

Lakenheath Halt Signal Box Removal 4th September 2021



Picture by British Rail demolition foreman.

It is with great sadness that I am writing to report that the Victorian signal box at Lakenheath Halt has been demolished by British Rail on Saturday 4th September 2021. It was an iconic building, one of only a very few that remain throughout the country with only 166 remaining in 2019. Serving the line between Shippea Hill and Brandon stations it originally had a crossover section operated by the signalmen at Lakenheath, a similar crossover was at Shippea Hill. The Crossover sections were removed at a later date.

The Lakenheath box was located on the North East side of Station Road. The Signal box is alleged to have been built in 1883 along with the box at Shippea Hill. Both boxes are GE type 4's but there is some mystery attached to the Lakenheath box because S&F Rocker & Gridiron 5" frame number was 4476 and according to records this can be dated to 1887 (This information was supplied by Steven John Miller who had witnessed the frame number when it was preserved) The Tender for these frames was made by GER WAY & Works and a committee meeting held on 5th July 1883 would indicate the earlier date could be credible. Gates were installed across the road as barriers for oncoming traffic and pedestrians. Until 2012 the railway line retained its historic characteristics, with well-preserved stations, semaphore signalling and, until 2009, lineside telegraph poles along with sections of jointed wooden sleepers. The re-signalling programme in August and December 2012 involved the closure of nine local mechanical signal boxes plus the removal of seven sets of manually-operated wooden gates at level crossings including Lakenheath Halt. Both Lakenheath Halt and Shippea Hill then became request stops.



Lakenheath box and gates 1987
Picture supplied by Lakenheath Heritage Group.



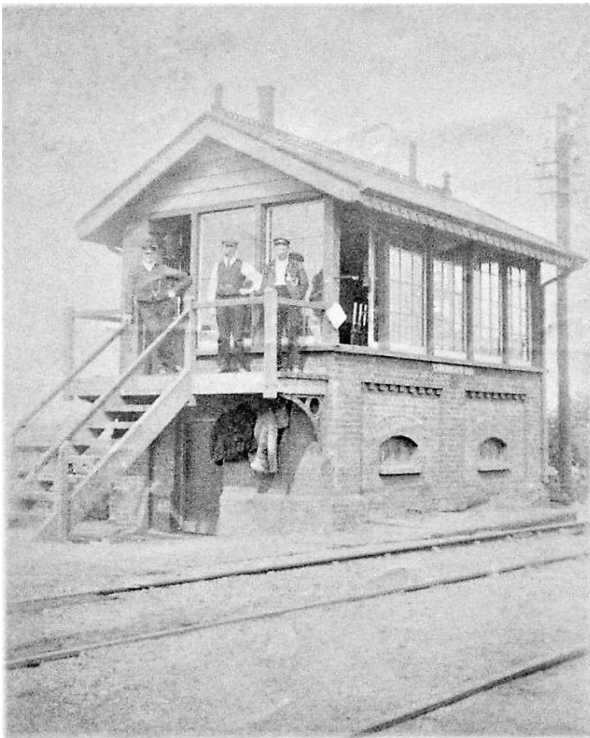
Drawing of Lakenheath Signal box by the Late Lawrence Lambert.



Lakenheath box after August 2012 closure.
Lakenheath box 1916

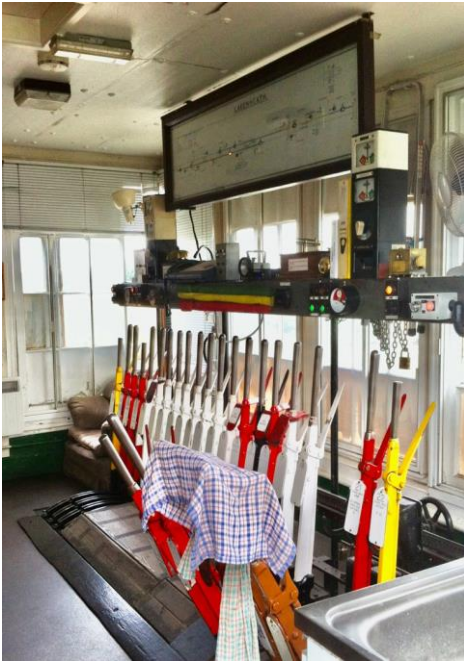


Lakenheath Signal box after August 2012



supplied by Lakenheath Heritage Group.





Inside Lakenheath signal box.
Supplied by Thomas Clayton/Lakenheath Heritage Group



Shippea Hill signal box interior. Same style as Lakenheath box.



Lakenheath Halt, date unknown.
Supplied by Lakenheath Heritage Group.



Opening the gates, date unknown.
Supplied by Steven John Miller

Historical Notes:

The Halt was possibly the first station to be built in Suffolk as the railway crossed the fens from Shippea Hill in Cambridgeshire. The Signal box stood whilst many things changed around it. Lakenheath Halt gave several financial advantages to the village of Lakenheath although it was 3 miles to the North of the village. The land now owned by the RSPB Reserve was once owned by Bryant and May who planted Black Poplar trees during the mid-1800s onwards for match and matchbox manufacturing and this was likely to be due to the proximity of the railway which allowed easy transportation of the timber to Bow in East London where the company was based. The Fens were also important for fruit growing and chicory.

A 20" narrow gauge rail link (Tramway) was built in 1914 to carry construction materials from Lakenheath Halt to Feltwell Aerodrome. This was a private line owned by the Military. Private Tramways were fairly common in rural areas as they allowed easy access to and from the main lines for transporting agricultural products and other materials. The Aerodrome was ready for use on the 8/7/1918 after which the narrow-gauge track was removed and shipped to Australia.

Chivers had a Chicory plant at Sedge Fen which was served by a Privately own standard gauge branch line which ran East from Shippea Hill. This in turn had had a network of narrow-gauge horse drawn tramways running South East onto the Chivers Estate. These can be seen on a 1920 ordnance survey map.

Messrs. Boon of Fordham built a new chicory processing plant for M.(Mr.) Charles Augustave de Cock, a Belgian, who managed the enterprise himself on the site of the old military depot at Lakenheath Halt during 1935/6, just behind the Signal box. The site was well chosen by M. de Cock because the triangular site was bound by the Railway, River and Road. M. de Cock and his family initially lived in converted railway carriages on the site and later moved to the now demolished White house that was built next to the river by the road to the South of the road bridge (information credited to Brian Turner on Lakenheath Facebook group Sept 2021). M. de Cock had brought over members of his family to operate the factory and to trained local employees but in 1939 at the outbreak of WW11 they were unable to return to Belgium. After WW11 he sold out to Samuel Hanson & son, Ltd who built up the business. The business was then resold to Cerebos ltd, in the early 1970's, who ran it for 4 years before it was sold again to Rank Hovis McDougal Ltd. It was then sold to Mr Fisher who was the last owner to run it as a Chicory factory. The factory was later replaced in 1981, when Mr Murfitt converted it into a carrot washing, grading and processing factory. The site is now owned by Murfitts Industries that processes tyres. Much of this information is from an article by Cecil Neal, Author Hockwold info (AWJMOR0) and additions by R.A Silverlock from Lakenheath June 1995.

The box was operated by signalmen up until the time when the line was fully automated in August 2012 this meant that the signalmen became redundant and the gates were replaced by electronic barriers. The last resident signalmen to work at the box were Scott Turner, Phil Owers, Antony Pederson plus there was one vacancy for a signalman at that time. Some of you may also recall Lawrence Lambert who had retired some time before the box closed, he took the job on in the knowledge that the line was going to be upgraded but it took longer than he had expected and he retired before the completion of the upgrade.

Please see picture of drawing done by Lawrence above. Picture was shared to Lakenheath Heritage group by local resident.

The Breckland line was originally constructed as part of the Eastern Counties Railway and was backed by Engineers George and Robert Stevenson. The Ely to Brandon section was the first part to be built followed by the Brandon to Norwich section that was incorporated in 1844 and opened in 1845. In 1845 Shippea Hill was named as Mildenhall Road and renamed Burnt Fen in 1885 before it adopted the name Shippea Hill in about 1904. (See Footnote).

Notable railway accidents between Lakenheath Halt and Shippea Hill:

On the 9th January 1847 2 ballast men were killed when the wagon they were travelling on broke up near Lakenheath.

On 7th April 1906, a passenger train was derailed at Shippea Hill due to excessive speed, injuring 8 passengers.



Supplied by Lakenheath Heritage Group.

On the 3rd December 1976 a passenger train collided with a 6-wheel ridged carrot lorry on the unmanned Chivers level crossing near Shippea hill killing the train driver and injuring 8 of the passengers. The lorry was pushed off the track but the driver survived. The 3-carriage diesel (15.35 Norwich to Birmingham) train was not derailed but the front coach was extensively damaged. The 12foot 6inch gates would normally have been closed and telephones each side of the track should have been used to contact the Shippea Hill signal box to check if it was safe to cross. The conditions were foggy and light was fading.

Footnote:

In 1990/91 I was travelling to work early in the morning and as I approached Shippea Hill crossing I came across a film crew in the middle of the road. They had cameras at ground level filming the old bridges that go over the dyke on the East side of the road near the railway track. As I waited for them to finish, I noted that the Shippea Hill signal box name had been replaced with a sign OUSE HILL. Several years later I watched the 1992 film Waterland starring Jeremy Irons and Sinead Cusack, and realised I had witnessed some scenes being filmed. The film was directed by Stephen Gyllenhaal. Many of the film locations were filmed around Lakenheath Base and local fenland sites. The film was based on Graham Swift's book of the same name. The film recalls a 1974 teacher relating his memories of his childhood to his pupils. He was raised in the fens between Cambridge and the sea. He grew up between the wars during a series of tragedies each becoming gloomier as he recalled them. So, if you watch the film, you will see the location that was being filmed on my way to work that day.

Written by Jeffery Flint