



“The Signal”

*The Newsletter of
The Friends of Romsey Signal Box*

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2005 – All change!

Acting Chairman Peter Chatfield writes:

Welcome, folks! Firstly, everyone should by now be aware that Dick Hewett stepped down as Chairman at the AGM in June after 16 years in charge. There's plenty of reminiscing later in this edition of The Signal, so I merely want to introduce myself as your Acting Chairman. My contact details are at the head of this page.



Dick Hewett ceremoniously hands the keys of the box to Peter Chatfield

2005 has witnessed several key developments and our project has steadily moved ahead. Dick used to say ‘2 steps forward, 1 step back’. Well, looking back on the year so far, I’d say its been ‘8 steps back’ given the sorry state of the box staircase.... But panic ye not, the overall direction this year has definitely been forward and, in fact, we will be able to replace the staircase early next year.

I must pay tribute to the work of Quentin Meheux. I know Dick has already done this before but, on behalf of the Friends, I’d like to highlight again the magnificent work undertaken by Quentin in constructing the pavilion. Quentin has, unfortunately, recently been ill. Likewise Bob McCann, who has been a regular at Open Days, helping to keep up with maintenance around the site, has had to withdraw recently due to ill health. We wish them both well and hope for speedy recoveries.

So the structure of the pavilion, including doors and windows, is complete. At the time of writing, electrical and plumbing work is in progress, and Ted Mason has kindly been project managing this important visitor and volunteer facility (see ‘Holding Group’ later). Preparation work on the window frames has been pursued by Rod Hoyle, Neil Kearns and others, and we are close to completing the exterior finishing by painting the window frames and fitting shutters.



Colin Meheux tests out the rotting steps!

The signal box itself is in a reasonable state of repair. However, several lower parts of the wood and one or two of the inner corner timbers need replacing. I have cut out small areas of rotten wood and filled; also, primer and undercoat has

been applied to the exposed lower parts. These are short-term measures pending replacement of the wood and full repainting. The aforementioned stairs are in a sufficiently poor condition to warrant total replacement. Funding will be available for these jobs, but we have to secure a firm commitment from the Buildings Trust - Dick is liaising with Frank Ackerman of the Trust (who is also a Friend).



General view of site: Pavilion on left, visitor van on right, signal box in distance

Generally, the site itself has recently looked pretty presentable. Of course, there's always that next job to be done.... Thanks are due to our stalwart volunteers for their constant efforts to keep the grass and vegetation under control. I would particularly like to thank - and welcome - Roger Pleasant, a Swanage signalman who joined earlier this year, and who has helped greatly with this. Dick has constructed a wooden platform to improve the area around the ground frame. And cleaning of the box, visitor van, and signals, and some related painting, has been undertaken.

Thanks also to our 'regulars', including Colin Meheux, Garth Long, Neil and Martin Kearns, Ken Hale, Ken Rye and Chris Rideout. (Dick: seems like you're becoming more 'regular' again, too!). To all our active volunteers: your contribution is much appreciated and vital to keep things under control. We also welcome back Ted Mason, an invaluable link with the Romsey & District Buildings Preservation Trust, and now our new pavilion project manager.

So has this positive progress been matched by developments elsewhere in our favour? Well, yes and no. As many of you will know, the school adjacent to the site will close next year and the land will be redeveloped. We cannot rule out the possibility of the signal box site being required also for redevelopment. But, a) this is unlikely for various reasons and, b) if this was to happen, we understand that

the Buildings Trust would seek to relocate the box elsewhere in Romsey. The Trust’s view is that we should continue with our plans to enhance the site and complete the pavilion, and I think this is the right course of action. A more recent matter is that there are also plans to develop a railway heritage site at Eastleigh. This is at an early stage, but we will keep an eye on how this may pan out, should we be in a situation (I repeat: currently unlikely) of having to move out of Romsey.

Visitor numbers have dipped a bit this year compared to 2004, but there is still regular, sustained public interest at Open Days - this is our core market to nurture and gently cultivate. We do also get new interest from outside the locality. An article on the Project was recently published in the ‘Signalling Record’ - the Signalling Record Society’s newsletter. We have had at least 3 people visit the box as a result, one of whom participated in a recent operating day. Imperial College Railway Society have just visited us this November to see the box and do some operating, with the prospect of one or two follow-up visits.

The number of volunteers at Open Days continues to fluctuate. The picture is not dissimilar to that of recent years - enough people arrive to keep things going, but we could always do with more.... An article has been submitted to Heritage Railway magazine - for publicity, to highlight recent developments, and to attract visitors and (hopefully) a few more active volunteers. Keep a look out at W.H.Smith, folks, they allow you to browse anyway! In case you think that’s enough articles, we are also looking to do some local publicity work - whatever is needed to attract attention to our historic working museum....

On the events front, January witnessed an Operating Day organised by Garth Long. Six people attended, including signalmen from the Mid-Hants and Swanage Railways. July saw the Romsey Arts Festival during which the box was open with an additional photographic display. And a further Operating Day in September attracted five people (this was without advertising it to the MHR and Swanage). The visit by Imperial College has already been mentioned, and it is likely that we will host a further operating session open to all early in the new year.

So what do you reckon then? Go on - surely **3 steps forward, 1 step back...!**

Peter

Memories of the first sixteen years... Dick Hewett, now ex-Chairman

16 years at the helm of the Romsey Signal Box Project: did I ever imagine I would find myself writing my ex-chairman’s epitaph after such a long length of service? It has been a period of great progress and also at times great frustrations. Periods of intense activity, then others when everything would go very quiet. Times with lots of enthusiastic support, and then times when I felt very alone and vulnerable.

After all this time, it is great that some new faces have appeared to lead the project onwards. Peter Chatfield and Garth Long in particular are a real blessing to us. But even had they not appeared, I had already decided it was time to hang up my signalman's cloth and take a back seat in the Friends. There comes a time when the energy is sapped, when you've put as much into something as you can, and when you want others to lead with renewed enthusiasm and fresh ideas.

But wasn't it fresh ideas that got me involved in the first place? Indeed, having moved from Chertsey, Surrey, to Romsey in 1984, the first time I set eyes on Romsey box was when, in 1986, I was walking into the nursery block of the Infants School with my long-suffering wife Anne and our small son David, who was about to join the school. “Hey, look”, I exclaimed, as I saw what I recognised to be the form of a single-storey wooden signal cabin covered by a tarpaulin on the side of the railway embankment: “Wouldn't it be great to have that in our garden? What a waste it's lying there.” Little did I realise then that (a) the reason it was lying there was because a project was already in progress to save it, and (b) I'd end up running the project for 16 years!

“We need help clearing the signal box site”, said Audrey Gebbie, the Infants School Headteacher, to a PTA meeting which Anne was attending about a year later, after the box had been rebuilt on it's present site. “My husband's interested in trains, he'll come along”, Anne called out. And so I found myself clearing bracken and brambles from the scrubland in the middle of which stood the box. My interest in railways noted, I was co-opted onto the project committee, as the “Parent Representative”.

A year or so further down the line, I was aware that very little was happening at the box. I decided to do some investigation. What I realised was that many local people (particularly Bill Tyndall and George Pryor) had ideas, but no one was bringing them altogether into a cohesive plan, with proper management. So using my professional experience, I wrote a comprehensive Project Plan and presented it to the committee. As a throwaway line at the end, I said “What you need is a Project Manager, and if you're interested, I'd be willing...” I never got any further. I should have suspected what I was letting myself in for when I noticed the chairman voting with both hands.

That was in 1989. In the next three years we achieved a huge amount. Highlights which spring to mind include the further clearance of the site; five trips with Bill Tyndall to Merehead Quarry to collect the stone which Foster Yeomen were donating us (for good publicity); levelling the site using the stone which had to be brought from the school car park (thanks to a whole number of friends called in to help out, and generous rates of hire for equipment); the night-time lifting down of the track from the embankment above; the Romsey track gang giving up their 8am tea-breaks to come and lay the track for us before heading off for their official

duties; a trip to Bicester and Medstead for various pieces of equipment; authorised scavenging of Weymouth signalbox (and leaping over the live lines in between trains to fill a Transit van); rescuing the signal from a compost heap in Ridge, raising it on site, and then deciding to move it after I decided it wasn't in the best place; and the official re-opening of the box to the public on 17th October 1992, exactly 10 years to the day since it had been closed. That was a proud moment. And it was in the midst of the first of several 48-hour signalling marathons, when I always seemed to do the midnight to 8am shift!

Progress continued with the construction of the level crossing, the supply of the external display boards (thanks to Rod Hoyle), and many other developments. Publication of the first guide and the “Signal” initiated the archiving and historical record, the most obvious element of which is the display in the Visitor Van, created from one of the container wagons rescued from behind a house in Timsbury.



The “Charles Mead” Visitor Van containing our displays

Throughout all this period there were forays to various locations around the country with our Cowley Bridge miniature signal box, usually in the company of Bill Tyndall and George Pryor, and including an overnigher at Crewe. The bells were a constant background sound at numerous model railway exhibitions, and at Witley near Guildford we fused all the electrics in the hall when we switched on Cowley Bridge.

And then on 1st March 1997 we had the most wonderful day, in the midst of our third weekend signalling marathon. Exactly 150 years previously, Romsey station had been opened with church bells and fanfares. So we re-enacted the entire scene, with help from the Abbey bellringers, the local schools band, the local

dramatic society, and Wales & West Trains. We had the TV and press and our local MP, and the station was packed. I even did a live radio interview early that morning, mentioning the two volunteers who were operating the signalbox at the time! We had every local mayor you could think of, and gave them all a trip to Salisbury and back on the train. Finally they returned to the signal box site to dedicate the visitor van. It was a truly memorable occasion, and I was very proud to have been successful in setting it all up.



Colin Meheux – Dick’s righthand man for so many years

Soon after that, we were fortunate to have a new, enthusiastic volunteer in Colin Meheux, who soon became a key member of the team. At the same time, we had the offer of an old pavilion as an extra building. Dismantled and stored on the site, it looked an extremely attractive proposition, and a successful application for funding from Awards For All meant we could push ahead with its restoration.

By the new Millenium, however, the regular attendance by active members of the Friends reduced to a stage where it was often down to Colin and myself alone to keep the box open on Open Days. On at least one occasion we had to shut the box because neither of us was available. For a short period Colin actually relieved me of the Project Manager duties, leaving me to focus on the roles of Chairman, Treasurer and publicity, but sadly within a few months Colin’s health began to deteriorate and it became clear that he would not be able to adequately fulfil the post, so we agreed I would resume the joint responsibility.

And so I feared for the future. Discussions ensued with the Swanage and MidHants Railways about the box being transferred to them. I couldn’t see how it

could be sustained at Romsey. But Romsey Town Council were having nothing of it, and the Deputy Mayor at the time, Mike Curtis, offered to host a public meeting. This generated a number of new volunteers, several of whom are still actively involved. An appeal via the Signalling Record Society prompted further interest; Peter Chatfield amongst those coming forward. Suddenly there was new blood.

After rotting for several years, the timbers of the old pavilion were beyond re-use, but Colin’s son Quentin Meheux agreed to take on the task of building a new version. I remember the 12-foot deep hole which had to be dug by the signal-box to connect with the sewage pipe, and the excitement of actually getting running water on site at last, 12 years after the conduit had been laid for it. But the most gratitude through this time must be reserved for Quentin, who spent a huge number of hours, at much personal expense, to construct us the building we now see almost completed.



Exterior of Pavilion: Shutters still to be fitted to windows, and flooring needed

Over the 16 years, a wide range of people have come and gone. It has been great that several youngsters who started with us have moved into quite prestigious jobs in the railway industry, in particular Chris Hack and Simon Cooper. Another early stalwart was Richard Read, now living in north Wales. I have made many friends through the signal box, but sadly few of the original team is now involved.

We have been to the bottom of the trough, and are now climbing out of it. There are new challenges ahead of us, not least of which is the closure of the Infants School next door in the summer of 2007. But I am now very confident that the

new team will carry us through those challenges. I am giving them my full support in any way I can, and have said I am happy to continue with some responsibilities.

In particular, I still thoroughly enjoy talking to visitors at Open days, especially children, and those people (90% of our visitors) who have never been in a signal box before. I enjoy asking that first question: “How do you steer a train?” and knowing that I can keep a family entertained for an hour with the history and hands-on demonstration of the box in operation. I am not embarrassed to proffer the Thomas donations tin at the end of anyone’s visit – because I think we give good entertainment, if it’s done well. I can’t do wiring, I can’t talk technical – but I can talk as a layman, and that’s the biggest skill I can contribute to the project.

My days as overall supremo are thankfully over. They were days of great satisfaction but also great frustration. I’m not too modest to accept that my own enthusiasm over so many years has been a significant contribution to keeping the project going and developing. I’m pleased with the outcome, and I wish the new team all my best wishes for the continuing development of our unique asset.

Dick Hewett, Project Manager and Chairman 1989-2005

Dick Hewett: an appreciation: *Peter Chatfield again...*

As writing your own epitaph might sound as though only you valued your contribution(!), I would like to point out that, in Dick’s case, nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, when I told Dick that I wanted to write a piece on his long chairmanship, but could he provide a few details to help me as I hadn’t been at Romsey anything like as long, I wasn’t expecting he’d end up writing it! Nevertheless, I do think the Friends would wish to record our appreciation for the many years of tireless work Dick undertook on behalf of the Project.

I first met Dick on my first visit to the Project just over 3 years ago. I was struck then, as I still am, by his enthusiasm, dedication and clear thinking. He is also, to our great benefit, a born communicator - this latter quality, I am afraid, I will never match, so please stick around, Dick! Sixteen years chairing anything is pretty good going; sixteen years riding the choppy waters of a start-up volunteer project, endless challenges, and an often precarious future is exceptional. This tenacity has resulted in a viable and popular visitor attraction, not to mention the priceless and unique railway heritage saved for the public and enthusiasts to enjoy.

Dick, we are hugely indebted to you and thank you for your enormous contribution. But having relinquished the chairmanship, in return for passing much of the work to me I do demand that you maintain the presidency for at least a further sixteen years - we still need you!!

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Friends held at the signal box site on Sunday 5th June 2005

Present: Dick Hewett (in the chair), Ken Hale (Secretary), Steve Hailes, Rod Hoyle, Neil Kearns, Garth Long, Ted Mason, Colin Meheux, John Read, Chris Rideout, Danny Scroggins, and Howard Sprenger.

1. Apologies: Frank Akerman, Tim Bourne, Peter Chatfield, Bob Hailes, Chris King-Smith, Bob McCann, Andrew Moody, Adam Rapley, and Bill Tyndall.

2. Minutes

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting held on 6th June 2004 were confirmed as a correct record.

3. Chairman’s Report

The Chairman welcomed members to the meeting and said overall it had been a good year, with progress as follows:

- The main structure of the visitors centre was in place. Quentin Meheux was thanked for his efforts. However there was still much to do with fitting out.
- Visitor numbers and volunteers on site on Open Days had “waxed and waned” but overall numbers were down.
- Cowley Bridge was still not finished.
- The “old” Cowley Bridge had been rescued from possible sequestration by bailiffs at the premises where it had been in store.
- The Health & Safety document was still outstanding.
- The promised new sleepers had not materialized.
- Rods and linkages were now on site but had not yet been installed. However this was low priority.
- All grant monies had been spent. Further costs for fitting out the visitors centre would need to be met by the Buildings Preservation Trust.

4. Revision to Constitution

The meeting adopted the following change to the Constitution:

- Delete Article 3(b). Substitute:
“3(b) The annual subscription shall be such sum as may be determined by the members in General Meeting, and shall be deemed to apply to the financial year from 1st April to 31st March in the following year.”
- Add to Article 3(c): “and on payment of any outstanding membership dues.”

5. Membership and subscriptions

It was resolved as follows:

“That the annual subscription in respect of the financial year ending 31st March 2006 shall be £5.00 for adults between the ages of 16 and 59 inclusive, and £2.50 for persons under 16 and over 59.”

(This resolution confirms the subscription reminder just issued, but extends the period covered by 3 months to 31st March 2006, making it a 15-month subscription year, in order to bring the subscription year into line with the financial year.)

The meeting further resolved that the subscription for the year commencing 1st April 2006 should remain the same.

6. Treasurer’s Report

The Chairman presented the annual financial statement which had been audited by the Trust’s auditors. This was adopted on a proposal from Ted Mason and seconded by Danny Scroggins.

7. Membership

Howard reported that there were currently 33 full members and 25 concessionary members fully paid up. There had been 6 members who had failed to renew, but 3 new members had joined. On the whole membership was fairly stable.

8. Election of Officers/Committee

Dick Hewett announced that he wished to relinquish the Chairmanship in order to devote more time to other interests. He said that he had been Chairman for 16 years and it was not healthy for one person to hold the office for so long. Howard Sprenger also announced that he wished to stand down from Membership secretary to follow other interests.

There was no nomination for Chairman. Neil Kearns offered to take on the role of Membership Secretary. Ken Hale agreed to continue as Secretary for one more year.

Garth Long undertook to convene an informal meeting to discuss how best to take the project forward. Ted Mason offered to join this group. Dick Hewett offered to continue as Treasurer and offered to continue the link to the Trust and the School.

Presentations were made to Dick and Colin in recognition of their long and devoted service to the Signal Box.

9. Diary Dates

Open Days as previously advertised were confirmed.

Romsey Arts Festival weekend, 16/17 July 2005: Garth and Dick would attend from 10am to 4pm and the visitor centre would be used for a photodisplay irrespective of whether it was finished.

10. Action list

- Cowley Bridge: Dick will ask Bill Tyndall to progress.
- Rods and links to be fitted – not time critical.
- Completion of the visitor centre. This was urgent and critical. A plumber was available to do the plumbing work. A professional would have to be employed to do the electrical work.
- Photographic display: Rod Hoyle undertook to provide photos for the display on 16/17 July.
- Consideration to be given by Garth’s group to an operating event on 17th/18th September.

11. Any other business

None.

12. Date of next Annual General Meeting

Agreed as Sunday 4th June 2006, 3.30pm, at the Signal Box site.

There being no further business, the meeting closed at 4.30pm.

Ken Hale, Secretary

Interim Sub-Committee

The AGM on 5 June had been unable to appoint a Chairman and the AGM had decided that an Interim Sub Committee should be formed (in accordance with the Constitution) to carry forward the business of the Friends. The AGM had noted those willing to act/continue to act in various capacities.

The group held its first meeting on Sunday 17 July 2005. In the absence of a Chairman of the Friends, Peter Chatfield agreed to take the chair in order to facilitate the conduct of business. Others in attendance included Dick Hewett, Ted Mason, Garth Long, Neil Kearns, and Roger Pleasant.

The Committee agreed the following structure and areas of responsibility/interest:

- Acting President - Dick Hewett, Treasurer, School and Buildings Trust Liaison, Media & Publicity;
- Chairman – vacant;
- Co-ordinator of the Interim Sub Committee, News Letter, Productions Publicity, Assistant Operating Development – Peter Chatfield;
- Secretary - Ken Hale;
- Membership Secretary, Duty Rosters - Neil Kearns;
- Open Days - A Member nominated by the Membership Secretary each time;
- Operating Development and Grass Management - Garth Long;
- Pavilion Project Development, and Buildings Trust Liaison - Ted Mason;
- Site Maintenance - Bob McCann, Garth Long;
- Legal Issues, Health & Safety - Bob Hailes;
- Webmaster - Steve Hailes;
- Cowley Bridge Project - Bill Tyndall;
- Archives and sales – Vacant (currently Dick Hewett).

The proposed office of President will be put to The Friends at an Extraordinary or Annual Meeting.

By way of reminder and briefing to fellow members the meeting considered the general position to date.

- The Pavilion was partly completed; Quentin Meheux was unable, because of ill health, to complete his contribution to that project. Grant money from, in particular the National Lottery and Test Valley Borough Council, had been subject to conditions about completion that had to be complied with. Accordingly money from those sources had been used to carry out infrastructural work e.g. drainage and laying of other services conduits. A plumber had been identified, but not an electrician. Early completion of the plumbing and wiring would facilitate Open Days and be a general moral booster. Dick Hewett had provided Ted Mason with paperwork. The meeting paid tribute to Quentin, without whom the Pavilion project would not have progressed to it's current state. ACTION: (a) Ted Mason to secure early completion of plumbing, wiring and internal cladding and allied works related to access by the disabled; (b) Neil Kearns to seek volunteer electrician from membership – target date 1 August 2005.
- Grounds maintenance was a continuing chore as many members were primarily interested in operating the Box and regretted time spent on basic housekeeping. ACTION: Garth Long and Roger Pleasant.
- The issues of Site Security and Special Events would be considered at the next meeting.

Postscript: Peter Chatfield was appointed as Acting Chairman in September 2005.

A rosier future? / Key projects

Peter Chatfield continues...

Our two main practical priorities are to complete the pavilion and to replace the box staircase and the box’s rotten timber. Once the plumbing and electrics are installed in the pavilion we will be able to fit and finish the interior. The exterior windows/shutters should be finished in the next few months. We need to obtain quotes for the staircase and for the timber. Painting of the box exterior will now be done next spring.



Inside of pavilion: Looking through to where the disabled toilet room will be fitted

The pavilion is to be our main ‘visitor centre’ with an attractive display of photos, artifacts, etc. The toilet and washing facilities will be a benefit to visitors and volunteers alike. We need to construct an access pathway suitable for wheelchair users, also CCTV equipment in the pavilion to relay demonstrations from the box.

The holding group will review security at the site. There have been several break-ins this year, thankfully with little damage caused. We will need to risk assess security, balancing the potential cost of equipment against the probable extent of future damage, remembering that we are not totally sure of the long-term future of the box at the site.

There has been very little done this year regarding mechanical/electrical restoration in the box. I am intending to consult our own volunteer specialists on this to see what needs to be done and how it can be actioned.



Garth Long inspects the inside of the pavilion where the displays will stand

Publicity has already been mentioned, and I am keen to promote links with related heritage railway groups and, perhaps, with local historic tourist attractions - to our mutual advantage. Dick and I will look further at targeting publicity to encourage visitors and more volunteers.

Steve Hailes, our webmaster, has recently updated the website. Those accessing the site can now send e-mails - this facility has already been useful, for example, with correspondence from the Imperial College Railway Society - thanks, Steve.

Not much discussion yet on this, but I am keen to continue with special events (within our volunteer capacity). We had over 100 visitors during the 48 hour operating marathon of September 2004. It would be good to have the marathon take place bi-annually, so how about September 2006, in association with Heritage Open Days? And for that we might just about have the pavilion up and running.... (Not to mention an event celebrating the long-awaited opening of the pavilion).

And finally....

Comments and feedback always welcome.... I propose that we have a newsletter about three times a year. Please let me know if there is anything in particular you would like to see in the newsletter, e.g. articles, letters, etc. If someone wants to write an article which you think would be of interest to the Friends, please contact me.

Very best wishes, Peter Chatfield, Acting Chairman (01892 522143)

Next Open day: 4 December 2005. Contact Neil Kearns, 023 8061 8167.

Open Days 2006: 5 February, 5 March, 2 April, 7 May, 4 June (**with AGM at 3.30pm**), 2 July, 6 August, 3 September, 1 October, 5 November, 3 December.

48-hour Marathon/Heritage Open Days: 9-10 September 2006

Special Members/Guests Operating Events: dates to be confirmed: contact Garth Long, 023 8031 5075.



Neil Kearns and Roger Pleasant operating the box

(All pictures taken during Open Day on November 6th 2005)