

Romsey Signal Box Project

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"THE SIGNAL"

Dear Reader

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BRIGHTER FUTURE ASSURED!

Three months ago, I wrote about the numerous worries of the Project Team. Without doubt, issue number 8 made depressing reading. Yet out of it came progress. Sometimes it is best to bring things out into the open and face challenges head on: and this has proven to have been one of those occasions. Truly, the corner is turned!

After reading their copies, several members took the trouble to put their reactions down on paper, whilst others phoned, and some made great efforts to attend the AGM in January. Messages of support were received from a host of interested parties, both in and outside the Friends. And the protagonists in the various debates became all the more determined to find solutions.

So it gives me the greatest pleasure to be able to report progress on all the fronts described in the last newsletter. First and foremost, agreement has been reached with Romsey Infants School on the terms and conditions of our access through their grounds. This was essential before anything else could be resolved. Compromise was necessary on both sides, and common sense has prevailed.

Second, I was delighted by the attendance at our AGM in the box on 8 January, and would like to thank John Prytherch in particular for making the effort to travel all the way down from Warrington in Lancashire to join us. John is also on the committee of the Exeter West Group, and his contribution to the discussions was invaluable.

The mood of the AGM was overwhelmingly positive. A more formalised committee structure was approved, and the five "unofficial" members unanimously confirmed in post. Fundamental issues of policy were discussed in some depth, and the new committee is now more confident of the membership's backing for its decisions. In addition broad future plans for open days, working sessions, and operating events were agreed, and priorities agreed on work both inside and outside the box. The AGM was an undoubted success.

Then thirdly, once we were able to convince the Buildings Preservation Trust that the Friends had found a new positive direction and differences with the school were resolved, the Trust agreed to back us and approved expenditure on whatever structural works are necessary to protect the box for the long-term. Further, the Romsey & District Society agreed to fund the necessary work to improve access routes onto the site.

There are so many good things to report in this edition. Suffice to say here that the corner has been turned, and I believe we can now face the future in a much more confident and positive frame of mind. Thanks to everyone for their support. Let's go for it!

Dick Hewett

Agents of the Romsey and District Buildings Preservation Trust

NEWS FROM THE SIGNAL BOX SITE

Anyone who hasn't visited the site in the last few months would notice a significant change. Some of those long-planned ideas and initiatives have suddenly been accomplished, and the impact is obvious. Many others are close to completion.

Progress made in the last three months

Inside the box, the new bar to support the locks and controllers has at last been fitted. This will enable progress to be made on linking the lever frame to the block shelf, the final major component in the restoration of the box to operational condition.

Outside, changes are even more spectacular. The ground frame has now been connected up to the distant signal. The benefits of this were only too obvious when over 100 children from Romsey Junior School were treated to a visit (report elsewhere).

Work has continued on the first of the meat container vans, and a successful attempt was made before the AGM to raise the van onto some level timber supports (with thanks to Bob Hack and his jacks). The enormity of the restoration task is now even more apparent!

A second security light has been mounted, facing away from the signal box. All that needs to be done now is to complete its connection to the mains circuit.

But the completion of the long-awaited level crossing gates is perhaps the most obvious sign of progress. Ben Penny is to be congratulated for the high quality of workmanship: it is easy to forget he is still only 14 years old.

Projects for completion in the rest of 1995

Elsewhere in this newsletter there is information about specific working sessions and events. The following is a broad list of the work it is hoped to complete before the end of the summer.

Inside the box, the materials for the permanent diagram are ready and it is hoped to have this ready by Easter. Without any doubt, this improvement will have the greatest visual impact for visitors in the box, and we shall be spared the embarrassment of the current one falling off in the middle of a demonstration!

Significant problems have developed with the electrics, and Ian Maxwell and Chris Hack hope to resolve these at Easter. Further work on the electrics will follow during the summer, including the mounting of the controllers. It is hoped to have some of this work complete by the mid-September event (news elsewhere).

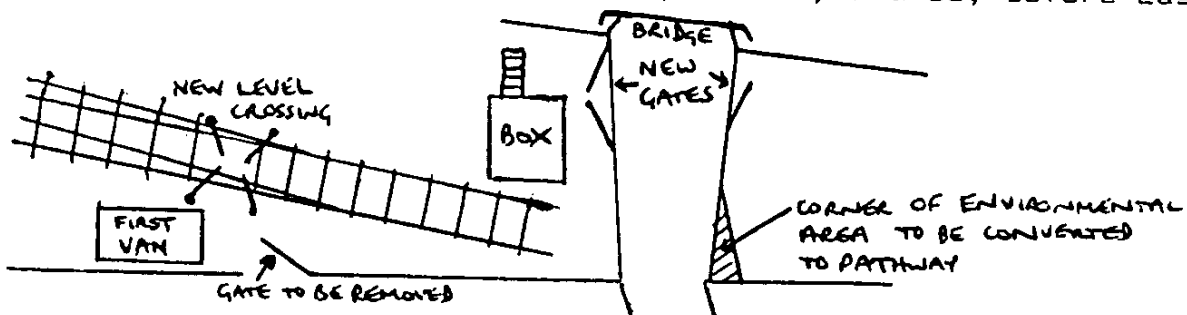
Outside, the second lever of the ground frame will be connected to one of our ground signals, which will be installed once the main access route onto the site has been moved (see below). A section of fencing will need to be installed around the distant and ground signals for safety. Nearby, the finishing touches need to be put

to the level crossing. All this work is planned for Easter.

Another long-standing task to complete is the colour-light signal. Raising of the light head, and its connection to the box, are also planned for Easter.

Rod Hoyle has been commissioned to produce some weatherproof display boards, as the start of a trail drawing visitors' attention to the various items of interest around the site. Funding for these boards is being provided by Test Valley Borough Council. The first two boards will cover the history of the railways of Romsey and of the box itself, together with a comprehensive notice board covering the terms and conditions of access to the site. All three boards will be mounted outside the box by the new entrance gates.

These new double gates are to be fitted in the fence bordering the footpath immediately below the steps of the signal box, after which the small gate currently providing access to the site from the nursery side will be removed and the fence there made good. This latter gate will instead be inserted in the fence opposite the new double gates, to give access into the "environmental area" direct from the signal box. Finally, it is planned to widen the gap through which any vehicles would have to pass to reach the new double gates from the school. All this work is due to be undertaken by the Trust's builders, I W Payne & Co, before Easter.



I W Payne & Co are also due to repair the brickwork around the box which has cracked badly. Some members felt the structure of the box was suffering, but the expert advice does not believe the problem to be so serious. However, some extra support is needed to the timber overhang in the corner of the box containing the sink, and a new timber strut will be inserted.

Weatherproofing the box could prove to be the most difficult challenge for Payne's. The Project Manager's visit to the identical box at Instow (see report elsewhere) provided direct evidence of the original design at Romsey. The Trust are now being asked to consider restoration of a second skin for Romsey box, as the best long-term yet authentic solution to the difficult problem.

The other major project on the site involves the meat container vans. Initial work must include protecting the existing roofs, timbers and frames. An attempt will be made to restore the first van during the summer: if this cannot be achieved, it may be that the vans get into too poor a condition to warrant restoration. A case of now or never, maybe. It would be nice to have one part of our visitor centre available for September.

Finally, up at Romsey Station, where we lease the old ladies waiting room on the Up Platform, enquiries continue to obtain a mains electric supply, and a clearance session may be mounted at Easter, to enable some of the materials currently stored under the box to be transferred.

Plenty of work to be done - so do make yourself available! Once again, progress has relied on a very small team of dedicated individuals, but with a bigger team progress can be accelerated!

NEWS OF "FRIENDS OF ROMSEY SIGNAL BOX"

As of 5 March there were 27 paid up full members, with 3 paid up pensioners and 8 paid up "child" members. 11 members from 1994 have yet to renew: all are being sent reminders with this edition of "The Signal". If you are one of those, please respond by Easter, after which you will be deleted from the distribution list.

However, if every existing Friend recruited a single member, our membership would double overnight. Ian Maxwell got the prize in 1994 for the most recruits (over half-a-dozen): can anyone get anywhere near that total in 1995?

With this edition of "The Signal", all paid up members will receive a copy of the Agreement with Romsey Infants School. This will be issued annually on receipt of subscription fees. In addition, the long-awaited membership cards are also enclosed: members planning to visit the site should be prepared to show their membership card to members of the school's staff.

The terms of the Agreement with the school are extensive, but it is worth repeating the main items here in summary:

1. No one should be on the Signal Box site during school hours without having first notified the school. Under 16s will only be allowed on the site if accompanied by an adult. Access to the school buildings is extremely limited and only with the school's express permission.
2. Outside school opening hours, the main gates by Plaza Parade will normally be kept shut, except during Open Days. The gate to the signal box site will be kept closed except during Open Days.
3. Vehicles will not be taken across the grass to the Signal Box unless authorised by the Project Manager. The Friends will be held responsible for any damage to the school grounds.

The actual agreement spells these items out in much more detail. In addition other clauses cover such things as electricity and water supplies, vegetation clearance, key holders, use of the school grounds for storage, and the agreement itself.

All members will be required to abide by the terms agreed with the school. Any member found to be in serious breach of these terms

may be banned from the site and their membership be rescinded without refund of subscription. Please therefore read these terms carefully if you are planning to enter the school grounds.

AGM SUMMARY

16 members attended, with apologies from 18 more. Richard Beton kindly agreed to take minutes, which will be reproduced and circulated later in the year.

A brief glance at Richard's notes reveals that the meeting opened with Chris Hack reviewing progress to date, setting the tone for the rest of the meeting with an upbeat message of achievements. Discussions followed about the financial situation and the relationships between the Friends and the various bodies holding interests in the box. Then John Prytherch's experience with our colleagues on the Exeter West Group provided invaluable guidance for the formalisation of our management team. Exeter also have a committee of five, and many other similarities.

The future direction of the Project, and the issues raised in the last newsletter, then formed the core of the meeting. In summary, the following were agreed after extensive discussions:

- The box would continue to be opened once per month.
- The restoration of the meat container vans would continue, in preference to any offers of Portacabins or the like.
- The restoration of the canal is neither our concern nor within our capabilities, even in the long-term.
- The feasibility study should proceed for the miniature railway, though long-term plans should not rely on its introduction.

Finally, various items were raised under "Any Other Business", most of which have been covered elsewhere in this newsletter. All told, a most successful event, to be repeated on the same Sunday in 1996 (the first after New Years' Day). Put it in your diaries!

MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

The new committee (Dick Hewett as Project Manager, Ian Maxwell and Chris Hack as electrical and technical experts, Richard Read as Site manager, and Bill Tyndall as Operations manager) held their first meeting in the Sun Inn on Saturday 4 February, over a pint of Boddingtons! As a result, good discussion followed, and details were put to many of the broad issues raised at the AGM, culminating in the specific plans described in this edition of "The Signal".

SWEATSHIRTS

New stocks of sweatshirts are now being ordered, and all members are encouraged to consider purchasing! One of the terms of our

agreement with the school is that members will, whenever possible, wear our own green sweatshirt uniform on site.

If you don't already have a sweatshirt with our logo, do consider purchasing one. If you already have one, is it in need of replacement? Have you grown/shrunk since you bought it? Has it faded through excessive washing?

All sweatshirts cost £12.50 plus post and packing for those unable to collect on site. A form is enclosed for orders to be placed. Please make cheques out to "Romsey Signal Box Project".

It would be nice to see as many of our members as possible sporting their Romsey Signal Box Project sweatshirts at every opportunity!

SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES' VISITS

We were delighted to entertain the whole of Years 5 and 6 (9-11 year olds) from Romsey Junior School, over 100 pupils in total, for a visit in early February - but not all at the same time! Each class of 25-30 children spent an hour on the site, starting with about 15 minutes introduction together, after which the class was divided, with one group entering the box and the other looking at the rest of the site; after 25 minutes the two groups swapped over.

It was during these visits that the benefits of the new ground frame and distant signal became only too apparent. They permitted the whole class to see the mechanical operation at close hand. Basic signalling can thus be added to the simple demonstration of "steering a train" on the turnout, before anyone is confronted by the complexities of the inside of the signal box, and considerable time can be saved by talking to the whole group in one go.

Having said all that, it would be inadvisable for us to actively encourage school visits until we have some shelter other than the box itself. The recent visits were postponed once through bad weather. If we get approached by a school, we should accept, but we should avoid seeking visits until we're ready.

Meanwhile one of the mature students who visited in November from Eastleigh College has chosen the Signal Box as the subject of her thesis for her GCSE in Travel and Tourism. She was expected to make some novel ideas for promotion. A copy is eagerly awaited!

COWLEY BRIDGE JUNCTION

Not much news to report, only one event since Christmas - a successful exhibition at Odiham on 4 March. The next outing is to Fareham on 2 April (a clash with our next Open Day!) Contact Bill Tyndall if you want to help operate at this or later events.

INSTOW SIGNAL BOX VISIT

Your Project Manager took the opportunity when he was down in the West Country on business a few weeks ago to make contact with the Bideford and Instow Railway Group, to see their development of Bideford Station site and more importantly the restoration of Instow Signal Box on the course of the line to Barnstaple. The visit may prove to be extremely valuable in the long term.

A brief (unaccompanied) look at Bideford Station suggested that the Group had restored the signal box there, as well as laying track through part of the platforms and installing two carriages. It turned out later that the Group owned only one of the vehicles, but more significantly the signal box was not original, but a complete reconstruction on the original foundations. It is used as the Group's museum, rather like we will be using our meat container vans if we get them finished before they collapse on us!

Then onto Instow, a couple of miles north on the Torridge estuary, and the scenic location of the superbly restored 1871 box. It doesn't have our wooden extension, has a smaller frame, and pieces of furniture are in slightly different places, but otherwise it is almost identical to Romsey, being of the same vintage.

What was particularly interesting was that Instow has a double skin, something Bill Tyndall has been going on about at Romsey ever since I first met him! The inside skin is the same as ours - vertical slatted timbers. But this is covered by an outer skin of horizontal timbers, affording excellent weatherproofing and insulation. The Trust here in Romsey are now being encouraged to add a similar outer skin to the Romsey box.

Other interesting aspects of Instow include the buckets hung outside, the way magazines and books are presented and made available for sale in a convenient corner, the authentic fireplace, the convincing clock which turns out to be battery operated, and the central light made out of a dustbin lid!

In contrast, even though much of the original equipment was saved when the box closed in 1979, and the box remained on its original site, it still took another 10 years (as at Romsey) before the box was reopened in 1989. During the next six years progress was slow: they only connected their first external signal to the box the week after I visited, and they have only a short piece of simple track, not a turnout. With even less room at Instow for development than we have at Romsey, the Group, with a larger membership base than us, have concentrated recent efforts upon Bideford Station area.

But for all that, Instow is without doubt an excellent example of what can be achieved, and any Romsey members should try to make the effort to visit. Instow box is open on the first and third Sundays in the month throughout the summer, and entrance is, as at Romsey, free. Perhaps like me, when you see the finished article at Instow, you will feel inspired to complete the work at Romsey!

EASTER WORKING SESSION

Once again, we are planning to have a blitz on the site during the few days before Easter. We hope as many members as possible will support us for all or part of this very successful annual event. Even labouring for a couple of hours would be welcome. There'll be plenty of work to do, even if the weather's not too good.

If you can manage any time on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday or Easter Saturday (13/14/15 April), please ring me on 01794-522979.

"HERITAGE OPEN DAYS '95": 16/17 SEPTEMBER 1995

Co-ordinated by the Civic Trust with funding from the Department of National Heritage, Heritage Open Days '95 offers free admission throughout England to a wide range of properties of architectural, historic, or cultural interest from every era and walk of life.

In Heritage Open Days '94, more than 250,000 people visited nearly 1,000 properties which ranged from dovecotes to dockyards, from a nuclear bunker to a bishop's palace. What better time for our own big event of 1995 at Romsey Signal Box but during Heritage Open Days '95, and plug into the high profile promotion?

I have therefore nominated us for inclusion in this highly publicised event which will take place on Saturday 16 and Sunday 17 September 1995. Locations with free admission must have a special event to qualify for inclusion. My proposal is to hold another sponsored 48-hour operating session, starting Friday evening through to Sunday evening, with the box open to the public throughout the weekend (they could be invited to help operate!).

Newer members might like to know that we successfully completed a 50-hour operating session on 17-18 October 1992, when the box was reopened exactly ten years to the day since it was closed. The weekend raised over £300 in sponsorship and donations, with the number of visitors well into the hundreds. We should repeat it.

Timing is perfect: it falls after the summer holidays, when we are likely to be coming to a halt on significant progress. It is before the likes of Chris Hack return to college, yet not in the main holiday season. The evenings will still be warm and light until around 8pm. Put it in your diaries, and start to plan your attendance. I don't see why Alan Gilmour and I should be forced to man the box both nights again!

It also gives us a specific focus for some of the work described earlier. Let's try to make the weekend a celebration of the completion of a successful season of work through 1995!

The next Issue of "The Signal" will hopefully be in the early Summer. *Contributions from members would be most welcome!*