

# TODAY'S CHILDREN, TOMORROW'S VISITORS AND VOLUNTEERS

By David Cockram, Education Officer

October 2016

Over the years the Bluebell Railway has built up a sound reputation for providing a comprehensive education service and schools, and other youth organisations, such as the Scouts, have taken advantage of what we have to offer. That service has of course been backed up by the efforts of colleagues running the Stepney Club and the 9F Club.

Recent years have seen a reduction in the number of schools visiting the Railway, brought about in large part because of financial pressures on school budgets. However, although those pressures remain, we are now seeing an increase in the number of schools and scout groups visiting—in a number of cases for the first time—as a result of recommendations. By the end of this calendar year, we will have entertained more than 40 schools and eight scout groups—some 1,900 children and 300 adults. We also had enquiries from a further 23 schools that wanted to visit but were unable to do so, in a number of cases because we were unable to provide suitable slots.

What has become increasingly clear is that it is no longer sufficient to say “we are here, come and see us”. Teachers are increasingly looking to focus their visits on specific areas of the curriculum, and we are having to adapt what we offer to meet their needs. Topics this year have ranged from “Going Places” to the “Impact of the Railways” and “Marvellous Machines”. We offer three broad themes for school visits: general visits dealing with the topics selected by the school; World War II Evacuation Exercises (we have spooked the station staff at Horsted Keynes on no less than 11 occasions this year); and enrichment visits, when we try to provide that little bit extra, such as a tour of the Carriage & Wagon Works or the opportunity to inspect some of our Victorian coaching stock.

We have also taken steps to make it easier for schools to obtain information about our activities and what we have to offer. The “School Groups” link on <http://www.bluebell-railway.com/> provides access to a host of information about the Bluebell and general railway history, plus guidance on risk assessments. Meanwhile the introduction of the dedicated education email address [education@bluebell-railway.co.uk](mailto:education@bluebell-railway.co.uk) is increasingly being used by schools as their first port of call. This system makes it easier for me to respond quickly to queries and requests for bookings.

We continue to look at ways of improving the service we offer, including improvements to the booking system and better facilities around the Railway for school parties. We are already planning an improvement in the display of

locomotives through the ASH Project—children love nothing better than to pull and push levers!

In providing for school visits we are, of course, indebted to the team of guides who meet and accompany school on their visit, but other volunteers also play an important part in making a success of these visits. They include, in particular, the station staff at all four stations and the loco crews, who so willingly allow the children to visit the footplate, which is for many children the highlight of the visit.

It is always helpful to receive feedback after school visits, and the following letter from a teacher who recently made his first visit to the Bluebell was most welcome:

*Hello David,*

*I just wanted to take a few moments to write and thank you, Sandon and all the other volunteers for all that you did to make our recent trip such a success. The children had a really fantastic day and learned a lot. Some of our children would never had had an opportunity to get up close to a vintage steam train in this way before, so I think you will have helped to create a lot of memories for our children!*

*I have to say that personally, as a teacher, it was one of the best trips I have ever been on. And in fifteen years that's a lot of trips. From the moment we arrived, you were on-hand to accompany us and make the day run smoothly. I really appreciated that because going on a trip can be a very stressful experience (!) and you really helped to alleviate that stress. You and Sandon were great with the children and helped to keep them engaged with all parts of the day, as well as keeping me informed and checking that everything was OK.*

*We have been working on writing some recounts of the day which I will forward copies of these to you. Our history work about the influence of the railways on Britain will also be more successful I feel as the children have a real experience to 'latch' onto.*

*Anyway, thanks again for all you did. Please pass my thanks to all the volunteers and long may the Bluebell Railway continue. I put some of the leaflets in the staff room and this generated a lot of interest. Surprisingly, quite a lot of my colleagues were not aware of the Bluebell Railway so hopefully we have pointed a few more people in your direction.*

*Kind regards,*

*Mike Trodd*

*Westcourt Primary & Nursery School, Gravesend*

We also receive letters from the children themselves, as shown by the following letter from Amy McQuitty from Robin Hood Junior School, Sutton:

Robin Hood Juniors,  
Thorncroft Road,  
Sutton,  
Surrey.

To everyone at the Bluebell Railway,

I am writing to say that I really enjoyed the trip we had yesterday and that I'm really grateful that we came.

The first thing that I noticed was how big the trains were! Some of them had been there since 1955. It was amazing that you have kept them in such good condition. They looked brand new!

When we eventually got onto the train, I was so excited. When I stepped onto it I felt as if I was in the 1900's! The smell, look, sounds and atmosphere were magical. When we set off I really believed I was an evacuee!

When the two train journeys ended I was quite disappointed but glad I had an amazing trip. When I got back to school I was sure I was going to tell my family about my day and try to persuade them to come again.

Thankyou for a delightful outing - I have learnt so much!

Best wishes,  
Amy McQuitty