

Tales from the Signal Box



The Brading Signal Box was built in 1882 and contains the original mechanisms.

The railway from Ryde to Shanklin was opened in 1864 and at first was a simple affair with mostly a single track for trains running in both directions on the same track. For this to work safely, use of the line was managed by dividing it into sections. The driver of the train would be issued a 'single line token' by the signalman to give him authority to safely run. The tokens were issued by a machine and a signalman located at the ends of each section, and the machines were linked electrically so when one token was issued another could not be withdrawn until the first was put back into the machine at the other end of the section.

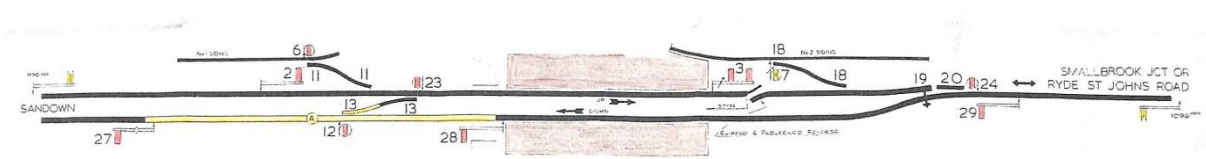
At Brading was a short branch to the Quay, but by 1882 the branch was extended to Bembridge which led to extensive re-modelling of the layout at Brading Station and the construction of our signal box to manage the additional train movements. Traffic kept growing such that in the 1920's a double track was installed between Brading and Sandown.

Our signalman was kept busy exchanging tokens, but he also had to switch the points on the line so the trains would go on the right track, for example a train coming off the branch and on to the main line, or a train from Ryde being switched to the correct platform and line to Sandown. The switching is done by pulling the levers in the box.

The signalman can move the points correctly for the train, but he has also to set the associated signals so that the train driver can see that the line is set to depart or is clear to approach the station. The Victorian lever mechanism has interlocks so that it should not be possible to show a safe signal if the points are not set correctly.



Interior of the restored box showing the point and signal levers.



Track diagram from the box.

Our signaller has to issue and receive the single line tokens from the driver, use the levers to set and lock the tracks, and show the correct signals. On top of all that he will record and respond to any safety-critical information that he hears or sees. Our man was the Air Traffic Control of his day with responsibility for the safe running of traffic through his area.

The Signal Box Book in the Station Heritage collection dates from May 1955 to December 1983 and it was used by the signaller to record any event other than the normal running of the rail traffic. A lot of information about the situation along the line was received from the train drivers and other signallers. These are some of the entries written by our Brading Signallers in the Signal Box Book.

Animals on the line

These were frequently recorded (note Up is towards Ryde, Down to Shanklin):

- May 01 1956 6.25 pm. Ex Ryde Pier Driver reported sheep on line Ryde side of bridge. Office staff informed, who notified farmer by phone. Driver of 6.5 Freight Ex Shanklin advised.
- May 13 1956 2.40 pm. Driver P Vallenden reported 3 Heifers on line between Smallbrook Bridge and Box. Ryde St John's Rd informed of same.
- Sept 20 1958 7.20 pm. Signaller Ryde St J reported cow on line at Brading down distant signal. Farmer notified to remove cow from line. Guard on 7.24 Down reported cow still on line at 7.42 pm,

driver of 7.42 ex Ventnor cautioned & told of circumstances. Farmer rang 7.55 pm, not his cattle. Up driver reports on arriving at RSJ Road, nothing seen on line. The 8.28 Down driver under caution and reports cow is down at Distant Signal against bank. At 8.50 Ganger Kennedy advised of situation, travelling on 8.42 ex Ventnor Up train to Brading, arrived Brading at 9.8 pm and gone to remove cow. Farmer Barnes informed and removed cow from line. Line cleared 9.50 pm.

- 28 Dec 1961 4.20 am. Informed by Driver Minter of 4.5 am Ryde to Ventnor that he had hit some cattle at Wall Lane bridge, and would require another engine to proceed to Ventnor. This engine could not be obtained until 5.20 am and was then unable to pass the scene of mishap.
- 16 Dec 1979 14.10 Crew of 13.41 ex Shanklin – Pier Head used short circuiting bar for purpose of shutting off current so as to remove a cow from line. Current restored @ 14.05, cow safe in field. Delayed some 14 minutes.

People on the line

It's not only animals, humans can cause problems too:

- 17 July 1975 12.11 Pre-school age children were seen on Wall Lane Crossing, playing 'Chicken' with the 12.02 ex Shanklin train. Children "shooed away" by unknown adult.
- 16 Sept 1976 14.20 Driver K. West stopped his train, station side of Furlongs Crossing, because two toddlers had run towards his train & he thought the smallest one was hit. I went to the crossing & told the children to keep away from the trains & the line. I also examined the spring on the gate, it appears to be very weak.
- 15 Sept 1977 18.08 The 17.57 ex Ryde Pier Head was already approaching Signal 29, when a black dog ran onto the crossing in path of train. A man, presumably the dog's owner, ran onto crossing to drag the dog clear. The train missed them both by inches!! Driver made an emergency brake application and stopped opposite coal yard, by then man had gone.
- 17 Jun 1978 16.02 A young boy of ten years stood at Jones's Crossing, when the 15.50 RPH-SKN train appeared under the bridge this lad started to run back and forth over the crossing in front of the train. I dropped No. 29 signal, the train stopped, the driver Mr West shouted at the boy and then proceeded into the station. I informed the Supervisor who sent the police to the station and caught hold of the boy, they gave him a very stiff talking to and then took him home to his parents.
- 3 July 1979 20.22 Child approx. 4 years playing on the foot crossing on single line. Chased off but returned after train had passed.
- 26 Aug 1956 10.6 am. 'Stop & Examine' received from Sandown (swinging door) on 9.40 Ex Ventnor. Investigation here. A passenger dropped his spectacles on track at Sandown & opened the door to see where they had fallen. Address was given & forwarded to Sandown. I was assured that no passenger had fallen out.



Incidents seen from the Box

From the elevated position of the signal box, several noteworthy incidents were seen and recorded:

- 29 Dec 1977 20.15 At 19.59 I received a call from Guard S. Jackman that a man had gone berserk on his train, the 19.41 ex Shanklin which was standing in the Up platform. He had smashed all light fittings in the first coach. I phoned Ryde box for police assistance. In the meantime, he was staggering all over the station, and we later discovered was under the effects of drugs. Police arrived at 20.10 and the policeman struggled with the man and got into difficulty and asked for my assistance. We struggled with him and were both bruised etc. in the process. We ended up pinning him to the ground

- with the assistance of a friend of mine. There we had to wait for another policeman and an ambulance. I told the policeman that the railway would require full details for possible prosecution.
- 03 Nov 1977 15.25 A Mr W. Cartland? collapsed on the first flight of stairs after getting off the 15.07 ex Ryde Pier Head. His wife and children who was with him was very upset so I went to their assistance. Having no G.P.O. phone I got Ted Bowers (M. Office) to ring his doctor who advised we should get an ambulance. Whilst awaiting arrival of ambulance with his wife's permission I made them a cup of tea and covered Mr Cartland up to keep him warm. Apparently, they live in Station Rd Brading and so a neighbour took the young baby from the pram and their other children to her house after the ambulance had been and gone. I helped the neighbour over the foot-bridge with the large pram.
 - 23 Feb 1978 15.50 A woman came off the down train with a pushchair and a baby in her arms, she went over the bridge. Upon reaching the up-platform side of the bridge, all I could see was the pushchair falling down the steps and the mother standing at the top, still with the baby in her arms. Some schoolboys came to see if they could do anything, but all they could do was to pick up the pushchair. I called to the woman if she was all right but she just walked off up the hill looking angry and she never said a word.
 - 11 Sept 1978 10.15 An old man of 72 years of age came over the bridge to the down side platform, he slipped and fell halfway down the steps, cutting open his head and the tops of his hands. I notified the supervisor who sent an ambulance out to take the old man to Ryde hospital for a check-up. The weather was fine but windy.
 - 30 Aug 1981 14.10 A running fight broke out between the Mods and rockers all on bikes, about 100 persons all told. Some bikers ran scared on to the Up platform and onto the Barnes crossing and into the cess where they became stuck. I stopped the 14.11 SKN - RPH at Sandown until the track and the crossing were cleared. I called the police who came within minutes and they quickly cleared everyone away.

Misuse of crossings

Further down the line (1.2 km from the box) towards Sandown and out of sight was Thomas Crossing where the local farmer could safely cross the line to access his fields. It was fitted with gates and had a telephone with direct contact to the signal box so the farmer could ask the signaller for permission to cross the line, and when crossed to report back that the crossing was clear and all gates were closed. At least, that was the theory.

- 9 Jun 1977 Driver of 12.41 Up train from Sandown reported a tractor using the Thomas Crossing. As the train was approaching the driver had to take steps to avoid a collision. No permission was given to the farmer to use the crossing at the time because he never phoned the signal box Brading.
- 10 July 1977 8.38 Thomas Crossing occupied @ 8.38 for cows. No call back to confirm crossing as clear. The 8.42 ex-Shanklin cautioned from Sandown. Call from farmer at 8.52 saying sorry he forgot to call back – apologies accepted – no hard feelings.
- 25 Nov 1977 14.55 The farmer at Thomas Farm persists in complaining whenever he is told to wait for passage of train. He seems to think we deliberately keep him waiting, saying he could easily get across in half a minute. Getting a nuisance!
- 14 July 1981 14.15 The Driver on 13.20 ex Shanklin service reported that a Water Authority Lorry was inside fence at Thomas Crossing. The 13.41 ex Shanklin and 13.37 ex R.P.H. cautioned. On further investigation of the matter with Water Board office, it was found that they in fact had crossed the line via Thomas Crossing without any authority at all. The Driver of 13.41 ex Shanklin informed me that lorry was now clear and well into field. Line cleared @ 13.52. After a further telephone

conversation with Water Board office I made it clear to Water Authority that driver of lorry must phone Signaller @ Brading before and after using the farm crossing.

- 14 Aug 1982 21.30 Driver D. Saunders reported that Thomas Crossing farm gate wide open. I could get no reply when I phoned the farmer about the matter. I had no alternative but caution Driver R. Richards on the 20.47 ex Pier service to Shanklin to stop in section if he would, and shut the said gate upon the return service, i.e. 21.12 from Shanklin to Pier Head. Driver Richards informed me he had shut the "Blue" gate, which was wide open, and he informed me he had got smattered in cow dung for his trouble. It was in fact a filthy night quite heavy rain; I thanked the Driver for his services regarding the matter and that I would report same to Mr Brodrick at first opportunity.

Objects on the track

Foreign objects on the track were a frequent issue. These could be from natural causes such as fallen trees, items thrown casually on the line, but more frequently from vandalism. A lot of problems take place around Pig Leg Crossing between Ryde St. John's and Smallbrook, (pictured below) where for some reason the youth of Oakfield take a dislike to the railway.

- 13 Dec 1980 12.50 Message from the signaller at RSJ that Driver had reported children were putting brick, timbers etc on line at Pig Leg crossing, driver of 12.41 ex Shanklin "cautioned". Supervisor E. Spears summoned police.
- 22 May 1980 17.45 Message from Ryde St John's that driver of down train reports that children had put stones upon the line, Pig Leg Crossing. Driver of 17.41 ex Shanklin cautioned.
- 15 Apr 1981 17.51 The Guard on the 17.37 RPH - SKN reported stones on the track at Pig Leg lane, and about a dozen children. Informed Ryde Police station who are going to investigate.
- 23 Mar 1983 22.00 The 20.11 ex Ryde Pier Head arrived 20.31, Driver reported striking object at Pig Leg Lane crossing. On examination of train, at least six feet of telegraph pole was found to be wedged under brake gear. After removing same, and further examination of train, train continued to Shanklin to make return service @ 21.11. Meanwhile incident reported to Police and Ryde Pier Head Supervisor. Line examined between Ryde St John's Road and Brading and cleared for safe running of traffic @ 21.44. Delay of 24 mins of 21.20 ex Brading – Pier Head, incident also reported to the fitters for further examination of train. Telegraph pole (part of) now lying on Down side platform (Brading).
- 21 Feb 1976 17.35 17.14 ex Shanklin. Advised by Signaller Russell at Ryde St John's train failed in section near Rowborough Sub-station. Cycle wheel found under conductor rail.
- 19 Jun 1979 The 21.38 Shanklin – Ryde Pier Head delayed 6 mins owing to line being examined between Ryde St John's and Smallbrook, - breaker in Sub-Station blown out, unable to replace, cause: an oil-drum thrown onto line. Line cleared @ 21.55.
- 18 May 1974 10.10 Message from Control "Information received that Council "Road Up" marking lamp lies between Conductor and Running Rails at Anglers Bridge (probably thrown over!)". Trackman T. Scammell contacted, issued with rubber gauntlets and instructed to clear. Obstruction removed and line clear and safe to run on at 10.35 hrs.



Running problems

The signal box and equipment inside was over 100 years old when still in use, and the trains themselves were always second-hand to the Island so equipment failures were frequently recorded. The electrical link between the tablet machines would fail or points not lock correctly, but well-rehearsed and safe ways to keep the trains running were always quickly put in place.

- 6 Dec 1977 17.00 Roof leaking during heavy rain. Office advised. 7 Dec 1977 Roof still leaking badly during heavy rain. 7 Dec 1977 16.45 Water pipe (spout) on Ascot fell off (broken).
- 28 Jan 1978 07.00 Rain coming in around window in South side of box. Almost no putty left holding window in place.
- 12 May 1978 20.00 Despite umpteen recent requests, the hasp on the ticket collectors' box has still not been replaced. This evening, someone managed to open the door and ripped all the timetables and fare charts off the wall, plus the information poster. This is particularly annoying since I spent about half an hour the other evening clearing the thing up. It would therefore be appreciated if this is given the earliest possible attention.
- 23 Feb 1981 23.00 The 22.12 ex Shanklin became derailed at catch points in advance of No. 17 starting signal, 2 front coaches derailed. Permanent Way Inspector informed, Wimbledon Control and Island Manager contacted. *(A team from Eastleigh re-railed the train the following day).*
- 8 Jun 1982 18.48 The 18.37 ex RPH arrived with smoke coming from Driving End Motor Unit. Terminated at Sandown & taken out of service.
- 28 Oct 1983 17.30 The Gaslight on the Up side platform of the bridge has failed to come on again, it is 3 times this week that it has failed. The Gasman comes out to fix it, but it seems that he can't. Will inform Eastleigh tomorrow and see if they can do something about it. Passengers have complained about it.

The Brading Signal Box closed in October 1988 following the removal of the second track to Sandown. With one long single section between Ryde St John's and Sandown there was no need for the Box and the Signaller. Now we have lost the person keeping an eye around the Station, ever-vigilant, watching for safety issues. With the other signallers along the line and the drivers with the maintenance teams they ran a safe railway with some obsolete but effective equipment.

In 1989 the station complex was given Grade II listing, and in 2007 work started on the restoration of the overgrown and abandoned Signal Box. Now fully-restored It stands today as a fine example of Victorian engineering and a memorial to the succession of dedicated railwaymen who have operated the levers in Brading Box.

We hope this little document has shown that the role of the Brading Signaller was more than pulling levers.

Compiled by A. Culley ©Brading Community Archive Group 2020



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