

# LEIGHTONFIELD RAILWAY STATION

## A RELIC OF WORLD WAR II



*Leightonfield station is in the centre of the photograph. There would hardly be another station surrounded by so much industry. The date is 20<sup>th</sup> December 1972. SOURCE: Parramatta City Council.*

### THE NEED FOR A STATION

Historian, Jim Longworth, has written that, early in World War II, the Commonwealth Government compulsively acquired about 816 acres of land between Villawood and Chester Hill railway stations for an explosive factory to be known as 'No. 3'. The factory complex was located on both the northern and southern side of the Regents Park to Cabramatta railway line. He writes that the intention was to increase local production of munitions in case overseas supply lines were disrupted.

Over 3,000 people worked at the factory at its peak in September 1943. Operations wound down after the War's conclusion in August 1945. However, there was no sudden closure as the N.S.W. Department of Railways made preliminary investigations for a siding in 1948 to what was known as the Tetryl Section of the factory. Tetryl was used to make explosives in World Wars I and II. There is no record of the siding being provided.

Part of the former factory site was converted in 1949 to become the Villawood Migrant Hostel and Immigration Centre.



*On 10<sup>th</sup> January 1978, the building on the northbound platform was in near original condition. It retained its timber and wire fencing with the top rail set on edge, this style being known as 'park' fencing. As seen at many other stations, staff at one time endeavoured to improve the appearance of their stations with the plants and this was the case at Leightonfield. The original corrugated asbestos cement roofing survives. On the left of the photograph, the original boundary fence has mostly disappeared.*

## **WHAT'S OF INTEREST?**

To the unenlightened, casual observer, there is no engaging aspect of the design or history of the structure. The story is different for people with a cultural awareness. Below is a table of what to note and why.

**TABLE: NOTABLE ATTRIBUTES OF LEIGHTONFIELD STATION**

<b>BUILDING ATTRIBUTE</b>	<b>EXPLANATION WHY THE ATTRIBUTE IS NOTABLE</b>
Timber platform buildings	After 1912, the Commissioner dictated that no further timber platform buildings were to be erected in the Sydney region. Leightonfield is one of the few exceptions.
Timing of and reason for approval	A rare surviving World War II railway structure

<b>BUILDING ATTRIBUTE</b>	<b>EXPLANATION WHY THE ATTRIBUTE IS NOTABLE</b>
Mass concrete piers	Tallest on NSW Railway system
Variable width of structure on northbound platform	Contrary to the then policy of consistent building width
Provision of a rear wall on the awning on the northbound platform	Contrary to the policy of eliminating awning walls
Single ticket windows on northbound platform offset to allow for a future second window	A scarce example of planning
Use of old rails for platform frame and old sleepers for the decks	Longest platforms using old rails and second-hand sleepers on NSW Railway system
Truncated width of platforms	The decision to narrow the width from 12 to 10 feet resulted in the exposure of the platform sub-structure
The absence of ramps at the ends of the platforms	A representative exemplar of a lack of planning to facilitate the cross-platform transfer of parcels and luggage
The omission of a ramp to reach the southbound platform	Reflects a lower status for travellers compared with people crossing the Railway corridor

## **APPROVAL**

The Acting Chief Civil Engineer, William Beaver, approved a series of plans between August and December 1941 for a new station called Leightonfield between Regents Park and Cabramatta Junction. It was built to serve the Commonwealth Government's No. 3 Explosives Factory, which opened in 1941. Beaver approved the main architectural plan on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1941 for a hardwood timber framed structure with the external walls covered with rusticated weatherboards.



*There are two interesting aspects of the planning of the building on the northbound platform evident in this photograph taken on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1980. The first was the significant height of the concrete piers. They were and still are the tallest mass concrete piers supporting a platform building on the N.S.W. system. Secondly, is the extent of variation in the building's width. Such disparity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was rare with the preference of railway architects at the time for uniform width. The original corrugated asbestos cement sheets cover the roof. Note the absence of chimneys. Electric radiators were the go in 1941.*

## **NEXT BIT**

## **THE FAMILY OF BUILDINGS TO WHICH LEIGHTONFIELD BELONGS**

The start of the end of the Federation-influenced style commenced in 1929 with the introduction of the new design for buildings on the East Hills branch line. Throughout the 1930s, the next move away from the Federation influences appeared in the form of structures based on domestic houses and it is in that group that the buildings at Leightonfield were designed. Below is a list of the dates and places where structure similar to Leightonfield were erected through the 1930s.

- 1935          Civic
- 1936          Griffith
- 1937          Denistone
- 1937          Morisset
- 1938          Wiley Park
- 1939          Captains Flat
- 1939          Quakers Hill
- 1940          Merrylands
- 1940          Kempsey
- 1941          Menindee
- 1941          Gerringong

- 1941 Coniston



*On the left above is a 1978 photograph of the male toilet. Ventilation above the urinal was simple and cheap. A gap was left between the top of the window frame and the glazing. The unglamorous expression of the steelwork to support the platform awning was another cost saver. The 2021 image on the right shows two more techniques aimed at reducing construction expenditure. The first was the omission of lining boards on the wall of the awning and the second was the reduction in the platform width beyond the structures.*

## **THE SOURCE OF DESIGN INFLUENCES**

The Leightonfield buildings were utilitarian in design and one would be pressed hard to argue that they followed the Inter War Functionalist style. Two stations to the west of Leightonfield was Carramar, where in 1938 approval was given for a small booking office which accorded to a mixture of elements of early Federation influences and the Inter-War Functionalist design. In particular, the Carramar building of 1924 featured cavity brickwork, the use of soldier courses around the external walls, chamfered reveals on windows and Marseille tiles on the roof. Only three features of the Leightonfield buildings provided a remote link to that design school, these being:

- the low pitched, hipped roofs,

- the provision of a near-horizontal, nine feet wide cantilevered awnings on both platforms, &
- some windows that being longer than higher.



*The above images show the entrance area for the northbound platform. The single ticket window shown in the left image was offset as provision was made on the plan to install a second ticket window to its right. One puzzling attribute is a brick wall with nibs of other walls crudely broken off at each end. It would have been most unusual to have a shelter for the station Junior Porter collecting tickets made of brickwork.*

## **THE LAYOUT OF ROOMS**

Separate structures were placed on each of the new Leightonfield side platforms. The building that served the line to Regents Park was 86 feet long and of variable width ranging from 12 feet 6 inches to 19 feet internal. It contained the following rooms:

- a “booking area” (i.e. entry with a single ticket window facing towards Cabramatta),
- the “Station Master’s and booking office”,
- a ladies’ waiting room with female toilets to the rear,
- a general waiting room with doors,
- a store, &
- the male toilet.

The structure on the southbound platform was 40 feet long and variable width ranging from 12 to 13 feet internal. It contained a booking area at the bottom of the steps, a tiny booking office measuring 13 feet by 5 feet and a general waiting room, again with doors.



*One of the hallmark aspects of the station is its original seating in both general waiting rooms. This image shows the widest room in the building on the northbound platform with the multi-slat, timber seats, which were typical of the 1930s. The image was taken on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 2021.*



*The photographer is looking south on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1980 and views the two room structure on the southbound platform. Originally, there was a ticket window facing the bottom of the stepway. Note the extent to which access to the platform was controlled in order to ensure that no one departed the platform without handing in their ticket to the Junior Porter collecting tickets.*



*This photograph reveals the awning on the northbound platform which had the effect of absorbing all views of the platform building. The awning was 250 feet long by nine feet wide. A similar treatment involving the use of long awnings was applied at Warwick Farm in 1943 and for a similar purpose – wartime duties. Note the station nameboard has black letters, not the blue letters of 2024. The blue letters appeared in the 1950s, disappeared and now have re-appeared. The date is 14<sup>th</sup> January 1978.*

## **DESIGN DETAILS**

Other features of the Leightonfield building were:

- Standard corrugated asbestos cement on roofs and awnings,
- Use of high, 12-inch square concrete piers,
- Awnings sloping back towards the buildings into concealed box gutters,
- Soffits to underside of awnings,
- Timber floors, except for use of concrete for the booking areas and toilets,
- Alpine Ash for joinery and Hoop Pine for internal fittings,
- Ceiling lined with 5/32-inch-thick asbestos sheets,
- Internal walls covered with 1/8-inch thick “unpainted Masonite Presswood” to a height of three feet above the floor forming the dado and 5/32-inch thick asbestos cement sheets above the dado with covers for the body of the walls, – internal asbestos sheets painted
- Five-panel all glass double doors to both general waiting rooms,
- ½ inch quadrant board at joint of floors and walls in place of skirting boards, &
- Pipe barriers at platform entrances for crowd control.





*In August 1941, the Department of Railways considered that the 45 feet by nine feet awning, shown in the photograph above, would be sufficient for the traffic. One month later, the Department had second thoughts and proposed to erect an awning 480 long from the bottom of the step in the northerly direction. It is unknown whether the longer awning was erected. Another change was the location of the footbridge. Originally, it was to be located in the middle of the platforms but another rethink resulted in its relocation towards the southern end of the station. This was possibly done so that one staff member could collect tickets at the same location from both platforms on the northern side of the station.*

One very significant feature of the station arrangement was the location of the platform entrances at the top of the ramp and bottom of both stepways from the footbridge. In other words, the entry structures were very close to the footbridge and this proximity facilitated the task of checking tickets from people detraining. This was an improvement over the arrangement that was used in 1939 on the Cronulla line whereby lengthy sections of fencing were constructed between the platform buildings and platform entrances at the bottoms of the stepways. This enabled staff to be in place in a much shorter time in order to inspect and collect tickets. The use of the long awning on the northbound platform was similar to the arrangement implemented at Warwick Farm also during World War II but, at Warwick Farm, the long awnings were not a part of the original planning proposal for the station.

Another interesting feature was the absence of any parcel facility. This absence enabled the omission of ramps at the ends of platforms as barrows would not be used to move parcels between platforms. Perhaps the most surprising feature was the provision of more toilet closets for women (four) than for men (three). This had never occurred in the history of New South Wales Railway toilets. Perhaps this was an indication of the sex of the majority of the workers at the nearby munitions factory.

## STATION OWNERSHIP

The Leightonfield station opened on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1942 but the buildings were allegedly erected by contract and the buildings were listed as being completed in 1943. The station, including the buildings and the footbridge, remained in the ownership of the Commonwealth Government until 1<sup>st</sup> February 1962. Ownership was then transferred to the New South Wales government.



*The photographer on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1980 is looking east towards Regents Park. The original fencing survives at the rear of the platforms. The corrugated iron sheets on the balustrade on the footbridge have been replaced.*

Why was Leightonfield station basic in intent and primitive in design, compared to the attractive buildings that also approved at Coniston and Gerringong in 1941? The question also applies to the design of the building at Rutherford in the Hunter Valley. These were structures under direct Commonwealth Government ownership and their officials requested buildings of the lowest cost yet operationally functional. The story was different for stations under the ownership of the New South Wales Government and, in these instances, Commonwealth officials would have been completely unaware that the State Government was gilding the lily in terms of a much higher level of design and the addition of decorative features.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF A KIOSK

Plans were issued in February and March 1967 for the construction of a kiosk at the bottom of the ramp leading to the northbound platform. Mrs. W. Britt was the lease and no doubt she paid for the structure. The 10 feet by five feet five inches kiosk had brick walls with the near-flat roof covered with corrugated iron sheets.



*The above image shows the 1967 kiosk which initially sold newspapers and later flowers. It is now the station's dry store.*



*Looking west on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1971 the photograph shows the absence of ramps at the ends of the platforms. Except for locomotive 4306 on a southbound goods train, the scene is as it was in 1941 so far as the station was concerned.*

## NEW BOOKING OFFICE WORKSTATION

A striking indictment on New South Wales Governments from the end of World War II to the 1980s is the grossly inadequate capital allocations to modernise the New South Wales railway system. Things changed with the release of the Booz Allen Hamilton report in 1988. It was Nick Greiner's coalition government that took swift and mind-boggling action. From the establishment of CityRail in 1989, every booking office in use received new work stations. It was the turn of Leightonfield in August 2002.



*The above 1978 photograph has captured the original arrangement of the officially named 'pipe barrier' on the southbound platform where the Junior Porter stood to collect tickets.*

## THE PLATFORMS

The platforms were open-fronted platforms 520 feet by a proposed 12 feet with frames using old rails, with timber decking. Beyond the buildings, the platform width was reduced to ten feet to save a dollar. There was a three inch fall across the platforms towards the tracks to prevent rainwater from pooling on the platforms. The timber decking was partly replaced with re-inforced concrete slabs in 1964. Those areas in front of the buildings retained their timber planks for some years but were replaced with concrete eventually. There were no ramps at the ends of platforms. The platform level was three feet seven inches above the head of the rail, which was standard for the Sydney suburban network. The wire and timber rail fences at the rear of the platforms were set to a height of three feet nine inches.

The footbridge was planned in 1941 and featured RSJ steel beams. It has a lightweight appearance, which was a facet of its design. A 1 in 8 asphalted ramp gave access to the platform serving northbound trains and from that platform the ramp continued to the deck of the footbridge. Oddly, there were stairs from the footbridge deck to the southbound platform, but a ramp was used for access to the opposing side of the rail

corridor. Originally, the balustrades of the footbridge were covered with galvanised iron sheets.



*After the establishment of CityRail in 1989, every station in its network was upgraded. Red paint was applied to lamp posts, seats and rubbish bins but all that work has disappeared. There is one trait of the CityRail upgrade that remains, namely the extensive white coloured loop top steel fencing at the rear of the platforms.*

## **HERITAGE ASSESSMENT**

The NSW Department of Environment and Heritage states the station represented the expansion of railway services through the World War II period. It says:

“The simple and utilitarian design of the station and its 1940s platform buildings demonstrate the urgency with which the station was established in 1942 to cater to passenger traffic to the factory.

The 1940s platform buildings are examples of interwar railway structures which demonstrate a shift away from the more ornate architectural style of earlier 1920s platform buildings.”

Yes. The buildings are simple and utilitarian. However, the writer of the above words has not placed the Leightonfield’s architecture into the context of other platform buildings erected during the War. Such an investigation would have exposed the existence of many large and attractive platform buildings displaying strong Inter-War Functionalist features erected during the War, such as those between Westmead and St. Marys. Leightonfield station does not represent a shift away from the Inter-War Functionalist style with examples of that architecture being erected as late as 1961, as at Granville.

An analysis of buildings funded by the Commonwealth Government during World War II reveals the essence of Leightonfield’s heritage significance. Those stations in the

ownership of the New South Wales Government received large, attractive, brick buildings displaying features of the Inter-War Functionalist style. Those stations in the ownership of the Commonwealth Government, namely Leightonfield, Ropes Creek, Dunheved and Rutherford received low-cost timber buildings which reflected a domestic design of the 1930s.

Stuart Sharp

5<sup>th</sup> September 2024