



# **THE PLATFORM**

THE OFFICIAL E-NEWSLETTER OF THE WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY

No. 1 June 2020



## ***From the Chairman***

Welcome to the first edition of this newsletter which is for everyone with an interest in the West Somerset Railway, whatever that may be – and whoever you are!

In these very difficult times, it becomes even more important that we use every opportunity to keep in touch. Communication is a two-way process and, if you have anything you want to say to us, or positive suggestions to make, please use the contact details at the end of the newsletter.

This newsletter will evolve in response to what you would find most useful and interesting, so please tell us! In the meantime, to you and your families, take care and stay safe. We look forward to seeing you back on the railway just as soon as we are able to open again.

***Jon Jones Pratt***, West Somerset Railway PLC Chairman

### **IN THIS ISSUE...**

In this first issue, there is an inevitable focus on the work the Board is doing to keep the railway in good order and prepare for re-opening as soon as we can. There are also brief contributions from the West Somerset Railway Association and the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust which we hope will be a regular feature. In due course, we look forward to contributions from other railway-associated organisations and groups. This edition also includes a main focus on engineering activity. We hope also to be able to feature contributions from other organisations and individuals beyond the railway who also work closely with us.

## ***What Next for the Railway?***

It goes without saying, but we'll say it anyway: we want to get the trains running again and busy with passengers as soon as we can! But at the time this is written (early June), we are still in partial lockdown. It is suggested that most shops will open in mid-June, but there is no knowledge of when hotels, restaurants and bars will open. Social distancing is to be observed for the foreseeable future, and the Government is still advising against travel on public transport. Numbers of people suffering from the Covid-19 virus are falling, but the virus is still a very considerable threat. This is the depressing situation, but the Board, the railway staff and volunteers are determined that there will come a time when the railway will run successfully again.

At the moment we have three overriding priorities:

1. To make sure, as far as we possibly can, that no staff or customers are put at risk by contact with the West Somerset Railway;
2. To make sure that we conserve the railway infrastructure and rolling stock in good order; and
3. To maintain the business so that we can operate again as soon as it is possible to do so.

As we all know, the railway is a seasonal business and closes each year in late October. The Board have come to the reluctant conclusion that it is just not realistic or financially feasible to fully open the railway near the end of the 2020 season, even if it is permissible. We also doubt if enough visitors will feel confident to return yet.

We do not believe that the present rate of fall of new infections is fast enough to be confident that we will be able to guarantee safety on all our trains for all our visitors by the middle of this autumn. It will be almost impossible to ensure social distancing in our period-railway carriages, and on our relatively narrow station platforms too. Of course, this is hugely disappointing for us, but we must be realistic, cautious and responsible.

That said, the Board will be considering whether it is possible to run trains at Christmas, and over the New Year holiday. If we feel we sensibly can, then we will, but there are a great many factors to be taken into account. Once the plans and possibilities become clearer and firmer, more detail will be announced and, as always, any possibilities will be subject to what is allowed, what is sensible and so subject to change.



### ***What are the Board members and advisors doing?***

The Board is meeting in a formal ‘virtual’ meeting at least once a week. Board members are also meeting with representatives of the WSRA and WSSRT most weeks. Board members are in touch with each other informally most days (including Saturdays and Sundays!), and often several times a day. Of course, activity doesn’t necessarily equate to outcomes, so everyone has to remain focussed.

The external situation with ever changing Government instructions, advice and support, and the progress of the fight against the disease is different every day. None of us have faced a situation like this ever before, but the Board members have a wide variety of experiences of dealing with challenging circumstances over several years, both in West Somerset and more widely.

A key focus for us is to do whatever we can to support our valuable staff. Sadly, the cash situation is extremely difficult, even though we had a very successful 2019. In effect what we are going through – in terms of cash generation - is going to be three winters in a row. So, a main focus of the Board is to do everything we can to generate enough cash to try to keep as many of our staff on the team as we possibly can. We are not the only heritage railway, or business, or charity out there seeking funds, but we make no excuse for continuing to pursue every possible avenue for funding support.

At the same time, we do have a priceless, working historic artefact extending over more than 20 miles of wonderful Somerset countryside. And, if we don't begin working again to keep all of our glorious estate up to scratch, then it might not be possible to open again in 2021 even if we wanted to. We owe it to the many generations of dedicated individuals who have got the West Somerset Railway to the high level heritage line that it now is, and ensure we are able to carry on for the future.

Happily, we will be issuing detailed guidance as to how volunteers can safely return to work again in different areas of the railway to comply with all of the regulations and guidance. And there is a developing plan for how we can get a grip on and remove those weeds from our shop windows!

And, of course, a major feature of our railway is the amazing collection of locomotives and rolling stock. Those of us that have been around a long time, remember the delight we had when the first larger sized ex-Great Western loco arrived! Now, we have a good fleet of steam and diesel locomotives available that are correctly representative of a mid-twentieth century West Country railway, and we must conserve this. A later article in this newsletter gives examples of the work being done on steam locomotives that has been carried out by our own team over the 2019-20 winter.

At the same time as all this work is taking place, the regulatory environment doesn't go away because the railway isn't running. The Board has continuing legal, financial and other responsibilities, including to our Regulator, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). We also have some longer-term developments that it would be short-sighted to ignore. For example, work with Somerset County Council is continuing to enable the full renewal of Minehead level crossing and which we expect to start in the early autumn whether trains are running or not.

### ***Keeping Up to Date***

All those working on the railway must have a high degree of competence to ensure that they keep themselves and our passengers safe. For almost everyone, there has been an unprecedented six-month gap in their practical hands-on experience, so it will be necessary to make sure everyone is appropriately skilled, competent and confident to perform their duties again. Whilst for some staff this may be a simple matter of re-familiarisation, for other grades of staff who fulfil safety critical roles, such as footplate crew, guards, signalmen and so on, there will almost certainly be a need for some re-examination and re-certification. Whilst everyone involved wants to make this process as straightforward as possible, we must accept with regret that some colleagues may decide inevitably that they wish to move on after such a gap in duties.

In the next few weeks, more information will be made available concerning what will be necessary and how it will all be delivered. We really hope that as many colleagues as possible will be back on the railway when it reopens and ideally in whatever role you previously had. But, if not, maybe you might choose to try something different? But please come back regardless and help us with whatever you want to do! If you're not sure what to do, please get in touch – the WSR needs your help please.

### ***The Railway as a 'social event'***

This may seem a strange title, but there is no doubt that for most staff and volunteers the main reason they stay on the West Somerset for so many years – besides the natural shared interest – is because they simply enjoy the experience. And this includes just being with like-minded colleagues and sharing wider knowledge and understanding of our railway hobby. These last few months have been difficult for everyone, not least because of social isolation. We all obviously value our friends and families, and for many of us the West Somerset is also a part of that wider 'family'.

And, in any group, we all can find colleagues exasperating at times, but that is the nature of human interaction! So, the sooner we get back together, the sooner we can feel life is coming back to normal. But we also know that may not be for a while yet. The Board recognises that for some people, and through no fault of their own, this period has been more difficult than it has been for others. The Company Doctor, Dr Andrew Tressider has written some helpful guidance for staff and volunteers which will be available shortly on the HOPS staff website if you wish to read it.

### ***News from the West Somerset Railway Association***

Mike Sherwood (Acting Chairman) writes....

Fundraising to support the railway during the lockdown period has achieved to the end of May:

Donations to the WSRA for Rail Renewal in 2020 - £24,954

Donations to the WSRA for Loco Restoration - £3,218

Donations to the two WSRA funds enable us to commission work on No. 4561 and continue to fund the track renewal, both of which can help to keep the Plc running in these difficult times.

In 2019, the WSRA funded around a quarter of a million pounds worth of heritage project work on the West Somerset Railway.

To help the railway move forward with this model, the WSRA funding policy and process have been rewritten and updated to encompass funding requests from all groups on the railway, ranging from the smallest station group to the WSR Plc. There is also a new application form, based on the old form for station groups and expanded to include larger applications as well. All are available for download from the [documents page](#) of the website [www.wsra.org.uk](http://www.wsra.org.uk).

### ***News from the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust***

Chris Austin (Chairman) writes...

The plan was to open the new Gauge Museum displays at the beginning of March, welcome in new school groups, run restored GWR coach 6705 during the Spring Gala and complete roof repairs at Blue Anchor Railway Museum, and look forward to a bumper year of visitors and passengers. But it was not to be, and following a period of inactivity, future uncertainty has made it difficult to plan ahead.

To help children and parents during the lockdown, Helen Anson has produced for the Trust 'Brunel's Great Western Railway Challenge,' which is great fun for all the family, but linked to STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths) subjects in the National Curriculum. You can find this on the Trust's website ([www.wsrtr.co.uk](http://www.wsrtr.co.uk)) and download it to work on at home.

We have worked with the Plc on the revised H&S protocols for working in the museums and we are just about to make a start at Bishops Lydeard to complete the work we so nearly finished back in March, and to clean the accumulation of three month's dust. A small team will also be looking to complete remedial work on the model railway too. We hope to restart work at Williton again soon, also with limited numbers to start with. Initially, volunteering will need to be pre-booked, to ensure we comply with the new rules, so please get in touch with your normal contact or with me, rather than turning on spec.



Trustees have continued to meet via Zoom, as has the Gauge Museum Project Group, and a couple of us have been meeting Plc and Association colleagues every two weeks by Zoom to take forward plans for the railway's survival. We are pushing ahead with a comprehensive cataloguing of everything in the museums, using a new system that is compatible with our aim of becoming a fully accredited museum in the future, and which involves overhauling our collections policy and other policies relating to conservation and museum management.

We do not expect to get back to anything like our normal activities until next Spring, but we do plan to finish the outstanding work over the summer so that, if there is an opportunity to welcome a few visitors later in the season (even without trains running), we shall be able to do so.

In the meantime, the donation boxes remain empty, the second-hand books unsold, but we are open for donations to either continue with our work in the museums or on the coaches, or to support the Plc in relation to heritage items of track and signalling, or rolling stock. See our website for details.

In future newsletters, I will give more details of what is in store at the museums and progress on historic coaches.

### ***Collaboration between the Plc and the WSRA***

It may not be widely known, but just prior to the Covid 19 situation unfolding, moves were taking place between the Plc and the WSR Association for the transfer of the West Somerset Restorations operations to the company. This move was part of a number of changes which took place at the start of the year. At that time, the Association staff at Williton were transferred to the employ of the Plc, and it was intended to build on work already being undertaken at Williton to develop a self-supporting contract workshop under Ryan Pope's leadership. Sadly, we all now know what happened to this proposal with the advent of Covid 19.

For a number of weeks now, the Plc board has been looking at how we might reopen Williton works as and when regulations might permit, and how we could ensure the safety of our staff. To this end, Martin Brown, in conjunction with Ryan Pope, has been studying all of the known Government guidelines and formulating rules and guidance to enable a restart to be made as and when government rules allow. Pleasingly, those rules are now finalised.

Given the pressures on the company finances at this time, the other big issue was the question of how the operation could be made self-financing quickly. The fundamental problem was ensuring that there would be sufficient work-load to occupy the staff for a definite period -- hopefully for twelve months initially -- thus enabling continuous, gainful employment, and also giving sufficient security to permit the acquisition of further work to sustain the company going forward. Ryan has been very busy talking to both existing and prospective customers, and his activities have proven to be very successful, even convincing our accountant and company secretary that Williton can be made into a going concern for the future.

One factor which has been fundamental and a key encouragement has been the support of the WSR Association Board. At the time of writing, we have agreed terms under which the Association can provide grants to support several contracts at Williton, the principal one being resumption of the major overhaul of small GWR prairie No. 4561. Whilst work on this loco has appeared to have stalled in recent times, it must be noted that a major milestone has been achieved with the production of patterns and castings for the cylinders, which have subsequently been machined and await delivery from the Black Country once Williton works reopens for deliveries. Receipt of these will enable an enormous leap forward on the reassembly of the locomotive's frames. A programme of work over an initial period of six months is in place ready for commencement of work. As this is written, grant support for other work on company coaches is being actively debated.

On other fronts too, Ryan has collected a number of contracts for other vehicles and engines. These range from traction engines, industrial loco boilers, living vans, coaches for individuals and the Pontypool and Blaenavon, to wagon restorations and the supply of components and boiler stays, all of which is a quite remarkable achievement in these rather uncertain times. We have to thank our customers for their confidence in our operation and their support for it, in particular the WSR Association. We hope to be able to report further good news on the operation in the next newsletter. I feel sure that everyone who supports the West Somerset Railway will want to wish Ryan, Liam, Don, Harry and Josh the very best of luck as they set out on the challenge to make this new enterprise a success.

**Bob Meanley**, Engineering Director

### ***Making sure the loco fleet are ready...***

We asked **Richard Hiscox** to summarise the position with the loco fleet. Richard kindly sent us full details of what had been done prior to the onset of Coronavirus. We have decided to use this in full because it gives a very good idea (even for non-engineers, like your Editor!) of the huge amount of work that goes into keeping our steam fleet up to scratch. Richard listed the work by locomotive (N.B. please direct technical questions to Richard at Minehead shed please!):

#### **7828 Odney Manor**

Ran 9085 miles in 2019 with no issues, winter jobs included a valve examination due at 10/12k miles. This was completed with wide rings and snap rings opened out.

A new right hand clack valve was fitted as the old one was very close to worn out.

Safety valves were lapped in and re-set on steam test during early March.

A brand new Front draw hook shackle was fitted as on annual examination the old one was again close to our limit and fits procedure.

A brand new tender steam heat valve 'carrot' was produced as again the old one was very worn out as suspected winter frost damage.

A new large ejector spindle was made as the old one was becoming poor.

Drain cocks were dismantled and lapped in repaired as appropriate.

Measurements were taken to crossheads as these will require re-metalling soon (next winter now)

A new castellated brake handle nut has been made and fitted.

A tender swap and repaint has taken place and 7828 now has its Churchward 3500 gallon tender (2206) back on for the time being, this time carrying BR late crest.  
7828 is ready for service once a few winter jobs are finished.

#### WSR 9351

The return of 9351 late 2019 was most welcome to our fleet at MD covering 5,542 miles during late 2019 and running well. A few jobs here and there just to perfect its running were carried out at MD during washouts - winter jobs included: Pairing it back up with its 3,000 gallon Collett tender that was behind 7828.

Lapping in and resetting safety valves.

Various cladding pieces to manufacture and fit under the boiler barrel.

A new tender steam heat valve 'carrot'.

A full repaint and lining out into BR livery early crest.

A newly made copper feed pipe for left hand steam injector.

A full set of 14A brake blocks plus adjusted.

A bit of work on hydrostatic lubricator pipe work.

A new baffle plate fitted.

Renewal of some parts of the cab floor on fireman's side.

#### 7F 53808

Again, 88 ran very well during 2019 covering just under 9,000 faultless miles on the WSR. Some fairly big jobs this winter on her including boiler work.

A full valve and piston examination this included brand new valve heads and valve rings.

Both pistons out measured cleaned and reassembled.

Usual winter annual examinations.

Renewal of clack valves plus lapping in.

New intermediate tender buffer springs.

27 new patch screws fitted into the boiler firebox lap seams.

Various stay nuts replaced.

10 new firebars fitted.

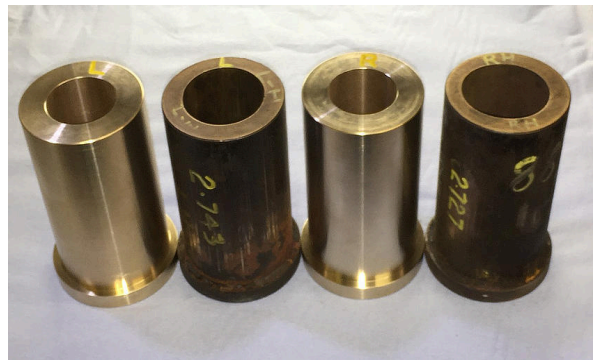
New valve gland bushes made for end covers.

8 foundation ring rivets built up using TIG and dressed back.

Tender coal space needle gunned repaired and re-painted.

Front buffer spring replaced.

Pressure relief valves removed/cleaned after valve boring.



#### 7752

A great little addition to the fleet during 2019 - this loco looking just the part in GWR green running 3,333 miles for us after a full repaint and coupling rod bushes being done at MD.

After a busy season on the railway, she then went to WN for winter works as MD was a little busy with the rest of the fleet.

### ***What else is there to look at?***

We intend to bring this Newsletter out on a monthly basis, at least until the railway re-opens, but 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 next edition of the excellent West Somerset Railway Journal, edited by Ian Coleby on behalf of the WSRA will be published shortly. This 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](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZFaYG5_kwQ4rKuSovan9_w)

If the number of subscribers reaches 1000, then the WSR 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](http://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.

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/](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](mailto:frank.courtney@wsrail.net)

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