

Special Feature

The Signal Box and the Henhouse

Move It!

In about 1974, the Chief Probation Officer for Oxfordshire was Kenneth Thompson; known to friends as Ken, to his colleagues as KD.

KD, I was a colleague, was a person of great originality, eccentricity, humour and style. His staff thought the world of him, but that does not mean to say he could not infuriate as well. KD lived, for many years at Berry Hill Farm, not far from Chadlington, but eventually the lack of mains water or electricity caused him to think of moving to somewhere more easily accessible.

Eventually, KD bought The Crossing Cottage at Bruern, which had fallen into disuse after British Railways installed an automatic barrier on the crossing. After much restoration work KD moved in.

Volunteers Step Forward

Once installed in the cottage, KD announced to the assembled staff of the Probation Service for Oxfordshire - at a formal staff meeting - that he wanted volunteers for two special projects. When KD asked for volunteers, there was no dodging the column, and before we knew it we were all roped in for work.



The two projects, that KD thought would be easily accomplished by lunchtime, were the removal of the henhouse from Chadlington to Bruern, and then of the Signal Box from beside the railway line to the site it now occupies in the cottage garden.

The henhouse, he said, would be

easy. We met at Berry Hill Farm, and waited for instructions. KD had planned ahead and had not let the hens out that morning (they were coming too!) and when we were ready, the job started.

Chick Chick Chick Chicken

First of all, KD climbed into his new Volvo, it was about a week old, and already showing signs of a hard life, and drove it up to the hen pen. He re-arranged the chicken wire round the henhouse and the car, and used his staff to catch the hens, putting them loose in the Volvo. Eventually all the hens were rounded up, and the car doors slammed on them. KD then supervised the rolling up of the chicken wire, which was tied to the roof of the Volvo. Now the clever bit, KD hitched a trailer to the tow bar of the Volvo, and reversed up to the henhouse. All assembled heaved and strained, watched by the hens inside the car, and levered the henhouse onto the trailer.

Time for a coffee and broken biscuits (KD did not believe in paying for unbroken ones for staff), and then a cortege drove to Bruern, as we followed KD and the hens.

KD never was one for undue regard to speed when driving, and he got carried away during the journey, but once the henhouse was back on the trailer we continued to Bruern.

Upon arrival, the process was reversed, the henhouse was put in the field, the chicken wire wound round it and the Volvo, and KD opened the doors and windows of the Volvo, and encouraged the hens to climb out by banging on the roof of the car with his fist. QED.

The Signal Box.....

KD had his eye on the signal box for many months, and tried to negotiate its purchase from British Rail.

Eventually, they caved in (he was so persuasive), and the deal he struck was that he would pay them a nominal £5 for the signal box, and for that price he would save them the difficulties of moving it by doing so himself. Not long after, the new owner of the signal box conceived a plan to move it, for free. The staff...!

KD's master plan was to put substantial battens across the base of the signal box, and then lift it, carry it down the road, turn it round, and put it on a new base (that the staff would have built in a spare moment after work). "No No No", was the cry. Eventually, KD accepted that a

signal box weighing several tons might be too heavy for the staff, and he hired a crane instead

The crane duly arrived, and the driver, following KD's instructions given over a loud hailer in a thick scouse accent (KD was a brilliant mimic), moved the box in one piece without a hitch.

Last Laugh

The crane driver left (with a dozen eggs from the hens), KD opened the bottles and we all celebrated. At this point, KD told us how he had managed to get the box moved for nothing. It seems that when British Rail moved out, they emptied the signal box of most of the equipment it had contained, but left behind the coal stove that had been used by the signalman to keep warm. KD noticed that this fine piece of Victorian cast iron had the GWR logo cast into it. He advertised the fire in *The Great Western Magazine*, and a railway enthusiast bought it for such a good price that it paid for the crane hire. That folks is how the Bruern Signal Box

was moved from railway side to garden - I know 'cos I was there!!!

Martin Hallam

After Ken Thompson died, a memorial window was installed in the Ladychapel at St. Simon and St. Jude Church, Milton depicting amongst other things the hens, the signal box and the removal, as the detailed photograph shows.

