

# Bricklayers' Arms Station

by Malcolm Tucker

*Bricklayers' Arms Goods Station in Bermondsey (L.B. of Southwark, TQ 332788 to 349784) closed in June 1981 after 137 years of commercial service. This article collates the fieldwork and documentary research undertaken by GLIAS members in the summer of 1982 and attempts to reconstruct the buildings and other operational components of a major nineteenth century railway depot.*

*The extensive complex with its approach tracks and sidings incorporated the principal goods stations of the SER and LBSCR companies, and the site of a major locomotive depot. The site as we found it was for the most part derelict and returning to nature, so that one GLIAS party encountered a fox inside the former SER goods shed. Redevelopment is now in progress, removing all but a few vestiges of this once important establishment.*

## HISTORICAL OUTLINE

### The Origin of Bricklayers' Arms Station

London's first steam-hauled railway, the London and Greenwich, was a short suburban line opened in 1836. By means of a costly viaduct it penetrated almost to the heart of the metropolis to terminate at London Bridge. Its line soon came to be used by the London & Croydon Railway, which opened in 1839, the London & Brighton Railway, which opened in 1841, and the South Eastern Railway (SER), which was completed to Folkestone in 1843 and Dover in 1844, with packet boat connections to the Continent.

Congestion at London Bridge, and the intransigence of the Greenwich company in the high level of tolls for use of its viaduct, soon prompted the South Eastern and Croydon companies to build an independent terminus, near the Bricklayers' Arms Inn on the Old Kent Road. The Act for the 1.6 mile branch line to this site received the Royal Assent in July 1843 [1]. Its route followed an undeveloped wedge of low-lying meadowland, criss-crossed by drainage ditches, between the expanding industrial suburbs of Bermondsey and the ribbon development of the Old Kent Road. The station site, between Swan Street (now Page's Walk) and Upper Grange Road (now Dunton Road) was the closest point of approach to the centre of London that could be reached without extensive demolitions and costly engineering works. It was already hemmed in by buildings, but few premises except a rope walk needed to be demolished

and land acquisition costs must therefore have been moderate [2]. The initially available area was 20 acres [3].

Bricklayers' Arms Station opened for both passenger and goods traffic on 1st May, 1844. Playing down the station's considerable distance from the City centre, it was promoted as the "Grand West End Terminus", with omnibus services to the West End and the City of London, cheap fares and an eye-catching main facade. Situated two miles east of Westminster Bridge, the new terminus was actually further from the West End than London Bridge, although the route was less congested. Considerable traffic was diverted from London Bridge, causing the Greenwich company severe financial problems, with the result that the whole of the Greenwich undertaking was leased to the SER in January 1845. Most passenger traffic quickly returned to London Bridge, and the Croydon Railway gave up its share of the Bricklayers' Arms site. These episodes are discussed at length by others [4,5]. The station closed to all regular passengers from the beginning of 1852 [6]. Thus, Bricklayers' Arms has tended to be derided by historians as a "failed" passenger terminus, or as a quirk of early railway politics. This view neglects its long and successful career, envisaged from the beginning, as a goods station.

### Its Role as a Goods Station.

For goods and livestock traffic, Bricklayers' Arms was well located for several reasons. It was close to the thriving commercial and industrial areas of Southwark and Bermondsey, close to major roads and not too far from the river and the Surrey Docks, yet clear of the intense congestion of the city centre. In contrast to London Bridge there was relatively cheap land for expansion, particularly for space-consuming sidings. The surrounding streets imposed a linear pattern on the subsequent growth of the site, which suited the operational needs of goods traffic. The populous, lower class neighbourhood provided a plentiful labour supply. Lastly, several railway routes converged immediately to the east. The original line towards Croydon and Brighton was supplemented in 1849 by a connection to the SER's new North Kent line, while in 1868 the SER's direct line to Tonbridge superseded the original Dover route via Redhill (Fig.1) [7].

Bricklayers' Arms therefore developed as the principal goods station of the SER, which

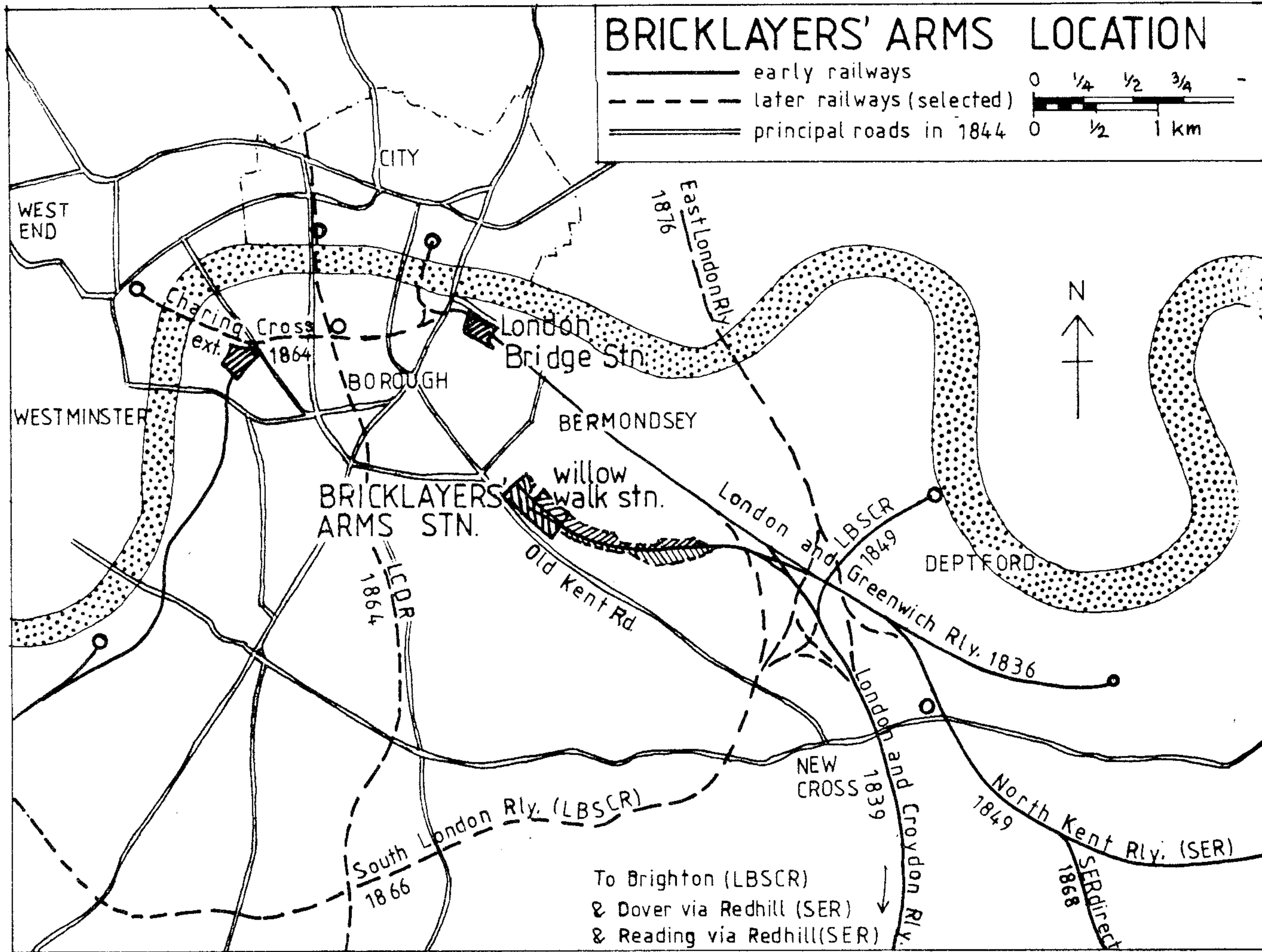


Fig.1. Location Map (Jon Wallsgrove)

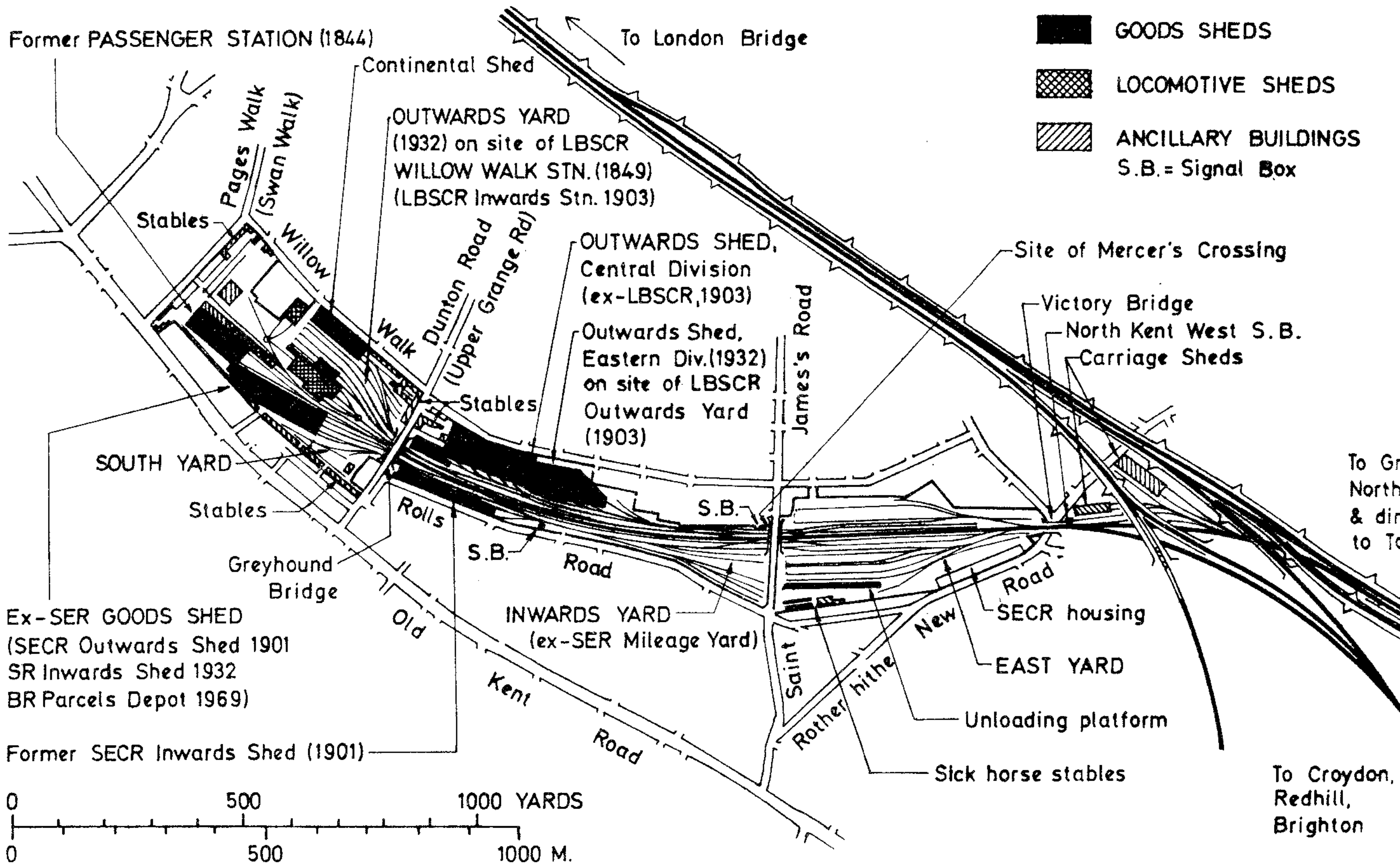


Fig.2. Plan of site in 1932

served much of Kent and the Continent through Dover and Folkestone, with also a westerly line via Redhill to Reading. Additionally, in 1845, the SER moved its principal locomotive depot to Bricklayers' Arms, and this remained an important establishment until the last years of steam traction. Then in 1849, as if to confirm the logic of the SER's strategy, the London Brighton & South Coast Railway (LBSCR) opened its own Willow Walk goods station on the north-eastern side of the SER site [8]. The LBSCR, formed in 1846 by the amalgamation of the Brighton and the Croydon with some other railway companies, served most of Sussex and east Surrey and had continental traffic via Shoreham and Newhaven [9].

The traffics of the SER and LBSCR were somewhat different from those from the Midlands and North. The country served by the two railways was relatively prosperous and well populated, but small in area and largely rural, with few manufacturing centres other than London itself. The predominant functions were to distribute all kinds of merchandise to the region and to bring farm produce back to the metropolis. The SER had special seasonal horticultural traffics, hops from Kent for the hop merchants of Southwark and fruit from Kent and the Continent for the London wholesale markets. There was a reverse flow of manure from the city's innumerable draught horses. Some manufactured products travelled inwards, such as building materials, paper from the mills of North Kent for London's packaging and printing industries, and flour, biscuits and tinned goods for the provision merchants based in Southwark. Huntley and Palmer's biscuit works at Reading was a significant user of the SER in the early 20th century [10]. Coal for local distribution was another inwards traffic, transferred to SER wagons from colliers at Angerstein's Wharf on the Thames [11].

The continental traffic using the railways was probably of a semi-express character, since the less urgent or bulky goods could be shipped more cheaply through the Port of London, particularly before the days of through wagons. Urgent parcels traffic, however, used the passenger trains into London Bridge.

#### Development and demise

Bricklayers' Arms began in 1844 as a two platform passenger station, with carriage shed, goods shed, sheep and cattle dock and local engine shed. By the early 1900s, it had expanded to include two large goods sheds, a granary, a coal yard, a cattle dock, extensive sidings, stabling for nearly 300 draught horses, various small workshops and a locomotive depot of 18 roads. In 1921, Bricklayers' Arms handled 800,000 tons of traffic per annum with about 1000 men employed in the yards and sheds and another 300 on clerical work [10].

The LBSCR had by then developed both Inwards and Outwards goods stations at Willow Walk, matching Bricklayers' Arms in their accommodation. The two companies' stations extended ultimately for 1.1 miles from Page's Walk to Rotherhithe New Road and together occupied 75 acres (Fig.2).

After the free-for-all expansion of the railways in the nineteenth century, the early twentieth century was a period of rationalisation, although traffic flourished until the 1920s. The SER and the London Chatham and Dover Railway (LCDR), bitter rivals since 1861, joined forces in 1899 as the South Eastern & Chatham Railways (SECR), allowing consolidation of traffics. In 1923, the Southern Railway (SR) was created by grouping together all the main railway companies south of the Thames. The SR reorganised the hitherto independent ex-SER and ex-LBSCR Stations into one operational unit in 1932, retaining the SER name of Bricklayers' Arms for the combined establishment. In 1948, the SR became the Southern Region of British Railways, later British Rail.

By the 1950s, many of the railways' traditional freight operations were becoming uneconomic, on account of the greater flexibility of modern road transport. With the phasing out of less-than-wagon-load traffic and the associated rationalisation following the Beeching Report of 1963, Bricklayers' Arms was reduced in 1969 to handling express parcels and a little coal and similar whole wagon traffic. The whole wagon freight facilities were in turn withdrawn in August 1977 [12]. British Rail terminated its collect-and-deliver Rail Express Parcels service throughout the UK on 19th June 1981 and railborne commercial traffic from Bricklayers' Arms thereupon ceased. [13]. The locomotive depot had closed in June 1962, when steam traction was eliminated from the South-Eastern Division of Southern Region. Following the closure of a crane maintenance depot, (transferred to Ashford, Kent), the last train left the site on 6 October 1983 [14].

#### BUILDINGS OF THE SER STATION

##### The Passenger Station of 1844

The original passenger station was designed by Lewis Cubitt, architect to the SER, and was erected by the well-known contractors, Grissell and Peto. The building was 405ft long and 215ft wide. There were two platforms, and between them under an overall roof were four tracks, interconnected by turntables to allow the marshalling of carriages. The *Illustrated London News* published a glowing account of the architecture and the accommodation for passengers, which it considered very extensive by the standards of the time [15].

On the north-eastern or departure side there were single-storey booking offices and waiting rooms, flanked externally by a Doric colonnade



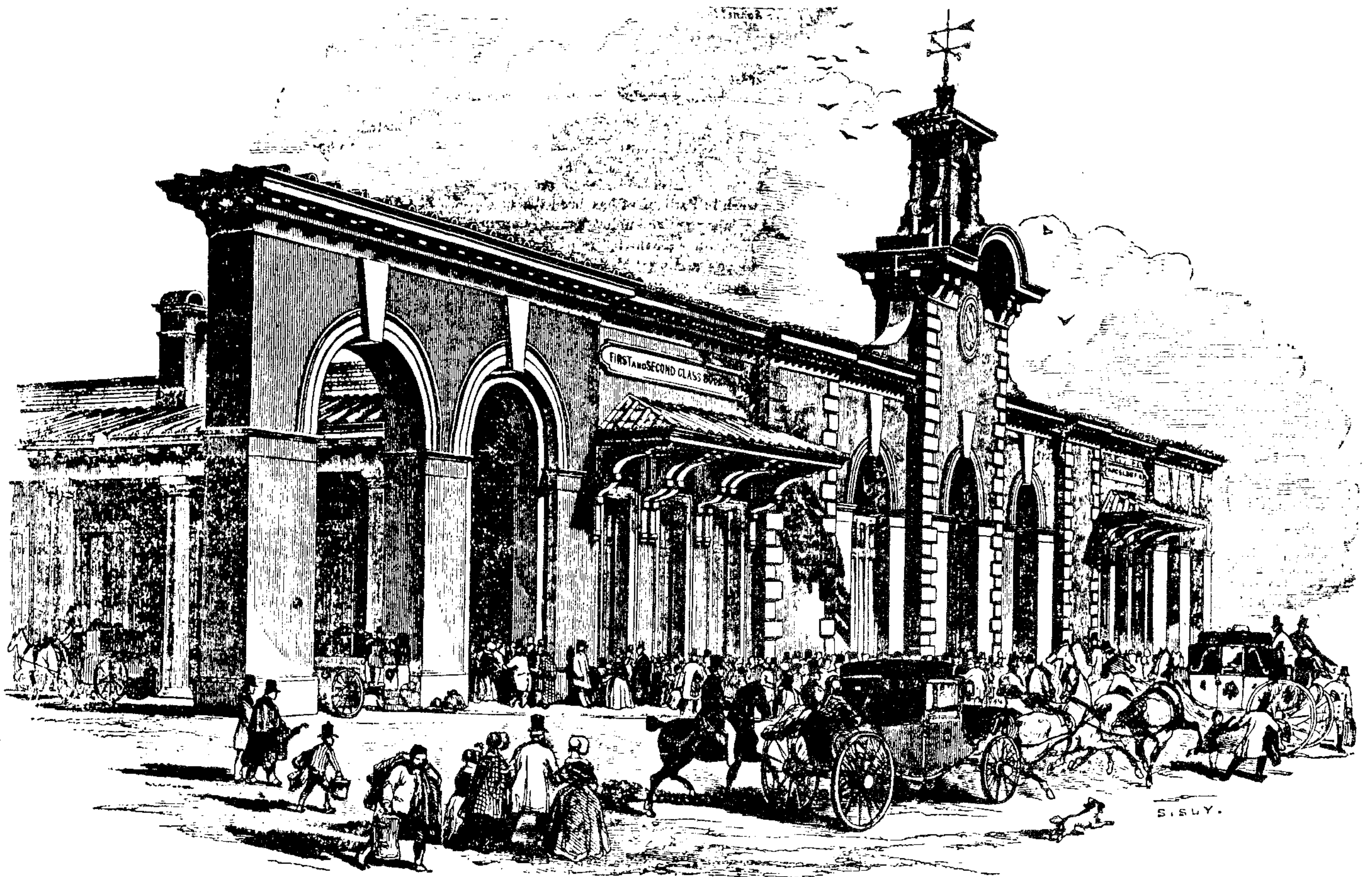


Fig.5. 1844 Passenger Station - artist's impression (Illustrated London News, 4 May 1844)



Plate 1. 1844 Booking Office in 1982

