

HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA

RAILWAY STATION REPORT

Title: Canadian National Railways Station
Grimsby, Ontario

Source: Anne M. de Fort-Menares, Toronto

RSR-218

INTRODUCTION

The Canadian National Railways (CNR) station at 55 Ontario street in Grimsby (Figures 1-3) was built by the Grand Trunk Railway (GTR) in 1902. It replaced a station built in 1900, which burned in 1902. This station in turn had replaced an earlier structure built by the Great Western Railway (GWR). The 1902 station was rebuilt as part of a significant upgrading programme carried out across the entire GTR system. The new station responded to the proven importance of Grimsby as a shipping depot for agricultural and industrial products. Architecturally the new building represented the epitome of GTR flamboyance, with unequal towers anchoring the passenger end of a long, decorated board and batten design.

In 1976 the CNR station was leased privately and redeveloped as a commercial tourism initiative. It has functioned as a combined bar and restaurant since about 1979, with a limited vestibule to shelter passengers riding the four daily VIA trains. The removal of freight sheds and sidings has made the yard into a through-line, diminishing its historic role as a busy depot, but the station remains viable and familiar in the commercial life of the town. The station is considered a significant landmark in Grimsby, where heritage character is promoted as contributing to the town's quality of life and identity.

HISTORICAL ASSOCIATIONS

Thematic

Dating from the 1895-1917 period of consolidation and capital improvements, the Grimsby station exemplifies the considerable investment made by the GTR in upgrading all parts of its system. For decades, the company had been criticised by farmers and town councils for its policies favouring long-distance shippers at the expense of local service; the upgrading and construction of

facilities signalled the company's recognition of provincial interests. The GWR track that opened through Grimsby in 1855 was the earliest main line through the peninsula, and served an international role in providing a through line linking the New England states with the American west. The railway contributed to the growth of manufacturing and agricultural specialization in the region, from the time of its original construction, well into the 20th century. This station represents the economic prosperity that was made possible and supported by the railway.

The number of lines that proliferated in the peninsula, peaking at four simultaneously in 1860 but spanning the histories of at least eight companies, was symptomatic of the "problem" of Canadian transportation: the reliance on external ports, markets, and investors, and the impossibility of funding services from local revenues. Railway development in the Niagara region, as in much of Canadian railway history, reflected the desires of directors and shareholders situated well beyond its borders. The passing of the GWR line through Grimsby, for example, was something of an afterthought. Initially advocated in 1834, the GWR revived its charter in 1845 to link the Detroit and Niagara rivers via London. The intended eastern terminus at Burlington Bay, north of Hamilton, was relocated to the site that would become the city of Niagara Falls in 1851. Grimsby, along with St. Catharines and other villages along the route, was therefore on the mainline.¹

By 1900, Canadian railway activities focused on western expansion and the construction of the two later transcontinental lines. The network was essentially completed in Ontario, and most smaller lines had collapsed into the Grand Trunk, including the GWR mainline through Grimsby. While most communities needed transportation, in the case of the Niagara region transportation needed the region. Shipments from the west crossed the border at Detroit, traversed southern Ontario, and from Niagara Falls proceeded toward the Erie Canal and Mohawk valley, reaching the ice-free port of New York. Niagara's advantages as the shortest route between Michigan and the eastern seaboard may have been overestimated by early promoters, but the Amtrak Toronto to New York passenger train still runs through Niagara Falls daily.

The GTR was buoyant and confident in 1900. For the first time it paid dividends on its preference stocks, which had risen enormously in value, and total gross revenues in the half-year ending December 1899 were the largest in the history of the railway.² The company was able to improve its lines, build hundreds of railway cars and locomotives, and spend around \$800,000 annually on maintenance and improvements. The GTR was the largest taxpayer in the Dominion, one of the largest manufacturers, and a great catalyst for industry: their traffic department calculated that 115 new industries were established along their lines across the country in 1901.³

To uphold its technological reputation for safe, well-built properties, the company had invested £1 million in double-tracking the line from Montreal to Toronto, completed in 1892. Another major project to double-track the line from Toronto to Windsor was undertaken in 1900 to facilitate the movement of traffic, particularly freight.⁴ Increased passenger business was expected in connection with the Pan-American exposition held in Buffalo in 1901, although the track was not completed in time for that purpose.⁵ The rebuilding of the Grimsby station in a style expressing the exuberant optimism of the company reflected an expectation of continuing growth in a high-traffic area.

Local Development

The splendid Grimsby station recognized the business importance of the town, where the railway had been instrumental in enlarging the market and tourism spheres. For the agricultural economy, trains carried perishable fruit farther, faster; and in conjunction with the interurban railways, the GTR brought tourists to the Grimsby Beach amusement park, the religious camp, and other nearby vacation spots. The town's geographical situation half-way between Hamilton and St. Catharines, and between Toronto and Buffalo, placed Grimsby strategically on major transportation routes connecting the American eastern seaboard with the west. All these activities were supported and maintained through the present station.

Buffalo, New York, was a key transportation node for rail and water transport in the 19th century. As the western terminus for the Erie Canal leading to the port of New York, Buffalo attracted the eastern termini of nearly all the Great Lakes shipping lines, in addition to 14 trunk lines with terminals or through-stations in the city. Any town in the region with aspirations to progress vied for railway links appropriate to their desired status.

Grimsby benefited from traffic between its larger neighbours, particularly Buffalo and Toronto, and from the business they generated locally. The effects on commerce were all that could be hoped. New markets became more accessible for local products, so that new trades and services could be set up in the community, and a public infrastructure of schools, municipal buildings, and service organizations slowly followed. One of the leading manufacturers was the Grout Agricultural Works, set up two years after the railway opened in 1854.⁶

In Grimsby, local manufacturing responded to changes in land use, with the emergence of numerous cooperages, basket factories, canneries, and dehydrator plants. The shift around 1880 from mixed, primarily subsistence farming, to specialized fruit crops was supported and partially enabled by railway service.⁷ Metal industries developed after 1900, with manufacturers of appliances, stoves, furniture, and other specialties, such as ice

cream parlour furniture, located here; the basketry manufacture was the largest single employment sector.⁸

The symbiosis between the railway and industrial location was particularly apposite in the Niagara region. The population in Grimsby had increased by 25 per cent in the decade preceding 1900 as a result of increased employment opportunities made possible by transportation facilities.⁹ The construction of the new GTR station in 1900, and its immediate replacement after it burned in 1902, coincided with the emergence of Grimsby as a regional centre.

The first local competition for the GTR was the Hamilton, Grimsby and Beamsville radial, opened in 1895, which carried passengers as well as fruit, at prices typically a third lower than what the railways charged. Trolley lines connected with the GTR at Grimsby and with the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Railway at Beamsville, and eventually extended to Hamilton and Niagara Falls. With lake transport, the interurbans seriously challenged the GTR monopoly, to the extent that the St. Catharines Board of Trade successfully fought the closure of the local radial in 1900 so as to remain free of the GTR freight monopoly.¹⁰

The commencement of a highway bus service in 1922 eroded rail transportation, although fruit shipments continued to be important into the 1930s.¹¹ The economies of fruit production changed after the Second World War with the introduction of marketing boards, and in Grimsby the destruction of many orchards for housing and industrial development eradicated the local industries that were associated with the production and shipping of fruit.

Tourism flourished into the 1920s, aided by the existence of this station, and by the network of interurban radial railways. At Grimsby Beach a famous amusement park (served by the Grimsby Beach GTR station), developed by the Canadian Railway News Company, offered a dance pavilion and casino, midway rides, and a theatre. The radial was closed in 1931 by Ontario Hydro, which had acquired the intercity bus and radial lines in 1930.¹² Tourism generally declined after 1945 with the closure or fall from fashion of the local attractions.

The construction of the Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW) in 1946, and of a local interchange in 1973, substantially affected historical residential patterns and the local economy, by displacing housing in favour of strip commercial and industrial development, and facilitating truck shipments of goods. The area attracted numerous industries and warehouses in the 1960s and 1970s, including a winery and a distillery capitalizing on the tender fruit business.¹³ In 1976 the Grimsby station was refurbished in a mixed retail development as part of a local tourism initiative, reviving the station's long history of public service. It was subsequently converted to use as a bar and restaurant.

ARCHITECTURE

Aesthetic/Visual Qualities

Festive, towered stations like Grimsby, festooned with decorative wooden brackets and bargeboards, and attractively clad in shingles, vertical board, and other combinations of timber, became popular with all of the railway companies operating in Ontario for a 15 year period 1890-1905. The functions are externally expressed in massing and wall treatment by a progression from the active rooflines and perforated walls of the passenger end, to the plain ridge, blind walls, and finally the dropped roof crest of the baggage, freight, and storage ends (Figure 4).

The station is exceptional among its type for its two unequal and asymmetrical towers, the picturesque profile of its rooflines, and the rhythm of openings. Characteristic of the period is the coherent application of vertical and diagonal boarding to the distinct parts of the wooden building (Figure 5). The towers flank a single doorway on the north track elevation. The lower circular tower, which has an almost completely glazed operator's bay, is capped by a conical roof. Before its removal, the semaphore signal projected from the window sill of the upper level. Still discernible on the taller octagonal tower are bracketed soffits, decorative diagonal panels beneath each window, and a disposition of openings suitable for looking out over the Ontario lakeshore plain. Window trim on the lower level is slightly more elaborate than the simple flat boards of the upper storey, having corner boxes at the top. Wood is used expressively to define structure, so that the vertical lines of the lower window frames are continued down to the foundation, and each angle of the tower is similarly framed.

The walls are divided into a low dado of narrow tongue-and-groove V-jointed board reaching just above the bottom of the window sills, with wide board and batten above. The battens have a moulded cyma profile rather than being flat sticks. The projecting eaves are carried on braced triangular brackets, which had become a leitmotif of the GTR by this time (Figures 6,7).

A few of the communities where the GTR employed variations of the design include Toronto's Don station, Uxbridge, Whitby, Ridgeway and Glencoe, the last two in the Niagara peninsula. The Don station (1899, relocated to Todmorden Mills Museum) recalled the Credit Valley type, with a circular tower at one end. At Ridgeway (ca. 1904, relocated 1976) a simple rectangular volume is enriched by semicircular end bays and a central tower (Figure 8). The Canadian Pacific Railway built comparable stations at Orangeville (1905; in private ownership) and Parry Sound (1908; CP Rail). One of the most celebrated was constructed for the Toronto, Hamilton and Buffalo Railway at Smithville (1903; owned by the municipality), which is also in the Niagara region. There

a circular tower pierced the roof over the waiting room, and a large gabled cross-roof emphasized the operator's bay (Figure 9).¹⁴ All are distinguished by wood cladding, one or more towers, usually placed on a corner, and a pavilion-like aspect to the overall volume. The type is today one of the most fondly regarded and, happily, often one of the least altered of the smaller stations. Unfortunately, few survive in railway use, and those that do are undermaintained.

At Grimsby a structural juncture has subsided, giving a romantic ripple to the walls, but otherwise few changes have occurred. Early doors have been replaced by a relatively modern type with six horizontal panels piled up the height of the door, and aluminum eaves have replaced the wooden eaves and soffit of the station section. Much of the original two-over-two glazing seems to survive. The building has not been properly painted in a number of years, and it would appear that original colours can be easily determined. The rather overgrown and neglected character of the setting has faded, but not vanquished, the gaiety of the station.

Functional/Technological Qualities

Original plans indicate that the largest functional division of spaces into freight, baggage, and passenger services has been maintained, although the definition of the ticket office has disappeared (Figures 10, 11). Otherwise, it is difficult to determine exactly how the spaces were used, or the extent of original material on the interior.

Only the ground floor is accessible in the turreted eastern section, which originally comprised the waiting room and ticket office. The modern heating plant is upstairs, and the upper tower space is used for storage. In the western half, which was used for baggage and freight, the floor level is up four steps, and the principal space is now a bar room. Typical of some early freight rooms, the rafters are open, but details are obscured by a combination of dark paint and dim illumination. The station has been expanded by a freight car on the west side (which constitutes another floor level), and by small sheds on the north. These ancillary spaces provide kitchen, cooler, and office areas for the restaurateur (Figures 12, 13).

The former baggage room now forms a narrow vestibule between the restaurant and the bar, which originally constituted the waiting and freight rooms respectively. The vestibule is trimmed in horizontally boarded walls and a tongue-and-groove boarded ceiling representing original materials (Figure 14). Easily secured, the vestibule space serves as a waiting room for VIA Rail clients and provides the principal access to both parts of the Railhouse Restaurant. Door frames throughout the building interior have symmetrical mouldings with boxed, bulls-eye corners: many of these are not original to the plan, although they could have been relocated within the building.

The rather large baggage end of the station provided safe, protected storage for the thousands of baskets of fruit that were shipped from the area, as well as the normal freight associated with passenger travel and manufacturing needs.

Overall, the planning of the station was typical of GTR buildings of the 1900 improvements period. The distinctive functional element of the picturesque Grimsby station is its extensive enclosed freight storage, showing very little external change.

Two designs exist for the station, one of them undated. Since the station of 1900 (Figure 15) burned within two years of its construction, reusing the same plans would be feasible. It seems, however, that the lost station was a decorated wood pavilion resembling the Newmarket station of 1900 (RSR, 138; designated) and that the design of the existing station was developed as a product of corporate success. Neither plan provided segregated waiting rooms or indoor toilets, common in passenger stations of this time.

ENVIRONMENT

Setting

Although the restaurant property is well defined, the former precinct of railway activity is not, and its boundaries have been blurred by changes in use of the land and buildings around it. The rail yard is discernible largely through the absence of supporting structures on the adjacent vacant land.

The GTR station replaced the first Great Western Railway station building of 1855, which was moved back from the tracks in 1900 and today continues in use by a lumber retailer behind the station. It was pressed back into service by the GTR after fire destroyed their new station, then returned to commercial use. The remarkable survival of that station, utilized throughout this century as a fruit warehouse by Niagara Packers Limited, reinforces the role and continuous historic significance of the railway in Grimsby (Figures 16, 17).

A notable element of the complex is the asphalt platform, whose level has been raised by successive repavings and subsequent settlings, to slightly higher than the base of the station (Figure 18). The baggage room was augmented by a vast covered platform for protecting the fruit shipments. That shelter, longer than the station, stood to the north where there is now a field. The siding has been lifted, thereby removing the traces of a working yard (Figure 19).

The station itself is slightly obscured by vegetation along the street front, and the unattractive parking, loading and service areas are more prominent on the town side, where the south back

of the station building is almost entirely obscured. The station is fully visible across the overgrown fields on the north side of the tracks, but there are few opportunities to appreciate that view. A fire hall under construction is the only building in the area north of the tracks.

The station and slightly raised level crossing are very close to the main street, indicating the importance of the railway in the evolution of the village (Figure 20). Traffic planning in the area has been conditioned by access to the limited-access QEW, the principal highway between Toronto and the Niagara peninsula, so that historic approaches are difficult to perceive in the landscape. What the site has lost in legibility is due to its relatively central location on a travelled road in the central core area.

Community Status

Grimsby has a charming character derived from the quantity and quality of its historic buildings and neighbourhoods, the meander of its streets, and the slight roll of the land so close to the Niagara Escarpment. It is a rather sprawling town, which has allowed new development to occur away from where the core seems to be, and suburban development has mostly happened nearer to the lake.

The railway station is considered a prominent landmark in the town because of its location and distinctive visual character. Having been in fairly stable use for over ten years, the building is not perceived to be threatened. An urban study conducted for Grimsby identified the station area as a "special policy" area of transitional use in the Central Core. "Low intensity" uses are encouraged, with the retention of existing buildings, and guidelines for development prefer residential, commercial, and institutional uses "compatible" in scale and use with the existing urban fabric.

The town has a LACAC (Local Architectural Conservation Advisory Committee) which designates only with the full consent, and preferably at the request of the owner; consequently the 12 or so buildings designated since its organization about six years ago have all been private houses. Nevertheless, the station is on a "target list" of buildings the committee is interested in seeing designated, and is expected to receive popular support in the event of any redevelopment threat.¹⁵

Endnotes

- 1 John N. Jackson and John Burtniak, Railways in the Niagara Peninsula. Their Development, Progress and Community Significance (Belleville: Mika Publishing Company, 1978), p. 37.

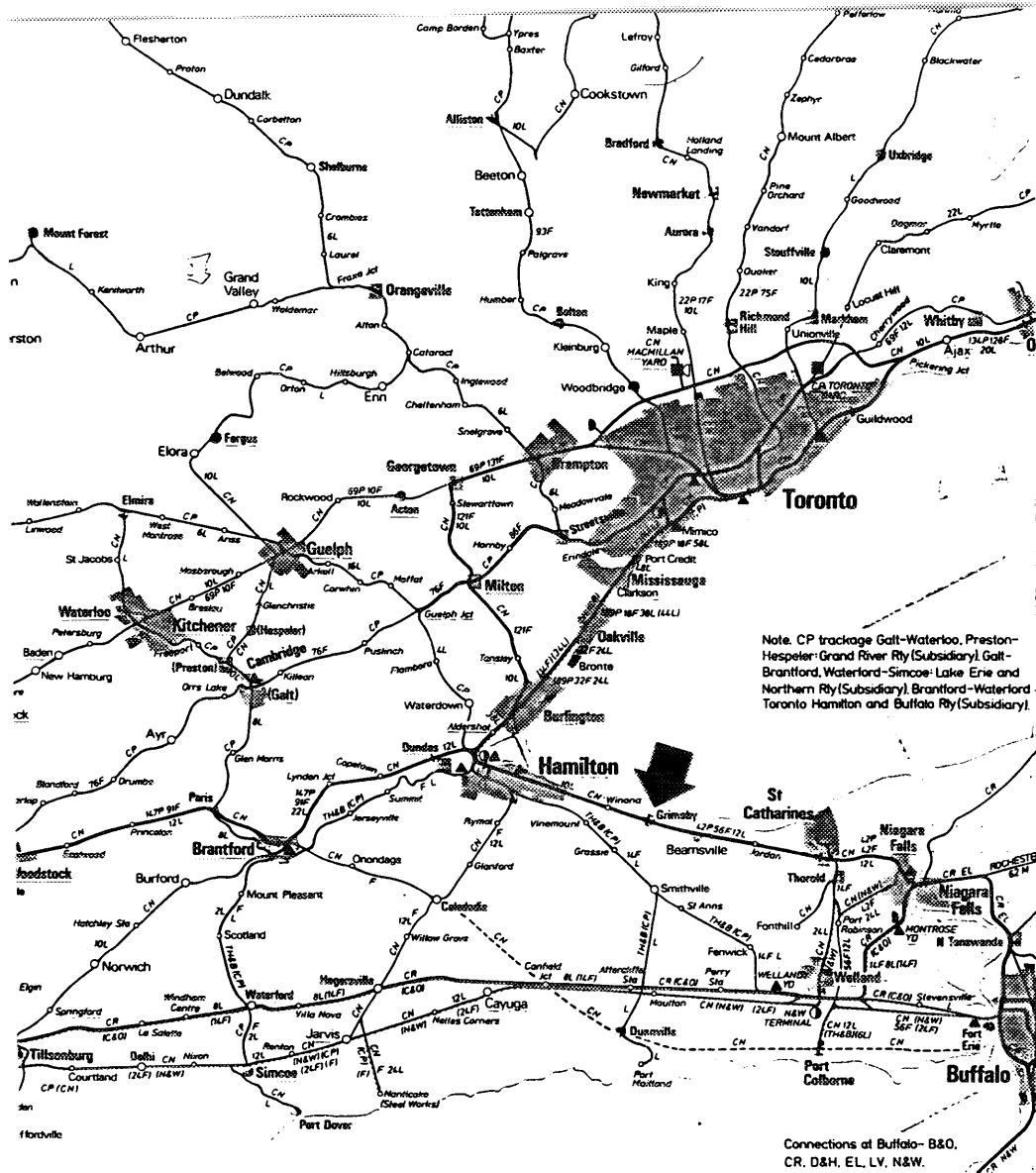
- 2 George R. Stevens, History of the Canadian National Railways (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1973), p. 191; "G.T.R. Semi-Annual Meeting," Canadian Railway and Marine World (CRMW) (May 1900), p. 129.
- 3 "G.T.R. Semi-Annual Meeting," CRMW (December 1902), p. 429.
- 4 Stevens, op. cit., p. 136; "G. T. R. Double-Tracking," CRMW (April 1901), p. 109.
- 5 "G.T.R. Semi-Annual Meeting," CRMW (May 1901), p. 131.
- 6 Ada Bromley, et al., comp., Once Upon a Little Town...Grimsby: 1876 to 1976 (n. p. [Grimsby?]: Grimsby Historical Society, 1976), p. 210.
- 7 Jackson and Burtniak, op. cit., p. 217
- 8 Bromley, op. cit., pp. 207, 191.
- 9 Ibid., p. 49. At the time the GTR built a new station in 1900, fruit could be shipped by rail overnight to Ottawa or Montreal. The introduction of refrigerated cars, and in 1912 of a cold storage plant, extended the shelf and travel life of the product. These developments increased employment opportunities and the volume of fruit that could be handled.
- 10 Jackson and Burtniak, op. cit., p. 132-4.
- 11 In 1935, for example, 82 car loads of pears and plums were shipped to Britain. Bromley, op. cit., p. 203.
- 12 Ibid., p. 279.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 270, 228.
- 14 Elizabeth Willmot, Meet Me at the Station (Toronto: Gage Publishing, 1976), pp. 32 (Glencoe), 36 (Smithville), 42 (Don), 66 (Orangeville), 78 (Ridgeway), 84 (Grimsby), 86 (Whitby), 94 (Uxbridge); Commonwealth Historic Resource Management Limited, A Study of Canadian Pacific's Heritage Railway Properties (for Ontario Heritage Foundation and the Ministry of Culture and Communications in co-operation with CP Rail and VIA Rail Canada, 1989), pp. 46-47.
- 15 All information on planning, conservation, and public perceptions of the station was expressed by Walter Basic, Planner, Town of Grimsby Planning Department, in conversation with the author 29 July 1993.

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



- 1 Canadian National Railways Station, Grimsby, Ontario. Built 1902. North front elevation. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

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2 Location of Grimsby. (Railway Map of Southern Ontario [Guelph: Clyde Publishing Ltd., (1984)].)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



- 4 Grimsby station, successive drops in roof levels at west end, from baggage room to miscellaneous storage. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

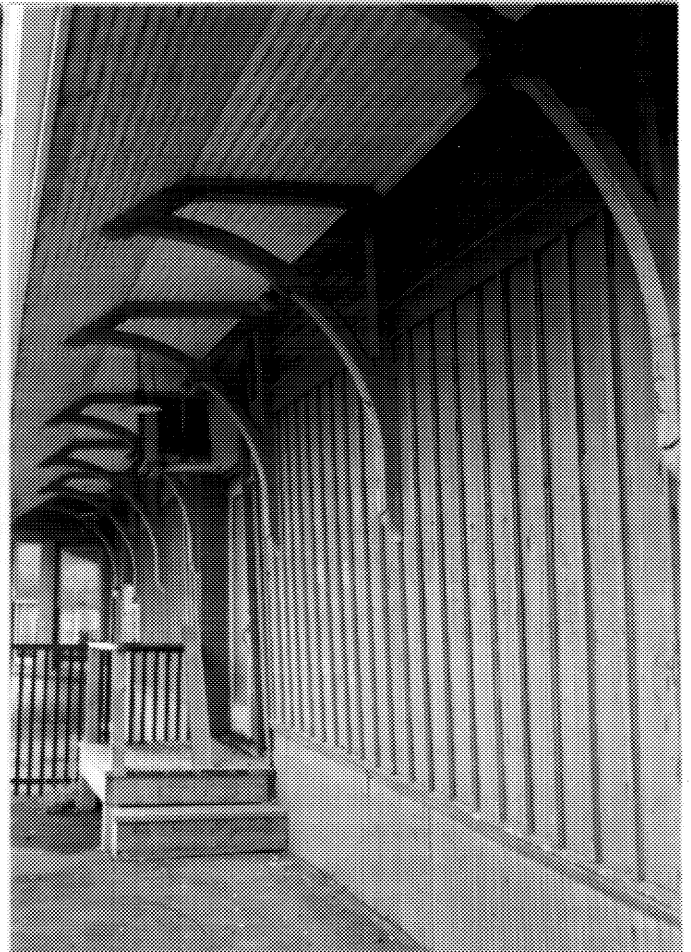


- 5 Grimsby station, east end and north front. (Elizabeth Willmott, Meet Me at the end Station [Toronto: Gage Publishing, 1976], p. 85.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



6 Detail of wall elevation at west end of baggage room. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)



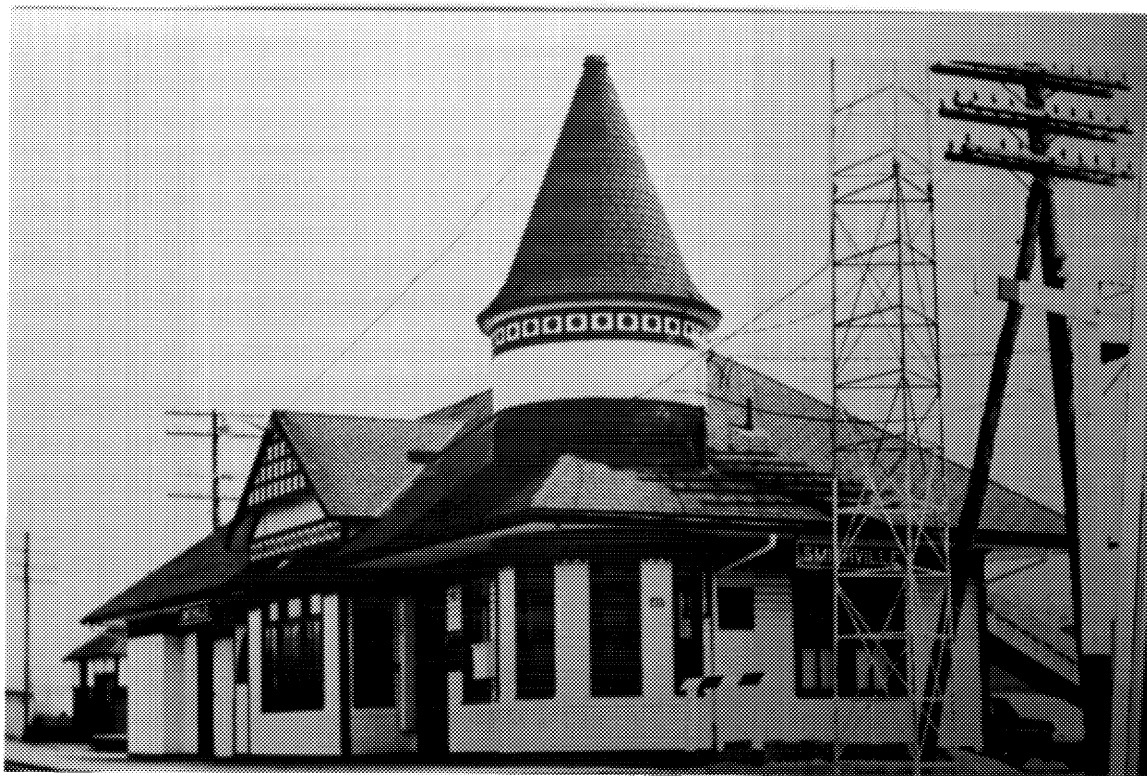
7 Grimsby station, brackets along north wall. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



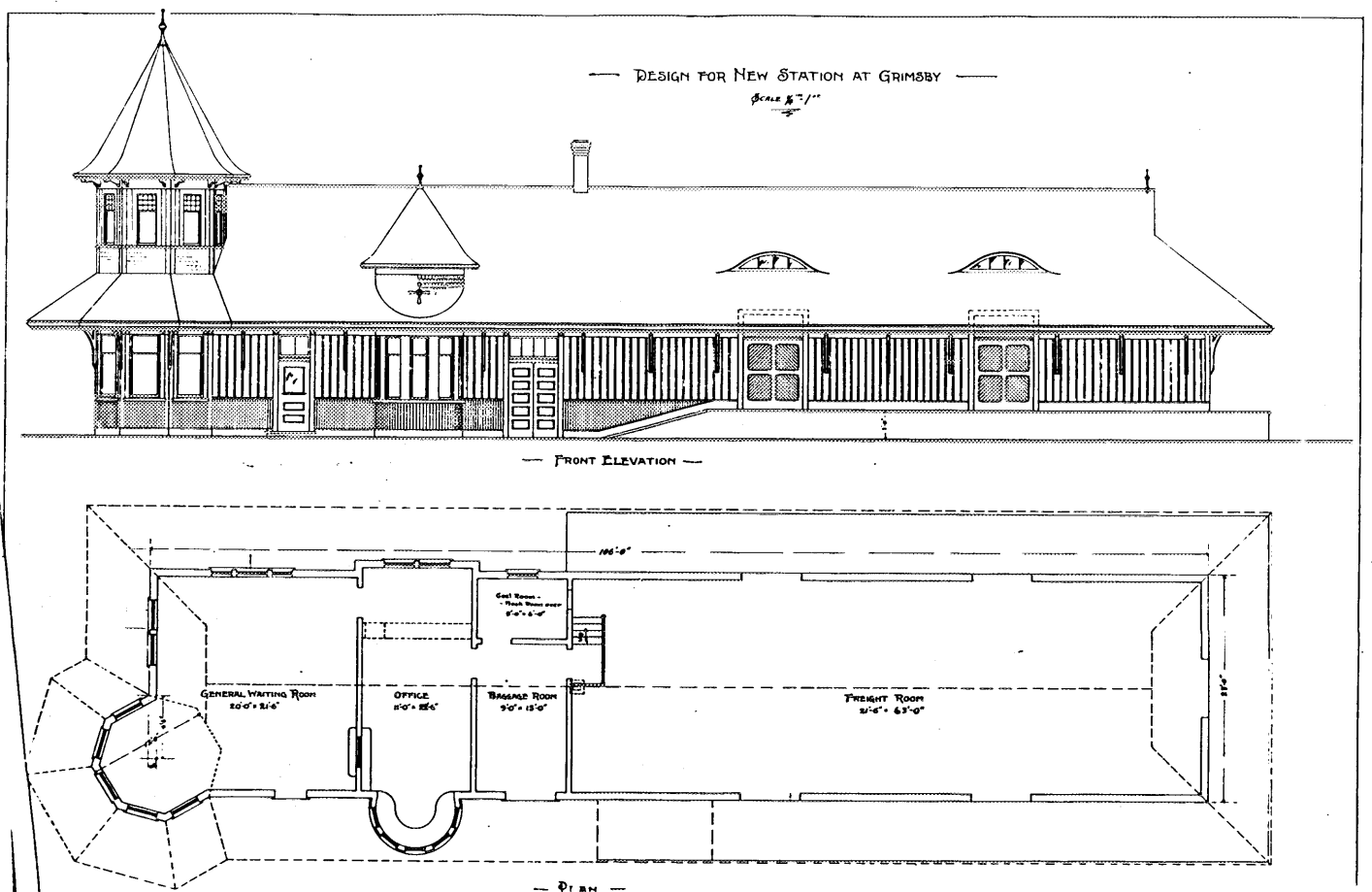
8 Former GTR station at Ridgeway, Ontario, built 1904.
(Elizabeth Willmott, Meet Me at the Station [Toronto: Gage
Publishing, 1976], p. 79.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



- 9 Former Toronto, Hamilton, and Buffalo Railway station at Smithville, Ontario, built 1903. (Elizabeth Willmott, Meet Me at the Station [Toronto: Gage Publishing, 1976], p. 37.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



10 "Design for New Station at Grimsby," no date. (National Archives of Canada [NAC] National Map Collection [NMC] 96702.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



11 Interior of the restaurant, formerly the general waiting room and office. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)



12 Grimsby station, rail car added to south back. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO

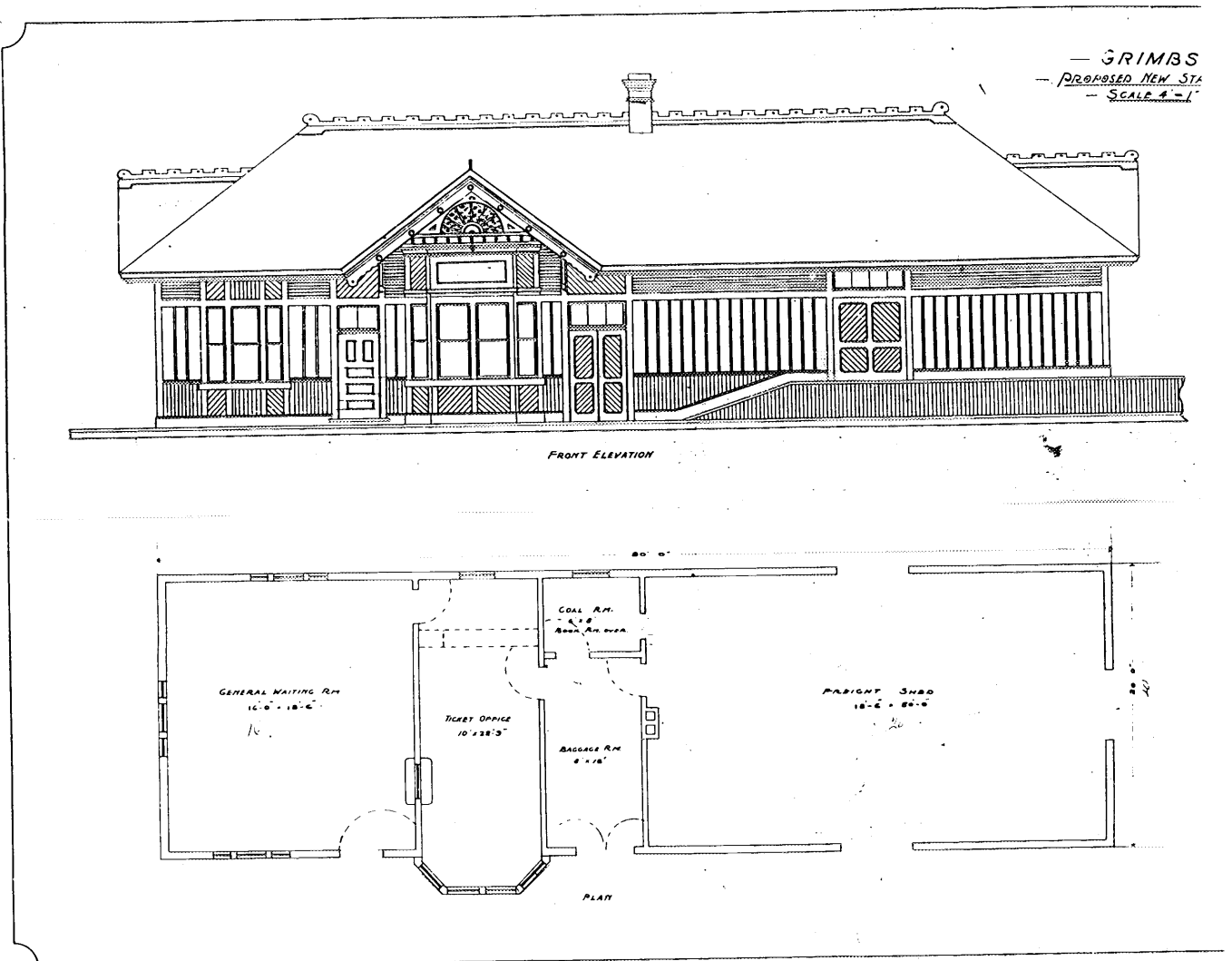


13 Grimsby station, addition on back of west end storage shed. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)



14 Vestibule, Grimsby station. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO

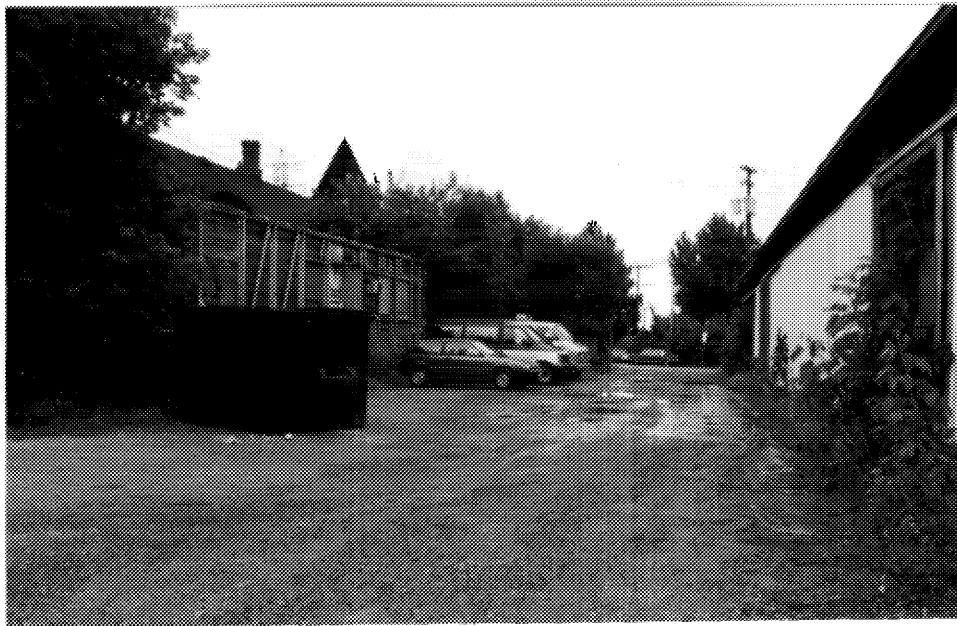


15 "Grimsby Proposed New Station." This undated drawing is believed to represent the station of 1900 that burned in 1902. (NAC NMC 24338.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO

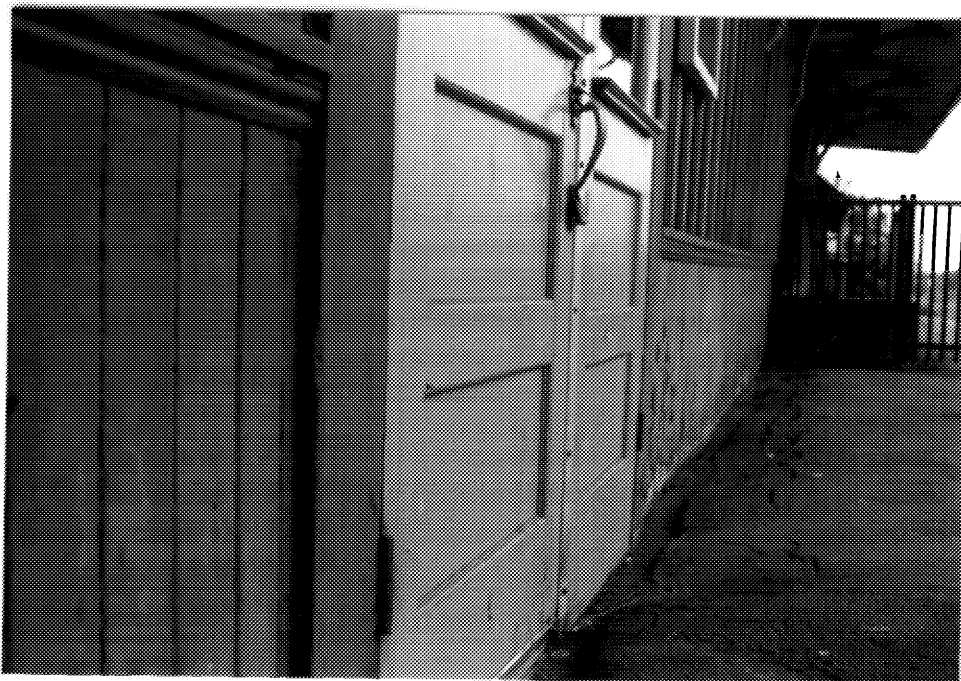


16 The first Great Western Railway station at Grimsby of 1855.
(A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)



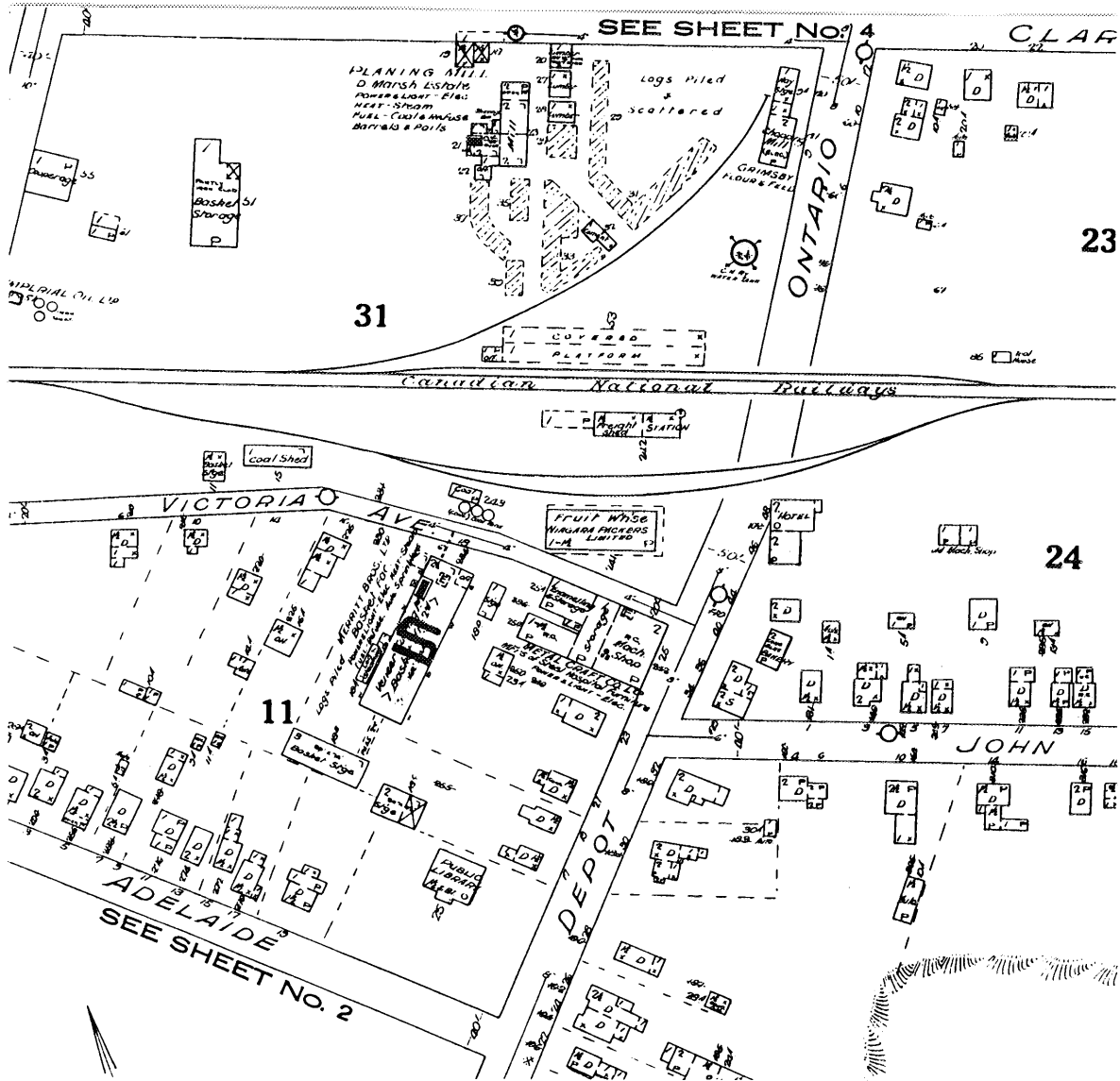
17 Lane between the former GWR and the present CNR stations,
Grimsby. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



18 Grimsby station, platform asphalt level above the building base. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



19 Plan of the station site in 1928 with fruit warehouses, covered platform and outbuildings. The address was originally on Depot Street. (Insurance Plan of Grimsby [Ottawa: Underwriter's Insurance Bureau, 1928], plate 3.)

CANADIAN NATIONAL RAILWAYS STATION, GRIMSBY, ONTARIO



- 20 View of Ontario Street in Grimsby at the level crossing. The turret of the present station is visible on the right, as is the GWR station of 1855. (A. M. de Fort-Menares, 1993.)