

Restoring a station to its former glory

Sara Hyland meets a man who has been on a mission to preserve a piece of railway heritage in the north west corner of Norfolk



Back on track:
Views of
Wolferton
Station as it
is today

Tucked away in the North West corner of Norfolk is Wolferton, a quiet hamlet. Quiet now, but when Queen Victoria bought the Sandringham estate in 1862 for her eldest son Edward it was quite a different story.

The building of the railways throughout the second half of the 19th Century to serve the new industrial age was to some too modern, too much of a change to rural life and something to be dreaded. Soon, however, people began to benefit from the work and travel

opportunities that would arise from the age of the train. Today many of us have a great sense of nostalgia for the railways and I met a man who has dedicated himself to this part of our heritage.

Richard Brown has owned the main station building at Wolferton for 12 years and has made it his goal to restore the platform and station building to its former glory. The glory days came when the royal family and worldwide royals, aristocrats and Heads of State used the station to arrive and depart from visits to Sandringham House. In

1862 the single line ran from Kings Lynn to Hunstanton with Wolferton being just another drop off point and collection point for goods such as apples and timber from the estate. When Queen Victoria purchased Sandringham, the Great Eastern Railway Company saw the potential for expansion. The other interested company, the Midland and Great Northern, was pipped to the post by GER who involved King Edward VII and his new wife Alexandra in expansion ideas as it was becoming clear that a single line could not cope

with the increase in use by royal visitors. As a result a dual line was built to Wolferton in the 1880's along with the updated station building completed in the 1890's. At that point in time it had a dual role as a royal shooting lodge and waiting room suite, hence its grandeur. The gardens around the building were dedicated to Queen Alexandra and were known by her name. Further expansion saw the building of a parcel and ticket office, more royal waiting rooms on the down side of the line, and the signal box was repositioned to the other side of the road, opposite the impressive station master's house, to accommodate serving the dual line in 1898. The Station Master's diary shows that in the 1890's the King and Queen of Denmark, the King of Portugal, and the German Emperor and Empress travelled the line to Wolferton to name but a few. Richard told me even Rasputin is reported to have arrived at the station with the intention of seeing the King at Sandringham. He was refused admission. The royals stopped using the line in 1966 preferring to travel to Kings Lynn by train and then to Sandringham by car. The line survived the Beeching cuts but then closed in 1969 and the buildings were sold off as private properties as they remain today. When Richard bought the main station building it was in a poor and run-down state. A 'York' family Yorkshireman, Richard's interest in the railways stems from the fact that his father and grandfather worked for the railways in the north. He explained to me that he has tried to restore the Wolferton station to the best of his ability – and what an ability. Every archive detail has been studied, researched, and then rebuilt or replaced to be as close as possible to the original structure, design, and decoration of the station in its heyday. This has meant anything from taking apart flooring to reveal an original rail sleeper raft in the signal box, to analysing the exact composition of the platform slabs to have replacements made for the broken ones. Oak wood doors and outside beams have been used to be as authentic as possible and probably his favourite parts, the crossing gates, have been reproduced to make the whole site complete. What work he has not done himself he has sourced to craftsmen with the skills required, for example the barley twist cast iron lamp posts and lanterns dotted around the site have been made by making a mold from an original to make an identical replacement. Brickwork patterns using back bedded car stone (found in the



Along the platform, top, and a peep inside one of the entrances

cliffs at Hunstanton) finish off the outer walls in keeping with the style of the area. Iron railings complete the overall appearance having studied photographs to achieve total authenticity of the station as it would have looked in the late 19th early 20th centuries. Even railway memorabilia items are scattered around the station to really make you feel that at any moment the toot of a whistle would be heard, and a trail of smoke seen in the distance would mark the arrival of a train. With boundless enthusiasm Richard has taken on the restoration of this site of historic interest so that not just himself but anyone can enjoy it. He welcomes visitors, of which there were several in the hour or so whilst I was there, though, of course, courtesy must be shown to the privacy of the people who own the

other station buildings. The visitors' book is interesting as several entries are by people who actually travelled the line and have shared their memories of it. The railways certainly do it for me. The sense of anticipation of the journey ahead; arriving at your destination, or changing course half way through; meeting people on the way or waiting for someone to arrive. Maybe it is this allegorical reflection of life, or maybe it is the railways' role and representation of a time gone by, or just for the example of engineering skills – whatever the reason our nostalgia for the railways remains strong. Thanks to people like Richard Brown we can, just for a while, lose ourselves in a little corner of Norfolk's railway history. www.wolfertonroyalstation.co.uk