements to the station entrance, tenders closed on 6th February, 1985, for work which included:

- new paving for the footpath in the subway,
- resurfacing the step treads on the stairway,
- new stainless-steel wall panelling fronting both sides of the entrance stairwell and at Mulga Road,
- new barrel vault roof over existing stairwell,
- removal of part of the existing pipe barrier over the stairwell, &
- removal of existing paving in the subway.²⁶

These were superficial improvements and did not fundamentally address the narrowness of the subway and issues, such as the narrowness and gradient, related to the stepway to the platforms.

THE CITYRAIL STATION UPGRADE 1991

Tenders closed on 4th November, 1991 for the upgrading of the station.²⁷ The work included:

²³ Photograph numbers 101371, 101372 and 305411 at ARHS Archives.

²⁴ No author, *CityRail Platform Lengths*, no details, ARHS Resource Centre.

²⁵ Howard, op. cit., p. 12.

²⁶ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14th January, 1985, p. 27.

²⁷ *Railway Digest*, January, 1992, p. 38.

- the provision of canopies over the platform and stairway,
- new booking office with ticket counter set at 915mm above the floor,
- new standard, bullet-proof ticket window,
- enlargement of the former general waiting room to include the former ladies' waiting room and store,
- new Colorbond custom orb roof, &
- major repairs to walls and windows.

At the same time, the Oatley structure also received its red and white paint scheme, which was the CityRail corporate colour scheme at the time. This paint scheme was applied not only to the braces of the platform awning and stepway canopies, the platform seats, rubbish bins and lamp posts but also extended to a height of 10 feet above the platform level on the overhead wiring structures that were located on the platform. A common improvement element used by CityRail was steel, loop-top, white-painted fencing for the ends of platforms and this was provided at Oatley.

A single closet was provided each for males and females and, for the first time at the station, a dedicated staff toilet. The entrances to the toilets were at the end of the internal waiting area and were within direct sight of the station staff, who activated a button in the booking office to unlock the toilet doors. This was the general arrangement at many stations. The existing toilets and the Station Master's office were removed. The building was divided into two major sections – a public waiting area and toilets and a staff area.

Viscount Constructions Pty Ltd undertook the work.

OTHER CITYRAIL IMPROVEMENTS

CCTV was installed in 1993 as part of a CityRail-wide programme.²⁸ More cameras were installed in 2001.

In 1996, a new standard work station and ticket window were installed to replace the 1991 standard ticket window.

PROVISION OF LIFTS 2012-2016

The then Minister for Transport, Gladys Berejiklian, announced in 2014 a “major upgrade” of Oatley station as part of the “Transport Access Program to deliver real improvements for public transport customers”. The work included:

- three lifts,
- new stairs,

²⁸ *Railway Digest*, March 1993, p. 114.

- commuter car park,
- upgraded footpath, &
- landscaping.

The Minister assured the public that “this upgrade will make the station safer and more user friendly”.

Whereas the subway access contained 30 steps from the subway to the platform, the new pedestrian bridge features 90 steps on the western side to reach the deck, followed by further steps to the platform. It was only through the pressure from the local community that the original subway entrance was retained. Ironically, after years of local protest to replace the subway entrance in the 1930s and 1940s, the community insisted on its retention in 2012.

The review of environmental factors was on public exhibition in May, 2014. A commuter car park holding 40 vehicles opened on 23rd December, 2015. The lifts open in September, 2016.

Stuart Sharp
16th February, 2018