



## **CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 4<sup>th</sup> MAR 2023**

So, Spring has allegedly arrived... and so did the snow!

My further appeal in last week's Update for help on the Golden Arrow has still not produced any further offers. So, as promised, I shall keep on appealing until I reach my target. I will even do some shifts myself if I can get 10 people to come forward and help. We are offering to train you - and remember there's pay too! So come on, *please* help. All you need to do is email me:

[Paul.churchman@bluebell-railway.com](mailto:Paul.churchman@bluebell-railway.com)

### **Saturday**

Today was quite busy, but probably not the best of days operationally. We had a steam heat leak on Pullman Car 'Christine' which resulted in our Golden Arrow lunch customers being a bit chilly, then we had sheep on the line (again). What a day! We got there in the end though.

### **Sunday**

Thankfully a much easier day operationally but we did have a lineside fire! The railway was again quite busy. I spent the weekend in Manchester as my stepdaughter is at university there - and it was her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday - and so Mrs C and myself went up to surprise her. Mrs C was very happy to have my presence for once, despite receiving Bluebell-related phone calls about steam heat leaks and sheep on the line!

### **Monday**

The Commercial and Customer Services teams are busy getting events for later in the year put online, for people to buy and so bring in much-needed cash. We will have Dinosaurs in the first weekend of April, and a Peppa Pig weekend later in the year. There really is loads going on, and we are focusing on every opportunity for adding value and attracting more people – but all as cost-effectively as possible. The value-added element is all-important: people want to feel they get more than just a train ride from a visit to the Bluebell (I know I have said this before, but I want to reiterate and stress the point so that everyone can understand the philosophy behind our commercial offerings).



### **Tuesday**

I spent the morning at Horsted Keynes talking to the C&W team, and with the BBC who were filming Car 54 in the Carriage Works as part of a future episode of 'Bargain Hunt.' Then I went to Sheffield Park with the BBC team to do an interview with Eric Knowles and to talk about Pullman Cars, which was done onboard 'Fingal'. I will let you know when it is to be broadcast.

I then spent time going through with Lisa some of the day-to-day stuff associated with running the business. There is a long list of things we need to address whilst we perform the vital task of getting our railway back to a break-even position.

### **Wednesday**

Work continues on the track north of the tunnel, and the awful weather we have seen this week should make us appreciate even more the work that these teams do, literally in all elements. The Infrastructure team turn out whatever the weather, they are active through rain and shine (and snow and ice!), and do a tremendous job. Through their efforts our permanent way and lineside are something we can all be extremely proud of. The very high standard and the quality of workmanship at the Bluebell is among the best in the Heritage sector.

PBS America (a news channel) want to interview someone next Sunday for a piece they are doing on the issues that heritage railways in the UK are facing. So, for the second time in a week, I will be on camera. Maybe I should get an agent?! All of this is fantastic publicity for us - and of course it is free! Experience shows that media attention such as this leads to increased passenger numbers.

### **Thursday**

The new phone system we have installed is delivering really useful benefits. We are now able to analyse the calls we receive, how long people must wait to be answered, when our peak call times are and how many calls we don't answer. We can also see the average duration of calls. Analysis of this information can be used to guide us to scheduling resources better, so we focus on manning the phones at times of higher demand, when calls might otherwise go unanswered. This should minimise customer disappointment – not answering the phones is something we have received criticism for in the past.

This afternoon, Neil, Lisa and myself are off to Birmingham to attend the Heritage Railway Association Spring Conference, which is being held on Friday and Saturday. So, I'm afraid poor Mrs C is once again deprived of her husband!



## Friday

Day 1 of the HRA Conference, and it is opened by speakers from the ORR (for those who don't know, this stands for 'Office of Road and Rail' the executive agency responsible for regulating railways). All the speakers are very good and the general theme for today is around how do we all survive. Clearly, the issues that we are facing are being faced by every heritage railway. Talking to people, we are in a much better place than many, which does provide some reassurance. It is also apparent that we are tackling things far more rapidly, and more directly than many.

Back at the Railway we're getting ready for another weekend of running public trains and hopefully, despite the weather, we will have two good days. The marketing team are preparing more Bluebell Railway content to go out via social media, advertising upcoming events and for general marketing. The effort the team puts in to preparing great content, with close attention to design and layouts, produces very professional results – vital for this portal, which presents a massive and dynamic opportunity to reach potential customers.

There is also a lot going on preparing for the "big" film production starting next week, and which will extend across two weeks. The income this is generating for the railway is very much-needed and is immensely valuable right now. We have to invest a lot of time but it will be well worth it. Thanks are due to everyone who is or will be involved, but especially so to Chris Knibbs, Rowan Millard, Matt Crawford and Jon Beardmore for all they are doing, over and above the requirements of their regular day jobs!

This week saw the retirement of Dick Beckwith. Dick, the Bluebell's volunteer Chartered Civil Engineer, has decided to hang up his hard hat after more than twenty years of keeping the Bluebell's bridges and structures safe. His association with the Railway began in 2001, when he was asked to produce a report on the condition of all the bridges and structures. His skill and dedication to the task resulted in the first such report being delivered in August of that year. Dick was formally appointed as the Professional Civil Engineering Advisor in 2003, and it is this role that he has fulfilled until this year.

Dick was one of the unsung heroes of the Railway, performing essential but often unglamorous work. Whether knee-deep in silted up culverts, scrambling up and down banks or getting a crick in the neck from looking up at the underside of our many bridges, Dick has quietly and professionally got on with the job. It is a little-known fact that we have over 90 bridges, culverts, and structures, all of which Dick inspected and reported on regularly.

Some of Dick's notable achievements included supervising the repairs to the East Grinstead viaduct, producing stability assessments for the rubbish retained in the tip at Imberhorn, designing the steelwork for various new structures, and much more besides. In addition, he provided advice and guidance to the Infrastructure team on a wide range of subjects.

The Railway is very grateful to Dick for all his work and dedication to the Railway over the years and we hope he continues to visit his old friends (and no longer wearing muddy boots!).



*Dick Beckwith*

*[Photo: Unknown]*

Paul Churchman

Chairman

10<sup>th</sup> March 2023