

CENTRAL SOUTHERN REGION THAMES VALLEY GROUP

The Maidenhead Canopy and Cholsey & Wallingford Heritage Railway

The 21st century's Crossrail modernisation of the Great Western Railway around London presented a risk to infrastructure designed and built by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, one of the 19th century's greatest engineers, and father of the GWR railway.

This challenge was turned into an opportunity by Cholsey & Wallingford Heritage Railway (C&WHR). When they became aware the platform canopy at Maidenhead station, which is believed to date from 1871, needed to be removed to accommodate Crossrail's electrification works, they sought to relocate it to Wallingford station.

Cholsey and Wallingford branch line operated between 1866 and 1981. In the same year, the Cholsey and Wallingford Railway Preservation Society was formed, and in 1985 the first heritage train ran. The acquisition of the Maidenhead canopy would secure a notable railway structure, ensure its restoration and conservation, and further enhance the period station infrastructure at Wallingford.

Network Rail agreed to 'sensitively dismantle, transport and drop off the sections' and in 2014 assorted, disassembled components of the canopy were delivered to C&WHR's site. Some were in good condition, while others were completely unusable due to the unhelpful way they had been dismantled. Thus began a complex project to assess what material had been received, determine what needed to be restored or remanufactured, and reassemble it.

In 2016 C&WHR approached the Railway Heritage Trust for a grant to help with costs, and sustainable structural engineering consultants Moreton Partnership were engaged to assist. The Trust agreed to fund the complete restoration costs estimated at £220,000.

A key requirement of the project was to closely replicate the historical materials and techniques originally employed so that the finished structure would be as period-correct as possible. Following a tender for the restoration phase, McCurdy & Co were appointed as they specialise in the repair and conservation of historic timber-framed buildings.

Then followed a process to find companies with the specialist skills to assist with the detailed restoration. A foundry in Sheffield was employed to make moulds from the original spandrels and bosses and recast



them to replace damaged or missing ones. New 'old growth' wood which provided the required strength for the rafters was sourced. A blacksmith's forge reproduced handmade nails and J bolts to original Victorian specifications, as well as remaking various original nuts and bolts with the original thread pitch. None of the decorative dagger boards from Maidenhead survived, so they were painstakingly recreated from photographs and similar examples in existence.

Once all the original and remade components were collated, reassembly and erection were carried out by specialist contractor Green Oak Carpentry Company.

With the canopy erected it was time to paint the woodwork and metalwork. Optical sectioning microscopy analysis of the original woodwork identified 34 coats of paint in various colours from the historical GWR palette. GWR's Stone 1 and 3, and Cream already used at Wallingford, were chosen.

Once painting was complete, final touches were added including period lampposts, extended and repaved platforms, and original and reproduction enamel signs faithful to those originally displayed at Maidenhead.

▲ The first heritage train ran in 1985

The final spend for the total project was around £750,000 and has transformed the station's appearance and ambience.

The quality and authenticity of the finished structure is a testament to the vision and eye for detail of the C&WHR team and their specialist contractors, reflected by the canopy's receipt of the Chairman's Special Award from the National Railway Heritage Awards.

The relocated, refurbished canopy was opened by Sir Peter Hendy of Network Rail on 25 June 2021 and looked as good as it had done on its original unveiling nearly 150 years earlier.

Simon Harris
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CILT Thames Valley Group is planning a visit to C&WHR on one of their Running Days in the early summer when you can see the canopy for yourself. Look out for details in *Focus* and in the Events section.