

Friends of Sheffield Park: Year's Activities to Date

By Richard Lowe | December 2016

The Friends of Sheffield Park (FOSP) have had another very productive year. This has been greatly helped by the weather as we were able to paint the footbridge in the Spring and many other outside painting jobs later in the year. In fact, one of our volunteers reckons that we had 14 consecutive warm and sunny Wednesdays this Autumn!

After the great triumph of the porch restoration last year, without doubt the most visible achievement of the year has been the replacement of the life-expired zinc sheet canopy roof to the north end of Platform 2. This was funded in part by the Bluebell Trust, and in part by residual funds accruing from the canopy extension project on Platform 1 (and with a small additional "top-up" from FOSP general funds). Thus we are now in the enviable position of having a full set of pristine platform canopies at Sheffield Park, and with roofing which should be good for 50 or 60 years. Although the actual roof installation was done by contractors, there was a significant labour input from FOSP volunteers, who as usual put in extra hours when required to ensure the project ran smoothly.

Following the completion of the porch, we quickly decided to proceed with restoring the floor to its original condition which together with the reconnection by the Electrical Department of the existing light inside the porch, illuminates the stained glass to great effect, making a welcoming sight to our visitors approaching after dusk. Out of public view, but no less prominent in our plans, the FOSP workshop Portakabin has continued to absorb many man-hours this year, with volunteers devoting their Wednesdays (and other days) full-time to this. The building is now fully re-roofed, weather-proofed and re-insulated/dry-lined internally and fitted out providing a very useful workshop facility.

The bridge painting project was completed for this phase of the bridge repairs, something like 30kg of specialist railway bridge paint has been applied during this exercise, and many brushes have been consumed as the rubberised paint trashes them beyond use after a day's painting. Many thanks are due to those who have engaged on this which shouldn't need a repeat for many a year. Phases 2 and 3 of the bridge repairs will require a similar painting effort, so don't breathe a sigh of relief too soon though.

Two other outside painting jobs which benefited from the favourable weather were the external repaint of the Withyham signal box (pictured in the eNewsletter) and the main post and metal brackets of the Sheffield Park Inner Home signal, which have been prepared, filled, and then painted to the specification provided by the Signal and Telecommunications Department (S&T). We now expect it to remain in good order for many years to come, and it now stands ready to receive the new timbers whenever S&T are ready to reconstruct and reinstate the signal.

Other minor repairs/paint jobs undertaken include:

- Retiling the Booking Hall and Waiting Room hearths
- Ongoing maintenance of the running in boards

- Platform bench refurbishment
- Various toilet and gate repairs
- Various fence painting projects
- Redecoration of the Bessemer Arms toilets
- Painting the new signaling battery container
- Repairs to the brick capping of the catering dock.
- Repainting the metal window frames of the loco shed

Although not strictly a FOSP project, two of our members collected the ex-East Grinstead Station post box from Catherine Bighty who had purchased it for £1 and wanted to donate it to the Bluebell Railway. They collected it from her, restored it, painted it, and handed it over to our East Grinstead Station staff for eventual relocation there.

Finally, we made a submission relating to the Sheffield Park picnic area, for the removal of a number of laurel trees which had grown up from modest shrubs on the embankment adjacent to the station drive and in other locations in the picnic area. These are non-native, were heavily shading the picnic area, and they are also not very customer-friendly as they have poisonous berries which fall and kill growth under the canopy and which are risky to our younger visitors. Our submission was successful, and we received a substantial grant to cover the full cost of professionally removing the trees. This was completed in the Autumn and a start was made on new hardstandings for some of the picnic tables. We hope the new planting and other changes will improve the picnic area greatly enhancing it as an attraction for our visitors.