

Diesel Developments

By Bob Pamment,
Acting Locomotive Director.



For some time now we have been conscious of our vulnerability in the event that hot, dry weather instigates a steam ban on our railway. This has become even more of a concern now that the Pandemic has brought home the severe financial implications of having no income from our travelling visitors for even a couple of weeks. We have been luckier than some who, in recent years, have experienced such bans but clearly a mitigation is required as it can only be a matter of time before we find ourselves having to face this proposition, whilst at the same time keeping the business afloat. There are very few available mitigations here, but Diesel traction is the most sensible. We have on occasions, rescued the service using our class 09 Diesel shunter D4106, but this has the downside of not being powerful enough to keep to the timetable. A main line Diesel Locomotive is really the only option. So, the Board discussed this proposition with the BRPS to establish whether such a mitigation has a valid place in the grand story that the Bluebell Railway is setting out to tell.

Meanwhile a group came up with the proposition of bringing a class 73 Electro-Diesel to the Bluebell. This was floated with the BRPS who decided that such a locomotive did indeed fill a gap in the story that we are telling. However, the Plc Board gave this due consideration and decided that as its Diesel engine was only 600 hp it would not be suitable to pull 6 coaches on our steep railway and keep time, so this proposal was not followed up.

So having established that a main line Diesel locomotive fulfils both a company need and a BRPS aspiration when the possibility of the B350 Ltd negotiating a deal to purchase a relatively rare Crompton Type 3 it was felt by all parties that this was an opportunity that should be grasped with both hands before it went away. The B350 group worked their magic and D6570 was secured for use on the Bluebell Railway and will be with us shortly.

I am aware that this project will not be universally well received, and I wish to reassure those with concerns that this project is not intended in any way to detract from the predominance of the Bluebell as a Steam Railway but instead will add value to an area of the story that we should tell and at the same time provide a level of insurance to our visitor income which is vital for our long-term security. Below is a release from the owning group, I hope that you will find this news as a positive addition to the Bluebell portfolio.

Best wishes,

Bob.

29 June 2021

The Group of long-standing locomotive department volunteers that owns Bluebell's class 09 shunter D4106 has acquired ex British Railways class 33 D6570 'Ashford' from the D6570 Ashford Group for use on the Bluebell Railway. This locomotive commonly known as a Crompton is one of a class of 98 locomotives built between 1960 and 1962 for the Southern Region of British Railways. With a Sulzer 8-cylinder 8LDA28A engine rated at 1550hp these were the most powerful 4 axle diesel locomotives built for the British Railways modernisation programme.

For over 30 years they were a common sight across the region on freight and passenger workings and were frequent visitors to East Grinstead on trains from London Bridge. D6570 entered service in October 1961 and was initially allocated to Hither Green depot. In 1980 it was named 'Ashford' and in 1985 re-allocated to Stewarts Lane where it was based until withdrawal in February 1997. It was subsequently sold from BR and transported to the Kent and East Sussex Railway where it has remained to date in the careful custodianship of the "D6570 Ashford Group".



The locomotive is in good mechanical condition and has been stored undercover out of use for several years at the Kent and East Sussex Railway. On arrival at the Bluebell Railway, it will not enter service immediately, however the new owners will implement a re-commissioning programme to ensure the locomotive is reliable before being available for service and at the same time undertake a number of bodywork and roofing repairs to make the loco weathertight.

It is envisaged that the Crompton will provide a wide range of benefits to the railway's operation including in the following areas:

During periods of high lineside fire risk where steam locomotive operation may be curtailed or prohibited by the authorities, the Crompton would allow a passenger service to continue to operate and so minimise revenue loss and risk to the business.

Support to steam passenger operations by giving greater flexibility in its use as a "thunderbird" locomotive able to rescue failed trains quickly and enable a passenger service to continue, it being more than capable of maintaining passenger timings which has always been a limitation for the 09, D4106.

Shunting, infrastructure and engineering works with it being able to haul heavier loads at higher speeds and so improve efficiency in the undertaking of these works.



The proposal made by the owning group to bring the locomotive to the railway has been approved by the PLC Board and also the trustees of the BRPS. Cromptons were an important part of the Southern scene in the early sixties. So operating the loco fits in with the recently revised Long Term Plan of the BRPS. Mike Hawkins from the owning group said, "D6570 Ashford coming to the Bluebell Railway is the culmination of a process that has taken time, but we wanted to make sure we got the right loco. We're really pleased to have secured this locomotive from our friends at the KESR, given its good overall condition and local connections".

Bob Pamment, Bluebell PLC director said, "Locomotive Ashford gives us more flexibility and security, we're pleased to continue working with the B350 owning group made up of long-standing locomotive department volunteers. They have proved what they can do in providing 09, D4106 to the railway for more than 7 years now."

Anyone interested in contributing to repairs, and particularly with experience of diesel locomotive maintenance (e.g., ex fitter) and restoration (e.g., steel work repairs) is asked to contact paulchillout@aol.com, one of the owning group, with their details, suggested contribution and experience.
