



## **CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 6<sup>th</sup> MAY 2023**

And here we are again: another week has shot by, and it was another short one – well, it didn't seem there were any less working days for me!

So, a new appeal: the infrastructure team are in need for help with gardening at Kingscote. Our stations always look immaculate and this is thanks to the various small teams and 'Friends' groups who do a tremendous job of keeping everything looking smart - so if you have green fingers and can offer some assistance at Kingscote, then please contact the Infrastructure team [infrastructure@bluebell-railway.com](mailto:infrastructure@bluebell-railway.com).

### **Saturday**

History was made - it was the King's Coronation - so, as you can imagine, we weren't terribly busy on the trains. In hindsight, we should have run a lesser service - although the Wealden Rambler was quite well-filled. I did not attend the Railway but was doing domestic chores. Later, a well-earned beer was enjoyed before a Chinese meal and watching the highlights of the coronation with Mrs C and some of the gremlins – sorry, children!

### **Sunday**

So today was Day 1 of Bluey & Bingo (who are children's TV characters who have become a big hit with very young children). So, we had five performances by 'B&B' in the loco running shed at Sheffield Park. There was no additional charge for the show and no special event fares either. This was part of our strategy of added-value events to increase visitor numbers. And it worked! We had a very busy day, although unfortunately Catering and the shop did not see as much of an increase as we did on fares. The train service ran well, all engines and carriages behaved, and it was a smooth-running day.

### **Monday**

Day 2 of Bluey & Bingo and I was signalman and Operating Supervisor at Sheffield Park. I had Neil Glaskin training with me until 3pm as he wants to get passed for Sheffield Park box as soon as he can.

The large number of visitors around by 9:15 was amazing, and the 10:30 train went out full. All trains except the 3:30 also departed full - and even the 3.30 was half-filled. The place was really buzzing and not only were fares massively up, we also did well in Catering and the shop. In the Bessemer, the pie was once again proving very popular. Well done Team Catering!

Mrs C was here as well - I had 'volunteered' her to be one of the people managing the seating and characters for the Bluey & Bingo performances, and she, along with the others down there, did a great job. Come to think of it, I didn't really give her much choice in the matter... I just announced:



“We are short darling, so I’ve said you will help”! It turned out to be quite a family day, as two of our daughters came along as well - they wanted to spend a day at the railway and go for a train ride.

The two days of this event were a real success, generating more than double what we would normally take in fares on these two days of a bank holiday weekend. Catering and shop takings were also up. Considering the economics, the cost of putting on the event was less than £4k and yet we generated more than £15k *additional* revenue, whilst not running any additional trains - just the normal weekend service of five departures. So, the strategy is working, as we are keeping incremental costs low, but we are driving passenger numbers up and with it the all-important revenues. Apart from offering ‘Kids for a Quid’, we aren’t discounting - and anyway the commercial reality is that it’s the adult fares and the secondary spend we are targeting. Everyone in the Commercial team is working flat out to create and promote these events... for which we say a very big Thankyou: you are all doing a great job and, as most of the advertising was via actually social media and people re-posting and tagging their friends with children, we aren’t even spending a lot on advertising.

### **Tuesday**

Into the day job today, lots to do there after a bank holiday. At the railway it was business as usual with the Tuesday Sheffield Park – Kingscote service. Now I know the question has been asked why we are running only as far as Kingscote on a Tuesday. There are two reasons:

1. There is a lot of coach party traffic on a Tuesday and we see very little walk-up trade. Hence, Tuesday running is mainly for the coach party pre-booked traffic. Coach party passengers are not much concerned whether they go to East Grinstead or not; and.
2. With the new East Grinstead signalling being installed (which will be controlled from Kingscote signal box), not running north of Kingscote gives the Infrastructure teams (S&T and Permanent Way) chance to work on the scheme without trains running over that section of line two days per week, which makes their progress more rapid. With such progress we hope the new scheme will be commissioned by Christmas.

### **Wednesday**

My second successive day of not coming to the Bluebell... I might get withdrawal symptoms (or Mrs C might get fed up with seeing me!).

Things remain busy at the Railway though, with final preparations for the Road Meets Rail event on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> May.

The train service was quite busy today, which is a promising continuation of the recent trend.

### **Thursday**

For the second week running my planned Carriage & Wagon day was interrupted: this time by Mrs C’s car breaking down and me having to wait at home for it to be recovered to the dealer. I held my



meeting with the team via a conference call (as Mrs C had to be present in-person at her meeting, she had to take my car!). Fingers crossed it's third time lucky next Thursday, and I will actually make it to Horsted Keynes. What I did discuss with the team was the RMB coach '1818' coming back into traffic next week after bodywork repairs, partial repaint and other operational fleet maintenance. We have also made the decision that when '1464' (Bullied TTO) is taken in for maintenance during July, it will only be used thereafter for Flying Scotsman and for Christmas; then it will be withdrawn, as a lot of work is needed - and if we keep running it, things will just get worse. I have a plan for this vehicle but it's complicated, so I will enlighten you in a later update once I have gained agreement from all involved parties.

### **Friday**

My Friday seemed manic, and time seemed to run away. I worked a bit from home, a bit from one of my pubs and then in one of the day job offices - and my phone would not stop ringing. Half was paid work and the other half unpaid (ie Bluebell!).

A reasonably busy day at the railway and everything was ready for the weekend.

### **And finally...**

Asa Griffiths, who was our Head of Retail, has left us. Asa did a lot of good work in the two years he was here, but as we need to streamline the senior management team further and to make further savings, this position will not be filled. The existing managers in Catering and in the shop will henceforth report to directly to Neil Glaskin.

And of course... don't forget AGM & Members Day on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June. It's going to be a fantastic day and I am really excited and keen we all make it a resounding success. So, please come along and let's have a party after the AGM.

Paul Churchman  
Chairman  
13<sup>th</sup> May 2023