

The end of the line for signal boxes?

When local printmaker John McGowan heard Network Rail intended to demolish all the local signal boxes, he devised a unique way to preserve their memory. Jonathan Craymer reports

JOHN McGOWAN'S quest began when a railway enthusiast friend commented over dinner that he intended to make a tour of the local signal boxes to say goodbye to them, as they were going to be bulldozed. "I was a bit taken aback by that," John recalls. "Can't they save them?" he asked. Apparently not. As the boxes are brick built, they couldn't be moved. No-one can stand in the way of progress it seems and as the Guardian reported in July 2013, Network Rail was intent on modernising the system as part of a 30 year plan - in which the signal boxes, many of them Victorian, had no place. So former art teacher John set to without delay, taking a series of photographs as a first stage of preserving four of the structures for posterity by making their images into beautiful screenprints.

"The signal boxes had become part of our local landscape," he says. "They're probably not things you look at if you go past them very often, but once you do stop and take note, you realise they contain some very individual bits of Victorian architecture."

"The Victorians built things to last and which were aesthetically pleasing. For instance on the St James Deeping one, you'd have found elegant barge boards on the edge of the roof, an interesting pinnacle, the sides had some restrained but nice brickwork about them, and the proportions were worthwhile - in the same way that nonconformist chapels have a simple elegance."

He believes the signal boxes were designed by architects employed to work on each railway line. In the case of the series of four local boxes he's concentrated on, these were created by people working for the Great Northern Line. "There are 'family' designs, but each one is quite different in materials and character."



John McGowan photographing Helpston box



Goodbye to the signalmen

It is also saddened John that all this marked the passing of the trade of signalman. "About 30 people were displaced in the closure of our local line up to Lincoln. About a year ago I happened to meet Jean Jones, daughter of a former signalman at the St James Deeping box in the 1950s."

"Her early years were spent as a signalman's child, sharing the life, going out with her father on foggy days to lay explosive charges on the line, or sitting in one of the crossings huts that

had to be manned, cooking breakfast with her father over an open stove. Knowing her story made making prints about that box even more interesting."

"There was a sense of romance from the time when we employed a great number of people on the railways. They joined communities together, almost like our local bus services might do today. I've also spoken to the signalmen of today and talked to them about life in the signal box. It's been a very interesting subject to explore."

What about signal boxes further afield? Is John interested in preserving others across the UK which might be about to be demolished?



Deeping St James

"In spring last year I took a trip around the East Midlands with a railway enthusiast friend, Graham Hobbs. He took me to virtually every signal box between here and Loughborough, during the course of a day. We photographed every one and I've made a self published book which with my prints brings all the images of the East Midlands together."

So far he hasn't pursued finding a publisher for this book - but who knows? "I'm not sure they'd be interested. But personal publishing is something I like to do as it helps me keep all my images together. I've made books about my canal prints with photographs taken of Northampton canal, and I'm going to make a photo book about my current project which is London warehouses."

"I've completed two prints and am working on a suite of six. These emanate from a series of photos I took in the early 1980s, when Rotherhithe stopped being an industrial centre, but hadn't quite started being gentrified. I'm fascinated to see the warehouses are still standing, as they're protected by Bermondsey Council. People are still interested in them."

Preserving a legacy

Clearly people do care about these old bits of our architectural heritage, and one of John's prints sparked a bit of campaigning in Deeping St. James.

"A local picture framer, Black Cab Studio put my print of the St. James Deeping box in the window and I think it reminded people that it was going to go. This resulted in a campaign and public meetings. The local MP was invited to a public meeting along with along with members of Network Rail. However there was no reprieve as the new automatic barriers need to be positioned exactly where the old box stood."

"The campaigners did manage to get Network Rail to agree to decommission the box 'sensitively'. I have photographs of the roof being taken down carefully, though the bricks were scooped up by the bucket load. I was told



John McGowan in his studio



Spalding Line

by one of the engineers that the 150-year-old building had very little adhesive left in its mortar, so the bricks virtually fell down. But the elements of the signal box have been preserved and are waiting for the pressure group to find some money and a site to build the box back up again. So perhaps the print did help people become aware of what was going on."

John adds that the Deeping signal box campaign is making great strides, with money donated by the Department of Culture and the Parish. Two sites are being considered for reconstruction of the box. John will be working on another Deeping Box print, after his current project is completed, to help raise funds for this project.

There's another nice story. Before it was taken down, Number One Box in Spalding bore a commemorative plaque stating that John Lee had worked as the signalman for no less than 51 years. As a result John called his print 'John Lee's box'. Just before our interview John made enquiries to find out what had happened to the plaque, and was delighted that it was to be remounted on the wall of the station in Spalding in a ceremony attended by Lee's son.

John asked station staff if he could attend, so he could present a copy of the print to Lee's offspring. "Though I didn't know John Lee, I feel I've made a personal connection with the fact that these boxes were occupied by people who devoted their lives to them. The print was published in the Spalding Guardian about a year ago with the message that I would like to give one of these prints to Lee's family. It's



Number One Box in Spalding



quite something to think that he worked from the age of 14 to 65 non-stop - which was only possible because railwaymen like him were considered so essential, they were exempted from national service."

John is taking part in the Peterborough Artists' Open Studios three weekends at his home (June 27-28, July 4-5 & 11-12) and his work is available at Black Cab Studio or via his website.

- www.johnmcgowanprintmaker.co.uk
- www.paos.org.uk
- www.blackcabstudio.com