



CHAIRMAN'S UPDATE – WEEK COMMENCING SAT 25th MAR 2023

Another week has passed and it's been another busy one for me - but this week I did manage to spend more time on the day job! I did spend all of Thursday at the Bluebell for a series of very productive meetings, including the Board meeting.

It wouldn't be right for me to begin this update without making an appeal for help...

Our new phone system is proving a great improvement over the old one and is giving us really useful data. But it is obvious we need more customer service team members to deal with the level of calls we are receiving. It is clear we are doing something right from the level of enquiries – but we need to address the issue of waiting times for callers. So please, if you would like to learn how to do this, then do get in touch - we need cover seven days a week. The clever technology we now have supports homeworking, which means people doing this work will not necessarily have to be in the office at Sheffield Park. As always, if you feel you're suited to this and can help, then please get in touch... paul.churchman@bluebell-railway.com

Saturday

The last weekend of only running to Horsted Keynes. A fairly quiet day passenger-wise but as always the activities behind the scenes carried on with the army of paid and volunteer staff that make the railway tick every day.

Sunday

Again, a slowish day and the weather has really not helped this March – after a record dry February, we have had a record wet March. Who knows what's going on?! Anyway, let's hope April is going to bring us better weather and better passenger numbers. Using Fenchurch for this period has been not only cost-effective but has given crews much useful familiarisation time on the footplate as this is not the easiest of engines to work.

Monday

A day in the office with various meetings in the day job, but I still managed time to fit in several calls and emails relating to Bluebell. I am delighted at the offers of help coming in from people answering my appeals, and who are willing to undertake additional roles. It is great to see some new faces appearing too. All such offers are very much needed to help run our large operation.



Tuesday

I had to travel to Birmingham for work and stayed overnight there. At least I could find the time sitting in my hotel room do some stuff I never seem to respond to.

At the Railway, tickets were selling fast for the imminent Dinosaur weekend; and the reaction on social media has been amazing. Clearly, dinosaurs are 'a thing' so let's hope all this interest translates into a busy weekend.

Wednesday

I was still in the Midlands, but things at the Railway were running at full pace. This weekend will be the first time in just under a year that our own chefs will be cooking on the Golden Arrow, and they were doing all the prep for that and for what is looking like a busy weekend.

Thursday

A full day at the Railway, starting off at C&W, catching up with Rowan and the team. Car 54 is progressing well in the paint shop, and the OBO is ready to have its new brake rigging fitted once it has been made. The first MET carriage is having the new door locks fitted and a whole raft of other tasks were underway.

Then to the Park and time with Lisa, then to the Loco works to see Simon Blaker and catch up on progress in there; I also saw Keith Sturt and got an update on the Brighton Atlantic.

These workshops are a hive of activity every day and we should be very proud of our C&W and Loco teams, as they do an amazing job day in and day out. This reflects in our standards of work and presentation, which are clearly among the best in the heritage railway sector.

Then into Catering to talk to the team about some changes we need to make to our offering in the Bessemer, and to see how they were getting-on preparing for the weekend. The new mural on the wall behind the bar is looking great and really brightens the place up.

Then to the Board meeting, which was very productive and where some good decisions were made; the continuing audit was also reviewed. It is hoped this will be concluded soon, at which point I will be able to fully reveal our status. What I can tell you is that the actions taken since January have improved our trading position and steadied our cash position. Having paid all the bills and the payroll, we still have cash in the bank and are not using the overdraft. We will shortly be receiving a very substantial sum of money for the recent filming which will be a tremendous boost.

I came away from the Board meeting feeling the most positive I have in over a year. I really cannot over-state how much effort all the Directors and senior managers are putting in to make sure we come through this year with a greatly improved financial situation as well as ensuring that we run a safe and efficient railway.



The dinosaur weekend already has over £8k of forward bookings, let alone the walk-up traffic on Saturday and Sunday. This is really excellent: we are already into profit on this event, and we haven't done it yet. So, a big well done to all involved.

Friday

I am having a weekend off, to get away from that dreadful British weather. I have come to Alicante for a long weekend and am going to relax. I am sorry to tell you I'm sitting in 26-degree heat as I write this update!

And finally...

I want to say a big thank you to the volunteers who work on the supper trains. We have done four this month and they have all been an outstanding success, and the fact we crew them with predominantly volunteers makes the profitability so much greater.

Next weekend is Easter and hopefully we will be as busy as we traditionally are. Let's hope the weather is better. I will be Operating Supervisor on Good Friday and Easter Sunday so will be going around the Railway catching up with as many people I can, listening to their views and answering any questions. So, if you are there either day hopefully I may see you - I will try to get round as many areas as possible.

I hope you all have a lovely weekend.

Paul Churchman
Chairman
31st March 2023