



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 12th AUGUST 2023

It's Saturday and I am sitting in my office at work. It has been such a busy week both in my day job and Bluebell-wise that I needed to catch up. Next week is of course going to be another manic one as *Flying Scotsman* is arriving – finally!

I will admit that I may have been a little emotive on one of the Facebook groups today. It's all to do with people asking about the accounts and making comments suggesting 'there must be problems.' Whilst I try not to be emotional about such things, always trying my best to ensure we as the leadership team communicate everything and keep people fully informed, on this occasion I'm afraid it annoyed me.

I had said a couple of months ago there was a delay, and that this was due to the volume of work, particularly concerning some historical issues which needed to be dealt with, having been left unresolved for several years. We also needed to provide a proper financial analysis to demonstrate the railway is a viable going concern. Collectively, this was a huge amount of work but I'm very pleased to announce we are finally there.

Anyway, I suppose my frustration got the better of me this morning, and I had a little rant. Maybe it will have given those keyboard warriors something to talk about!

Saturday

It was day one of Peppa Pig and what a success! From early morning we had families arriving to see Peppa and her family. I know Peppa is a very popular character, having been subjected to all things Peppa when the show first came on TV, as my youngest daughter who was small at the time was obsessed with her.

Trains were well-filled, and everything seemed to be working well.

Sunday

I was Duty Operations Manager for the first part of the day, with Neil Glaskin taking over from me in the afternoon, as I had my eldest daughter's birthday. As the birthday girl had to do an early shift at Gatwick, I was able to come to the Railway without it looking like I was a bad dad!

Again, the day started busy, with families arriving early to see Peppa (I decided not to go and have my photo taken with Peppa on this occasion), and it remained busy throughout the day.

The weather was nice, with no rain for a change. No pie for me today, however tempting it was, because I was doing a BBQ when I got home!



Monday

The inconsistency of British weather makes it so hard to forecast our passenger numbers. However, the week started well for us, with a good number of people coming through the doors.

Tuesday

Despite the best (or worst?) efforts of the weather, we seemed to have strong visitor numbers again today.

As ever, there was plenty of activity around the Railway. In the workshops at Sheffield Park the team are assembling *Sir Archibald Sinclair*, which once again looks like a Bullied Pacific.

At Horsted Keynes, in the carriage shed work was well underway sorting the broken spring on 3069's bogie, plus the first topcoat was going on to Car 54, and of course the weekly routine maintenance continued.

Wednesday

The final touches and checking of all aspects of *Flying Scotsman's* visit were underway. Everyone has put in amazing amount of work to make this a success, and I believe this will be a truly spectacular event.

It was another good day for visitor numbers. The train crews all seemed to be having a good week too, with Mike Hawkins and his 'gang' on their annual week on the engine and having a lot of fun.

Thursday

I was at Carriage & Wagon at 9am for my weekly catch-up and we went through a number of things, including re-prioritising certain tasks, given the unforeseen defects that had been discovered on 3069 and on Car 64.

We had new wheels made for Car 64 earlier in the year, and we will be installing these in late September. Then, during the first quarter of 2024, will be putting newly overhauled bogies under her.

Meanwhile, also related to the issue with 3069, Clive was having a lot of fun getting the bolster spring out of a spare bogie. This is a job we have not undertaken previously, but Clive, Rowan and the team have leapt onto it with enthusiasm. Once again, I must pay tribute to the passion, effort and commitment found in C&W among all the staff - paid and volunteer.

Then I headed to Sheffield Park to see Lisa for a catch up, which also included lunch with her and Chris Barber who is taking over the interim role of Loco Engineering Director (I had the chicken and leek pie, which was of course delicious - our pies just keep getting better!). After lunch, it was time to meet the Sheffield Park workshop team, followed by a trip into 'Atlantic House' to talk to Keith Sturt.



Finally, I had a meeting with Steve Trigg, to go through the finalised year-end accounts and agree what we would write in the strategic report that accompanies them. The accounts are now with the auditors, and we hope to file them either late this week or early next week.

By now it was 5pm and it was off to the gym for me. I'd had a manic day but a very productive one. I was supposed to have been the shunter today but, owing to the volume of admin stuff I needed to deal with, I had to give up that turn, which disappointed me as that and signalling are what I actually prefer to come to the Bluebell for!

Friday

We don't have any special events this weekend... the proverbial lull before the storm! So, it would be a 'business as usual weekend' for everyone for once.

Visitor numbers were again good, and I'm delighted to report revenue has been strong in all areas over the past few weeks. The first seventeen days of August were 20% 'up' in terms of revenue compared with the equivalent period last year. This is amazing and reflects the fact the whole organisation has been pulling together to deliver a heritage railway attraction that people want to visit and to come back to. The trick will be in making this consistent, giving it momentum and longevity. We will only achieve this if we are able to continue thinking of new ways to attract visitors.

There has been criticism that we are becoming a 'theme park' rather than a heritage railway. Whilst I can see this may be a disappointment for some, I'm afraid we simply cannot rely on the income from enthusiast visitors alone - there simply aren't enough of them. What we must do - and are doing successfully - is using other 'attractants' to get the family traffic to come.

And finally...

It has been another busy week, and thank you to everyone that keeps the place going and doing everything that you all do across the whole railway.

Our Santa and *Steamlights* advance sales have reached nearly £300k, which is amazing. If we keep selling at the rate we are then these events will be sold-out by mid-September, this much needed income is fantastic for the business.

Paul Churchman
Chairman
19th August 2023