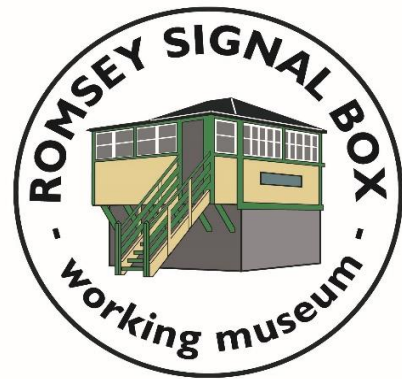


# *The Signal*

| Newsletter of the  
Friends of Romsey Signal Box

| No 69 - May 2023



## *Then and now...*



*March 1990*



*May 2023*



## From the Editor....

*Peter Chatfield, Newsletter Editor/Co-Chairman*

Welcome to our Spring newsletter. You will see from Dick's Update below that much attention is currently being paid to Romsey Signal Box itself. We've long been aware that there are a number of structural and other defects to the box. As we now fortunately have the funding, it's important that we address the various issues to ensure the future longevity of the structure and, of course, to prevent further deterioration that could be more costly to rectify, or even that could compromise our ability to operate the box and open to the public.

Open Days continue to go well and we are working to ensure continuity of the cake supply for the Café(!) and continuity of operations at Cowley Bridge Junction – see Dick's and Dave's contributions below. Colin Varney reports on our new 'Full Operation' open days – an exciting first for us to offer to the visiting public the full 'real experience' of what it was (and in a few cases, still is) like in a mechanical signal box, with our visitors able to participate hands-on if they wish to.

As Malcolm reports, we are making further progress with the Discovery Centre (formerly the 'Education Building'). This has only been possible through the efforts of our team of volunteers who've stepped up to get the displays ready for public opening later this year. It will be another exciting step forward for us to open the Centre and so radically increase our interactive displays, aimed particularly at young adults but also to be enjoyed by all.

Adrian provides a Site update and Neil a membership report with a few other bits and pieces....

Finally, please do send us *your contribution* to *The Signal*! No matter how large or small, your editor would be delighted to receive contributions from folks other than 'the same old faces'! We know that members are doing a multitude of things that others will be interested in, whether it's to do with railways, railway signalling, transport....whatever!

Wishing you all a good Summer.

Very best wishes, Peter

## Then and Now...

*Dick Hewett writes:*

I thought it was worth reflecting on how far things have progressed in the past 33 years since I started at the site. The front cover picture which I took in March 1990 shows erstwhile Trustee Ted Mason viewing through Barry Marsh's theodolite, surveying the site after it had been cleared of brambles and shrubs (my first involvement), whilst Bill Tyndall watches on, together with assorted children. Note the lumps of concrete and small trees, with the old school in the background. Contrast with the current view, which I took from just about the same position...



## *Send in your article or ‘Knowing Me, Knowing You’ contribution!!*

*Peter Chatfield writes:*

Your editor is delighted to receive contributions of articles and photographs for future editions of *The Signal*. Much of what you read is the result of him chasing folks for material - and he would love to take a rest....!!

No, seriously, *The Signal* is all about our members and much of what you do will be of interest to others. So please do send in any contributions – large or small - to the Newsletter Editor at: [info@romseysignalbox.org.uk](mailto:info@romseysignalbox.org.uk)

Many of you will be fine with writing an article, but we are very happy to assist if you don't feel confident about writing. We know many members have interests, or are doing things, which other members will be interested in – so please do tell us all about it in *The Signal*!

(Please note that copyright may apply to some photographs if sourced via the internet. If you submit photos taken by someone other than yourself, please kindly check with them if they wish their name to be credited to the photo.)

## *Update and News from the Chairmen*

*Dick Hewett and Peter Chatfield write:*

The Committee met recently and spent much of the meeting discussing the potential work on the signal box structure. James Laffeaty has produced an initial report, which highlights many of the issues which will need to be addressed, although he is currently awaiting the final report from the structural engineer.

It is clear that the structure of the signal box is currently compromised with insufficient support for the lever frame (though we are told it is not enough of a risk to close the box). We will also need to address the brickwork, with repointing and in some instances rebuilding small areas, whilst there is much to be done with the timberwork, particularly window frames and the main beams supporting them. The task will be completed with decorating. We now await a schedule of works and the appointment of contractors to do the work. The challenge will be fitting this work around our Open Days. Every effort will be made to continue opening the signal box to the public, but contingency plans will be put in place if this becomes impossible at any time. The one thing we want to avoid is having to cancel any advertised Open Days completely.

The electrics in the box are becoming increasingly unreliable, and despite Mike Walshaw producing diagrams some years ago, it isn't always easy to establish what everything does and where the faults are. We are therefore currently negotiating with a commercial S&T contractor who see Romsey Signal Box as a potentially valuable training facility for themselves, and a good





way to contribute to “the community”, as they are being encouraged to do. This could be a great “win-win” package for both organisations, and we really hope it will come to fruition.

Reports to the committee on the development of the Discovery Centre (as it will now be called) and the Signage project highlighted the difficulties of maintaining momentum on projects. Both projects are behind target for a variety of reasons. We are now targeting September for completion of them all to an acceptable level.

## Open Days and Events

*Dick Hewett writes:*



*A quiet Open Day: Whilst Colin Varney and Andy Wright gaze at a static frame, hoping for someone to talk to, Lee Wainwright takes 40 winks after two hours staring at a car park with empty spaces!*



*Later that day, Charlie explains to a family how you steer a train!*

Our regular Open Days have continued, with the addition of several full operational days, of which more later. Visitor numbers have varied dramatically – with good numbers some days, and very few on others. It is impossible to predict how many will come and at what times. On the recent Open Day on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup>, albeit on the Coronation weekend, we had five visitors at the

start of the day, then no one until mid-afternoon when a family of seven turned up – and that was it. On the other hand, we had 42 on the May Day Bank Holiday, not one of our long-established days.

*Some visitors come just for the café. Here residents from nearby sheltered accommodation enjoy Dave's tea and cakes*

One challenge this year will be catering in the Buffer Stop Café. Dave describes below the procedures he goes through for a typical Open Day, however he will not be on duty every time, and he will also not be able to make the cake for all the extra days we have scheduled. So, we have already agreed that we shall buy in cake for the Thursdays when we open. Experiments so far have proven reasonably successful on that front.



*Ian Pidgley on Cowley Bridge Junction*

We have recently had a spate of issues with Cowley Bridge Junction, which have been reported to Alan Johnston. I'm delighted that Jamie Brooker has been to test the kit. He fixed a couple of items, but was unable to replicate other problems which had been experienced during Open Days. We are now asking all Cowley Bridge operators to stop operating the moment any problem arises, so we can immediately note it, and check what operations immediately preceded the problem. By this means we can start to confirm whether it is the system, or operator error, in each instance.



Meanwhile we recently hosted a visit by Wellow Beavers, and have several further group visits for Beavers, Cubs and the local Dementia group planned for June and July. These visits are easy to organise, if sometimes a bit chaotic (12 Beavers in the signal box all wanting to pull a lever in the space of a 25-minute explanation and demonstration is a challenge!), and help spread the word about the signal box, as well as providing an interesting outing for the group itself.

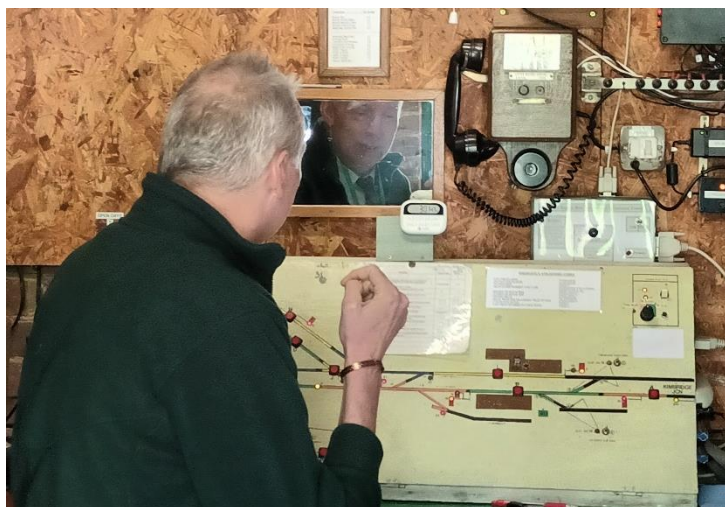
Rostering remains a bit of a balancing act, and I try to be as fair to everyone whilst respecting how far some of our volunteers have to travel to get here. I certainly don't want volunteers to feel they are surplus to requirements, however on quiet days that can inevitably feel like the case, whilst on busy days we need a full team. So I'm always grateful to all those who volunteer for Open Days, and the flexibility everyone shows to cover the many duties. I must also thank everyone for their cooperation in fitting in with all our new policies and procedures, and the need for DBS checks, photography permissions, and the like. It's all intended to make us safe and at low risk of problems arising. Despite all this, we must all enjoy being at the site.





# Full Operation Training & Open Days

Colin Varney (shown here on the simulator) reflects:



The true achievement of restoring any piece of industrial heritage is surely to see it returned to its full operation: as it was when in its working glory. With our “living” Signal Box, it's a long time since several 24- or 48-hour marathons were held in its restored lifetime. These were in the 1990s, with the only current operator involved in them all being Dick, so I had no idea whether there was the enthusiasm, interest or will to achieve it as a longer-term project in the present day. To set us on our journey, it was agreed that

the simulator panel would benefit from illuminated button indicators to more easily see the track circuits when operated. It was then that I realised the strong enthusiasm that existed, when Dave - on taking delivery of the new switches - had them installed in an instant. Thanks, Dave for the charge of enthusiasm that sparked the start of it all.

Further discussions allowed two training days to be set up during Christmas of last year. During these training days, the attendees were involved in operating the box and simulator with a “booking boy” role in the Box, to assist. A basic timetable was explored which mimics the present passenger timetable. It was created by using actual track circuit occupation times recorded from visits to Eastleigh Signalling Centre. It was then offered out for feedback to improve it and over the last 3 months it has evolved with more trains added in to the train plan. I have personally been humbled by the continuing input, engagement, and attendance of the guys who have stepped forward to take this challenge on.

Let's be honest, Romsey never was a “busy” box. However, the guys who have pledged their time to operating the simulator on our first two open days have achieved considerable success. They have practiced being three signalmen, a shunter, train driver, the CONTROL office and a “second-by-second” track circuit operator **all at the same time**. All with the purpose of delivering a true-to-life re-creation of how the Signaller upstairs would have once operated the box on the real railway. It reminded me of the comparison to a swan. The signaller in the box gliding gracefully over the lever frame to recreate the scene, while downstairs, the unseen “swans’ legs” were blazing away pushing buttons, ringing block bells, and making radio or phone calls with the visiting public blissfully unaware of how it was all done.

The full operation days have been scheduled for special events (such as La Ronde and the extra day for Heritage Open Days) as well as Bank Holidays (which are additional open days). One aim is to attract signalling enthusiasts and we have had good publicity in the Signalling Record Society newsletter. The challenge now is to perfect how we engage with the public whilst



focused on operating, and adjust how we entertain visitors on the rest of the site (such as Cowley Bridge) on these days. As with all these challenges, people's skills evolve and improve as the product is tested. The first three Full Operation Open Days have been an encouraging success and I have been privileged to lead this project in the hope that its success grows enough to take it forward into next year. Thanks to all of you for dedicating the most valuable commodity of all: Your time.

## *Discovery Centre (formerly 'Education Building')*

*Malcolm Moore writes:*

We're pleased to announce that the educational facility we're working on will be known as the "Discovery Centre." It's a place where our visitors can explore some history of signalling, delve into engineering concepts, and more, all at their own pace.



Our dedicated volunteers and team continue working hard to bring this project to life, and we're proud to report that things are moving along nicely.

The building itself is still a work in progress, and the shelving and storage completed by Derek Grover is now being painted in Southern Railway colours by Noah Moxom.

*Work in progress on the shelving*

### *The track circuit display*

One of our exhibits, the track circuit, has been completed thanks to the hard work of Alan Clark, Adrian Birtles, Derek Grover, and Noah Moxom. Several visitors, including the Mayor of Test Valley, have already had the opportunity to view this exhibit, and it has received positive feedback.

Dave White has been working on an interactive challenge that is based on Romsey Junction. Visitors can use a touch screen to switch points and set signals, moving locos between Redbridge, Romsey, and Kimbridge. Success is rewarded with visual and auditory feedback.





Lee Wainwright is currently programming a challenge for visitors to learn about signalling communications using bell codes, which we intend to link to real tappers or plungers.

John Pennells and Graeme Hay have been working on the model railway exhibit with the expert help of Andy Keane. The track is laid, signals and a loco have been purchased, and sound effects have been added using DCC. We are taking a continuous improvement approach to this exhibit, and will evolve it based on feedback and experience.

Byron Horne is working on compiling a selection of short video clips, including videos from Kingfisher Productions and Dick Hewett's library.

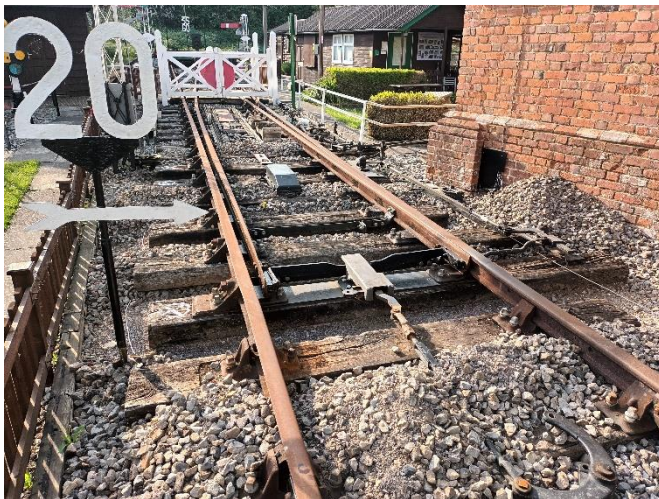
We're thrilled with the progress we've made so far and can't wait to complete phase one and get the "Discovery Centre" open.

## Site Report Update

*Adrian Birtles writes:*

The main site activity since the last edition has been routine maintenance, but through the good offices of Steve Hailes, two long-standing electrical faults have been repaired so that now the red aspect of Signal No 1 is glowing red again and the repeater on Signal No 17 is working.

A significant event was the delivery from the Watercress Railway of point rodding and fittings to enable our facing point lock to be coupled to its lever in the Box (many thanks to Dave Hayden for the transport). But before that can be done, the rotten sleeper under the point blades, on which the point and FPL mechanisms are mounted, will have to be replaced. To that end, a start has been made on removing the ballast from around that sleeper (and five others in dire need of replacement), so that this may be done as soon as new sleepers have been sourced. When that time comes, we shall be seeking volunteers to form a "Heavy Gang" to do this major task, which will involve some substantial manual work.



Meanwhile Alan Combeer continues to green the site with new grass growing between the many plants which he and Neil have planted.





# Behind the scenes in the Buffer Stop

*Dave Trewern writes:*

Welcome everyone to The Buffer Stop Cafe. Firstly, I'd like to report that the cafe did extremely well in the last financial year. We are still getting many people on site just for the cafe. A hot cuppa, a snack and a warm-up are always welcome on a cold and/or wet day. Customer numbers are always unpredictable, which makes baking and stock levels difficult, but we get by.

Lee and John have been trained to run the cafe and are now being rostered on occasionally, when I can't be there or just to keep everyone "fresh". This is particularly important now as we are opening more often this year and I can't commit myself to every open day. "Management" at home would definitely have something to say!

I thought it may be of interest to know what happens behind the scenes, as it were, in The Buffer Stop...

Each open day consists of two days for the cafe. The day before for preparation and baking, and the open day itself.

Let's start with the day before opening. First thing in the morning I go shopping for any ingredients required for the baking, and for the perishables, which can include things like milk, bread, rolls, bacon, sausages etc. etc. This means at least one supermarket and possibly a



wholesaler also. After returning home the perishables are put in the fridge. The next thing is to plug in the electric cool box. This is how the cakes and perishables are transported to the signal box.

Having decided what I am going to supply, I now need to start baking. This nearly always involves a fresh cream Victoria sponge and a butter cream one (chocolate, coffee, lemon and poppy seed etc). I may also bake some home-made sausage rolls, Cornish pasties or scones. Whilst these are being baked and cooling it's time for the first of several

wash-ups. After lunch comes the finishing touches. The cakes are filled and stored in the cool box, along with anything else that needs to be kept cool. This has a thermometer for me to monitor the temperature. There is now another lot of dishes to be washed up. Time to put my feet up with a nice cup of tea!

On the open day there is a great deal to do for a couple of hours before we actually open... I always consider the toilet to be a part of the cafe and so this needs to be properly cleaned and disinfected. The hand basin and all surfaces are cleaned and shelves, handrails etc polished. The floor is washed and a clean towel put out. The heater is also turned on during the cold weather.



Now it's time for the cafe itself... After unlocking the cafe the first thing to do is take the fridge temperature and clean and sanitise the inside. The perishables can then be stored in the fridge. The next thing is to rinse out the water urn and clean and sanitise the worktop where it sits. It can then be filled and turned on so that it's ready for when we open.



Having completed this, the rest can be carried out in any order. This involves making sure the floor is clean and washed if required. Cleaning and sanitising all surfaces, light switches, sockets etc. Changing the washing up sponge and dish cloth and changing the hand towel and tea towels. The sink and draining board are thoroughly cleaned.

The official paperwork is then completed. This means noting the date, fridge temperature and ticking the box for the pre-opening checks. This is required for our hygiene certificate (and we can be spot checked at any time). The cafe and merchandise sales sheets are then completed and put on the wall clip ready to record sales. The menus and specials board are then updated.



Next comes the setting out ready for the customers...

This includes many things such as – Cutting the cakes into slices, putting out plates, serving slices and tongs, milk jug and ensuring stocks are presentable and in date. In the kitchen the cash box and calculator are positioned and the toaster and sandwich grill set up ready for use.

There are many other things that need to be carried out but this gives you a flavour (pun intended!). All this can seem like a great deal of work but I enjoy it, and it's very rewarding when customers comment about the cleanliness, quality and value.

Finally, a good cup of tea is in order and very welcome!



# Membership Matters, Nature Notes, Winchester Exhibition

*Neil Kearns, Membership Secretary, writes:*

Thank you to the fifty-eight members who have renewed their membership since the 1<sup>st</sup> April. If you are not certain whether you have renewed, please contact me by e-mail or phone to confirm whether you have renewed your membership. Also, a warm welcome to the five members who have joined in the last month.



There have been small birds including blackcaps who couldn't be bothered to migrate any further in the depths of the bramble bank along the embankment all winter. The wrens and robins started to proclaim their territories in late March, but the male blackcaps only started singing in mid-April. Now that the bramble leaves are opening, their grey plumage ensures that they disappear into the shadows.

*Blackcaps: sketch by Janet Kearns*

The first swallows and house martins were also seen in mid-April. The first swifts were seen over the signal box on 3<sup>rd</sup> May. Both buzzards and red kites are seen overhead most weeks, and on 3<sup>rd</sup> May there was a quick skirmish between a buzzard and two carrion crows overhead. I didn't see the outcome but a buzzard was soaring high overhead later in the day.

Railway Exhibition at Winchester: A couple of years ago one of our members, Howard Sprenger, was connected with the delayed 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Micheldever Station. The exhibition, which was part of the event at Micheldever station area, will be on display at Winchester County Record Office from 3<sup>rd</sup> May until 28<sup>th</sup> June.

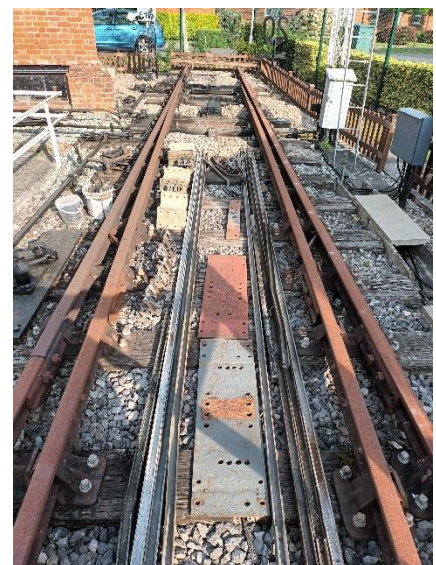
<https://www.hants.gov.uk/librariesandarchives/archives/events/micheldever-station-3may-28jun23>

## Health & Safety – Update....

*Dick Hewett and Peter Chatfield write:*

Just a reminder to everyone who volunteers on site that they should follow the procedures and policies which are displayed in the Mess Hut. We haven't had any incidents recently – and we want it to stay that way!

*Trip hazards abound on the site. This is the equipment for the facing point lock, awaiting the arrival of replacement sleepers.*



# Open Days and Dates for your Diary 2023

Please see our website for up-to-date information: [romseysignalbox.org.uk](http://romseysignalbox.org.uk).

Our **advertised programme of open days** is as follows:

Month	Normal Opening	School Holiday Extras	Full timetable demonstrations
May	Saturday 20th		Monday 29th
June	Sunday 4th; Saturday 17th	Thursday 1st	
July	Sunday 2nd; Saturday 15th	Thursday 27th	Saturday 1st; Sunday 9th
August	Sunday 6th; Saturday 19th	Thursdays 3rd, 10th, 17th, 24th & 31st	Monday 29th
September	Sunday 3rd; Saturday 16th (Heritage Open Days weekend – free admission)		Sunday 17th (Heritage Open Days weekend – free admission)
October	Sunday 1st; Saturday 21st	Thursday 26th	
November	Sunday 5th; Saturday 18th		
December 2023	Sunday 3rd <i>Please note our leaflet incorrectly shows this as 4th</i>		

Contributions of articles and photographs for the next edition are welcome, please forward them to the Newsletter Editor at: [info@romseysignalbox.org.uk](mailto:info@romseysignalbox.org.uk)

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