

The Tradition of Railway Gardening

London Road Station today has two small gardens on either side of the station building – one for edible growing, the other for shade-loving plants. There are also three ornamental planters on the south platform and two planters in front of the station building with herbs for local people and passers-by. These gardens have been created and are maintained by volunteers living near the station as part of the London Road Station Partnership.

There is a long tradition of gardening at British stations. As a *Country Life* journalist put it: “In the century between Brunel and Beeching, the railway garden, with station platforms in full bloom and booking offices framed with window boxes and hanging baskets, became one of Britain's most cherished horticultural features.”



Aberdour station, Scotland. Winner of ACoRP's 'Best Station Garden' award 2005.

We tend to associate such flowering displays with rural stations, but even urban stations often have hanging baskets full of brightly coloured bedding plants. Station gardening in the past went well beyond this. At Farringdon Station in the City of London, for instance, the platforms were once lined with herbaceous borders including tall delphiniums and hollyhocks, typical of the English cottage garden. The same can be seen in the photo below at Walham Green underground station in the late 1930's. At Harpenden Station, Hertfordshire, there was even a lily-pond with fish on the platform in the late 1940s. These gardens were usually created and maintained by station staff.



Walham Green station garden, London Underground, 1939.
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This was a time when stations had resident Station Masters and other staff. It was a matter of pride to create an attractive environment for waiting passengers. Gardening was strongly encouraged by the railway companies who held annual competitions for the best-kept station garden.



Station Master and Porter in their award-winning garden at Elsham station, Lincolnshire, c. 1960
Thanks to Patrick Draper and <http://www.davesrailpics.bravehost.com/elsham/elsham.htm>

This tradition of gardening started to disappear from the late 1960s onwards as Britain's railways were 'restructured' following the Beeching reports. Many smaller stations closed, station staffing was reduced, and stations became just another bit of infrastructure rather than a part of the community. More recently, however, gardening at stations is growing again. Volunteer groups are getting involved in improving station environments.

Station community partnerships – formal links between railway companies and the community around a station – first appeared in the 1990s and a national group to promote them, the Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP), was formed in 2000. In

our region, the Sussex Community Rail Partnership was set up in 2004 and well over a dozen stations now have station partnerships with Southern Railways. The London Road Station Partnership was created in 2011.



Members of London Road Station Partnership celebrate Big Dig Day, March 2013 at the station.

Railway allotments

Growing at railway stations was not restricted to ornamental displays, as the widespread presence of allotments next to railways lines today attests. Station staff were often allowed to cultivate spare plots of land alongside the tracks. The railways were part of the 19th century transformation from an agrarian subsistence economy to an industrial one: for urban railway workers, wages were low, housing often overcrowded and opportunities to grow fresh food restricted. Large employers with land available, such as the railway companies, often provided allotments for their workers as a way of supplementing wages and encouraging productive 'outdoor activity'. In Victorian times, allotments were seen as a way of encouraging a healthier, and no doubt more amenable, workforce.

During the First World War, the pressure of food shortages meant that any available land not large enough for agricultural use was pressed into service for edible growing. Land alongside railway lines and sidings typically fell into this category. Where previously allotments had been given or leased to railway workers, the railway companies now started to make them available to the general public and joined with councils and the national government in promoting edible growing.

The North Eastern Railway, for example, provided line-side allotments for free, offered their tenants free copies of A.S. Galt's *Making and Management of an Allotment*, delivered bags of seed potatoes to any station on their line and even encouraged tenants to keep rabbits, chickens and goats on their plots. The Earl of Lancaster later commented in the 1922 House of Lords debate on allotments: "... the railways have been, perhaps, the very best friends of allotment holders".



Judging planters filled with leafy vegetables at Kilburn station, 1942.
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The Second World War saw a similar surge in the use of spare land. In October 1939, the government launched the famous 'Dig for Victory' campaign with the aim of creating a further half a million allotments. Many were again created on railway land. But after 1945, interest in edible growing declined. In 1950, there were around 75,000 plots on railway land, but they decreased thereafter at a rate of 3,000 a year. British Rail, the nationalised railway company, saw administration of allotments as an economic burden and land around railway stations was frequently sold off for re-development.

At London Road Station, the land on the north-west side served for many years as a railway allotment, available to railway employees for a nominal rent. It is not known when the allotment started, but it lasted until the early 1990s. Resident Jean Calder remembers the allotments in full use in the 1970's; they were "absolutely spectacular – a huge splash of colour". As well as vegetables, flowers such as chrysanthemums and dahlias were grown. "They used to cheer me up every morning", she says. Another resident remembers how the rail-side allotments created "a very tranquil, countryside atmosphere" just minutes from the centre of Brighton.

As mentioned in our other posters, the allotment fell into disuse in the 1990s and the land was sold on for development. Plans to build on the site have been strongly opposed by local residents who feel it provides much-needed green space for our densely populated area. We'd love to see the allotments resurrected one day, but meanwhile, we grow apples, pears, plums, beans, potatoes and lettuce in our tiny 16m² plot by the bridge.