



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING MONDAY 11th DECEMBER 2023

Well, we are nearly there, and this will be my last update until after the Big Day. Mrs C and I were supposed to be in Spain for Christmas but owing to 'day job' commitments we can't be – so we will be spending Christmas Day at home on our own watching films (and we will be having sausage and Mash!)

I hope all of you have a great Christmas and, for those of you that have to work, I hope that you still manage some quality time with loved ones at some point.

For the Bluebell, it has been a year of massive change, with much hard work and going full speed ahead, but the effort has been truly worthwhile. We have successfully turned that corner, ending the year in a far better state than we started it. We are not home and dry yet of course – there are still more challenges and possibly 2024 will be an even tougher year - but if we keep on the same trajectory, I am confident we will continue to make good progress.

Monday

No trains running today – and again everyone needs a rest as we are coming to the really manic time as we enter the final week before Christmas.

Tuesday

Again, no trains today, but everyone was focused on being ready for the start of the next round of services this week, which get busier as the big day approaches.

Wednesday

We had a mid-week Golden Arrow lunch train which was again well filled, plus SteamLights. Everyone is loving the dancing fairy which is a key part of the welcome and switch-on ceremony this year. All had a lovely time, and the feedback continues to be extremely positive.

Thursday

I was at Carriage and Wagon first thing to review status on various projects, and how we will get them over the finish line. In the coming week, Car 54 will have its braking set up, with running-in and commissioning scheduled to commence in January. We have completed the first MET carriage door lock replacement, and the great news is that it isn't going to take as long as we had expected.

The productivity in C&W is amazing, and I want to thank all the department for the fantastic effort everyone has put in during the year.

Then it was back to the day job, as there's a lot going on there, so I didn't manage to spend the full day at the railway as I usually do on Thursdays.



As far as running goes, we had the annual charter services for schools at Christmas, plus SteamLights, which again was full.

Friday

I attended the C&W paid staff Christmas lunch at the Red Lion in Lindfield, which was excellent, and all had a good time. But then I had to head back to Reigate for an evening function – it never stops!

At the railway, more SteamLights services ran. Both journeys were virtually full, plus there was a Golden Arrow dining train – also full. So, it was busy busy once again, but everything went according to plan and our passengers left fulfilled and happy.

Saturday

Yet another busy day with full trains – just what we need! Unfortunately, the start to the operating day was slightly problematic, getting engines off shed on time was a challenge. Then the E Grinstead set seemed to lose time throughout the day. However, the enjoyment of our visitors was the main thing... and everyone had a great time.

Sunday

I was Duty Operations Manager today - not my last turn of 2023, as I still have the 28th Dec to do.

The day started well with engines off shed on time. Sadly, the positivity didn't last... there had been an oversight to fill up the water tower. So, when Archie tried to take water there was barely half a tenderfull available - and that came out very slowly too - so not the best start. Happily, the first train was only five minutes mins late away - and it was warm and cosy inside – so, no harm done.

As the day progressed, the Sheffield Park set ran to time, but the E Grinstead set again lost time. We have a review scheduled to take place in January – in which we will be planning the events for next Christmas – and any learning points from this year's experiences will be considered. It may seem crazy to be looking at next Christmas already, but experience shows it is never too soon to begin the planning (we have already had some email discussion).

And finally...

On behalf of my fellow Directors, Trustees and Governors I would like to thank everyone for the incredible effort you have all put in, ensuring our precious railway is here to 'fight' another year. It hasn't been easy at times but, even so, I would like to think we have all had fun, and I personally think the morale and atmosphere around the railway is far better than it was.

A Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all and I look forward to us facing the challenges of 2024 together.

Paul Churchman
Chairman
20th December 2023

