

# WEST SOMERSET STEAM RAILWAY TRUST

Welcome to special issue No. 14 of the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust Newsletter. I hope you are keeping well and managing during these strange times.

This update is for all members and volunteers of the Steam Trust to provide as much information as we know about the current situation, and what we have been doing to prepare for a return to our favourite railway as soon as we can. This is a fast-changing situation, so the note reflects the position today. It may change tomorrow.

We are sorry that we have not been able to do this before. For several weeks now, the situation has been fluid and the prospects changing frequently.

*Chris Austin, Chairman*

## **So far**

The Government requirements from 23 March meant that the situation was pretty clear – stay home. The railway was closed along with the associated workshops and the only activity was a patrolling regime that allowed named staff to keep an eye on the safety and security of the railway. The weather and the lockdown have meant that the railway remains in good shape, even if the rails are a little rusty, and the grass a little high. However, there has been a worrying increase in trespass, as people in search of exercise have taken to the tracks, and steps had to be taken to discourage this. Even if no trains are running (and you always have to work on the basis that something might be

running), there is a risk of trips and falls on the track which might be in a remote location and out of sight and earshot of rescue. During the shutdown, we have stayed in close touch with PLC and Association colleagues, both by phone and e-mail, and with an online conference via Zoom every two weeks for an update and agreement on action going forward.

## **What next?**

The latest Government statements allow a limited return to work now in some sectors of the economy, if work cannot be carried out at home. We are discussing with the PLC whether that might allow a resumption of our volunteer operations and if so, what safeguards we might need to put in place to allow any resumption of work to be undertaken safely, whether that is carriage restoration or working in the museums. Arrangements will be needed, for example, to allow volunteers to stay 2m apart while they are working and during tea or lunch breaks. This may in due course allow us back in the museums and on the model railway to finish the winter work that was cut short, so that we can prepare for visitors as soon as that becomes possible (see below).



*A corner of the 'new look' gauge museum, waiting for visitors.*

**Further Ahead**

The latest Government advice suggests that, if the number of infections does not rise as restrictions are lifted, it might be possible to go further in July, with some leisure facilities reopening with social distancing. It may be that tourist attractions could follow that, but the requirements for people to stay 2m apart is clearly going to be difficult in the confines of a railway carriage, or even on a busy platform. Even if that were possible, the limited number of passengers on a train might not be enough to cover the costs of running it.

The other issue will be whether volunteers and visitors will be prepared to return yet. This is particularly true for the over 70s, classified as 'vulnerable' and with special shielding measures still in place.

With proposals for some children to go back to school in June, we will also consider how far we can take the education work back to schools.

Opinions differ on the longer-term future. Some think that the continuing restrictions on overseas travel will lead to a bonanza for British tourism, as those who have been cooped up indoors for so long are desperate to get out and enjoy favourite destinations such as Somerset. Others are more pessimistic, suggesting that the lack of income for those who are unemployed as a result of the pandemic will mean that nobody has money to travel, or to spend if they could get

away. I am an optimist and do foresee an increase in visitors with money to spend, but it may take some time to build up, and may also reduce once air travel becomes possible again. Our job is to be ready for the boom as far as we can, by keeping in close touch with developments.

**Financial**

So, the position is complex, and with no money coming in from passengers or shop or café sales, and no donations in our collecting boxes, great care is going to be needed to avoid racking up losses which the railway cannot afford to do. At the same time, there is a need to raise funds for further work next winter to allow the work required for a successful 2021 season.

We would hope that we might resume work at Williton sooner and to reopen the museums before trains start running again, although everything will be on a reduced scale to start with. Once we are sure about what we can do and when we have the agreement of our volunteers and the PLC to go ahead, we will post details on our website and on Facebook.

Fundraising has reached over £110,000 this week for the railway as a whole, but much more is needed, with a target of £500,000 both to support the PLC in the maintenance of the railway, and for a fund for winter projects. Fundraising is being led by the Association, but we are playing our part too, and our Treasurer Don Fraser is happy to receive donations via our website, or cheques and donation forms can be sent to his home address:

6 Shakespeare Close,  
Tiverton  
Devon  
EX16 6NN.

Alternatively donations can be made directly into our Bank Account, Account Number 15668968 Sort Code 30-62-63. It would be appreciated if any direct donations could be confirmed by e-mail saying what the donation should be used for. The e-mail address is:

[don.fraser@wssrt.co.uk](mailto:don.fraser@wssrt.co.uk). Don would also be glad to hear from you if you have still to pay your subscription!

Donations via the Trust can also attract Gift Aid which increases their value. In the Trust, we are still looking for funds for covers to protect our coaches and for their restoration, particularly 3639, the Toplight former ambulance coach. We are also collecting for the railway's infrastructure fund, so that we can ensure the supply of components for heritage track, particularly in station areas, and to enable traditional materials to be used in structural maintenance and repairs. Renewal of the infrastructure is essential if we are to be able to run our heritage carriages as they are restored.

***Please help with one of these if you are able to.***

**Updates and Information**

When we have more to report it will appear on our website, [www.wssrt.co.uk](http://www.wssrt.co.uk) along with this newsletter. If you are on HOPS, you will have received a regular series of helpful updates from the PLC on what is happening, with advice on how to protect yourself. Periodic information is also press released by them or included in letters to volunteers and shareholders. Steve Edge's excellent website [www.wsr.org.uk](http://www.wsr.org.uk) has a comprehensive collection of news and information on every aspect of the railway during the closure period. Look out for the next WSR Journal too for more information.

We hope you find this note useful and do get in touch if you have any questions or suggestions to offer.



*A reminder of happier days, just before the lockdown! Richard Gibb and Geoff Evens washing the sleeping car.*

Join the Trust: You can now become a member of the Trust for a minimum donation of £1 per month, although most members contribute more than this, thereby helping fund the work of the Trust. Membership forms are on the website <http://www.wssrt.co.uk>

The latest Board Minutes for the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust may be found on the WSSRT Web site <http://www.wssrt.co.uk/>

The Trust office at BL is closed at the moment, any correspondence received by mail will be forwarded to the Trust as and when possible, but there may be a delay.

To make sure that the information we hold on members is up to date, if you have moved house, changed your email address, are no longer eligible for Gift Aid, please inform the Membership Secretary.

In order to continue to receive Trust Newsletters and other information relating to the Trust any changes can either be e-mailed to [info@wsrt.co.uk](mailto:info@wsrt.co.uk) or [don.fraser@wsrt.co.uk](mailto:don.fraser@wsrt.co.uk) (Membership Secretary), or sent by post to:

West Somerset Steam Railway Trust

The Railway Station  
Station Road, Bishops Lydeard  
Taunton, Somerset, TA4 3BX

If you would like to check what information we hold, please use the same address.