



Little Bowden Junction Crossing

In an article last year, “*Lib.Dem. Blogger*” Jonathan Calder featured the Northampton line’s Little Bowden Crossing (at the junction of Scotland Road and Northampton Road), and wondered whether the signal box at its counterpart, the Midland line’s Little Bowden Junction (Glebe Road / Braybrooke Road) had survived the closure of Coventry’s Electric Railway Museum. The question arose because the “*Junction*” box had been moved to Coventry when it fell out of use.

Happily, it had survived! It is now stored at the Battlefield Line, Shackerstone, Leicestershire, and is scheduled for restoration (quite when, of course, is anyone’s guess in the current circumstances).

The Midland line has a long history, of course, and level crossings were frequently the subject of modification and, sometimes, controversy.



Little Bowden Junction Signal Box looking towards Kettering with train approaching Harborough. Top right: note the old style semaphore signal, also apparent in the photograph above.

Back in 1882 a typical proposition was made, and it’s worth looking at the detail-as indicative of the times.

On 4th April a suggestion was made that the Little Bowden crossing should be converted to a subway and that the Braybrooke Road should be screened. The company agreed to the screening, but not to take action over the crossing.

In December of the same year an application was lodged to excavate a portion of railway land to widen the brook at Little Bowden and to construct a culvert under the

railway. The cost was subsequently estimated at £1400 to widen the Welland under the railway and make a new waterway fifteen feet wide under the line at Little Bowden. Once again, however, the company resolved to decline the proposal.



Local people have fond memories of the crossing in more recent times and on the very informative Facebook group site “*Market Harborough & Local Railways*” recently a number reminisced:

*One remembered waiting for the signalman to unlock the small gate so that she could get to school in the 70s and early 80s; another remembered the “**Beware of trains**” sign and, at that particular time, the anticipation upon hearing the gates lock! A third person recalled crossing over on his way home after finishing his paper round.*

*Another correspondent referred to his late father working “**Little B**” until the “**Leicester Gap**” re-signalling project made the boxes and “**semaphores**” redundant, whilst someone (whose granddad worked in the box) remembered his own father giving books and manuals from the box to the Coventry Museum at the time of the transfer.*

Subsequently, access was possible via the “*Public Footpath with Miniature Stop lights*” [Crossing Data: ABC Railway Guide]. An April, 2015 assessment by ABC put the risk ratings at “*Extremely low*”. [ABC Guide](#)



Little Bowden Junction Crossing, September 2014. Tracks on the left are to Harborough. The signal box was located just to the right of the photographer's position. ABC rated the risk as "Extremely low".

However, Network Rail closed the crossing in 2015, regarding it as “*one of the highest-risk level crossings in the area*”. One factor was said to be very variable time-differences between activation of the warning lights and the arrival of trains (196 of them per day, sometimes at 75 mph). Another was seen to be misuse and Gary Walsh, Area Director at Network Rail said:

“Safety is our primary concern, and we believe the construction of [a] bridge will reduce the amount of people who choose to risk their lives by misusing the crossing.”



Semaphore signals lasted until 1987.

Tragically, there was a fatality at the crossing in February, 2015, apparently regarded as “*not suspicious*” by the Police. The (April) ABC assessment, mentioned above, had indicated no accidents or near misses on site prior to its publication, but Network Rail place suicides on record separately from accidents, and so perhaps the approach was the same.

Network Rail began work on plans for a footbridge in 2015, and public consultations followed. Main concerns expressed by those consulted included lack of facility for disabled people and those with push-chairs or similar. Strong objections drew attention to the inadequate and dangerous nearest alternative crossing-place beneath the bridge on Scotland Road, and called for improvements there as an adjunct to the new bridge project.

However, Planning Permission was granted eventually, and after a legal glitch led to temporary cessation of construction work the new (£1m) bridge came into use at last in March, 2019.



An interesting footnote is that a wooden shed adjacent to No.4, Braybrooke Road (the house visible in pictures of the crossing)¹ stabled Harborough Bus vehicles for over twenty years, after the demise of the Company. Edward Sharpe, owner of the house, and proprietor of the Market Harborough Motor Traction Company could not bring himself to dispose of them and, over the years, the shed became dilapidated and the vehicles vandalised.

Mr Sharpe retired as signalman at the Crossing in town in 1928.

Tony Cook March 2021

Sources:

“Market Harborough & Local Railways” F/B group site.

Peter J. Blakeman. *“The Rise and fall of the Harborough Bus”*. 1982.

John Gough. *“Market Harborough: Railway Crossroads”*. 2020.

¹ See picture on page 2