Sustaining Our Wonderful Pullman Train

By Bob Pamment, rolling stock director

THE CURRENT POSITION

The Bluebell Railway's Pullman Train experience is designed to provide top of the range passenger accommodation, consisting of entirely Pullman car vehicles, providing a minimum of around one hundred customer seats, including some wheelchair access. This product is very much aligned to the company mission statement to provide a "heritage railway experience that educates, entertains, and inspires its visitors as it immerses them in the world of railway operation and development and tells the story of the way of life at the golden age of railways". It is a profitable operation.

The product is vulnerable, particularly in terms of reputation, if not supported by sufficient Pullman carriages in running condition. Demand for this product has historically been such that seats are booked many months in advance and, when full, potential customers have been declined. In recent years there has been some customer dissatisfaction due to the Pullman experience being compromised – due to the withdrawal of Pullman Car 'Lilian' – by the provision of a Mark 1 First Open (FO) (albeit a very nice FO) instead of a Pullman car. This has resulted in some decline in the demand over the last couple of years. It has been the aim of the Pullman Train Strategy to provide sufficient vehicles to cover for maintenance, overhaul and failure. It is planned that when a full complement of spare vehicles is achieved then, when they are not covering for non-available vehicles, the spare vehicles can be used in the formation to satisfy higher demand.

The most prominent area of vulnerability for the Pullman Train Product is the eventual failure of the BGZ 32975. This vehicle – which acts as a brake van and scullery – is safe currently but in decline. A Pullman Kitchen Car is the ideal replacement for the BGZ as it would provide the scullery facility for the 100-seat train. Alternatively, it could, if required, provide a second kitchen car which, when formed with Fingall, Car 64, Car 54 and Car 36, gives a total of 161 seats. This would remove the limitation of around 100 seats which is the
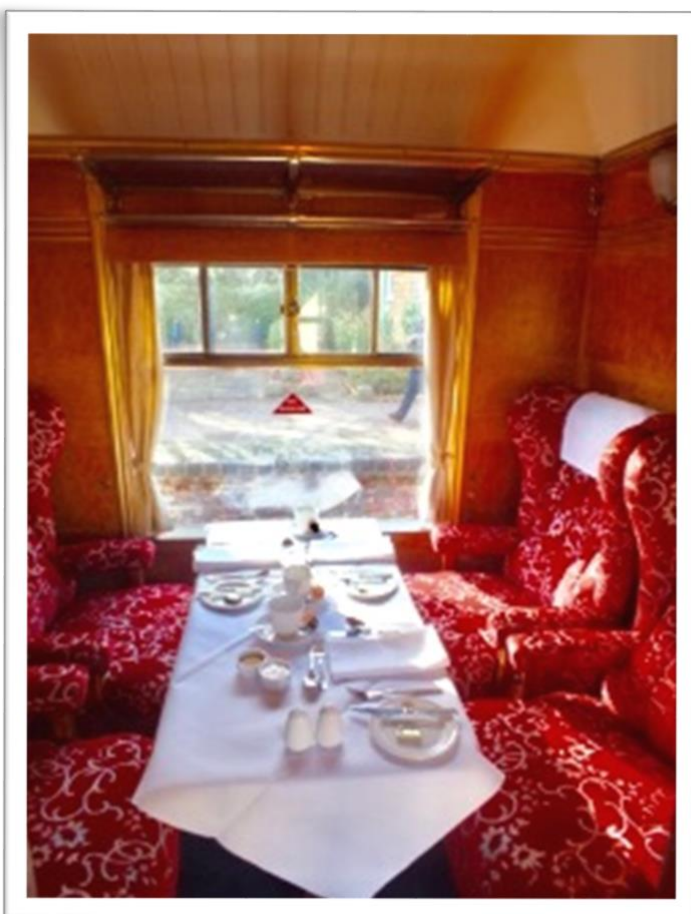

Pullman Car 'Aquila'

Above – general view

Below – Inside the Coupé

Photos: Richard Jones

constraint imposed by having only one kitchen car in the formation. Whilst we already have Kitchen Car Carina, its condition is such that it will need around £500K spent on it to restore it and take a number of years to complete – so the opportunity is there to do something rather special with it when we have the money, particularly given its historical connections.

ENTER "AQUILA" & CAR 36.

Parlour Car 36, owned by David Jones, is already here and ready to be worked on. The major upgrade on Car 36 is the interior which needs to be re-equipped, the underframe being in relatively good condition.

The owner of Pullman Car 'Aquila', Richard Jones, has agreed to the transfer of his vehicle to the Bluebell Railway from the South Devon Railway. He has entered a running agreement for 30 years and the vehicle is in good condition internally but will require an intermediate overhaul plus a re-wire. The major areas of work on Aquila are on the underframe with some attention also to roof and bodyside plus the re-wire. The re-wire will require significant stripping out of the interior with subsequent re-build. Aquila arrived with us on 28 May 2021.

THE PLAN

Carriage and Wagon Works Manager Rowan Millard's team has been working on the underframe overhaul on 'Fingall'. 'Christine' also needs an underframe overhaul and Rowan has carried out some inspection so that parts can be manufactured in advance for when Christine stops for overhaul hence minimising the time that Christine will be stopped. Meanwhile Christine will be made available for one-off special events in the second half of this year. From Valentine's Day 2022, two Pullman vehicles will be available for the Pullman train plus Mark 1 FO 3069. When Car 54 is released from restoration then Christine will be stopped for its overhaul, thereby ensuring two Pullman cars are available all the time for the Pullman train (plus FO 3069). When Christine is released from overhaul in late 2022 then we shall have three Pullman cars available for the Pullman Train rather than two Pullman cars and the FO, and this gets us back to the kind of product that we were able to provide when Lilian was in service.
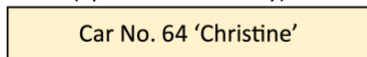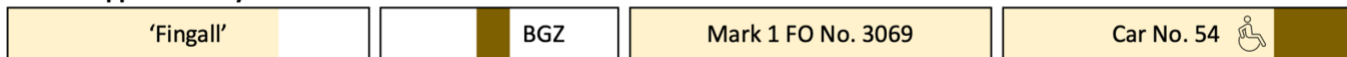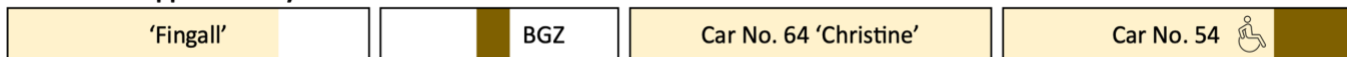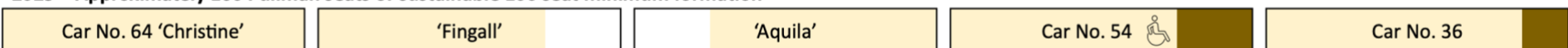

Above – 'Aquila' inside the saloon

Below – Unloading at Sheffield Park

Photos: Richard Jones (above) David Jones (below)

Next year a start can be made on Aquila's overhaul for completion at the start of 2024 when the BGZ is likely to fail, be stood aside and eventually returned to its former condition. The overhaul of Aquila will be spread over the two years 2022 and 2023 and a start made on Car 36. With the introduction of Aquila in 2024 there will be the potential of accommodating 22 additional seats on the standard Pullman train. Finally enter car 36 giving us a total of 161 seats, or a sustainable 100 seat minimum train. It must be emphasized at this point that the dates suggested are somewhat aspirational and could easily drift given the uncertain nature of the unfolding engineering challenges. Even without surprises it can be seen from the summary below that with this focused plan it will still take us until 2025 to reach a position where we can breathe more easily in terms of the reliable delivery of this top of the range, luxurious, part of the railway story that we tell.

Early days (Prior to 2015) – Approximately 100 Pullman seats

| Car No. 64 'Christine' | 'Fingall' | BGZ | Car No. 76 'Lilian' |

From Start of 2015 – 64 Pullman seats

| Car No. 64 'Christine' | 'Fingall' | BGZ | Mark 1 FO No. 3064 |

From Late 2019 – 64 Pullman seats

| Car No. 64 'Christine' | 'Fingall' | BGZ | Mark 1 FO No. 3069 |

2021 (Special Events Only) **– 42 Pullman seats**

| Car No. 64 'Christine' |

2022 – Approximately 55 Pullman seats

| 'Fingall' | BGZ | Mark 1 FO No. 3069 | Car No. 54 |

Late 2022 – Approximately 100 Pullman seats

| 'Fingall' | BGZ | Car No. 64 'Christine' | Car No. 54 |

2024 – Up to 120 seat Pullman seats

| Car No. 64 'Christine' | 'Fingall' | 'Aquila' | Car No. 54 |

2025 – Approximately 160 Pullman seats or sustainable 100 seat minimum formation

| Car No. 64 'Christine' | 'Fingall' | 'Aquila' | Car No. 54 | Car No. 36 |

Key ▬ Brake compartment ▭ Passenger accommodation ▢ Kitchen / Scullery

Diagram: Katharine James / Tom James 1 June 2021