

Railway Ramblings

Issue 157

August 2023

The monthly newsletter of the RCTS Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch



Chinnor Station (Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway) – 26th April 2021

Photo: John Dossett

Railway Ramblings is published by the committee of the Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch of The Railway Correspondence & Travel Society. Such committee does not endorse any personal opinions expressed in this publication.

Branch Programme

Note: In the event of any late change to the programme, everyone on the distribution list for this newsletter will receive an emails advising the details of the change.

During August 2023

6th August

Sunday

Branch visit to the Epping Ongar Railway. For those participating, the programme for the day is repeated on page 4.

The next indoor meetings at Hitchin and Welwyn will be in September

During September 2023

17th September **Branch Visit to the Epping Signalling Museum.**

Book places with Dave Elsdon (Hitchin@rcts.org.uk)

At Hitchin (19:30 - 22:00, doors open from 19:00)

12th September **The Last Four Years of Steam**

George Howe

At Digswell, Welwyn (14:00-16:30, doors open from 13:30)

26th September **The Line from Doncaster to Hull**

Stephen Gay

Donations are requested for attendance at branch meetings – these, together with book sales, go towards the costs of hiring the venues, speakers expenses/fees and the provision of tea/coffee & biscuits during the meeting. These are now £3 for members and £5 for non-members.

Hitchin meetings are held at Tilehouse Street Baptist Church Hall, Upper Tilehouse Street, Hitchin SG5 2EE

Digswell, Welwyn meetings are held at Digswell Village Church Hall, Warren Way, Digswell, Welwyn AL6 0DH

“Zoom” Virtual Presentations

Some RCTS branches are offering Zoom virtual presentations. In addition, there are “national” Zoom presentations (on the fourth Thursday of each month). Details of these can be found on the RCTS website (and in the *Railway Observer*). Members can register and then take part in any of these events.



Chairman's Platform

There seems to be light at the end of the tunnel. Branch finances have improved – due to meeting attendance numbers picking up, book sales at meetings improving, income from exhibitions, and the higher donation rates now requested for our meetings – and our Branch Treasurer (Paul) is a happier man. My wife has even seen a reduction in the number of boxes of books stored in our house. Our Branch Secretary is compiling next year's programme and (as I pen these words) the sun is shining. What more could I want!

The August visit, to the Epping Ongar Railway, is about to happen and I look forward to seeing many of you there. Don't forget to allow time at Epping Underground Station to pay for car parking before our heritage bus leaves for North Weald Station.

One thing that has already happened, as a result of planning the Epping Ongar visit, is that we have become aware of the Epping Signalling Museum. Initial reactions were to try to somehow add this to the EOR visit but it quickly became apparent that this was not the right thing to do, mainly because of the time needed for a worthwhile visit. In this issue of *Railway Ramblings* our Editor has included an insight into this museum and we are organising a separate Branch RCTS visit there (17th September). If you would like to participate then you need to advise Dave Elsdon.

I was saddened to receive news of the death of Alex Bell, an RCTS member whom a number of you will remember from our Branch meetings. Alex was a real railway enthusiast and his wife, Sarah, has written an obituary which we have published on page 6. On behalf of the Society, I have extended our condolences to Sarah.

Steve Lacey

New Branch Member

We welcome Colin Hothersall, of Luton, as a new member of the RCTS and of the Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch.

A New Visit – 17th September 2023

Book Now

As mentioned in *Chairman's Platform* there is an addition to the previously published Branch programme – a visit, on the afternoon of 17th September, to the Epping Signalling Museum. See page 7 for more details.

This visit is not on a public opening day. If you wish to participate in this visit please contact Dave Elsdon (Hitchin@rcts.org.uk). As the number of museum volunteers required as guides for the visit depends on the number of visitors, please book as early as possible and no later than 26th August.



RCTS Hitchin & Welwyn Garden City Branch Visit

Sunday 6th August 2023



10.25 Catch the 339 Routemaster bus from Epping Underground Station, going through parts of Epping Forest, to North Weald Station.

10.37 Arrive at North Weald Station, have a look around the Station (could visit the LNER Chalet for morning tea/coffee)

11.00 Depart North Weald Station for Ongar, sit back and enjoy the countryside views passing through, the now closed, Blake Hall Station, formerly London Underground's least used station with only 6 passengers a day.

11.15 Arrive Ongar have a look around the Station & Penny Saloon

11.35 Depart Ongar for North Weald Station sit back and enjoy the countryside views again passing through Blake Hall Station. Arr. North Weald 11.50

12.00 Talk on the railway and shed tour

12.45 Lunch (could be from LNER Chalet)



13.10 Take trip on the DMU to Epping Forest (you cannot get off as there is no platform) arr. back North Weald 13.30

13.30 Tour of North Weald Signal Box

14.00 Depart North Weald for Ongar passing through Blake Hall Station. arr. Ongar and **Visit the Signal Box**

14.35 Depart Ongar for North Weald Station, yet again passing through Blake Hall Station. Arr. North Weald 14.50

Have a look around North Weald Station & shop for a souvenir of your visit

15.00 or 15.35 Catch the 339 Routemaster bus from North Weald Station to Epping Underground Station, going through parts of Epping Forest.

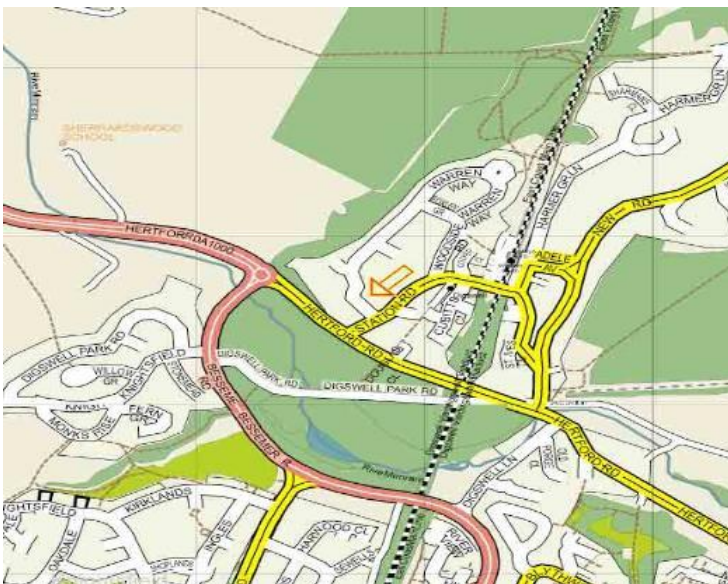
Information prepared by EOR group visits team

The Welwyn Meeting Venue

For those who have decided that this Autumn is now the time to return to Branch meetings, a reminder that meetings in the south of our area have moved from Welwyn Garden City to Digswell Village Church Hall, Digswell, Welwyn AL6 0DH



Digswell Village Church is located in Warren Way, Digswell. In this photograph the hall and adjacent car park are to the right of the picture. Apart from the car park there is on-street parking available in Warren Way and other nearby roads. The parking restriction only applies 09:00 to 11:00 (to discourage commuters using Welwyn North station).



Welwyn North Station is a short five-minute walk away.

The small red arrow indicates the location of the hall.

Note
This is "Digswell Village CHURCH Hall"
- NOT "Digswell Village Hall".

The RCTS Website

A reminder that the RCTS website <https://rcts.org.uk/> contains past copies of *Railway Ramblings* as well as branch details for all of the RCTS branches. Much of the site is also accessible to non-members.

Alex (Alexander) Bell 1954-2023

In early July, Alex died very suddenly just before a trip of a lifetime, delayed by Covid. It was to mark his retirement as a pathologist at the Harefield and the Brompton Hospital Trust, whereby his specialism was transplant pathology. He was only 68. We were about to go to Australia and had included in that trip *The Ghan* and *The Buffing Billy*.



For my 50th in May I had a fun footplate ride at Whipsnade Zoo with Alex in the carriage behind, taking pictures galore, a little green with envy! This is us there.

Alex was wonderful and supportive of my role as a Head of Lower School. The eldest of five, he adored being an Uncle and *Great Uncle Beard*. Many railway trips were planned with "the smalls".

Pre-Covid, we had done Father Christmas at The Buckingham Railway Centre at Quainton for a number of years, indeed we were married there. In 2006, our courtship was done on the various Little Trains of Wales. Our honeymoon was in York and we saw The Flying Scotsman, in bits, being restored at the NRM. Alex was impressed with my railway links, as my Great Grandfather Jack was a driver of The Flying Scotsman.

We were active especially with the Welsh Highland restoration and the continuing work at Corris.

The RCTS was a great passion of his and his Uncle Jeremy and father Alan, sadly both deceased. Alex was enjoying the meetings very much. It was all helpful in getting into the swing of things, during retirement. We had a super behind the scenes RCTS tour of the Nene Valley Railway last year and had also enjoyed the event at the Barrow Hill Gala. I'm so grateful that he found such joy in this new outlet in recent times.

Sarah Bell

(If you wish to have information about the funeral arrangements, please contact Steve Lacey.)



As mentioned in *Chairman's Platform* (see p3) there will be a Branch visit in September.

This museum opened a very short while before the start of the Covid-19 restrictions and has therefore only been going properly again for just over a year. Situated alongside live running Central Line trains on the approach to Epping station is this unique LONDON TRANSPORT signal cabin. It is the only Cabin on the entire Underground network in preservation and open to the public. It is this signal cabin and Locomotive L11 that together make up Epping Signalling Museum.

The most striking exhibit as you approach the gate is the bright yellow 90+ year old former shunting locomotive L11. Museum guides will show you around and explain the signalling and other safety systems that keep London Underground one of the safest railways in the world. You are welcome to climb on board and sit at the controls of a genuine London Underground train, not forgetting to watch for the lineside signals and working set of points. All this whilst Central Line trains clatter past on the other line!



The next destination will be the downstairs room of the signal cabin, originally called the Relay Room. This is where the collection of railway artefacts and memorabilia is housed. There are working signals and warning indicators, an illuminated track diagram, a guards door panel, and of course relays! There are original Underground station signs from long forgotten stations. 'Behind the scenes' equipment such as Train Sequencer machines are also on show.

Then, upstairs to the highlight of the exhibition - the Signal Cabin operating floor itself. Directly overlooking the Central Line and with a view of trains as they leave the station or approach from Theydon Bois, this is where the signaller worked. They would have controlled trains in and out of not only Epping station but, in days gone by, the goods yard and gas works siding as well! The 47 fully interlocked chrome plated levers controlled all the signals and points in the Epping area, even the ones towards North Weald. Guides will explain how it all works, and then it's over to you to use the levers and simulator to signal a train into Epping station and beyond!



Our RCTS visit will be tailored to our requests so our experience at the Museum should suit whether you're a former signaller, railway expert, generally interested in railways or just looking for "something different". Looking on *Trip Advisor* shows many very satisfied visitors and that a duration of 2+ hours is needed.

A Sunday afternoon visit (17th September) has been arranged. Car parking would be in the station car park at Epping (£6 for the day). Access to the museum is from the car park. Depending on numbers, a larger group will be split so that all can get the most from the visit. The museum makes no admission charge but donations are very much welcomed. Tea/coffee and biscuits will be provided (without charge) during the visit!

Please let Dave Elsdon (Hitchin@rcts.org.uk) know, at the latest by 26th August, if you are interested.

Information reproduced courtesy of the Epping Signalling Museum.

Exhibition Report

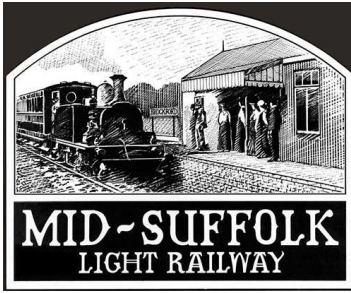
Letchworth Model Railway Society – 22 July 2023



The Branch had a stand at this exhibition – manned by Steve Lacey and Paul Holloway.

A good attendance, perhaps helped by the poor weather, and an excellent location for our stand, all meant that Steve and Paul had an excellent day. Some 84 books were sold, plus the LNER set, and 5 DVDs. After allowing for the stand fee and credit card charges the branch made a net profit of £356.00.

In addition, they signed up 3 new members to the Society and sold 4 new RCTS books.



Mid-Suffolk Light Railway

Steam Punk & Big Bus Show Day

13 Aug 2023



The Middy has a new special arrangement with the Eastern Counties Bus Preservation Group's *Big Bus Show* to run buses from Stonham Barns to Brockford and return. On Sunday 13th August visitors to the Middy will be able to take a *Big Bus* ride to Stonham Barns and return, absolutely free. (If you wish to stay and go into the *Big Bus Show* and other parts of Stonham Barns there would be a charge of £5.00 per person, under 12s free.)



During the day, Brockford will be visited by *Steam Punks* in their extraordinary and colourful gear and displays of their steam technology world.

(For further details about this event see <https://www.mslr.org.uk>)

All-in-all this should be a memorable day, with as many rides on the Middy trains as you like, a free return ride to Stonham Barns and maybe an extra visit whilst you are there and an introduction to the world and life style of the Steam Punk community.

Brockford Station, Wetheringsett, Stowmarket, Suffolk, IP14 5PW.

Reproduced courtesy of the MSLR

The August Puzzle – Martin Elms

This month, the first letter of the answer to the following questions will spell the name of a previous train and bus operator

1. Proposed class name for unsuccessful loco designed by Bulleid.	
2. Sir Henry ? 1823 – 1914 General Manager of Great Northern Railway.	
3. Early railway construction workers.	
4. Safety device fitted to Diesel and Electric traction.	
5. ? Vaughan Snell Bulleid (from Question 1).	
6. Name of diesel locomotive number D9020.	

7. Device fitted at a signal on some lines to stop a train passing a signal at danger.	
8. Station between Gortan and Corroul on West Highland Line.	
9.? Key used to unlock ground frames, or little used connections, instead of providing a fixed manned signalling system.	
10. North Cornish seaside resort still rail connected.	
11 Name of B.R. shipping division created in 1968.	
12. Sir Samuel ? Victorian civil engineer and railway engineer.	
13. Locomotive depot with code 89D.	
14. ? Junction where Northampton loop diverges from WCML.	
15. Original name of cross-London railway linking Bedford to Brighton, via Farringdon.	

As usual, best of luck – my solutions are on page 22. No cheating!

Martin Elms



Nene Valley Railway

A Look at the Heritage and Archive Group

The Nene Valley Railway, in its entirety, is an Accredited Museum and comprises several departments that preserve the Railway's heritage. They are the Mechanical Engineering, Locomotive, Carriage, Wagon, Operating, Civil Engineering, Commercial and Heritage & Archive Departments.

All these departments have their own manager and concentrate on their designated work but members will assist in other areas if required to do so.

The Heritage & Archive Group

This group embraces the Old Station Building project, the Education team, the Railway Letter Service, Model Railway department, the Night Mail team, the Railway's Archives and of course its normal museum business involving the collection and display of photographs, artefacts etc., and recording everything under its care. The historic *Wagons Lits* carriages and Travelling Post Office vehicles also fall under the responsibility of the H&AG.

The Archive

The type of material contained within the Railway's archive is split into two main elements – those relating to Nene Valley Railway and those relating to Mail-by-Rail, chiefly Travelling Post Offices.

In the section devoted to NVR is a range of plans, track diagrams and maps, some of which NVR has been allowed to copy from original material including other local lines and some are original documents. These are housed in the NVR's own archive while some very early original plans are kept in the Huntingdonshire Records Office.

The Railway's history in various forms, has been recorded from the period before the 1843 Act was passed to allow the construction of the Blisworth to Peterborough line (opened in 1845 and the first railway into Peterborough).

Recently more modern archives have been gathered from the early days of the Peterborough Railway Society, which became the Nene Valley Railway. A large photographic collection has also been amassed and is continually being catalogued and digitised.

In the section devoted to Mail-by-Rail an equally large and interesting collection of documents, photographs and printed work has been put together from various sources. The personal collection of a one-time TPO worker (the late D Moulder) was donated to the NVR on the condition that 'it received a good home' where it might be available to other interested people.

A considerable amount of material from local TPOs was also donated when the three respective services terminated in 1990 (East Anglian TPO), 1991 (Peterborough Crewe TPO) and 1996 (Peterborough Carlisle TPO).

On top of this, a number of ex-TPO staff have donated personal ephemera and photographs. Principal among these is member and dedicated supporter M. Jones.

This aspect of the NVR's work has been supported by the British Postal Museum and Archive throughout and whose help is extremely valuable.

NOTE: At the present the Archive does not have a public reader facility but it is hoped that within a two year period this may be improved. In the meantime, if sight of a particular piece of information is requested, every effort will be made to make it available.

The Museum

While the entire organisation is an Accredited Museum, all 'museum' issues are dealt with by a dedicated group who concentrate on the management of the NVR's collection in its entirety. All their activities are overseen by a professional Museum Mentor.

The NVR has a collection and disposal policy in accordance with normal museum practice and items loaned or donated are recorded and acknowledged.

The Museum Group has a massive workload and is desperately short of volunteers. Anyone wishing to know anything about the work of the group, the archives, and artefacts that are held by the NVR, please contact the Museum Customer Liaison Officer.

museumcustomer.liaisonofficer@nvr.org.uk

Details courtesy the Nene Valley Railway



Advance Notice

GWR Saint Class No.2999
Lady of Legend

At the NVR 9th 10th 16th &
17th September 2023

No. 2999 The Lady of Legend





GWR Saint Class Visit



**GREAT WESTERN
GOODS
EXPERIENCE**

NENE VALLEY RAILWAY
WAGON GROUP

JOIN THE CREW

**GWR 2900 'SAINT' CLASS
LADY OF LEGEND
No 2999**

ON
SEPT 8TH 2023

**CARRY OUT THE DUTIES OF
DRIVER, GUARD AND SHUNTER**

UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF EXPERIENCED STAFF.
INCLUDING A VISIT TO A SIGNAL BOX TO LEARN HOW SIGNALS ARE CONTROLLED

FOR FURTHER DETAILS, ENQUIRIES AND TO BOOK
VISIT: WWW.NVR.ORG.UK CALL: 01780 784444 OR EMAIL: NVRWAGONS@GMAIL.COM

Newsletter Distribution

This e-newsletter, *Railway Ramblings*, is distributed by the Branch Chairman (Steve Lacey). If you do not currently receive a copy directly but would like to do so, provide him with your email address and you will be added to the list. Conversely, if you currently receive a copy but wish to be taken off the distribution list then please advise him accordingly. Steve's email address is gricersteve@hotmail.com

Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway



All-Day Rover and Classic Cream Tea in the Train Restaurant – August 10th, 13th & 24th



The combined All-Day Rover Ticket and Classic Cream Tea offer is the perfect opportunity for a relaxing full or half-day out on 10, 13 & 24 August; (also 10 & 24 September).

You can travel on all train services throughout the day (or on as many as you choose!) - and also enjoy your choice of a traditional Cream Tea served at your reserved seats in the Train Restaurant - which departs from Chinnor station at 15.45 hours (also additional departures at 13.10 hours on 10, 24 August only).

C&PRR volunteer stewards will be delighted to welcome you onboard the Train Restaurant and serve your Classic Cream Tea together with your choice of tea / coffee, or soft drink. A selection of wines can also be served at an additional charge.

All-Day Rover Ticket and Classic Cream Tea: £25 per person - minimum of 2-persons per table. Seat reservations for the Train Restaurant are included on the 15.45 departure from Chinnor. Passengers are seated at tables of 2, 3 or 4 persons. (No seat reservations are required on any other steam or diesel services and ample seating is provided throughout the day.) Tickets must be pre-booked.

Further details: <https://www.chinnorrailway.co.uk/>

Information reproduced courtesy of the C&PRR



Epping Ongar Railway

Recent History of the Line

Decline of the Line

Due to reduced passenger numbers Blake Hall station was closed on Sundays and a reduced weekday timetable implemented from 17th October 1966. In the same year Central line 1962 stock replaced the two 4-car trains on the branch line. Continued decline in passenger numbers led to the decommissioning of the passing loop and signal box at North Weald in 1976, and complete closure of Blake Hall station on 31st October 1981. A reduced service operated on the rest of the branch line. In 1989 an attempt was made to run an all-day service. It was unsuccessful and London Transport closed the loss-making section on 30th September 1994.



London Underground Standard Stock with an Epping shuttle service at Ongar - 30 September 1961
(Photograph: John Bristow)

1994-2007

Shortly after 1994, a private company 'Pilot Developments' purchased the Epping to Ongar section of the line. Despite assurances that they would run a passenger service within five years of the purchase, no trains ran. In the early part of the new millennium The Epping Ongar Railway Volunteer Society (EORVS) was formed. Initially, this consisted of a small group of enthusiasts, volunteering their time to repair and preserve, damage and wear and tear, to the neglected buildings and track. Working alongside the owners the volunteer group gradually restored the line and station building at Ongar so that trains could run once again and provide

a passenger service to North Weald. On 10th October 2004, almost ten years to the day since the line closed, the first EORVS train service left Ongar at 11am. EORVS operated five train services every Sunday until December 2007.



10th October, 2004. EORVS first passenger train leaving Ongar and at North Weald Station.

Developments Since 2007

A change in ownership occurred late in 2007. It was decided to cease running trains and to concentrate on improving the infrastructure, both to enable locomotive hauled trains to run once again, and to secure the long-term future of the branch.

All of the essential infrastructure improvements (both track, signalling and rolling stock) that have and continue to be undertaken help to widen the variety and frequency of heritage services, and are all key parts towards the central goal - to once again run trains to connect at Epping; both to preserve our transport heritage and to enable the EOR to run services for the wider benefit of the local community, restoring this important link in our transport network.

Both Ongar and North Weald Stations have seen long over-due investments in their infrastructure in our efforts to undertake an authentic restoration of the branch: More about those in the next issue of *Railway Ramblings*.

Details reproduced courtesy Epping Ongar Railway

NVR Workshop Wanderings – Steve Lacey

Repairs, repairs, repairs!

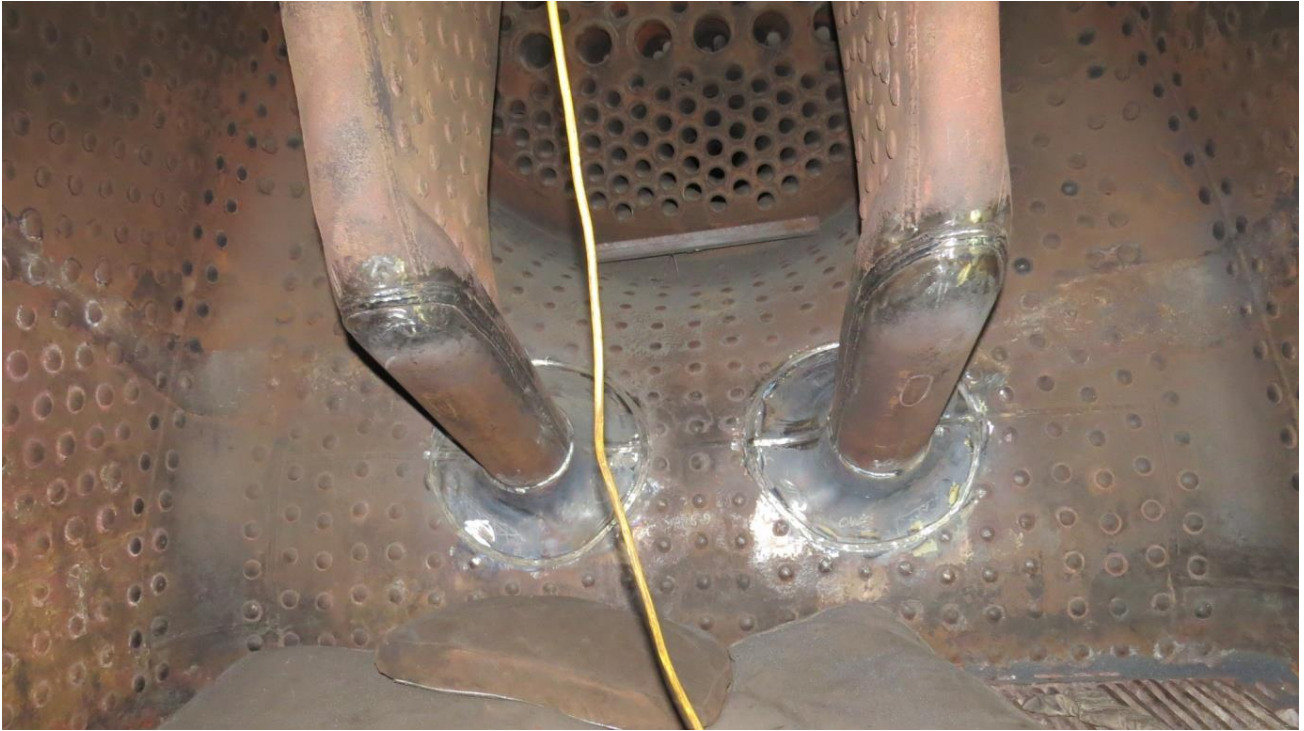
Repairs to 34081 92 *Squadron* are ongoing, but the welding phase is now complete (we hope), with replacement of the lower siphons, which were heavily scaled and wasted with newly manufactured parts obtained from another Battle of Britain, *Boscastle*. In addition, the collars where they fit onto the firebox were also replaced as cracking had been found around previous repairs.

We think the problems are related to poor water treatment (rather hit and miss at the Nene Valley Railway) and poor firing techniques. It has been suggested that the large amount of weld repairs in the area of the collars had compromised flexibility, as the weld material is “stiffer” and had caused additional stress in the metal. Hence the decision to renew the whole area.



Removed sections of collar, showing wasting and heavy scale with replacements suitably labelled.

The welding repairs have been carried out by Adam from LMS at Loughborough, who did a fantastic job, in horrid conditions, enabling the work to be done without a boiler lift. The preparation work and support have been done by Alan and Tony, our chief engineers, who now have the equally horrible task of drilling and fitting stays to the repaired area. Once completed, 92 *Squadron* needs a hydraulic test before return to traffic.



Who says welding is not true artistry! The collars are in 2 parts to enable fitting to the repaired siphons. Note the cushions used by the welder while he basks in the rest area!

Now an update on the Wansford signal box.

When the scaffolding enabled a closer inspection of the roof, more damage than was visible from the ground in the previous survey, using binoculars, was discovered. Approval was finally received from English Heritage, after a 6-week delay, for the revised plan of repair. They agreed to re-slating the north (barely visible) side of the box with reclaimed appropriate slates and using the good original ones on the south side. In addition, the bottom runners on many of the sliding windows are being replaced.

We all remember doing DIY repairs to windows; just imagine doing a whole signal box!





Wansford Signal Box

In other news, the Danish F Class has finally started running trials. Apparently, it has been decided that it will need to do 500 miles of running in to ensure reliability i.e., 50 return trips to Peterborough. So far, all is well with the bearings and only a few small easily cured steam leaks. As always, the steam air-pump needs occasional persuasion with a hammer!



All of these repairs take massive amounts of cash, so please support your local railway.

Advance notice, the Deltic is visiting in October.

Steve Lacey

Chippenham Junction 1966

– a short story by Martin Elms

“Another call to Chippenham Junction,” said Joe.

Joe and I were the “on call” British Railways Signal and Telegraph engineers based at Cambridge.

I had just arrived, at seven o'clock, to start the day shift, meeting Joe who was clutching a sheet of paper with details of the fault which we were tasked to attend.

Gathering up the tools and testing equipment required for the shift, we set off in our green-coloured Bedford petrol van of the 1963 era. It was complete with sliding entry doors and temperamental three-speed non-synchromesh gearbox!

Chippenham Junction, east of Newmarket, is situated on the Ely to Bury St Edmunds line, where the branch from Cambridge via Newmarket joins. There was formerly a north-to-east chord line (removed six years previously) creating the much favoured - by the Great Eastern Railway - triangle.

In an early British Railways rationalisation scheme the area became an experimental power control system leading the way for many future rationalisation schemes. The junction between the line from Cambridge and from Bury was renamed Chippenham Junction, the signal box at the North end of the chord line from Ely was closed along with the one at the East end of the chord from Newmarket. The revamped Chippenham Junction Box was then equipped with a power control system to operate the points at the original north and west junctions and the corresponding signals, also either semaphores with electric motors or colour lights all operated from the existing, modified, levers. The idea being to save signalman positions in a hard to recruit area and hopefully easier to maintain equipment. However, recently our fault calls to this location had increased by an alarming amount.

We arrived at the signal box, which was accessed by a private road from the A11. We left the vehicle and climbed a small embankment which continued, by use of a long a path, through a gate to reach the box. The walkway was level, due to the box being situated in a cutting. Steps were only required to access the track from the operation area within the box.

“Hello to you – again” greeted Bruce the signalman on this early shift “Same again, track circuit number four showing occupied when clear.” He confirmed the fault by also producing the associated paperwork.

I went downstairs to look at the locking and electrics. A great deal of this was now disused, as the east-to-north chord had been removed a year ago. Track circuit four was in the vicinity of the removed East box and its associated, now removed, power operated points.

I evaluated and shook some of the disused locking apparatus and dusty switch work as this action had worked before and sure enough there was a clunk from somewhere followed by a shout from Bruce upstairs.

“All clear, it's back working again must have been the ghost of Sam”. He then laughed.

Sam was a previous signalman who always managed to work night turns by swapping shifts with the other two signalman. He preferred nights - some said to enable him to “moonlight” on various other jobs; illegal, but he managed to get away with it!

The signal box was now manned on two shifts. It was closed at night when the only line used was between Bury and Ely. The signals and points being adjusted accordingly at ten o'clock when the shift finished and were reactivated at six when it reopened. Sam had retired when this alteration was first proposed three years ago.

We chatted to Bruce, and I looked sadly at the now diminished lever frame. Only some fifteen in use, the other thirty-odd painted white. However, the signal diagram above remained as it was when the chord existed, the relevant points and signals blanked-out, making a dismal under-used scene.

A few days later, after my rest day, I was returning from Bury in the late evening after taking part in a darts match, losing heavily. About eleven I glanced across from my car on the quiet A11 through leafless trees. A light had caught my attention. I was sure it was in Chippenham Box which I knew should be closed at night. There was no engineering work on for it to be open. I was suspicious that foul play may be occurring at this remote location.

By doubling back and using side roads I drove around to reach the private road and parked up at the entrance gate. It was now getting misty and, as I left my warm car, I felt very cold. In the distance I heard an owl toot and, closer, the sound of wildlife rustling in the undergrowth!

The gate was open and I passed through, trying to be brave, hoping my generous size and unexpected presence would frighten any miscreants away.

Holding my breath, I pushed the door open and swept inside.

I stopped in my tracks.

At the lever frame was a signaller dressed in an older-generation uniform. The frame, I noticed with a gasp, was complete. All levers coloured and a glance at the diagram showed it all in use. The signal box was in an operational mode as it must have been some thirty years ago!!

"Why, you made me jump," said the surprised signaller. Obviously summing me up as an authorised visitor he continued to chat away.

I discovered his name to be Sam. He preferred night working and had been a signaller here for some thirty years.

My head swam. Lots of questions raced round my head. This included that this box is closed at night, why are all the signals and points in use and what was Sam doing here??

"Excuse me a minute" he continued "must set the route for the Ely to Cambridge Parcels, along the north chord. I always seem to have trouble with the east-end points. I will have to fault them."

He busied himself. I realised that this was more than bizarre and, feeling very shaky, decided to retreat, not being able to take this in.

I left Sam who was too preoccupied with his work and writing in the Train Register to notice my hasty departure. On the balcony I drew in large gulps of air and almost swayed with fear and wonder at what I had witnessed. I looked over the fields and sure enough I could make out the lights of a diesel-hauled parcels train squealing round the tight curve from the north. In true amazement I watched it turn towards Warren Hill tunnel and Newmarket. The tail lamp flickering as it continued its eastbound passage.

I drove away from the railway heading for home. I was not able to take in all that I had seen and heard. It was a restless night, thinking over the experience I had been a part of – or did I dream it. I was aware of my wife telling me, plainly, to be quiet and still.

I decided to keep quiet about my experience to Joe. I arrived to work the following morning. On entering the office Joe looked at me with a clear concern for my welfare as he said

“You look terrible.”

In reply I muttered something about night-time indigestion had disturbed my sleep.

“We have a call to Chippenham, the same fault, track circuit four!” said Joe.

I gave an involuntary start, but luckily Joe had his back to me collecting tools and didn’t see.

We drove to Chippenham. During the journey, Joe commented on my unusual silence. I was dreading this return visit. Feeling completely unnerved about the whole event that I had witnessed some hours earlier.

“Come on then” said Joe “You look like you’ve seen a ghost - Sam again?” he said this cheerfully, in a combination of light-hearted jovial manner.

Joe entered the Signal box first. I was lagging, almost afraid to look when I entered.

Inside the layout was just as it had been on our last day-time working visit.

Martin Elms

Puzzle Solutions

Solution to the puzzle in this issue (page 10):

1. Leader. 2. Oakley. 3. Navvies. 4. Dead Mans Handle (or Pedal). 5. Oliver. 6. Nimbus.
7. Trip–cock. 8. Rannoch. 9. Annett’s. 10. Newquay. 11. Sealink. 12. Peto. 13. Oswestry.
14. Roade. 15. Thameslink 2000.

Solution: LONDON TRANSPORT

Martin Elms

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