

Gosport's Most Private Station

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The Borough of Gosport had at one time eight or nine passenger railway stations within its boundaries. Whether the total is eight or nine depends on whether or not a most private station is included, for the Royal Victoria Station was quite definitely not open to the public. Most of it has now followed the way most Gosport stations have gone, for only a small token fragment has been preserved. However, it was in many ways a unique establishment, and one of the most interesting features of Victorian Gosport.

To place it in historical and geographical perspective, it is necessary to outline the railway history of Gosport. It is a well known fact that the railway reached Gosport in 1841, six years before the first station was opened in Portsmouth. A branch of the Southampton line was opened, with



intermediate stations at Botley and Fareham and an impressive terminus in Spring Gardens, Gosport. It stopped at this point, as further progress was barred by the inner fortifications. Despite limitations on height - the enabling Act of Parliament specified that it was not to be higher than the local Commanding Royal Engineer permitted - Gosport Station was a remarkably fine building. It has recently been described as 'one of the finest pieces of external station architecture surviving from the beginning of the railway age'. Even in its present degraded condition, it remains the object of visits from all parts of the country, and also attracts visitors from overseas. However, it is not the subject of the present paper, beyond noting that its position, cut off from the waterfront by the fortifications, was the main reason for the opening of the private station in the Clarence Yard.

The next major railway development in Gosport was the opening of the Stokes Bay line in 1863. This branched off from the main line about quarter of a mile short of its terminal and ran down to a pier at Stokes Bay. Its main function was to take passengers for the Isle of Wight direct to connecting steamers, but an intermediate station was opened at Stoke Road for the benefit of the town. (It was re-named Gosport Road in 1866). Gosport's fourth station was opened at Brockhurst in 1865 at a point where the existing line crossed the new Military Road. Its association with the Victorian defences was stressed in 1893 when, to

avoid confusion with Brockenhurst, it was re-named Fort Brockhurst. The next three stations came into use in 1894 when the independent Lee-on-the-Solent Railway was opened from a separate platform at Fort Brockhurst to its terminus near the pier at Lee-on-the-Solent. (The station building still survives). There were intermediate stations at Privett (re-named Fort Gomer in 1904) and Browndown. The grand total of eight stations, was reached in 1910 when another wayside station was opened on the Lee-on-the-Solent branch at Elmore. This was the climax of railway development in Gosport and, with the First World War, the decline began.

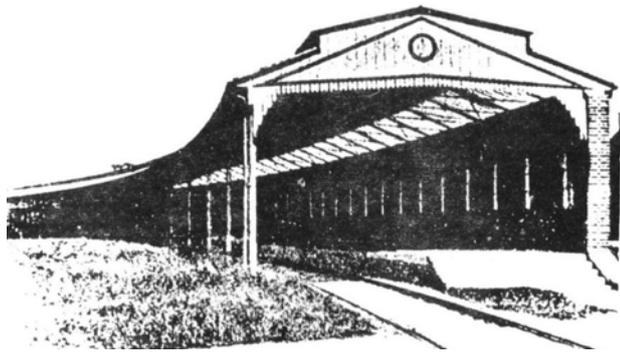
The first casualty was the Stokes Bay branch, closed to public traffic in 1915. The Lee-on-the-Solent line was closed to passengers at the end of 1930 although it remained in use for goods traffic until 1935. In March 1934, the 'main line' from Fareham to Gosport was converted to a single line branch, although two tracks were retained through Fort Brockhurst Station for trains to pass. There were no further abandonments until after the war, but Gosport Station suffered air raid damage. Even under the pressure of wartime overcrowding, most passengers preferred to use the electric train service from Portsmouth, and it was no surprise when, in 1953, the Gosport line was closed to passengers. After this, first the engine shed was closed, then the signal boxes until, finally, in 1969, the whole railway was abandoned south of the Admiralty siding at Bedenham.



The Royal Victoria Station does not fit neatly into Gosport's railway history because it was never opened or closed to the public. In 1845, the Queen and the Prince Consort purchased Osborne House on the Isle of Wight and started a major rebuilding programme. It was clear to Prince Albert that a simple extension of the down line across the road and through the fortifications into the Royal Clarence Yard would greatly facilitate the royal journeys to the Island. In view of the tremendous debate about impairing the strength of the fortifications, the facility with which this 600 yard extension was constructed is a striking testimony to the potency of royal influence. It is, of course, necessary to stress that the extension was constructed for the Admiralty, and was not a public railway. The Appendix to the Working Time Table of the Southern Railway for 1934 describes the way in which, when goods traffic was

to be run into the yard ... 'a telephone or written advice must be sent by the Station Master at Gosport to the Superintendent of the Royal Clarence Yard, in order that arrangements may be made for the Clarence Yard gates to be opened'. The extension was opened in September 1845, but this was not the end.

In the yard was constructed what must have been the least used station in the country. The Royal Victoria Station was for the exclusive use of the Royal Family on their journeys to and from Osborne. (The name 'Royal Victoria Station' appears on the very long brass label which is attached to the key of the building). There was no question of skimping although, as the Queen's train became longer over the years, the side platform of 520 feet was not always long enough to receive it. A curtain wall ran along the back of the



platform with generous lighting achieved by numerous round headed windows with iron glazing bars incorporating royal coronets. Protection from weather was ensured by an overall roof, supported by iron columns on the side opposite to the curtain wall. The royal saloons were always in the centre of the train, but the royal waiting room was nearer to the north end of the station, as near as possible to the pier. On the occasion of my last visit, the Royal Victoria Station was in use as a store. The single track had been removed and a floor inserted level with the platform. The gaps between the columns opposite the curtain wall had been filled in and doors added at the end. The waiting rooms, which projected outside the wall, had been knocked down. Regret-ably, many of the iron coronets were missing from the window frames. In 1971, with the exception of a short length of the curtain wall, the Royal Victoria Station was demolished. With the closure of the Gosport branch, Clarence Yard is now cut off from the railway system, and an inexplicable legend has grown up in Gosport that the Queen used Stokes Bay Pier. While this is not impossible, I have failed to find any evidence that she, as opposed to her luggage, ever did so. On the other hand, there are numerous records of her using the station in Clarence Yard. The Royal train was usually provided by the London and North Western Company and, on eighteen occasions from 1873 to 1894, G. P. Neele, their Superintendent of the Line, came down to Gosport to supervise operations. He wrote, rather scathingly ... 'I never saw Mr. Archibald Scott, the General Manager of the L.S.W.R. in attendance to receive Her Majesty; the duty was apparently delegated to the Superintendent of the Line'. Mr. Neele wrote about the arrangements at Gosport in the Railway Magazine for

December 1906 'The arrangements for the reception of Her Majesty at Gosport were, in a marked degree, different from those at any other of the stations from which the Queen was accustomed to travel; here there were no excited crowds of patriotic citizens or gazing rustics to be kept at a respectful distance, entailing special precautions to maintain a cordon of clear space; here there were no gradual arrivals of the household servants through the entrance gates and along the roadway adjoining the platform to take, their allotted compartments, no equipages conveying the Court suite in graduated order of precedence to their appointed carriages on the train, no clatter of equerries' horses accompanying the Royal chariot, no National Anthem, no guard of honour, no display of police protection'. In fact, arrival and departure from Gosport was comparatively informal. First, the empty train was backed in, with the carriages conforming to a diagram approved by the Queen's private secretary. Alderman Rogers of Gosport has been kind enough to show me the diagram issued by the L.N.W.R. for the train leaving Gosport on Thursday, 26 August and reaching Ballater on Friday, 27 August 1880. This gives details of the thirteen vehicles actually twelve left Gosport, as the carriage truck carrying the 'Queen's fourgon' ran from Stokes Bay and was attached



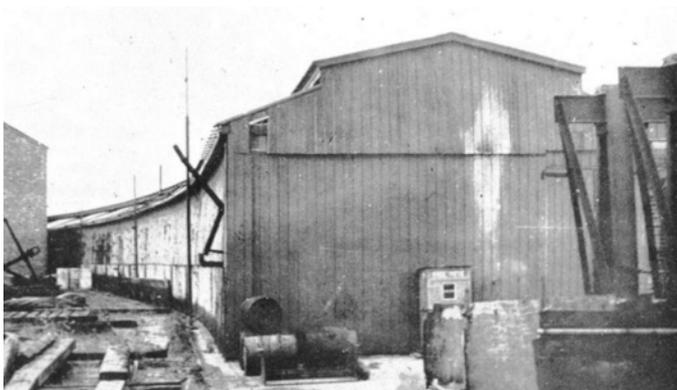
at Basingstoke. It also indicates the occupants, varying from Pages and Upper Servants in Day Saloon No. 72 to Personal Servants, including John Brown, who travelled in one of the two Royal Saloons. On this occasion, the Queen was accompanied by Princess Beatrice. But Mr. Neele described a typical rather than a particular occasion. After noting the Head Guard of the L.S.W.R., 'respondent in a scarlet and gold uniform', he described the careful approach of the royal yacht 'Alberta'. 'Her Majesty is on deck watching the progress of affairs. The household servants and the ladies' maids are the first to alight; they pass through the covered gallery and proceed along the platform to take their places, and put in order the small impedimenta with which they are entrusted, each of the carriages being distinctly marked with the names of the expected occupants, their only difficulty being that, owing to the shortness of the platform, the vehicles in front in which they travel, have each to be served by a special set of portable steps to enable the passengers to enter the doors without 'clambering up'. The sailors bring ashore some of the heavier packages from the yacht, but the bulk of the

Queen's luggage has been sent on Her Majesty's 'fourgon' by special steamer to Stokes Bay and we shall find it waiting for us at Basingstoke'.

After the Queen was on the train, came John Brown's part in the proceedings. 'The signal to start cannot be given until we have received from Her Majesty's somewhat consequential personal servant (the well-known John Brown) who travels in the special portion of the Royal Saloon allotted to the 'pages' the intimation, given in Highland brogue - 'Aw reet, aw reet' - and the railway group of officers quickly take their places in the last carriage of the train, the guard at the rear van waves his green flag, a signal which has been anxiously awaited by the front guard who now, in turn, passes it to the driver. And so we start on our journey which, for me and the rest of the staff who go through to Scotland, entails eighteen or nineteen hours of anxious watchfulness, the tension not ceasing till we reach Ballater about two o'clock in the afternoon, after completing our run of 625 miles'.

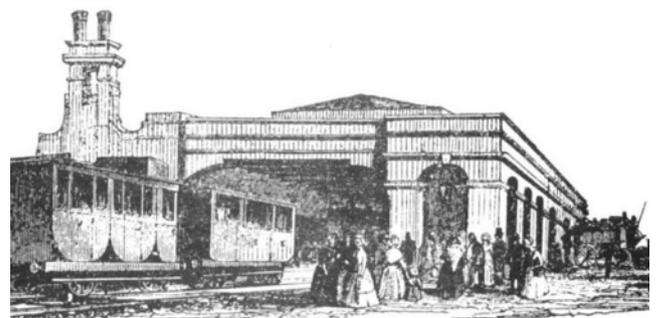
Things did not always go entirely smoothly. In 1875, the 'Alberta' hit the yacht 'Mistletoe' with three fatalities. This made the departure from Gosport 30 minutes late but, by surreptitious improvements on the scheduled speed of 38 to 40 m.p.h., right time was regained by Carlisle. In 1884 there were problems with brakes, of which there were three varieties on the coaches of the Royal train - automatic vacuum on the L.S.W. and Great Western coaches, simple vacuum on the London and North Western, and Westinghouse air brakes on the Caledonian and Great North of Scotland coaches. (Incidentally, these were the companies who owned the various sections of the route).

In 1894, the journey was arranged for 27 August, but was delayed for one day because of the Queen's health. She was 'conveyed in a small wheeled invalid chair from the steamer to the railway saloon, where the removal to the carriage was effected with some difficulty'. Neele wrote that this was the hundred and ninth occasion that he was in charge of the Royal train, and was the last journey he made from 'Clarence Yard Station, Gosport'. The Queen died at Osborne at the end of January 1901 and, on the night of February 1st, the 'Alberta' was moored off the Yard. In the morning, the new King and Queen, with the German Emperor and other members of the Royal Family went aboard for a short service. The funeral train was too long for the platform but, on this occasion, instead of providing



steps, a temporary extension of 50 feet was added to the platform. Instead of Scotland, what was, in a sense, the Queen's last train from Gosport, ran to London. The Royal Family preferred to arrive at Victoria Station and so, having been taken as far as Fareham by the L.S.W.R., at that station an L.B.S.C. locomotive came onto the other end of the train to complete the journey to London via Havant and Chichester. As the train was behind schedule, and the new King expressed a desire to reach London on time, the Queen's last journey from Gosport was also her most rapid. King Edward was not interested in Osborne, and the Royal Victoria Station fell into disuse. It is possible that it was used for occasional special trains, but I have not yet succeeded in finding any positive evidence of this.

On the other hand, I have discovered an old lady who, as a child, waited with the rest of her school at the level crossing outside Gosport station, to watch the Queen pass. On this occasion they did see her but, the following year, probably 1899, the blinds of the Royal Saloon were down.



The Royal Victoria Station symbolised many of the characteristics of Victoria's reign. First, it would hardly have been built at all but for the Queen's prejudice against Portsmouth although, for journeys to Scotland as opposed to London, Gosport was at no great disadvantage with regard to distance. Secondly, there was the quite incredible extravagance of building a station which was so little used. This reflected the Queen's desire for privacy from 'excited crowds of patriotic citizens or gazing rustics to be kept at a respectful distance' - presumably Gosport contained both. On the other hand, the only real extravagance was the station building, as the extension line also served the Clarence Yard. With its almost complete demolition, Gosport retains only one major relic of its railway history, but the station in Spring Gardens is not so much a local as a national monument.

Additional Reading:

The Hidden Railways of Portsmouth and Gosport by Dave Marsden

Rails to the Yards by Peter Keat