

Weekend

The royal train now standing...

Norfolk station where kings
and queens once arrived

pages 4-5



How Richard keeps alive former station with unique royal links



There are plenty of disused railway stations in East Anglia. But none has the very special historic interest of Wolferton, which has welcomed emperors and empresses, kings and queens - and seen them depart too (in all senses of the word). **DANIEL BARDSLEY** reports.

Wolferton railway station, a few miles north of King's Lynn, is immaculate: the paintwork looks fresh, the windows shine and the grass behind the main building is neatly trimmed. It is a station fit for royalty.

Of course this is appropriate because, although the railway tracks that led here have long since been taken away, Wolferton was for decades a royal station, used by the royal family and their guests as they travelled to and from Sandringham.

Once described by the poet Sir John Betjeman as "different from all other stations in England", Wolferton was where, in 1863, Prince Edward, the Prince of Wales, later King Edward VII, and Princess Alexandra alighted after marrying at Windsor. And, in 1936 and 1952, the funeral cortèges of King George V and King George VI began here.

This year marks the 50th anniversary since the last royal train used the station

and, of great relevance when it comes to its marvellous condition today, the 15th anniversary since Yorkshireman Richard Brown acquired the station. That 2001 purchase started an extraordinary labour of love that shows no signs of ending.

"If you are to do something, I feel it should be done well. I say to those who come here to assist me with the work at the station that we're on a 100-year plan - the Victorians have brought us here and now it's our turn," he said.

"It would've been special in its day. My thoughts are that when I cannot keep it to this standard, I shall move on. It definitely warrants someone willing to give it love and attention."

Sitting on the line between King's Lynn and Hunstanton, the station opened as a stop to serve Wolferton village in 1862, the same year Queen Victoria bought the nearby Sandringham estate for Prince Edward.

Richard's home dates from the late 1890s, when it was built as part of an expansion programme to create royal retiring and reception rooms. There are



■ Above, The Royal train carrying the body of George VI leaves Wolferton on February 11 1952. Inset top left, Wolferton Station sign.

Pictures: ARCHANT LIBRARY

“Once you start to share it with people, it becomes very enjoyable. People share stories...”

also buildings on the other side of the platform that are now used as private homes.

"It was realised that they were getting more and more visitors to Sandringham and the Great Eastern Railway Company decided that the station should reflect the importance of these visitors," said Richard.

Soldiers would line up as the monarch and guests - including foreign kings and queens, emperors, presidents and members of high society - swept in and out by horse and carriage. In what could be considered the station's heyday, the last decade and a half or so of the 19th century, and the first decade of the 20th century, there were more than 600 royal train arrivals and departures. Royal shooting parties would take lunch here.

The last train of any kind to use the station did so in 1969, three years after the final royal train called. The railway lines at the station were taken up, with this area now a sunken garden, while the buildings Richard lives in now became a museum.

The story that brought Richard to Wolferton is, like the history of the station itself, a fascinating one.

An interest in railways runs in his family: his father worked on the railway and some of his uncles spent their whole careers in the industry as guards and porters. When Richard himself was about to begin his working life, however, his relatives advised him against following the family tradition.

"They said it had no future; the car had taken over. It was a general attitude that the railway was done for," he said.

Instead, Richard, who spent his

childhood in York and Sheffield, followed his other career interest - trucks - and joined a truck-parts company as a storeman, later acquiring his own truck business. But he continued to nurture an interest in railways and as far back as the 1970s, would tell his family that he wanted, one day, to live in a former railway station.

Around a decade and a half ago, that ambition started to come to fruition when he heard that the former royal station was up for sale. He had never been to Wolferton before, but visited the station while it was up for sale.

"It's not the perfect station for a railway enthusiast: I would've liked one with a buffet etc, but the royal connection makes up for it," he said.

Ultimately, after acquiring the station, he set about his meticulous programme of improvements.

In achieving his aim of returning the station as close as possible to its original condition, there was much work to be done. Not only had the station "lost its railway feel totally", but a host of major repairs were required.

For the first seven years or so, it was not possible to allow visitors in as Richard "took it apart". He replaced the crossing gates, carried out major refurbishment to the main buildings and signal box, and even had the platform relaid.

"It's the last stop on the line for me, I felt I may as well have it right. I've tried to go through every detail concerned with the station. Everything, virtually, has been replaced," he said.

Richard has been keen to make full use of what are now often better materials, such as paint and sealers and the like,

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than were available while the station was in active service. Another priority has been adding items that would have been present in the station's heyday. For example, the station now has a bell, as one would have been used to alert villagers that a train was due.

"Someone mentioned years ago this place had a bike to deliver parcels. So I've got a bike, probably a better bike than they would've had," he said.

Although Richard still has a business in Leeds, he spends almost all of his time at the station and usually opens up the gate by about midday whenever possible. Then he is keen to welcome visitors, who are invited to wander in and soak up the atmosphere.

Across from the main buildings, Richard has a workshop that he has turned into a small museum filled with railway memorabilia connected with the line. Richard enjoys chatting to visitors and sharing "rail tales" about the station's history and the railways.

"My thoughts are, if you live in history, you're going to have people look at it. What's the point of having a Rembrandt in the cellar? I noticed very early on that people were interested," he said.

"Once you start to share it with people, it becomes very enjoyable. People share stories - railway drivers, ex-railway personnel, we get everybody here.

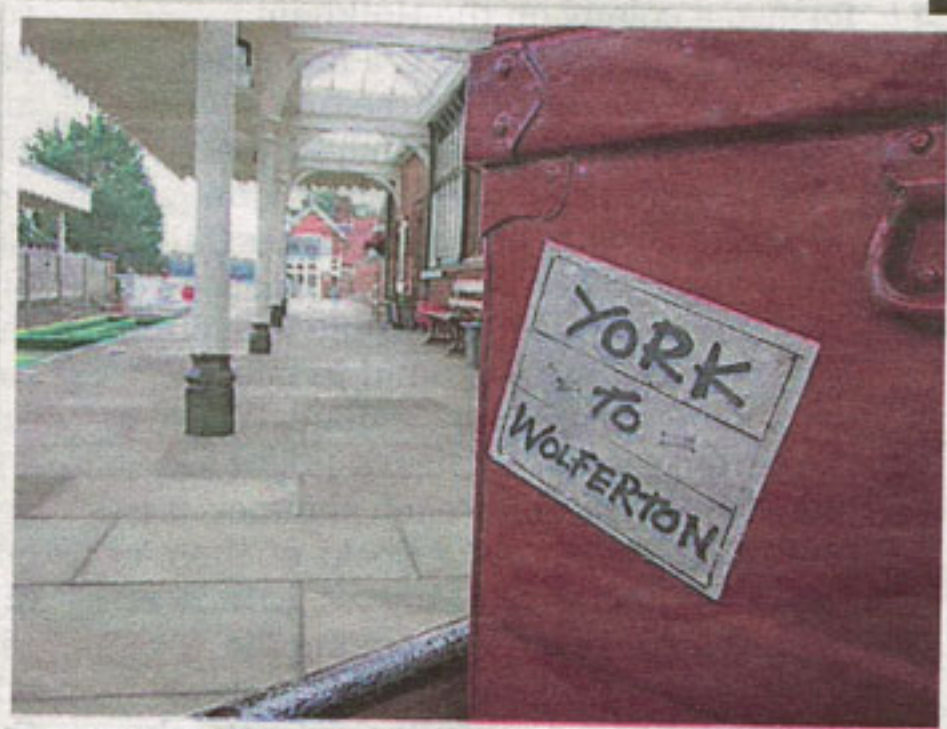
"The thing with railway enthusiasts ... they know their stuff. 'That wouldn't have been there;

that's not right; that's the wrong colour.' I do get people who comment on things: 'Are you sure you've got that in the right place?' I've done my utmost to get it back as it would've been, but I don't know for certain.

"We get groups of people, which is most enjoyable. We have a scout camp in the village and they generally come to visit the station. I do my best to answer all their sometimes unusual questions. You get lots of interesting questions from kids."

What is especially remarkable is that Richard does not charge for entry. There are also free postcards, some of them of paintings of the station that were produced from photos by a railway artist.

"I enjoy sharing the station with people and it's nice to do it without having to think about reward," he said.



■ Top image, Richard Brown, the owner of the former Royal railway station at Wolferton. Above, Wolferton station signal box in 1969. Left, A suitcase on the platform showing York, where Richard Brown comes from.

Pictures: DANIEL BARDSLEY/SUBMITTER