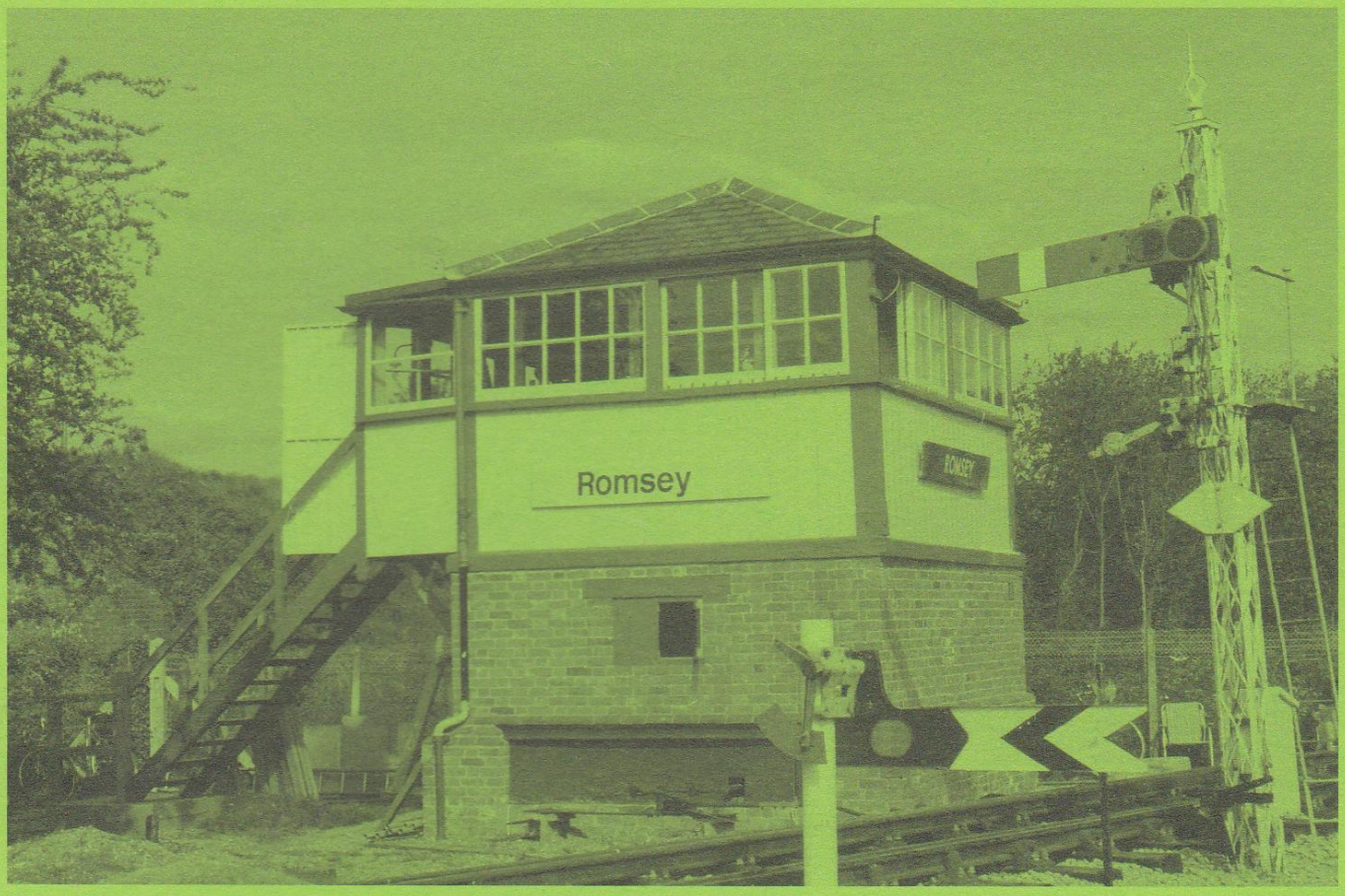
A guide to the

ROMSEY
Signal Box Project



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"Steering the train". A typical schools visit. Romsey County Junior School visit to Romsey Signal Box, with teacher Kevin Lynch pushing trolley under the direction of Project Manager Dick Hewett, January 1997.

WHAT PRECISELY IS THE ROMSEY SIGNAL BOX PROJECT?

Although many signal boxes have been preserved in Britain, most of them are on operational railways or in the hands of private individuals. But the Romsey Signal Box Project is an entirely different sort of preservation scheme, a scheme that has involved lowering a very old signal box down an embankment into the grounds of an infants school, where it has become the centrepiece of a unique educational and community project.

The Project basically consists of two parts:

1. The restored Romsey signal box, with:
   - the lever frame connected to working instruments and to a simulator; in the ground floor of the signal box; a full-size point and signals linked to certain of the levers;
   - other associated artifacts, information and displays at the signal box site, relating to Romsey's transport history in general (including the nearby canal).
2. A working, mobile replica of Cowley Bridge Junction signal box, connected to a second simulator.

What are the Project's Aims and Objectives?

- Primarily, to educate and provide pleasure;
- To develop an educational resource;
- To preserve some of Romsey's history;
- To develop and interest in transport history and signalling in particular.

The Terms of reference of the Project are:

> "To oversee, on behalf of the Romsey and District Buildings Preservation Trust and Hampshire County Council, the development and management of the Trust's land (and the signal box) at the Romsey Infant School, for the purpose of education." (In this context, "education" applies to the whole community).

The project is reliant upon grants and donations. Major suppliers of materials and assistance to date have included British Rail, Foster Yeoman and Southern Electric. The Project is supported by Hampshire County Council and Test Valley Borough Council, who gave the original grants to purchase the necessary land. Continued funding by Hampshire County Council and the Romsey & District Buildings Preservation Trust, together with grants from Test Valley Borough Council and Romsey Town Council, help to cover costs which are incurred in association with the efforts of the volunteer Project Team. The project was the recipient of a grant from the "Awards For All" scheme in 2003 for the reconstruction of an old building as a new visitor centre. Donations are also received from individuals, including membership subscriptions for the Friends of Romsey Signal Box.

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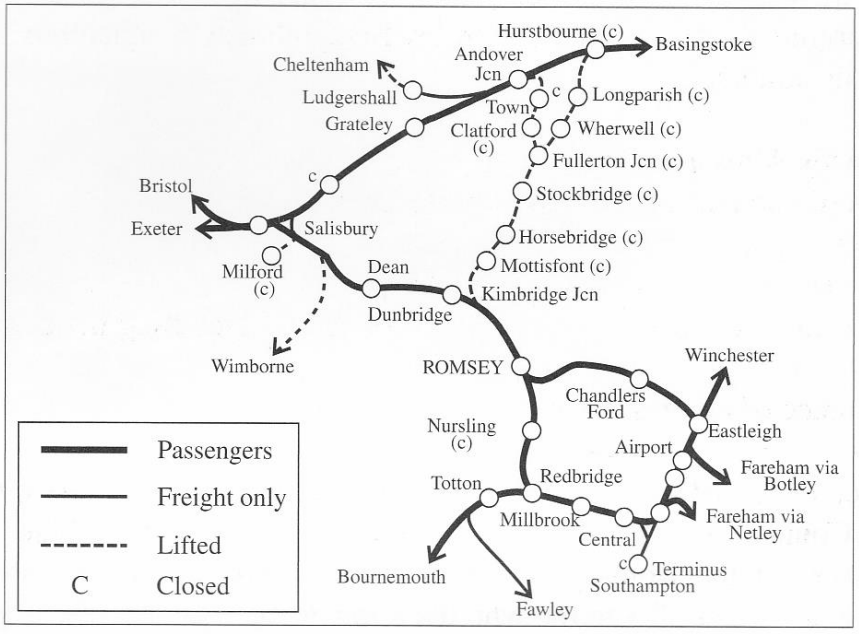
A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE RAILWAYS OF ROMSEY

Romsey lies on one of the first branches to be built from the original London and Southampton Railway. This branch was the first railway to Salisbury, opened to goods traffic from Bishopstoke (later renamed Eastleigh) to a terminus at Milford on the east side of Salisbury on 27th January 1847, and to passengers on 1st March 1847. The line's most famous legacy in Romsey was the notorious low bridge on the Winchester Road known as the Sun Arch.

Romsey became a junction on 6th March 1865 when a branch from Southampton to Andover was opened. The line had to climb steeply as it approached Romsey Junction from the south, swinging sharply to join the original main line after crossing Winchester Road at its junction with Botley Road. Even today the line from Romsey to Eastleigh which sweeps broadly through Romsey Junction is referred to as the main line and the sharp curve to the right towards Redbridge as the branch, despite the fact that the latter now carries the majority of the traffic.



Romsey lost one of its passenger routes on 7th September 1964 when services were withdrawn over the line from Kimbridge Junction to Andover. Services from Eastleigh via Chandlers Ford followed on 5th May 1969. From then until 2003, passenger services through Romsey consisted in the main of Portsmouth-Cardiff cross-country trains and locals between Southampton and Salisbury.

The line through Chandlers Ford was still used regularly by empty stock and light engines as a short cut to Eastleigh. There is also a regular service of freight trains, including stone trains run by ARC/Foster Yeoman Ltd from their quarry at Merehead in Somerset to their depot at Botley on the line from Eastleigh to Fareham.

Reinstatement of regular services came on the 18th May 2003 with a new, regular Romsey-Chandlers Ford-Eastleigh-Southampton-Totton service. Ever since the line through Chandlers Ford was closed there were appeals for it to be reopened. The population of the area the line traverses has grown enormously in the last 20 years. Passenger services once more returned to the Eastleigh/Romsey line and Romsey Junction saw the return of busier times. But they will no longer be controlled by Romsey Signal Box.

THE HISTORY OF ROMSEY SIGNAL BOX ITSELF

At the time of its closure in 1982 Romsey Signal Box was probably one of the oldest signal boxes still in service. The first requirement for a proper signal box at Romsey would have come when the Redbridge branch was opened on 6th March 1865, and the box now being preserved could date from then. The Ordnance Survey map of 1867 shows a signal box on the same site. However we know that the frame inside, a Steven's, was not built until 1870 at the earliest, because it features tappet locking. Nevertheless the box was certainly in service before its neighbours at Dean and Dunbridge, which dated from the early 1870s.

Romsey Signal Box and Station, 1973

The site of the box when it was in service can still be seen today. From the far (north) side of the line the base remains on the side of the embankment just to the left of the small arch though to the box's current site. From the signal box itself on its current site, the original site can be identified by the 50 mph speed restriction sign on the far side of the present tracks.

The first version of the signal box was almost totally square, was entirely wooden (both floors), and contained an 18-lever frame controlling the junction between the double-track Eastleigh-Salisbury main line and the single-track branch to Southampton via Redbridge. Several of the signals were placed on the roof of the signal box, a situation which continued after the junction layout had been revised in 1884 when the Redbridge line was converted to double track. However the roof signals are likely to have disappeared by the late 1880s. The wooden ground floor was at some time replaced by brick, because timbers in the ground rot quickly.

The levers in the box today probably date from the doubling of the Redbridge line in 1884/5 - a change which would have made complete replacement worthwhile. The box continued with an 18-lever frame through to the First World War. Then, at some time between 1917 and 1932, the box was extended with the addition of the flat-roofed overhanging section of the first floor, and 7 levers added to the frame. Changes to the box itself continued right up to the end; for example, the entrance door was moved as recently as the 1960s to give more room inside.

The track layout developed with additional sidings until it reached its maximum extent by 1944. On the embankment above the present site of the signal box there were several sidings, and the goods yard was extended to cope with the wartime traffic. The sidings at the Kimbridge end of the station have always been controlled by a ground frame, which had six levers in 1944. A second ground frame controlled the siding off the Redbridge branch south of Winchester Road. This served Wills (now Hilliers) Nursery, opening on 13th February 1928.

The gradual decline in freight traffic which started with the closure of Wills Siding on 2nd August 1959 continued with the closure of Romsey Goods Yard on 20th July 1970. In the meantime the "main" line from Eastleigh through Chandlers Ford was closed to passengers on 5th May 1969. The inevitable singling of the Chandlers Ford freight-only route took place on 1st May 1972.

Class 9 92203 'Black Prince' with David Shepherd on the footplate passes Romsey box, 13th May 1973.

This singling coincided with the conversion of the first mechanical signals to colour lights. It is believed the 25-lever frame was shortened to its present 23 levers during a final eight week period in September and October 1976, by which time the remaining semaphore signals had been replaced. As each signal and point was connected to electrical operation, the top of the relevant lever in Romsey signal box was shortened by several inches.

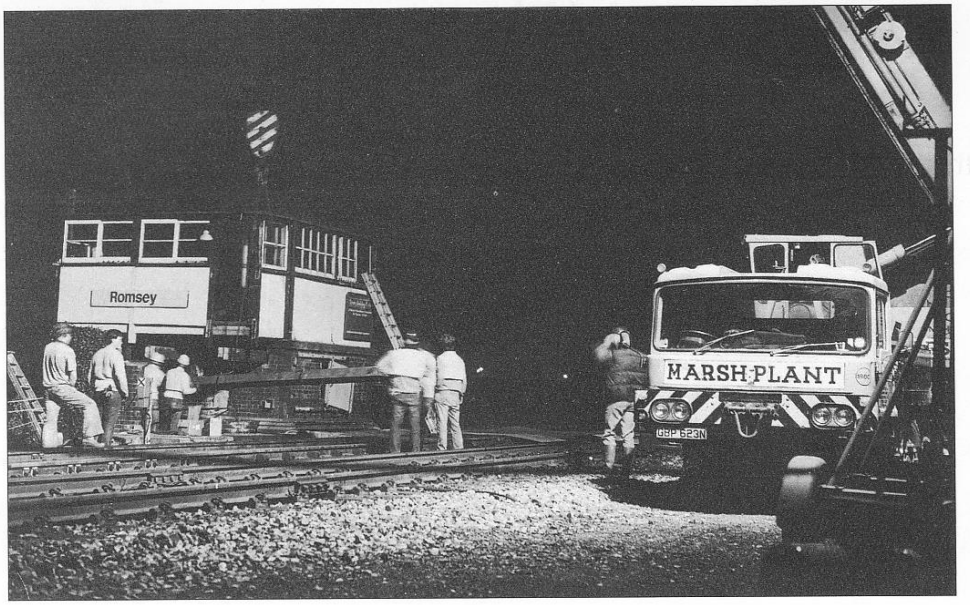
There were three regular signalmen who worked 8-hour shifts (12 hours on Sundays), with every third weekend off. A rest-day relief signalman covered Romsey and several other boxes in the vicinity. By the last years of the box mains electricity, water and gas had been provided, but no toilet facilities. These were introduced in the form of the infamous "Portaloo" in the late 1970s after several protests from staff, who had brought services to a halt by working to rule, closing the box and walking to the station toilets.

During the last years of service, the Romsey box saw numerous minor changes as traditional equipment and techniques continued to be superseded by modern technology. The latter finally triumphed when the last of the points and signals was converted, and Eastleigh panel assumed responsibility for the Romsey area. Romsey signal box was closed on 17th October 1982, after what may have been as much as 117 years of continuous service.

Inside Romsey signal box, 26th April 1982.

THE RESCUE OF ROMSEY SIGNAL BOX

After its closure in October 1982 the signal box was left only a short while before demolition was planned. It was when Eric Romaine, a British Rail official, requested access through the grounds of Romsey County Infants School for the demolition gang that Headteacher Mrs Audrey Gebbie had the idea of saving it for educational use.



Early morning, 26th June 1983, and the wooden structure is lifted off its original base.

Mrs Gebbie contacted the Romsey and District Buildings Preservation Trust. The Trust, better known for renovating threatened cottages and town houses, agreed to purchase the box for a nominal £10 and to fund the £1,000 costs of removal. This was achieved on the night of Sunday 26th June 1983. The first floor wooden box, which weighed about a ton, was lifted across the tracks to a temporary position in the school grounds on the other side of the embankment. The 23-lever frame, weighing over 3 tons, was a different proposition, but this too was lifted over.

Negotiations to buy a suitable strip of land at the foot of the embankment took several years, but agreement was reached and, thanks to funds from Hampshire County Council, the land purchased and a new ground floor constructed. The lever frame was lifted onto this base in April 1987, with the wooden first floor following it to its final permanent home.

The wooden first floor joins the lever frame on their new base, April 1987.

Progress with the Project has been reliant upon volunteer efforts and the generosity of firms, organisations and individuals alike. Three particular firms included British Rail, who have contributed trackwork, equipment and labour; Foster Yeoman Ltd, whose trains rumble past the box, and who donated 100 tons of ballast for the track and site paths; and Southern Electric, who provided the box with a mains electric supply. Many other local firms have provided equipment and materials at low or no cost.

Completion of the first stage of the Project was celebrated on Wednesday 26th June 1991 when the first signal was re-connected to the lever frame, exactly eight years to the day since the box was lifted off its original site. This signal was the original down branch home arm and down branch distance post. It returned to Romsey after over a decade guarding a compost heap in a garden several miles away. Once more controlled by its parent signal box, it signalled a clear line for the further development of the project.

Celebrations for the reconnection of the signal and point to the signal box, 26th June 1991.
Front row, *seated on trolley: Dick Hewett (Project Manager)*
Mrs Audrey Gebbie (Headteacher, Romsey County Infants School),
Ted Mason (Hampshire County Council).
Standing *(left to right): Ivor Mason (Foster Yeoman Ltd), Ken Davies, Andy Webb,*
Richard Read, Ian Maxwell, Joe Davies (volunteers),
Councillor Craig Lewis (Deputy Mayor, Test Valley Borough Council),
Chris Gibb (Western Cross-Country, Regional Railways),
Bill Tyndall and Chris Hack (volunteers).

Work then commenced on the construction of a simulator located in the ground floor of the box, which, connected to the instruments upstairs, simulates the actions of the neighbouring boxes along the lines from Romsey. The Project Team had set themselves a challenging target, but successfully restored the signal box to operation on the 10th anniversary of the closure of the box, 17th October 1992, with due celebration.

Ideally the signal box would be restored to its early Southern Railway condition, but the locking alterations and shortened levers referred to earlier have prohibited that. Nevertheless it is felt that to restore the box to its situation at the date of closure would reduce the scope of the project, since it was entirely colour light by then. So a compromise has been reached, whereby a combination of semaphore and colour light signalling is being displayed. The restoration therefore does not replicate any particular moment in the signal box's history, but is representative of the various stages through which it went in the second half of the 20th century.

Members of the Friends of Romsey Signal Box putting the finishing touches to signal no 3, 1992.

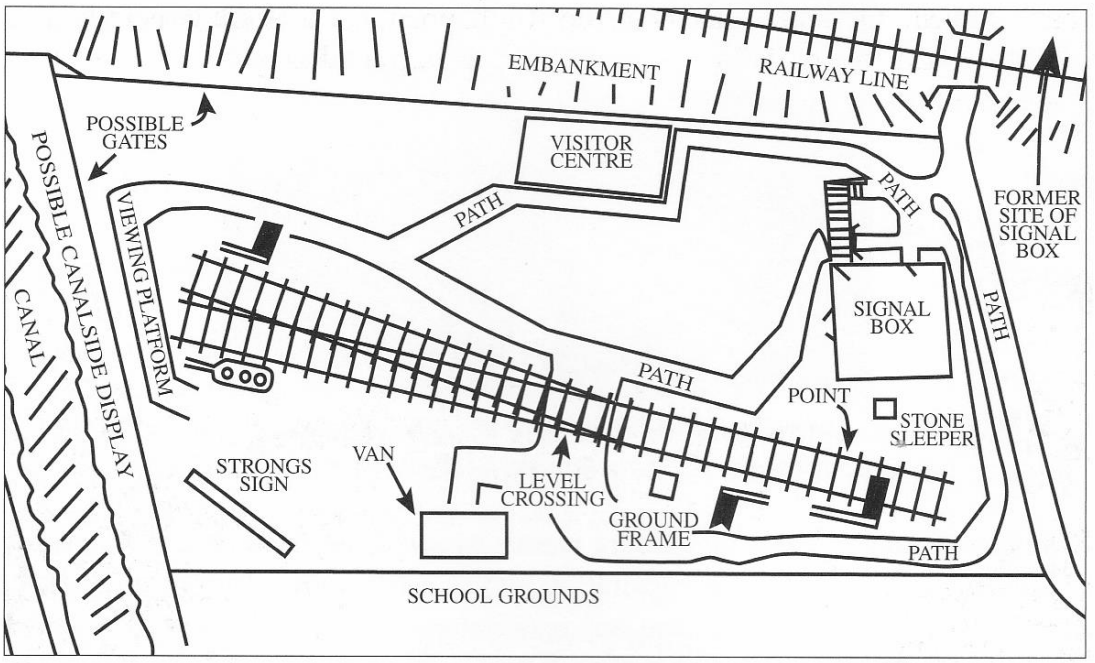
Three ex-Southern Railway meat containers were rescued from a garden in Timsbury in April 1994 and brought to the site, one for restoration and two for spare materials. Thanks in part to funding from Romsey Town Council, the one restored van now forms the visitor centre, opened by the Town Mayor of Romsey, Councillor Charles Mead, on 1st March 1997, the 150th Anniversary of the very first passenger train from Bishopstoke through Romsey to Salisbury.

During 2004 this will be partly replaced as a visitor centre by a restored 1920s pavilion which was donated to the friends. Thanks to a Lottery grant from the "Awards For All" scheme, the building will provide a disabled toilet, washing and meeting facilities.

The 1920's pavilion in a garden in Romsey prior to being dismantled in 2000. This will be reassembled on the signal box site, with National Lottery support.

Elsewhere on the site, various artifacts have been mounted, including display boards funded by Test Valley Borough Council, covering many aspects of Romsey's transport history. Further artifacts and trackwork are planned.

In the longer term, it is hoped to consider the addition of a miniature railway around the site; to develop the potential of the canalside location; and to improve access to the site from outside (perhaps from the railway embankment).



HOW DOES IT ALL WORK?

To the casual visitor, the crashes and bangs of levers being pulled, the tinkling of various bells, and the flashing of assorted lights on the diagram and instruments will be a complete mystery. And it is certainly true that signalling is a highly complex subject, with many interlocking systems designed specifically to cover many eventualities and to permit the passenger to travel in safety.

A visit to Romsey signal box will give an opportunity for some of this complexity to be explained, and it is one of the important aspects of the project that visitors are not only given a commentary on what is going on and why, but even have the chance to get involved. At the heart of all this noise and apparently frenetic bouts of activity are some very simple principles.

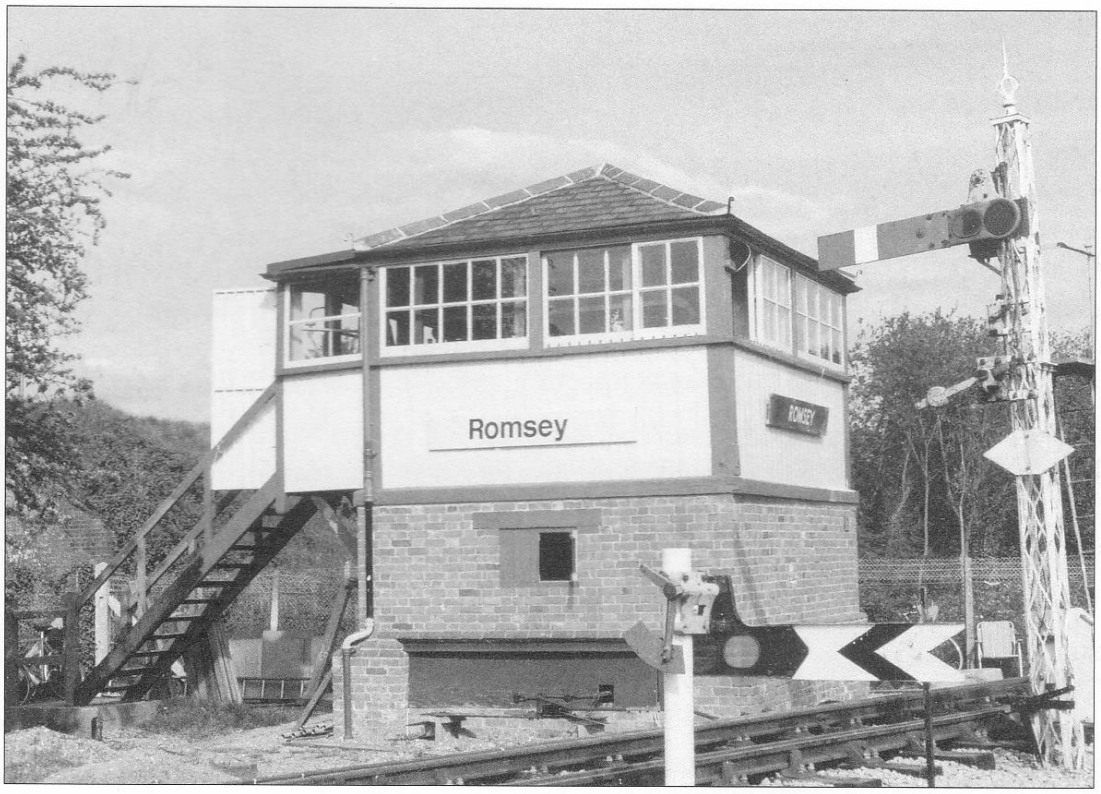
Fundamental principles

With the wheels of the train following the tracks, it is the signal man's responsibility to "steer" the train along one track or another, using points, and to give permission for the train to proceed by means of "signals" to the driver. One of the fundamental principles of railway signalling is that the signals cannot be set to "go" unless the track ahead is set correctly and the appropriate permission has been granted by the signalman in the next box.

The points, signals and various instruments are all "interlocked" to avoid the signalman making a fatal error. At Romsey the interlocking between the signals and points is still purely mechanical, whilst there is some electrical interlocking between these and the instruments.

The track is divided into sections, each controlled by at least one set of signals. A second fundamental principle of railway signalling is that only one train can be in one section of track at any one time. Again all the instrumentation is interlocked to prevent the signalman permitting a train to proceed into a section already occupied by another train except under very careful controls.

All the equipment and systems have developed as a result of accidents throughout railway history, and loopholes and anomalies progressively covered, until the apparently complex system we see today had evolved. Of course, accidents do still happen, but they are generally as a result of human error, broken trackwork, failure of equipment, or flagrant disregard of the rules, rather than a loophole in signalling design.



Working point and signals on the box's new site. 1993.

Signals and points

Semaphore stop signals are those provided with a red arm, bearing a white stripe down the face. In the horizontal position they indicate "stop" and are lowered (on some railways) or raised (as here at Romsey) by means of the levers in the signal box to indicate "Proceed" or "Go". At night time, the yellow flame from an oil lamp would shine through the dark red glass (horizontal position) or turquoise glass (raised) to give a bright red light (for "Stop") or green light (for "Proceed"). Once a week the lamp man would climb the ladder of the signal post to change and clean this lamp.

At Romsey two semaphore stop signals have been installed, connected to lever numbers 3 and 5. The more modern equivalent, a three aspect colour-light signal which is basically the same as a road traffic light, is also on display, connected to lever number 2. A further variant, the "ground signal", is connected to a small two-lever ground frame by the level crossing. Ground signals were used for sidings and "drawing forward".

In addition a low-level 'distant' signal is connected to the small ground frame. Distant signals act as a preliminary warning to the driver, and the semaphore version is yellow with a black chevron. When the driver passes a distant signal in the upright (raised) "all clear" position, he knows the stop signal he is approaching is at "Proceed" and he can continue at full speed. But if the distant signal is in the horizontal "caution" position, he must slow and be prepared to stop at the next stop signal. At night time the distant signal showed green for "all clear" and yellow for "caution".

Inside the signal box

Visitors to Romsey will climb the stairs to the operating floor, which was on the first floor principally for good visibility of the tracks nearby. The main features of the operating floor are the lever frame, the block shelf (with instruments), and the track diagram.

The track diagram and track circuits

This depicts the area of track covered by the Romsey box, and shows the positions of all the points and signals with their relevant lever numbers. The points are drawn in a way which shows which way each is set when the respective levers are back in the frame. The track on the ground is divided up into short sections, each separated from the next by an insulator. On the diagram each section is shown in a different colour, and has its own lozenge light.

A low voltage current passes along one rail, through the signal box, and back to the other rail. When any part of a train is anywhere on the section of track, the current is short-circuited through the axle of the train, and the current fails to reach the contact in the signal box, causing the light to be illuminated on the track diagram. By this means the signalman can watch the progress of the train across his area of responsibility.

The lever frame

The lever frame at Romsey is the original from 1885. The levers in the frame are painted in various colours, each being individually numbered with a suitable description. The numbers corresponded with the various signals and points on the track diagram above.

Signals: Red levers are for stop (home/red) signals, whilst yellow levers are for distant (yellow) signals. At Romsey there are several red/yellow levers, which controlled both a home signal and its associated distant signal on the one lever. They were combined when the distants were converted to electric colour light in the 1970s.

Points: Black levers are for points, whilst blue levers are for point locks. These prevented the points being moved under a train: they were only needed on facing points where there was the greatest danger from a possible derailment.

Other levers: Blue/brown levers were electrical interlocking levers, to release levers in a ground frame elsewhere in the area: at Romsey, the shunter from the station would telephone to the signal box from the ground frame to request a release.

At Romsey a further brown/white lever (no 6) provided an unusual replacement for a conventional block instrument on the line to Eastleigh, when either signalman requested permission for a train to pass. In the frame it cleared the instruments for trains to travel towards Eastleigh, providing the Eastleigh signalman had pressed an appropriate button in his panel box. For a train to pass in the other direction towards Romsey, lever number 6 was pulled off, locking the instruments in the opposite direction.

Diagram, block instrument, bells and lever frame. Even youngsters get to operate.

When all the levers are in the frame, all the signals are at "Stop" and all the points set as shown on the track diagram. The only levers to be pulled off when no train was due would be those for facing point locks, to lock the relevant points in the positions shown on the diagram. At Romsey facing point lock no 9 is left pulled off during operating sessions, but at other times it is put back in the frame to avoid visitors falling over it!

The block shelf

In between the lever frame and the diagram are the wooden shelf and various instruments together referred to as the "block shelf". The original block shelf and instruments from Romsey were removed when the box was closed. The replacement block shelf was obtained from Weymouth signal box in 1991, and all the instruments have had to be acquired. The instrumentation on the shelf is as close to the original as possible.

The most obvious parts of the block shelf are the bells and block instruments. These are used to signal the trains from one signal box to another. Three differently shaped bells provided different tones for messages from Redbridge, Eastleigh and Kimbridge Junction. At Romsey there were only two block instruments, for trains to/from Redbridge and Kimbridge Junction: lever number 6 provided the "block" for trains to/from Eastleigh.

The other feature of the block shelf is the range of "repeaters" along the front, each repeating the position of the external signals. Signalmen could rarely see the signals outside and the repeaters were an important means of confirming whether the signal was showing the correct aspect.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A TRAIN PASSES

So let's imagine what happens in Romsey signal box when a train from Southampton to Salisbury via Romsey is due. This is probably the simplest operation of all the common operations in the box, yet it is still fairly complex.

The first indication that a train is due is when the Redbridge bell rings once. This is the Redbridge signalman calling for the attention of the man at Romsey, who answers with one push of the buzzer on the end of the shelf, thus ringing an equivalent bell in Redbridge signal box. The Redbridge signalman then gives a train code (say "4-4", i.e. four bells, space, four bells). Each train has a different code, and the signalman can check his timetable to see what is expected. The Romsey man checks the instruments, confirms he can accept the train, turns his Redbridge block instrument to "Line Clear" (which is repeated on a similar instrument in Redbridge signal box), and buzzes back "4-4" as confirmation. At this time the train is still somewhere between Southampton and Redbridge, but the signalman at Redbridge can set his tracks and signals so that, when the train arrives at Redbridge, he can permit it to continue on past him towards Romsey.

Some time later, the Redbridge bell rings twice (meaning "Train entering section"), the Romsey man turns his instrument to "Train on line" and buzzes back "2" bells. The train is now passing Redbridge signal box. The Romsey signalman now walks to the other end of the frame and rings the Kimbridge Junction signalman with a single push on the buzzer. Kimbridge responds (one bell) and Romsey buzzes the train code ("4-4"). The Kimbridge signalman turns his instrument to "Line Clear" (repeated on the top part of the Kimbridge instrument in Romsey box) and returns the "4-4" call on the bell.

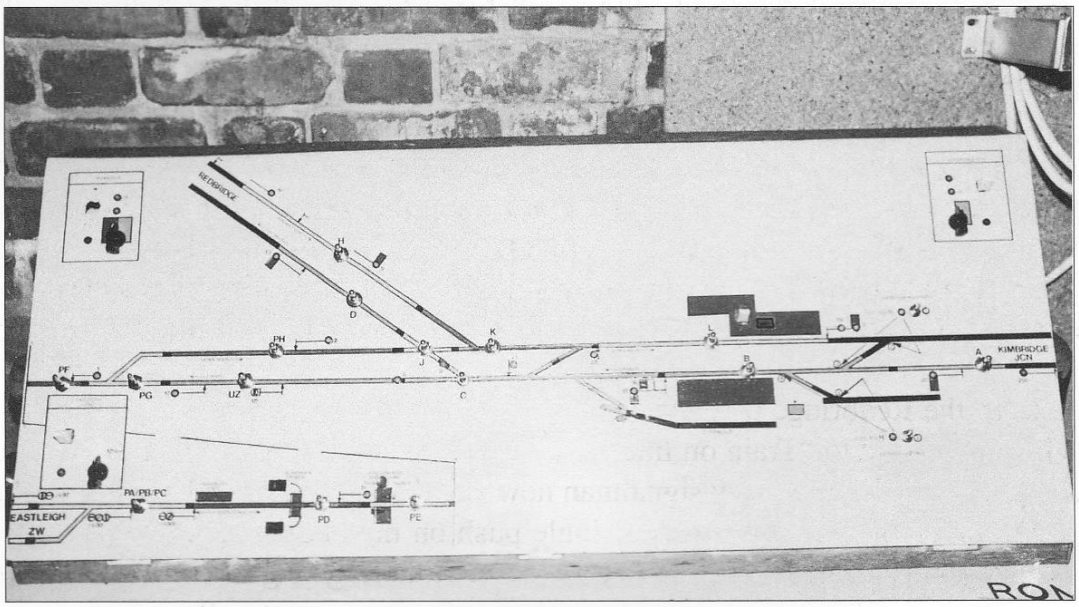
The train is now on its way towards Romsey and the signalman needs to set the track and signals accordingly. A quick check of the diagram will show that the points are set correctly for this train when all the point levers are back in the frame, but facing point lever number 9 should be out. Two signals control the passage through Romsey - numbers 3 and 5 - and both must be pulled off in front of the train.

The train is now approaching. Its progress will be shown by the lights on the diagram, with the lozenge light for section H illuminating first. As K illuminates and H goes out, the Romsey signalman will lower signal 5 to return it to "Stop", thus protecting the rear of the train. It is only now that the train will appear into view through the signal box windows, and normally as the front

of the train passes the box, he will ring Kimbridge with the "Train entering section" code of two bells. The Kimbridge signalman will turn his instrument to "Train on line" and return the 2-ring bell code. If the train is stopping in the station, the Romsey signalman will wait until it is leaving the platform before ringing Kimbridge Junction.

The Romsey signalman will observe the whole of the train as it passes, looking for the rear light (to make sure the whole of the train has indeed passed), and will then buzz to Redbridge the code for "Train out of section" (two rings, space, one ring), and turn the Redbridge instrument back to "normal". Redbridge will return the 2-1 bell code, and would be free to offer another train at this stage if he so wished, even if the first train was stopping in the station.

Meanwhile the train would by now have arrived at Romsey station, illuminating section L on the diagram, and then leaving past signal number 3, which the Romsey signalman would lower behind the train once the light for section L had gone out. Some minutes later, the Kimbridge bell would ring 2-1, indicating that the train had passed Kimbridge Junction box, and the repeater on top of the Kimbridge block instrument would change back to "Normal". Romsey would return the 2-1 code, and the passage of this particular train would be complete.



The simulator panel for Romsey Signal box, which permits realistic operation of the box once again.

All this activity would be recorded in the Train Register on the desk at the back of the signal box. The train register was not only a useful aide memoire for busy signalmen, but was critical at shift changes in guiding the new signalman as to the situation at the moment he took duty. It would also provide valuable evidence in the event of any accident.

This sequence was one of the simplest movements through Romsey. In practice often there would be several trains in the area at any one time, and the signalman would have to keep on top of them all, fully alert to everything going on, to keep the passage of trains as uninhibited as possible. The signalman at Romsey had a complex task, with many different rules and regulations, bell codes and lever sequences, extra un-timetabled trains and unusual situations to manage. It was a task that many signalmen found they could only do in solitude, and even today some professional signalmen prefer to operate the simulated box at Romsey in their own time, rather than when visitors are present.

But those that are confident with visitors are always happy to share their knowledge and experiences. It was a job in which many men happily spent their whole career, and the love of signalmen for their profession and the boxes they used to operate is self-evident whenever one calls as a visitor to Romsey and begins to relive the "good old days". Learning to operate the Romsey signal box, or its miniature equivalent Cowley Bridge Junction, can give today's observers a taste of the same job satisfaction.

Nowadays operation of the box is reliant not on communication with other boxes or the passage of real trains, but thanks to the installation of a simulator which is connected to the block shelf and diagram, and which is used to send the appropriate messages and light the appropriate lights on the diagram. Even for the professional, the realism is staggering. The same principle is used for Cowley Bridge Junction.

COWLEY BRIDGE JUNCTION MINIATURE, MOBILE SIGNAL BOX

A visit to the restored Romsey Signal Box will enable the public to learn all about signalling, and transport history in general at full size. However such visits are not always possible, so to overcome this problem, Cowley Bridge Junction is a miniature working signal box which can be taken to schools and exhibitions. Watching the display at work can give a very good impression of life in an old mechanical signal box. The other benefit is that it promotes the Project as a whole, and many members of the Friends have joined after first coming across the Project at a model railway exhibition where Cowley Bridge Junction has been operating.

Operating Cowley Bridge Junction on Swanage Station platform, 1993

Cowley Bridge, a famous railway junction near Exeter, was selected because it offers intensive working over a track layout which is interesting without being too large or complicated. The exhibit is small enough when dismantled to be transported in a car.

It consists of three functional parts:

- the miniature lever frame;
- a full-size block shelf with all its instruments,
- and a simulator panel which simulates the next signal boxes up each line from Cowley Bridge, enabling the operator to exchange messages with them just like the prototype.

In addition, display boards give a full description of the operation and history of Cowley Bridge and the Project in general.

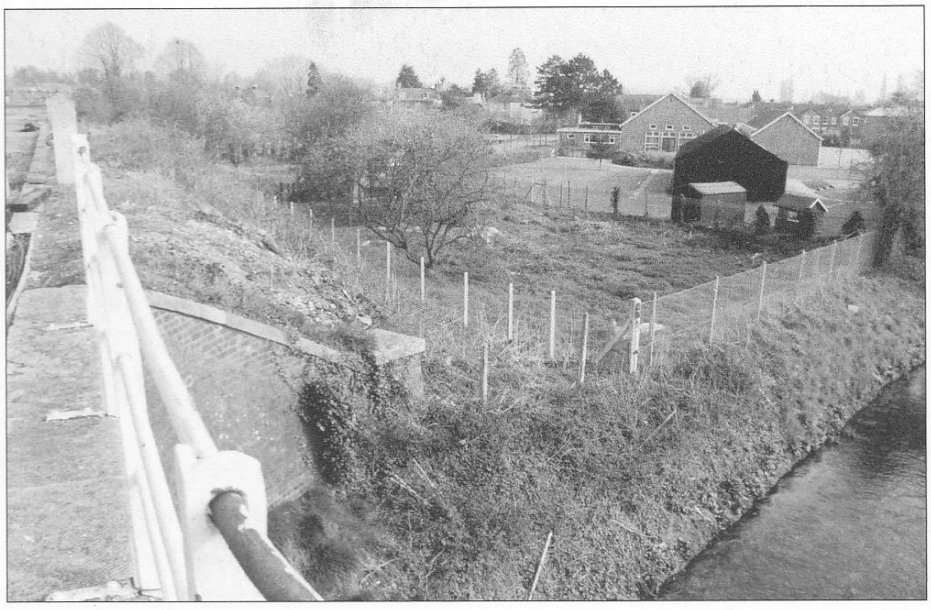
A new Cowley Bridge Junction miniature signal box is now in production, and should be available for exhibitions and events from 2005. This will be a fully interlocked frame to a high quality of workmanship, a significent improvement on the original.

Both Romsey and Cowley Bridge Junction require a minimum of two operators, one out front operating the frame, and another on the simulator. but ideally they should be manned by three or even four people at a time, so that spare operators are available to talk to viewers. Clearly there is a need for quite a large team of operators. The Romsey and Cowley Bridge Signalmen (and women!) undergo a thorough course, such that they can eventually be "passed out" to operate unassisted.

OTHER TRANSPORT HISTORY FEATURED ON THE SITE

The Redbridge-Andover Canal

The site purchased as a home for the signal box is bounded on one side by the railway and on another by what appears to be an innocuous stream. This is actually part of one of the few remaining sections of the canal originally opened in 1794 from Redbridge to Andover. Just north of Timsbury the construction of a branch canal to Salisbury was started early the following century, but the dawning of the railway age not only stopped further development but in the case of the Redbridge-Andover Canal caused its direct closure.



The Redbridge-Andover canal seen from the railway, with the signal box hidden behind the trees on its newly cleared site, and Romsey County Infants School in the distance. 1990.

March 1990 The builders of the new railway line in the 1860s between the same two centres selected the route of the canal as the best for construction, and purchased the canal, filling and converting much of it to railway. However rather than merely crossing the existing Eastleigh-Salisbury line at Romsey, the railway builders decided to use the existing line between Romsey and Kimbridge Junctions, leaving a short stretch of canal untouched. Unusually for a canal so long out of use, much of this stretch remains as a tranquil waterway from behind the Plaza Theatre in Romsey northwards past the present signal box site, under the railway, and onwards for several miles towards Timsbury. Part even remains navigable to shallow-draft boats.

There were several locks, long since disappeared, along this stretch, and the general water level has fallen considerably. Weirs and low bridges camouflage what was once a major transport routeway, but the Project team aim to maximise the canalside location and restore at least one small part of the canal to its original appearance, with suitable canalside features.

Road transport

The triangle of land on which the school and signal box stand is bounded on the third side by the A3090 road from Winchester through Romsey to Cadnam. Until the opening of the M27 in the late 1970s, this was the main A31 route from London to Bournemouth and Dorset, being renumbered in 1996. It has now become much less important, but the Project Team hope to make features of several items of interest which still remain from Romsey's road history.

Firstly transport historians are alerted to the turnpike house next to the A3090/A27 roundabout. From here the A27 road towards Southampton was built along the course of the old canal when Lord Palmerston ordered the diversion of the main Romsey/Southampton route which previously passed through the ground of Broadlands house.

In the other direction the A3090 road onwards towards Ringwood from the roundabout is a typical short by-pass from the 1930s. The by-pass permitted through traffic to avoid Romsey town centre, which still features a number of coaching inns, notably the White Horse. Romsey was an important coaching stop on the route to Dorset. Romsey was also a brewery town of some repute, and the Strongs brewery drays were a familiar sight in the past. "You are now entering Strong country" was a famous welcoming slogan on signs by roads and railways in the area for many years, and the project team now have one such sign on the signal box site. This was rescued from a field just outside Romsey and has been restored to its former glory.

A more recent innovation, near the signal box site, is one of the country's first warning systems for high vehicles. This was installed some years ago to prevent the regular unwelcome attention received by the notorious Sun Arch over the A3090 from over-height vehicles. Vehicles tall enough to cut a sight line across the road in each of the approaching directions set off an illuminated warning sign telling drivers to divert. The posts for vehicles approaching from the Romsey direction are positioned immediately outside the school entrance gates. The system cannot prevent the determined driver from attempting the impossible, but it has severely reduced the number of incidents.

These items and many others are featured in the visitor centre.

THE MILFORD SESQUICENTENARY

But let us return to where it all started, and the scene at Romsey railway station on the morning of 1st March 1847, some time after 10am, as described in the local paper of the time:

> "There was a host of people gathered at the railway, at every vantage point many persons had collected together. At the railway station was the Mayor, and members of the Borough Council, and the Romsey Town Band. They had all attended to welcome the first passenger train to come from Bishopstoke, call at Romsey, and pass onto Milford (Salisbury). Suddenly there was an atmosphere of tension, and with the Abbey bells ringing, whistles blowing, and with lots of cheering, the train came into view from the direction of Halterworth. The bandstruck up the tune "See the conquering hero comes", and the train, drawn by a steam locomotive with the name "Eclipse", came to a halt at the gaily decorated station."

It has now been established that the train ran sometime after 10am and was in fact pulled by a locomotive called "Firebrand".

150 years later on 1st March 1997, there was another host of people gathered at the station, to re-enact that very scene, but with the latest service train of its day. The event was organised jointly by the Romsey & District Society and the Friends of Romsey Signal Box.

Around 150 people were on the platform, one for each year, including Charles Mead, the Town Mayor of Romsey, with his wife the Lady Mayoress; also the Mayor and Mayoress of Test Valley; the Chairman of Salisbury District Council; the Deputy Mayor of Salisbury; Romsey & Waterside MP Michael Colvin; and many others. All were awaiting the arrival of the service train which was to form the 10.44 to Salisbury, where the party would be met by the Mayor of Salisbury.

Project Manager Dick Hewett and signpainter Rod Hoyle with the headboard, 1st March 1997, as official guests board the train.

Romsey Schools' Orchestra provided the band, again playing "See the conquering hero comes", the Abbey bells rung out again, and bunting decorated the front of the station. Again there was good media coverage, with Meridian TV, Radio Solent and Wiltshire Sound all covering the event in some way, and good representation from all the local press.

The official party enjoyed a trip to Salisbury and back courtesy of South Wales & West Railway and their Service Group Manager Chris Gibb, with refreshments in the Salisbury buffet provided by South West Trains Ltd. On the way the train made a special stop at a gaily decorated Dean station to pick up local representatives from the local community. And then the party returned to the signal box site to open the visitor van with its appropriate plaque.

Friends, Mayors, Chairman and assorted Victorians at the Signal Box, 1st March 1997.

It was a day to enjoy but a day to remember. A day to celebrate the continuation of railway services through Romsey. It was also a day when the Romsey Signal Box Project, and the group of Friends who have taken upon themselves the task of restoring and developing the signal box site, came of age. Clearly there is more to come in Romsey's railway history. And the signal box will remain at the centre of it all.

FRIENDS OF ROMSEY SIGNAL BOX

The Friends of Romsey Signal Box is a group established to undertake the restoration and operation of Cowley Bridge Junction miniature and Romsey signal boxes, and of the site at Romsey, on behalf of the Romsey & District Buildings Preservation Trust Ltd, to which it is affiliated. The group operates within the charitable status of the Trust (no 270498).

In addition there are always tasks for people without a technical background or interest, and of course donations and membership subscriptions form an essential source of income from those who would just like to support the project from the comfort of their own armchairs.

Membership of the Friends is open to anyone with an interest in the preservation of the box. Anyone wishing to join the Friends of Romsey Signal Box or requiring further information should write to:

The Chairman, 42 Botley Road, Romsey, Hants, SO51 5AP.

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