

The Signal

| Newsletter of the
Friends of Romsey Signal Box

| No 57 - May 2020



Old era!

Temporary closure – and a trip down memory lane



Ted Mason (see tribute below) and Audrey Gebbie (former headmistress, Romsey Infants School) join Dick Hewett (then Project Manager), various Friends, and other dignitaries for our celebration of the first public opening in June 1991. Other notable guests included Bill Tyndall (second from right), Ivor Mason (Foster Yeoman, far left) and Chris Gibb, Manager Regional Railways Wales and West (standing on trolley).



From the Editor....

From 'New Era' (newsletter February) to 'Old Era' – what's going on? You could well answer: not very much, thanks to a certain pandemic and lockdown. But this edition's focus on the old era is prompted both by the cessation of work on site giving us an opportunity to look back to the early days of the signal box project and also, by Ted Mason's sad passing last year, an opportunity to highlight his contribution to the signal box as one of its greatest early supporters.

I have in front of me *Railway Magazine, Nov 1988*, sub-title on front page 'Resurrection at Romsey', and on the Contents page it says: 'George Pryer & Ted Mason relate how an old signal box was given a new lease of life'. Yours truly read with much interest at the time and, some years later, in 2002 remembered this article and, in conjunction with the Signalling Record Society piece about Romsey Signal Box Project urgently needing volunteers, decided to act.... So Ted had a direct impact on my initial interest in the signal box (thanks, Ted, it's been an interesting journey!). I've now returned the precious magazine to its plastic sleeve for safekeeping, but for those of you who may not remember or have not seen the magazine and article, provide a link to it below.

There's not much I can add to Dick's fine tribute to Ted Mason (see below), except to say that he was indeed a great friend and supporter of the signal box at the Romsey & District Buildings Preservation Trust and, on a personal level, I valued not only his generosity of spirit, but also that he was also a shrewd, wise, knowledgeable and persuasive ambassador. Members may recall the Romsey Signal Box cake produced to celebrate the 20th anniversary of opening to the public (see *The Signal, Spring 2013* (page 15)). That was Ted's conception and we still have the photo, if not the cake, as a momento!

Talking of which, our own master cake-baker, Dave Trewern, writes about developments to the café, and gives us a report on recent progress in the fitting out of the new Education Building. Work is of course paused as I write due to the lockdown. But these developments show that we continue to move forward and, despite the current situation with the pandemic, on re-opening we will be resuming activity from the strong position the signal box was in at the start of this year.

Our final report has been prompted by the recruitment and re-training of ex-signalmen in light of the pandemic's impact on staff sickness. We report on how the preserved Swindon Panel has come into its own as a training tool for Network Rail.

Finally, Stuart Jones alerts us to some new developments on the website and in social media.

Looking ahead, there will be a full report on site maintenance, including work on the signals and other infrastructure, from Adrian Birtles in the next edition of *The Signal*, so watch this space....

It remains for me, on behalf of all at RSB, to sincerely wish that you and your family all stay safe at this time. Now please read on....

Peter Chatfield, Newsletter Editor



Coronavirus

Dick Hewett writes:

During the current coronavirus epidemic, we have taken the precaution of closing the signal box site not just to the public, but also to volunteers, to avoid any possible spread of the virus amongst members, and so as not to upset the residents of Brick Lane. Access is limited to myself and Alan Coombeer, who lives next door and who is very kindly keeping an eye on the site for us - including dealing with the alarm every time it goes off. Thanks Alan!

Obviously this means progress on our new developments has stopped, apart from anything we can do at home, and we are not getting any of the income from open days. Because parking in the town is currently free, at least three of our weekday car park hirers have cancelled their agreements with us - at my suggestion. At the same time, we will continue to pay some standing costs, such as water, and the electricity we use for the alarms, basic heating, and so on. So financially we will see a slight reduction in our balances, but this won't be critical.

None of us has any clear idea when the restrictions will be lifted, but we will keep members posted, and as soon as we are able to re-open to the public, I shall coordinate the roster again. The Romsey Festival which was planned for this July has been postponed until July 2021, however we have advertised our opening on five dates during July 2020: this is obviously dependent on being permitted to open to the public again. All we can do at this time is to be patient, and use the hiatus to do all the long-standing tasks which we have put off for so long, but which we can do at home. In my case, that includes a number of background tasks for the signal box, the results of which may become apparent in due course.

Stay safe, follow the guidelines, and hopefully we'll be able to welcome members and the public back to the site in the not too distant future.



The signal box in the 1970s (John Hinson) as it looked before closure and 'resurrection'. Like the closure in 2014-15 due to the adjacent building development, we hope the current closure due to lockdown will be followed by renewed popularity of this historic building and working museum.



Railway Magazine: Romsey Signal Box in 1988

The signal box closed in 1982 and was re-opened to regular public opening in 1992. The late 1980s represented a mid-point between these two events when the box had been saved, but its future was uncertain. This was the context for an article in *Railway Magazine* – the only sizeable article ever published in a national magazine about the box – that highlighted the plight of the signal box to a national audience.

The article was written by George Pryer and Ted Mason. George was an early volunteer with RSB. A Southern signalman and railway author, he wrote the seminal *A Pictorial Record of Southern Signals* (OPC 1977/1991), *Signal Boxes of the LSWR* (Oakwood 2000), and produced a comprehensive series of signal box diagrams, mostly of the Southern Region and its constituents. Ted Mason's long history with the signal box is discussed by Dick below.

We thought that members who have not seen the article, or may not have seen it for some time, might like to revisit it – so it's now on the RSB website in the 'History' tab, and you can access it via this link:

<https://romseysignalbox.org.uk/history/>

Ted Mason: A tribute

Dick Hewett writes:

One of the most influential people in the preservation of the signal box over the years was Ted Mason. It was a sad moment in April last year therefore when Ted passed away.

Romsey Signal Box was re-erected on its new site at the back of Romsey Infants School in 1987. A resident of the town, Ted joined the Romsey & District Buildings Preservation Trust (RDBPT) the following year, bringing with him a wealth of legal expertise from a long career in Hampshire County Council. He was immediately appointed to the Transport Heritage Committee which was established to manage the box and site. His legal background was to prove critical in some of the issues which arose with regards to ownership, legal access, and statutory requirements and responsibilities over the years.

Coincidentally at the same time I was also appointed to the Committee as an 'Interested Parent/Railway Enthusiast' representative (having sons at the school), with other notable members such as Audrey Gebbie (headteacher) and Bill Tyndall (professional railwayman). Ted, Bill and I soon became good friends and Ted was an enthusiastic supporter of our efforts to develop this historical resource which had been saved for the town. Unfortunately this was also the moment when the introduction of the National Curriculum and local funding for schools made it impossible to pursue the original concept of an educational resource for Hampshire schools to visit.





March 1990: Ted stares through the theodolite whilst Barry, Bill, and Ted and Barry's children look on. (Photo taken by Dick Hewett)

With the signal box becoming marooned in a wilderness of brambles and shrubs, Ted fully supported the project plan I developed to focus on opening the site to the general public. Early in 1990 Bill, Ted and I were on site when another friend Barry Marsh surveyed the site so we could plan out the earthmoving and clearance needed for the track we had been offered by British Rail. Only 15 months later, in June 1991, we were able to celebrate the opening of the box to the public for the first time (see the cover photo). From these early beginnings Ted remained a loyal and active supporter for the remainder of his life, and he would have been delighted to know we broke our visitor numbers record yet again in 2019.

Nevertheless, within the RDBPT, the signal box was something of a 'poisoned chalice'. The acquisition of the box by the RDBPT was not a unanimous decision, being a departure from the usual cycle of buy-it, fix-it and sell-it. Fears that the Signal Box would become a financial millstone split the opinions of the Trustees, but Ted was able to gently persuade his colleagues of the value to the RDBPT of retaining the box in the long term, promoting the work of the RDBPT to the public and validating the Trust's charitable aims, as well as being a real asset for the town. As the Friends of Romsey Signal Box developed the site, Ted was able to convince all his fellow Trustees, thanks in particular to his exceptional good humour and positive attitude.

Ted shared Audrey Gebbie's vision of the Signal Box as an educational tool, and the thread of this ambition has endured through all the various changes and developments on site, and in particular since reopening after the arrival of the new surrounding housing development. With changes to the National Curriculum now making the facilities of the signal box site relevant in many subject areas, the new education building will hopefully be opened later this year, where the principles of signalling and engineering as well as local history will be on offer to local schools and the general public. This will mean we will at last have achieved the original vision of the signal box as an educational resource.



From a personal perspective, Ted remained a valued friend and confidante throughout many challenging times for the Project, and his unwavering support within the Trustees (consistently backed up by Frank Akerman) was critical in enabling the Friends to continue with the financial backing necessary from RDBPT, the parent body. His greatest legacy is in the commitment he has managed to instil in other Trustees, thereby ensuring the signal box will remain a key part of the Trust's work and responsibilities.

Catering Report and new Education Building Works

(Please note: All works undertaken before site closure due to lockdown restrictions)

Dave Trewern writes:

I write this during the coronavirus lockdown. We are in very strange times but I hope everyone is safe and well, and remains that way until we all come out the other side.

The signal box is closed until further notice, as you know. This is what I have been up to over the last few months, prior to lockdown ...various minor things and one not so minor have been happening regarding The Buffer Stop café.

The most noticeable change is the addition of the kiosk window. There had been talk for some time about how the volunteers could get their drinks without entering the café. One idea was to alter the window by the kitchen sink to allow for an opening casement. This would mean easy access from the mess hut. In the end it was decided to alter the window and shutter arrangement on the opposite side of the kitchen.

A new external shelf, some suitable signs and one or two alterations internally completed the works after the window modification itself. This means not only the volunteers but also the visitors have access to catering without the need to go into the café. This is ideal for those enjoying the fresh air during fine weather and is great for a quick drink or an ice cream. This is working very well and is easy to set up on open day mornings.



The café is something of a challenge at busy times. The tiny kitchen is really only suitable for one person safely and so I am constantly trying to find more efficient ways to manage everything – the mugs are better kept there, the toaster works well over on that shelf, etc, etc!

I am also constantly monitoring sales to see which items are popular and which aren't. I try to vary the menu (small though it is) to give some variety. I nearly always bake a fresh cream Victoria sponge along with another type such as coffee or chocolate. Sometimes I will also sell my home-made sausage rolls or Cornish pasties, which usually prove a hit. During the summer months I will bake plain, fruit or cheese scones. Cream teas seem to be enjoyed. I serve these



with two scones of any type, clotted cream, jam and refillable tea or coffee. Beans on toast and soup and bread are nearly always available also.

I suppose we must be doing something right because we now have regulars just for the café, which is very gratifying. Since The Buffer Stop was set up we have had a steady increase in income and these days it contributes a very worthwhile amount to the signal box funds.

Thank you to all the volunteers who take my advice and vacate the café when the public are present. It's so small it can easily get crowded!



(Dave continues:) Meanwhile during the last few months I have been working in the new education building. This building was supplied without insulation or linings to the walls or ceiling. Insulation, plywood, beadings and mouldings, timber and decorating materials all had to be sourced, collected or delivered.

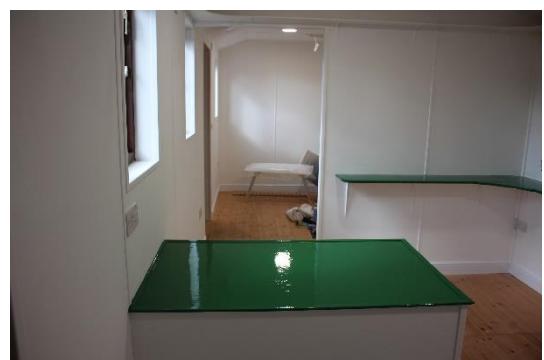


The first part of the work was to cut and fit all the new insulation. Next a new partition wall was constructed along with the four loft traps. Then came the mammoth task of measuring, cutting and installing all the umpteen sheets of ply. The island unit was next to be constructed. This was boxed in and a door installed at the end to allow for storage underneath. A bench seat was then made which is easily removed for access to the electrical distribution board. The main shelving was then made and installed along with the high-level shelving for the model railway. The final pieces of construction were the beadings, mouldings and skirting boards.

After all this the hundreds of nail heads were painted with red oxide to prevent any rust showing through the paint. A great deal of filling, sanding and preparation was then required.

The first "sealing" coat of emulsion was put on the walls and ceiling. Two further coats were applied to give a good finish. The grey undercoat and green gloss were then applied to the island unit, shelving and seat. The floor was then sanded and sealed with decking sealer. After a bit of "snagging" and some minor touching in the job was finally complete. The building is now ready for fitting out.

I would like to thank Keith, Adrian, Jamie and Neil for all the help they gave me.



Swindon Panel: preserved signalling centre helps Network Rail in response to Covid 19

(Article credit: Didcot Railway Centre)



Network Rail Programme Director Paul Stanford refreshes his signalling skills using the preserved Swindon Panel at Didcot Railway Centre on 1 April 2020 (image credit: Jamie Brooker)

Didcot Railway Centre and Swindon Panel Society are proud to be helping Network Rail during this Coronavirus period.

The two heritage charities made their facilities available to enable Network Rail prepare for train service delivery in the event of a shortage of regular signallers due to Coronavirus or the measures to prevent its spread.

Former Network Rail signallers who have moved to other roles in the organisation started a series of refresher courses on 31 March using the preserved Swindon Panel which is part of the collection of restored locomotives, carriages, buildings and equipment cared for at the 21-acre railway centre.



The Panel was used to control trains on the Great Western mainline from 1968 until 2016, after which it was bought by SPS and painstakingly restored as the centre piece of DRC's Signalling Centre and, in normal times, is now used to demonstrate railway signalling to the adults and children of all ages that visit DRC.

The high-accuracy simulator equipment designed and installed by volunteers to ensure the panel's controls and indications work exactly as they did when it was in service, mean that NR trainers can use the panel to simulate scenarios that might occur on track including signal failures, train breakdowns, signals passed at danger and rescuing failed trains.

Danny Scroggins, Swindon Panel Society Chairman said 'We are delighted that we have been able to help out Network Rail at these unprecedented times'.

DRC's Chief Executive, Emma Jhita, added 'It's brilliant the Panel has proved such a useful resource for the re-training and upskilling of additional Network Rail staff – a real credit to the volunteers and the remarkable restoration work they have done. It is particularly rewarding that the Centre can make a positive contribution during this time that we are unfortunately closed to the public'.

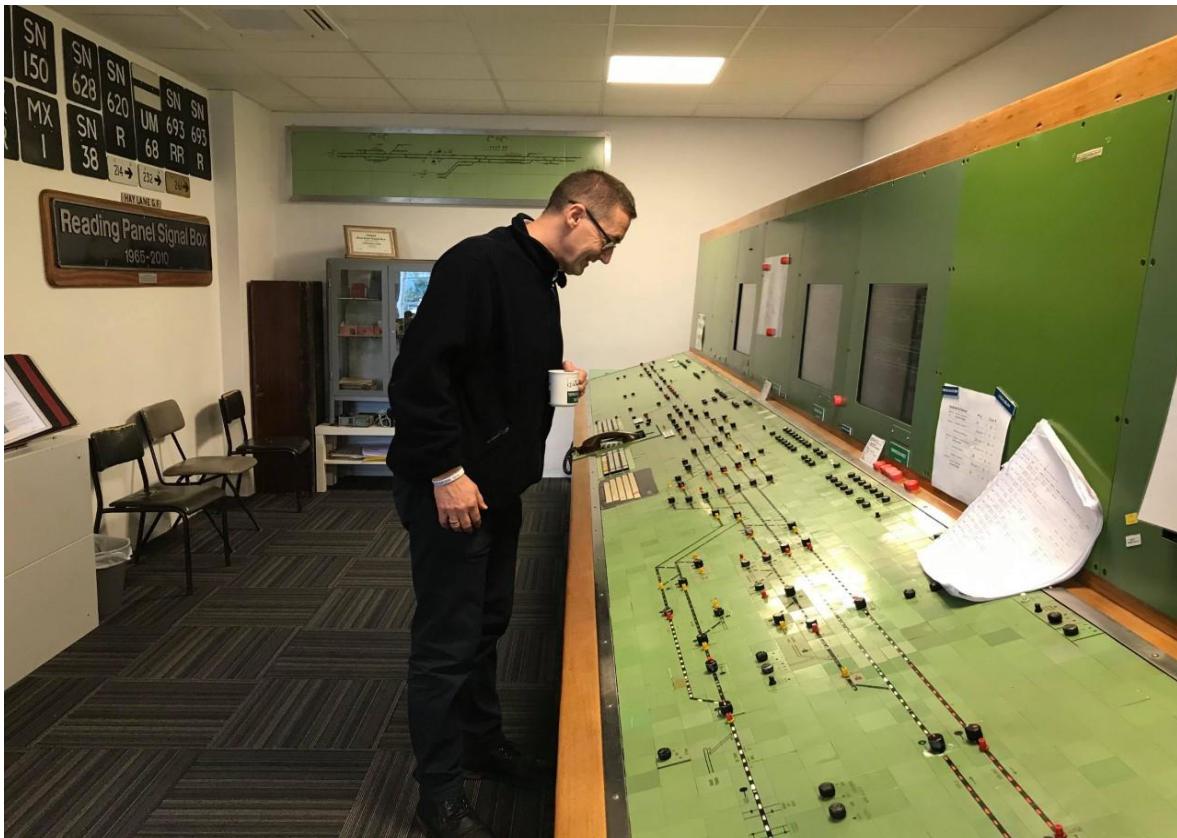
Full details of the Centre can be found at www.DidcotRailwayCentre.org.uk.



Two further images from The Signalling Centre at Didcot Railway Centre

Above: Swindon Panel when it was still in mainline operation, with push button controls, track sections with train indication, telephones and noticeboard.

Overleaf: Paul Stanford at the Panel controls



Editor's notes:

Swindon Panel was in use from 1968 to 2016, and controlled a 40-mile section on the Western main line. Like Romsey Signal Box, it offers a superb visitor experience for adults and children of all ages, and visitors can 'have a go' as shown below. Didcot Railway Centre itself is of great interest for all things 'Western'. Roll on the end of the virus!



For those readers unaware, you may be interested to know that Danny Scroggins, Swindon Panel Society Chairman, joined Romsey Signal Box in 2002 as part of the intake of 'new blood' and has played an active role in signalling heritage since then.

Full details of the Centre can be found at www.DidcotRailwayCentre.org.uk

The Swindon Panel website is at www.swindonpanel.org.uk

Image: Swindon Panel – Didcot Railway Centre

Website Development and Archives Now Available

Several members, including our webmaster Steve Hailes, Stuart Jones and Dick Hewett are working to expand the resources we have on our **website** – for the interest of members and the public.

Stuart Jones is now posting regularly on our **Facebook** and **Twitter** accounts.

A video of the signalling sequence on Stuart's Romsey Lego layout is now on Twitter:
<https://twitter.com/RomseyLegoRail/status/1253969017703890946>. The layout is essential viewing for anyone who hasn't seen it! You don't have to have a Twitter account to view. Any feedback welcome!

There is also a link to the real Romsey Signal Box on the tweet, with a link to the diagram and signals post.

Please also note that ALL editions of *The Signal* – yes, that's right back to 1991! – together with the very comprehensive *Guide to Romsey Signal Box* are now available via the Downloads tab. Although the *Guide* was published in 2004 and pre-dates many of the changes to RSB since then, it is well worth a read. And if you want to understand all the developments over the years, *The Signal* back issues make fascinating reading – especially edition no 1!

Dick is now completing the archiving in digital form of all the **photos** to which he has access, covering Romsey Signal Box and the surrounding lines, including when the box was still in operation on the lineside. If you have any relevant photos which you don't think Dick has seen, and you're willing for them to be made available in the public arena, please forward them to him via info@romseysignalbox.org.uk. Please note however that we cannot guarantee they will be credited to the individual photographer at all times.

Membership Renewals / 'Space filler'

Neil Kearns, Membership Secretary, writes:

Thank you to the 43 members who have already renewed their 2020/2021 membership or joined recently. A gentle reminder that membership fees are now due for the year starting 1st April 2020. Membership is now £10 per year, except for under 16's who pay £5.

Payment can be made by Cheque (Payable to Friends of Romsey Signal Box) posted to me at 38 Arundel Road, Boyatt Wood, Eastleigh, Hants, SO50 4PQ.

Bank transfer to Sort Code 30-97-14, account 01037221, reference: YourName/"Subs". It does help if you send me a quick e-mail to say that you have renewed by bank transfer.

An odd space filler -

How to watch the network from the comfort of your own home using Open Train Times:

<https://www.opentraintimes.com/maps/signalling/westofengland>



Just click on "Maps" to explore other areas.

The technical background is explained through this link:

<https://www.railengineer.co.uk/2020/04/03/open-train-times/>

Open Days and Dates for your Diary 2020

Covid 19 lockdown:

As you will be aware, there is **currently no access to the site** (other than emergency access) due to the lockdown restrictions. We hope to re-open the site as soon as possible when restrictions are lifted, subject to the provision of any measures necessary in the interests of the safety of our visitors and volunteers.

Please visit our website romseysignalbox.org.uk for the latest information and we will advertise re-opening dates as soon as these are confirmed.

Meanwhile, our **advertised programme of open days** is as follows:

June	Sunday 7th; Saturday 20 th BOTH DEFINITELY CANCELLED
July	Saturday 4th; Sunday 5th; Sunday 12th; Saturday 18th & Sunday 19 th ALL UNLIKELY
August	Sunday 2nd; Saturday 15 th (followed by AGM)
September	Sunday 6th; Heritage Open Days weekend: Saturday 19th & Sunday 20th (free admission both days)
October	Sunday 4th; Saturday 17th
November	Sunday 1st; Saturday 21st
December	Sunday 6th

Contributions of articles and photographs for the next edition are welcome, please forward them to the Newsletter Editor at:

info@romseysignalbox.org.uk

(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.)

