



"ONLINE"



THE NEWSLETTER OF THE WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY AND THE WEST SOMERSET RAILWAY ASSOCIATION JANUARY 2009.

FROM THE GENERAL MANAGER

As you will see elsewhere 2008 ended on a strong note and it is therefore appropriate to begin this year by saying thank you to everyone who worked so hard in difficult circumstances for the Railway during the last twelve months. Our December operations were an undoubted success. John Cronin's report on Special Events follows this but the Carol Trains, Dunster by Candlelight and Santas involved a lot of hard work being done during the low part of the yearly cycle for daylight and personal comfort for volunteers and staff. Thanks to your efforts all passed off well and we had many expressions of thanks from satisfied customers.

The post-Christmas operations became progressively more difficult as temperatures dropped on a daily basis but once again everyone on duty worked well, and together, to offer a good day out to passengers looking for a Christmas/New Year day out. We had difficulties with frozen water pipes and other winter problems but once again our passengers enjoyed themselves and as a result will hopefully visit us again when the days are longer and warmer.

However we still have a difficult year ahead of us. All Departments are having to operate with reduced budgets and the Railway as a whole has no option but to live within our means. Failure to do this will endanger all that has been built up since 1976 and we must remember, rather than re-learn, the hard lessons that had to be learned in the past. We have a brief period between the end of operations on January 4th and the resumption on February 14th and if you can assist with some maintenance work along the line or help out with some of the mailing activity from Minehead or Bishops Lydeard offices please don't be backward in coming forward. A strong start to 2009 will be crucial.

However the best asset that we possess is YOU, the people who run, promote and maintain the West Somerset Railway, and if we work together sensibly we can look forward to a bright future for our Railway.

(Paul Conibeare)

SPECIAL EVENTS NEWS

I am pleased to report we rounded off 2008 with a successful Winter Steam Festival held for the first time this year over 2 days. Last year on Festival Day we carried 1104 passengers and the day after on a Red Timetable day we carried 314 passengers, a total for the two days of 1418 passengers. This year with a 2 Day Festival we carried 2056 passengers (up 31%) with fares revenue (with tickets at standard rather than gala prices) up by 32%, vindicating my predecessor, Richard Jones, who went out on a limb to convince people that we could make a success of a 2 Day Winter Steam Festival if we developed a winning formula based on a mix of visiting and home based locomotives. As you probably know we used a total of 6 steam locomotives over the 2 days including no. 6024 "King Edward I" and 0-6-2T no. 6695 plus no's 34046 "Braunton", 88, 3850 and 9351 and that proved to be a winning line-up.

On the downside, the weather was cold and we received many complaints about lack of trainheating, overcrowding because of insufficient coaches in each set and a lack of operational buffet cars. There were also timekeeping issues with each day finishing some half hour late which is not going to encourage visitors with longer homeward journeys to make to revisit us. These issues need to be examined as an urgent priority bearing in mind scheduled services begin again on 14th February and if the weather pundits have got it right we could be in the middle of a deep freeze by then.

However I feel we can judge the event a success overall, achieved by your input as staff on duty on one or both days, for which my Planning Team thank you. Thanks also go to Richard Jones who had the vision over 2 years ago of a winning formula for a 2 day Winter Steam Festival. Well done Richard and once again thank you.

Looking ahead to 2009, the Spring Steam Gala to be held on the 21st/22nd March and between 26th and 29th March is only 11 weeks away and SEPT hope to publish the Gala Leaflet and Booking Form early in January, the aim being to maximise advanced ticket income. When the publicity leaflet becomes available can we ask as many of you as possible to take a sensible amount home with you to hand on to family, friends and work colleagues so we get maximum coverage at least cost of what we plan to be a magic Gala. However, as always, any Gala can only be successful if we have sufficient competent staff on duty to welcome and look after all our visitors whilst they are with us. To that end can I ask all of you in all Departments and Stations to make yourself available for duty at an early date so we can be assured all the hundreds of jobs are fully covered and together we can deliver a quality event

for our visitors with minimum stress levels and maximum enjoyment for all the Team.

Finally, Here's hoping 2009 will be a Vintage Year for this Railway and our Special Events as we endeavour to build on what we, together, achieved in 2008 which I feel we can rightly judge a good result despite the many problems we had to face along the way.

May I wish you all on behalf of the Special Events Team a Happy, Healthy and Prosperous New Year.

(John Cronin)

YEAR END PASSENGER FIGURES

When the last trains pulled into Bishops Lydeard and Minehead on December 31st we had carried 203,966 passengers in 2008, the second-best annual total in the WSR's 32 year history, narrowly beating 2005. This does represent quite a drop-off from 2007's all time record of 213,423 but as we look back over the year there are some contributory factors that we can identify.

For the first half of the year the work being carried out at Minehead in conjunction with the work on the turntable installation and seafront enhancement meant no car parking by the station and the area looking like a building site, rather than a working railway terminus. Secondly the substitution of diesels for steam on most services during the summer certainly lost us some trade (for most of the general public a heritage railway is a steam railway) and thirdly we did not welcome as many mainline charter trains to the line compared with recent years. And the problems which led to there being no "Thomas" event also meant a large drop in figures in early July. From August onwards we were trading virtually at par with 2007 but the losses in the early part of 2008 could not be recovered.

DOWN AT TRACK ROOTS

This month there is some Civil Engineering Permanent Way News and some Works News to report:

CIVILS NEWS

STOPPING AT MINEHEAD TURNTABLE – The creation of an appropriate heritage environment within WSR property around the new turntable continues. An issue that arises when creating a new facility in a heritage environment is that modern legislation has to be complied with. 'Grandfather Rights' as they are called, broadly apply to the historic equipment, although not exclusively and thus the new run off spur for the turntable is required to have a means of arresting an 'over-running' locomotive. A friction stop block therefore has to be installed. Clearly we must all hope that its friction properties never have to be put to the test, but with the

potential to have many people stood right behind the short run off spur when a locomotive moves onto the turntable, it is a risk that has to be controlled

As supplied a friction stop block is not a 'heritage friendly' piece of equipment and whilst a coat of black paint helped, both Engineering Director Ric Auger and Chief Civil Engineer John Buxton were still of the view that something that was more sympathetic to the heritage environment could be created. John then remembered his formative model railway days and the sleeper stop block that Peco made in the 1960s as a 'clip in 'accessory (which incidentally was based in turn on a 1930's Stuart Reidpath product). John and his team then formulated a design that involved the fabrication of a frame that is fitted to the friction stop block and then clad with sleepers, thus becoming a prototype that was designed from a model !

The new 'sleeper stockade' stop block is to be mounted on and around the metal friction stop block. The design permits both the stockade and the friction stop block to move as one unit should a loco over-run. In this instance the friction grip clamps would arrest the velocity of the loco and bring it to a controlled stand. The Civil Engineering team are undertaking the installation prior to the Christmas break and after a typical Somerset Winter it should weather in and nicely recreate a typical Great Western stockade stop block.

ULTRASONIC RAIL TESTING – The continuing co-operation between the WSR and NR's Infrastructure organisation resulted in the testing of a Road / Rail Unimog based, ultrasonic rail test vehicle. The testing has benefited both parties and from the WSR's perspective it assists in further confirming and validating the structural integrity of the rails.

The ultrasonic testing undertaken is broadly similar in concept to that utilised to test wheels and axles, in that in simple terms, high frequency electronic oscillations create vibration waves that are projected into a piece of metal (in this case a rail) and readings are taken from the echo reflections. If there is a discrepancy from the norm then it will show up both on an electronic graph screen display and on the recorded data readings, from these the operator can identify what the fault cause might be. The 'degree' of fault present then dictates the remedial action that has to be taken. Most of the faults found are totally undetectable by the human eye, being internal within a faulty rail. The faults can occur at any time and then propagate into serious cracks and ultimately rail breaks under an imposed load, i.e. a train. The rail crash at Hatfield a few years ago was caused by a rail disintegration at a known fault site, but where there was a failure to take the appropriate rectification action promptly. In general the older and more worn a rail is then the more susceptible to faults it can be and if it suffers from the 'hammering' effect of wheel flats or wheel burns (from slipping wheels) then the risk level also increases.

Railways, within both the legislation under which they operate and within common law, have a duty to ensure that they are maintained and operated as safely as reasonably practicable and the WSR CE team strives to ensure that it constantly monitors the relevant maintenance performance parameters applicable. The ultrasonic testing is part of this process in that the technical data obtained assists and supports the continued provision of safe track on the WSR.

AVOIDING BRIDGE STRIKES BY ROAD VEHICLES - The serious consequences arising from a major road vehicle bridge strike should not be underestimated and indeed one could potentially put the WSR out of action for many months, if for example, substantial structural repairs were required. Clearly insurance is seen as a comfort in such circumstances but as the major bank washouts on the Seven Valley proved it is better not to be facing the problem in the first place. As a result one of the last actions that outgoing chairman Chris Austin took was to lobby Somerset County Council at a senior level to set up a joint WSR / SCC Highways working party to look at the problem and possible solutions.

The WSR team was headed up by General Manager Paul Conibeare, assisted by Tony Phillips from the CE team and the first step they took was to explain to the SCC team what the risks were. This then led to an assessment of how SCC might help to mitigate them and what the potential costs might be to achieve this state. A number of possible technical solutions to improve the current situation are now being investigated by the working party and these will be reported on in later issues of Online as progress is made. One of the most interesting issues noted so far, was the level of appreciation from the SCC Highway representatives of the economic, social and tourism consequences for the area if the WSR were not able to operate its full line service and the A358 were to be obstructed or partially obstructed for any length of time.

(Tony Phillips)

DIESEL NEWS

December has proved to be a busy month at Williton depot as we have steadily progressed our many projects. Sadly, Class 35 "Hymek" D7017 was not ready for a trial start before Christmas and we now need to get it up and running as early as possible in January. Class 25 no. D7523 has had her cab floor repaired at Williton and returned to traffic as the Company Service locomotive during the month. The plan is she will continue this role until Easter 2009 allowing us to withdraw Class 08 no. D3462 for engine repairs and Class 33 no. D6566 for a new set of batteries and other repair jobs.

Class 14 no. D9526 finally returned home to Williton during the month and is currently resident in the Heritage Visitor Centre where we plan to undertake a full body repaint in the Spring. Class 52 "Western" no. D1010 remains stored outside the Heritage Visitor Centre sheltering under temporary tarpaulins until we can find room in the shed for her once D7017 is returned to traffic. However the other engine in the locomotive has been fired-up and can be rotated so hopefully it has not suffered any long term damage due to water ingress.

Away from the depot at the end of the month, just before Christmas 28 members of the Team and their wives/partners enjoyed a superb Christmas Dinner in the "Wyndham Arms" at Williton to round off a successful 2008 for the DEPG Team at Williton.

Thus we can look forward to 2009 with keen anticipation despite the financial gloom that surrounds so many of at work and at home and I close by wishing you, on behalf of all the DEPG Team, a Happy, Healthy and successful New Year, see you all in 2009.

(John Cronin)

FRIENDS OF MINEHEAD STATION

The cold weather during the post-Christmas period didn't deter the hardy souls who staff Readers Halt and were determined that it should have taken £150,000 in just over a decade before Frances Bristow handed over the running of the Halt to Wendy and Jeff Cousins after February 14th and the FOMS AGM. Aided by a £5 purchase by the General Manager the target was duly reached on December 31st. It is a remarkable achievement by Frances and the various helpers down the years and also a reflection on the level of support from the rest of the WSR and the general public who have contributed items for sale and raised funds for the maintenance and improvement of Minehead Station.

Looking further ahead the Grimethorpe Colliery Band is returning to the Regal Theatre in Minehead on Sunday 15th May. The concert will raise money for FOMS and the Regal Theatre and starts at 3.00 p.m. Book now to avoid missing what is bound to be a sell-out concert. Tickets can be obtained from the Regal on 01643 706340.

NOTIFICATION OF TEMPORAY CLOSURE OF BLUE ANCHOR LEVEL CROSSING

The West Somerset Railway has obtained consent from Somerset County Council for the temporary closure of the public highway across the level crossing at Blue Anchor between Monday 2nd February 2009 and Friday 13th February 2009 inclusive.

NO VEHICULAR ACCESS OVER THE LEVEL CROSSING WILL BE

AVAILABLE DURING THIS PERIOD because of the need to renew the roadway, both railway tracks and the supporting foundations.

This is a substantial engineering project and it is understood that it will cause inconvenience to both residents and business's, although it is hopefully appreciated that the work has been programmed to be undertaken outside normal holiday periods. The main alternative vehicular route will be via Carhampton and Old Cleeve and more than forty 'diversion signs' will be situated in the local area to give guidance on these alternative routes.

Pedestrian access will be maintained by means of a timber board walk adjoining the existing level crossing, but at certain times when for example heavy machinery is being moved around the site, there may be some unavoidable short delays in being able to cross the railway from one side to the other.

The West Somerset Railway wants in advance of the work starting, to thank all residents and businesses in the area for their understanding and co-operation whilst this essential engineering work is being undertaken.

If anyone reading this has any questions that they wish to raise with the West Somerset Railway, then please contact Paul Conibeare (01643 700388).

WANTED

We have a need to acquire as cheaply as possible or ideally for free the following items of equipment.

A laptop capable of laying DVD's for use in future Personal Track Safety Courses (or if anyone can arrange it sponsorship of purchasing one).

Fax Machines. We are looking for 10 of these (once again ideally for free or via sponsorship). The purpose is to improve communications between stations and control offices when problems arise along the line. They could be particularly useful during Galas or other periods of intensive train operation if a failure occurs or some other possible cause of delay to services.

If you are able to help with either please contact Paul Conibeare at the Minehead Office.

THE RETURN OF THE "FLOCKTON FLYER"

Inspired no doubt by the continued sales of "Thomas" dvds and the success of the reissued "Ivor The Engine" stories on dvd Simply Home Entertainment are re-releasing the 1970's children's t.v. series at the end of February/early March. The series was originally made by Southern Television in 1976/77 and a total of twelve

thirty minute episodes were recorded with the VSR being used for the external shots. The "Flockton Flyer" itself was number 6412 which carried the appropriate name plates during 1977. Apart from the stories themselves and the usual malicious delight that will be taken in seeing long serving volunteers and staff with fewer wrinkles, more hair and slimmer waistlines than is the case thirty years on, the background details should be fascinating in showing how much the line has changed since the days when we were re-opening and weren't yet running to Bishops Lydeard. No doubt stocks will appear in the Railway's shops.

THE BARNSTAPLE LINE

After obtaining the necessary agreement and approval of Network Rail volunteers from the Association Cutting Back and Permanent Way gangs spent January 3rd and 4th clearing the undergrowth from the ditch between the old Barnstaple line formation and the up Exeter-Taunton line. (The Taunton-Barnstaple line closed in October 1966). This section of the old branch trackbed is going to be transferred to the WSRA in the Spring for incorporation into the turning triangle at Norton Fitzwarren and subject to the final grading the entire triangle is now very nearly ready for progressive ballasting during the Spring of 2009. There is another working party on January 10th and 11th.

BOOK EARLY FOR CHRISTMAS??????

It was on Tuesday January 6th that the Commercial Department at Minehead received their first enquiry for booking on the Carol Trains for December. It was for a block booking of 20 seats and suggests that some folk had a very good time on the December 2008 operations. The same day also produced an enquiry if it was too late to enter photographs for the design of the Santa Train leaflets.

STEAM TRUST NEWS

The Steam Trust is holding an Update Meeting which will be open to everyone interested in the Heritage Carriages Project. It will take place at the Ruishton Inn, near Taunton, on the evening of January 31st starting at 6.30 p.m.

During the Spring Steam Gala, on Saturday March 28th at 7.30 p.m. a film evening is taking place at Crowcombe Village Hall.

Meanwhile the next working parties on Toplight 3639 will take place at Williton on January 17th and 31st. No doubt more hands, skilled and less-so, will be welcome. Some details of the Heritage Carriages Project have now appeared in the January edition of the "Railway Observer", published by the Railway Correspondence and Travel Society.

A REMARKABLE FIND

The archival side of the Steam Trust has acquired an item which not only predates the “Toplights” and the “Flockton Flyer” but also the original West Somerset Railway. It is an envelope dating from May 10th 1860, posted in Taunton and sent to Mr Edward Risdon at Washford. The outside of the envelope explains that it contained a receipt for cash paid to the West Somerset Railway Company £10 for 20 shares at 10 shillings per share (interesting to note that the original WSR terminated at Watchet and Washford didn't see a service train apart from on the Mineral Line until 1874) and it also bears the seal of the original company seal. Despite being posted in Taunton the seal has the Company's London address of 6 Victoria Street, rather than that of the Hammett Street Office.

NEW BOOKS FOR THE MARCH GALA

The Spring Steam Gala traditionally sees new books being launched and this year's is no exception to that rule of thumb. The Nostalgia Collection are producing “West Somerset Railway Past and Present Volume 2” which has been compiled by David Williams, editor of the West Somerset Railway Association “Journal” and that is due for an official launch during the second weekend. Also due along is what has almost become a rite of Spring in itself, a new Somerset and Dorset book compiled by Alan and Christine Hammond.

STEAM ENGINEMAN COURSES

All Stage One Dates in the original 2009 programme have already been filled and there are only two “Taster” dates with spaces left on them suggesting that there are still a lot of us who want to be engine drivers when we grow up and that the product which we offer is a good one. Thought will be going into how we can offer extra dates.