



WATERLOO STATION

1848 A CENTENARY OF UNINTERRUPTED SERVICE DURING WAR AND PEACE 1948
SOUTHERN RAILWAY

My Favourite History Place

Nigel Watt doesn't take us on a journey but instead takes us to the starting point of many journeys

Waterloo station may not be an obvious choice for a favourite history place. It is big. It is busy. It's a place that people pass through rather than linger. Yet its story is interesting. If time permits, an hour spent exploring is a rewarding experience.

Passengers first used Waterloo in 1848, when the London and South Western Railway extended its London to Southampton mainline eastwards from its original station at Nine Elms.

Nothing remains of the original Waterloo Bridge station, which was,

by all accounts, a ramshackle and rather chaotic affair. By the 1890s, with the growth of commuting from the expanding suburbs, the London and South Western Railway decided to rebuild the station. Most of what the modern passenger sees today is the product of that rebuild, a long drawn out affair that continued through the First World War, and lasted more than 20 years. Queen Mary opened the 'new' Waterloo in October 1922.

The design of Waterloo station reveals how successfully the company directors addressed the challenges of

an increasingly busy passenger railway. Waterloo had twenty-two platforms; these provided the capacity to boost service frequencies using innovative 'clock-face' timetables on newly electrified suburban services. There was a large station concourse, which, in Edwardian times, was unencumbered by retail outlets. This allowed large numbers of passengers to move quickly and easily, an essential requirement if railway punctuality was to be maintained, especially in peak commuting periods. There was also the huge glass roof, with its ridge and furrowed design, supported

Some destinations carved into the stonework at the main arch over main entrance (mezzanine).



The Victory Arch and main pedestrian entrance.



by octagonal riveted iron columns; this continues to protect passengers from the worst of the weather and helps create a light and airy ambience.

While Waterloo station might be described as functional, it does boast some decorative flourishes. A walk along the recently installed mezzanine reveals faces and other motifs carved on to the stone facings of the company offices that form the backdrop to the concourse. Midway along, on either side of the curved entrance arch, just opposite the clock, the names of the counties served by the London and South Western Railway are proudly displayed. While Middlesex, Surrey and Hampshire retain their importance as destinations on the modern railway, Waterloo's influence in the far west, along the so-called 'Withered Arm,' has declined in Devon and disappeared completely in Cornwall.

Also on the mezzanine is a reminder of Waterloo's historical significance as a name. Here, in 2015, a large replica of the Waterloo Campaign Medal was installed to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the famous battle. Although the name Waterloo was chosen because of the station's proximity to Waterloo Bridge, and not through any decision to commemorate the battle, that association has become embedded in the public consciousness. There is some irony in the fact that, from 1994 to 2007, international trains carried passengers from Waterloo through the Channel Tunnel to Brussels and Paris.

In fact, the theme of war underpins much of Waterloo's story. For example, a glance at the departure screens reveals just how many trains continue to serve centres of historic military importance. For over a century, army personnel used Waterloo to access the training grounds at Aldershot, or further west, near Andover, on the Salisbury Plain. Naval personnel also made good use of the 'direct' line to Portsmouth, opened in 1858, as well as the longer routes to Weymouth, for Portland, and Plymouth, for Devonport. In both world wars, the station

would have been incredibly busy as sailors and soldiers headed to the ports for action on the high seas or in France. A sense of these times is evoked in Helen McKie's wonderful painting of 'Waterloo Station at War,' commissioned by the Southern Railway, for a poster, in 1948.

Waterloo's connections with the First World War are further emphasised by the Victory Arch, the station's most ornate feature, Grade II listed, and now the main access point for pedestrians. This grand façade, designed by James Robert Scott in consultation with the company's employees, and completed just after the Treaty of Versailles, reflects the hopes of the time. Close inspection reveals the carved compositions of Bellona (1914), the goddess of war, on the left of the arch, and the winged figure of Victory (1918), to the right. The names of the main areas of conflict are carved around the arch, while at the top, the triumphal figure of Britannia clasps the torch of victory, presumably to light the way towards a more enlightened and peaceful future. Within the arch itself, at the top of the stairs, are set the brass plaques that commemorate the names of 583 London and South Western Railway servants who gave their lives in this conflict. In June 2016, it seemed entirely appropriate that young actors dressed as soldiers should descend on Waterloo in a moving, silent tribute to the fallen on the first day of the Battle of the Somme.

The constant bustle around the Great Arch affirms the obvious point; that the history of any railway station is, primarily, about the passengers who use its facilities. What better place to ponder the changing patterns of passenger travel than from under the four-faced concourse clock, a popular meeting point for generations of travellers?

Commuters, the bread and butter of Waterloo's existence, continue to surge under the clock as they have for over a hundred years. At first, they would have filled short distance services from south-west London and the leafy suburbs of Middlesex and Surrey; but since the 1920s, the reach of

Destinations for commuters, holiday makers and the navy.

Waterloo's famous clock and concourse.

The remaining part of the necropolis station.



Waterloo's commuter network has extended further south and west, to Portsmouth, Southampton, Bournemouth and Salisbury. Reflecting the many changes in society and work patterns, today's commuters are a much more diverse, less uniform group than when the bowler-hatted, broly-bearing brigade reigned supreme, Monday to Saturday!

Leisure travellers also continue to populate the concourse, whether for shopping trips to 'town', for sporting events at Wimbledon, Twickenham or Ascot, or for a cheap day-return to the seaside; but the heyday of the Summer Saturday holiday peak has long since disappeared. From the 1920s to the 1950s, luggage-laden families patiently queued for trains that whisked them to their annual holiday at resorts on the south coast or further west in North Devon and Cornwall, on the romantic 'Atlantic Coast' as the Southern Railway publicists would have it. Indeed, places such as Bournemouth, Swanage, Bude or Padstow would never have become prosperous holiday centres without the railway.

And then there are Waterloo's links to the wider world. Long before the opening of the Channel Tunnel, Waterloo could genuinely lay claim to being an international railway terminus. Opposite the clock, there is a large chemist's. It is built across the old taxi road that once provided direct access to the boat train platforms. Through the first half of the twentieth century, passengers from North America would disembark from liners either at Southampton, or, if they wanted to reach London sooner, off Plymouth Sound. Fast boat trains to the capital were laid on specially. In John Schlesinger's famous documentary, *Terminus*, filmed at Waterloo in 1960, some of the most memorable scenes concentrate on the comings and goings of the boat trains. During the 1920s and 30s, these services linked London to the far-flung reaches of its empire. By the 1950s and 60s, before the advent of mass air travel, they linked London to the Commonwealth and beyond. In *Terminus* a scene showing passengers from the West Indies

arriving on a boat train confirm Waterloo's place in the story of the Windrush generation.

In another memorable scene a coffin is loaded into a guard's van. This serves as a reminder that the railways catered for a much wider range of traffic than today, including the carriage of the deceased. Some notable figures made their final journeys from Waterloo, including Sir Winston Churchill in 1965 (from Platform 11), and Earl Mountbatten of Burma in 1979.

Most extraordinary of all, however, is Waterloo's connection with the London Necropolis Company. By the mid nineteenth century, London's growing population, and the impact of the cholera epidemics, placed the capital's burial system under increasing pressure. To tackle this problem, a dedicated 'Necropolis' station was opened at Waterloo in 1854. Its purpose was to carry the deceased and their mourners to a vast new cemetery at Brookwood, west of Woking, on the sandy heathlands of Surrey. The promoters had high hopes, but the service never fulfilled its promise, and the final funeral train left Waterloo in 1941 just before the Necropolis platform was destroyed in an enemy air raid. The only remaining part of the London Necropolis Company's 1902 terminus, the rather ostentatious first-class entrance, is but a five-minute walk down Lower Marsh Street (along the south flank of the station) to Westminster Bridge Road.

While a visit to Waterloo reveals many links with its past, the station continues to evolve in ways that the directors of the London and South Western Railway would readily approve. From 2016, further building work will take place to increase capacity and the station will become busier than ever before.

Waterloo station is open 363 days a year. Entry is free. A ticket to travel must be paid for!

If you would like to tell us about your favourite history place in a future edition of *The Historian*, in about 700 words, please email: alf.wilkinson@history.org.uk