

# Princes Risborough North Signal Box



## Newsletter



Spring 2023

Dear Supporter,

Welcome to another PRNB newsletter. I start to write this newsletter gazing down from the box as Prairie tank engine GWR 4144 passes by on Mother's Day, our first operating day of the new season. It is pleasing to see progress at Princes Risborough in a number of areas, the most important of those being the commissioning of the Middle Box lever frame. See my report below. Temporary access has been made through the operating floor in the north side of the internal partition to the lower levels of the box. It's also there to reduce the number of times a working signaller is interrupted with passing volunteers in the south side. In the ideal world you would not want the signaller to be distracted too often. Finally a thank you to Ian Aldridge (a former booking boy) who visited us last summer and agreed to share some of his memories in this newsletter.

### Princes Risborough Middle Box – Lever Frame Update

The fitting out of the Middle box, which is actually the Southern section of the Princes Risborough North box, has been completed. It was finally commissioned in January and is now an operational lever frame controlling our points and signals at Princes Risborough. Our signallers have undergone training and familiarisation. It is more complicated compared to the temporary ground frame that has been in use and features 29 levers (including spares).



It is worth noting that when the signalbox is closed the route and signals are left set so that tampers etc. can access and exit our sidings from the National Network for stabling purposes. See photo left and position of the levers. It's not uncommon to see main line engineering vehicles stabled there when we arrive to carry out our work. There are two sidings with some of our own vehicles stabled there as well.

### Signal Box Lever Lead Plate

Each signal box lever has a "lead" plate attached to it (pronounced leed). This plate contains the lever number, what it operates and the pulling sequence of other levers that have to be moved ahead of the one in question. So if we look at the third lever in the photo to the right for example, lever number 122 is labelled as Disc Loop Starting to Chinnor Independent. Below that it has 113 and 114 so those levers have to be positioned in the correct place before lever 122 will be allowed to move.



## Princes Risborough North Box – Lever Frame Update

It has been a long term plan to convert the frame in the north section of the box into a simulator demonstration frame. This is an 81 lever mechanism and will represent how the track layout was back in 1964 for which we still have the illuminated diagram. So far the block shelf has been cleared of instruments, the wood rubbed down and filled where necessary and repainted. Ongoing work will be to clean, polish (possibly repaint in places) from the top down. You may be able to see from the photo below that all the handles are rusty so there are many wire brushing days ahead of us with lots of emery cloth needed to get the shine back again. Additional work is required to complete the locking mechanism beneath the levers so that nobody can pull a lever that causes a conflict with the way other levers are set. The mechanical work involved is no simple task. Rebuilding an 81 lever frame locking mechanism from scratch is a rare event these days! More on how that is done will be featured in a later edition of the newsletter.

As well as the mechanical side of things it will have to have indicators, block instruments and bells all wired in. Plus electric lever locks fitted which interface to the simulated track circuits. It may only be a simulator but all the electrical and mechanical parts will be in use up to where cables and rodding would normally be attached. It's expected that sensors will detect the position of all levers and feed back to a computer system that will be running various simulations.

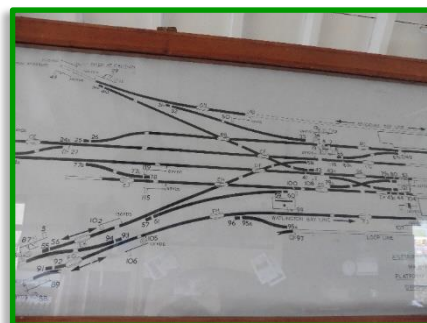
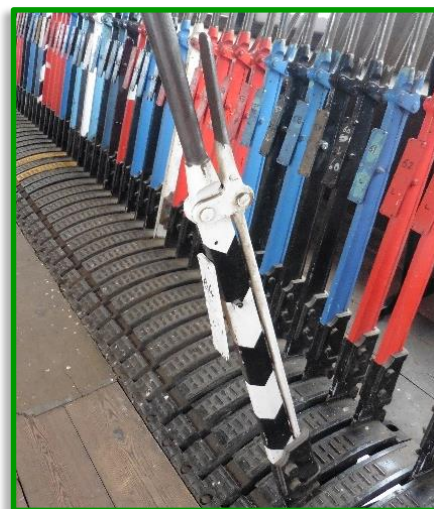


Photo above – Part of the 1964 illuminated diagram which will be used by the simulator. Photo left – The 81 levers to form the simulator.

### Chevron painted levers

The more eagle eyed viewers may have noticed a couple of levers with unusual colour markings in the photo above. Let's take a closer look. See photo right. Painted black and white with chevron direction either up or down these would operate a detonator placer which would automatically place a detonator on top of the rail to stop a train in an emergency. As the train ran over them they would explode with a load bang. The driver would hear this over the noise of the loco he was driving and apply the brakes. Chevrons pointing up would work the up line and pointing down the down line.

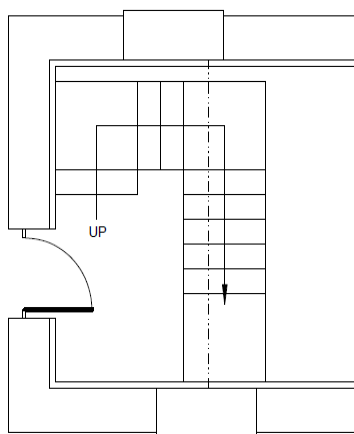


## A new internal staircase

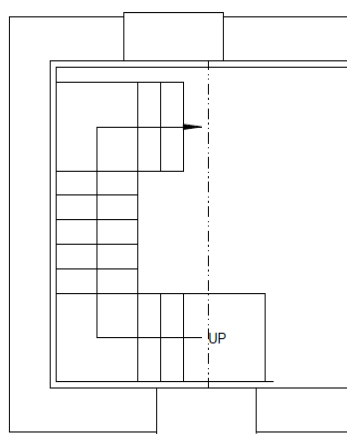
Our aim of creating a signalling simulator will require us to create a separate public access point. The main reason is that we can't have the public continuously walking through the operational part of the box thus disturbing the signaller. The plan is to build an internal "dogleg" staircase at the north end of the signal box. Entry will be via the existing single door at the same end and onto a level surface where the climb of the staircase will begin.

The two diagrams produced by Richard Fillmore below illustrates the direction of travel over two sets of flights, one reaches the intermediate floor, the other the operating floor. Listed building consent has been submitted to the local authority and we wait the outcome of that.

The whole stair assembly will be fabricated in steel to comply with current building and fire regulations.



GROUND FLOOR to  
INTERMEDIATE LEVEL



INTERMEDIATE to  
OPERATING FLOOR LEVEL

## Memories from a former Booking Boy

By Ian Aldridge

Do you want a job?

It was at the old Great Western & Great Central Joint station at Haddenham (the original) that the Station Master Mike Hopkins asked me if I wanted a job. I had just turned 15 at the end of June 1962 and was enjoying my school holidays, not that I was going back to school, mind you.

I had been enjoying my time train spotting there and helping out the porter, Topper Hopkins (son of the Station Master) with the parcels and seeing people on and off the trains with the odd visit to the signal box. Mr Hopkins senior informed me on his return from lunch one day that there was job going for a booking boy at Princess Risborough North Box, if I wanted it. I duly jumped on the auto train and some ten minutes later was knocking on the station master's door at Risborough



*Photo: Ian Aldridge  
Station Master at Bishops Lydeard*



station. A smiling Mr Ellwood greeted me then led me towards the signal box along the platform, across the main line and along the cinder path that led to the box itself. On reaching the steps to the box it felt like we were on the steps to heaven and I guess in a way we were. He opened the door to the signal box and wow what I saw next I had not expected although I had passed that signal box numerous times on my way home to Thame. The box looked colossal with its 122 levers. I had only been in Thame and Haddenham signal boxes and you could fit both in there. I was introduced to the signaller named Jack and the booking boy Vince I would be taking over from, subject to a medical, as he was going into the Merchant Navy. Jack would have been around 60 and had worked the box for a number of years but unfortunately I never got to work with him as he went sick with cancer and did not return to work.

I only needed to look around the box and see what my job would be before I said yes, I would accept the job. Mr Ellwood then asked me how I would get to work as the shifts were 6-2 and 2-10 Monday to Saturday. 'By bike' I replied, although little did I know what that would mean in the winter of 1962-63. I was informed that I would hear from Paddington in due course. Only a week later I was summoned to go and see the Railway Doctor at Paddington by letter together with my free travel pass. On arrival at Paddington I made my way to the Doctors office the doctor was very thorough and he even performed *the 'cough'* test. I had not experienced that before! Thankfully I passed the medical and I returned home with a grin from ear to ear. My mother was overjoyed, as was I, that the prospect of working in a factory with her had gone, not that I didn't love my mum of course.

I remember on a Monday in late August I was there learning the ropes on my own with a different signal man in charge. Gee this was complicated; 4 bells to listen to all giving a different message, 3 Tokens to give out and collect, plus 6 times events to record for each train movement in the signal box register as a train journeyed on its way. There could be up to 6 train movements within the station but thankfully they had their own time slots. It appeared a nightmare to me at first and a couple of times I got my knuckles wrapped for getting the train register wrong. Signalmen do not like the register messed up as it is a reflection on them when the Signalling Inspector calls. It took me 3 months to get it all right.

On Saturday afternoons we used to clean up the box, cleaning the windows, brass, toilet, and polished and buffed the floor using an army buffer that was a 25pound weight on a long pole. It took some moving but was okay when you got into the swing of things. The summer settled into Autumn and the 'King' class steam trains were withdrawn the Western Class diesel locos were taking over. To me it was a sad occasion to witness, but not as sad as the final steam service at Oxford on the 1st January 1966. Those are my initial memories. More to come in the next edition of this newsletter.

Ian Aldridge - former Signal Box Booking Boy.

### **PRNB Open Day**

The next PRNB Open Day will be Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2023 from 10:00 to 16:00. Entrance is free. Donations welcome. Full details will be published on our website shortly.

Any comments/feedback to myself at [news@risboroughbox.org.uk](mailto:news@risboroughbox.org.uk) (Alan Jeffries)

Donations welcome. Cheque payable to CPRRA (write PRNB Fund on the back)

Postal Address: PRNB Fund, Chinnor & Princes Risborough Railway, Station Road, Chinnor, OX39 4ER

Donations can be made online at [www.risboroughbox.org.uk](http://www.risboroughbox.org.uk)



Risborough Box Group is a team within the Chinnor and Princes Risborough Railway Association