

The Landmark Trust

ALTON STATION, ALTON, STAFFORDSHIRE

Alton Station was built in 1849 as part of the Churnet Valley branch line for the North Staffordshire Railway (the NSR, also known as "The Knotty", from the Staffordshire Knot which it took as its emblem).

Railway fever coincided with the height of the Battle of the Styles in Victorian England and the construction of stations provided a rare opportunity outside the aristocratic and institutional for well funded, architect-designed buildings. In the countryside, there was no need for a grand scale and indeed the railways were keen to provide a familiar and reassuring setting for nervous rural passengers who might not have encountered this new form of transport before. As they forged across the countryside, the railway engineers and speculators were often high-handed, but the area served by the NSR was lucky, in that the line was built when railway design was possibly at its best. The plans for the Churnet Valley Line had been laid in 1845, the first of the years of "railway mania", but it was not begun until 1847, by which time improved methods of engineering and construction had been developed, and railway architecture was at its most inventive and attractive.

Some stations would have passed for lodges, especially where they matched the style of the 'great house'. The stations on the NSR were a particularly fine group, the majority being in a consistent Tudor or Jacobean style, but with the odd appearance of Domestic, Rural and Italianate Styles. The main line stations were characterised by diamond patterns in the brickwork, the Churnet Valley line by the use of the local stone, while the roofs of both displayed patterns in different shaped tiles. The NSR employed a London architect called Henry Arthur Hunt to design these stations for them. On this basis, Hunt seems the most likely candidate to have designed Alton Station, even though his other stations were Tudor or Jacobean. Conclusive evidence remains elusive and it is strange that Alton is unique among NSR stations in being Italianate in style.

For a long time, sheer geographical and chronological coincidence meant that the station was attributed to A. W. Pugin, in an area that contains some of the finest examples of his collaboration with Lord Shrewsbury in the Gothic Revival style, although it is implausible that Pugin would have designed such an Italianate group of buildings. In fact, NSR Company were happy to employ Pugin, on condition that he provided detailed drawings and specifications. This Pugin declined to do – he was not capable of tendering on these terms, since he relied heavily on his builder, George Myers to transform his drawings into reality. Pugin had to settle for providing a new lodge across the road, a suitably grand entrance to convey those visiting Lord Shrewsbury by rail on by carriage to Alton Towers itself.

Perhaps all this discussion delayed progress on the line, since Alton had a temporary station when the Churnet Valley line opened for passengers and freight on 13th July 1849. Even so, H. A. Hunt could easily have built a station in style in keeping with Pugin's Gothic gatehouse a hundred yards away and built a year earlier. If the Earl was indeed disinterested, the design may even have been a propagandist gesture by Hunt on behalf of 'cosmopolite practice' in the so-called Battle of the Styles, a successful and provocative infiltration of the opposition's very heartland.

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It was not until 1850, then, that the main station buildings (on the Up side) were ready to receive passengers. Most were day visitors who came in their droves from the pottery towns to visit the famous gardens at Alton Towers and marvel at its temples, pagodas, glass-houses and monoliths. Initially, the Waiting Room was known as the Booking Hall, with a small, heated Ladies Waiting Room (now a kitchen) alongside, and a Ladies' WC leading off, a Station Master's Office and Porters' Room (gentlemen's facilities were originally across the line on the Down platform, behind the signal box, but in less inhibited times were moved alongside the Ladies'). Across the line were goods sidings and sheds, cattle dock and a weighing machine and office, with a goods hoist at the end of the platform against the bridge. Around 1880, the goods yard and sidings were enlarged and a 30 - lever signal box built, with ornate bargeboards and window boxes. In 1882 a separate booking office was added on to the rear of the waiting room (easily distinguished today by its heavier character) and a waiting shelter on the Down. In 1884, £200 was spent on lengthening the platforms and building a special pathway leading directly from the platform to the road up to the Towers, known as 'The Avenues'.

In 1923 the NSR merged with the London, Midland and Scottish Railway (LMS), which extended the catchment area for excursion trains considerably. Alton Towers itself was sold to a consortium that planned to run it as a full-scale public attraction. Business on the line boomed and in 1937, three rows of steps and barriers were put in up The Avenues, to manage the flow of visitors to and from Alton Towers in an orderly fashion. After nationalisation in 1948, the name of Alton Station was changed to Alton Towers – and use of such rural lines began to decline dramatically. In 1960, passenger services on the Churnet Valley Line were cut to almost nothing. Four years later, as part of Dr Beeching's overhaul, the line was reduced to single track, with total closure following in 1965. The stationmaster lived on in his house for a year or two, but the waiting room soon began to suffer from neglect and the inevitable attentions of vandals. Staffordshire County Council bought sections of the line with the station buildings in 1969, aiming to turn the former into a footpath and find new uses for the latter. In 1970, having failed to find anyone locally to take on Alton Station, the County Planning Officer approached Landmark, who in 1972 took on the station master's house and the waiting room block.

At the time, funds were only available to make the station master's house into Landmark accommodation. The house needed little work to make it habitable again. The only major change was to turn the kitchen into a third bedroom, and to make a new, and combined, kitchen and dining room, with an arch inserted between this and the sitting room, to make both rooms larger and lighter. The waiting room, meanwhile, was simply made sound, repainted in LMS colours and left to complete the picture until funds became available or some other use could be found for it. The station embarked on a new lease of life as an inspiring place to stay, and since then thousands of people have enjoyed living in and learning about this remnant from the height of the Railway Age.

In 2008, the time had come for a thorough refurbishment of the accommodation. Landmark was able to make funds available to incorporate the Waiting Room block into the accommodation, turning the Booking Office into an additional bedroom, the Ladies Waiting Room into a new kitchen and the Lamp or Porters' Room into a shower room. New internal doors were made into the bedroom, kitchen and bathroom, registered in the floor tiling. Care was also taken to ensure that the external appearance of the Waiting Room block did not change, even where a door had to be blocked internally. All surviving original features have been retained: Minton tiles on the floor, interior finishes (the 'panelling' is in fact plaster, for better wear), the shelving, hatch and ticket barrier associated with the booking office, the brackets for fire buckets and oil lamps outside. The London Midland and Scottish Railway colours, which had survived on the walls, have been repainted. In the Station Master's house, the kitchen was turned into a bathroom and the sitting room made slightly smaller to allow a corridor between, now that visitors also have the whole Waiting Room to enjoy.

The Landmark Trust is a building preservation charity that rescues historic buildings at risk and lets them for holidays. Alton Station sleeps up to 6 people. To book the building or any other Landmark property for a holiday, please contact us.