

THEY'RE HAPPY DOWN THE HOLE

by David Burnell

Not too much has been written about Underground signal boxes or those associated with the Underground, especially the more remote ones not contained within a station. Mike Horne in his recent book on 'The Hammersmith and City Railway' refers to and illustrates the signal box contained within the tunnel walls at Praed Street Junction. Photographs of boxes contained within the tunnels of the City and South London have been published, (e.g. Printz Holman's 'The Amazing Electric Tube'). The void between tunnels connecting the Metropolitan and the Great Northern at King's Cross contained a location where the trains were to be signalled by flags held out through apertures in the tunnel wall.

Older readers may well remember that several Yerkes tube stations had signal cabins at the end of the platform. At stations such as Baker Street and Liverpool Street the operation of the 1930s miniature lever cabins in cross passages or off the circulating area could be viewed when the signalman chose to keep the door open, presumably for ventilation purposes.

Sorting through an old British Railways staff magazine from October 1950 I came across an article about the long abandoned St. Pancras Tunnel (signal) Box, which used to lie 46 feet below St. Pancras station controlling the majority of double track line in the 1,386 yard tunnel that connected the Midland main line with the City Widened Lines, opened in 1868. The last section of the tunnel and the junction along with the Great Northern connection to the City Widened lines were latterly controlled by the London Transport King's Cross 'C' box, and formerly by the Met. Railway's Midland Junction box. The St. Pancras Tunnel box, opened in 1889, was a 'block post' with four levers and two spares that simply shortened the signalling sections on this long piece of track and thus allowed a more frequent service of both passenger and freight trains. Its location was, I judge, to be somewhere along the platforms of today's Thameslink platforms.



The signalbox (*Left*) was scooped out of the eastern tunnel wall and was accessed from an anonymous door set in the wall of the cab rank on the west side of St. Pancras station. The door led to a spiral staircase at the bottom of which another door led into the tunnel itself. To gain access to the box the tracks had to be crossed. (*Apologies for the poor photo – Ed.*)

Being a staff magazine the article inevitably focussed on the experiences of the signalmen who regularly worked this very lonely location. The welfare of the signal man was, according to the article, well provided for with an electric fan, running water and a gas stove, plus signal frame

all within a 12 square feet space (toilet facilities not mentioned). Nearby, the River Fleet passed along the crown of the tunnel encased in its sewer tunnel but this wasn't blamed for the damp atmosphere in the tunnel and box. This was down to the 60 trains a day half of which exhausted steam and smoke climbing up to the St. Paul's Road portal and fresh air. Of the 60 trains only five were LMR passenger workings bound to or from Moorgate, demonstrating that the even in the 1950s the Widened Lines connecting the railways to the north with those south of the Thames were predominantly a freight artery. Being on the tunnel's curve, the view through the grimy windows was very limited. No gazing at a beautiful pastoral scene for these signalmen. If there was a reason to sleep the signalman would be rudely awoken by a klaxon horn and loud electric gong, each emitting a 30-second cacophony to warn of an approaching train. Three men worked the box, each on an 8-hour shift.

The article reports they all 'liked' the box but also wanted promotion to a busier location, (and one presumably above ground). For reasons unexplained each stated that the 14.00 to 22.00 shift was the loneliest. The signal inspector accompanying the journalist stated that the box 'was used as a sort of nursery' for new men who, with the light traffic, had an opportunity to become more quickly acquainted

with the rules and regulations, (and presumably the meaning of life). One old timer, retiring in 1930, had been there 15 years and wanted to stay, refusing the eventual promotion out of Hades.

The most bizarre revelation was that the box's own ventilation shaft, which exited through a grill in the Midland Road above, could be used as a giant speaking tube. This was used to good effect during the war when after a blitz someone would call down from the Midland Road to check things were OK. The signalmen also recalled that in the small hours they could often pick up the conversation of late night stragglers passing by the grill and have it amplified into the box. Otherwise the men reported the eerie silence, 'like a cloud of cotton wool' between trains and the muffled approach of the labouring engines.

The most frequent 'guests' in the box were the rats, one of which a signal man reputedly trained to sit up and beg – those train intervals must have been long. No ghosts were reported but when you next stand on the Thameslink platforms, have a thought for the lonely working lives spent under Midland Road. It all came to an end in 1958 when the operation of the box was transferred to LT's King's Cross 'C' box.

Thanks to Alan A Jackson's definitive work, 'London's Termini' (1969) for verification of some of the facts in the article.