



Vale and Downland Museum – Local History Series

When Didcot Station Burnt Down

by Reg Wilkinson

Most readers of *The Blowing Stone* will be aware of the alterations which have been carried out at Didcot Station during the past year. This is the second time that major changes have taken place at Didcot as the station was completely rebuilt about a century ago.

The first station at Didcot was not opened until a branch from the main London/Bristol line to Oxford was constructed in 1844. It was called Oxford Road Station until 1850. Four lines were served by five platforms with waiting rooms and a refreshment room on the central platform and one large roof covering everything.

Just after noon on March 11, 1886, a railwayman was filling oil lamps in one of the waiting rooms when his supply of oil somehow became ignited. In no time at all the whole building was ablaze!

The station master and his men did their best to contain the fire until appliances from Harwell village, Wallingford, Abingdon and Oxford arrived to combat the blaze. Unfortunately their efforts were in vain and an hour after the fire started the station was a ruin.

Sightseers from miles around turned up in strength to watch the structure burn and large detachments of police were called out to control the crowds. The Junction Hotel, across the road from the station, did a brisk trade in spite of the fact that it was itself in danger from the blaze.

An enquiry decided that the roof which covered the whole station was a contributory factor to the extent of the inferno, As a result of this each platform was provided with a separate canopy when the station was rebuilt and all except one are still in use today.

The exception is the canopy which covered Platform One. This was removed when recent modifications were taking place, much to the disgust of many railway conservationists.

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