

Highlights of BRPS Meetings, 18 May, 2019

Those members attending the Bluebell Railway Preservation Society (BRPS) meetings in Burgess Hill on 18 May had a busy evening as the agenda covered the reconvened 58th Annual General Meeting (AGM) from 2018, which failed to be quorate; an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM); and the 59th AGM.

On this Saturday evening it was essential that the meeting be quorate—requiring 200 attendees—and indeed we made that number, but it was tight.

The EGM came first, the key part of which was an enabling motion to authorise the Trustees to transfer the assets and obligations of the Society to a Company Limited by Guarantee, a recommendation that had formed part of the findings of the Corporate Governance Review.

Discussions that followed indicated that there was not a clear understanding by all present of the roles of the Society and the Public Limited Company (PLC). It was emphasised that the roles and responsibilities of the three key players—the Society, the PLC, and the Trust—did not change, and these were outlined to the meeting. It was also confirmed that we were hopeful of getting dispensation to continue to use “Bluebell Railway Preservation Society” as the name for the new entity.

There were five motions as part of the EGM, another key motion being a change from 200 to 100 as the number of attendees required for a meeting to be quorate. A number of proxy votes had been submitted, of which 142 left discretion to vote with the Society Chairman. All motions were carried easily. It was confirmed that the next key step was to draw up the Articles of Association for the new entity and that these would align as closely as possible to the current Society rules. Approval of the Articles by the membership will form part of another EGM expected in late 2019 or early 2020.

The reconvened 58th AGM agenda was accomplished quite quickly and included approval of the 2017 minutes and 2017 Society accounts. In response to a question, it was emphasised that the Society did not borrow money, only the PLC did that. Furthermore, as has been the case for many years, the Society lent its surplus income from membership and other donations to the PLC on a monthly basis, with the figure being converted into PLC shares (£500,000 of such conversion took place during 2018).

The 59th AGM was then held. It included 50-, 40- and 25-year service awards for volunteers. This year also saw awards for those with 10 years' service and also for 60!

The Society Officers—i.e., Chairman, Vice Chairman, General Secretary, Membership Secretary, and Treasurer—all stood for re-election and were unopposed. Also, all the Trustees positions are now filled.

The motion for an increase in membership subscriptions originally presented last year—but unable to be discussed—was re-presented. The BRPS Treasurer outlined the thinking for the need to catch up with cost increases, the last membership increase being on 1 Jan., 2013. The motion was carried easily, and increases will take effect 1 Oct., 2019. Also approved was a £2 discount for memberships paid for by direct debit, plus a revision in the calculation for five-year membership rates.

A discussion was held over the 2019 timetable changes and in particular the reduced number of operating days. The PLC Chairman responded on this point in some detail. Though winter operating days had initially been cut back by necessity to accommodate track relaying between Sheffield Park and Horsted Keynes, considerations had gone further. Savings from not operating a running service go well beyond reduced coal consumption. The Board, and the Railway in general, have to be put on a sustainable financial footing for the long term, and right now a gap between operating revenue and operating costs of about £200,000 needs to be closed.

The timetable cut backs in 2019 had been essentially around Monday/Tuesday operation in the shoulder months of May, September, and October. In looking at the approach to the 2019 timetable, we consulted with other similar sized heritage railways, who indeed have a similar approach to cutting out poorly loaded services. The PLC Chairman stated that he saw the Bluebell Railway as remaining a steam railway, a view supported by the audience, thus the perceived economies and flexibilities of diesel motive power were not on the agenda.

Timetable changes are, however, not fixed in stone, and for 2020 operations a full review of passenger loadings and related costs for will be key. It was acknowledged that some signage and literature that continue to refer to daily operations between April and October should be brought up to date.

On the PLC accounts, Finance Director Martin Widdowson re-affirmed his statement about heritage railways' basic financial model not being sustainable and the balancing of preservation ideals with customer wishes was key to success. If the peak in income occasioned in 2017—thanks to the visit of “Flying Scotsman”—was taken out, our results over recent years have been very similar. Net assets in 2018 had increased from £17.6 million to £19.3 million, contributing to which was:

- OP4: £200k
- ASH: £850k
- Maintenance Shed: £160k
- Car 54: £120k
- Atlantic Project: £100k

The Finance Director stated general fare income is £200,000 below where it should be.

The PLC and Society chairmen made a joint closing address. The customer/visitor expectations get ever higher and “just a riding on a train” is no longer enough. Visitors are looking for a wider experience. The attraction of steam remains key, especially to family visitors, and our great success in this market is readily evidenced by the success of Santa season. The playground at Kingscote, Elephant Play Van at Horsted Keynes, and SteamWorks! and Museum at Sheffield Park are an essential part of our delivery to the younger visitor.

Ideas for generating the additional £200k of fare revenue are being worked on, and a small team of four has been assembled with representation from the Trust, PLC, and Society to look at formulating a Business Plan with a clear vision of where we want the Railway to be in five, 10, and 20 years’ time and what we need to address to get there. The Business Plan by definition would need to have as a core ingredient the continued priority of safety for our visitors, staff, and volunteers.

With time having run out, the Society Chairman asked that if there were any further questions, these be submitted in writing to General Secretary Gavin Bennett.

As a closing note, money raised on the evening from refreshments (£300) and the retiring collection (£331.59) will be put towards the fund to restore the Maunsell Restaurant Car.

By Roger Garman, Trustee, Bluebell Railway Preservation Society