

Bluebell Railway Infrastructure

Permanent Way Department

Line Side Vegetation Clearance

Sheffield Park to East Grinstead

August 2020

Line Side Vegetation Clearance Background

Sheffield Park to East Grinstead.

Bluebell Railway, a heritage steam railway, is for the most part single-track running for just over 11 miles. It runs from Sheffield Park to East Grinstead, through the beautiful Sussex countryside. The landscape is typical for this rural part of the county, with a series of small rolling hills, valleys and wooded areas. The part of the railway from Sheffield Park to Horsted Keynes was originally intended to be a double track, although it has only ever been a single.

From Horsted Keynes to East Grinstead it was built and laid as double track. However the land the railway is responsible for stretches well beyond the narrow strip on which the track itself sits, and all this land requires managing. It is a fulltime job with several dedicated gangs of volunteers working on vegetation control on the lineside all year round.

The first Covid lockdown in March 2020 resulted in the temporary closure of the railway, not only to the public but also to all staff and volunteers. This was the first time in our history that anything like this had happened, fortunately though by the end of June the Lock Down began to be relaxed so plans were made for an initial track and lineside inspection to cover the whole of the railway. From the start of these inspections it became immediately apparent that the exceptionally wet winter of 2019/2020, followed by the consistently hot weather from the start of April 2020, had encouraged nature to do its best to take over and reclaim the railway. Due to the vast amount of vegetation growth we had to employ an enhanced mechanised clearance recovery scheme, employing additional paid contractors, to ensure that we would be ready to reopen to the public once Covid restrictions allowed.

It must be remembered that vegetation management forms an essential part of the safe running of any railway and that the safety of trains and staff working on the track and lineside is paramount. Clear sighting of signals and clear access to positions of safety and safe trackside walking routes must always be maintained. Added to this there is the very real risk of fire caused by sparks from the passing steam locomotives. This is not only a risk to ourselves but also to our neighbouring farmer's crops. Which is why vegetation clearance is a never-ending job full time job.

Sheffield Park to East Grinstead Line Side Vegetation Clearance Recovery Scheme

The locations below show typical examples of the overgrown vegetation and just how great was the task we faced.



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John Millam's tractor with a mower was put to work to clear the lighter weight vegetation. The first photo shows how high and how close to the track it had reached.



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The tractor mower couldn't be used on the embankments and cutting sides as they were too steep, so these areas were tackled by L&W's Road Rail Machines fitted with Vegetation Flails. The final photos shows how effective the mechanical approach was, given the scale of the task we faced.





This project was made possible by a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund Emergency Grant Scheme. This scheme provided up to £250,000 to sustain heritage organisations during the Coronavirus Pandemic.

The Bluebell Railway was pleased to receive a grant for the maximum amount.