

The Railway Luncheon Club

18 November 2009

PENRITH

Forty-three members visited Penrith Station on 18 November. A special mention must be made to Alan Turner, who travelled from Whyalla, SA, to be part of the fun of the day. NSW members made sure that Alan took home fond memories of his adventure. A highlight was an inspection of the 1956 signal box. CityRail kindly organised for members in small groups to inspect the facility. Member Noel Reed, a retired signals engineer, very kindly interpreted the various apparatus to members. Councillor Nev Pollard was the special guest on the day and he spoke about the role of Penrith locomotive depot in the days when the Lapstone Zig Zag was in operation. Nev also widened the discussion to talk about bank engine working and this engaged other members, such as Ian Brady, to tell how he personally witnessed D57 Class on 1,500 ton Up coal trains thundering through the station and making the ground shake. Members received a six-page handout outlining the history of Penrith Station.

Penrith Station was opened on 19 January 1863. The present station is situated at the base of a 1 in 66 gradient against Up trains known as Kingswood Bank. John Whitton approved the plan for the structure on the present Platform 3 on 1 May 1862 and the contract for construction was signed in May, 1862. A two-storey residence was built for the station master and today is the oldest free-standing residence on the NSW railway system.

The No. 3 platform building at Penrith was the third example of a design that Whitton had previously used at Campbelltown in 1858 and Parramatta in 1859. Track duplication originally finished just before Penrith platform and was not extended through the station until 1890, at which time the present structure on Platform 1/2 was erected under the approval of James Angus, Engineer for Existing Lines in Chief Commissioner Eddy's regime.

The design of the 1862 building on Platform 3 accorded with a standard style that incorporated Georgian renaissance architecture. The dominant design features are an overall symmetry, uncluttered roofscape, and hipped roof flanked by pavilions at each end. Another dominant feature was the almost absence of windows on the platform side. Only one large set of three windows, flanked by double doors on each side, was provided and these marked the location of the ticket office and entrances to the platform. The use of three windows as a group is a classic feature of 19th Century Victorian architecture and is known as a Venetian window. The windows and doors dating from 1862 survive. At the Down end, the men's toilet was enlarged and had until 1955 a ridge-ventilator in the roof. Now, the roof line had been continued as part of the main roof.

Angus's 1890 building for the Up platform continued the use of the hipped roof but introduced a small degree of complexity to reflect a status that had been given to renewed stations in Sydney in the 1880s. The roof was not the only feature that suggested an elevated status for the station and was the same style as was used on second class platform structures. The structure was symmetrical and was a composition of three parts. At each end were toilets. The NSW railway tradition of keeping male and female toilets as far apart as possible was maintained by placing each at the opposite ends of the building. The centre and main structure comprised of three waiting rooms.

At the Down end was the Ladies' Waiting Room, which also acted as an ante-chamber to the ladies' toilet. In the middle was a General Waiting Room with a 12-foot wide opening facing the platform. In other words, there were no doors leading to the General Waiting Room. This was a feature used at stations mainly in Sydney where large crowds would gather for waiting trains. The most unusual feature of the structure was the existence of a Gentlemen's Waiting Room. Such facilities were extremely rare on NSW stations and had been usually restricted to large stations such as Goulburn in 1869 and Albury in 1880. While the ladies had direct access to their toilet from their waiting room, no such provision was made for men.

In the 1870s, the Commissioner for Railways responded to increasing demands for the establishment of refreshment services. The first to be provided

was Mittagong in 1873 and by 1875 Railway Refreshment Rooms (RRRs) were also at Sydney, Mount Victoria and Singleton. A refreshment room was opened at Penrith, operated by a private contractor, in 1880 in the Up end of the building. The building on Platform 3 was widened at that date by 10 feet but not lengthened. Like all 37 other RRRs throughout the State, the NSWGR assumed control of the facilities at Penrith in 1917.

The public's use of RRRs was generally slowing in the 1950s and by 1961 the store for the Down platform RRR was leased to a commercial party as a "depot for day old chicks". RRR girls continued to live in the staff cottage at the side of the station forecourt near the station master's residence.

A steel beam footbridge was erected in conjunction with electrification in 1955. The brick, elevated signal box at the Down end of Platforms 1 and 2 was opened in 1956. It is amongst the last elevated examples of the traditional railway signal box style built on the NSW rail system. Not only is the box elevated, the roof has a most unusual polygonal shape and, additionally, has a rare tiled roof. The present signal box replaced two previous signal boxes and the present structure is the only building in the station complex that was built by departmental day labour rather than by contract.

The present footbridge was built in 1999 and it was paid for by funds from the Olympic Games organisation. As well as the provision of Easy Access lifts, provision was made underneath the Down side steps for new toilets, a new control room, newsagent, food outlet and a police room. Penrith Station has had four footbridges, all of which have been in the same general area. The first was in 1890, which was replaced in 1955. This was in turn replaced by a temporary structure in 1998 and the present footbridge in 1999.

One very nice feature of the 1998 changes was the conversion of the former RRR into a booking office and booking hall. Passengers now purchase tickets from three windows that face into that part of the RRR that was in the staff area behind the counter. The alterations have exposed an original beam and cornice brackets and a very ornate and unusual vertical steel support that dates from the opening of the former Down platform RRR in 1880.

The current location of the ticket windows marks the fourth location where tickets have been sold (the first was inside the ticket office; the second was facing one of the two entrance hallways; the third was facing the street and the fourth is the present location). The existence of the brackets and beam help to draw attention to the power and problems of John Whitton, these features being added after he lost control of changes to the station.

The first wave of RRR closures occurred in 1956. Penrith was in the second wave in 1957, although passengers could and can still purchase food and drinks on Platform 3, a feature that has continually existed on that platform for almost 130 years. Penrith Station holds the record for the longest continually available refreshment facility on the same platform on the NSW rail system.

The locomotive depot at Penrith was opened in 1879. Following the opening of Valley Heights Depot in 1914, Penrith became a sub-depot of Enfield in 1917. It closed in 1956. Penrith was one of a small number of locations in NSW where bank engine working occurred in two directions.

At the conclusion of the inspection, members walked to the near-by Red Cow Hotel where they enjoyed fellowship as well as bargain \$6.00 lunches. For under \$10, members enjoyed a very pleasant outing.

The next meeting of the Railway Luncheon Club is set for Wednesday 16 December 2009. The destination is the Homebush Signalling Control Centre. Members are to meet at 11.00 in front of the railway gate on the corner of Loftus and Station Streets, Homebush. Wear your name badge. This is a rare opportunity to inspect a facility not normally open to non-CityRail staff.

Thank you Stuart organising this very successful outing, for preparing the handout notes and for writing this report - Ed.