

TAPLOW STATION

Taplow station is a familiar place to many of us from Dorney, as our nearest railway station, with access to London and Reading and the whole railway network beyond. As it is currently undergoing major change, it seems a good time to look back at its history.

The Great Western Railway was the third major line from London to be built and was designed to link Bristol to the capital. Construction was managed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, and it took only three years before the first section of the line opened from Paddington on 4 June 1838. This terminated at the original Taplow station, then called Maidenhead station. The platforms were on the embankment just west of the bridge which carries the railway over the A4, and access to them was via stairs built into the bridge. A contemporary illustration shows two simple but stylish wooden station buildings. Eight trains each way were scheduled to run, with six on Sundays, but reliability was poor in these early days. Single fares from Paddington to Taplow ranged from 3s 6d in an open carriage to 5s 6d in a first-class coach.

The line was extended to Twyford a year later, and then in stages beyond, reaching Bristol in 1841. The station was renamed Maidenhead and Taplow in 1854. A guide to the Great Western Railway published in 1852 describes the area as “...a most beautiful district...dotted with pleasant, well-kept villas, intersected with umbrageous up and down lanes, with hedges abounding in wild-flowers.” By this time, the railway was no longer a novelty, but an accepted means of transport, and the GWR carried nearly 2 million passengers in the first half of 1852.

M Maidenhead got its own station in 1871, when the old station was renamed Taplow. A year later, that closed, and Taplow station reopened at the site we know today. The core of the present station buildings date from this time, and still display fine decorative brick and stonework. By 1900, the old station was described having been a wretched wooden shanty, of which no trace remained.

Brunel had constructed the GWR as a broad-gauge line, unlike all the other railways. Eventually this became untenable, and it was gradually converted to mixed gauge. The original two running lines also proved inadequate, and the track was progressively quadrupled, reaching Taplow in 1884. A covered footbridge was installed to connect all four platforms. This was a very attractive structure, with ornate iron lattice work and wooden valance, noted in the National Trust Book of Bridges (1984) as exceptionally elegant.

The station environment was further enhanced by circular flower beds on the central platform. A photograph taken in 1913 shows a mature tree growing in one of these, so they must have been in existence for some time before that.

In 1900, the Railway Magazine wrote that “*Probably no place in England has, in proportion to its population, a handsomer station or a better supply of trains than Taplow*”. It went on to note the convenience of the station to nearby great houses such as Cliveden, and the somewhat surprising inclusion in the timetable of several fast services to Paddington, direct or with only one stop. A non-stop train, in these days of steam, took only half an hour to run from Taplow to the London terminus. This good level of service, remnants of which still existed in the 1980s, was said to be because some senior GWR directors/shareholders lived nearby, and Taplow was their local station. Slip coaches were also used; passengers for London would board the slip coach, left in a siding, which was then picked up by the express train as it ran through, and would be dropped off on the return journey.

Recollections by Rodney Pain, whose family lived at Ye Meads, describe the station in the 1920s, with the “*pretty wooden bridge*” between the platforms and “*the crowd of business types with their bowler hats, tightly rolled brollies, and Daily Mails*”.

As well as passenger services, Taplow station handled goods in the area east of Station Road. North of the main lines, there were cattle pens, and a siding ran down into the land where flats and houses have recently been built. In the 1930s, there was a link across Institute Road towards a sand and gravel pit served by a separate internal rail network. South of the railway were more sidings and a goods shed. Michael Twist, whose family farmed on the Burnham Estate, recalled sending sheep to the Royal Show in Newcastle via Taplow station, in a specially constructed horse-drawn sheep van loaded onto a flat railway truck. On another occasion, they received a calf there, brought in the guard's van of a passenger train.

Over the years since its Victorian heyday, Taplow station has seen many changes. During the Second World War, it was used to offload tanks destined for storage at Slough Trading Estate, while there was a large barbed wire dump by the northern siding. Two signal boxes, one on top of the footbridge, were replaced by a single one in 1930, which finally closed in 1974. The building on platform one which had housed a ticket office and waiting room was demolished, and the ornate lanterns which used to hang from the footbridge were removed. Steam trains were replaced by diesel in the mid-1960s.

The goods shed closed in the 1960s, and from 1966 to 1967 was home to locomotives acquired by the Great Western Society, before they moved to their current base at Didcot. The goods shed was then demolished, but lives on in a kit model produced for railway modellers.

A major refurbishment took place in 2006, in preparation for the World Rowing Championships at Dorney Lake. At a cost of £250k, work included renovation of the footbridge and renewal of the circular flower beds. The Taplow Rail Users Group was active at this time and took over the disused waiting room in the main station building, where historical material was collected and occasionally displayed. This group merged in 2013 with the Marlow-Maidenhead Passengers Association.

And so we come to the present day, with 281,000 passengers using the station in 2017/8. The landscape of Taplow station has been forever altered by the installation of tall gantries carrying the electric lines to power a new era of rolling stock. Operation of the station itself has been taken over by TfL (Transport for London) as a first step towards the eventual rollout of Crossrail. When complete, the new Elizabeth Line will link Taplow with Abbey Wood and Shenfield via the West End, the City and Docklands. It may also give us up to four trains an hour each way and a train service on Sundays. TfL is currently refurbishing the two waiting rooms, including the one on platform 3 which I don't recall ever seeing open. The station retains some attractive Victorian features, including an operational post box in the wall on platform 4.

Sadly, it is too late to save the old footbridge. Despite assurances that this bridge would be retained after Crossrail, its life came to an ignoble end after it was damaged by contractors in 2015. It was dismantled and has subsequently disappeared, last seen in a scrap yard in Hayes. A new footbridge, complete with lifts providing step free access, is now under construction while passengers currently use the second of two temporary bridges. Some of the flower beds remain, but there has been significant damage during the construction work.

We will no doubt gain a fast and hopefully efficient service to and across London, but it seems unlikely that a future commentator will describe Taplow station as handsome.

Virginia Silvester