

# SANDGATE AND SANDGATE CEMETERY STATIONS

## SANDGATE

### WHY PROVIDE A STATION AT SANDGATE?

A few people would probably say that Sandgate, the suburb and the station, is a dump of a place. The locality is void of natural beauty in any form and it would be easy to think that the suburb has the lowest density of living people in any part of the Newcastle area. It takes no effort to understand why Newcastle's cemetery was established there in 1881. Note the comment by Newcastle and Hunter Historian, Ed Tonks, about Sandgate. "Sandgate is a dump because, for many years, the Newcastle City Council had its largest land fill rubbish dump there. I often refer to Sandgate as having the highest sedentary population density in the Newcastle area."<sup>1</sup>

The only reason for the station's existence was the cemetery and, given the close proximity of the main line station to the cemetery, it is hard to understand why the Railway Department would think that the construction of a branch line was a wise expenditure of public funds.

Duplication went through the site of the station in 1878 while quadruplication passed to the south of the platforms in 1913.

One interesting item is the numbering of the station. In the 1898 Northern Local Appendix, station number 1 is Newcastle, as one would expect. What one would not expect is that Sandgate station was numbered 1A and Sandgate Cemetery station was numbered 1B. Why is a good question?

### THE FIRST BUILDINGS

The main line station opened in 1881 but is unknown whether any platform structures were provided at the time. Probably no is the answer but yes may also be correct. Only one article has ever appeared in *Bulletin* dealing with the Sandgate and the Sandgate Cemetery line and it provides zero information on the buildings at either Sandgate or at the cemetery station.<sup>2</sup> On the Newcastle-bound or up platform, the first building erected was a small, brick waiting shed. The plan for that structure is undated. It consisted of an almost square brick waiting shed, with an unusual brick floor, measuring 14 feet 2 inches across the front and 13 feet 6 inches wide. Seats surrounded three sides of the structure. There are three design features that confirm that it was built sometime in the 1880s and it is a possibility that it was built for the station opening in 1881. These three features are the Gothic-shaped window

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<sup>1</sup> Email from Ed Tonks to author, 2<sup>nd</sup> June, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> C. C. Singleton, "Cemetery Railways, Part 2, *Bulletin*, June, 1948, p. 74.

design, the hipped roof, with a nice little ventilator in the roof apex, and the arched head to the entry from the platform. Whoever designed the platform building for the main line station at least had a look at what existed at the cemetery platform. Both buildings share the same design of windows, these being narrow church-like openings with pointed Gothic style window heads. It is unknown which of the two buildings – the main line station and the cemetery station - was designed and built first. Possibly they were built at the same time, the date for the cemetery station being April, 1881.

The omission of a platform awning on the main line station was a money-saving initiative, no doubt to balance the expenditure involved in providing the English bond brick structure. Nothing is shown to have existed on the Maitland-bound or down platform at the time of station opening and for the next 40 years, though Dr Bob Taaffe advises that the first interlocking frame at the station existed between 1889 and 1912. The location of that interlocking frame/signal box is unknown.

### **INCREASED FACILITIES 1901**

In 1901, two additional buildings were provided on the Newcastle-bound platform. The first structure was a timber general waiting room and a ladies' waiting room with toilet. This structure had a skillion roof and measured 25 feet x 10 feet. Such buildings usually had fairly narrow awnings of either three feet wide when no timber struts were provided or five feet wide if timber struts were installed. This example at Sandgate had an awning eight feet wide, beyond the ability of support provided by timber elements. In this case, the awning was supported by inverted "U" metal brackets, which were usually found on larger, brick stations at the time, such as at Waratah, Hexham or Maitland. The structure existed up until the 1980s. The second building was the male toilet and it was located towards the Maitland end of platform.

At the same time (i.e. 1901), the original brick waiting shed was converted into a booking office. The 1898 Northern Local Appendix says no one was in charge of the station, which was under the control of Hexham station. This seems to relate to live people but the evidence relating to the 1901 waiting room conversion is not entirely convincing. It is pretty safe to conclude that the 1901 booking office represented the first time that the station was staffed by living humans.

Two arch-headed, narrow windows were placed in the wall facing the platform and joined the existing windows on the other three sides. The brick floor was replaced with timber. A dotted outline was placed on the plan against the wall on the Newcastle side of the brick shed with the message "suggested position for lever frame." The draughtsman who prepared the drawing must have thought that the officer manning the facility would be used to the cold weather, possibly being sourced from the local cemetery, as no heating was provided. Again, nothing was proposed for the Maitland-bound platform.

## **THE IMPACT OF QUADRUPPLICATION**

In 1910, the Tarro Shire Council had a deputation to see the Newcastle District Superintendent, H. Fox, and requested the provision of a goods siding and stockyard. As decision making on virtually all subjects, especially those topics involving expenditure of funds, was conducted in Sydney, Mr Fox flicked the request to the Chief Commissioner, who ultimately replied that “the expenditure was not justified”, especially in view of the forthcoming quadruplication.<sup>3</sup>

A regional newspaper reported in 1912 that the Maitland-bound platform would be converted into an island platform. This seems to be only partly correct as no railway line served the southern side of the platform but there may have existed a rear brick wall for the down platform even though it did not serve trains. In reality, the down platform became an isolated, quasi-island platform. At the same time, there was a newspaper report advising readers that a footbridge was to be erected at the station to connect the two platforms and that a new booking office was “in the course of erection.” The most interesting piece of information was the mention that the existing signal box was to be enlarged.<sup>4</sup>

From that newspaper report, it is intimated that the 1889 interlocking frame or signal box was located on the Maitland-bound platform. Let us not get too carried away with speculation as there also existed a reference to the interlocking frame being located on the Newcastle-bound platform, which really makes more sense. Anyway, the new or enlarged signal box dates was located on the Maitland-bound platform from 1912 and operated the facing double track junction with the cemetery branch as well as a trailing crossover at the Maitland end of platform.

It would seem that in 1914 the Railway Department decided to add a third room to the existing two room timber structure on the Newcastle-bound platform that had been there from 1901. This additional room was designated for a ticket office to replace the brick structure towards the Newcastle end of the platform. It was a slightly smaller office than previous was the case and, once again, no heating was provided for the apparently deceased officer attending to ticket sales. With the addition of the third room, the building was now 34 feet 10 inches long. Nothing is recorded as to the use of the original 1880s brick waiting shed/1901 ticket office until the 1970s.

## **SALE OF TICKETS ON MAITLAND-BOUND PLATFORM**

In 1920, a plan was prepared to provide a ticket window in the signal box as well as the replacement of the narrow awning with a much wider awning over the platform. Contrasting with the Newcastle-bound platform, the signal box was staffed by undead people and evidence of this assumption is based on the provision of a stove in the facility. This hypothesis is further supported by the provision of a residence for

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<sup>3</sup> *The Maitland Daily Mercury*, 15th July, 1910, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 20th January, 1912, p. 4.

the Station Officer in 1913 – the first time a staff house had been provided (also a confirmation that, prior to 1913, the Newcastle-bound platform was staffed by junior members enlisted from the cemetery, as that was the only local accommodation). Not far from the signal box on the down platform, a timber waiting shed was proposed measuring 20 feet by 12 feet with a nine feet wide awning over the platform. This structure was built and lasted until the late 1970s or a bit later.

## **THE IMPACT OF THE PTC, STATE RAIL AND CITYRAIL**

Modernising toilets was a popular activity in the 1970s by the then Public Transport Commission, mainly because it did receive some Commonwealth money under the Urban Public Transport Improvement Programme. At Sandgate, the off-platform male toilet on the Newcastle-bound platform was eliminated and the brick building dating from the 1880s that was, firstly, a waiting room and, secondly, a ticket office between 1901 and 1914, was given a third use – as a toilet block. The building was divided into two parts. Ladies entered the original entrance with the arch head while men were provided a new entrance on the Newcastle side wall to reach their toilet at the rear of the structure. A photograph of this third use of the structure is in Ron Preston, *The Great Northern Railway*, page 90. The photograph also shows the 1901 timber building on the Newcastle-bound platform and the 1912 signal box on the Maitland-bound platform.

In 1980, track work was undertaken on both the up and down main lines for some or all of the section between Waratah and Maitland and passenger services were transferred to the coal roads using temporary, short, steel-framed platforms. The one on the down coal road at Sandgate was located at the rear on the southern side stepway and it seems that the rear of the main line down platform served up trains. An investigation needs to be undertaken to check whether there exists a platform wall for the entire length of the rear of the down platform.

The 1980s was a time when concrete was much in favour for the provision of portable buildings. The objective was twofold. Firstly, they were relatively cheap and simple to make and could be moved into position with a road based mobile crane. Secondly, vandalism and graffiti were major issues and the use of concrete was preferred because it could withstand severe and sustained damage by those in the community who acted in an anti-social manner. With that policy in mind, State Rail approved the provision in 1985 on the Maitland-bound platform of a commercially available, circular bus stop shelter, the same as those that exist today at Aberdeen, Burradoo and Tallong.

It was amazing how different design philosophies were in the 1980s and 1990s. From the heavy concrete policy of the 1980s, CityRail, following its establishment in 1989, abandoned what may be termed the heavy design policy of the 1980s and went 180° in the opposite direction by the provision of lightweight, transparent structures with the use of glazing as a dominant building material.

All the structures that remained on the Sandgate platforms in 1990 were demolished and replaced sometime between 1990 and 1996 by simple, transparent waiting facilities that provided shelter more for the ticket machines than the rare, alive waiting passenger.

## **SANDGATE CEMETERY**

### **THE FIRST BUILDING - 1881**

The branch line into the cemetery was opened in 1881, the same year as the main line station was opened. One would have to ask why it was necessary to have two stations considering the short distance involved. The 1925 Traffic Branch Circular stated that the branch is “a short line about 1,200 feet until the “Mortuary Station” is reached.

By his good nature, Ed Tonks has brought to attention a reference in the *Newcastle Morning Herald* on 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1881. It reads:

“To form a connection with it to the main track, a siding has been run in, proceeding by a gentle incline and gradual curve towards the middle of the cemetery, at the exact centre of which a terminus is formed, a platform erected, and a handsome mortuary receiving house or waiting room provided. The benefit of this arrangement will be greatly appreciated: since by the plan thus adopted funeral parties can be conveyed to the nearest approach to either one of the various denominational sections into which the whole is subdivided. The structure itself measures internally 23 feet by 16 feet, with a verandah 20 feet by 17 feet, the platform being 100 feet long, exclusive of two fifteen feet ramps at either end. The upper portion (i.e. the roof) is galvanized iron with neat barge-board fringing the eaves, and ornamental verandah posts, &c., attached. The formal work of constructing it is being carried out by Mr. P. Morrison, who expects to have everything complete within a day or two.”

The timber station building was a one room affair and its design heritage could be termed NSW Railway El Cheapo style. The newspaper report of the building measurements does not accord with the plan, which provided a building 25 feet 6 inches long internal and 15 feet 9 inches wide. While the width is basically consistent, the length of the structure differed by about three feet. It consisted of a general waiting room. The roof was gabled, which was a strong clue that the Railway Department did not want to spend a lot of money on the structure, possibly because it had been directed by the Colonial Government to build a branch line and provide the infrastructure at both stations. The pretty ordinary looking affair could well be classified as another instance of departmental revenge, a term meaning that the

Department did what was told to do by its political masters but showed its displeasure by not providing a building of greater beauty or larger size.

The platform awning was supported by vertical timber posts. The design officer adopted the same window style for the cemetery platform building as existed for the brick structure on the Newcastle-bound platform at the main line station. These windows were narrow and the heads of the windows came together in the style of a Gothic pointed arch. These windows were most atypical of New South Wales Railway practice and were the only features that could be used to argue that the appearance of both buildings was designed for the location served – i.e. a cemetery. Normally, the design staff in the Railway Department would design what the Department wanted rather than what the local residents wanted. Anyway, there was no local opposition to the platform building that was erected in the cemetery. Even in this instance, it is meritorious to be cautious and the claim of a link between the window style and the location of the station may be false, given other evidence. For example, the male toilet at Ardglen also had the same style of Gothic-influenced windows. Then again, both toilets and cemetery buildings share a common connection as both are related to the passing of things (in this case, solids and souls) from the body.

There were also two nice design touches that both related to the platform awning, possibly provided to convey eyesight away from the primitive, timber platform. The first design feature was the use of small, cast iron brackets underneath each end of the awning and the second feature was the provision of spandrels (another name for fancy, moulded timber detailing) rather than vertical timber boarding at each end of the platform awning. These design features were used from time to time at other locations throughout the New South Wales railway system.

### **TOILETS PROVIDED 1887**

In November, 1887, the *Newcastle Morning Herald* reported that male and female “retiring rooms”, meaning toilets, would be “erected shortly” at the station.<sup>5</sup> For the ladies, a ladies’ waiting room was to be added to the Newcastle end of the building 12 feet 3 inches long and from that chamber a door led to the ladies’ closet which was three feet wide by 15 feet 9 inches long. As was the normal practice for unimportant stations in isolated areas, the male toilet was to be located off-platform and contained two urinals and one closet three feet three inches wide. It was unusual to have the male closet wider than the female closet and the normal arrangement was the reverse. By 1970, a new, detached male toilet had been provided directly on the platform to replace the off-platform toilet.

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<sup>5</sup> *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners’ Advocate*, 8th November, 1887, p. 4.

## **THE PLATFORM**

The 1930 Northern Local Appendix shows the platform being 480 feet in length and this figure is also shown in the 1961 addition but has been reduced to 151 feet in the 1977 Appendix.

The 1881 platform was composed entirely of a timber frame and a deck of timber planks, possibly old sleepers. This was another indicator of El Cheapo construction.

A plan exists dated 1934 which showed that the timber platform from the Newcastle end of the building to the end towards the branch line junction had been replaced by an earth-filled platform with brick wall and coping. The platform was a pretty ugly affair with half the wall in timber, including that part in front of the buildings, and half in brickwork. This could in no way be described as attractive and was typical of the policy adopted by the Railways which was based on the belief that the cheapest possible option should be implemented in the absence of protests from politicians or local residents. This is a design philosophy that continues to have currency in 2016. The use of timber decking at Sandgate Cemetery certainly was a sign of a lack of capital funds but it was also a sign that the physical neighbours adjacent to the rail corridor within the cemetery were either complacent or uninterested. By the 1930s, passenger business must have been falling off as the fence at the rear of the platform was demolished. Possibly by that time, the preference of Novocastrians was for road based funerals rather than the use of funeral trains.

There was one design feature that can be said with 100% accuracy that was applied specifically to the Sandgate Cemetery station site in 1881. In other words, it was a rare case where Railway designers did something that would suit that site alone. Normally, the rear of platform building is at ground level and it is only in a few cases, such as at Carcoar and Paterson, where there is a stepped entry between ground level and platform level. At Sandgate Cemetery station, the rear of the platform building was well above ground level and a connection was provided between the two levels by the use of a ramp rather than the usual steps. No doubt this was done to facilitate transfer of coffins. Perhaps the Railway Department had learnt from the stepped entry at the Mortuary station erected in Regent Street in 1868?

## **THE END**

The platform buildings at Sandgate Cemetery were demolished during 1978. The masonry part of the platform wall survives.

Ed Tonks advises that the last trains ran from Sandgate Cemetery on Sunday, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 1985.

*The assistance of Ed Tonks is greatly appreciated in the preparation of these notes.*

Stuart Sharp

7<sup>th</sup> June, 2016