



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 22nd APRIL 2023

Another week has gone by, and it was another busy one as we ramp up towards the summer season. There is much good stuff going on, and the feeling I get around the railway is one of optimism and drive. We will pull through and I am confident we will emerge more efficient and stronger having done so. I do fear some railways may not be as fortunate as ours and may not emerge from the bad situation we all find ourselves in, so we must be relentless in keeping the positive momentum going, otherwise we too will be staring down the gun barrel once more.

I must apologise to Andy Palmer, as in last week's update I mentioned somebody else was Matt Crawford's number two – sorry Andy, you do an amazing job.

My weekly appeal is urgent... we need help for the Bluey and Bingo Event (Bluey and Bingo are children's cartoon characters, for those of you without small children!). We'll need five helpers per day for this event., which is proving very popular with lots of bookings. The event will be hosted at Sheffield Park (in SteamWorks) on May 7th and 8th, from 9 am until 3.30pm. Tasks to be covered will include managing a ticket system, helping with crowd control, talking to the public and providing 'security' - ensuring Bluey and Bingo can walk from SteamWorks to the classroom in a safe manner. If you'd like to help, please email Sarah Jaban on sarah.jaban@bluebell-railway.com. Thank you!

Saturday

Day 2 of Branch Line weekend and as I had spent so much time at the railway in the week leading up to it I wasn't rostered to do anything, but then Mrs C and my youngest daughter decided we should go and ride on the trains and just be visitors.

Seeing the operation from the point of view of a visiting family was a useful experience for me. And I am pleased to say a very positive one. Everywhere was busy and the timetable was superb. Everyone was clearly having a great time. Mrs C said (only excepting dining on the Golden Arrow) it was the best visit she has ever had to the railway and she really enjoyed it. Praise indeed! Oh, and the steak & ale pie and the chicken 'a la king' in the buffet were fabulous.

Sunday

Day 2 of Branch Line weekend and not as busy as Friday and Saturday, but still good. The weather was pretty awful and that would certainly have put some people off.



I, too, was having a day off. I was cooking roast beef and chicken for Sunday lunch and somehow between children (or, 'gremlins' as I refer to them with Mrs C), plus friends we ended up with thirteen for lunch. Happily, it was a success.

Monday

Clearing up after a busy three days and lots going on. I was at Carriage and Wagon first thing, to go through the reorganisation with the team. Then it was off to Sheffield Park to attend the Safety Review Group (SRG) meeting at 4pm. I did manage to sit with Chris Knibbs and Jon Beardmore for a couple of hours discussing various things we have going on. I even got some day job work done in between as well.

We had the BBC filming scenes for the Police Drama "Grace" at Sheffield Park and Horsted Keynes. At Sheffield Park, the Bessemer Arms was turned into an old peoples home for the filming!

The SRG meeting went well. We were finalising things for the ORR visit on Wednesday as well as reviewing other safety-related matters across the railway. SRG is responsible for monitoring and advising the Board on matters of safety and ensuring robust change management is practised as well as dealing with risk awareness and avoidance, all ensuring we maintain a strong safety culture.

The '73' arrived this evening, while one of the visiting locos for Branch Line Weekend departed.

Tuesday

There was shunting going on at Sheffield Park and much else besides. I was focused on the day job, as I have a lot going on there too. But I still managed to deal with Bluebell-related emails and phone calls.

Wednesday

We had a visit from our allocated ORR Inspector. This was a follow-up visit to review actions we have taken following the fall from height incident we had in the Loco department before Christmas. The visit went well, and the inspector was impressed by the amount of work we had done, strengthening our systems and also with new equipment we had acquired. We will discover in the coming weeks whether we have done enough to avoid further action.

This sequence of events, leading to ORR involvement is a stark warning for us all. The Inspector indicated that were we to have another incident we would likely face immediate action by the regulator - and we obviously don't need that. So, I ask all of you to *please* complete the online Working at Height course on HOPS. Everyone working on a railway will at some point be deemed to be working at height – so please don't dismiss this as 'not needed by me.' I also ask everyone to think carefully about what you are doing and how you do it - and if even slightly uncertain about the safety of your actions, seek help. We must operate a safe railway. **Safety First always.**



Thursday

A busy day for me today, as I was both Operating Supervisor and Shunter. Thankfully I had two shunter's assistants with me, which helped a lot. We had a good day of it - and Andrew and Jack, my assistants, were 'sound' and good fun to work with.

At 4pm there was a Board meeting, which was productive. We were able to review management accounts, as we have finally reached a point where Steve Trigg has been able to produce them. There is further refinement to be done in the reporting, but we already have a much clearer picture of how things stand.

To give some idea of the current situation, in the first three months of this year we lost over £600k. That is what we would have expected, given there is little operating income during this period and of course we still have all the bills to pay (the only thing we don't use much of when not running is coal!). The better news is that we have over £900k of cash in the bank, from advance sales and from the large filming job we hosted in Feb/Mar. It should be noted the £600k loss was recorded prior to 'banking' the filming job receipts, as they were not invoiced/received until April.

Now we have clearer sight of revenues and costs, we are revisiting the budget for the year, and I am hopeful we can get to an outturn that will show a loss of around £250k.

Other things discussed at the Board meeting were the fact we need to do major work to the footbridge at Sheffield Park. We also had an update from all departmental directors - and we managed to do it all in two hours which was very good.

An early finish was especially welcome for Neil Glaskin and I, as we needed to get Reigate for a 'day job' celebration dinner for our sales team who had smashed their April targets.

Friday

Another busy day at the railway, getting ready for the first of the three upcoming bank holiday weekends. We are hopeful this first one will see strong business. I will be Operating Supervisor again tomorrow so will see as many of you who are there as I can.

And finally...

I am going to keep plugging this..... Don't forget AGM & Members Day on the 3rd of June. Gavin Bennett has ordered a marquee that will hold more people than we have had at an AGM for probably anytime since the sixties. So please come along to see what is going on at the railway, and get involved. Then come to the AGM, and enjoy the food and drink afterwards.

Paul Churchman
Chairman
28th April 2023