

Research and Development. The National Aircraft Factory Branch Line.

Members of the Archive Team (Colin Richardson and Peter Skinner) recently noticed that the platform attached to the Steve Frieze Removals and Storage business had been tidied up and become more visible. The platform was, of course, once in use for the branch railway line which served the National Aircraft Factory and its successors from 1918 to about 1924.

The 1960 aerial photograph below is often referred to in this article. A London A – Z street map could be useful in conjunction with the aerial view. The numbers refer to the aerial photograph. Also in this picture are a dotted white line indicating Headley Avenue, more or less between ‘2’ and ‘3’, to its right a single white line representing the railway ‘track bed’ and to its right another dotted white line indicating Merebank Lane.

It was decided to check if there were any other reminders of the route taken by the branch line from the factory platform ‘1’, to Stafford Road and then across Stafford Road ‘2’ and then via the curve round to join the West Croydon to Epsom railway line ‘3’, with a recreation ground shown to its left.



Aerial view from 1960 looking approx. north. Stafford Road runs across the picture from left to right, just below ‘2’. The numbers refer to the text above. (Handford/Tom Samson).

The Steve Frieze Platform. ‘1’.

The platform is a significant relic of the factory branch line, still remaining in 2011 in Princes Way. This part of the line continued south across Queensway to alongside the west side of the NAF hangar (known to CAS as ‘C’ hangar).



This is the north end of the platform adjoining the Steve Frieze Removals and Storage business in Princes Way. The line continued roughly southwards across Queensway and on to the west side of Croydon Airport's 'C' hangar. (Peter Skinner, June 2011.).

Crossing Stafford Road. '2'.

Position '2' on the 1960 photograph above shows a side wall and roof apex of a business at rather a strange angle, with a gap to the next business on the right. A stall with canopy occupies the gap at ground level. This is where the branch line crossed Stafford Road.

In June, 2011, some building modifications are evident. Two businesses now fill the gap, with the upper storey of one forming a bridge over a narrow passageway.



The far left of the picture clearly shows the wall and apex of a business at a strange angle relative to the 'new' businesses, 'Charcoal Grill' and 'Ozzie's Café', on its right. The narrow passageway occupies part of the space where the branch line passed after crossing Stafford Road. (Peter Skinner, June 2011.).

Between Stafford Road, '2', and the Curved Banking, '3'.

(A London A – Z or local street map will be handy for local Members. For others, a continuous white line has been placed on the picture from behind the Stafford Road crossing point by '2' to the railway banking '3' showing the branch line route.).

It came as a surprise to the CAS researchers when it was discovered that most of the 'track bed' between Stafford Road and the curved banking which joined the Croydon to Epsom railway line is still visible in 2011! Today the 'track bed', shown as a continuous white line, serves to access the rear of the gardens of houses between Headley Avenue (between '2' and '3', shown as a dotted line on the 1960 aerial view) and Merebank Lane (also shown as a dotted line on the aerial view). A few garages and sheds appear along the route but its narrowness and grass surface makes vehicular use and turning difficult. There are links via passages from both Headley Avenue and Merebank Lane. On maps the 'track bed' between the gardens runs close to the route of the Croydon district boundary. [e.g. Ref.1].



The 'track bed' looking south towards 'Charcoal Grill' and Stafford Road. (Peter Skinner, June 2011).

The 'track bed' looking north towards the curved banking '3'. The house is in Godalming Avenue. (Peter Skinner, June 2011).

The curved Banking '3',

The curved banking is clearly visible in the labelled photograph at '3'. There has been little change between 1960 and today (July 2011). The banking can be accessed from the adjacent recreation ground. Trains from the Waddon direction bound for the National Aircraft Factory would pass the branch line intersection and after the points had been set, reverse onto the branch line and onwards to the Factory. When a train left the Factory bound for Waddon, it would halt just past the intersection and then reverse towards a line cross-over to regain the correct track. Good co-ordination was needed by the railway staff involved regarding the operation of any train using the branch line.

Reference:-

1. Cluett, Douglas et al; The First Croydon Airport, 1915-1928, 2nd Edition; Croydon Airport Society, 2001; ISBN 0-9541370-0-0. See sketch maps inside front and rear covers.
2. The Local Studies Departments of both Croydon and Sutton Libraries contain various large scale maps relevant to the text. In some, the branch line track has been overdrawn.