

This was published as a series of 5 articles, by Mick Hutson, in the BRS newsletter.

The Story of Bracknell Station

Part 1 (June 1986)

Bracknell Station today consists of two platforms with uninspiring modern “office block” architecture, and little remains of the London & South Western Railway station which served the town for about 120 years. At its peak around 1914, facilities were surprisingly varied; this is an attempt to describe what has gone and what can still be seen.

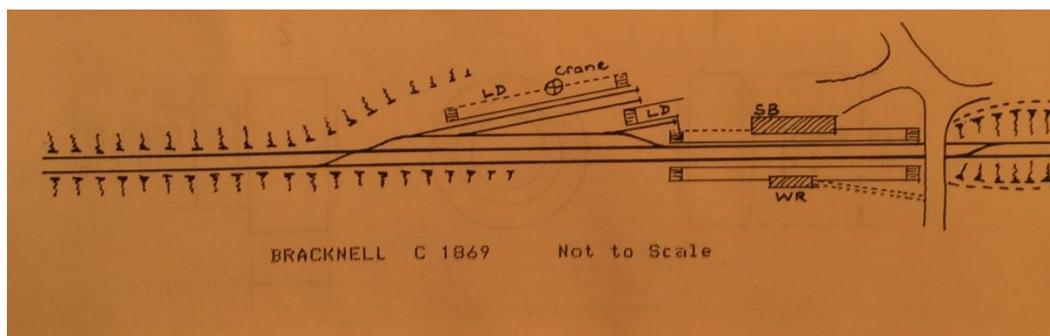
Origins

Bracknell opened in July 1856 with the Staines, Wokingham & Woking Junction Railway, a double track branch line designed to link Staines, and the L&SW network, to Reading. The SW&WJ had plans to link themselves to the north by laying mixed gauge track over the Great Western to Oxford, but this traffic never properly materialised. Until 1878 the line was independent, but was worked by the L&SW, meaning that the SW&WJ was responsible for the initial architecture. As opened in 1856 Bracknell had two short (160ft) platforms and a small goods yard on the Up side. It was sited “conventionally”, that is at the break from a cutting into the long bank toward Wokingham. This made construction of the station and its facilities as cheap as possible at the time with minimal earthmoving, but later expansion meant the extended goods yard being built on the embankment. The station was well located to serve the small market town, and could also serve a large surrounding area with good road communications. The main traffic at that time would have been agricultural goods from the north of the line, the area to the south being heathland.

The Station Building

This was on the Up platform to be nearest to the town and beside the goods yard entrance. It was similar but not identical to, the other 4 SW&WJ station buildings, a low two storey affair with a central booking hall, and the Station Master’s accommodation above it. The roof line was low, presenting a straight appearance from the road side, but there were two end gables on the platform side providing bedrooms for the inhabitants. Two windows on the road side were larger (see drawing) and the roof was cut away for them, but this may be a later alteration. A distinctive feature of all SW&WJ buildings was a bay window at ground level, and Bracknell had one protruding onto the platform, but it was removed circa 1938.

The SW&WJ station buildings were rather plain brick affairs (Bracknell, Ascot, Sunningdale in local red bricks, Egham and Virginia Water a grey/green brick) and were not repeated elsewhere on the L&SW. They may have proved too cramped a design and too expensive for general use at country stations. After 25-30 years it became necessary to extend the building at Bracknell, but fortunately rebuilding was not required.



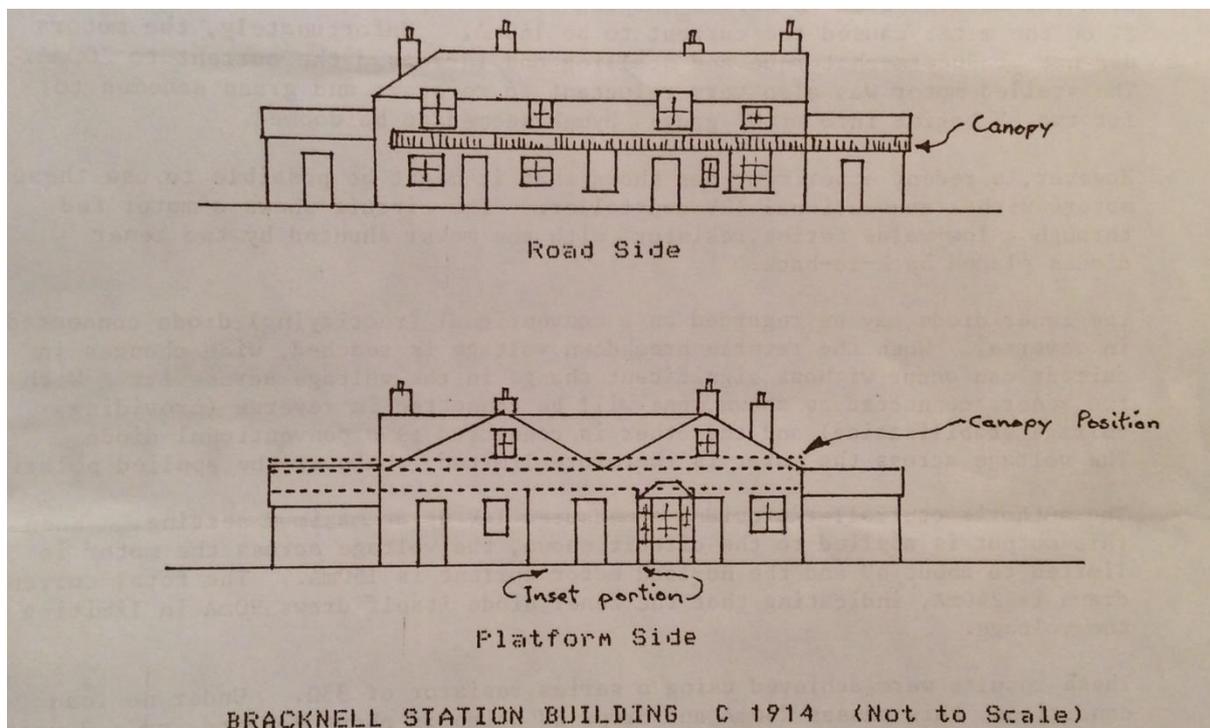
Part 2 (August 1986)

Continuing this interesting history, we pick up the story concerning the buildings at the time of the first alterations.

Passenger traffic expanded steadily from Bracknell after the 1870s, as more wealthy residents set up country houses in the area and the little town prospered. Some commuter traffic to London and Reading must have begun at around this time. To cater for this, a new 'V' shaped canopy, a standard L&SW design, was erected on the platform side in about 1885, and new parcels/luggage offices were built at the west end, being a single storey gabled extension. The first floor was also extended to provide more room for the Station Master, an end gabled section being added to the west end, and this destroyed the symmetrical appearance of the building. Ascot was dealt with in the same way, but at the opposite end. The new canopy extended as far as the signal box, behind which a new gents lavatory block with prominent wooden clerestorey ventilator was provided. A Separate brick staff hut was built at the east end of the building, and between this and the approach road was a small and sloping Stationmaster's garden. The roadside canopy was also added at about this time. It was a simple "half-V" type which extended the full length of the building, but offered little protection from the elements, being so narrow. It originally had ornate valancing but this was removed by the Southern Railway. A similar canopy survived at Ascot until 1985.

After 1890 there were few major changes. In 1938 the SR carried out some improvements in preparation for electrification; the doors and windows on the platform side were altered including the removal of the bay window. The platform canopy was replaced by an SR pattern flat roofed, steel and glass awning, angled at about 10 degrees from the building, and of the same length as the original.

There were no subsequent changes and the station building closed in September 1974, demolition starting on the 27th and being completed a few days later, the whole platform being cleared.



Down Platform Building

For the opening in 1856 a small open fronted waiting shelter was provided on the Down platform. No details are known but similar types of shelters existed at Egham, Virginia Water and Sunningdale until circa 1890. Passengers reached it by foot crossings at the platform ends or by a footpath which ran down the side of the cutting from the Bagshot Road. This path still exists although disused since 1949. The 1856 building was probably wooden with a brick base and a timber bench seat along the rear wall. Similar shelters still exist along the Portsmouth line and elsewhere, and were a standard design until around 1875.

Increasing passenger traffic to Reading led to a new structure being erected in about 1890. This was a standard "V" shaped canopy, formed of wood with short end screens on the platform, and a wooden rear wall extending the full length of the canopy. A small brick gabled waiting room was provided at the rear, set into the cutting side. Similar structures to this were provided at many stations in the 1880s. This building saw no major changes until late BR days when some valancing was removed. It was demolished in February 1976 and was replaced by the present BR structure, which at least looks like a platform canopy.

Part 3 (October 1986)

Platforms

The original platform length at SW&WJ stations was only 160 feet, at Bracknell both extending west from the road bridge. This short length caused increasing problems as carriages and trains got longer but the SW&WJ refused to pay for improvements. Eventually, in 1876/7 the LSW did the work itself.

The Up platform could not extend west due to the trailing connections to the goods yard, so it was extended east into the cutting under the road bridge, to a length of 280 feet. There are narrow clearances under the old bridge to this day. The Down platform was extended to the west to a length of 260 feet, but why it was made shorter is unknown. The result was that the platforms were slightly staggered. Both were brick faced and until SR days had gravel surfaces away from the buildings. They were linked by a barrow-way at the west end of the Down platform, a board walk connecting it to the end of the Up platform. There was also a foot board crossing sited between the buildings.

Platform Raising

As opened in 1856, Bracknell station would have had the usual very low platforms of this period, only about 1ft 9ins above rail level. From 1878 the L&SW began raising platforms to a standard 2ft 6ins height, and Bracknell's were dealt with in @1880 along with several other developments.

Platform raising was expensive; in some cases whole buildings were physically lifted, or steps or ramps linked offices to the platform. Numerous structural changes were often needed to station buildings, and this was the course chosen at Bracknell.

The raised platforms were completely refaced and no trace of the original height remains. The Up platform was raised by 9ins – 1ft and so the windows on the platform side were lower than those facing the road. Ascot was dealt with similarly and shows this feature well. The floors in offices must have been raised, causing internal changes, and doorways may have been heightened, but I have no clear photos to prove this. No changes were needed to the Down platform building which was a later addition.

Part 4 (December 1986)

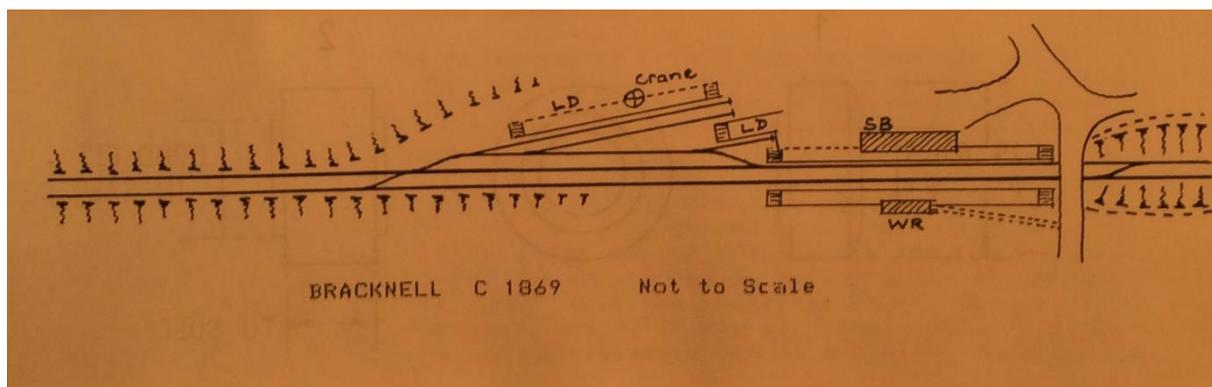
Footbridges

No footbridge existed originally, but one was provided in 1890 to cater for the increased passenger traffic. It was sited beside the road bridge and was a standard wooden lattice structure, several of this pattern being built between 1890 and 1903. It only linked the platforms, and had wooden boarding behind the crossbracing on the passageway and stairways. It also had a rounded, corrugated iron roof, open at the sides.

These timber bridges decayed badly and none survived into recent years. Bracknell's was replaced in 1949 by a standard SR concrete bridge on the same site, which also had a footway linking it to the Bagshot Road entrance, replacing the path to the down platform. A retrograde step, though, was the lack of a roof on the new bridge! The Bagained in use until about 1970 when it was closed and blocked off.

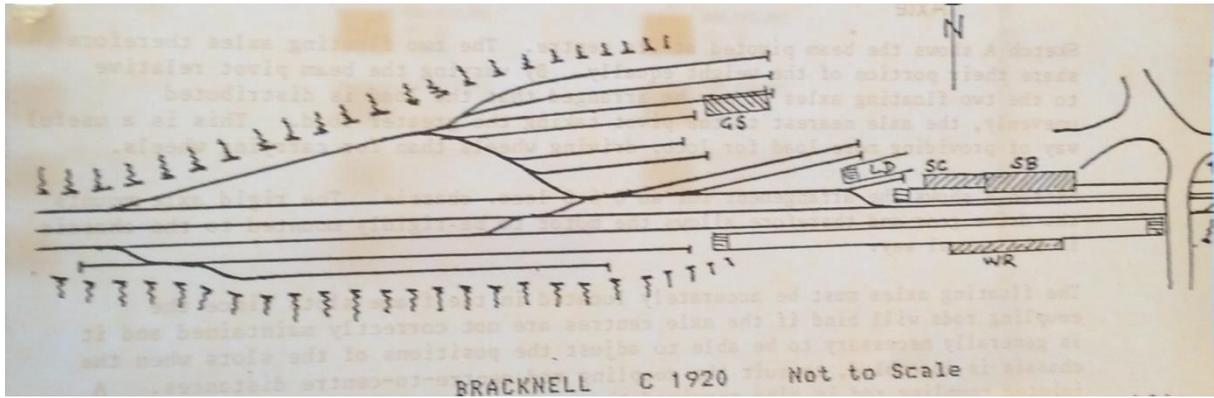
The Goods Yard

The plans shew the growth of the yard layout in the 19th Century. As opened the yard had two long sidings and a loop siding, from which a short spur ran to an end loading dock behind the future site of the signal box. There was a long loading bank with a crane alongside the northernmost siding. No headshunt was provided and there were no Down sidings at all.



These facilities reflect the heavy agricultural traffic at this station. Bracknell Cattle Market (near the Old Manor) was set up in 1870, animals being driven down Church Road (try doing that today!) to the station. Brickmaking began in the area in 1860, a heavy traffic which required loading banks to be handled easily.

Around 1880 the goods yard was greatly extended to the west, to assume the layout shewn in the 1920 plan, this trackplan remaining almost static until closure. Six new sidings and a long headshunt were added, the embankment having to be considerably widened to achieve this. The original sidings and docks were unaltered, and a large wooden goods shed, as well as extensive coal pens, were provided on the new sidings. The rebuilt yard was commodious and was the largest between Feltham and Reading. Two long Down sidings were added in the 1890s to hold trains awaiting their turn to enter Reading yards.



The layout altered little after 1900, until the station closed to public goods traffic in 1968. Stone traffic for the M3 motorway until 1972. The Down sidings were lifted in 1970 and the Up yard followed in 1972.

Part 5 (February 1987)

The Goods Yard

A large wooden goods shed was built with the enlarged goods yard in @1880; prior to this, no shed was provided. A siding ran through one side of the building and inside was a loading platform with a 30cwt crane. There were two roadside loading doors, protected by small canopies. I have little other information on the story of this shed but a very similar structure still stands today at Staines; wooden sheds of this type were not common on the L&SW. It appears that few alterations were made and the shed was demolished in 21st April 1969.

The other facilities in the goods yard were well laid out and remained in use until closure. There was a long loading bank beside one of the original sidings on which was a 7ton 10cwt crane and a rather small cattle dock. It seems that most animals were driven direct from the market to the train and vice versa. Old photographs show horseboxes alongside the shorter loading dock behind the signal box, where they could be easily coupled to passing passenger trains. A 10ton cart eighbridge was sited at the station entrance, gates closing the goods yard from the public access road. There were sundry huts, including a concrete SR cycle shed, beside the weighbridge, and in the yard itself were two small coal offices. Finally there was a small wooden taxi office beside the yard entrance. All these structures were removed between 1969 and 1974, with the single exception of a wooden permanent way hut at the west end of the Up yard. This was the only pw hut at Bracknell station and it is the only L&SW building to survive today.

Signalling

Little is known about the early signalling here, but there was no block working, and no signal box was provided. An 1869 OS map shews signal posts on the Up line – an advanced home by bridge No.31, a starting signal at the platform end and an outer starting signal at bridge No.29 (Larges Lane). There may have been Down line signals but there is no record of them.

In about 1875 the block signalling system was installed and a signal box was erected on the Up platform at the west end of the station building. The box was a standard L&SW wooden building with a Stevens lever frame and a hipped roof. This was similar to numerous other boxes on the L&SW, of the 1865-1877 period. The lower storey was the frame room, with cross-braced wooden frameworks on each wall. These were planked over in SR days to eliminate draughts and damp. The upper floor was glazed on three sides; the roof was wooden with felt covering. A tall stovepipe ventilator was at the rear. There was a large cutaway under the platform in front of the box to cater for the point and signal rodding. Bracknell signal box closed in 1874 when the Feltham panel took over signalling in the area.

The Down sidings were controlled by an L&SW wooden “lean-to” type covered ground frame beside the connection to the main line. This was built in @1890 and closed in 1970 when the sidings went out of use.

Manor siding, on the west side of bridge No.31, was controlled by Manor Siding Signal Box on the Down side of the line. This was only 722 yards from Bracknell box and appears to have been a temporary block post in 1934. However, little is known of its use and I have no information on its appearance. It opened in 1899 and closed in 1955, and apart from the siding it also controlled a crossover. All that remain are four concrete pillars on the side of the embankment.

In later years the running line signals at Bracknell were all SR upper quadrants on L&SW pattern lattice posts and with only the double track main line to control there were no surprises. Earlier

signals would have been lower quadrant L&SW types and would have had timber posts. All manual signalling was removed in 1974.

By 1900 there were three main line crossovers; in 1934 one was removed and the trailing connection from the Down line to the Up yard made into a single slip. Manor siding crossover went in 1955, and the slip connection in 1972. The crossover at the east end, beyond bridge No.30, was re-sited in 1936 and closed but not removed in 1974. However it was again re-sited in 1976 and remains for emergencies today.

Brickworks Sidings

There were two private sidings which both served nearby brickworks. Manor Siding, just west of bridge No.31 on the Up side, opened in 1899 and closed in 1945. It served Downmill Brickworks and was operated by a shunting movement from Bracknell yard. The siding fell steeply beside the embankment and this incline can still be seen today.

The other siding ran to Easthampstead brickworks and opened in @1895. It left the Up yard headshunt and fell steeply to the works on the far side of Skimped Hill lane. It seems to have had a short career and was out of use by 1910, but the earthworks remained until @1950.

Bridges

Three brick road bridges come within the scope of this survey; bridges on the SW&WJ were numbered from Staines and these were Nos 29-31. No 29 spanned the cutting east of the station and was for Larges Lane. This attractive 3-arch red brick bridge is little altered today <although closed to vehicular traffic. – Ed> The unstable nature of the sandy soil in this area is the reason for the sturdy 3-arch design.

No 30 was for Bagshot Road at the station. It also survives, a 3-arch red-brick structure although more “square” in appearance than No 29. Each pier was pierced by three small arches and in 1974 the parapets were replaced with concrete. In late L&SW or SR days a steel girder footway was added on the west side to segregate pedestrians from the road, and this remained until 1976. <The bridge is now part of the footpath/cycletrack system, being replaced for vehicular use by the two bridges on the roundabout. – Ed>

No 31 crossed Easthampstead Road at Manor Siding but did not remain in L&SW condition. In @1958 a roundabout was built here with two steel girder bridges which survive today. The L&SW bridge was a graceful high red-brick single arch, of the same design as the surviving No 20 (just east of Ascot station). <I believe the original bridge to still remain although buried in the embankment between the two steel bridges. I think that only the parapets were demolished. -Ed>

The “Station Hotel” stood opposite the main building, but had no “official” Connection with the railway. It began as the “Railway Hotel” and became the “Market Inn” in 1957.

Modern Developments

Bracknell changed little until the 1970s when a transformation took place. The sidings were lifted in 1972 and in 1974 the Up platform was cleared, a new office block cum station building arising in its place. The Up platform was extended to the west at the same time, making it much longer than the Down side, the western ramps now being parallel. The new building opened in June 1976 but there was no platform waiting room until the present narrow affair was added in February 1981. The goods yard became a car park although the far western end remains derelict. <and another office block has been built on part of it – Ed>

During the work to the Up platform in 1975, the re-surfacing raised the height again by three inches on top of the old platform. While the rebuilding was in progress, a temporary wooden platform was provided on the site of the goods yard, linked to the Down platform by a temporary footbridge. This operated from September 1974 to June 1976. Although a modern shelter has been provided on the Down side, the platform otherwise remains virtually untouched and is still at its L&SW height.

Anyone seeking further discussion on platform raising should consult the author (or the Treasurer for GWR practice).

I would be interested to hear if anyone has material relating to Bracknell station, particularly in pre-grouping days.

<That concludes Mick's article – bibliography and references will appear in the next issue – Ed>

Tailpiece

Bibliography

Little has been published on Bracknell station and I know of only three pre-1923 photographs.

Track Plans

OPC/BR Collection. 52 C/5 1938 40ft:1inch plan.

OS 1869/1871 6inch/1 mile map (Bracknell Library).

Track plans of the SR (RA Cooke) part 8 "Windsor Lines" (1900 plan).

References

"Bygone Bracknell" C Hickson (Phillimore)

"Brickmaking – a local history" M Dumbleton (Bracknell & District Historical Society).

"The L&SWR and Brickworks in Berkshire" M Hutson (South Western Circular – January 1983)

SR Western Section Working TT Appendix, 1934. (Reprinted by Bradford Barton)

"Railway Stations – Southern Region" M Wikely & J Middleton (Peco Publications)

As I stated before I would be interested to hear if anyone has material relating to Bracknell station, particularly in pre-grouping days.

<Incidentally, I have established that the old bridge between the Twin Bridges does still exist as I suspected. I am informed that it was last noted when the subway was being constructed and they discovered the foundations! The subway had to be suitably reinforced to take account of this. – Ed.>

With reference to the Editor's comments about this bridge, how about:-

Bridge 31 Restoration Group.

Help us to restore this fine example of a London & South Western Railway bridge, buried in the embankment of Twin Bridges Roundabout, Bracknell, for 30 years! With your help we can restore it to its former glory! Meet at Twin Bridges Roundabout, 1st April next, at midnight. Bring torches, spades, wheelbarrows & balaclava helmets. Progress review meetings will be held soon afterwards in Bracknell Police Station, and later in the Magistrates Court! The loan of a JCB would be very welcome!

Contact Mick Hutson.