

Bluebell Railway Volunteer Forum March 2023

Notes of the volunteer forum held on 18th March 2023 in the Birch Grove Suite, starting at 5.00 pm.

Plc Chair Paul Churchman welcomed everyone to the meeting, which had an excellent turnout of over 50 people. Paul introduced his fellow directors and trustees, and then gave an overview of the current position of the company - and of how other heritage rail companies appeared to be faring, based on feedback from the recent HRA Conference, at which Paul, Lisa and Neil had represented the Bluebell. Our reps felt that we are in a relatively sound position, compared to many. Mention was made of cutbacks made by the Severn Valley which had proved to be too drastic.

Thanks were given all those who give up their time to keep our railway going. As ever, more help is needed with lead positions in the operation of the society, and some of these will shortly be advertised. Delegates were strongly encouraged to consider applying.

The Chair opened the floor for a Q and A session, during which he and the other directors present answered questions raised. The following summarises issues covered.

Finance

Q. What is the current financial situation at the Railway?

A. A financial audit of 2022 performance is currently underway; and the Railway is working on financial plans for the current year. It is anticipated to make a loss. To minimise the losses as far as possible, budget reductions in all departments have been necessary and some vacancies will not be filled.

For 2023/24 we are planning our operation around our cost base and whilst we may still forecast a loss for this period, it will be in the order of £250k. This will be an improvement on this year (final figures are still being worked on but the loss is likely to be close to £750k). We are currently sustained using funds (legacies etc) held in trust, but our forward strategic intention is to always break even.

Q. Do we have sufficient resources in the Finance team?

A. A new Finance manager and Assistant are now in-post and are making inroads into better organisation in the department. Recently we have had some additional administrative volunteers helping in the business which has also made a big difference. Thanks to those who have volunteered their time.

Q. We have a really good shop which is doing well. Is there more we can do?

A. Our existing business model is based on Bernard Holden's assertion: "You don't make money from running trains" - the money is made from catering, events etc. Bernard Holden said this in early Bluebell days, at the start of his time as General Manager and it still applies.

Q. Is energy consumption still of concern?

A. Yes, but we have made great strides in analysing the areas of high consumption through extensive auditing, and we have identified most of our meters and what is costing us the most money. Smart meters will be installed to better monitor consumption, and solar panels should appear at Sheffield Park and Horsted Keynes. Mid-Sussex DC have been less than helpful in supporting this initiative although their attitude has now moderated given the panels will be out of sight.

Website

The general observation from the floor was that the website is a bit 'clunky' and it is difficult to find what you need (the Strathspey Railway was cited as an example of a good website). Where website changes are made, it was suggested that volunteers could be used to test out a 'beta' version, to give an opportunity for informed feedback and possible fine-tuning before going public. Is there an opportunity to increase our model railway sales from the shop?

Responding, the Chair said the Company was well-aware of the website limitations and highlighted some of the recent problems. There are issues between the 'front-end' (the bit customers see) and the 'back-end' which is the interface with the railway; server configurations can also be problematic. There have also been repeated attempts to hack and flood the website. If anyone has expert knowledge to offer, then please make contact... James (our webmaster) is very receptive to assistance.

External relationships

Q. Is it possible to develop a combined ticket with NT Sheffield Park gardens.

A. Sadly not. It is evident current NT management do not see this as of benefit to them, quite possibly because they have problems managing demand at peak times.

Q. Could we place leaflets in libraries and hotels?

A. Limited production of a reasonable quality leaflet can be very expensive, and many places lease their leafleting space to a service provider who will exclude/remove all unapproved leaflets, which can defeat such a strategy. Most business is done through social media these days.

Everyone welcomed the recent joint meeting of railway preservation bodies in the southeast. (Isle of Wight Steam Railway; Mid-Hants (Watercress) Line; Spa Valley

Railway; Kent & East Sussex Railway; and The Bluebell). There could be future opportunities for strategic joint initiatives arising from this.

Events

Q. Can we advertise services (especially Golden Arrow) sooner?

A. Staffing shortages across the hospitality sector are a major challenge at the present time. This has adversely affected our ability to ensure we always have enough staff to deliver the quality expected on our premium Golden Arrow services.

Q. Do our special events actually make us money?

A. Our aim is to ensure we understand our costs, such that special activities produce a positive return. Sometimes we gain unexpected business (for example the February half-term ice skating event – where people who had booked just for the ice rink then opted to travel on our trains). We are always looking hard at opportunities for ‘added value’ events. Recently, our website had nearly 1m hits when we launched our Dinosaur weekend, so it is pretty clear there was strong interest, showing very clearly that our visitors want more than a steam train ride.

Q. Can we make more out of footplate experience events?

A. Yes, our Footplate Tasters have been a great success. We have now added dates for using the 350 diesel shunter at Horsted Keynes, and we working on further options. More details in the very near future.

Q Other railways have diesel galas which appear to be great success. Can we plan to do similar?

A. This presents a big challenge, as we are reliant on bringing-in diesel locomotives. We had planned on a diesel gala for the end of the 2023 season, but the owners we had been in discussions with had to withdraw in the face of increasing maintenance/repairs costs. With our own diesel fleet (Class 33, Cl. 73, 1305 and the DSL) we will have an in-house base from which to start in 2024. Again, considering our cost base, it is vitally important that all expenses are included in each budget for events. Road transport for visiting locos and stock is expensive and more efficiency can be gained by transporting vehicles both in and out using the same low-loader movements. It is hoped to operate a diesel gala in 2024.

Train service

Q. Are we running enough trains? Would more trains attract people on dates when we currently plan to operate one train for three round trips?

A. The current service is based on the actual numbers travelling. Running ‘Fenchurch’ has proved to be very economical, and is a cost-effective way of running the service. Will look at how we can use her in periods outside the traditional peak periods.

Locomotives

Q. All being well 'Sir Archibald Sinclair' is due to re-enter service later this year. Is there an opportunity for renting her out?

A. Possibly. Loco swaps with other railway heritage organisations will continue, but we must be careful that we retain sufficient locomotives to sustain our own services.

Q. Is obtaining coal still a problem?

A. Yes, we have some coal from Kazakhstan, although we prefer to use Welsh coal. Unfortunately, the Welsh mine has been experiencing some production problems; and political resistance to ongoing mining of fossil fuels in Wales are a potential threat.

The cost of coal has doubled since 2019 (currently £400 - £500 per tonne).

As an aside, it was recorded that one of our engine crews today had a maximum age of 26 years - so we are attracting younger people, which is encouraging when our general age profile is rather higher.

Carriages

Q. Is there a market for our traditional spring and autumn specials using the LNWR Observation Saloon?

A. Yes. Although out of traffic for several years, for remedial works on the braking system, we plan to have the observation car back in service by mid-summer. We plan to use her as part of the Flying Scotsman visit in August.

Miniature Railway

Q. Are there plans to start building the miniature railway?

A. After a very protracted battle with Lewes District Council we now have the relevant planning permission. It is without doubt a fantastic initiative but held up by resource availability and finance. Also, construction work has to be overseen by Infrastructure team who currently don't have capacity. If there is anyone who would be prepared to take on the project management role then please get in contact with us. An alternative/interim measure could be to locate the miniature railway at Kingscote - but that presents problems of site access.

Others

Q. Cost of tickets - even with 'kids for a quid' - can be high for a family. Suggested by those with experience of Sheffield Park BO that some families just take a 'platform ticket' option.

A. Our price for unlimited journeys is comparable with other attractions. General feedback from HRA Conference is that people want to come for events that 'entertain' for a day. The turn up and go market is therefore much reduced.

Q. Does it come down to perceived value? Is it better to offer more two train service days and fewer one train service days?

A. We do recognise that we can create a self-fulfilling prophecy, by running a reduced service, but we have to recognise that the market for just a steam train ride is not what it was. This year will be crucial to our long term survival and so we must husband very penny we can. Running near empty trains is never good, but we do recognise that the longer 'whole week' view rather than a 'per-train' view is important, when considering viability of the service offer.

Q. Can we tap into the overseas visitor market particularly the Chinese and American market? For example, is there an opportunity to market "Great Heritage Railways of the Southeast"?

A. The Chinese market is difficult to tap into because they tend to travel in large groups, and to a prepared itinerary. The North American market has changed from large groups travelling together to more independent travel. Currently, they will be sold a whole set of bespoke options such as hotels and visitor packages. Very few Americans just arrive in the UK and then set out working out what to do. We have identified that we need to tap into this market at source. We have identified who we need to talk to and hope to have someone to especially target the US. Given that many Americans will already have booked their holidays for this year it is likely to be 2024 before we start to see more such visitors. It should also be noted that many Americans take their holidays in one-week blocks; especially when travelling outside of the states.

Q. Should we consider a summer raffle with some good prizes?

A. Will have a look at this but the challenge will be not to detract from on-the-day sales in the shop as opposed to an impulse raffle ticket purchase.

Q. Are we going to build the Ardingly extension?

A. Strategically, we have to protect for realising this goal in the future. There is the need to obtain planning permission and there are some areas where we need to tread carefully - especially with regard Lywood Tunnel, which is owned by the Highways Agency Historic Railway Estate. Overall, we must avoid taking on liabilities which we can ill-afford, but at the same time protecting the longer-term viability of the

track bed. The aim is to be realistic and the main focus must be on continuing to run our existing railway.

The meeting closed at 6:30pm.