



## **CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 11<sup>th</sup> FEB 2023**

I hope everyone has had a good week. I am going to start this week's update with an appeal. Over 400 people receive my weekly updates – so hopefully my goal of finding 15-20 to help with something will be successful. So here goes.....

As you will all know the Golden Arrow is not only a highly successful and popular service, it is also highly profitable. If we could only run 5 'GAs' a week (all full), the Railway would make a profit. Sadly, that's not possible as that level of customer demand is not there, but there *is* demand at weekends. A real threat to the weekend GA service is recruiting enough staff to serve on them. So, I am appealing to any of you reading this who would like to train to work on these trains. You would need to commit to working at least 2 Saturday evenings a month, plus other *ad hoc* evenings in the summer. If any of you can offer this help, then please do get in touch (and if it helps you to decide, this is paid work!). We need to get a dedicated team of people together so we are able to reliably put on the quality service needed for this premium product. You will be provided with GA uniform and full training will be provided. So please, if you can help, then email me...

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### **Saturday**

We started running trains again, although only between Horsted Keynes and Sheffield Park as the work at Vaux End continues. We also have the ice rink in the engine shed at Sheffield Park.

The day was busy but also gave some challenges as we had a Golden Arrow lunch train and then we had sheep all over the line. This created no end of problems and we ended up running rather late. I was wondering if there was an opportunity for some free lamb to put on the menu in the Bessemer – but alas all sheep were returned to their farmer!

### **Sunday**

Another busy day and more people enjoying the ice rink - and more sheep! These sheep clearly were fascinated with Fenchurch and the vintage set we were running. Again, I wondered if there was some free lamb to be had for Sunday dinner, but all the sheep were happily returned to their field, and this time the farmer assisted with some fence repairs to keep his sheep securely in the right place.

### **Monday**

I was signalman at Sheffield Park as well as Operating Supervisor, I was actually doing the bit that I love. Of course I enjoy everything I do on the Railway(!) - but signalling and shunting are my favourites and those are my hobbies.



Thankfully we had no sheep to worry about and the trains were well-loaded and ran to time. The day was quite busy and again the ice rink was busy. Several people did drop by the signal box to say hello and I had some productive discussions.

What is great about being in Sheffield Park box is you can see the Railway working around you: the carriage cleaning team first thing, then the station staff, the shop and catering staff, and various others throughout the day. It makes you realise how many people do so much around the place.

We also had carriages travelling on main line rails from Carnforth to Hull, where they will spend the week on a film job. We don't know what the film is going to be called but it has a big budget. After the filming one carriage will go by road to Leavesden Studios and the others will come back by rail from Hull to East Grinstead, together with West Coast Railways' 'Black 5' locomotive. In March, more filming will take place over several days at Horsted Keynes.

### **Tuesday**

For me it was back to the day job, but of course with various phone calls and emails relating to Bluebell. The work continues at a fast pace in the background as we look at reducing costs, increasing revenue, and streamlining anywhere and everywhere we can to get towards that break-even target.

The Railway was busier again Tuesday which is great news, providing us with much-needed revenue. The ice rink really does also bring in families with teenage children as well as couples, and a lot of them probably wouldn't come if we didn't have it. This shows us we have to offer more than just a train ride - and broadening the offer so we can appeal to a wider customer base is something Lisa, Ruth and the team are working on constantly.

It was also Valentine's Day and we had an evening Golden Arrow that was sold out. It went very well with all the love birds enjoying the romantic ambience we provided.

### **Wednesday**

I took my 14-year-old daughter to London and we went on HMS Belfast and had dinner at a lovely Italian restaurant on the South Bank. However, I did still manage to end up on the phone regarding Bluebell matters – thankfully she doesn't mind as she loves the Railway too!

The Railway was busier than we had been all week. Fenchurch and the 3-carriage train is proving really popular and it is so efficient to run. Given it is half term, and with the number of younger children around, this is the perfect train and loco to operate as the children are fascinated by Fenchurch and it's not too big to scare them.



### **Thursday**

Another busy day at the Railway – and every day I hear this I breathe another sigh of relief. There was the usual flurry of emails during the day from everything to do with C&W, Infrastructure, day to day management and Catering.

It also came out that the Severn Valley Railway is making 14 paid staff redundant, underlining how the severe challenges we face are also being faced by many others in this sector. It is not affecting the smaller railways so severely, as they don't have such a large cost base as businesses like us and the Severn Valley have.

### **Friday**

It is Mrs C's birthday today and we have a busy day and weekend to be fair. We are off to a restaurant in Shoreditch for lunch – but we are the diners where the BBC is filming a celebrity cooking show, so this should be an experience!

At the Railway we are hoping for another busy day. We have been so lucky with the good weather this week, as it has meant people have gone out. We still have the weekend to go, which should also do well. Then we are back to only weekend running until Easter.

The track is now reconnected at Vaux End, and the Infrastructure team are awaiting the arrival of a tamper to complete the work, whilst also attending to some of the remedial work. The team have done a fantastic job and the quality and professionalism of the work is something we can all be proud of.

There is so much we now need to focus on - and it's not all about the financials, it's also about the planning for the events, day to day operations, catering and so many things that take time - but if we don't do them, we will be in a far worse place.

I want to mention the volunteers that staff the museum every day we run trains; these are more unsung heroes of our wonderful railway. They are there from start to finish of every operating day and on hand to guide people around the museum or just answer random questions. It can be a slow job at times if there aren't many people around, but the team that do it always arrive and present a smile to everyone every day – thank you.

Have a lovely weekend everyone and I will communicate again next week.

Paul Churchman

Chairman

17<sup>th</sup> February 2023