

# MILLTHORPE RAILWAY STATION

## THE FASTEST SECTION OF TRACK BUILT IN THE COLONY

The 48 miles of track between Bathurst and Orange was completed in 54 weeks by contractors, Mason and Elkington, and newspapers claimed that it was an act of unbelievable speed and was the fast section of line opened in the Colony since 1855. The line was 11 miles longer than the existing coach route.

More importantly, it was the first section of line, together with the lines south of Goulburn and north of Murrurundi to feature lowered construction standards. These lower standards were mirrored in the following ways:

- Reduction in the radius of curves,
- Use of lighter rails,
- Sleepers made from inferior, local gum trees,
- Utilisation of stones from the Macquarie River for ballast rather than crushed gravel,
- Two-rail fencing,
- Minimisation of permanent platform buildings,
- Minimisation of openings for natural waterways, &
- Absence or minimisation of metal rail and overhead timber road bridges.<sup>1</sup>

This lowering of construction standards had an almost immediate impact on the higher track maintenance and other costs.

## LOCAL MYTHOLOGY ABOUT THE FIRST STATION

Local historian, M. K. Nesbitt, wrote that there was no station for Millthorpe at the time of the line opening on 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1877, between Blayney and Orange.<sup>2</sup> Wrong! A correspondent's report on 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1877, stated that the station existed.<sup>3</sup> Nesbitt claimed that the station opened in 1878. Again, wrong!

## THE FIRST STATION SITE AND BUILDINGS

John Whitton, the Engineer in Chief, gave a lot of consideration in the 1870s to ways of reducing the amount of funds he spent on platform buildings and essential residences for Station Masters. It was a time when Whitton was clearly not wedded to any one design. For example, the building he approved for Blayney in March, 1876, was the last time that he would combine in a single-storey both traditional office accommodation and a residence for the Station Master and his family on the Main West line. For the next four years, Whitton played with designs

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<sup>1</sup> G. Reynolds, *The Kings Colonials*, privately published, 1982, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> M. K. Nesbitt, *Millthorpe – Days Gone By*, privately published, 1988, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *The Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1877, p. 2.

on all the main lines until he perfected what would become a standard station design and a standard residential design in 1880.

The station opened at Millthorpe on 19<sup>th</sup> April, 1877, under the name of Spring Grove, the station name being changed Millthorpe on 29<sup>th</sup> February, 1884. A meeting of town residents was held in March, 1884, about the proposed name change and the result of the vote was 38 votes for Millthorpe and 31 for Spring Grove.<sup>4</sup> Note that the Railway Commissioners changed the name of the station before the local residents had a chance to express their views.

The present location of the station was not where it is today but about 500 metres towards Sydney on the other side of the road overbridge linking Millthorpe with Blayney. The most amazing fact was that the passenger platform and building and the goods siding and goods shed were at different locations. The freight facilities were where the present station is located but the passenger platform was on the other side of the hill towards Blayney. One commentator described the peculiarity in the following manner:

“we cannot refrain from abusing the Railway authorities for having placed the passenger station where it is. Why not have it where the goods station is?”<sup>5</sup>

The correspondent added that:

“further proof of their error of judgement is that they have placed a wicket gate for foot passengers on the platform side of the line, which leads to the Blayney road.”<sup>6</sup>

He pointed out that only 1% of passengers detrained and headed in that direction. The others had to cross the line at the level crossing and walk up and down the hill into Millthorpe. He also pointed out that the curved platform at the site required two men to flag trains away.

The plan for the first Millthorpe station building is not extant but it was described in a postal history of Millthorpe as a “long timber building”, which also housed the post office. The building and the first station site were replaced in 1886. The 1877 built Station Master’s residence survives to mark the location of the first station.

Why did the Railway Commissioners placed the first passenger station distant from the village – on a gradient, on a curved platform and with a temporary timber building? For a start, the Commissioner did not intend to provide any station at Millthorpe and considered a station at Spring Hill would be sufficient. After all, the omission of stations was one way to achieve financial savings and lower overall construction costs. The answer to the puzzle of the location was another case of departmental revenge. The community clearly indicated to the NSW Government

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<sup>4</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 8th March, 1884, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *The Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1877, p. 775.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the requested location of the station in the town.<sup>7</sup> The Railway Department and showed its nastiness in exercising departmental revenge on a number of occasions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries elsewhere on the railway system.

In 1874, the Millthorpe community presented a heap of statistics supporting its claim for a station for the village. W. B. Wade was the Resident Engineer based in Orange. He met the local burghers and was unconvinced of their claim for a new station. Local politics intervened and the village gets its station. However, vengeance was the Railway Commissioner's prerogative. He got to choose the location and chose it with spite by placing it away from the local users, with minimal siting distance so that passengers waiting on the platform could not see the train from Orange arriving and making the platform curved. Locals in 1878 nicknamed the station "Dead Horse Platform."<sup>8</sup> The platform was described at the time as "in a dangerous and inconvenient position."<sup>9</sup> Was the decision really committed in a spiteful manner? Yes, according to old-timers of the village.

Before the railway arrived, the road between Millthorpe and Blayney was across the crest of the hill. When the Railway Department excavated a deep cutting, no bridge was provided. Why not? In order to save money is the answer. A level crossing was provided at the base of the gradient and was known as Nye's Gate. The level crossing was closed in 1985 when the road was deviated over the crest of the hill, where the road existed before 1877. At last, the local villagers got their road bridge – only 108 years late.

Although a plan was prepared for a brick combination building for Spring Hill, no permanent building was intended for Millthorpe. Whitton used a temporary timber structure for the platform and decided not to proceed with the combination structure for Spring Hill. The platform building at Millthorpe was pretty crappy but Whitton was working on the introduction of new designs for both stations and residences. This process took him a full 10 years in the 1870s. Tenders closed on 19<sup>th</sup> December, 1876, for the residences at Millthorpe and Spring Hill - the same date that tenders closed for the construction of similarly designed residences at Binalong and Harden, making these four structures the first examples of the new design on the New South Wales rail system.<sup>10</sup> James Douglas, who had constructed the platform structure at Blayney, was the builder for the residence at Millthorpe.

## **THE SECOND (PRESENT) STATION BUILDING**

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<sup>7</sup> D. J. Chamberlain, *Diary of a Challenge*, privately published, no date, p. 65.

<sup>8</sup> Nesbitt, op. cit. p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9th December, 1876, p. 9.

Planning had been underway by the Railway Department from 1883 on the selection of a site for a new station.<sup>11</sup>

The Member of Parliament for Orange, William Clarke, asked the Treasurer about the construction of a new building for Millthorpe station in July, 1884. The Treasurer, Charles Dibbs, replied with information that was an alternative for the truth and stated that that the site for the new station had not be determined and that the plans had not been prepared.<sup>12</sup> Not only was that an alternative fact but the local community would have been wondering why any lengthy consideration would be needed to establish the new station site. After all, the goods facilities were at the base of Pym Street and had been there since 1877. It was a no-brainer to provide the passenger station in the same location. Politicians just do not know when they look and acted stupidly.

In October, 1884, Treasurer Dibbs said that plans for both the new buildings at Millthorpe and Spring Hill were ready and that tenders would be called “shortly”.<sup>13</sup> By June, 1885, by which time nothing had happened, William Clarke organised another deputation to the Minister for Public Works asking him to make a decision on the site.<sup>14</sup> The truth was that George Cowdery, the Engineer in Chief for Existing Lines, had prepared an architectural plan on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 1885, with the site selected in its present location. Nearly one year after Francis Wright had indicated that tenders would be called “shortly”, he indicated in September, 1885 that he had decided on a location and that tenders would be sought “in a fortnight.”<sup>15</sup>

Rather than two weeks, it was two months before there was action. Tenders closed on 17<sup>th</sup> November, 1885 for the construction of the present Millthorpe railway station building.<sup>16</sup> James Douglas, once again, was the successful contractor.<sup>17</sup> Of basically the same design, tenders had closed nearly one year previously for the construction of the platform building at Spring Hill, the successful tenderer being Frank Siebert.<sup>18</sup> Millthorpe station was constructed in the first half of 1886 with a report in March, 1886, saying that the new buildings “are rapidly approaching completion.”<sup>19</sup>

While the architectural plan for the 1886 Millthorpe building does not exist, there are three references in a surviving index of plans, one being an entry dated 4<sup>th</sup> January, 1886 and another entry relating to details of the platform awning dated 31<sup>st</sup> March, 1886. The third entry is dated 19<sup>th</sup> May, 1886 and provides details of the station fittings. Of course, those dates indicate a time after the calling of tenders but that

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<sup>11</sup> Index card, former Railway Infrastructure Corporation Plan Room at Bathurst.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 12<sup>th</sup> July, 1884, p. 7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 15<sup>th</sup> October, 1884, p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19th June, 1885, p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 16th September, 1885, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 27th October, 1885, Issue 503, p. 6977.

<sup>17</sup> *Australian Town and Country Journal*, 26th December, 1885, p. 41.

<sup>18</sup> *New South Wales Government Gazette*, 30th December, 1884, Issue 669, p. 8636 stated that tenders closed on 6 January, 1885. See *Gazette*, 23rd January, 1885, Issue 36, p. 749 for the selection of Frank Siebert.

<sup>19</sup> *Evening News*, 23rd March, 1886, p. 6.

was no surprise as that also occurred with the construction of the building at Spring Hill the previous year.

What is a surprise is the unusual design adopted for both the buildings at Millthorpe and Spring Hill. Not only were those buildings unusual, there were many platform structures on the western line that were atypical of what was happening elsewhere on the New South Wales railway system. Other examples are at Springwood, Wellington, Dubbo and Trangie show strange design features. These are additional to the bizarre case in 1891 of erecting a building at Katoomba which was designed purely for the main western line from Sydney to Homebush. The existence of unusual design elements was not restricted to station buildings. In 1880, a house for the Station Master had been built at Bathurst; similar one was erected at Blayney in 1885 and a third example instructed at Orange in 1886. All three examples shared a similar but very rare design element – a faceted bay window on the street elevation. Nowhere else in New South Wales where there three examples in the same region. Why? Some heritage architects have considered the possibility of an external design influence on some buildings on the western line.<sup>20</sup> The design that was used at Millthorpe and Spring Hill was never again utilised on the New South Wales railway system.

The location of the Millthorpe station, both in relation to the first and second sites, raises interest. The first site was placed at the foot of a one in 40 gradient against trains proceeding to Orange. It was a location that would not normally be selected by the Railway Department because of the difficulty of locomotives, which had stopped at the station, starting on a rising gradient. The second site is interesting for the opposite reason. It was carefully selected at the bottom of Pym Street, thus providing excellent views of the building upon approach through the village.

The brick structure was moderate in size, being approximately 60 feet by 18 feet wide internal, but dramatic in its vertical presentation, emphasised by the symmetrically placed four, tall brick chimneys. The main building contained five rooms with centre pedestrian access, marked by the larger size of the general waiting room, which stood proud of the main building wall. The functions of the five rooms varied over the life of the building. Ten feet from the main building at each end was a detached/semi-detached brick pavilion - one was a male toilet and the other was a female toilet. This arrangement of both pavilions as toilets was unusual in itself and contrasted against the typical use of only one of the pavilions for both male and female toilets.

Another rare feature was the location of a pediment on the roadside, which reads "GWR 1886". This was the last time such a title was displayed on a New South Wales railway station building, the trend away from such pediments having begun in 1883. The top of the concave awning on the road approach was painted alternative

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<sup>20</sup> For example, David Sheedy and Christo Aitken.

light and dark stripes, as was the custom at the time. At the rear of the platform was white picket fencing.

Conservation Architect, Christo Aitken, analysed the design differences between the buildings at Spring Hill and Millthorpe.<sup>21</sup> He identified the following differences:

- taller chimneys at Millthorpe in order to elevate the status of the building,
- additional design elements to the chimneys at Millthorpe, including enlarged bases, accentuated cornice mouldings and semi-circular vertical fins to the chimney tops,
- use of a flowing, curved design for the bargeboards on the gables at Millthorpe, rather than the geometric pattern at Spring Hill,
- elevation of the roof of the verandah on the road approach at Millthorpe, making the structure appear larger,
- re-arrangement of the vertical columns supporting the front verandah from seven to six at Millthorpe, in order to eliminate an awkwardly placed column at Spring Hill almost in front of the entry door on the road approach,
- use of galvanised, corrugated iron sheets for the roof at Millthorpe, compared to the use of slate at Spring Hill, &
- use of cast iron for the verandah frieze at Millthorpe, compared to the use of intricate timber work at Spring Hill.

Why not design both buildings the same? Every town considered it possessed a special importance and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the civic leaders wanted to know that their station building was equal to the status of their town and better than any other station in the district. In 1886, the townfolk at Millthorpe could certainly claim that their station building was far superior in design compared to the ordinary-looking, combined residences/offices at both Blayney and Orange. Millthorpe had always been a larger town than Spring Hill because of the flour mill that was located at Millthorpe from the early 1880s. The local community at Millthorpe would not have been happy to have received a level of decoration consistent with its smaller and less important neighbour at Spring Hill. From the above differences in design, it is clear that there was an attempt to elevate the status of the example at Millthorpe. If that were the case, why was slate not used for the roof at Millthorpe? Possibly because the people at Spring Hill could not grumble entirely about the improved appearance of the station at Millthorpe and could at least take comfort that their building at Spring Hill had one feature not shared by the villagers at Millthorpe.

Conservation work was undertaken in the late 1990s at the station at Millthorpe when a community group became interested in saving the building. Since then, the building has been used for commercial premises and continues to provide a public toilet in the detached pavilion at the Sydney end.

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<sup>21</sup> C. Aitken & Associates, *Millthorpe Railway Station – a Conservation Management Plan for the Passenger Station Building*, unpublished internal document prepared for State Rail Authority, Sydney, 1997, p. 23.

## **OTHER BUILDINGS AT THE STATION**

Robert Kendall on 25<sup>th</sup> January, 1917, approved a plan for a new down platform 365 feet long by 12 feet wide opposite the existing platform. This work was associated with the proposed track duplication but the section between Murrabo, on the Sydney side of Blayney, and Spring Hill was never duplicated, due to the inability to obtain overseas loan funding. Nevertheless, the platform was built to serve loop and a two-room timber building was erected on it. There was a weatherboard clad waiting room measuring 20 feet by 12 feet internal and, adjoined to it, an out of room measuring 10 feet by 12 feet. The design was consistent with what was being provided for duplication works throughout the State. The building had a gabled roof which was covered by the usual No. 26 galvanised, corrugated iron sheets. It was also intended to provide a footbridge but this was never built. The internal walls of the waiting room were lined, which was rare for that type of building, but may have been an indication of the above-normal status of the town Millthorpe. The structure and eventually the platform were demolished in the 1970s.

In addition, there was a timber signal box with a skillion roof on the existing platform. It measured 19 feet 5 inches by 11 feet 5 inches internal or 20 feet by 12 feet external. It was opened on 22<sup>nd</sup> October, 1925, and closed on 7<sup>th</sup> February, 1977. The one thing that was interesting about the signal box was its entry from the side wall, rather than the usual doorway facing onto the platform on the front elevation. The historian of railway signal boxes and interlocking, Dr Bob Taaffe, comments about the Millthorpe signal box:

“A side entry door on a skillion roofed signal box was not normal but not unusual. For example, not far away there was Tarana, Brewongle and Tumulla - off the top of my head with side door entry. The door could have just been for the convenience of the Station Master. Something of interest was the installation in 1925 of a 28 lever machine of which only six levers ever worked. This and the platform opposite were intended for the duplication that never happened. Even 28 levers seems a bit much. The machine was replaced by a six-lever machine in 1937.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1900, the local community complained about the absence of a large platform clock. These were considered items which reflected the status of the town behind the clock.<sup>23</sup> Millthorpe station never got its clock.

## **THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SURVIVING STATION MASTER’S RESIDENCE**

John Whitton continued tinkering with the design of platform buildings and residences throughout the 1870s. In 1876, the very year when he decided not to use any further combination structures, as he approved for Blayney and initially considered for Spring Hill. In that year, he approved the, for the first time, the use of a new style of residence for Station Masters across the whole rail system. This time,

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<sup>22</sup> Email from Dr Bob Taaffe dated 16th April, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> *Millthorpe Messenger*, 14<sup>th</sup> March, 1900.

there was no combination office and residence. The idea involved the erection, initially, of a two-bedroom, free-standing, brick structure with a hipped roof.<sup>24</sup> The residence was 30 feet wide and had a full-width verandah across the front. This style of residence was necessarily because Whitton did not want to spend much money on brick platform buildings, especially at small locations, and the temporary buildings he did use were small. A house 30 feet wide was not a large structure. The stand-alone, railway residences at Millthorpe, Spring Hill, Binalong and Harden that survive today were built in 1877 and provide a further insight into railway culture. That culture believed that it was far more important to provide reasonable housing for staff as a priority over accommodation for the travelling public.

### **A CONCLUSION AND A SPECULATION**

The platform building survives today as a rare example of the architectural differences of buildings on the western line, compared to those on the main southern and main northern railway lines. It is an acknowledgement of the status of the town but, more importantly, it is an indication of what could be done to provide attractive buildings if the New South Wales Government could borrow loan funds overseas.

Perhaps, if the decision were to be made in 1887, rather than in 1886, to provide a replacement building a more modest structure may have been erected or no replacement building provided. Money tightened up from 1886 and, from that time, timber station buildings were the norm rather than the exception.

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18<sup>th</sup> April, 2017.

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<sup>24</sup> In the 1880s, in addition to the 1876 example, Whitton also used a larger residence but of the same external design.