

Preliminary Project Plan for Renovation of Wheathampstead Railway Station Platform

Introduction

The single track railway that ran through Wheathampstead formed part of the Hatfield to Luton GNR railway and was opened on September 1st, 1860. For over 100 years it formed the lifeblood of the village bringing business and visitors and taking residents on vacation to Norfolk, London and beyond. Before the last passenger train ran on 26th April 1965, it was also a commuter route for those working in the Capital.



The Wheathampstead History Group have published “Wheathampstead Railway Recollections” which describes how the railway was integral to village life, bringing cattle and goods (including elephant dung from London Zoo to for fertilizer), laundry for washing (the air was fresher here!) and raw materials for local factories. In return, we dispatched salad grown in our nurseries (then located in Nurseries Road), straw for the hatters in Luton, clean laundry and school children for day trips to Hunstanton in

Norfolk.

George Bernard Shaw was a regular user of the line. Walking from Ayot St Lawrence where he lived at Shaw’s Corner, the staff would often hold trains for him so that he wouldn’t miss his connection. In return he was not very complimentary of the station saying that the smell (coming from the rubbish brought from London and dumped at Blackbridge tip) reminded him of “Stromboli and Hell”. Many other well-known individuals, too many to mention here, also made use of the station.

Although the Beeching Report in the 1960s devastated rural train services, interest in them has never been greater, with enthusiasts maintaining architecture, equipment, rolling stock and memorabilia. The St Albans Signal Box Preservation Trust was established in 2002 to restore a signal box just outside the station, which was built in 1892. The box was opened to the public this year following complete renovation. Harpenden has an enthusiastic railway society and Wheathampstead has a company that distributes DVDs of historical railways worldwide all indicating just how popular the subject is.

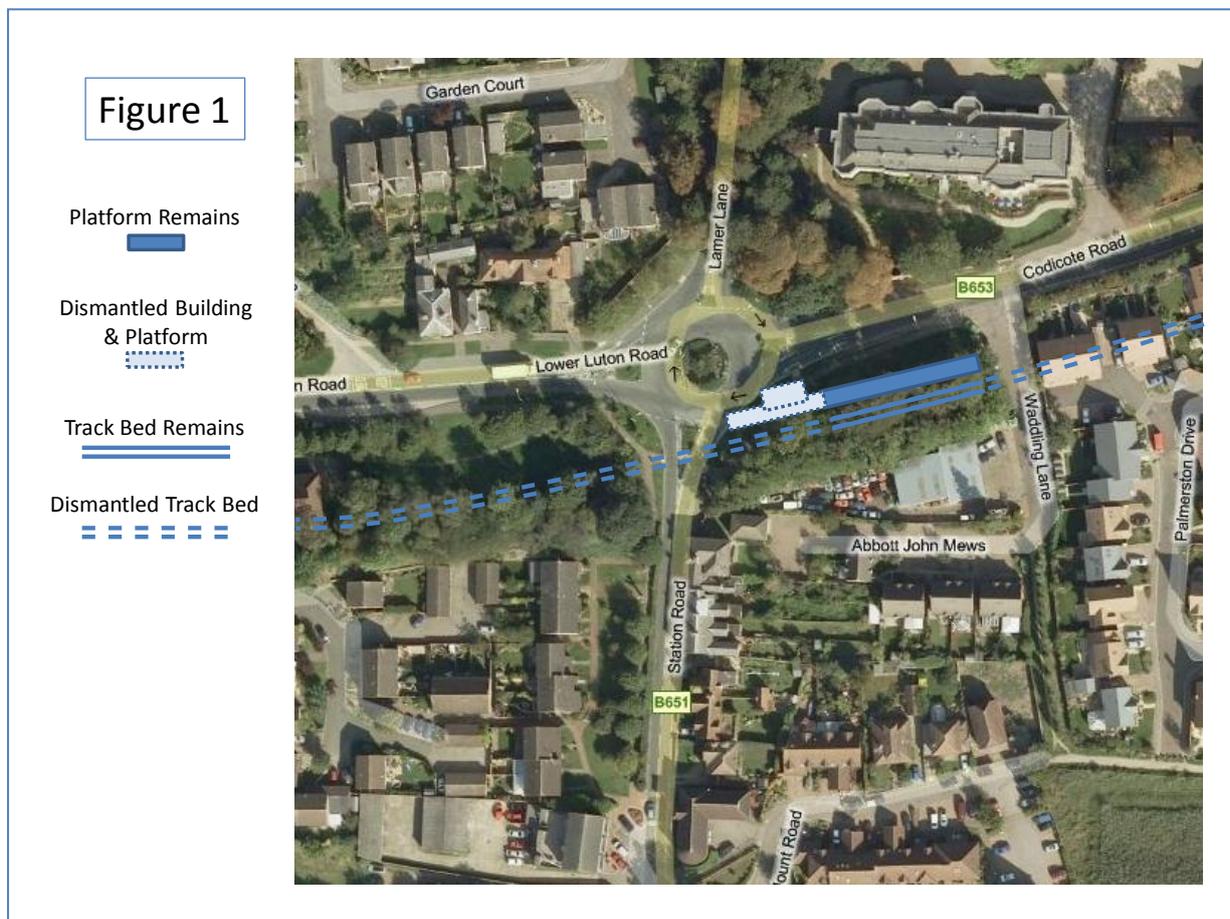


The remains of Wheathampstead’s station platform were recently re-discovered and found to be in relatively good condition despite over 40 years of neglect. We are now looking to restore the platform and make the space it occupies open to the community. It will be developed as a area for picnics, art exhibitions, an open-air classroom and visitor attraction. It will also form part of the Wheathampstead Heritage Trail currently under development and we will develop the connection with George Bernard Shaw. We would like to open the restored platform on the 150th anniversary of the station on September 1st, 2010.

David Johnston
November, 2009

Current Situation

The site is located on an embankment at the edge of the village at the end of Station Road (appropriately) and indicated on the aerial view shown in Figure 1.



The site is raised on an embankment approximately 8-10m above pavement level. The railings at the back of the platform are visible from road level but undergrowth obscures them and they are easily missed. The site is surrounded by mature trees, offering an attractive and secluded area isolated from private dwellings with a high tree canopy and easily accessible from the village centre along the High Street and Station Road.

The 30m or so of platform that remains is in reasonably good condition with much of the original stone and brickwork in place. Unfortunately the paving slabs have either been removed or have been pushed onto the track bed. We will need to perform further clearance work before we can be certain how much material remains (Figure 2). Saplings are growing from the track bed surface and from the platform itself. These will have to be cleared and killed (Figure 4).

The railings mounted in concrete posts, including supports for two main station signs and a brick drainage gully, (?) are also intact.

Figure 2

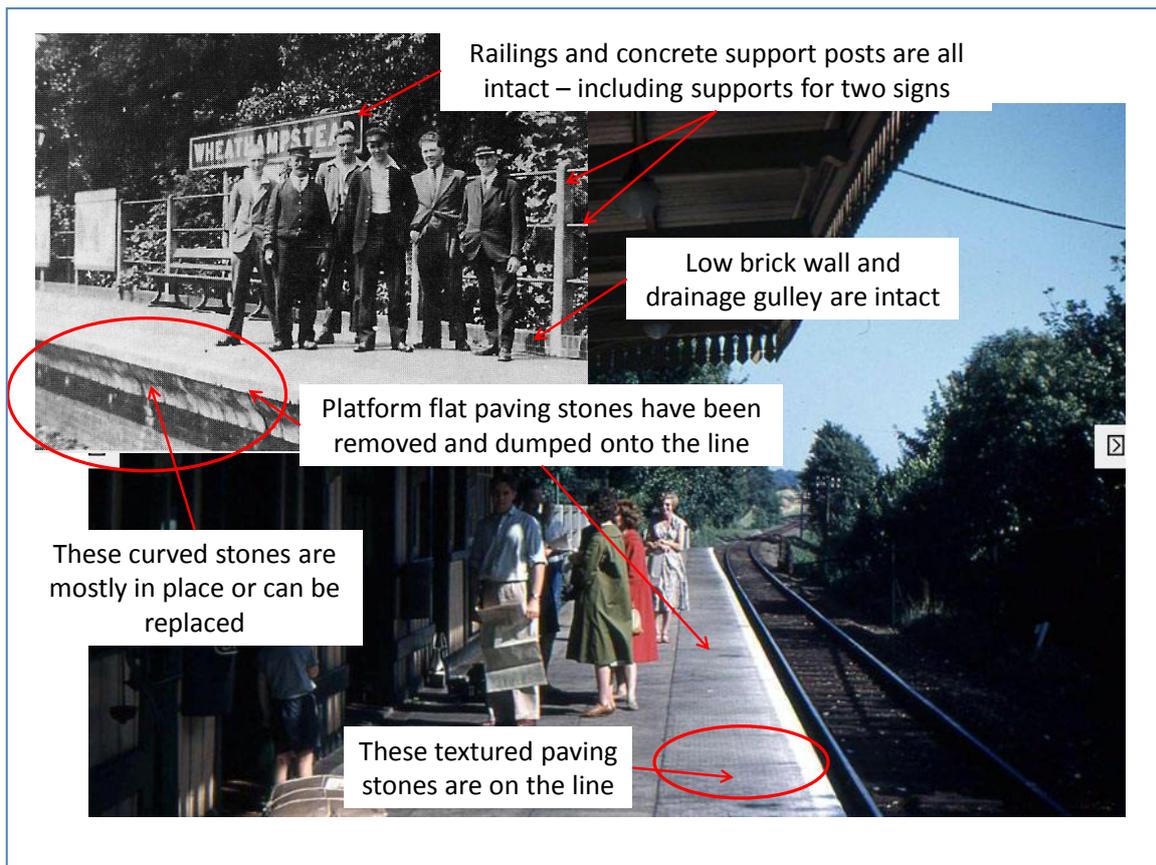


Figure 3

The site covered by extensive organic growth mainly caused by ivy, shrubs and saplings as shown in Figures 3 and 4. In addition to the organic material, there are the remains of the platform slabs strewn about the track bed



Figure 4

Project Goal

Our goal is to clear the track bed and lay a grass or other suitable surface. We will restore the platform with paving slabs to recreate the look and feel of the original station. We will reproduce one or two "WHEATHAMPSTEAD" signs and hang them from their original supports. Two benches as close to the originals shown in old photographs will be added and painted in the appropriate livery. The railings will be cleaned and painted. Scraps of paint remaining on the railings will allow us to match the colours.

In addition to restoring the platform, we will also add an illustrated information sign with the history of the station and its impact on the village. We will also establish the connection to George Bernard Shaw ideally by commissioning a sculpture of the author seated, waiting for a train so that visitors can have a photograph taken seated next to him. This will require additional funding and may not be in place before the anniversary in 2010.

Access to the site is somewhat awkward and will require us to install a flight of steps up the bank. Disabled access may not be possible.

Stakeholders

The Parish Council owns the site and is therefore the main stakeholder of the project. Neil Page is the appropriate committee chairman and he has agreed to have the project team report into him. Tessa Reason is sponsoring the project on behalf of the PC.

Our parish traders association, WEB, wants to encourage the development of the High Street and its rejuvenation as a shopping centre for the village. It is also supporting general business and community activities.

The Wheathampstead and District Preservation Society (WDPS) is also concerned with the preservation and development of our community in a way that conserves the village's character and environment.

We will create a team comprising representatives of the stakeholders and wider community to drive the project to completion.

Benefits to the Community

1. Village Heritage

Wheathampstead has a long history dating back to pre-Roman occupation. Historians think it to be the ancient capital of the Cassuvelauni and Julius Caesar fought a significant battle in the area defeating the tribe. Many Saxon and splendid Roman remains have been found within the parish and, indeed, when they first built the station a Saxon Bronze Pot was unearthed and is now in the British Museum. In later centuries the Wicked Lady roamed Nomansland Common. Nomansland was also the site of the first steeple chasing races to be run in Britain, was infamous for bare-knuckle fighting and cock fighting. There are over 50 Grade II listed buildings in the village and the parish church of St Helens and the former Mill are a Grade I listed monuments.

The railway forms an important part of the village heritage and is to be included in our Heritage Trail. The Parish Council is developing the Trail to make residents aware of the historical significance of the village and encourage a sense of pride in our environment.

2. Local Businesses

There is an urgent need to attract visitors to the village and increase footfall for the benefit local businesses including restaurants, cafes, shops and pubs. The Heritage Trail will play an important role in this, as we will advertise it on our web sites and publish visitor information literature for distribution outside of the village.

Shaw's Corner is a popular National Trust property attracting thousands of visitors each year. By associating the village through the railway with GBS, we would hope to attract more visitors to the village offering facilities not available at Ayot St Lawrence.

3. Village Events

The site is ideal for holding outdoor art, photographic and other exhibitions, social events and business presentations during the summer months.

St Albans Girls School occupies Wheathampstead House located directly across the road. They and other village schools can make use of the space as an outdoor classroom.

4. Leisure

We will equip the site with seating so that residents can go there for a picnic or take their sandwiches or lunch, perhaps purchased from one of several outlets in the village, and relax in a pleasant environment.

Project Activities and Funding

- Clearing

We will require two tracked diggers with trained operators for one week to clear the site after the removal of saplings and overhanging branches. The diggers will move most of the organic material to the far end of the site where it will form a natural barrier and landscaped at a later time. The far end of the site has a steep decline into Waddling Lane so a retaining structure will be required. By keeping this material on site we can keep the cost of removing material to a minimum.

Alternatively, we could remove the material from the site and a second access point created into Waddling Lane. This would allow us to include the site as part of a circular walk from Station Road to the bridleway in Abbott John Mews.

The diggers will also be able to clear the platform and recover what remains of the concrete slabs. These may, again if possible, be left on site and reused as part of the reconstruction process.

- Access

General access to the site is awkward given it is isolated on a raised embankment. There are several alternatives for access and these need careful consideration in terms of cost and ease of use. The simplest option is to carve steps into the bank with wooden facing, a wooden hand rail and non-slip material such as gravel for the treads. Disabled access will be progressed as soon as practicable.

It may also be possible to have two access points, one at either end of the platform thus making the site more open and the possibility of incorporating it into a circular walk.

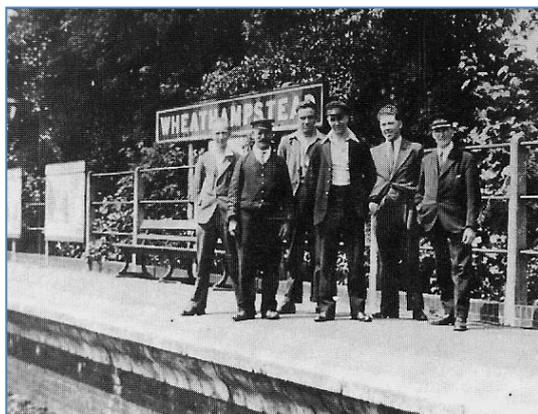
- Safety

The whole site is raised above ground level and surrounded by shrubs and trees. The North side of the platform facing Cory-Wright Way has concrete posts with steel rails (the original structures) and these provide a safety barrier. The south side will also require a safety rail. The East end of the platform will have a barrier built using the material taken from the platform and track bed unless the decision is to keep it open as an access point; in which case a safety rail will be required.

The platform edge is also a possible hazard but a suitable replica of a standard railway sign may suffice as a warning. Further discussion will take place once a decision is made as to how the track bed is finished. Finishing in grass reduces the risk associated with falling from the platform.

We will consult with RoSpa and other experts for clarification of the requirement.

Figure 5



- Seating

We will need two bench seats of a type shown in the photograph (Figure 5) or similar painted in the appropriate livery. We anticipate recreating this or a similar photograph as part of the press release planned for the official opening.

- Signage

We will produce replicas of the WHEATHAMPSTEAD station sign and mount them on their original posts (Figure 5). We will also have an illustrated information sign at the entrance to the site, with information about the station and its history.

- On-Going Maintenance

Once completed, the site will need to be maintained. If we use grass as a surface for the track bed then regular mowing is required. General cutting back of shrubs, trees, ivy, etc will be required once or twice a year. We would need to conduct safety checks on the barriers and steps regularly.

- Outline Plan

Dates are subject to funding availability

Activity	Notes	Cost	Planned Dates	
			Start	Completion
Initial Site Survey	8 man-hours		October 2009	Completed
Initial Site Clearance	50 man hours		November 2009	Completed
Site Clearance		£2,000	January 2009	February 2010
Platform Rebuild		??	March 2009	June 2010
Access Steps		£3,000	May 2009	July 2010
Safety Barriers		??	June 2010	August 2010
Signage		??	June 2010	August 2010
Seating		??	June 2010	August 2010
Landscaping		??	June 2010	August 2010
Statue of GBS		£15,000	When funding is available	
On-Going Maintenance		??	2011	