

# LONE WOLFERTON

Is this Britain's best-preserved railway station, even though its trains have long since departed? **ANDY COWARD** revels in the ornate beauty of Wolferton, the Royal Family's former gateway to its Norfolk Sandringham estate, in the first of a new series.

One of the joys of railway preservation is standing on a beautifully restored station and admiring the countless hours that have been put into presenting an attractive and authentic setting for others to enjoy. Preservation is about so much more than historic steam locomotives or carriages, and standing on a well restored station platform admiring the surrounding architecture is always enjoyable.

However, arguably one of the most stunning station restorations in the UK isn't on a heritage railway or even on the national network, but on a long-closed line that no longer has any train services running on it at all.

Welcome to Wolferton. A small country station serving the village of the same name on the former King's Lynn to Hunstanton railway line, it was closed by British Rail on May 3 1969. But Wolferton wasn't just a sleepy countryside halt. This is a station that has a very special place in railway history and

its distinctive and rather grand appearance gives away some clues as to its former stature.

The small village of Wolferton is part of the Sandringham Estate, which was purchased by Queen Victoria in 1862, the same year the railway line through the village opened. Its proximity to the Royal Estate quickly established Wolferton as a station which would regularly play host to Royals for the majority of its 107-year working history. Many members of the Royal Family, past and present, as well as distinguished guests visiting Sandringham, have walked along the station platforms.

Wolferton is an attractive and idyllic place to live, with well-tended houses and gardens throughout. There are fewer than 50 properties in the village and all of them, except for six former railway properties dotted around the former platforms, belong to the Sandringham Estate and are rented out.

It is one of those villages that looks so inviting on a picture postcard and the station is



## PRESERVATION'S hidden treasures

↓ MAIN IMAGE: Looking from Wolferton signal box towards the station buildings shows how well the Great Eastern Railway infrastructure has been preserved. The lawn area between the platforms is the obvious clue that this is no longer an operational station. NICK BRODRICK/SR

← A similar view of Wolferton station taken almost 100 years earlier. It is often described as 'Sandringham station' by mainstream media. FOX PHOTOS/GETTY

← INSET: One of the souvenir Edmondson card tickets available free to people who visit the station. ANDY COWARD





a prominent part of the village. It's a tranquil and peaceful place, with very little traffic. It doesn't feature any street lighting, which helps to emphasise the traditional rural charm.

Sadly, the serenity of the surroundings was a major reason why the line came under the scrutiny of officials as they sought to slim down the railway network during the 1960s in the wake of the infamous 1963 *Reshaping of British Railways* report. For its final years, train services were operated using DMUs, but many were lightly loaded. The Royal Train last called at Wolferton in 1966.

MANICURED TRACKBED

Even so, 50 years since the King's Lynn to Hunstanton line was taken out of use, and as you approach Wolferton station along Station Street, it is instantly recognisable as a railway station, with buildings and canopies on both sides of the trackbed, level crossing gates and a beautifully presented signal box.

You can almost imagine block bells ringing out from inside the signal box to herald an approaching train, as the crossing gates swing and close before a train rolls over the level crossing and into the station.

There is one striking omission that brings you sharply back to real life – there are no rails across the road and between the platforms (although two short lengths of rail have been laid adjacent to the signal box). This quickly reminds you that this is no longer an operational station, but a joyful time warp.

Its location on the Sandringham Estate meant that Wolferton was provided with rather grand station facilities for such a rural village, with Royal waiting rooms, staff accommodation and other station buildings provided on both platforms, along with a stationmaster's house within a short distance of the station.

However, the buildings on the Up and Down platforms have been sold off for private residential use, creating beautiful homes. Thankfully, the station canopies on both sides of the station have been retained and these also help to remind passers-by of the history of the site.

The lion's share belongs to Richard Brown, a Yorkshireman who fell in love with Wolferton when he first got the chance to buy it almost two decades ago on a visit with his wife. He has since spent many years and a considerable sum of money respecting the memory of the station that is now also his home.

The major proportion of the Down side of the station, which included the staff accommodation and the former Royal waiting rooms, was bought by retired railwayman Eric Walker and his wife Herta, along with the adjacent section of trackbed between the platforms and the signal box.

The couple established a small railway museum at the station, which also doubled up as their house, and the museum operated for a number of years between the late 1970s and early 1990s, in which time a collection of artefacts relevant to the station and the line on which it was situated was amassed.

The station museum was subsequently taken over by the Walkers' son after his father died in 1984, but after getting into financial difficulties the museum was forced to close a decade later and the buildings and its collection of railwayana were sold off to recoup the accumulated debts.

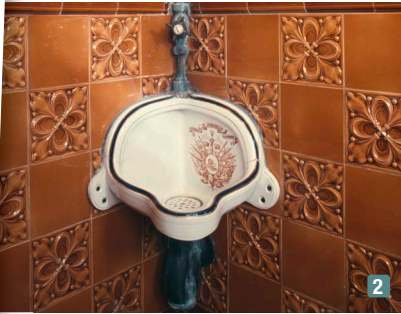
AMBITION FULFILLED

While the buildings were subsequently purchased for conversion into a private house, the signal box was used as a glorified shed and workshop, which had become increasingly derelict by the time Richard Brown first stumbled across the station.

His family originates from York and several generations of the family had worked on the railway, including his father and uncle. However, Richard decided not to join the railway and forged a career in business, going on to run several successful businesses



Wolferton station on August 6 2019, showing the station driveway and Down side buildings. This part of the station grounds is open to visits from the public most afternoons from 1pm. RICHARD BROWN COLLECTION



- 1 Wolferton's signal box has also been immortalised in nesting box form! NICK BRODRICK/SR
- 2 The interior of Richard Brown's house still features Edward VII's Urinal. ARCAID IMAGES/ALAMY
- 3 Fire buckets... just in case. Such ephemera around the station reflects a number of different epochs from the original Great Eastern Railway through to British Railways. NICK BRODRICK/SR
- 4 One of the replica canopy lights. A number have been recreated to match the originals. The canopy's restored glazed skylights are also shown to good effect. ANDY COWARD

at one time. Although now largely retired, he still owns a couple of businesses which he runs from home.

With his family links to the railways and being an enthusiast himself, Richard had always harboured an ambition to own a former railway station and live in it. He didn't know exactly where he would find a suitable station and concentrated on growing his business interests.

Having been made aware that the former station museum buildings at Wolferton were for sale, he ventured to East Anglia with his wife to take a closer look, although the time wasn't right for him to make an offer following the first visit.

He explained: "It was clear this was a very grand building and far different to most other stations I had seen, but it was also obvious that it wasn't in great condition and needed a lot of work to bring it up to a decent standard.

"However, it had real character and a special charm, and its regal links made it an extra special proposition. While I was more

interested in the history of the station itself, my wife was more enthusiastic about the link with the Royal Family, and the close proximity to Sandringham makes this a very special place.

GATE EXPECTATIONS

A few months later, Richard sold a truck business that he had built up and decided to see if the station building at Wolferton was still up for sale. When he found out it was, a deal was subsequently reached for him to buy it.

He also successfully bought the former signal box in a separate deal, giving him ownership of all the buildings that had originally been saved by Eric Walker. Acquiring the 'box was an essential part of the deal for Richard, who is passionate about these characterful structures, and without being able to buy the signal box as well as the station he says that he would have probably looked elsewhere.

Most people who go about buying such a property would set about getting the buildings back in good repair, but Richard Brown's first priority was to reinstate a set of level crossing gates to give the station a more authentic appearance.

The original crossing gates had long since been removed and he worked hard to make sure that the replacement gates looked authentic. This was the start of his obsession with ensuring that every detail of the restoration was as accurate as it possibly can be, and that attention to detail is obvious everywhere you look.

The station now boasts its second set of crossing gates after the original set suffered from wood rot. The timber for the replacement gates was tested extensively, and they remain in excellent condition several years after they were installed.

Since buying the station, Richard has spared no expense in restoring the buildings to their former glory and while the outside is easily recognisable, the interior has also had much attention lavished on it to make it the perfect home, as Richard explains.



“As far as I am concerned this is the last stop on the line for me and I think it should be done right. We have turned the building into a luxury home that is wonderful to live in and I open the platforms and grounds for visitors because I think it is my duty to share this wonderful building with others. I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else now and I feel very lucky.”

Indeed, the station platforms are open virtually every afternoon for visitors to look around and view the station and its grounds, with a small outbuilding doubling up as an exhibits museum dedicated mainly to the history of Wolferton station and also some of the railways around Richard’s native Yorkshire. He even provides free postcards and souvenir Wolferton station Edmondson card tickets to which visitors can help themselves.

It’s a fascinating place and it’s free of charge to visit, as Richard explains: “If visitors want to make a donation during their visit, we then donate the money to organisations linked to the village or the air ambulance.

“It is clear that there is a lot of appreciation for the work we have done and we have received many favourable comments about the station on TripAdvisor. I don’t open the station grounds for profit,

but it is wonderful to be able to donate funds raised by our visitors to good causes which benefit the village.”

The building that is now home to the Browns was previously two separate buildings, but these have been cleverly linked with a luxury kitchen sandwiched between to complement the original structures. It replaced a more rudimentary structure that had been installed while the station was first owned by the Walker family.

Richard is quick to praise the work of Eric Walker for saving Wolferton in the first place, having bought it from British Rail upon his retirement, in the dying days of services on the line.

At the time, it was feared that the land could be sold off for a housing development, but thanks to his efforts the station was sold intact and the signal box was also acquired with the lever frame and other equipment left in place. His efforts ensured its survival and set in motion the chain of events that resulted in such good preservation to the present day. Eric Walker is buried in the village churchyard.

### ROYAL APPROVAL

Despite his truly stunning home, it is the signal box that is perhaps Richard’s proudest achievement, as he explains: “It was in very poor condition when we started. Extensive work was undertaken on the whole building to straighten it. This included jacking up the structure, re-fitting the roof and extensive groundworks.

The finished building is probably my favourite part of the station and I am really pleased with the end result.”

The signal box is now also private residential space, but clever design has allowed the retention of the lever frame and other aspects of its history.

On the platforms, the canopies are immaculately presented, and replica canopy lighting has been provided to match the long-lost originals.

The entire platform has been resurfaced with new paving slabs, while neatly kept lawns occupy the former trackbed. Various station sack trucks and trollies help to set the scene, while poster boards and signage complete the look.



Two sets of rails have been re-laid on the King's Lynn side of Station Street as a further reminder of the site's heritage, although the owner has resisted the temptation to lay track or install rolling stock between the platforms. NICK BRODRICK



Time stands still on September 1 as Wolferton awaits passenger trains that will never arrive... NICK BRODRICK/SR



Busier times. A 1950s view of GER 'D16' 4-4-0 No. 62529 rolling into Wolferton with a Sunday excursion to Hunstanton. IAN C. ALLEN/TRANSPORT TREASURY



The outside of the station and its immaculately presented and manicured grounds are the areas that Richard allows visitors to view, while the main building interiors remain private.

The whole site is completed to a high standard and no detail has been missed in its remarkable restoration.

Richard explains: “This station is unique and I am happy to have played my part in preserving it for other people to enjoy.

“While it’s my home, I love to share it with anyone who is interested. We get so many favourable comments, it is clear that

other people appreciate the effort. It has cost a lot of money along the way and some people may think I’m mad for spending so much on it over the years, but to me it’s been worth every penny and there’s nowhere else I want to be.”

The station’s restoration has also come to the attention of Her Majesty the Queen, whom Richard Brown has met on a number of occasions since moving to the area, and she has complimented the high standards of restoration work and how well it fits into its unspoilt surroundings.

Wolferton may not have a train service any more, but it most definitely still has a station. Even without the presence of steam, it has to be one of the finest preserved railway centres anywhere in Britain. [SR](#)

• More information on the history and restoration of Wolferton Station can be found at [www.wolfertonroyalstation.co.uk](http://www.wolfertonroyalstation.co.uk)

