



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 3rd JUN 2023

And another week has shot by - but at least the weather is warming up at last. Let's see how long it lasts! This has been a busy week and some significant milestones have been achieved too, which just shows how our Bluebell determination leads to great outcomes.

Saturday

AGM Day. A new location and a new format... on the railway and coupled with a Members Day. To say I had been nervous this morning would have been an understatement. The AGM has been held in a school hall at 6.30pm on a Saturday evening since time was a lad, so I was somewhat 'twitchy' having decided to throw that up in the air.

We had erected a marquee, and prepared food for up to 250 people. The weather was lovely, but it was the FA Cup final, which had been moved (it is normally held in May, but because the World Cup last year was at Christmas it had upset the FA calendar). And then there was a train strike. So, I was nervous - wondering whether the scene was set for a disaster.

Roy had co-ordinated a day of displays and tours and we had appealed to the 10,000 members, many of whom rarely visit, to come along and see their railway and experience what we are doing, and of course to encourage them to spend money to help us keep going!

As the time approached 1.15, and as I watched more and more people arrive at Horsted Keynes - including many faces I hadn't seen for years - I began to feel slightly more relaxed! By 1.45 there was quite a queue as members lined-up to sign-in to the AGM; the membership team were working as fast as they could to process everyone, but queue was still lengthening and at one point stretched way down towards the station driveway. We delayed the start until 2:20, to ensure everyone was safely accommodated, and it was standing room only in the marquee. By the time we started, 266 people had signed-in to the meeting. I heaved a huge sigh of relief, but also felt quite emotional that we had generated one of the biggest turn outs in twenty years. Result!

There was a good atmosphere, the meeting only took an hour, and I felt it went very well. I firmly believe that communicating weekly with everyone via these 'updates' has made everyone feel more engaged and informed – especially as I have tried saying pretty directly what's going-on (the good, the bad and the ugly!). I think this has reduced the tendency for members to think "I must go to the AGM and question them".

After the Trustee election votes had been counted, we had some new Trustees to welcome to the team – so, Annett, Keith and Howard, I look forward to working with you.

AGM over, and it was time to bring on the food and open the bar. These were a roaring success, and we took a good amount of money too, covering costs and making a profit on the event.



I had to disappear at about 5pm as I had a family BBQ to attend, plus I *really* needed a beer or two after the day.

We are already thinking about how to improve things for next year, and a few 'tweaks' will be made... probably starting later (say, 4pm), and making more of a post-AGM event – perhaps with a band or something. We will keep the members day theme though, and hopefully next year we can have 350 at the meeting.

Sunday

My day started with taking Mrs C to A&E at East Surrey Hospital. I had sensibly come home at a decent hour on Saturday night, leaving Mrs C with some of our friends who were heading to a late bar. Sadly, when walking home later, she misjudged the depth of a kerb crossing the road and managed to fracture her ankle!

Meanwhile the Railway was having a fairly busy day and there was apparently an air of excitement and enthusiasm about the place among the people working there (this information was emailed to me by one volunteer). Such news always makes me feel we are getting things right.

Monday

The 'BG' we have purchased should have arrived today but had been delayed and was rescheduled to arrive Wednesday instead.

Neil Glaskin and I were at Sheffield Park all day for meetings with Catering to discuss progress year to date, plus things we need to do as we approach the peak season. This covered everything from staffing levels to what we buy (and where from), and improvements to the Bessemer Arms. A very productive meeting with Megan and Sarah.

Neil and I sat outside the Bessemer working after our various meetings and it was perfectly tranquil, with no trains or people around and the sun shining.

Tuesday

Back into the day job today and a lot going on for me this week.

The railway was having an 'OK' day, but not especially busy. We will consider very carefully whether we should run trains on Tuesdays in May and June next year, as visitor numbers have been very up and down. Although we only run two departures, coal and staffing costs mean this level of business is marginal at best, and we must seriously consider whether we should do it.



Wednesday

A hectic day for me. I had to be in London first thing to go to St Thomas's hospital with my daughter for her check-up and then off to the Midlands by train. My company was delivering some of the inter-site bus services for the Download music festival at Donington Park in the East Midlands from Wednesday to Sunday and it's a big operation. So that would consume all my time until Friday.

The 'BG' finally arrived at the railway today, and privately owned Mk1 'FO' 3068 left on the same transport to go to Cranford, where steam heat will be fitted and some bodywork repairs done, before it returns to serve in the Wealden Rambler set. This will replace 4824 which is due to be withdrawn in July; Maunsell 1336 will cover in the short term, until 3068 is back.

We also ran into IT system issues which lingered through the rest of the week.

Thursday

I was lacking sleep working at the festival, which is rock and heavy metal – not my favourite!

A day to celebrate today – the 'OBO' was returned to traffic. A huge thank you to Clive Newton, Pete Sulsh, Dave Mathews, Glen Jones, Ray Medhurst, Tony Silcock, Steve Porter, Giles Clifford and Steven Goldsmith for doing a brilliant job. A gem of our collection is back in service.

Not only is this carriage a revenue earner, but our passengers love it. It is immensely useful for running services such as the extremely popular Autumn Tints, and Fenchurch with the OBO is an extremely cost effective combination.

Lots of work was underway preparing for this weekend's Bluebell on Parade event. A big thank you to everyone that has pulled out the stops to do this, in particular Jim Taylor who has been the event organiser.

Friday

A busy day at the railway, as the final preparations were under way for Bluebell on Parade weekend which is looking like an exciting event. The '73' unfortunately was not going to be working though, as there are still issues with the air system; it seems it may be necessary to get a contractor in next week.

The weather was lovely, and Bluebell trains were fairly busy. I was travelling back from East Midlands Parkway this afternoon, daydreaming of sitting in the paddock at Horsted, watching the trains go by; there is nothing more therapeutic on days like this.



And finally...

It has been a week to be proud of. We have got the OBO back, and this coming weekend we will see three of the four-wheeler carriages return to traffic for the first time since pre-COVID.

I often say how great it is to see the work that everyone puts into making the locos, carriages, wagons and stations as good as they can be - but all of this wouldn't result in an operational railway if we didn't have the Infrastructure team literally providing a safe railway to run all our lovely trains upon. They are a massive team, comprising many unsung heroes, but I especially want to recognise the work of the Signal and Telecommunications team. Fundamental to our operation, safe signalling and reliable telecoms are vital to a safe railway, and we have one of the best signalled heritage railways in the country. So, to Charlie, Gordon, Brian, Ali, Paul, and all the S&T team: thank you, your skill and craftsmanship make us one of the best.

Paul Churchman

Chairman

11th June 2023