

More History of Bricklayers Arms

The Bricklayers Arms branch, about 1¾ miles long, was built by the South Eastern Railway (SER) and opened on 1 May, 1844. The London & Croydon Railway was granted running powers from the first, these passing to the London, Brighton & South Coast Railway (LBSCR) upon its formation by amalgamation of the London & Croydon and London & Brighton companies on 27 July, 1846. The branch deviated from the Croydon line at Bricklayers Arms Junction South, some 50 chains north of New Cross [Gate].

The reason for constructing the branch was the decision of London & Greenwich Railway's (LGR) to charge 4½d (17½p) for each passenger conveyed over their metals between the junction at Corbetts Lane and London Bridge. The latter station had opened on 14 Dec., 1836 with the westward extension of the Greenwich line from Spa Road station, the first in London, which had opened 10 months previously. The London & Croydon line opened from [West] Croydon to its own London Bridge station—to the *north* of the Greenwich establishment—on 5 June, 1839.

To modern eyes, the labelling of Bricklayers Arms as the “station for the West End of London” may appear ludicrous. However, at that time a regular service of coaches stopped at the adjacent Bricklayers Arms tavern. It should also be remembered that the West End was not nearly as well developed as it is now. Despite Royal connections, it was considered very much the poor relation to the City that still formed the major and more important part of London.

Charing Cross station opened on 11 Jan., 1864 and the narrowness of its site is indicative of a terminus deemed to accommodate relatively few services: it still has only six platforms. By contrast, the equivalent SER City station at Cannon Street had nine platform faces and no fewer than 10 approach tracks when it came into use on 1 Sept., 1866.

At first Bricklayers Arms was served by all SER trains and about half of those worked by the Croydon, which soon caused a financial crisis for the LGR, which consequently offered to reduce the toll and/or lay additional lines of rails. These plans came to nothing and LGR permitted itself to be taken by the South Eastern on a 999-year lease from 1 Jan., 1845.

With the need to avoid LGR tolls now gone, the service to Bricklayers Arms faded away, the station closing to passengers in January 1852. As a matter of further interest, LGR was still independent when absorbed into the Southern at Grouping in 1923.

However, because of limited freight facilities at London Bridge—a station built on arches and thus well above local street level—SER continued to develop the cheap land along the Arms branch. It also permitted the LBSCR to construct a major London freight depot—Willow Walk—to the north of its own goods, loco, and carriage siding facilities there.

The freight depot was the last to go, closing in 1981, while the loco shed and carriage sidings went after the second phase of the Kent Coast electrification scheme was completed in June 1962. The whole area has now been redeveloped with housing and industrial units.

(Not surprisingly there are a number of very comprehensive entries about the station and subsequent facilities development on Wikipedia. A 1932 layout of the site and photos of its approaches may be found in the Middleton Press's "London Bridge to East Croydon" book published in 1988 in the Southern Main Lines series.)

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