

London Road – Our Station

London Road Station is very much a part of the local community, and the railway is appreciated, not just for its transport role, but as a “green corridor” that interrupts the urban sprawl – however briefly – and provides a haven for foxes, squirrels and birds.

The station is loved by all – both recent arrivals and “old hands”. Some have lived here for several decades, and have seen many changes, even in a part of the environment which by its very nature is unchanging – the “Permanent Way”. Veronica Smith, who has lived in Springfield Road all her life, remembers when the Station Master lived in a house on the Springfield Road side of the station, where the scaffold yard is now. As a little girl in the 1950s, Veronica played with the Station Master’s daughter, Margaret Davis, in her garden adjacent to the house. All of this was swept away when the house was demolished in the early 1990s, the site becoming a station forecourt before it was sold off in the aftermath of privatisation. Veronica also remembers that there were canopies over both platforms, which can be seen in old photographs but are long gone now.



At around the same time, Jeff Bradley would walk to the Downs Primary School in Rugby Road (this was housed in the current Downs Junior building, before separation into infant and junior with the building of the new infants’ school) from his home at the bottom of Ditchling Rise. This involved going over the footbridge at the station, and Jeff remembers seeing one of the railwaymen tending the allotment behind the Open House pub (which in those days was the Springfield Hotel). On his way home he would often see the same railwayman lighting the gas lamps on the platforms, and was sometimes allowed to help with this, by pulling the chain to turn on the gas. He was rewarded for this work by being given produce from the allotment.

Phyllis Smith’s memories go back to the Second World War. She lived in the upper part of No. 6 Shaftesbury Place, and recalls that she and her brother would go up in the attic to watch as the German bombers came over, and they could see the bombs dropping. There was an ‘Ak Ak’ post set up on Viaduct road to track the enemy. Her family had moved there from Springfield Road, carrying their possessions over the footbridge. (This was seen, in those days, as a “downmarket” move – she says the residents of Springfield looked down on those on the other side of the tracks!)



Phyllis outside her house (in the north-west corner of Shaftesbury Place) with her husband, Alec (left) and a friend, Gordon (right) setting off for Land’s End on a camping trip in 1952

Jean Calder lived in Vere Road in 1975, and used the station to get to and from the University of Sussex. At that time the canopies were still there, and were very much appreciated by passengers waiting on the platform, as they provided the only protection from rain. “They were allowed to go to rack and ruin”, she says – then they were removed without any warning, and passengers were exposed to the elements. Jim Grozier, a Springfield Road resident who used to work on the railways, remembers the orgy of destruction carried out by the BR civil engineers in the 1980s. “They wanted to demolish station structures in order to reduce their maintenance costs”, he said; there was little thought for passengers’ comfort. At around the same time, the station toilets closed too; the gents’ toilet now appears to function as a store room, and the rooms which formerly housed the ladies’ toilet and ladies’ waiting room are used by Brighton Model Railway Club.

During Jean’s time as a commuter to the university, she also remembers the end of routine ticket checking: “I remember when it started to happen, that you could just walk through, and walk out”. The side entrance to the westbound platform at the Brighton end was kept locked in those days, and the entrance by the footbridge did not exist until the footbridge was renewed in 2001; so the only way in or out was through the ticket hall. (There was a period when one had to go this way even when accessing the eastbound platform, when the entrance on that side closed due to staff cuts).

The railway has not always been uncritically appreciated locally, however. Veronica’s mother would complain that the soot from the steam engines blackened her washing. (The line through London road was electrified in 1935, but some of the branch lines beyond Lewes were still served by steam even 20 years later). But the children liked the steam trains at any rate. Engine drivers were under instruction to “put the steam down” if they

saw anyone on the footbridge as they approached it; but Veronica and her friends would crouch behind the parapet so as not to be seen, only jumping up at the last minute, to be engulfed in mist. Jeff also remembers doing this, and going home with a sooty face. The steam trains probably disappeared after the branch lines were closed in the 1960s.



In more recent times, locals were up in arms after a change of rolling stock meant much louder horns, which train drivers were obliged to sound before entering the tunnel, disturbing local residents.

“What tunnel?” you may ask. Well, at 66 yards, Ditchling Road Tunnel is too long to be classified as a bridge, so a tunnel it was, and the horns must be sounded – even though drivers can see right through it. But, as Maggie Grimsdell of Springfield Road recalls, a group of locals protested, and managed to persuade the railways to reclassify the tunnel.

There have also been several stand-offs between local people and the railway authorities concerning the cutting down of trees; in 1993 a radical tree-cutting programme at the Ditchling Road end was under way when some local residents protested and wrote to the local paper. Amazingly they were able to broker a deal with the workmen, who left some of the trees in place.



A letter in the local press protesting about the 1993 tree felling

This conflict is ongoing; understandably the railway companies want to minimise leaf fall and must, in any case, keep the trees under control; but local residents have a role to play in making sure this is done sensitively and proportionately, and in such a way that wildlife is not endangered.

One fondly remembered part-time resident was Somersby, the “station cat”. He was a large tabby. He did not actually live on the station – he had human servants living somewhere nearby – but would often come and sit on the laps of waiting passengers in the early 1990s. Then he suddenly disappeared – perhaps his human servants moved elsewhere. Sadly, there are no photographs of him that we are aware of, but he lives on in our memories.

If London Road Station is a part of the local community, then Nick Horn is its human embodiment. He has worked in the ticket office for nearly 25 years, and has seen many changes. In the early 1990s, as now, only the ticket office was staffed – there were no longer any platform staff, as there had been in earlier times – but at least it was open all day, and there were two shifts – from 6.00 am to 2.00 pm, and 2.00 to 10.00 pm. There was also a Chief Clerk who travelled up and down the line collecting the takings – but that job is done by security contractors now. Jean Calder recalls that cutting back on station staff and opening hours made her feel very insecure as a young woman travelling alone. To make things worse, “the lighting was very poor, and so it was very dark”.

When Nick started working at the station, he was the only point of contact for train information – there were no electronic indicators as there are now. Also all the ticket sales were done in the ticket office – no machines on the platforms – and the ticket window was much smaller. He would sometimes see old Reg, a retired railwayman, working the allotment, although later in the 1990s the plot was allowed to grow wild, as Reg was reportedly too unwell to work on it.



When attempts were made in the late 1990s to get permission to build on the old allotments, they were strenuously opposed by local people, who formed a pressure group called the Friends of London Road Station. As well as fighting off the first planning application, the group also campaigned for the Springfield Road entrance to be re-opened; it had been closed several years earlier when British Rail decided to clamp down on fare-dodging, so that in order to access the eastbound platform one had to go over the bridge and then back via the subway – impossible for anyone with mobility problems. The replacement of the footbridge in 2001 provided an opportunity for this wish to be granted too. The protests continue – the picture shows a demonstration against another planning application in 2008.