

Charfield Station

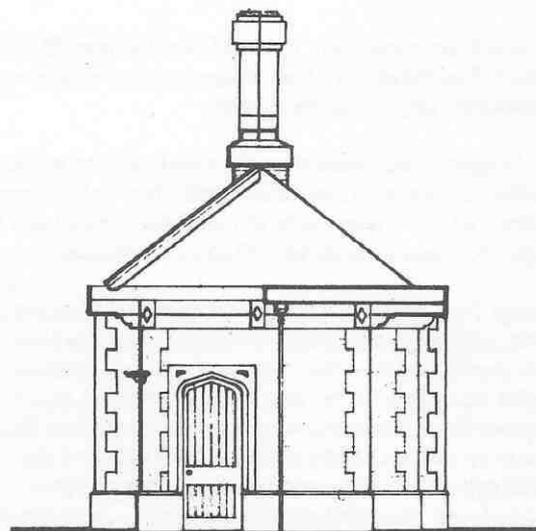
Will Harris

The Act authorising construction of the Bristol and Gloucester Railway received Royal Assent on July 1st, 1839. Construction started in 1841, the engineer being I K Brunel, and the line ran from Cuckolds Pill (now Avon Street Wharf) on the Floating Harbour to a junction at Stonehouse with the Cheltenham and Great Western Union Railway. The railway absorbed the Bristol and Gloucestershire Railway, and made use of its alignment between Mangotsfield and the Pill, and a connecting line into Temple Meads was added in 1843. When opened on July 6th, 1844, the Bristol and Gloucester completed the through rail route between Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Exeter, and though originally designed as a standard gauge line, it was altered to broad gauge before completion.

Agreement was reached on January 14th, 1844, on the terms of a merger between the Bristol and Gloucester and the Birmingham and Gloucester railways, leading the Great Western to suggest an extension of the broad gauge to Birmingham, followed by a proposal to amalgamate the Bristol and Birmingham and the Great Western. However, in a major strategic error, the Great Western allowed itself to be outbid by the Midland Railway, and control passed to the latter company. This extension of the Midland Railway to Bristol had important implications for the railway network in the area - the Somerset and Dorset Railway and the Midland and South Western Junction Railway (Cheltenham - Andover) were allowed to come into existence, difficulties were experienced with the Great Western's Birmingham to Cardiff services and eventually the Great Western built its own direct line between Cheltenham and Birmingham in 1908. Most of these anomalies have been rationalised since the formation of British Railways.

Of the seven stations on the Bristol to Gloucester line, Wickwar has been completely demolished, whilst at Frocester, Berkeley Road and Mangotsfield only the station masters' houses remain in ashlar, brick and pennant sandstone respectively. Stonehouse, in ashlar, and Yate and Charfield in red brick with ashlar dressing are largely complete. Goods services were withdrawn from Charfield in October, 1964, and passenger services a few months later in January, 1965, though increasing development in the area has led some local residents to press for a re-introduction of the latter.

At Charfield, which cost £1,428 to construct, there remain the main station block, an adjacent lavatory block, the station master's house (in ashlar), a water tank on a brick plinth and the road bridge. The water tank, originally fed by gravity from Wickwar Tunnel, may possibly be of later date than the other buildings, but is a distinctive and unusual feature within the group. The road bridge was repaired after the accident of October 13th, 1928, with little sensitivity, using blue bricks and concrete coping blocks. An attractive line of trees and a wrought iron fence

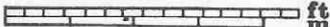


CHARFIELD STATION
Gloucestershire

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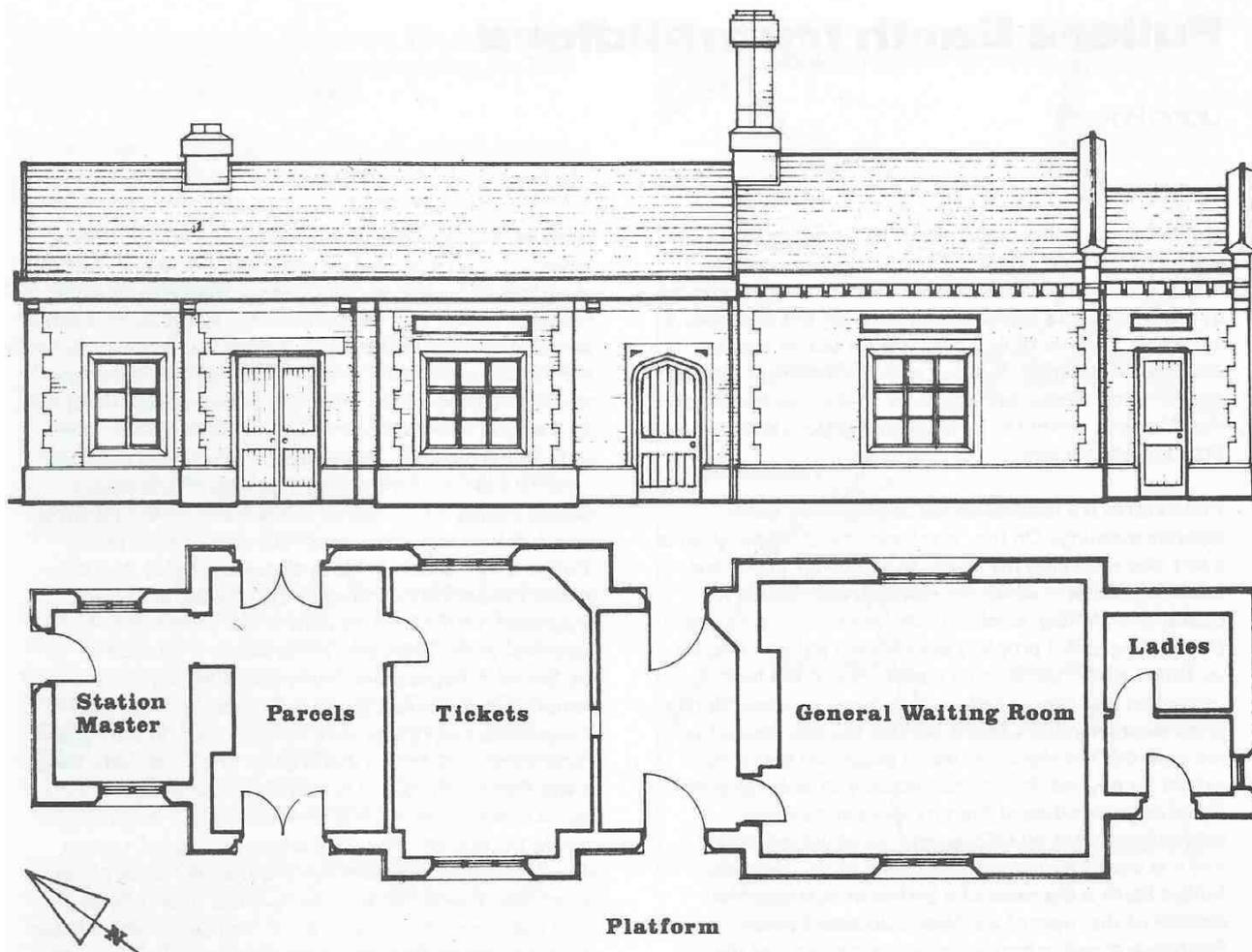
Survey 24 September 1977

Will Harris
Martin Watts
Roger Wilkes

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border the station approach, and two different types of Midland Railway wooden fencing survive in places around the perimeter: there is a stone-built coal wharf to the south of the station. Two platform seats were removed by one of the station staff and installed on the village playing field where they remain. What has been lost is the shelter and platform on the up side, the canopy from the station building and the platform edge on the down side. The signal box, of a later Midland design, was removed by the Dean Forest Preservation Society and re-erected at Parkend. A market was opened adjacent to the station, but nothing now remains of it. North of the refuge sidings, the line is carried across the valley of the Little Avon on a substantial embankment 750 metres long and 13 metres high. The line curves as it passes through the station, presumably to achieve the correct alignment for this embankment. The station complex forms a distinctive and conspicuous feature of the village of Charfield.

The station building was surveyed by the BIAS Survey Unit on 24th September 1977 and, like the other buildings in the complex, appeared at the time to be structurally sound. However, subsequent inspections by British Rail suggest that the building may need extensive repairs. Decay has occurred where the canopy was removed because successive cuts in their budget prevented British Rail from carrying out the necessary maintenance. If the prediction is correct, there must be grave doubts as to whether British Rail can justify the expense of repairing the building from the resources currently made available to the Board by the Department of Transport. The British Rail Board argues that



the Department, and its predecessors, have successively failed to provide adequate funds for the upkeep of the many hundreds of industrial monuments in the Board's possession.

The accident on 13th October, 1928 occurred when an express travelling south from Gloucester overran a signal at Huntingford and collided underneath the road bridge with a goods train that was setting back from the down line into a refuge siding, and an up train from Bristol which was also passing under the bridge at the same time. The situation was made worse by the presence of wooden carriages with gas lighting which piled up against the bridge and caught fire. Thirteen people were killed. The goods train had to set back into the siding as there were no facing points at the time: the refuge siding is still there and in use, but now trains run in at one end, proceed down to the signal and await a clear road before leaving at the other end. The Great Western Railway had installed a system of automatic train control from 1890, and only had one accident similar to the Charfield one - that at Norton Fitzwarren in 1940 - between 1890 and Nationalisation in 1948. However, this system of train control was not in use on any scale outside the Great Western until the coming of British Railways. Had the accident not occurred at 05.30, the death-roll would presumably have been higher.

The accident has acquired a macabre notoriety due to an allegation that two bodies recovered from the wreckage, but never identified, were those of children. This legend has in turn evoked further myths, such as the lady in black who visits the cemetery on the anniversary of the accident.

The truth, however, is probably more prosaic. In an article written in 1965 by the then village constable at Charfield, who deployed contemporary police analytical methods to the rumour, the only medical support available at the scene of the accident was the local GP who, at the time of writing, is still alive. It fell to him to certify the bodies which were laid out in a shed at the adjacent Railway Hotel and Tavern. Two of the bodies were so badly charred that he was unable to identify them, and no-one came forward to claim them. He did not have access to modern post mortem facilities. When questioned, he is reported to have said that 'they might have been children', given their short stature. The author of the article suggests that it is unlikely that two children would have been travelling unaccompanied at that hour of the day, and even less likely that no-one would have come forward to claim them. The common grave in St James' Churchyard lists them as two persons unknown. However, the press has seized on the remark and the legend has flourished.

I would like to express my thanks to the railway workers at Charfield, past and present, to Jenny Birkett, Avon County Conservation Officer, and to Martin Watts and Roger Wilkes of the BIAS Survey Unit for their help in the preparation of this article.

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