

# **KATOOMBA RAILWAY STATION**

## **PLATFORM BUILDINGS**

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RAILWAY PRECINCT**

The buildings at Katoomba station represent the most significant collection of timber structures owned by the NSW Railways. All structures on the platform and in the goods yard are timber framed and clad. Also, the goods yard is the only in-tact and complete railway goods yard in the CityRail network.

This paper examines the platform structures. There is an excellent reproduction of an official NSW Railways photograph of all the platform buildings in C. Mackey, *The Railways at Work*, Vol. 1, Strathfield, Orion Fine Arts, 2000, p. 18.

### **1877-1884 THE FIRST PLATFORM BUILDINGS**

The Great Western Railway opened through the area now known as Katoomba in 1868. According to John Forsyth's information, Katoomba was opened in 1874 but a passenger platform was not built until 1877. The name changed from the functional basis of "Crushers" to the ethereal "Katoomba" when the platform was erected in 1877. The absence of a platform initially is consistent with other stations being firstly opened as halts, including Strathfield. Also in accordance with NSW Railway practice, the buildings on the platform were provided over a period of time, as local passenger demand increased. A Telegraph Office was erected in 1878. Bob Taaffe also points out that Ordinary Train Staff and Ticket was introduced in 1878 and that a room would be necessary to hold both the staves and the ticket boxes.

In 1881 and 1882, a larger timber building was erected of non-standard design. The most unusual aspect of the building was its full-length, narrow platform awning, which was attached to the external wall of the building with timber struts. This feature was inconsistent for other timber buildings erected around the same time and suggests that the building was a composition of earlier, small structures joined by a new awning.

The 1881/82 building was a timber structure of four rooms with a gabled roof. There was one single and one double chimney piercing the roof ridge. From the evidence, it would seem that the building would be about 50 feet long and contain a Ladies' Waiting Room and toilet, a General Waiting Room, a Booking Office and an office for the Station Master, as he would have to keep the train staves safe. There were also two other buildings on the platform in the down direction. Closer by was a small structure about

10 feet by 10 feet with a hipped roof. This was probably the lamp room. Next, was a building with a gabled roof and a ventilator through the roof. There is little doubt this was the men's toilet. The roof ridge was in line with the roof ridge of the main building, and not transverse to it like the standard roadside station buildings of the 1880s. There is no known plan of the 1881/82 building, though, according to *The Katoomba Times* newspaper of 10<sup>th</sup> October 1891, parts of the structure were re-used as the office for the goods shed, being relocated to the goods shed on 7th October, 1891. Perhaps what is less well-known is that the former men's toilet was converted for use just inside the goods yard as an office for Signal Branch staff. It still retains the ventilator on the ridge of the roof.

## **1884-1891 – THE IMPACT OF THE CARRINGTON HOTEL OPENING**

In 1884, the huge Carrington Hotel was opened and, immediately, there was pressure on the station to provide more shelter from the frequent, unpleasant weather. Sometime between 1884 and 1891, the narrow, bracketed awning was replaced by a more conventional posted verandah. This new awning extended to the platform edge for the full length of the building and was supported by six vertical timber posts. Photographs have been published showing the two styles of awning. The narrow awning is shown in L. Paddison, *The Railways of NSW 1855-1955*, 1955, Sydney, Department of Railways, p. 46 and the wider awning with vertical posts is visible in G. J. Taylor, *The Carrington Hotel, Katoomba*, no details, pp. 2 and 4. A second alteration was made between 1884 and 1891 to accommodate the increasing crowds on the platform. The existing lamp room was relocated from the up side to the down side of the men's toilet and the space between the main building and the men's toilet was in-filled using timber framing and timber walls. In so doing, the area of enclosed waiting space was doubled.

The 1881 building, the posted awning and the in-fill structure lasted only until 1891 in passenger use when they were replaced by the present timber building. Such short life was consistent with what Eddy did with existing structures built for the Redfern-Homebush quadruplication in 1892. Typical of the waste of the time was the demolition of a 12 feet by 10 feet "Standard Lamp Room" in 1891 that was only approved by James Angus, the Engineer-in-Chief for Existing Lines, and built in 1890. Despite the 1890 Depression having huge effects on the NSW economy, Eddy was able to secure large amounts of public capital funds and, like today, frugality was not a concern to him at the time.

The opening and success of the Carrington Hotel explains the desire for improved platform accommodation but the key aspects of the decision making process is why

build the structure in the Depression. Also, why was such an expensive built, considering the structure was on a new curved platform with brick platform walls and the consequent, necessary alterations that were required to remodel the goods yard facilities and structures.

## **THE 1891 (PRESENT) BUILDING**

James Angus approved the construction of the present building in January, 1891. The design is attributed to the decision of the Chief Commissioner, E.M.G. Eddy, who had taken over the top job the year previously, to introduce a contemporary design of standard platform building. He had previously worked in Great Britain and it is commonly thought that he introduced the new design from knowledge of the railways he had left behind. The external walls of the building and awnings are curved and follow the line of the island platform. No one knows for sure why the structure was built at Katoomba as it was the only example of its type outside the section of line between Redfern and Homebush, where similar buildings were erected at 11 stations. Certainly, it was the first such example of the type built but all the other examples were also approved not much later in 1891 than the approval for the Katoomba building.

The design falls inside the period when Edwardian architecture was popular. In relation to Katoomba and the other examples in Sydney, the nomenclature, Edwardian, is used as a means of identifying its design characteristics, which were unlike anything before or after it with one exception. That exception was the platform canopies on the 1900 design for Strathfield station. These canopies survive today, being re-used for the 1927 (present) station. The dominant design characteristics are the linear floor plan and the low-pitched roof which is further subdued by the high valance on all side of the building. Up until the time of Katoomba station, floor plans were based on centre transverse entry point with rooms balanced each side of a central General Waiting Room. The building at Katoomba abandoned that practice and the rooms were positioned one behind each other from the up end Booking Hall.

The features of the Katoomba building are:

1. Low-pitched, hipped roof with brick chimneys penetrating the ridge and a ridge ventilator over the male toilets,
2. 10 feet wide platform awnings supported not by vertical posts but roof rafters extended as cantilever supports, together with small, ornamental cast iron brackets,
3. Slate roof covering with iron ridge capping,
4. 12 feet internal ceiling height,
5. Rusticated weatherboards on all external walls,
6. Multi-coloured, small panes for glazing in the upper window sashes and fanlights

7. New room designations in the case of the “Booking Hall” and “Ladies’ Waiting room” – the building also had a General Waiting Room, making it one of less than five buildings on the NSW rail system with three waiting rooms,
8. Vertical boarding on wide fascia all around the structure,
9. Internal walls were sheets with vertical lining boards,
10. Possibly the first station to have ticket sales at one end of the structure rather than the middle,
11. Monogrammed, cast iron awning brackets, with the letters “NSWR”, at the building corners,
12. The urinal was fitted with a cleaning system using stored water from the roof, which was retained in tanks above the urinal - Underground urinal pit three feet in diameter and eight feet deep exactly like a pre-1890 underground water tank,
13. Toilet ventilation using “Air Closets”, &
14. A total overall external length of 125 feet six inches.

A feature that Eddy used for the Redfern-Homebush quadruplication buildings was the provision of platform access using subways. He also applied this technique for pedestrian access to the Katoomba platform. Subways had been in use in the 1880s at a few stations. Therefore, Eddy could not claim this aspect as a feature which he introduced into the NSW Railways.

Up to 1890, there was not much difference between the design of platform buildings in rural and urban areas. Eddy changed that situation with his quadruplication building style, the only example being erected outside Sydney was the prototype at Katoomba in 1890. Eddy did not always get things correct. Whilst the majority of buildings on the pre-1890 Sydney- Parramatta line used large, open-fronted waiting area, Eddy change the design policy to make the waiting areas smaller and to enclose them with minimal openings, each fitted with doors. He even added fireplaces to all General Waiting Rooms, including the small structures on the side platforms. Eddy was hostile to Charles Goodchap, the out-going Commissioner and all his Heads of Branches before his appointment and possibly wanted to demonstrate his authority and disdain for his predecessors. Hubris at times is reflected in buildings and this is the case with the NSW Railways in this study. The last officer to occupy the position of Chief Civil Engineer, Don Hagarty, also points to other issues with Eddy’s timber platform buildings. Firstly, he says that their construction directly on the ground resulted in massive problems with termites. Secondly, the replacement of the rotten roof rafters that were termite damaged was a substantial problem as they were cantilevered towards the platform coping and formed the platform awnings on each side of the buildings.

Why was there a new structure approved in 1891 and approved to the design of the Redfern-Homebush quadruplication buildings? The design was possibly used because

an island platform was to be used at Katoomba, like those in Sydney. Also, the western line in Sydney served elite homes and such a similar design at Katoomba would have made the affluent people comfortable. It is noteworthy to recall that platform Nos. 2 and 3 at Newcastle in 1898 and the approach hoarding on the western concourse and platforms at Sydney in 1906 also used the same style of a wide fascia sheeted with vertical boarding. It would be reasonable to say that the vertical boarding style of fascia was considered by the NSW Railways to be a departmental acknowledgement recognition of a special place.

The harder question about Katoomba station building is why was the Edwardian style selected for the construction of the 1892 constructed building? Another good question is why was this high-class structure erected during the 1890s Depression. The answer is perhaps political, not economic. The influence of key people was and is enormous on railways in NSW. About the same time, the beautiful station at Kiama was opened, as were the magnificent buildings on the Belmore line. The North Shore line opened in 1890 and was extended in 1893. Its construction to serve the powerful land speculators is further evidence that, even when capital funding was in short supply, the big end of town could and did trump the tightening of the capital supply.

## **POST 1892 ALTERATIONS TO THE BUILDING**

The Blue Mountains was regarded with a special status by the NSW Railways in view of its tourist appeal and rail travel to the region was heavily promoted by the rail organisation. One significant indicator of both the Blue Mountains region in general and Katoomba in particular was the selection of the present building for the reproduction of the first photograph in a departmental Annual Report. The photograph occurred in the 1893/94 Report.

In 1913, a barrier cabin measuring eight feet by six feet three inches was re-erected at the top of the stairs at extreme up end of platform. The walls featured lapped, horizontal weatherboards. There was a gable roof covered with corrugated “iron” but no awning. Only the ceiling was lined. The cabin had previously been located at the bottom of the steps. It was heated with a cast iron stove with metal flue through the wall. Although the occupant did not sell tickets to prospective travelers, he did do a good business in selling tickets to people whom he caught without a ticket. For this reason, the cabin had a “standard ticket window”.

In 1919, an awning was planned over the entry steps and along platform to the existing building and built in 1920. Interestingly, this type of work was consistent with what was happening with the similar-designed Edwardian examples in Sydney. The corrugated “iron” on the roof of the subway was No. 26 gauge, which was fastened to five inch by two inch hardwood rafters. It was supported by six inch square hardwood posts set in

four inches of concrete. The gabled ends were panelled with Fibrolite sheets and nine feet long by one inch thick rusticated weatherboards were added to the walls above steps. The awning was ten feet wide and a new six foot wide penetration was made to the end of the 1891 building. The cover photograph of J. Low, *Pictorial Memories – Blue Mountains*, Alexandria, 1998, Kingsclear Books, Second Ed., shows the up end of the building prior to the construction of the awning in 1920. The window frames are painted white but all other building elements are painted in a couple of shades of departmental “stone” colour. The cover image and another taken about 1920 on p. 132 show very large crowds of people on the platform. This latter photograph shows the awning over the steps and along the platform.

In 1923, unknown alterations were made to the Booking Office and the Parcels Office but it could be assumed that the changes were intended to cope with extra coaching traffic. In the same year, electric lighting was installed at the station. The Carrington Hotel had been providing electricity to many railway stations on the Blue Mountains from 1913 but it took the NSW Railways ten years to decide to connect the nearest station to the Hotel power supply. In 1928, the Lithgow power station commenced supplying electricity to Katoomba station and use of the supply from the Carrington Hotel ceased at that time.

A great indicator of the high status of the station is provided in 1937 when there was an attempt to improve the seating in the Ladies’ Waiting Room. It was proposed to provide two sprung, upholstered seats ten feet long fixed along the walls. The front of the seats was one foot four and three quarter inches above the floor, being well below the NSW Railway standard seat height of 18 inches above the floor. The seats were similar in design to those in a first class carriage seats, with a sloping back featuring “Dunlopillo head rests”. This proposal was not implemented and it took another year for the Department of Railways to make a decision on the type of seats for ladies’ posteriors.

In 1938, a more standard arrangement of seating was provided. Gone was the upholstery and gone were the Dunlopillo head rests. The seats were all timber but even lower, being only one foot three and a half inches above the floor. The only interesting aspect was the arrangement of the fixed seats. Rather than simple oblong seats along each wall, the seats were set around three sides of the rooms with a triangular “spandrel” to address the room corners with an in-fill, bevelled shelf. The alteration to the seating in the Ladies’ Waiting Room was a continuation of a policy first introduced in 1921 to eliminate casual chairs and replace them with the same style of seating that had always been provided in General Waiting Rooms.

In the late 1970s, when it was realized that there would never be a new station, the Public Transport Commission modernised the structure. The initial thought by the bureaucracy was to completely remove the fascia but the National Trust objected

strongly to this proposal. The Commission decided to retain the fascia and achieve its modernisation goal by applying what was at the time considered a new product, namely ribbed metal wall siding. It could be best described as the ultimate ugliness, the metal siding being applied to the wide fascia around the building.

In 1987, State Rail replaced the steps leading to the platform with a ramp and extended the General Waiting Room in the up direction towards the ramp. At the same time, vinyl floor tiles covered the hardwood flooring in the Waiting Room, Booking Office and Meal Room. Colorbond Custom Orb was used on the roof over ramp. The most important change was the replacement of the metal cladding on the fascia with authentic timber boarding. The Authority even used new timber window frames for the area over the ramp instead of metal-framed windows. Clearly, State Rail did extremely well at the time to understand and conserve the heritage values of the structure.

In the early 1990s, the station was tizzied up as part of the CityRail upgrading programme. There was honourable but ill-informed action to provide sympathetic platform seats. Yes, the standard CityRail fiberglass seats were not used but the “heritage” type seats in Brunswick Green paint are nowhere near authentic.

Bob Debus, the local M.P., was furious with State Rail in 1998 for the calling of expressions of interest for the disposal of the airspace above the station. Debus said that there was already another process at state level underway involving a “charrette planning process” for the whole of the town. A spokesman for State Rail Property said that “we don’t want to have to wait until 2010 to develop the airspace”. By 2012, still nothing has happened.

Today, the station is used by large numbers of tourists and regular commuters. The ladies’ toilet accommodation is totally inadequate for the large number of people wishing to use the service upon the arrival of the down morning services filled with tourists. The main platform building is the only complete and largely in-tact example of the 12 Edwardian structures approved by James Angus and commonly known as the “Eddy” type.

## **THE SIGNAL BOX**

The second oldest building on the platform is the signal box. It dates from 1902 and was designed to a type that was introduced in 1882 and used until about 1916. Of the 12 examples of the Edwardian style of platform building, Katoomba was the only and remains the only station to feature an on-platform example of this style of signal box. The box is 21 feet six inches long and 12 feet six inches wide. The operating level is four feet two inches above the platform surface. These statistics were pretty much in accord with standard NSW signal box design practice at the time of construction. The

present cam and tappet, 40 lever, interlocking frame was installed in 1945 but has been substantially modified.

The architecture was the second most popular design of signal box used on the NSW Railways, with a total of 138 examples. The example at Katoomba possesses a brick base and this is consistent with many other examples, such as the signal box on the platform at Newnes Junction. The use of brick for the base was no doubt provided to reflect the knowledge of the approving officer that he knew the important status of Katoomba station. No toilet was provided because of the close proximity to the public toilets in the main structure, though the signallers in recent times have requested their own toilet attached to the box. These requests have been rejected because of the consequent diminution of the heritage values of the structure.

The Katoomba signal box, like the station, is staffed 24 hours each and every day of the week.

Adjacent to the signal box on the down side is a concrete-panelled relay room. This small structure was built at an unknown time to a standard NSW Railway design. The design of relay hut was in use from 1919 to about 1985. With the cessation of the use of this style of relay hut went the use of pre-cast concrete units for railway buildings in NSW.

## **THE TRAFFIC INSPECTOR'S OFFICE AND THE OUT-OF SHED**

In 1909, approval was given for the construction of a two room timber structure 24 feet by 10 feet with a gabled roof, without finials, for the Traffic Inspector and an Electrician. It is still located on the platform towards the down end. It had an eleven feet six inch ceiling height. Each of the rooms was warmed by a Dumpy stove with metal flues through the walls.

In 1944, an 11 feet by 10 feet meal room for station and running staff was added to the existing two-room timber building at the down end of the platform. Nine inch wide Cypress Pine rusticated weatherboards were used to match existing structure. Hardwood was used for the structural timbers and the flooring. All joinery was Alpine Ash. Internally, the internal wall linings and the ceiling was asbestos cement sheets. Corrugated iron was on the roof and a cast iron stove with a metal flue was provided for heating. The existing two rooms were still occupied by the Signal Branch Electricians and the Traffic inspector. The work was completed on 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1945. At the down end of the building is a window protected by an authentic NSW Railways fixed awning sheeted with corrugated iron.

A timber Out-of Shed exists on the up side of the down end building. Of interest, is the double doors placed in the up end of the structure rather than on the sides.

## **PLANNED NEW STATIONS**

More than any other station on the NSW railway system, plans were prepared for a completely new station at Katoomba. These were all for off-platform structures, either facing the Great Western Highway or on overhead concourses. Plans were prepared in 1937, 1938, 1939, 1945, 1946 and 1948. None were implemented.

In 1938, the present group of shops, known as the Progress Building, was erected between the station and Bathurst Road. It was intended that that such retail premises would occupy the street frontage and a booking office would be built on a second level above the shops. The shops were built as the one and the only part of the scheme, probably because the Department of Railways considered that some revenue could at least be established through weekly rentals. The shops are still owned by RailCorp.

The last attempt at a new station occurred in 1970. In that year, *NSW Digest*, Vol. 7 No. 12, April 1970, p. 5 reported that Ald. Harold Coates, the local MP for Blue Mountains, said that he will seek from the Minister for Transport and the Railway Commissioner the construction of a new railway station to replace the existing "hotch potch of brick, wood and tin structures". We are still waiting.

*The assistance of Dr Bob Taaffe is gratefully acknowledged.*

Stuart Sharp

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