

WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY SET FOR PARTIAL RE-OPENING ON MAY 22

After being shut for exactly 14 months now since Wednesday 17th March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions, the West Somerset Railway (WSR) has been getting ready for a late Spring re-opening of the 22-mile heritage line running from Bishops Lydeard near Taunton to Minehead.

The West Somerset Railway is scheduled to re-start train services on **Saturday 22nd May** following the easing of Government CV-19 restrictions today (17 May) in line with the recovery roadmap still staying on track.

Initially, WSR trains will operate out and back from Bishops Lydeard to Williton only. Social distancing regulations will still be in force then and passengers will, therefore, need to travel in pre-allocated seats and remain on board for the entire return journey, similar to the WSR's Santa services last December.

As a result, it will not yet be possible to offer train services to any intermediate stations on the line, or through to Minehead yet sadly, and which the WSR regrets but it is working hard to complete the link again.

Extensive key infrastructure works between Williton and Minehead have yet to be completed, including the rebuilt Seaward Way Level Crossing at the seaside town.

WSR trains will be fully cleaned internally between services, and seats will need to be pre-booked either on the WSR website on the internet, or by 'phone to the WSR's Minehead offices. Advance on-line bookings are now open.

In order to enhance the passenger offering, a range of at-seat catering options will be made available on selected running days. These will include various food and drink choices on different services such as morning tea, coffee and cake, lunchtime fish and chips, and afternoon cream teas. Further catering options will be made available later in the season on specific dates, as in previous years.

As Government restrictions are gradually lifted, the WSR expects to extend the services to Watchet and Blue Anchor after 2nd June, and then Dunster with a bus-link to Minehead.

If CV-19 restrictions do remain in place, however, it will be necessary for passengers to have fixed return journeys to specific destinations.

With all of the uncertainty for the year ahead, it may not be possible to carry out many of the popular, quality events that the WSR normally offers, but it intends to announce these later in 2021.

That said, it's anticipated that the 1940s weekend will go ahead in some form over the weekend of 11th and 12th September, along with hopefully normal Christmas services planned to recommence at the beginning of December.

Prior to the re-opening to passengers, several pre-opening trial and test train have been operating in order for safety critical staff to have refresher duties and receive updated operational information.

These 'test' trains started running in mid-April and the sight and sound of steam locos has also breathed new life into many local residents who have been pleased to have them back again, especially the sound of the loco's whistles.

WSR staff, including volunteers, have been undertaking a variety of remote training over the closed-down period. Whilst this served a very important role in keeping people up to date, clearly there is a need for practical re-familiarisation with trains and with the line.

Full details of passenger times and fares are available via the WSR plc website, see: www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk

WSR plc Chairman, Jonathan Jones- Pratt comments:

"By far, this has been the longest enforced period of closure for the WSR since the full reopening of the whole heritage line from Minehead to Bishops Lydeard in 1979, apart from the short exception of our 2020 pre-Christmas period.

"So much really hard work has been undertaken in the background by our dedicated teams on all aspects of getting our working steam railway ready for business again.

"Now, we are all greatly looking forward to welcoming passengers back to enjoy our wonderful railway running through the Somerset countryside again this coming summer.

"Re-opening on 22 May has been our target and we are nearly there now. We are hoping that the Covid 19 situation improves soon for everyone.

"When, and perhaps if, the Covid restrictions lift fully in June, we will amend our plans to suit the situation at that time, and issue updates as soon as we have confirmation of a change in circumstances."

WSR steam trains were due to re-commence on Saturday 20 March last year, but visitors had naturally deserted the West Country by then and the first lockdown took place from that weekend.

So, it's now the longest period that the longest standard gauge route and former GWR branch line has been closed in its 45-year history after first re-opening as a tourist railway in 1976 from Minehead to Blue Anchor following closure by British Railways in January 1971.

The WSR plc Board determined that the line could only re-open in a way where passengers and staff were safe from the Covid virus, but also by which the WSR makes some money from running trains too.

The railway now has to generate enough money to get it through next winter, and the Board is clear there is no point in making a loss and pretending that money isn't important, especially given its recent history which the railway has traded its way out from.

As soon as firm dates for each development are known, this will be announced on the West Somerset Railway website. In order to achieve social distancing on trains, and avoid crowding on platforms, trains will have to operate for at least the start of the season as "excursion trains."

What this means in practical terms, is that passengers will have to pre-book (on the internet, or by 'phone) and will be allocated seats. The booking will specify a particular timed train, out and

back.

For the high season, after more experience with this limited type of operation has been gained, the WSR will be looking at the possibility of an intermediate “walk up and go” all stations operation, possibly with the Diesel Multiple Unit.

But social distancing is going to have to be the watchword, for as long as it is recommended by the Government and it will take time.

The WSR is putting in a range of measures to ensure that customers can travel on trains in confidence and safely.