



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 8th APRIL 2023

It feels like I only wrote last week's update five minutes ago – plus, I have had to write my Bluebell Times piece this week as well! It has been another busy week and it's been a short working week too but, despite being at the railway last Sunday, I ended up back again Tuesday morning, and I am here again Friday as I was signalman at Sheffield Park – so some of this was written in between signalling trains.

This week's appeal for help is for station staff. Sheffield Park has a good establishment, but Horsted Keynes, Kingscote and East Grinstead are all struggling for numbers. Station staff are our 'first face' the public see when they arrive, so they provide an all-important customer service role, but they are also essential to the safe operation of trains through the stations. So, if you feel you can be a people-facing person and fancy trying something different, then please step forward - it is very rewarding. I was on the station staff Sheffield Park, and I worked my way up from Junior Porter to become Station Master - so you can see there is plenty of scope for progression! There is also a great team spirit among the station staff groups, plus many people have begun their volunteering 'journey' at the Bluebell via this route. So, if you feel this could be for you, as always drop me an email paul.churchman@bluebell-railway.com

Saturday

The mobile farm was at Kingscote and proved very popular. There were lots of families visiting, and the trains were well filled throughout the day. We had a Golden Arrow dining train as well as a Wealden Rambler and all were full. The positive comments and praise of the food and service on-board were really good to hear – so thank you to our catering team for their efforts and the for the high standard of quality they are clearly delivering.

Sunday

I was at the railway again as Operating Supervisor, thankfully I didn't have to do another role today as well. Trains were busy and again the feedback about the mobile farm from our passengers was excellent. This event was cheap to put on and increased our fares revenue by at least 50%. A great result.

One exciting thing that happened during the day was that I had to withdraw buffet car 1818 from service, owing to some bodywork defects. This resulted in me having to go to Horsted to do a small shunt to get a replacement carriage. I decided to withdraw 1818 now as we need it to be available all summer - so by taking it out now it has been possible to get it straight into the paint shop. This will delay Car 54 a little bit, but it gives us the opportunity to fix 1818's boiler, to do the six-monthly maintenance checks and to have it back in service by early May, so we can then use it all summer.



We launched the carvery roast dinner service in the Birch Grove Suite and this proved popular (and was delicious: I 'sampled' one!). Our catering team has also changed some of the offering downstairs in the Bessemer and this has proved successful as well as looking better.

Monday

It's a Bank Holiday. We have a lot of these coming up this year, thanks to a certain event! The railway was fairly busy and trains ran generally to time. Things seemed quiet on the volunteer front, but bank holidays are funny things, you either get loads of people or very few.

I was at home cooking a roast dinner for 13 people... which I did enjoy (plus Mrs C said my cauliflower cheese was as good as hers!)

Tuesday

I was at Carriage & Wagon this morning to see the team and go through what we had planned for the next couple of weeks ; also to discuss some changes we are making in terms of planning and production.

It was the second week of the school holidays and trains were running with steady loads... nothing amazing but definitely worthwhile.

Wednesday

Another day and another service to run. Unfortunately, the somewhat excessive April Showers seem to have put people off going out. Had the weather of been better I know we would have been much busier.

I was sent a link to a video that the Severn Valley have put on Youtube about needing to raise £1.5m from their members in order to survive. I really feel for them. It is tough, but we are managing to weather the storm reasonably well. There is still a lot to do but we are seeing the signs of recovery in the far distance. We have started the climb the mountain and are progressing upwards.

Thursday

This weather!! I was driving back from Heathrow (as I have had to juggle the day job with my youngest daughter being on school holidays), and one minute I had my sunglasses on and the next it was black clouds and hail hitting the car so hard I wondered if it was going to dent it.

So, because of the weather, the railway wasn't as busy as we had hoped, but there was still a fair number of people around. Thank goodness we have advance booking online now, as it means people are committed and have to come (also, we've already got their money!).



Friday

I had a day doing the thing I love doing the most on the railway, and which is also something vital to the operation - I was signalman at Sheffield Park on the early turn. Signalling is my favourite part of my hobby.

It was a footplate taster day as well as a two passenger train service. The first train was surprisingly busy, especially given how awful the weather was! The second train was quieter and the 1pm departure wasn't too great either.

I had my youngest daughter, Isla, with me. She is 14, and she likes the Bluebell. In fact she admits to me that she's secretly a train nerd... I bet she wouldn't say that in front of her trendy mates!

And finally...

As I regularly walk around our railway I find I am meeting for the first time people who, in many cases, have been here as long or longer than me - and yet I've never seen them before. Many of them work away in the background performing tasks which may be unglamorous, but which are essential to the running of the railway. They rarely get recognised but it is important that we do so – as, without them, this place simply would not work. There are many cogs in the Bluebell machine.

Paul Churchman

Chairman

9th April 2023