WORKING THE NEW TRIANGLE

Evesham Road Crossing Signal Box 1960 – 1965

Recent threads on the SMJ site have mentioned the use of the triangle of lines formed by the building of the SMJ (Old Town) Station to GW Racecourse Platform through connection. This chord line was never given an official title. Local railwaymen including the bobbies that worked the new box normally referred to the connection which was sited immediately south of the Racecourse Platform as "the racecourse junction" I never remember it being called the "south curve" a name that seems to have gained popularity in recent times. For the benefit of those with an interest in signalling I will set the scene and describe the signalling arrangements over the area that became the responsibility of the new Evesham Road Crossing Box in June 1960. If any part of my memories conflict with anything published by the Railway Signalling Society or similar bodies I suggest that their records are the most accurate and I would defer to them. This account is based on my recollections as an enthusiast who was privileged to witness the workings of the signal boxes referred to and assisted many visiting "foreign" engine crews unfamiliar with the complex procedure involved in using the triangle because due to staff shortages there was rarely an official pilotman around.

Before the 1959/60 engineering works took place the area that came under the control of the "new" Evesham Road Box was served as follows. The GWR North Warwickshire line had two signal boxes serving the GW station, Stratford East was nearest Birmingham and was open continuously, and Stratford West was at the south end of the station just a few yards from the Alcester Road overbridge. It controlled access to the back platform road 3 & 4 (one long platform split in two numerically) and the back run round loop. The West Box was also kept busy until the DMU's arrived in running round the locos from terminating locals from the north. It controlled one long carriage siding adjacent to the up main that had a short over run siding next to the box where the banking engine would often lay over. After about 1958 I recall that Stratford West was often switched out for the overnight shift. The block section south from the West Box was to S M Junction Signal Box (this box was almost universally known locally as "Sanctus Road" box as it was adjacent to the road bridge of that name) this was the original double track junction that connected the GWR to The SMJ yards and station. By the late 1950's S M Junction was only open as required which meant for a few hours in the mornings Mon to Sat for interchange traffic. It was of course provided with a switch and the normal block section was to Milcote a box that was open continuously due to a level crossing. Thus the normal block on the North Warwick line was Stratford West (or East if West was switched out) to Milcote. The pre 1960 Evesham Road box which was about half a mile south of Stratford West and 300 yards north of S M Junction was not a block post and only controlled the gates, wickets and detonator placers by means of a small frame with stop signals to protect the crossing and distants slotted with the boxes either side. On the SMJ the original Railway Signal Co box on the platform had been replaced in early LMS days by a box a few yards off the platform end on the same side. The through siding to S M Junction was worked permissively as double track and on the SMJ main line the double track east to Clifford Sidings was also worked permissively. The ER&SJR line to Broom was divided into two possible sections after 1942. Interlocked electric train staffs were provided to either Broom North (to allow Broom East to be out of use) or Broom East. The Broom East staff had a keyed end to access the sidings at Binton and Bidford.

In order to save money when the rather hasty plan to build the new curve was put in place it was decided that the whole layout from the overlap with Stratford West and Milcote on the North Warwick line and Clifford Sidings and S M Junction on the SMJ together with the new chord line would be controlled by one traditional mechanical signal box. The end result was a lot of fairly revolutionary (for the time) practices to be put in place. The busy level crossing over Evesham Road dictated that the box would have to be sited there and it was built right next to the existing small GW brick structure (there are a few photos around showing them both in situ during May – June 1960). This meant that any train proceeding from Clifford Sidings around the new curve towards Milcote and vice versa would never be seen by the bobby and therefore the rules regarding observation of tail lamps could not be met. This was overcome by the provision of extensive track circuits so that virtually all of the running lines controlled by the new box were so equipped. Both up and down lines on the new curve were provided with trap points near to the Racecourse Junction to protect the North Warwick line from runaways on the curve. The former double track connection between the SMJ station and S M Junction was downgraded to a single through siding and not track circuited. The entrance to this siding was controlled by Stratford on Avon Old Town GF which was designated Ground Frame A and released electrically from the box. The exit from the through siding was controlled directly from the box by points and trap 20 & 21 and an elevated disc signal 23.

It may seem incredible looking back but I am sure that no thought whatsoever was given to the fact that although the reason for the new box and all the track work was to pass freight traffic, in doing so the triangle of lines so formed could be used to turn locomotives! My reasons are that firstly due to the workings of the track circuits which rightly gave extensive protection to the passenger carrying lines it was a complex task to turn a loco without fouling up the system as some of the signals were electrically locked and released only by track circuit or block instrument setting. Secondly the SMJ turntable that had served the loco shed for decades was retained and connected to the down main on the new curve by means of ground frame B. Someone obviously thought that it would be needed but in the event the only time it was ever used was to test the turntable once a year usually with a PW Wickham Trolley! I never saw a loco turned in anger on that table after 1959 and if anyone can tell me otherwise I would be pleased to alter the record.

Stratford GW station was a popular destination for excursion and theatre special trains. They would appear from all over the country and increasingly through the early sixties would have “foreign” locos and crews. Any pilotman that accompanied them seemed to do a vanishing act until the return working was due out. The coaches would be shunted into the long siding adjacent to the East Box Goods loop or the Back Platform loop. The loco would be coaled at the GW shed and before June 1960 would be sent to the nearest GW triangle of lines at either Hatton or Honeybourne to turn. Once the new Evesham Road Box was open someone worked out what was the only way to run round the triangle without causing interlocking problems. This was how to do it!

Loco is sent from Stratford West and runs on down North Warwick line as a normal light engine move, he is cautioned by flag from the Evesham Road box and unless the crew are regulars they inevitably stop and receive a quick verbal instruction on what to do, as most of them forgot it or got it wrong they needed to use the line side signal phones at one or more of the reversing locations unless they were prepared to give an unofficial footplate ride to a teenager who knew what to do!! The loco then draws forward of crossover 19 and reverses back under disc signal 22, he is now on

the up North Warwick and showing on the track circuit, he can see the box clearly, the bobby has to "block back" to Milcote and then gives the loco a flag to proceed "wrong road" to a point just in advance of his up home junction bracket 49main/45branch. The road is then reset to access the new up curve by reversing 36 points and clearing 45 signal. Once he has cleared the track circuit on the up North Warwick that line can be cleared for traffic. The loco then proceeds past signal 44 onto track circuit DF which is the section running through the SMJ up platform, to stop clear of points controlled by ground frame A. Permission is obtained by phone and the frame released electrically. Now this was the awkward part because with a long loco and tender the positioning of the loco between the insulated joints only just allowed the frame to be unlocked! If all was ok the points and locks were operated and the disc cleared from the frame to allow access to the through siding (and what was left of the SMJ yard). The signalman would be informed by phone that the loco was inside the yard and he could lock out the frame. He would give verbal authority for the loco to traverse the siding and instruct him to whistle at elevated disc 23. This was a location just at the rear of where the S M Junction box had been located. If the road was available points and trap 20 & 21 would be reversed to set the road onto the down North Warwick. Almost immediately the loco would enter crossover 19 for the second time and proceed right road to the up starting signal just in front of the crossing gates. I have heard more than one driver shout across to the bobby at this point in the proceedings that he could have got to Hatton and turned in less time. This was because of traffic on the North Warwick line holding up proceedings at one or more points in the manoeuvre!

From a point just in the rear of signal 44 to the exit from the through siding past disc 23 the loco was on genuine SMJ formation.