



THE PLATFORM

THE OFFICIAL E-NEWSLETTER OF THE WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY

No. 2 July 2020



Minehead during a recent Steam gala, with several visiting locomotives

From the Chairman

We had very good feedback from the first edition of this Newsletter, so thank you for that. It is very important that we do everything we can to keep people in touch.

We are now moving towards a recovery phase with the railway, and this newsletter reports a number of actions to move things forward. Foremost amongst these is our Living Museum event at Minehead station. We are very grateful to all those who have offered support and encouragement. Details of the event are given later in this Newsletter.

However, things continue to be very uncertain. The Covid-19 virus continues to affect all our lives, and whilst it would be fantastic to say “let’s just get on with things”, for a railway like ours the challenges are enormous. Having only just recovered from a dire financial situation we really cannot afford to risk all on a significant gamble. All of us are desperate to get our fantastic railway operational again and as soon as we consider we can do this safely while maintaining the business, we will do so. In the mean-time I look forward to seeing you at Minehead at one of the upcoming weekend events.

Jon Jones Pratt, West Somerset Railway PLC Chairman

IN THIS ISSUE.... Why isn’t the WSR open this summer?...Minehead Living Museum days...fundraising...news from Minehead Station...news from the WSRA and the WSSRT...getting the weeds under control...trains running on the WSR...who are the Board members?

What are the next steps on the Railway?

The railway is coming together with an event at Minehead station on two consecutive weekends in the near future (25-26 July and 1 – 2 August). Full details are on Page 3 of this Newsletter. We hope to see you there.

Now that the lockdown is eased, people are beginning to undertake a variety of work to keep the railway up to standard and ready to go in due course. There are a whole range of reasons why this is extremely difficult to manage. The bottom line is that we have a very limited amount of money coming in. As detailed later in this newsletter we are delighted that the main line HOBK trains are coming in again to Norton Fitzwarren, and we have also taken steps to start selling various goods on-line through the company website. We are now able to agree to some of our staff come back to work, mainly part time, to help with this. Volunteers are always welcome.

As detailed later, the fund-raising operation across all the railway partners has been restructured and brought together, and we hope that this will lead to a more targeted approach. On the infrastructure side, the volunteer team has been out undertaking a range of work. Locomotive and rolling stock maintenance now continues, and station staff have been busy right along the railway. As many have noticed weed removal has continued at pace.

Why isn't the WSR open this summer?

Readers will be well aware that the railway isn't open now, and will not be open this summer, whilst at the same time some other heritage railways are taking steps to reopen, or partially reopen. We thought we should take a little space in this newsletter to set out the reasons as clearly as we can.

First this is not a decision that the Board have taken without thinking it through very carefully. All the Board members would like nothing more than to see passengers riding our trains behind one of our steam engines. That is why we are here! So, this is the thinking behind the decision not to open this summer.

Three winters in a row

First, at the start of the Covid lockdown, the railway was just emerging from a very difficult financial period. There were many reasons for the crisis that the Board faced in 2018 and chief among them was that passenger numbers (and income) had been on a slow decline for several years, so that expenditure on staff and maintenance was outstripping income. To some extent this had been masked by some excellent special events, which generated large sums. But these events were exceptional and could not be relied on. So the Board took the very difficult decision to reduce the staffing and carefully examine every aspect of expenditure. We also developed some new and different events. This hard work paid off and by March 2020, the Plc was in surplus. Further timetable changes were developed for 2020, and we looked forward to a successful year. Then along came the Covid-19 virus and a long period of enforced shutdown at the start of season.

From the end of March, almost all the paid staff were put onto the Government's furlough arrangement and in late July, many still are, although some have been back for odd days as we start to work on some parts of the railway. Some staff in critical areas, including permanent way, managed to get jobs elsewhere. We are very sorry they left us, but they had opportunities for career development and these do not come along very often. So we very much wish them well. However, this has left a gap on the permanent way side in particular, which will take time to fill. The railway still needs to have as much available cash as possible to take as many staff as possible through the coming winter period, and pay other regular bills.

Railway income in doubt

It is clear that with social distancing, even if our trains operate at maximum capacity, they would be unlikely to generate more than 50% of the normal income. We have a very limited amount of compartment stock, so most would be travelling in our "open" carriages with no barriers between seats, and many seats would have to be blocked off. Many of our passengers (and many of our volunteers) are in the "at risk" category with Covid. We know some of our potential visitors are still concerned about travelling. So we have no assurance that passengers would want to travel in the same numbers as before, even if it were possible. In other words, even if we could operate trains, we are very uncertain that they would generate enough income even to cover their costs.

The Re-opening Plan

Re-opening the railway safely will take tremendous effort by all the staff and volunteers. This is not something we can ask people to do if we are not sure it is commercially viable. The Board took the view that it would be irresponsible to put the finances of the company at further risk in something of a commercial gamble. As, hopefully, the virus retreats, and as we are able to learn from other heritage railways, this will change. We have to convince the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) that we can open safely, but we are very confident this can be done. The present intention is to run some trains over the Christmas period, so that we are fully able to reopen next Spring.

However, we *are* going to operate some events on Minehead station shortly. We have a wonderful historic resource, and we recognise that there are some things we can do when the trains aren't running, such as conducting visitors round the engine running shed, and showing how we maintain the locomotives. And, can YOU push the turntable? Details of the events are on a later page.

And finally we can announce that there will be a 1940s event on Minehead station on August 15th and 16th. More details in the next Newsletter.



WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY

MINEHEAD STATION LIVING RAILWAY MUSEUM DAYS

**Saturday 25th and Sunday 26th July 2020
Saturday 1st and Sunday 2nd August 2020**

Between 10 am and 4pm



ACTIVITIES INCLUDE:

- Turntable Cafe and Buffer Stop Shop Open
- Readers Halt Book Stall Open
- Locomotives on display
- Access to footplate of steam locomotive
- Access to Diesel Multiple Unit Cab
- Stalls on Minehead Platform



Steam Engine Workshop Tours Available (this area is usually off limits to the general public)
Vintage Double Decker Bus rides around Minehead.



ADMISSION PRICES:

ADULT/SENIOR £5.00
CHILD £3.00



ALL PROCEEDS WILL GO TOWARDS OUR FUNDRAISING APPEAL.
LIMITED TICKETS WILL BE AVAILABLE, THEREFORE BOOKING IN ADVANCE THROUGH OUR WEBSITE IS STRONGLY ADVISED. ANY REMAINING TICKETS WILL BE AVAILABLE ON THE GATE.

DUE TO COVID 19 WE WILL REQUIRE ALL VISITORS TO WEAR A MASK WHILST ON SITE.

**For more details please visit our website
WWW.WEST-SOMERSET-RAILWAY.CO.UK
or call us on 01643 704996**

The Bailey Report

Following the company's disagreement with the Somerset and Dorset Trust, currently based at Washford, it was jointly agreed to approach the Heritage Railways Association, to undertake a review of the problem. This review was led for the HRA by John Bailey, a highly experienced and respected heritage railway director on another railway. John's report was produced towards the end of May, and has led to constructive discussions between the WSR PLC and the S&D Trust to resolve matters.

At the same time John took the opportunity to make some observations about the overall arrangements for the railway and the formal relationships between the operating company, and the various charities and other organisations that exist around the railway. Most people acknowledge that the present structures are in need of review. These discussions have now commenced and are ongoing. It is hoped to have detailed recommendations to put to the various stakeholder groups (shareholders, staff, members of associations and so on) within the next six to nine months.

Fundraising

The West Somerset Railway Association has agreed to be the lead organisation for WSR wide fund raising. A Joint Fundraising Group has been established including the PLC and the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust. A revised and updated appeal letter has been agreed and is currently being published in order to provide a renewed stimulus to donations. A "Donations Ladder" has been established with incentives for those who donate specified amounts. These incentives come from all three organisations. The PLC is putting together a schedule of (mainly infrastructure) projects with which to ask the Association and the Steam Trust to find within their charitable objects and powers.



Visiting Loco 7714 leaving Watchet with a train for Minehead

News from Minehead Station

Martyn Snell writes:

The Friends of Minehead Station (FoMS) will celebrate its 25th anniversary during 2021. 1998 seems a long time ago when the late David Perry suggested that, to support the railway and keep our Grade II listed building up together, that a group should be formed to raise money for all sort of needs at Minehead.

As well as the very important social side of things, it was quickly realised that selling recycled book and magazines was a good source of income. A purpose-built shop was built and away we went. The success of the venture has meant that we have had to extend Readers Halt twice, invest in containers to store our stock on the platform and during 2019, erect an overflow shed for stock that, we are pleased to say, keeps on being donated. The folks who have run the stall over the years have done stalwart service in all weathers and look forward to reopening after the current long break. They enjoy their involvement and the chats they have with the buyers. In addition to railway related items, many pre-read books and the occasional specialist item are available.

Where does the money go? Refurbishing the canopy, tarmacking the platform, paying for new fence around the site plus gallons of paint over the years soon take up that which is raised. We try to use local contractors if the work needed requires specialist skills. So the money raised, stays mostly in the local area. Very important we feel.

Above all, we enjoy each other's company and we have great fun together at our various social events sadly curtailed during recent times. If you want to join in and become part of the 140 strong membership, it only costs £3.50 annually (£35.00 for life membership) or £6 for a couple living at the same address (£60 for similar life membership). We look forward to hearing from you and seeing you at Minehead.

News from the West Somerset Railway Association

Mike Sherwood (*Acting Chairman*) writes....

The best news has to be the establishment of a joint fundraising team for the railway. The Association had already diverted most of its efforts to promoting the emergency appeal for funds for the WSR plc and it's great to see WSR plc and WSSRT colleagues joining this effort. I answered countless letters from supporters unsure of where to send their donations and was able to direct them to the WSR plc appeal. The establishment of a joint team will enable the request for support to be much more professionally managed.

I'm also pleased to say that we are now close to resolving the matter of the sale of WSRA (Promotions) Ltd. WSRA have offered a loan with a deferred repayment start date of April 2021. Once the paperwork is concluded WSRA will be able to report to the Charity Commission that the problem has been resolved. The loan also gives a cash injection of £91,000 to the WSR plc.

Speaking of support I'm please to say that The WSRA has pledged ~ £50,000 in the form of a purchase order for work on 4561 that will give the WSR plc the comfort and confidence they need to re-start work at Williton. A further £10,000 has been pledged for coach painting at both Williton and Minehead. The joint fundraising team will use these pledges as a basis for running targeted appeals so that even more rolling stock can be painted and more staff can be kept in employment.

It's great to see the railway waking up and some work starting. Hopefully all those small P-way jobs can soon be attended to. Luckily the materials for most of them are on site already. Due to the

generosity of donors to the 2019 Rail Renewal Appeal there is £50,000 of P-way materials on site awaiting installation.

You'll all have seen at least part of the John Bailey report after he gave permission for it to be published. You'll probably also have seen the detailed response from WSRA to the relevant parts of the published report. If not they can be found on the WSR plc and WSRA web site in the news sections. You'll see that John proposes structural change in order to deliver what he calls a "Peaceful Somerset". WSRA welcome the WSR plc endorsement of the recommendations in the report. We look forward to soon engaging positively in meaningful facilitated dialogue with all members of the railway family to make the recommendations into a reality. Re-establishment of PDG just a few days ago is one positive step that has already been taken. Clearly PDG needs to be further strengthened as time goes on so that it can fully engage the railway in the community. One immediate win, if I can call it that, at the first meeting was understanding there was a problem with Williton Goods Shed roof. The joint fundraising team will now be onto this.

News from the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust

Chris Austin (Chairman) writes...

Work has restarted in the Gauge Museum, with a small working party under curator Geoff Evens going in every week to complete the work that we had to abandon in March, sticking to the protocols for working in buildings agreed with the PLC. Outstanding painting has been completed, additional items displayed and the carpet has been deep cleaned, so that you can now see what colour it is! During the earlier heat wave, some of the displays detached from the walls and the consultant is returning to replace them with a more permanent fixing. The work will continue for the rest of this month, and probably through August as well. Meanwhile, we will be updating the system we use to register the inventory of artefacts and records we hold to meet modern standards, and to comply with the requirements for museum accreditation, which we are currently pursuing. A guide for the new look museum is in preparation by Ian Coleby with help from Matt Sutton for production at the end of this year. At Blue Anchor, work has still to be undertaken to restore the barge-boarding and deal with some corrosion on gutters and canopy supports with the help of RAMS. Consultation has taken place on the future development plans for this museum and will be discussed by Trustees shortly.

A small team under Matt Jackson has been working to prepare the model railway Gauge Junction for running trains, and are currently undertaking a major track relay along the back wall of the layout. You can follow progress on the first of a series of videos he is producing, now showing on WSR TV. The problem is the same as that on the railway outside the museum, of the formation needing attention after many years of operation. So, the track and ballast have been removed to deal with the underlying problem of an uneven baseboard, but should be restored for test running during August. Alan Meade has very generously donated four rakes of coaches to the Group, which is very much appreciated and will help those young operators who are not able to bring their own rolling stock to operating days.

Our Learning Officer Helen Anson has also made a video for WSR TV, showing how the education initiative is working in practice. It is linked to Brunel's Great Western Railway Challenge on the Trust website (www.wssrt.co.uk) and you can see how the railway supports the Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths elements of the national curriculum. As school visits are not currently possible, she is also working on the conservation and care policy for the museum to make sure we use best practice, again essential for museum accreditation.

We have not yet been able to restart work at Williton, but hope to do so during August. One of our volunteers, Richard Gibbs has been working from home, however, and his beautiful restoration of a set of Toplight ventilators is shown here, ready to instal in our former ambulance coach 3639.



Meanwhile Trustees have continued to meet on line to carry on the work, and raising money through the railway's Fundraising Group where we are represented, appropriately, by our Treasurer, Don Fraser. The Trust itself has just received a generous donation from the Peall Railway Trust, of which more news next time. Our Vice Chairman, Steve Williams, represents the Trust on the railway's Volunteering Group, and Steve and I meet PLC and Association colleagues every fortnight to support the work of rescuing and supporting the railway as we work through the current Covid crisis. We are seeking expressions of interest from people who could contribute as trustees as part of our succession planning, and

with Alan Meade's retirement, we are also taking the opportunity to review the structure of the Model Railway Group, governance issues and management appointments for the group. Ironically, I am spending more time on WSR business than ever, even though there are no trains running!"

Getting the Weeds Under Control

A number of groups of volunteers have been very active since the end of lockdown, hand weeding parts of the track. This is pretty hard work and the individuals are to be congratulated on what has been achieved. Some people have asked, why hasn't the railway used the weed-killer train as usual? The answer is a combination of factors. The weed-killer train can only be operated by staff who are qualified, and signed off, to use it. Bringing these staff back from furlough inevitably costs the railway money, as does running the train itself. There are actually significant advantages to hand weeding, although we don't usually have time to do it. First, it draws the weeds out by their roots so they cannot regrow quickly. Also, however "environmentally friendly" the weed-killer is, it is not as environmentally friendly as no weed-killer at all. We have seen the substantial reduction in insects, including bees and butterflies in the countryside over recent years, and anything that can be done to redress the balance is to be welcomed.

From this....



To this....



Congratulations to the team who weeded Stogumber - and to all the other volunteers working at this worthwhile task!

Helping on Weed Removal

If you have any time available and are interested to help one of the weed removal teams, you would be very welcome indeed. It is important though, for safety and insurance purposes, that you are one of the official groups working on the line. (This is a “live” railway and works trains may still run. We need to know where people are.) If you are interested please contact Martin Brown, martinbrown.avfc@gmail.com who would be pleased to hear from you.

Trains running again on the West Somerset!



Another HOBC train heading off the mainline bound for the WSR at Norton Fitzwarren

Several High Output Ballast Cleaner (HOBC) trains have been running from the national network to Norton Fitzwarren in the last few weeks. For those unaware of these trains, they have been running for several years, and have recently recommenced. Operated by Network Rail the trains are made up of a series of wagons connected by conveyor belts, currently usually hauled by Class 66 locomotives. Ballast is lifted and cleaned, with spent ballast being taken forward to be deposited at Norton, where it is cleaned, graded and resold by Messrs Luffman's. A series of contracts are in place between Network Rail, the WSR plc (who own the track), the WSRA (who own the site) and Messrs Luffman's and this provides a relatively small but useful contribution to the railway's income. The WSR PLC has to provide a conductor-driver because the train is travelling on West Somerset rails – if only for a relatively short distance. In the last few weeks trains have travelled up from work sites in South Devon, but spent ballast may come from all across the south west. A few years ago, ballast was brought from as far away as Box Tunnel when the track-bed there was being lowered in preparation for electrification (which has yet to happen!).

Who are the Board members?

After the first Newsletter we received requests to remind people and bring them up to date with who the current PLC Board members are, and give something of their background. So, here are some brief biographic notes:

Jon Jones Pratt is Chairman. Jon is a qualified fireman and has worked as a volunteer on the WSR for several years. His professional career has been in the public transport industry and he is a director of various transport companies. He is Chairman of JJP Holdings who have a major share in Somerset Passenger Solutions Ltd, who run a network of buses across Somerset for staff at Hinckley Point Power Station. He has a particular interest in vintage transport and is the owner of a number of buses, traction engines and railway engines.

Mark Smith is Vice Chairman. Following a career in education, Mark became Managing Director of the WSR in 1990. After retiring from a full-time post with the railway he became Vice Chairman of the Heritage Railways Association (HRA), where he has undertaken significant work supporting a wide

range of heritage railway activity. He rejoined the WSR Board in 2018, and acts as Deputy to the Chairman across all aspects of activity.

Martin Brown is Director with special responsibility for safety. Martin has degrees in engineering and industrial relations. He has held various senior posts in the rail industry including as Assistant Chief Inspector of Railways for HMRI, Director of Health, Safety and Environment for Tube Line and then for London Rail, Transport for London, and latterly Health and Safety Director for the Crossrail Project.

Bob Meanley is Director with responsibility for Engineering and Infrastructure. Bob was Chief Engineer at Tyseley Locomotive Works for 25 years. Bob had responsibility for restoring a number of locomotives from near scrap condition to mainline running. He is an acknowledged national expert on steam locomotive development, conservation and maintenance. Earlier this year Bob won the Railway Magazine Award for Services to Railway Preservation at the HRA Annual Awards.

Justin Kerr-Peterson is Director and General Manager designate for the railway. Justin has been a volunteer guard on the railway for many years. The early part of his career was in posts on the WSR in the Commercial and Operations Departments. In 2013 Justin left the WSR to take up a post with Network Rail. He is currently Strategy Interface Manager for Great Western Railway.

Steve Williams is Director with a main responsibility for external liaison. This currently includes Chairing the Partnership Development Group (PDG). Steve is concurrently Vice Chairman of the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust. Steve has previously held other roles in the WSR including as trustee of the West Somerset Railway Association and as Director of the PLC from 2012 to 2017. Until recently he ran his own management consultancy company.

There are two Board advisers, who support the board and undertake particular assignments. They are:

Frank Courtney has been a volunteer guard on the railway for over 30 years. He has previously been Vice Chairman of the PLC and Chairman of the WSRA. His professional life has been in education where he has been a teacher, lecturer, local authority officer and most recently managed a variety of international projects in education management for organisations such as the World Bank and the EU.

Mike Thompson is also a volunteer guard on the railway. He is supporting the Board in several areas including in financial modelling. In his professional life he is an experienced aviation specialist with over 30 years in leadership roles managing a wide range of international teams including Sales, Marketing, Customer Service & Operations.

What else is there to look at?

There is much other information available to help you keep up to date with WSR developments. If you have access to Facebook, please keep in touch with the WSR Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/WSrail/>

For railway staff (including volunteers) please make sure you keep up to date through the HOPS on-line system. Regular more detailed briefings about railway developments, including specific detailed regular briefings on COVID-19, are available to download from HOPS. Training information will be sent direct to appropriate staff, but also be made available on HOPS.

The excellent West Somerset Railway Journal, edited by Ian Coleby on behalf of the WSRA is sent free to WSRA members but is also available to purchase from Bishops Lydeard shop.

If you feel you need to remind yourself of what you are missing on the railway, then have a look at “West Somerset Railway TV” on YouTube

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZFaYG5_kwQ4rKuSovan9_w

If the number of subscribers reaches 1000, then the WSRA starts to receive money from YouTube, so please press the “subscribe” button! It won’t cost you anything!

And, of course, everyone is recommended to keep a close eye on Steve Edge’s “unofficial” WSR site at www.wsr.org.uk There is a regular flow of all sorts of information and the best, most up to date flow of pictures you are likely to find anywhere.

Please Contribute and Help Us

The plain fact is – despite all the hard work – there won’t be a West Somerset Railway for future generations if we don’t weather this very difficult time and all pull together. We need your help to do this please.

The railway itself (through the Plc) needs cash to survive until then, and if you are able to contribute to this, please consider a donation direct to the Plc, or the purchase of shares in the company if you’re an existing shareholder. And smaller, staged donations over the next nine months would be very welcome too.

A range of rewards are available to donors who give specific amounts of funding. Full details are given on the joint fundraising site at:

<https://www.wsra.org.uk/fundraising>

The Association and the Steam Trust are fundraising for heritage track components, heritage rolling stock and our historic buildings, but this has to be in line with the objects of the charity, and cannot go to the general support of the railway. If you donate through the support charities, however, they can generally reclaim gift aid on your donation.

PLC Donations: <https://www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk/donations>
PLC Share Purchases: <https://www.west-somerset-railway.co.uk/shareholders>
WSRA Donations: https://www.wsra.org.uk/support_us/
WSSRT Donations: <http://www.wssrt.co.uk/>

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Getting in Touch

If you have any views, ideas or contributions please get in touch with the Editor, Frank Courtney, preferably by email frank.courtney@wsrail.net

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