



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 23rd SEPTEMBER 2023

Another week has shot by, and it has been a busy one. I actually managed to only spend one day at the railway last week, although of course that didn't mean no phone calls and emails.

We are fast approaching Christmas and sales are doing quite well. Although there is a slower uptake on the East Grinstead Santas, the Sheffield Park ones are almost sold-out. Steamlights is also selling really well, and the Golden Arrows are starting to sell well too. Unfortunately, the Reindeer event at Kingscote has been slow to pick up, but I am sure we can push the sales on this too. Overall, it is really promising, and we are on target to hit our budgeted income.

Saturday

Day 2 of the Beer Festival and wow what a day! We had a charter come in off the mainline and the bus service into Sheffield Park was very busy indeed. We did have a minor issue in the evening with some of our visitors as a consequence of their 'enjoyment' of the beer, but overall it was a great success. Numbers-wise we had around 2000 visitors today.

Sunday

Day 3 of the Beer Festival and although not as busy, it was still very well attended. The weather was kind to us over the weekend and there was very positive feedback from everyone.

I attended on the Friday and the Saturday and the atmosphere was superb. Our revenue across the three days was in excess of £100k, which is absolutely amazing. We have grown this event really quickly, and its reputation is clearly spreading with the growing numbers attending each year. Thank you to everyone who helped-out - or just came and drank beer.

Monday

Just the usual behind the scenes stuff going on today. Everyone hard at work and a lot of energy going into 'Archie'.

Tuesday

Again, no trains today although I seemed to spend a large amount of my day doing Bluebell work, nothing specific just lots of emails and a few phone calls.

Wednesday

Trains were running today... we had the two-departure service, plus 'Autumn Tints' using the observation car and *Fenchurch*. The service train was busy with groups, but sadly the Autumn Tints were poorly patronised.

"Archie" had a steam test and passed, which is obviously fantastic news. But, although this is a major milestone, there is still a lot of work to do. We are aiming for a return to traffic in time for Santas.



Thursday

I was at carriage & wagon for my usual meeting just after 9, which was very productive. I also went round the workshop and saw everyone. Car 54 is almost complete in the paint shop and in about a week should hopefully move back to 'E' Road for finishing; the Bicester Mk1 then goes into the paint shop to be ready for Santas.

During November and December we will be revarnishing all three Maunsells.

Off to Sheffield Park to see Lisa. We reviewed the Autumn Tints service and the very poor loadings. Having consulted by phone with Neil Glaskin, we decided to cancel the dedicated AT service, and instead attach the OBO to the back of the service train, with a premium charge to ride in it. Dynamic decision-making such as this is vital in the present trading environment, and being able to react to circumstances is one of the reasons we are succeeding. Doing nothing in this case would've essentially resulted in pointless steaming of a loco and a waste of coal. The revised arrangement allowed us to save on running costs yet still collect some extra revenue from the few AT customers.

The regular service trains showed good loadings and our schools and group traffic is still really strong too.

I also managed to sample the pie of the day!

Later on, we had a good Board meeting, and I am excited to be able to share with you our financial position. Year to date we have made a loss of £131k, which is less than we had budgeted. Our cash position is strong, with just over £1m in the bank. We still anticipate a loss for 2023 of circa £150k but we will work hard to try and achieve break-even. This is truly amazing, as last year our trading loss was just short of £1.4m. The actions we have taken, the increases in revenue and the sheer hard work put in by everyone is paying off, but we still can't afford to take our foot off the gas.

Friday

Another good day for group traffic and a few walk-ups too, which was all good.

And finally...

We have got Giants of Steam coming up and this promises to be another successful event with lots of people. We also have ice-skating again at half-term. The skating rink will be open during Giants of Steam so we may attract families, as well as the usual GoS enthusiasts. We do need volunteers to help with the manning of the ice rink so if you can help, please do drop me an email.

Paul Churchman
Chairman
2nd October 2023