

West Somerset Railway plans for the future

The West Somerset Railway has recently agreed three key steps to enable the 22-mile long heritage line not only to survive the current CV 19 crisis, but also then to rightly resume its position as 'the jewel in Somerset's tourism crown' when it re-opens, probably now in 2021.

- Fundraising with a target of £500,000 or more to allow the railway to survive without any income this year in order to carry out essential maintenance and renewal works before it re-opens to visitors.
- The re-establishment of the 'Partnership Development Group', involving the West Somerset Railway family¹, together with the local authorities for whom the railway is so important as part of the Somerset tourist economy.
- A new approach to the recruitment and retention of volunteers to help to run the railway when it can reopen, involving the WSR's two main support charities: the West Somerset Railway Association (WSRA) and the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust (WSSRT).

At the start of 2020, the WSR was looking forward to a successful start to the operating season having turned the corner over a difficult 18 months of the plc making significant losses and facing insolvency at one point, and also getting everything back onto an even keel with the ageing infrastructure.

The WSR plc had stabilised its finances with a greater than expected £311,000 profit to the end of March; the Steam Trust had won its HLF grant bid and was well on the way to reopening the Museum at Bishops Lydeard; the transfer of the Williton workshop and the shop and café at Bishops Lydeard between the WSRA and the Plc was progressing well. Infrastructure work over the winter had improved some key track sections, a number of carriages had been repainted, locos prepared, and the stations were being readied for visitors.

Then the Covid19 Lockdown hit hard, and all the well laid plans were thrown into the air and everything stopped just days before the 2020 running season was due to start. The WSR suddenly had no income, no one could carry out their usual work, and a rescue appeal was quickly launched because it was obvious that things would not change to the good again for a very long time.

Understandably, this meant that a dedicated and more joined-up, coordinated approach was needed between the WSR's 'family members' to safeguard the railway for the future and through unprecedented times.

Since the start of the Covid 19 challenge began, the Plc, WSRA and WSSRT have been meeting together regularly via a number of forums to deal with the crisis, and this led to aligned strategies, enhanced communications and working far more closely together. As a result, some significant progress has been made in making the 'family' work better as a unit.

For example, the WSR has developed a common approach to recruitment and retention of volunteers, including a common approach to induction and training, and safeguarding them too.

¹ The West Somerset 'family' is made up of the Diesel Electric Preservation Group, Somerset and Dorset Railway Trust, West Somerset Railway Association, West Somerset Railway Plc, West Somerset Steam Railway Trust and the Friends of the Stations groups

Similarly, WSR TV has been launched with over 650 subscribers to date, and we know this has been a great benefit to those unable to get to the railway in person but seeing their railway running in past footage.

We have agreed to a more linked up approach to fundraising, and with a creditable £170,000 donated already from our supporters, we will keep pushing towards reaching the target of £500,000 needed this year, perhaps more.

In getting the railway ready to begin to allow our volunteers return, we have seen really great co-operation across the WSR 'family', and there will more of this working together over the coming weeks. For our volunteers, who give so much back to the railway, it really matters that we do work together.

Meanwhile, we have put in place new Covid 19 health & safety protocols which our regulator, the Office of Rail & Road has asked all heritage railways to follow, and which will allow work on cleaning and maintenance to take place along the line under controlled conditions, and these mean volunteers will be able to resume their usual cleaning and maintenance duties soon.

We have also agreed that the WSR 'Partnership Development Group' will restart soon too, and which had been under discussion internally for some time. So far, this has already included discussions with the two local Councils about their renewed participation, confirmation of the Terms of Reference, and we are now finalising the first meeting.

During this period, the leasehold issue between the Somerset and Dorset Railway Trust and the West Somerset Plc -- which occurred pre Covid 19 -- has not been resolved, but an independent review has been completed by the Heritage Railway Association, and which we hope will lead to a conclusion. This has not been a matter for the WSRA & WSSRT to determine, but all parties have been involved and assisted in the review.

It is unlikely that the WSR will be able to resume running passenger trains this year, so we have to plan to be able to survive until Easter 2021 before we can look to sufficient fares revenue, catering and retail receipts to start coming in again to replenish the empty coffers.

The railway itself, through the plc as operator, desperately needs cash to survive until then, and if people are able to contribute to this, then please consider a donation direct to the plc, or the purchase of shares in the company. Staged donations over the next nine months would be welcome too from those able to donate regularly of course.

The charitable WSRA and WSSRT are both actively fundraising for heritage track components, heritage rolling stock and our historic buildings, but this has to be in line with the objects of both charities, and so cannot go to the general support of the railway.

But if people donate through the WSR's support charities, then they can generally reclaim Gift Aid on a donation from the Government, so adding 25% to it free of charge.

WSR plc Chairman Jon Jones-Pratt concluded:

"In the end, we all care deeply about the West Somerset Railway and wish to protect it from harm. Covid -19 is a serious threat to that ambition, but one we are determined to overcome.

“Working together as we have been, means we are sure that we will succeed in saving the railway. We would invite everyone who loves the railway to get behind this initiative and, in particular, to contribute to our funding appeals.

“We’re a third of the way there now towards raising £500,000 we need to keep the railway going and finish works off, but we will need more money to survive and also be ready to start running trains when it is safe and profitable to do so.”