

## THE CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS TO THE 2021 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The whole country has been through an extraordinary eighteen months. The disruption to normal life has been unprecedented in peacetime. And yet we are still here. In fact, as you have just heard, we are thriving.

Why is that? There are the obvious answers, such as the people. Shaun Dewey, our general manager, led the response to Covid itself as well as the start-ups after the two major periods of disruption. We owe him a lot. And there are others too numerous to mention – trustees, paid staff, volunteers, supporters and contributors.

But there is something else too, and I think I can best illustrate it by looking at the tale of our two Terriers.

These are engines from a class that has been continually present on our Railway since 1903. If you say “Kent and East Sussex” the natural answer is “Terrier”.

They represent our **heritage**, and our links with our Colonel Stephens roots. We have invested heavily in their restoration, and this shows that we value that heritage.

By next spring we shall have two of them in service. We couldn't have done that without the **funding**. Over the past few years we have become far better at fund-raising.

We have run successful appeals, we have made full use of Government and other grants, and we are always looking at new opportunities to raise money. We have a fundraising Working Party to co-ordinate and drive these efforts. And let's not forget the fact that we are continuing to attract people to ride on our trains and to pay for doing so.

At the moment we have the money to catch up on the backlog of maintenance and to start investing in equipment for the future. A lot of this investment won't be on the exciting big-ticket items – it will be on less glamorous kit essential for us to do our jobs safely and efficiently.

Can we do more? Yes. We have set ourselves ambitious targets of covering direct costs and overheads plus £100k from revenue, in addition to raising £250k per annum from external sources. This will mean exploiting new markets, away from our traditional support base. Ambitious, but not out of reach.

In each of last two financial years we have significantly exceeded the £250k goal, and not just because of government Covid-19 support. We have adopted a range of new approaches to fundraising. Unsurprisingly, generating a surplus from our normal activities has not been possible in these extraordinary times.

The first of the Terriers to return to service is in fine fettle. This is down to the **skills** of the people at Rolvenden. We now have a young and enthusiastic team who are embracing the opportunities that new technology can bring.

And the skills are not only at Rolvenden. They exist, and are being nurtured, right across the Railway, for example in Carriage and Wagon, in the infrastructure departments, S&T and the all-important commercial areas.

We have learned that doing things on the cheap, while often for understandable reasons, is not always the best policy

For the second Terrier, we have subcontracted most of the work to a third party in Norfolk. This is another example of doing things in a new way. We are authorising the work in carefully controlled stages and learning lessons as we go. We don't always get contractor and supplier relationships right, and this is something on which there needs to be an increased focus.

Once the Terriers are returned to service and some remedial work done to the existing fleet, the locomotive department will complete the overhauls of the second USA and the P. This will be followed, they estimate around this time next year, by a start on 6619, a large and useful engine.

Talking of control, we are improving our project management capability and we also have a new way of ensuring that bids for expenditure are scrutinised and prioritised. This, like everything else, is a work in progress but already it is resulting in new equipment appearing and existing jobs being cleanly finished off.

Heritage Railways must move with the times if they are to survive and thrive. Society is changing, and we, and the sector as a whole,

must change too. We don't want to lose what we have, but we do need to adapt to reflect the outside world. We must appeal to the young, those with different backgrounds from ourselves, and those with different priorities – and dare I say it, to those with no particular interest in steam railways.

And here again the Terriers have a part to play. In partnership with The Terrier Trust, a successful bid for Lottery funding has been made for an initiative with the education department of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. This will reach 5,000 primary school children and their families in this inner city area. If we get it right it will open us up to an audience we could in the past only have dreamed of reaching. It might also challenge us, and that would be good.

Along with diversity comes sustainability. Young people increasingly expect us to be environmentally conscious, and we must respect that. It is right. We cannot assume that we will be allowed to burn coal for ever. We must reduce our energy usage and our environmental footprint. We must do all we can to avoid accusations of wilful pollution.

We must also do still more to understand and make the most of the countryside in which we operate. We have established an environmental sustainability working group and we'll be developing this area further in the new year.

Partnerships. These are important if we are to achieve maximum profitability and they are an opportunity to leverage in extra resource. They aren't always easy, and there is the potential for

friction given differing pressures and priorities. Our relationship with The Terrier Trust is an example of a partnership that is working well.

There are plenty of other partnerships – 4253 and the Bodiam camping coach spring to mind, not to mention TREATS and the impressive collection of on-track pant on the Railway – and they are all grist to the mill.

I'd like us also to develop partnerships with organisations beyond the traditional railway ones – the London Borough I've just mentioned is one such example.

In fact we are busy working on our relationships with local government and community bodies – and indeed with other heritage railways. We have a great story to tell, and it's to our advantage to get it out there. The first Terrier has already gone on tour as an ambassador for the Kent and East Sussex Railway and there will be more of this in 2022.

I've used the Terriers to illustrate what we are doing, and what we hope to do, but there's more to the Railway than that.

We always need volunteers, and the response to recent appeals has been overwhelming which shows that we are getting something right. Many people without a traditional railway interest want to be part of us, and that is good. We must make sure that we capture and place them before their enthusiasm has waned.

Safety is crucial to our survival. We have made progress in the past year but there is much still to do, not only to be the safest railway we can be but to prove that we are. Neil has just spoken about this.

There is so much more I could have said, but there isn't the time.

So how shall I sum up?

We have a five-year plan, and we are entering the third year of its span. Progress has been solid, despite the impact of Covid, but some areas are more developed than others and not all the achievements are irreversibly nailed down. Sometimes it feels like three steps forward and two back. But then I'm a glass half-empty person.

What I will say is this. The past couple of years have been gruelling at times. But we have emerged into whatever the new normal will turn out to be in as good a shape as could reasonably have been expected. Actually, even better. There are plenty of challenges ahead – Robertsbridge and the increasing burden of regulation being but two – and we won't get everything right. We are after all only human and there is only limited bandwidth, although we do continue to try to attract new talent. But we are in good shape to face the challenges.

And that is down to my fellow trustees – all of whom give their time voluntarily – our staff paid and unpaid, all our supporters and all of you.

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