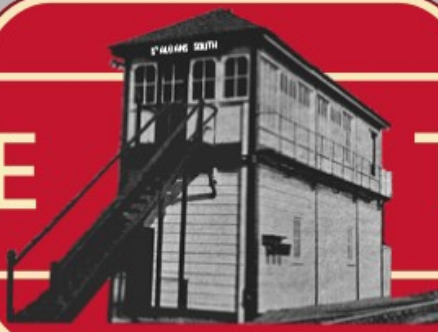


134 Years old

1892 to 2026

OUTSIDE



THE BOX

Newsletter February 2026 Issue 83



A distinctly chilly seasonal view of the Box from January 1979 as it entered its last year of active service. Photo courtesy of Steph South.

20 years of progress

In issue No.7 of 'Outside the Box' in March 2006 Keith advised that the lease from Network Rail had finally been agreed and signed. This would release sponsorship funds and enable the restoration of the Box and creation of the garden space to begin in earnest.

As we look back, so much has been achieved in the 20 years since. A look around the garden at the number of working artefacts and the extended garden railway it is hard to remember what the site looked like in 2006. The same applies to the collection in the Museum where we started off with a few exhibits and now have little room for new additions.

What will the next 20 years bring for the Box, the Trust and its members? Answers on a postcard please!

Richard Kirk

Chairman's Words

As I write we are just into another year - 2026, and already beginning the preparations for the next AGM – see details below. 2025 proved a steady year, highlighted by celebrating National Railway 200. We played our part in the commemoration with a number of initiatives, topped by Tony and Adrian's superb extension to the model railway. Even that has been further topped by Thomas acquiring a working front light! Additionally, the erection of our Irish signal; placing of the Railway 200 bench on the lawn; and the updated Handbook were welcome extras.

During the year we have continued to undertake the inevitable repairs, re-paints and gardening – and the annual hedge and embankment trim is nearly completed – despite a flurry of seasonal ailments, including Rob Little's lengthy treatment, and the usual indifferent winter weather. The gazebo over our work area by the lamp hut has proved very helpful. Furthermore, some new volunteers have been a welcome addition to the team.

This year we hope to see another signal erected and in mid-year the next re-paint of the Box. The attention to our listed building was originally completed every four years, but some excellent and re-engaged painters and the move to coach paint has meant that we can now stretch to five-yearly intervals.

Visitor numbers have held up, but wider publicity is still needed, along with encouraging more private group visits.

At the change of year it would be wrong not to recognise all our volunteers who continue to support St. Albans South, and in particular those who faithfully attend on Wednesday Workdays and Sunday Openings, including our critical 'Buffet Executives'. It was sad when we visited the superb but closed Winchcombe Garden Railway Museum in Gloucestershire, and we are so grateful to all who work so hard to ensure it doesn't happen to St. Albans South!

John Telford



Winners of the 2008 St Albans Civic Society Award



Winners of the 2010 Invensys Rail Signalling Award (Structures)



Winners of the 2017 Mayor of St Alban's Recognition Award

2026/7 Subscriptions are now due

Thank you for your support over the last year. It is now time to renew your membership for the year to 31 January 2027. The cost is just a minimum of £10, so we do hope you will continue to support the work of the Trust and our volunteers.

You will have received a renewal notice by email, or by post with this newsletter. As a reminder, you may pay by bank transfer to the Signal Box account at Metro Bank - sort code 23-05-80, account number 17746944, with your name as reference. Alternatively, you may pay by cheque payable to St Albans Signal Box Preservation Trust, and send directly to me at 20 Flavian Close, St Albans, AL3 4JX.

Several members have already renewed, including some by standing order, so, thank you and you have nothing more to do, **except**

This year I am taking the opportunity to update and tidy our records of Gift Aid declarations. To this end, you will receive a separate email, to which please simply reply YES (plus a few details) or NO - I've made it as easy as possible! A paper copy is available for 'postal' members to complete and return.

Rob Little

Annual General Meeting

The Trust's AGM will take place on Monday 2nd March at St Paul's Church, Blandford Road, St Albans, AL1 4JP at 7.30pm (room available from 7.00pm). All members are invited. Formal notification of the meeting and the proposed agenda accompany this newsletter.



Left: Andy Buckley from Beds & Herts Community Rail Partnership took this photo of the Railway 200 bench arriving in September. Entitled 'Wait for my signal' it has been entered into the CRP annual awards competition.

Right: Two trains on the same track! James chasing Thomas! As Adrian explains below we can now run two trains on the main garden railway circuit. Photo by John Webb



Progress at the Box

Despite the recent poor weather, our team of volunteers have still managed to get a lot of work done around the grounds. The annual tidy up of the embankment is almost complete, with last year's growth of brambles and Buddleia having been cut back. Similarly, hedges around the garden have been trimmed and weeds (lots of them) removed from around the paths.

Our Great Northern Railway (Ireland) lower quadrant signal has been wired to the electricity supply and the signal lamp now lights up. The signal arm needs to be connected to a ground frame, which will hopefully progress during the year.

JAMES GOES DIGITAL, not Eagles or Ivell!!!, but James the red engine. Thomas's big red friend has been converted to radio control operation, which allows us to now run two trains simultaneously on the extended viaduct line, without any horrible accidents, as well as a third engine on the inner line. Hopefully we will be able to convert some of our other engines, including Thomas, in the future.

As always, many thanks to all our volunteers, old and new, for all their hard work. There are plenty of jobs for people to get involved with: gardening (always gardening!!), painting, general maintenance etc. If anyone would like to help, please come along on Wednesday's from 11am.

Adrian Wootton

'Twas the night before Christmas!

The article below was spotted by member David Smith on a railway website. David commented that 'the "author" was a well respected Bletchley box supervisor and worked at Watford - now happily retired up north!'

It would interesting to know if any of the passengers are still with us and able to recollect the event.

A Christmas Tale

by the Impressionist

It was Christmas Eve 1970. I was on nights in Elstree box with a taxi booked to take me home to Leagrave at 02.00 to get some sleep before getting into the festive spirit. Things went well until the last passenger train left St. Pancras at 00.15.

I was working to Cricklewood Junction and St. Albans Station respectively but unfortunately the distance meant that the block bells to Cricklewood wouldn't work so we were signalling trains by 'phone. Since there were only a couple of trains it didn't matter too much anyway and when the last train passed me at 00.45 the party spirit was very much in evidence on the train with balloons, hooters, party hats – the lot. I gave 'on line' to St. Albans and settled down to wait for the empty stock to come back from Luton. Then I could go home. I started to get ready for 'the off'.

The normal time it took for one of these old diesel units to clear St. Albans was about 18 minutes. After about 30 minutes of sitting down, the signalman at St. Albans South said that it hadn't arrived yet. We were then in the position of having a train an unusually long time in section but no other trains in the area with which to examine the line and find out where it was. I contacted Cricklewood Junction Box who was not amused when I asked him if there was anybody in Cricklewood Depot with an engine, just in case. He said he would see if anyone was there. We left it at that for a while.

Time passed on. My taxi arrived at 02.00, I had to send him away and told them that I would ring for one when I was ready. Time still passed on. No word or sign of the 'revellers special'.

Around 3 o'clock the driver appeared, exhausted, at St. Albans having walked from his train to the St. Albans orbital road and thumbed a lift. The guard was still with the train enjoying the party. The driver stated he wanted 'some gas' – the unit had run out of fuel!

This news was very well received by all concerned. It was arranged for a taxi to take the driver of the failed unit back to Radlett platform where he could meet an assisting engine – when we could find one. The St. Albans signalman enquired of the passengers. The driver told him not to worry, they were having a great time. The party still continued. Cricklewood signalman collared the traction arranger to get a class 31 out to assist, which he did.

I reminded him to fill up the 31 with gas, I didn't want another failure. Around 4 o'clock the engine arrived, to my great delight. St. Albans took him in under 2 bells. It felt like we were the only people on the railway. We had a little chat about the situation, wished each other a Merry Christmas and off he went into the obstructed section to pick up the driver. The train eventually cleared St. Albans at around 04.45 and then onto Luton, where taxis were waiting. (Was the 05.12 from Bletchley running?) Around 05.20 I was offered and accepted the party empty stock special. Santa Clause driving. I diverted the train fast to slow for the carriage sidings at Cricklewood. He sounded a Christmas fanfare as he went by the box. The train eventually cleared Cricklewood about 05.40. I then contacted the taxi firm to take me home but not until I have left my relief a little gift – a note left in the block book telling the first turn Boxing Day man to caution the first one down the fast. It was a Christmas I'll always remember.

David Littlechild, AMI Bletchley



The two signal boxes referred to in the article above in addition to St Albans South. Above left: Elstree signal box, this was situated north of Elstree & Borehamwood station adjacent to the Up Slow line (photo from the Trust's collection); right: Cricklewood Junction box, this was close to the north end of Cricklewood Station on the same side as Elstree and controlled the southern exit from Cricklewood Sidings seen in the background (photo by Don Gilham taken from the Mechanical Railway Signalling Facebook pages).

Note both boxes have had their wooden bases replaced by brick, presumably as a protection from war time damage.

Visitor numbers for 2025

John Webb has compiled the visitor numbers to the Box for last year and the monthly totals are shown below. Total attendance in 2025 was down on 2024 by 4% (2289 to 2381). Most notable was the 209 attendance on the Wednesday half-term opening in February. September's figure includes the Heritage Open Weekend.

January	56
February	358
March	146
April	142
May	254
June	212
July	151
August	149
September	427
October	280
November	74
December	40
Total:	2289



Two great photographs taken by Steph South on 31 October 1979. They show the three doll bracket signal that stood to the south of the Box and appears in the background of many of our pictures and that was to be swept away soon after this date when the resignalling and closure of the Box took place.

The three signals were (from the left) operated by levers numbered 36, 39 and 25. First on the left 36 controlled the down slow to down fast crossover (points 33 and 31); in the middle 39 was for the through down slow line into the station and on the right 25 was for the down slow to up slow crossover immediately before the station (points 4).