

County Police Station, Bridge Street



County Police Station, Bridge Street, Abingdon (2001)

Highlights

About to be remodelled as part of the Old Gaol development at the time of writing, the former County Police Station dominates the west side of Bridge Street. It was built in 1856-7 and the architect was J B Clacy. It is one of the three surviving buildings from Abingdon's heyday as Berkshire's county town. When built, it had domestic accommodation for a superintendent and a sergeant, and stables to the rear for them to use when visiting outposts elsewhere in the county. The building to the left, in a very similar style replaced a former court room, but this was demolished in 2011 to make a new entrance to the Old Gaol. Inside the police station, there was a rabbit-warren of rooms, and all the domestic areas had been converted to offices by 1999 when it closed. However, it did have a suite of three cells deep inside. It is hoped that these will survive the redevelopment.

Site History

The former County Police Station stands on Bridge Street, a busy main road over the key Thames crossing which has contributed to the historic importance of Abingdon for many centuries. Its location in relation to the bridge and other main public buildings in the town is shown on the 25" 1st edition OS map (Fig.1). It shows a 'Court Room' attached to the police station, a 'Gaol Lodge', and a number of structures in the area to the rear. All of these have now gone, apart from vestiges incorporated in other buildings. The dominant structure in this part of the town is the former County Gaol, built in the early 19th century.

The Police Station occupies the front of a wedge-shaped plot, its western boundary respecting the line of a carriageway (now Turnagain Lane) which served a number of properties to the north-west, and which may have been related to the White Hart Inn, on the site of which the gaol was built. The Police Station had a narrow walled area extending over the present pavement, through which a gateway led directly to the front door. The northern part of the building returns at an acute angle along the lane and contained separate suite, entered from the lane, and with a stairway leading to the upper rooms.

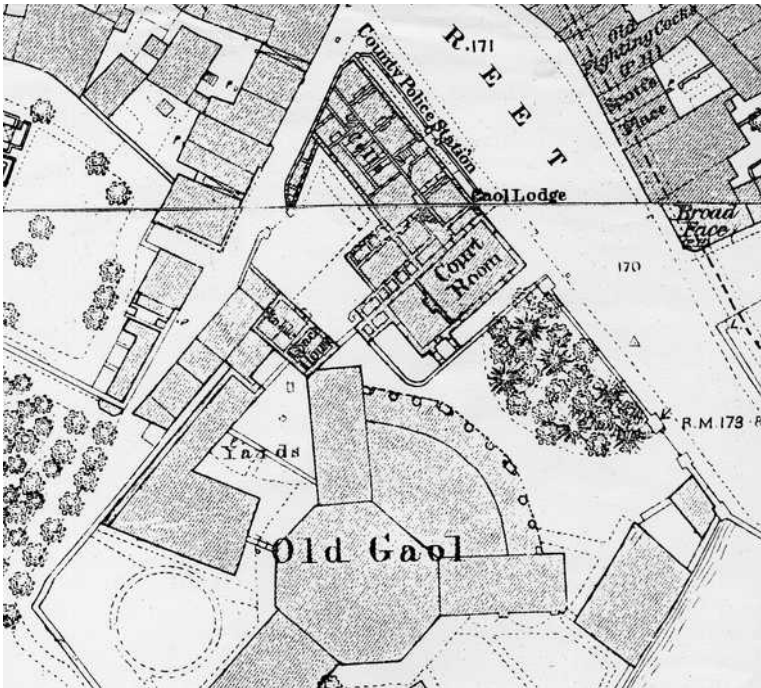


Figure 1 Extract from 1st edition OS map (1874)

Building description and history

Note: this was written before the building was converted. All references to structures no longer standing have been removed, but the main building has been described as it was when recorded in 2001.

The earliest extant plans show that the ground floor consisted of the sergeant's private suite with a drawing room, sitting room, kitchen and pantry on the north side, the Superintendent's study to the left of the entry lobby. Three cells backed on to these rooms in the centre of the building, their doors opening on to a corridor, the only access to which was from the guard room. Communal areas including an enquiry office, guard room, mess room and scullery occupied the rest of the ground floor space. On the first floor, the remaining rooms of the sergeant's flat (which, from the disposition of the doorways could have extended to 4 bedrooms and a bathroom) and a further 5 bedrooms and a bathroom, presumably for the other ranks. Nine of the 12 rooms were heated. A modern ground floor plan is shown below at Fig.2.

The site of the Court Room was incorporated into the station with a later building, the street façade of which extended over the former SE end wall of the station building.

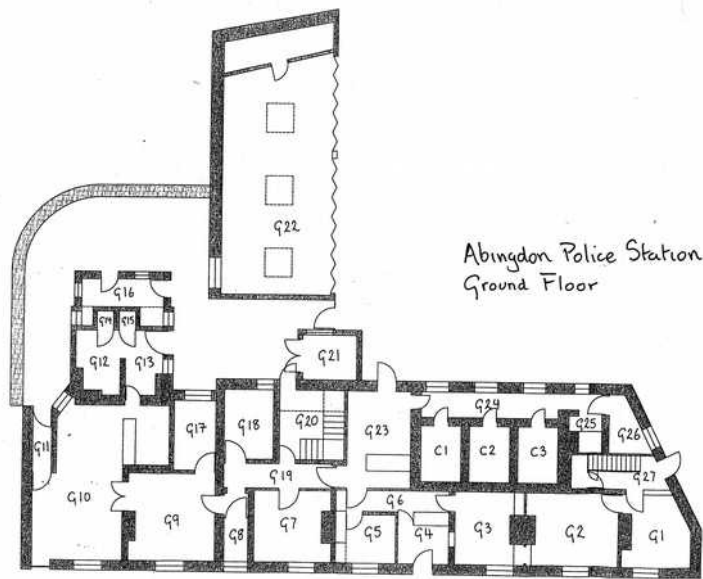


Figure 2 Ground floor plan

Behind the police station was a yard, entered through a gateway in the lane. A stable and coach-house are shown on the OS map, and part of the rear and southern walls remained until recently incorporated into some modern garages on the site. In a 1948 plan, this end of the structure then in place still contained a coach house, stall and loose box, and also a harness room.

Exterior

The original façade is plain and unpretentious, articulated with seven bays, symmetrical about a central doorway, but with evidence of a former doorway (to the Gaol Lodge) at the southern end, now blocked with lighter coloured bricks. An ashlar platband contains the inscription, COUNTY POLICE STATION in the centre, incised in Roman capitals.

Building Materials

The external walling material is roughly coursed dark yellow ochre limestone rubble, with at first floor level, a stone platband on the street elevation, returning into the lane, but only along the first (visible) section of the wall.

The mortar is grey ribbon-banded lime, apparently deliberately darkened with the addition of ash or charcoal. The stonework of the rear elevation is random rubble, again mostly limestone, but with some darker brown greensand blocks as well.

At the southern rear corner of the building, the upper part of the wall which returns to the later extension has ashlar quoins, such as appear nowhere else. There was probably a need to re-quin this corner of the police station when the courtroom was removed; the OS map shows that this building extended much further to the west than the present structure, so the police station wall would have been exposed.

On the street and lane elevations, the stone is blackened (presumably from air pollution from the heavy traffic in the road outside), but this is completely absent at the rear, the contrast being so abrupt as to be anomalous. There are various pointing materials at the rear, some hard modern cement mortars, others lime-based. The darkening seen at the front is not in evidence at the rear.

The roof is hipped and covered with Welsh slate with dark blue ridge tiles. It seems to have been re-roofed, presumably in the twentieth century when central heating was introduced and the original chimneystacks were removed.

Doors and Windows

The doorways have flat brick arches, that on the front gauged, to the side, of plain brick. Each has an overlight with rectangular glazed lights (five over the front door, four over that to the superintendent's flat)

The main doorway (1m 28cm x 2m x 48cm) is reached by means of a flight of three steps with twentieth-century iron handrails on either side. The front door is panelled, but covered with a sheet of chip-board and painted blue. The 'blue lamp' which hung above the door as the traditional sign of a police station has been removed ('to prevent the public thinking the station was still in operation'). It is apparently in safe-keeping somewhere.

There is evidence in the stonework and use of a different mortar under the southernmost window of the northern range that the present window replaced a doorway at this point.

The quoins and window dressings are red brick (233mm x 120mm x 65mm); the sills are painted stone. The flat arches above the windows and doors are of fine rubbed orange sandy brickwork, except at the rear, where the upper windows have ordinary brick arches, and the lower (cell block) windows have stone lintels below stone relieving arches (which relate precisely to those of the cell windows in the Old Gaol behind) and diamond-section iron bars (currently visible only from inside). The bars appear to have been set in to the sill and lintel during construction, to ensure the greatest difficulty of removal.

The northernmost bay at the rear also has a further window on the ground floor, with a brick surround, and an iron grille. The stonework gives little away of the presence of an earlier doorway at the northern end into the former kitchen, but the rebuilding of the wall at this point helps to explain the lack of blackening of the stone in this area.

The windows are of 8 over 8 pane vertically hung sashes with narrow glazing bars. Those in the ground floor street elevation (three each side of the doorway) have been covered with security material painted to resemble sash windows. There are seven identical windows lighting the first floor rooms.

The ground floor is ventilated by a series of ceramic tiles to the right of the doorway, and by iron grilles on the left.

At the Turnagain Lane elevation, there is a small ground floor window with plain brick surround and stone sill, now obscured by boarding, and at the first floor level, an 8 over 8 sash without horns.

This type of window continues along the rear elevation; the northernmost has an externally fitted iron grille. All the windows of the southern extension are blocked at the rear, except for one six-over-six paned vertical sash window without horns at first floor level. All have stone sills, and brick lintels in a slightly curved arch.

A rear extension to the ground floor has two narrow windows 154cm x 57cm, with stone lintels and painted stone sills, and on both sides a wide relieving arch of two courses of headers. On the north, there is a door and window (both blocked) within; on the south, only a window, but a change in the colour and texture of the brick infill suggests a similar pattern to that on the north at some stage.

Rear Elevation

The rear area of the police station bears the scars of a number of changes to the structures on the site, but the original 7-bay scheme can still be discerned. The two right-hand bays (within the inner compound of the station) have the following features at ground floor level, from right to left. First, red brick quoins in stretcher bond, a blocked doorway, the infill of more orange-red brick, some possibly re-used. In the wall above, blackened shadow of former rainwater pipe across stonework of wall at an angle to an ashlar quoin with scars of former fixing. Above the doorway, some white pigment on the stonework, and on a brick buttress (ht. 2.26m) to the left. Next, a window (covered with chip-board) in bay 7 with brick dressings and stone sill matching those in window above. Just above the top of the window arch, to the left, a stone corbel, and the stones of the surrounding wall again with traces of white pigment. Then, very close to it, a modern doorway with a wooden, slate-covered hood, lamp under, lead flashing to the wall.

Interior layout and features (in 2001)

The present ground floor plan is shown above (Fig.2) and the spaces are numbered according to that plan. The front door enters in to a small vestibule (G4), a modern screen and doorway preventing public access beyond. The original plan, however, shows a stairway in this area, no trace of which now remains. Beyond, a short spine corridor gives access to some of the ground floor rooms: the street side of this is a modern insertion. The original plan showed a very limited degree of communication between the rooms, as the original requirement was to a large extent a requirement for domestic accommodation for police officers and their families. When it closed, all the rooms were offices or recreational rooms, with specific functions. Some partition walls have been opened up, but a number of original features remain.

Between two rooms on the ground floor, part of the original wall has been removed, and the space fitted with a climb-through cupboard (between G3 and G4), presumably for bulky items to be passed to the lost-property office.

While the uses of rooms elsewhere in the building have changed, the major fixed element in the plan remained the block of three cells (discussed below) in the centre of the building.

One of the upstairs rooms was recorded in some detail, as an example. Many of the features, such as the fitted cupboards, brass door-locks¹, window and door mouldings, are present in other rooms. We were unable to record the fireplace as it was blocked and boarded.

In the 'interview room', there were acoustic panels on the walls, and a red light on the exterior to show when the room was being used.

Ephemera

When the police left, there were a number of posters, scrawled inscriptions, and other ephemera. Many of these were posters in general use at the time, such as reminders like 'Have you locked your bike?' and exhortations such as, 'Pavements are for People'. There was also a white-board in one of the offices (F4), showing the names of those on duty just before the station closed. There were 4 units, each under a Sergeant, with 6 or 7 officers. Other groups indicated on the board were the Special Constables, Civilians, and Traffic Wardens.

Decorative Scheme

Examination of the paintwork on the walls showed that the original paint colour on the plaster was a heavy green, then mid-green (downstairs), or pale blue (upstairs) then a layer of wallpaper, on top of which white, then yellow, a grey, possibly undercoat, and finally, 'magnolia'. All woodwork in the main building appears to have had a brown stain or painted finish.

On the upper floor is a small suite, comprising a toilet and shower-room, and ante-room, the latter with linoleum floor-covering, and curtained windows (all the other windows in the station have Venetian blinds). The door to the inner room has a sign indicating a female toilet, and this, with the clear difference of furnishing materials, indicates the presence of a special facility for female officers, and hence is likely to post-date the introduction of female officers to police forces, in 1945².

¹ By Gibbons of Wolverhampton.

² There was a Womens Police Force in existence in 1915, but although women had been employed as auxiliaries since 1941, Indge (1956) records that the first WPCs arrived in Berkshire in 1945.

Roof construction

The roof of the main station building was difficult to access, but visual inspection from the first floor corridor showed trusses of softwood with king-posts and raking struts to the principals. The roof was pierced by a skylight opening onto a long timber light-well which brought natural light to the upper corridor.

The Cell-block



This is one of the most interesting features of the building, both in terms of the retention of original features, and for the evidence it contains for the use of these rooms for the detention of those suspected of having committed an offence. The block is entered through a pair of doors, one timber, the other a wrought iron security gate.

Figure 3 Door to cell corridor from the guard room

To open the gate, the officer had first to unlock, using a key, a small wall-safe indicated by diagonal stripes of white and red, a few inches to the right of the doorway. Inside this safe was a sliding metal bolt with a brass doorknob. The 'business end' being a solid iron wedge which penetrated the outermost vertical member of the gate. A further security measure on the hinge side was a small iron projection on the gate which fitted into a matching recess in the doorpost, so ensuring that when closed the gate could not be lifted from its hinges.



Figure 4 Cell corridor from the south



The outer door opens into a narrow corridor (Fig.4), lit by the small windows high on the wall on the left, with the cells to the right. Each cell has a wooden outer door, then an iron gate similar to that at the entrance to the cell corridor, but with a facing of sheet metal, containing a small window, presumably as a concession to privacy.

Figure 5 Metal inner cell door with window and speaking grille

Below this is a panel with small holes forming concentric rings, presumably allowing spoken communication to take place. There also appears to be a sliding mechanism for

introducing food into the cell. The locks are also of similar design, as shown in fig 6. The specification for these locks survives in the Berkshire Record Office, along with a number of tenders received.³ There is no evidence either in the building or in the Record Office, as to which firm won the job, although James Wilder & Sons of Reading submitted the lowest tender.



Figure 6 Cell lock

The outer wooden doors present a plain plank face inward to the cell, but to the corridor, the carpentry details can be seen to comprise a surrounding frame, the upper and lower part of which contain cross-members, all the inside edges being finished with chamfers and stops. An additional lock is fixed to the outer edge.

Inside each cell is a built-in unit comprising a wooden bedstead and toilet. These are probably not original, as in two of the cells they do not quite fit the space neatly, and the beds are in different positions. These fittings may date from the mid twentieth century. The toilets were originally flushed by a chain-operated cistern in the corridor outside, hence at the convenience of the officer in charge, rather than that of the detainee. The presence of a chain in the cell was probably also thought to be a risk – either for use as a weapon or for suicide. Later, inside push-buttons were installed.

Historical Background: law and order in Abingdon

At the time (1856/7) when the County Police Station was built, Abingdon was in its final years as county town of Berkshire. Functions were already threatened with transfer to Reading, which by then had its own gaol.

In 1784, John Howard, the prison reformer, visited Abingdon and reported on two earlier penal institutions, the County Bridewell, also referred to as a House of Correction, and the Abingdon Town Gaol. The latter was described as 'several rooms over a gateway', presumably the Abbey Gatehouse, in which there was a police station in the nineteenth century⁴. Before the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835, there were no formal local police forces. Some towns had watchmen appointed by the Paving Commissioners, and a Constable appointed by the Corporation. Abingdon set up a borough police force in 1836, consisting of an inspector, two day constables and five night constables. The gatehouse was a station and inspector's house. Part of this was within the right-hand arch of the

³ Berkshire Record Office (MF 10075 APc4)

⁴ Horn, *op cit* p.86 shows a photograph of it as a police station in 1858.

gateway, which was unblocked in 1865 after the new station was built to the south-east of the gateway. The 1st Edition OS map clearly shows this with a block of three cells. This closed in the 1890s, when all police activity was transferred to the County Police Station in Bridge Street.

The County police force was formed in 1856⁵, following the enactment of the County and Borough Police Act of the same year, but its genesis was an 1839 report commissioned by Sir Robert Peel into the best means of establishing an efficient constabulary force in the counties. Answering to a Chief Constable, the force was divided into districts, the Northern being based at Abingdon, and comprising a superintendent (William Lott Hunt), two sergeants (James Read and John Bostock) and 15 constables, 2 in Abingdon, and the remainder based in the villages around. Two years later, the force was reorganised to correspond to the nine petty sessions divisions of the county, and the Northern District became the Abingdon Division. During the 1860s, a number of other duties were imposed on the police forces, including a requirement for the superintendent to be the local inspector of weights and measures, and in 1870 a duty to 'relieve' vagrants, under the Pedlars Act of that year. In Wallingford, one of the front windows of the police station⁶ was opened to issue the tramps with their tokens for a night at the workhouse.

Superintendents were required to carry out their travelling duties on horseback, and carts were used to bring prisoners to the station. There was a coach house and stables to the rear of the police station yard in Abingdon. Originally, contractors supplied the horses, but in 1862 the service was taken in-house.

Police dogs, originally for tracking suspects, do not seem to have been part of the force until after WW2. In Newbury, orders for 1938⁷ show that tracker dogs were hired from a local kennels as needed. Mounted police were also a twentieth century introduction in Berkshire, appearing in Wallingford in 1904. A writer in the Berks and Oxon Advertiser of 16 December of that year felt this to be a burden too much to bear: 'as we are almost without crime this seems to us as unnecessary as it would be for the County Council to send down umbrellas for Hermon's ducks on the river'.

Another structure associated with law and order in nineteenth-century Abingdon was a 'Court Room' shown on the 1st Edition OS map to the south-east of the police station. This may have been for the Police Court, which larger⁸ towns could set up with a stipendiary magistrate following an Act of 1863. It seems that it had not been built in 1858, when a view of the gaol was drawn⁹, but the map evidence shows it to be there in 1876. However, it was demolished when the extension was built on to the police station, thus dating the extension to after 1876. But when and why was it built in the first place? The lower part of the distinctive curved wall shown on the OS map still existed in 2001.

⁵ see Indge, W (1956) for a history of the force.

⁶ Dewey et al (1989) p.163

⁷ Tolman (1994) p.63

⁸ ie with a population of more than 25,000. Abingdon was much smaller (ca.11,000) so why this was built needs investigating further.

⁹ Horn, *op cit* p.33 shows a print of 1858 in which the court room does not appear.

A photograph by Henry Taunt¹⁰ of ca.1890 appears to show the frontage to Bridge Street as having a gable with a steeply pitched roof with deep eaves, but this date is much later than that normally given for the present extension. The photograph also shows a low wall in front of this and the police station, descending the slope in three distinct stages.

Documentary Evidence for the building and occupation history of the site.

The station building was designed by J B Clacy and built by James Thomas, builders, of Abingdon at a tender price of £1312 9s 5d, dated 25 July 1856.¹¹

The census of 1871 shows that there were 14 people living in the police station on the night in question, the superintendent, Peter Hedger, his wife, Jane, and a family of 4 daughters and two sons, two constables, George Beale and Joseph Price (the latter with his wife and two children) and one prisoner, a 20-year old labourer by the name of Frederick Hutchins. In 1891, however, the complement was much less: an inspector and two constables, a total of five people, with no children or prisoners.

Other Police Stations in former Berkshire

The original establishment of the Berks. Constabulary entailed the construction of six District stations, at Abingdon, Faringdon, Ilsley, Newbury, Wantage and Wallingford. Those at Wantage and at Faringdon, have been converted into housing, the latter in the 1970s. The Newbury building still stands, but the police moved out to a new station in 1966¹². That at Ilsley does not appear to have survived. It seems that different builders were contracted for each of the stations, and there are no common architectural features.

Wallingford's police station was also built in 1856/7, in Fish Street, now St Mary's Street. The Oxford Chronicle of 18 July 1857 reported that, 'the elevation presents a very pleasing appearance, and will be an additional architectural adornment to the town. In the interior the offices for the police have been planned with every regard to convenience and comfort, but the cells for the prisoners are very dismal places indeed, and seem calculated to bring the most hardened offenders like St Patrick's snakes and toads "to a sense of their situation". Several of our loose fish have already inspected these places, and express infinite disgust at the severity of the accommodation in store for them'.

The photographs of parts of the frontage reproduced in Dewey et al (1989)¹³ show a carriage entrance with ashlar dressings and a canted two-storey wing in brick with ashlar plinth, quoins and window dressings, those on the ground floor being rusticated with deep incisions.

¹⁰ reproduced in Hammond, 1996 p.23

¹¹ Berkshire Record Office, Reading. (MF 10075 APc1)

¹² Tolman *op cit* p.64

¹³ eg. pp.163 and 252

Discussion: phases and dates of construction

The surviving section of the station was built in 1856/7. From the map evidence, the attached court room and gaol lodge were part of it at this time also. Then, in the 1890s, the court room was demolished, and the southern extension built on its foundations, adopting the two-step lower floor level, but wrapping round at the front and fitting in under the eaves of the earlier part. To the rear was a coach house and stable, with a kitchen and other outbuildings at the northern side of the outer courtyard.

By the mid twentieth century, there was a roofed over connexion from the station to the rear stable building, used as a recreation room, and the kitchen had been replaced by cycle sheds and other structures.

Post war developments included a further extension to the rear of the southern range, the construction of a boiler house for central heating, with the consequent blocking in of the fireplaces, removal of the chimneys, and re-roofing of both parts of the structure.

Later still, a single-storey lean-to at the rear of the southern extension was built to contain toilet facilities, and allow the recreation room which now took up most of the ground floor of the building, to have suitable kitchens and storage facilities.

The suite of rooms to the north, entered from the lane, have a high standard of finish, and, although they connect with the main station at the upper level, are essentially self-contained. This suggests that they were the residence of the superintendent, or chief officer of the unit based at the station.

The later changes to the building reflect changed requirements. The superintendent's living rooms became the Property Officer's rooms, containing both items confiscated from miscreants (in recent times drug-related items and pornographic videos) and lost property.

The lower floor of the 1870s extension contained a bar and recreation area, reflecting the need for the force to reinforce its social cohesion, but also a requirement for minimal social contact with the general public. Police officers were required, for example, to return to the station for meals while on duty, rather than buy them in the locality in which they are working.

Conclusions

The recording of the County Police Station in Abingdon uncovered a wealth of detail which has shed light on the operations of the force between its establishment in 1856 and the date when it left the premises. The building evidence has in some cases been confirmed and enlightened by the plans, photographs and documentation which survive, but one value of this work has been to highlight the effects of the loss of documentation from the very recent past which would have confirmed or otherwise many of the conclusions which have been put forward as tentative. We would urge local authorities

not to dispose of their records in this way, and to ensure they are deposited in record offices as a basis for future workers. The story of Law and Order in Oxfordshire has yet to be written, but much exists, and could be pulled together. We hope this study has shown in some small way what can be done, and that others will take the work forward in the future to ensure that future generations are aware of this part of our local history.

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Annex

Berkshire Record Office, Reading. Extract from transcript of MF 10075 APc1

1. Contract for Abingdon Police Station 1856

Tender for £1312.9.5 from James Thomas, Builders, Abingdon, 25 July 1856
No details other than price.

2. Articles of agreement between Mayor, Aldermen and Burgesses of the Borough of Abingdon, Berks. acting as the urban sanitary authority, and John Thornhill Morland, gentleman, Clerk of the Peace acting for Her Majesty's Justices of the Peace of the same county, 9 November 1878. The Justices are the owners [of the Police Station] and are desirous of draining the same into the town sewer. The agreement permits this to be done.

Extract from transcript of MF 10075 APc4

1. Cell fittings. Supervising officer, J B Cla(c)y, County Surveyor, Reading, July 1856
Specifications for the fittings of cells of police stations at Abingdon, Ilsley, Faringdon, Newbury, Wantage and Wallingford.

Unspecific plans for lock boxes

Tenders received from:

Wilders, Reading, £268

another, Reading £532.5.0

Edwards Castle Ironworks, Swindon, £277.5.0

another, Reading £425

Williams, Reading, £340, who foresaw a difficulty in getting the L-iron of the right specification on the proposed time schedule, suggested cast iron in consultation with surveyors

Baker, Compton, £355.2.0

Newbury firm, £339.18.7

James Cadel & Son, Faringdon, who quoted only for the station in that town, £56.16.0

No record of who won the contract, but presumably Wilders.