

Gillingham Station

The station building of the Salisbury & Yeovil Railway, built in 1859, was the work of the railway architect Sir William Tite. In London, Tite was responsible for a number of public and commercial buildings including the Royal Exchange. He designed many of the stations along the S & YR. Gillingham, with its 3-storey station house, was designated a 'first-class' station. It is similar in appearance to Tite's station at Sherborne. The station is stone built, but by 1950 much of the station walling had been rendered. The tall brick chimney stacks of the station house were later taken down.

A blue plaque on the frontage commemorates the turning of the first turf in 1856 and the opening of the railway in 1859. The first turf was turned at Gillingham on 3rd April 1856, using a silver spade and an ornate hand-carved wheelbarrow. These are both to be seen in the Gillingham Museum. The line from Salisbury to Gillingham was opened on 1st May 1859, marked by a large celebration attended by the whole of the town.



Left: The plaque on the station frontage; Right: the hand barrow used in 1856, to be seen in the Gillingham Museum

Gillingham station soon played an important role in both passenger and freight traffic. London could now be reached in a matter of hours rather than days, although most journeys to the capital involved a change at Salisbury. Milk could now be carried to London, at first in churns which lined the platform when waiting for the arrival of the milk trains. Other goods traffic increased as more industry arrived, and the station and goods yard saw the movement of bricks and tiles, timber, coal for local

merchants, and the products of the bacon and glue factories. Compton Stud at Sandley was a regular user of the station for transporting bloodstock around the country.

The station had a 'Dando' or wind-operated water pump on the north side of the line which pumped water for use by locomotives on both platforms. The original iron footbridge was replaced by the footbridge from Dinton, after the station's closure in 1966. The standard L & SWR signal box was replaced in 1956 by a British Railways signal box.



Two views of the station in the 1950s

During World War I the station played an important role in moving wounded troops to the Red Cross hospitals in the town at Plank House and Station Road (see separate information sheets), and in Mere and Sutton Veney. Groups of Red Cross volunteers would await the arrival of trains and escort the wounded to the hospitals.

In June 1889 the station saw the arrival of the Liberal politician William Gladstone, in a train hauled by a flower-adorned locomotive. On 3rd July 1952 Gillingham was visited HM Queen Elizabeth II, who arrived at the station from Yeovil and was met by a welcome from local dignitaries and schoolchildren. She later visited the National Stud at Sandley and Duchy of Cornwall estates in Mere. The Queen made a further visit in 1991, when she arrived by train to visit Port Regis school, where her grandchildren were pupils.

During the 1960s services on the line were run down, and much of the line between Salisbury and Exeter was single-tracked. Gillingham, along with other stations on the line, lost all of its goods facilities. In recent years, passenger services and timetables have improved, and it can be difficult on some days to find a space in the station car park.

