



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 15th APRIL 2023

Another busy week for me and for the railway as we prepared for Branch Line Weekend, the first gala weekend of the year. Advance sales were way beyond our expectation and meant that the event had already covered the costs of transport and steaming fees for the hired-in engines as well as the estimated cost of the coal we will use.

This week's appeal relates to the upcoming Society AGM. Many of you will have read Bluebell News, which came out this week, and will have seen the article about Members Day and the AGM. We have struggled over the years to get large numbers to attend the AGM, but this year I want that to change. We are holding it at the Railway, on June 3rd. The timing has been changed, to be more convenient for more people - and there will be a hog roast afterwards - so please do come along and support the event. This is your opportunity to join-in, and to ask lots of questions about anything and everything concerning *your* railway.

Saturday

Quite a novelty: I had a break! Mrs C was away with a friend in Bournemouth for the weekend and I thought I'd try this thing called a 'day off'! I went for a walk, cooked myself lunch and then went for another walk - but this time stopped at a pub that I haven't been in since it had a refit and changed owners. It was all very relaxing, and I recommend it (not too often though... your railway still needs you!)

At the Railway, trains were running but we weren't having a good day, with problems with the 'O1' leading to delays and cancellations. The '09' was on Diesel Taster Days so the only resilience we had wasn't available.

Sunday

Back to normal today, up early and into the day job for a meeting about an acquisition of another business. Then it was over to East Grinstead to meet Roy Watts to talk about a few things we hadn't had time to do in the week (Roy doesn't live far from me and we tend to meet in The Bell in Reigate (one of my pubs) and go through railway business over a pint!)

When I arrived at East Grinstead, Roy was not having a good day. The 'O1' had failed again and there was a Golden Arrow lunch train. He had two engines but needed three, and the '09' was again on Diesel Tasters. Still, a solution was found by consolidating two trains and cancelling the 2.15pm – so everything was sorted-out and passengers were moved (and fed).

This shows why we absolutely need the '73' – which will arrive on Monday 24th.



Monday

Back to Sheffield Park for 0830 to meet with Lisa and go through several items, and then up to Horsted Keynes to meet the team there for a discussion about restructuring the management of the department with the aim of improving productivity.

I also had a chat with Matt Crawford about several Infrastructure projects and timelines. There was a delegation from South Bank University visiting, and Dave Wilson - Matt's 'number two' - was taking them around on the Wickham trolley. It is most important that we work with these research universities, as we gain access to potentially valuable data, plus often the institutions can use our infrastructure for their projects – resulting in a direct benefit for us, as they do stuff for free that we would otherwise have to pay for. So, it's a 'win-win' situation for both parties. It also demonstrates to the ORR that we are using all means to manage our assets and to look after their maintenance in a professional manner.

Then it was back in the car and off to the day job.

Tuesday

I managed to avoid going to the railway today, but I did spend a couple of hours on phone calls and emails. The final preparations were underway for the upcoming Branch Line Weekend

Wednesday

Another busy day at the railway with Infrastructure going about their regular weekly tasks as well as the many projects they have on the go. Wednesday is a day many of those unsung heroes attend, coming to work in the workshops or to look after station gardens, or to paint things, and to mend small items of broken infrastructure (it's surprising how often toilet defects need attending to – especially at Sheffield Park... a lot of flushes happen there when the railway is busy!). Such tasks as these often go unnoticed, but are immensely valuable to the upkeep and operation of the railway, and to keep things looking attractive and functioning for our visitors.

Thursday

Final shunting was being done ready for Branch Line Weekend and everything looked set for a brilliant event. Chris Knibbs and Graham Aitken have done a fabulous job on the timetable, making use of Horsted Keynes as a terminus for trains originating at both ends of the railway. A great opportunity to make this fine station a centre of attraction.

I was at work most of the day and then in the car on my way to the Society Board Meeting at 6.30 at Sheffield Park. We had a good meeting which lasted two hours. As usual, several strategic and policy matters that we need to work on were discussed. It was also encouraging to hear that our membership numbers are still rising, and we are back to pre-pandemic levels. Let's hope they keep rising.



Friday

The first day of Branch Line Weekend and wow what a start, despite the early morning rain it was very busy. I worked from home until about 11.30 and then made my way to Sheffield Park. I found it hard to find a parking space. It was great to see everywhere so busy (I had driven past Horsted Keynes on my way to Sheffield Park, so I could see it was busy there too).

We had a very good day, with excellent fares revenue and the menu changes in catering had done the trick - we sold out of Steak & Ale pie!

As I did my customary 'walkabout', talking to people and observing everything, I experienced a really positive atmosphere. I felt that we had got the 'Bluebell feeling' back, with enthusiasm, positivity, and the will to get it done whilst having fun as well.

And finally...

We will have 73133 '*The Bluebell Railway*' arriving on Monday. She will have commissioning work to be done but should be into traffic within a few weeks... a much-needed Thunderbird!

Last night a piece on heritage railways and the struggle we face was aired on PBS News Hour, I was interviewed for this along with the Swanage. Hopefully such publicity contributes towards bringing us more visitors. Here's a link:

<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/how-the-war-in-ukraine-is-threatening-britains-historic-steam-engines>

Paul Churchman
Chairman
22nd April 2023