

# SHELLHARBOUR JUNCTION STATION

A BEASTLY PRODUCT OF ECONOMIC  
RATIONALISM



*This photograph affirms the loveliness of past times with the green fields of grass and a passing steam engine. Locomotive 5597 , with a Wampu tender, climbs toward the location of Shellharbour Junction station on 10<sup>th</sup> October 1966 with a tour train. The photograph demonstrates the significant vertical difference in height between the former Shellharbour station and the new station location. People with good vision may spot the red roof of the Station Master's residence at Shellharbour station in front of the distant row of dark green trees. Now, the scene is partly spoilt by increasing urban development and the monstrous four lane Pacific Highway.*



*This image shows the entrance/exit to/from the station from Piper Drive. Upon exit from the station, passengers are confronted by an unbelievably repulsive mountain covered with white material. It is a mini version of the hill of mine tailings opposite Broken Hill station except that the setting at Shellharbour Junction looks like Thredbo in Winter. A set of stairs climbs the mountain and, once at the top, the adventurer is startled to find that there is nothing there – no development, no landscaping – nothing.*

## **WHAT'S UNAPPEALING ABOUT THE STATION?**

- A subjugation of attractiveness by uninspired engineering reflected in the dominance of the deck structure of the footbridge, the plainness of the platform awnings and the extensive application of black paint
- The addition of “Junction” to the station name in the absence of any physical evidence of give meaning to the word
- The manner in which the station name was chosen prior to a decision by the New South Wales Geographical Names Board
- The misleading title of “station and interchange” – with a total of 11 bus services either starting or terminating at the station every 24 hours
- The unbelievably disagreeable mountain covered in white material opposite the station entrance
- The incessant high level of noise from the adjacent Pacific Highway



*The era of Sydney Trains, which started in 2013, is visually identified by the extensive use of dark grey and black paint on stations and elsewhere. Black paint replaced the era of CityRail which existed between 1989 and 2013 and was identified by the extensive use of white paint, including the fencing at the rear of platforms and elsewhere. Shellharbour Junction station is a marker in the transition from CityRail to Sydney Trains and the history of the change in corporate title is conspicuous by the contrast between black and white infrastructure. When the Liberal/National Coalition Government took office in 2011, it was enthusiastic to eliminate all the vestiges of power of the former Labor Party administration and this included changing the name of the organisation, changing the colour of station nameboards and rubbish bins and platform seats – in addition to the purging from CityRail the white and blue paint. Sydney Trains replaced white and blue with black, which is the negation of colour. Something went very wrong at Shellharbour Junction where the white paint survived the transition of corporate titles.*

## **WHY BLAME ECONOMIC RATIONALISM FOR THE NEW STATION?**

The philosophy of economic rationalism encompasses the belief that good government is achieved by the minimisation of the size of public sector employment and the maximisation of employment of contractors and consultants in the private sector. Academic, Mariana Mazzucato, listed the following additional elements of economic rationalism which were rebadged by some adherents as the “new public management theory”:

- fabrication and propagation of the (false) image “of a lazy State and a dynamic private sector”
- adoption of accounting practices from the private sector including application of cost benefit analyses
- outsourcing of functions in the name of efficiency &



- privatisation of government owned assets.<sup>1</sup>

Mazzucato writes that the end result is an erosion of corporate knowledge that helps future administrators to understand what works and what doesn't work. The new economic philosophy also weakens government organisations and undermines confidence in public institutions. More importantly, economic rationalism does not provide the alleged benefits to taxpayers.<sup>2</sup>

So far as the former State Rail Authority was concerned, introduction of economic rationalism involved the complete eradication of the Architects Section in the Way and Works Branch. As a result, Sydney Trains retained no in-house design specialists to supervise the preparation of architectural station plans that embraced consideration of the needs of passengers, maintenance staff and adjacent residents. It lost all its in-house, corporate knowledge in relation to station design.

The Architects Section was not the only part of the railway empire to be purged. No longer was it possible to have a career in railway operations and management. There was no chance anymore progressing through the various ranks to reach senior levels. Junior professional and operational staff could no longer hold onto the belief that their knowledge, that had been accumulated over the years, would be useful and rewarded by promotion. The outcome has been the employment of staff on stations who have little more to do than sweep the platform and empty rubbish bins. Concepts such as pride in the organisation and employee camaraderie have taken a massive hit.



*A timber building at Shellharbour was erected in 1887 and, despite its simple construction, was maintained for the next 127 years to provide shelter for waiting passengers. This photograph taken in February 2000 shows the comfy conditions of the waiting room where old photographs and wall mounted timetables existed to provide a welcoming ambience. Such enclosed waiting accommodation is absent from the present Shellharbour Junction station. Clearly, not everything improves over time.*

<sup>1</sup> M. Mazzucato, *The Entrepreneurial State*, New York, Perseus Books, 2015, pp. XXV111, XXVIV, 2 & 3.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

The result of economic rationalism is the design of stations by individual contract architectural firms. There are guidelines for them but the overall design is one where private enterprise is mostly unrestricted in what it proposed at a particular station. Moreover, there seems to be an absence of close supervision by anyone within the railway bureaucracy.

It would be doubtful whether any person involved in the design process of Shellharbour Junction station frequently waited on the platform and caught a train to or from the location. The evidence, including the misnomer of the station name, the frightful white hill outside the entrance and the incessant highway noise all suggests a disinterest in what was planned and built. The boxy nature of the footbridge structure, the absence of any passenger protection from unpleasant winds and the extensive, depressing black paint add to the thought that the experience of passengers was not a high priority to Sydney Trains.

The situation at Shellharbour Junction does not imply that every station design by external contracting organisations has been adverse. Indeed, the adjoining station at Oak Flats is perhaps the only example on the entire railway system of an attractive building that reflects elements of the Post-Modernist design school. There is no consistency in the delivery of good station designs. Economic rationalism embraces the idea that whatever the private sector produces has to be better than the public sector. The station at Shellharbour Junction is an important reminder that challenges the philosophy.

## **OPENING OF SHELLHARBOUR JUNCTION STATION**

Sydney Trains was established on 1<sup>st</sup> July 2013 and Shellharbour Junction, opened on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2014, is the first and only railway station it has opened since its establishment. The station it replaced, namely Shellharbour/Dunmore, was closed the previous day. The new station was less than two kilometres from the old one. The more significant statistic was the differential elevation with Shellharbour at the bottom of a gradient and Shellharbour Junction towards the top of the bank at places between the two stations with grades of 1 in 40 and 1 in 55.



*The foregoing picture shows the alleged interchange at the station. Although the bus shelters are small, they are very adequate for the extremely restricted timetable for bus route No. 52 which is the only bus route servicing the station. There are no bus services for 7 ½ hours between 0800 and 1532 and those in the morning are all inbound and those in the afternoon are all outbound. So much for the station title name “interchange”.*

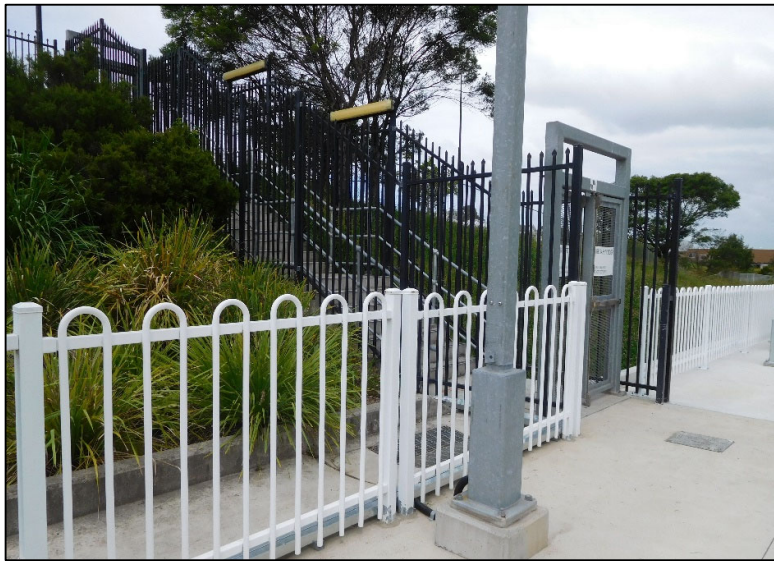
## **STATION FACILITIES**

The station comprises two side platforms with awnings in the centre of the platforms but no enclosed waiting areas. When opened, there was no toilet but it would appear that the relevant local government authority, and not Sydney Trains, erected a unisex, Exeloo toilet on one side of the entrance. The station is visually dominated by the very substantial footbridge erected to provide pedestrian access across the main line to the loop platform. All trains use the main line platform unless passenger trains are crossing.



*Sydney Trains did not provide a toilet when the station opened but the toilet has a familiar appearance. Yes. It is a recurrent element in shopping centres, playgrounds and elsewhere. How come Sydney Trains did not wish to provide such a facility?*

The vast majority of planning for the new station was undertaken in the time of CityRail. Despite the razzle dazzle of orange coloured porcelain tiles on the platform walls of the new station, there is one feature of the old CityRail organisation that Sydney Trains failed to eliminate. That was the white coloured, loop top fencing at the rear perimeter of both platforms.



*Both platforms were extended at the southern end in 2022 to accommodate ten car trains. The white fencing erected in 2014 at the station was a remnant of the policy of CityRail and its application at Shellharbour Junction marked a transition from the corporate identity of that organisation and the then relatively newly formed Sydney Trains. However, Sydney Trains decided to continue the use of white loop top fencing in 2022, making the station the last use of white loop top fencing in the CityRail/Sydney Trains network. Probably, someone in Transport for New South Wales realised that it would look ridiculous if a different style and colour of fencing were erected adjacent to the existing fencing. However, such thinking did not extend to the safety exits erected on each platform which were protected by the jet black fencing that identifies the corporate preference of Sydney Trains. Just to add some additional interest into the visual presentation, extensive use of unpainted galvanised steel for stanchions and lamp posts and other elements has been erected.*

## **STAFFING**

Shellharbour Junction station is unattended. A spokesman at for Transport for NSW stated that:

“As has always been the case, stations across the network in lower patronage areas such as Shellharbour Junction and Dunmore are not permanently staffed”.<sup>3</sup>

That statement is partly incorrect. The adverb, “always”, may relate to the time of Sydney Trains but not before 2013.

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<sup>3</sup> *Railway Digest*, January 2015, p. 10.





*The above photograph, taken on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2000 in the Dunmore/Shellharbour signal box, is evidence that it has not always been the case that stations with lower patronage have been unattended. Dunmore/Shellharbour station, with its tiny patronage, was attended from the time of its opening in 1887 to its closure in 2014. In this picture, the station staff are testing the miniature electric staff instrument for the section between Dunmore/Shellharbour and Albion Park.*

## **STATION NAME**

The railway station serving the town of Shellharbour has had an interesting history involving the name of its station. Several communities throughout New South Wales have been insulted over the decades by the decision of the Railway Commissioners to allocate names to stations which were distant from the villages and towns they served. One of those instances were Shellharbour station which was about two miles distant from the village of that name. The local residents were irritated with the station name until 19<sup>th</sup> January 1981 when the then State Rail Authority at least acknowledged the problem and renamed station Dunmore Shellharbour.

Thirty years later, another disputation appeared around the station name. The proposed name of the new station had commenced in the early 2000s as Flinders and for the next 10 years the proposed station was known by that name. Then, the name Shell Cove received attention. Before the Geographical Names Board had made a decision on the station name, Sydney Trains had erected the station nameboards with the title Shellharbour Junction.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.





*The above photographs of Dunmore/Shellharbour show two features that made the station easy to use. Firstly, virtually no time was required in changing modes between road and rail. Secondly, the signage was easy to read. Such good features disappeared with the opening of Shellharbour Junction. Not everything that is old is old-fashioned. Taken on 15<sup>th</sup> April 2003*

All stations are places of modal interchange. Why then was the new station given the name, “station and interchange”, as shown on a plaque at the station entrance? Moreover, it is an exaggerated title so far as local bus services are concerned. Only one route, namely 52, serves the station. There are five services arriving at the station between 0521 and 0800 and six services departing from the station between 1532 and 2010.



*The foregoing image indicates that the station name is Shellharbour Junction. The application of the proper noun, Junction, is befuddling. "Junction" means a joining of things or an intersection or confluence. It is visually, cognitively and physiologically flummoxing to comprehend the use of "Junction" in the name. To what place or mode is the station a junction? In the history of the New South Wales Railways, not many stations have been opened simultaneously by three people. Shellharbour Junction was one of the lucky stations. The above picture shows the plaque that was unveiled by the then Minister for Transport, the Minister for the Illawarra and the Parliamentary Member for Kiama. Interestingly, the railway station was not located within the electorate of Kiama but came within Shellharbour electorate. However, as the seat of Shellharbour was held by the Parliamentary Opposition, the location was overlooked for the sake of politics. John Ajarka lived nowhere near Shellharbour or Kiama but in the Shire of Sutherland. Of course, the name that should have been on the plaque was Anna Watson, the Member for Shellharbour and the present Parliamentary Secretary for Regional Transport. Politics can be a disagreeable and dishonourable business.*

## NINETEENTH CENTURY REQUESTS FOR THE ERECTION OF A PLATFORM IN THE VICINITY OF SHELLHARBOUR JUNCTION STATION



*The preceding photograph of Dunmore/Shellharbour station is a reminder of past corporate policy. In times past, much more attention was given by governments to the limiting of capital expenditure when revenue into the government treasury was low. This was reflected in the original Shellharbour station. The building with the open-fronted waiting room was erected in 1887, though it has been extended on the northern end. It was built in a time when the amount of capital finance available to the New South Wales Railways was declining – which led to the 1890s Depression. The shortage of money was primarily reflected in the absence of a platform awning. Another economic feature of the time was the decision to separate male toilets from the main building and construct the male toilets with lower cost materials, namely corrugated iron sheets on the walls. In this photograph taken on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1978, the original toilet survives and is located at the far northern end of the platform (i.e., on the left-hand side of the picture). Behind the male toilet block is a brick residence of the Station Master, which is identified by the two brick chimneys through the ridge of the roof. Although financial restraint was reflected in the public infrastructure, that philosophy did not extend to housing for the staff of the New South Wales Railways before 1890. Indeed, for most of the history of the railway administration up to 1972, the Railway Commissioner endeavoured to ensure that staff and their families were provided with residential accommodation especially when it was unavailable in the commercial market.*

In December 1889, the three Railway Commissioners visited the area. Leading local citizens, Messrs. Lindsay and Dunster, awaited on them at Shellharbour station. They wanted a platform for passengers and milk at what was known as Lindsay's Lane. The proposed location was estimated to be about one mile north of the existing Shellharbour station, which placed it in the vicinity of Shellharbour Junction station. Lindsay and Dunster indicated that such a platform would reduce the distance to the town of Shellharbour to about one mile. It would also source increased traffic. The spot

for the station was pointed out to the Commissioners, who promised to consider the matter.<sup>5</sup> Naturally, nothing happened.

One year later in 1890 another deputation waited at Shellharbour platform which reminded the Commissioner's that they had promised to consider the request.<sup>6</sup> Again, nothing. A third and final request was made in 1891. At the Commissioners' visit in June 1891, the matter was again brought to their attention.<sup>7</sup> A saving of 20 minutes travel time would be obtained according to the Shellharbour residents as the then existing station was two miles from the town of the same name.<sup>8</sup> No outcome of the deputation was recorded by the press. A few days after the second deputation, a public meeting was called to request the platform.<sup>9</sup> No record survives of the meeting outcome. Perhaps they gave up?



*Not only was commuter car parking extremely convenient at the former Dunmore/Shellharbour station, but the platform was also located in an idyllic setting whereby waiting passengers could stand amongst the station landscaping as well as looking out onto the green, undulating panorama. Such a pleasant environment does not exist at the new Shellharbour Junction station. This photograph shows the rear of the 1887 timber structure with the additional room at the northern end and an inter-building connection to the adjacent signal box. The photograph was taken on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2000.*

The site of original Shellharbour station provided the only sufficient flatland to enable a station and siding to be erected in 1887. Three factors were important to the Railway

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<sup>5</sup> *Illawarra Mercury*, 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1889, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Illawarra Mercury*, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1890, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser*, 5<sup>th</sup> June 1891, p. 3.  
*Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Kiama Independent, and Shoalhaven Advertiser*, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1891, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Sydney Mail and New South Wales Advertiser*, 6<sup>th</sup> June 1891, p. 1286.



Commissioners. Firstly, there was a need to retain the existing station site because it was level and facilitated the crossing of trains and working the good siding. Secondly, they would not be keen on having to stations close together, even if one were unattended. Thirdly, they would want to avoid stopping trains on a substantial gradient. There were precedents over the years where the Railway Commissioners faced the same problems and did indeed build two or more stations close together while keeping all facilities open, such as the situation at Cunnigar, Harden, Murrumburrah and Demondrille. However, if there were insufficient political power placed on the Commissioners, they would not meet such requests. That seems to have been the case with the original Shellharbour station.

## **PLANNING FOR THE SHELLHARBOUR JUNCTION STATION**

*Railway Digest* in April 2003 carried an article which indicated that a new station, to be called Flinders, was to replace the existing Shellharbour/Dunmore station.<sup>10</sup> That was news to the Planning Division of CityRail. At that time, only preliminary concept planning for a possible station had been discussed with the local government authority, the Roads and Traffic Authority and the land developer, namely LandComm, which was selling real estate in the suburb known as Flinders. There was no government commitment or budget planning for the establishment of a new station at Flinders in 2003. New South Wales general elections were held on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2003 but neither major party made any reference during the election campaign to the notion of a new station.



*This image shows the 105 spaces for the commuter car park at Shellharbour Junction. Of interest, was the supply of parking which exceeded demand. Contrasting with the lovely visual setting of Dunmore/Shellharbour station, commuters walking between the Shellharbour*

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<sup>10</sup> *Railway Digest*, April 2003, p. 11.

*Junction station and their motor vehicles are immersed in the ugliness of the white mountain landscape.*

Inter-governmental communications took place in 2004 and, in early 2005, CityRail had selected a spot for a new station. Unfortunately for CityRail, the Roads and Traffic Authority had already planned and selected the same spot for a new road interchange between the Pacific Highway and Shellharbour Road including two roundabouts. Now, CityRail was faced with finding a new location because it did not enjoy the concept of the Roads and Traffic Authority having an unpalatable institutional and physical ascendancy above the new railway station. Similarly, CityRail dismissed a proposal to allow the Roads and Traffic Authority to build the new station as a part of its planned road interchange. CityRail's first choice for an alternative site was north of the station on a curve heading towards Croom Tunnel, but that was dismissed because CityRail's preference was to locate the station on a straight piece of track. With that in mind, CityRail chose the existing station location south of the initial site as the station location.

While Flinders station was not part of the election process in 2003, that situation change for the 2011 general elections. The candidate for the Parliamentary seat of Shellharbour, Anna Watson, announced in the lead up to the State general elections on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2011 that the Labor Government would build the Flinders station at an estimated cost of \$35 million. The then Labor Government had wisely arranged for a commencement of earthworks for the station prior to the election date. It was in the 2011 election that the Labor Party lost government. In it held office for 16 years between 1995 and 2011. Gareth Ward, like Anna Watson, was elected to Parliament at the 2011 elections. He held the seat of Kiama for the Liberal Party. At the time of Anna Watson's announcement, Ward described the news release as a "cynical ploy". In short, both major political parties supported the concept of a new station.

By the middle of 2011, CityRail indicated it had commenced the first stage of the construction of the station "as part of the Dunmore Passing Loop project".<sup>11</sup> Physical work was to begin later in 2011. The new station was to serve a new residential development. The Minister for Transport, Gladys Berejiklian, and Gareth Ward announced on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2012 the construction of the new station. A verbal dispute broke out between Anna Watson and Gareth Ward in relation to which political party was responsible for the construction of the new station.

## **CONSTRUCTION**

Haslin Constructions of Sutherland built Shellharbour Junction station with a contract value of \$22 million. The building was completed prior to the official opening.

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<sup>11</sup> CityRail, *Update Issue No. 13 2011*, p. 1.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The image below summarises the sadness of the station.



*Six aspects of the station make it a place of sadness. These are:*

- *the incessant sound of motor vehicles on the adjacent Princess Highway 50 metres from the platforms,*
- *the decision to dominate the station with black paint, except for parts of the fencing,*
- *the seemingly human-made hill outside the station entrance,*
- *the delayed decision to provide a public toilet,*
- *the decision by Sydney trains to choose a station name prior to the decision of the Geographic Names Board, &*
- *the poor choice of the station description – a junction to nowhere.*

**GOODBYE**



*It is time to leave Shellharbour Junction with its new concrete infrastructure, its new galvanised steel work and its black-and-white fencing. Beneath the platforms and the distant green hills are four lanes of noisy Pacific Highway traffic. Sometimes it is good that readers cannot hear the sounds of images and that is the case at Shellharbour Junction. The only question to be resolved by veteran A.R.H.S. Member, Bill Laidlaw, is whether he catches the “H” set or waits for a better option. What could that be?*





*What would be the benefit of waiting? Well, something more interesting might come along, such as the two-car "L" set waiting down the line a bit at Dunmore/Shellharbour. Waiting provides one additional benefit to the modern "H" set, namely a ride home with one's memories.*

Stuart Sharp

12<sup>th</sup> July 2023