



West Somerset Railway P.L.C

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To Shareholders, Volunteers and supporters

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to you today to bring you up to speed with what has been happening on the railway in the past month or so, to set out the destination we are working towards, to set out how some of the challenges are being dealt with, and to seek your help with the challenge the railway is facing. It is really important to me that I can communicate directly with you.

I very much hope that in these challenging times which we find ourselves in, you are physically well, and you are coping well with the constraints the Government has asked us to comply with. I know how hard this is, but we can see it is making a difference, and like you I am determined that we keep doing our bit.

I want to formally recognise the many people who contributed so much to our Railway's recovery in 2019 and through the early months of 2020. It was a great achievement and we were set fair for a wonderful summer of train operations. We had reduced the number of our paid staff, and made real progress in the reorganisation of our contracts and liabilities. Our paid staff and our volunteers had re-established the effective and profitable operation of the railway, through their many capabilities and competence. We were ready to build on this, and we know what was needed for our great trains to thread their way between the Quantocks and Exmoor and on to the seaside.

Some of the highlights have been : our purchase and installation of 44 new rails, 20 lengths of flat bottom and two new breather switches to a standard un-heard of in the WSR's history; teams of people turning out to painting coaches into our cherished liveries – Maroon, Chocolate and Cream, Blood and Custard and the QB; large numbers cleaning and polishing so that our passengers could ride in a clean and cared for carriages; No 9351 moved to Williton part way through its overhaul and returned to service in record time, supported by a veritable fleet of well turned out locomotives. All these achievements were made possible by people's generosity either in giving freely of their time and energy, or money that other most precious and necessary of resources. We recognised some of the confidence of old and were looking forward to 2020 with high hopes.

Coronavirus has changed all that. As I write, we have a closed Railway. At this time of year we would normally be urging you to come to the line we all love, to work or ride the trains, to tend the station gardens, and recreate that special West Somerset Railway welcome for which we are rightly famed. But I have to write to thank you for staying away.

Behind the scenes we are continuing to do as much as we can for the resumption of our Railway. In many ways we are having to do more as Board to get ready for the restart than we would be normally doing. We will continue to scrutinise advice from government and adopt that which is applicable. We are in touch with other leading heritage railways, sharing ideas on when and how to operate in what will undoubtedly be a different environment. We have worked hard to conserve our cash and capital resources. We have placed staff on the Government's 'Furlough scheme', we have suspended projects, we have been applying for rates rebates, and other grants. The PLC now has a very clear understanding of the financial model, and we are developing different ways of opening the railway. But as you would expect we are also working on a worse case basis, which would not see us open until next year.

This pandemic could never have been properly anticipated or insured against, and we are not covered for things like loss of earnings. We are worried about taking up offers of Government loans which only have to be paid back eventually and simply increase debt.

We have begun undertaking key tasks, such as watching the security of the line, and a small number of individuals are quietly checking to see that all is still there. Work is underway to revise and re-write Risk Assessments to take account of social distancing requirements. It may be a well-used cliché to say the safety of our staff, passengers and visitors is our priority, but it is true and our immediate priorities are the people who depend on the Railway for their livelihoods.

Notwithstanding all this success and positive development, during the past few weeks we have received some undesirable attention on social media, in particular a site called National Preservation. This became so unpleasant, that the operators of this particular website took down the page dedicated to the West Somerset Railway, which as far as I can tell is the first time they have had to take such action.

It is important that you are aware we have decided that to protect the good name of the PLC, and you as shareholders, we have changed our approach from trying to ignore these comments, to one of issuing factual statements to rebut these unfair, unbalanced and unjustified remarks. One has been issued already and others may follow.

We enjoy a long Railway with over fifty bridges and culverts, and over fifty footpaths, bridleways and level crossings. We have a fine collection of 19th century Railway buildings. Their requirement for care and maintenance is on-going, trains or not. The track renewals I described are a small part of a much bigger and ongoing picture. The need for rail, sleepers and ballast is ongoing. We have insurance premiums, on-going contracts for IT and telecoms. Our buildings need a little heat to keep dampness at bay. Batteries and other essential components of the signalling system need maintenance. Essential expenditure has been pulled back to the minimum but will still have bills to pay every month.

You will have seen the Emergency Appeal we launched in March, and I am bowled over that we are on target to hit 100k shortly. With more from separate WSRA and WSSRT appeals. This shows such a positive support for our railway.

We want to say thank both the WSRA and WSSRT for their continuing support within their charitable objects, which is funding specific campaigns. We are working more closely with both of them than for a long time. The three campaigns can be found at:

WSR PLC: <https://www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk/donations>

WSRA: <https://www.wsra.org.uk/railrenewal/> and <https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/railrenewal2020>

WSSRT: <http://www.wssrt.co.uk/>

The West Somerset Railway Association has also now completed implementation of the Coombs Report, which will enable it to concentrate on major strategic fundraising and new volunteer recruitment for the railway together with locomotive restoration. The Steam Trust remains committed to maintaining and developing the heritage aspects of the WSR with a particular focus on museums, carriage restoration and education and learning.

Book online at www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk

Sadly the need for funds while we are not generating ticket sales and other associated income does not stop, and we need to keep pushing for the £500k we need to get us through.

Shareholdings offer very generous travel concessions, which we hope you will be able to take up when we are eventually running, and give you an opportunity to participate in the election of directors, and to question and comment.

If you can, please continue your generous support for your Company. We can receive donations over the phone by calling:

Kerry Noble

Phone Number – 01643 704996

E-mail – kerry.noble@wsrail.net

or by cheque to Minehead or via the payment arrangements on the websites. A share application form can be downloaded and submitted electronically or by Royal Mail.

These are very challenging times for the Heritage sector as a whole, a time when we need to think differently if we are to pull through. We are looking at specific areas that could be sponsored on the WSR, running silent actions, developing advance ticket purchases, and other retail opportunities. And you might have other great ideas for raising cash, if so please come back to me.

Finally, we wish to improve the number of communications we send to you and wish to engage regularly, especially in these challenging times. Of course we are faced with a financial crisis, and as we stand today we can't afford using the postal method for everyone each time. So if you haven't yet provided an e-mail contact address, can you please do so now. It will help us immensely and would be very much appreciated. Please make contact with Kerry Noble.

We will ensure that our communications are also sent out via the websites, HOPS, and of course the current e-mail address that we have for you on our database.

The Board will be writing to you again to explain further how and what we are doing to safeguard the WSR and the actions that will be taken to ensure your Railway is maintained in healthy provision. We look forward to sharing this with you.

We realise that there are many financial and other demands on people at the present time, and that there are a number of difficult choices to be made. Nonetheless, we hope that the West Somerset Railway will be one of those good causes you choose to support. This is of course your West Somerset Railway and I want to ensure that the old girl is protected for the future. I am confident that we will ensure this is achieved. It won't be an easy journey, but if you can offer any views or support please do make contact.

For now from the PLC board, Stay Healthy, and I look forward to meeting you on the Railway as soon as it is safe to do so.

Yours sincerely,



Jonathan Jones-Pratt

Chairman, WSR PLC

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