

Location

Statutory Address:

PRIMROSE HILL TUNNELS (EASTERN PORTALS), PRIMROSE HILL ROAD

The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.

County:

Greater London Authority

District:

Camden (London Borough)

National Grid Reference:

TQ 27566 84231

Details

798-1/63/1338 PRIMROSE HILL ROAD 26-JUN-07 PRIMROSE HILL TUNNELS (EASTERN PORTALS)

II* Pair of railway tunnel portals at the eastern end of the Primrose Hill Tunnels, 1837 (northern) and 1879 (southern), for the London and Birmingham Railway to designs by William Budden.

PORTALS: While the context of the Primrose Hill Tunnels has alterned dramatically, the structures themselves remain largely as they were built. The northern portal is the earlier, built in 1837, of stock brick and stone with stone dressings. It has a round-arched tunnel mouth with coved reveals of rusticated voussoirs and is crowned by a heavy modillion cornice with carved lion masks. The opening is flanked by massive stone piers on vermiculated stone pedestals with long and short quoins and console bracketed hipped capitals designed to appear as ridged lead roofs. Flanking the piers are quadrant brick wing walls, also with vermiculated stone podiums, and broken by channelled stone pillars crowned by segmental pediments. The southern portal, dating from 1879, faithfully replicates the design of the original portal down to decorative detail such as the lion masks. It differs only in size, being taller than the northern portal in order to retain the land rising up to Primrose Hill.

HISTORY: The northernmost of the two Primrose Hill tunnels was completed in 1837 and was the first railway tunnel in London as well as one of the earliest in the country. The tunnel was built for the London and Birmingham Railway Company and engineered by George Stephenson and Son; the portal was designed by William Budden, Stephenson's assistant. A second tunnel, to the south, with a portal in the same design as Budden's original, was completed in 1879 following the addition of a further two tracks to the line in 1846.

The land under which the tunnel was driven was the Chalcots Estate, owned by Eton College and largely rural in 1837. The College had begun to develop the area, beginning in 1830 with Adelaide Road which now runs alongside the railway track, and were originally opposed to the railway speculators' proposals for fear of the adverse affect of the cutting on the value of the land and subsequent house leases. The College's reservations necessitated the very existence of the tunnel

and determined its appearance. Unwilling to lose the building land to railway tracks, the College insisted on a tunnel, made by tunnelling and not 'cut and cover', despite the fact that the gradient of the land allowed track to be laid without one; the terms of the Act of Parliament of 1833 which gave permission for the railway stated that the tunnel should be constructed with sufficient strength for buildings to be erected at ground level. The College also demanded that the tunnel mouth should 'be made good and finished with a substantial ornamental facing of brickwork or masonry to the satisfaction of the Provost and College'. The resulting portal cost £7,000 and differed from the Western Portal which was less grand.

The tunnel became a popular attraction and, before houses hemmed in the approach, the sloping sides of the cutting provided viewing points for members of the public eager to witness the coming and going of the trains and the portal itself. The scene is depicted in a watercolour by J H Nixon, after a painting by J Cleghorn of 1837 and a lithograph by C Rosenberg.

The London and Birmingham Railway, which opened in 1838, was one of the first intercity railway lines in the world, and (after the London to Greenwich Railway of 1836) the first major railway line to be built into London. The line was engineered by Robert Stephenson and started at Euston Station. The London and Birmingham Railway was one of the most significant engineering projects of the C19 and a landmark in pioneering railway technology world wide.

A second tunnel to the south was subsequently built and became operational in June 1879. The southern portal replicated the original in all but height.

SOURCES: John C Bourne, Drawings of the London and Birmingham Railway (1839) Anthony Cooper (Ed), Primrose Hill to Euston Road, Camden History Society (1984) Penny Hatfield, The Eton College Estate, Camden History Review 17, Camden History Society (1992) K. A. Scholey, The Railways of Camden, Camden History Society Occasional Paper 4, 2002 FML Thompson, Hampstead: Building a Borough 1650 - 1964 (1974) 219-20 Christopher Wade (Ed), The Streets of Belsize, Camden History Society (1991) Jack Whitehead, The Growth of Camden Town: AD 1800-2000 (2000) Gordon Biddle, Britain's Historic Railway Buildings (2003) 50

SUMMARY OF IMPORTANCE: As an early railway structure dating from 1837 and a part of one of the pioneering railway speculations, the London and Birmingham Railway, the northernmost Eastern Portal to the Primrose Hill Tunnel is of special historic interest. This inherent interest is considerably enhanced by the uniqueness of the tunnel's construction: it was the first railway tunnel in London; the first nationally to negotiate the issue of competing claims for the use of land in an urban context; and the first tunnel to treat one of its portals architecturally. Comparison with the Western Portals (Grade II), at the opposite end of the two tunnels, emphasises the exceptional circumstances at the eastern end of the tunnel where the Eton College Estate demanded a grand architectural set-piece: the Western Portals are of a much humbler design. The portal is also of more than special architectural interest for its proud, classical elevation which is indicative of the upmarket development Eton College hoped to undertake nearby. There are similarities in design with Brunel's portals to the Box Tunnel in the use of ashlar to imply strength, the classical features such as the treatment of the cornices and rusticated quoins, and the employment of quadrant arches to convey the sense of a grand entrance. The second portal, dating from 1879, is also of special interest for its intrinsic merit in that it represents the quick expansion of the railways in the mid-C19 and as an important component of the site.

Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.

Legacy System number:

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Sources

Books and journals

Biddle, G, Britain's Historic Railway Buildings, (2003), 50

Bourne, J C , Drawings of the London and Birmingham Railway, (1839)

Thompson, F M L , Hampstead: Building a Borough 1650-1964, (1974), 219-220

Whitehead, J, The Growth of Camden Town AD 1800-2000, (2000)

'Camden History Society' in Primrose Hill to Euston Road, (1984)

'Camden History Society' in The Streets of Belsize, (1991)

Hatfield, P, 'Camden History Review' in 17 The Eton College Estate, , Vol. 17, (1992)

Scholey, K A, 'Camden History Society Occasional Paper 4' in The Railways of Camden, , Vol. 4, (2002)

Legal

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.

End of official listing