

Sykes Instruments and work at Horsted Keynes.

Horsted Keynes resignalling has just passed two significant milestones. The first was to connect the final mechanical signal wire to the signal box in readiness for the electrical changeover to take place in the relay room. All the signals have now been mechanically rehearsed to ensure correct adjustment and ease of operation, in some cases the electric signal motors were temporary disconnected but have now been reconnected until the appropriate electrical stages have been completed. The relay room work has also progressed well with stage 14 now commissioned out of the 18 stages required for final completion.

The second milestone, as a part of stage 14, has seen two new instruments in the signal box brought into work. Although these may seem insignificant they are perhaps the only working examples of what was a common safety device used widely on the Southern Railway, Great Eastern, North British and elsewhere. The system was also sold in the USA, Russia and Japan.

These instruments were made by W.R Sykes of Clapham London; the company was associated with Westinghouse Brake & Signals in 1917 and fully incorporated in 1964. Their original South London premises are still in existence, situated just west of Clapham Road Station adjacent to the Up Atlantic Lines.

The system using these instruments was promoted as "The Sykes Lock and Block" (sometimes labelled "SYX"). It was an important development in railway safety, enforcing the signaller to operate the signals in a strict order but only when the train had been detected at specific safe location.

The apparatus was invented by William Robert Sykes who started his career with a telegraph company, but he had a passion for clocks and the two interests saw him move to the Royal Observatory Greenwich as a Chronometer maker involved in synchronising clocks by telegraph. He moved to the LC&D Railway and he somehow managed to persuade them to install his fledgling Lock & Block system in three South London signal boxes. The LCDR was obviously impressed as many of their signal boxes ended up using his product right up to the demise of mechanical signalling.

Sadly the system was most famous for its specific weakness; because it had this strict regime of enforcing the signaller to follow a sequence, when something went wrong there had to be a way of negating the locking. The signaller was therefore supplied with a release key, only of course to be used under specific conditions. Unfortunately it was misused on occasions resulting in a number of famous accidents; Battersea Park, South Croydon and Barnes being some of the best (or worst) known.

Brian Hymas