

## GM AGM Presentation

Let me start by saying “**What a year**”, a year where much has changed both in and outside of the railway, a year where everything we do has stood on its head.

### Looking back, what did we carry forward from 2020

- Covid lockdown was back again from 05th November, which meant Santa 2020 had to be cancelled
- 50% of passengers agreed to transfer bookings to Santa 2021 but the remaining 50% were refunded. All in all a mammoth task, very well executed by Lin Batt and her booking office team.
- IT systems issues building day by day.
- We said good-bye to a number of staff, many long term. Necessary but never pleasant.
- December saw the machining accident in C&W, which if not for the vigilant action by members of staff could have been a great deal worse than it actually was. The volunteer concerned has thankfully recovered well and much time and effort has been devoted to improving competency and shed procedures.

### Then we were into 2021.

- The headline was **Survival**, for we were still in lockdown, most paid staff were furloughed and home working where possible was the order of the day.
- Expenditure remained strictly controlled.
- Slowly but surely the covid landscape improved and getting back to business became the new challenge - when and how?
- Step 1 in March, Step 2 in April, neither gave us any help, but....the move to step 3 in May finally enabled the Railway to reopen on Saturday 22/05/21 albeit with a limited number of services, socially distanced trains, and no change of train permitted.
- We were no longer selling individual seats, we were now selling fixed units, or space as Andre called it, such as a compartment, or a table for 4 for example, at a fixed price regardless of the number travelling. This required quite a change to the reservation system to make it work.
- A great deal of effort by staff across the railway went into the restart - covid protocols, sanitising, track & trace, plastic screens, carriage set up, staff availability, refresher training, competencies, shake down trains, the list was endless.
- Step 4 originally scheduled for June was deferred by a month by the Government to 19/07/21. This permitted a move away from social distancing. All seats were available for sale and customers with freedom tickets permitted a change of train.
- Much of what we did during the year was experimental moving away from what had historically been done. Simplicity and flexibility were key. We did not want empty trains and so maintained a simple but flexible and easily scaleable program, reacting where possible to customer demand with a mix of 3, 4 or 5 trip days.
- Events were limited to avoid large concentrations of people and instead we improved our customer offering on our standard services.

- Activities such as 1940's, evacuation, hop festival, fright night, Austin counties, art exhibitions, natural hibernation activities, fish and chip trains and many more have given variety and enabled our standard operation to remain fresh, whilst avoiding many of the up front fixed costs with dedicated events during a period of uncertainty with regards both customer and staff willingness to be with us.
- We anticipate we will carry 45,000 passengers in 2021 calendar year compared to 15,500 in 2020 and 87,000 in 2019. A good result bearing in mind we were closed for half the year and with social distancing had unsaleable capacity on each train.
- There was concern at the level of volunteer availability. August rosters were only 55% full one week out but thanks to the commitment and support of all staff the vacant slots were filled and unlike some other railways we did not have to cancel any services because of staff shortages. Thank you.
- In October we had our annual Visit England quality audit (VAQAAS). Our 2021 score was 83% up on the 82% given in 2019. We were marked down for catering in line with many other attractions, but where we did particularly well was for staff. **Well done and again thank you to all.**
- We concentrated our marketing online, using digital platforms, minimising wherever possible the use of paper timetables which would be out of date immediately a service was changed. Such changes are far more easily managed online.
- We rebuilt the web site and concentrated sales online via merac, our online booking system. Despite being closed for half the year and half of Santa already sold from last year our online sales have been at a record level, at least 35% up on 2019. As I have said many times, online sales can be made 24/7 and over 50% of online bookings occur between 18:00 and 24:00. Making it easy for our customers to book is essential.

### **What was also going on ?**

- The RVR Public Inquiry was conducted virtually on line this summer. We anticipate a decision next summer.
- Station Catering was closed in 2020, but for 2021 to minimise risk and waste we provided catering on a retail basis, buying in and selling on from the SCO which could be accommodated with one volunteer. Over the summer the product offering improved using where possible local suppliers, and with improved quality came increased sales. As autumn approached we switched from the SCO to the buffet to provide necessary shelter for staff and customers in the event of inclement weather. We introduced a new click and collect on train product, allowing passengers to pre order online and collect prior to their train journey. In many ways we only touched the surface with this concept as we had to stop it due to growing supply chain issues, putting our delivery at serious risk. What it showed once again was the importance of pre-order reducing wastage.
- To facilitate many of these processes being developed , the KESR IT systems needed to be upgraded. Matt Hyner led the IT Upgrade Project with three phases. First, our key systems - Microsoft Office and Merac are now hosted in the cloud. Secondly, the office / commercial phones will be separated from signalling and switched to VOIP which will improve customer access as well as home working. Thirdly, station Wi-Fi, CCTV and security will follow.
- Loco provided 3 x Class 5 locomotives in service - No 21 Wainright, No 25 Austerity and No 30 1638 Pannier Tank, together with 1 x Class 2 locomotive

Terrier Knowle. 1638 operation was problematical and it requires an amount of bottom end work which will be completed in the first half of 2022 ready for peak season operations. Terrier "Bodiam" has been in overhaul at the NNR, to be completed in March 2022 in readiness for its 150th anniversary next year.

- With the Treats Class 14 requiring a major service and 888 unserviceability, a Class 14 diesel was hired in during 2021 from DEPG to support the loco fleets. We are looking to extend this arrangement for next year.
- Water treatment continued seamlessly in the capable hands of Liam Head which has played a big part in maximising the life of our locos. There is no doubt we are one of the leading heritage railways in this field and we look forward to seeing his recommendations in the New Year to develop this work further.
- Sustainability was a new initiative in 2021. HVO (Hydro treated vegetable oil) was introduced on the diesel fleet. With an annual burn of 19,500 litres our greenhouse gas emissions will reduce from 71 to 4 tons per annum.
- In C&W completing No 86 overhaul in time for Santa has been this years top priority and the staff and volunteers have worked like trojans to achieve it. Again thanks go to all concerned. Wagons have also started to re-appear in C&W this year, a very rare sight over recent years! Other projects have included the District Coach, repainting of the Family Saloon and our thanks go to Craftmaster for their support with this.
- Permanent Way, Forestry, S&T, as well as Infrastructure have all been extremely active this year, including Witt Road track, Rother Bridge repair, track clearance, fencing, Bodiam sewage works as well as signalling. Much of these tasks are done behind the scenes which very few people are aware of but without their dedicated work their would be no railway to enjoy.
- KESR Adventures have almost completed the Glamping Coach renovation which will allow the Railway to develop a new year round (rather than seasonal) ancillary income stream. They have done a splendid job. The next step is getting the certifications in place, the handover completed and getting it set up on the reservation system.
- These items hardly scratch the surface but to everyone involved this year across the railway, in whatever capacity - I thank you for what has been achieved in often very difficult circumstances, and guaranteeing our **Survival**.

### **And now what does 2022 have in store.**

- I regard 2022 as a very important year in the railways history because there will be no "return to normal" as quite frankly it doesn't exist, for over the last year the world has both stopped and continued to turn, often at the same time!
- So many things have changed, and therefore questioned. We have an opportunity to put in place what we believe is right, in order to drive the Railway forward, safely and efficiently to lay down a pattern of operation that benefits the Railway, our customers, our staff and the long term future of the Railway.
- We will have a decision following the RVR Public Inquiry on the extension to Robertsbridge.
- We will continue build on what has been achieved this year but in light of the recent increase in covid cases in UK we also have to retain flexibility, as lockdown could return at any time as we are now seeing on the continent. We cannot take anything for granted.

- Our headlines for 2022 are very much **People, Safety, Process and Efficiency (PSPE)**.
- People:
  - Work on reorganisation has been going on all year as we redefine the business need, and is slowly being rolled out so that we go into 2022 with all staff knowing what they should be doing and enabled to get on with it.
  - Splendid work has been done this year by the Volunteer Committee in attracting new volunteers and this will grow next year and must be supported by all managers.
- Safety:
  - Work on Safety Management System (SMS) and H&S improvements across the Railway will continue next year together with culture ensuring the SMS is part of everyday activity and not just a file sitting on a shelf.
- Process:
  - “*Heritage on the outside, state of the art on the inside*” is what we are trying to achieve. Business processes in many areas across the Railway are still very antiquated but much can be improved with better use of technology.
  - Where we have new technology we have in certain instances got carried away by having a new box of tricks, and this has to be managed. Technology has to be used to meet the business needs of the Railway. How the business need is determined, the technology properly identified and introduced is an essential process.
  - I will therefore be establishing a new Systems Group to oversee our business needs and ensure those needs are adequately met. For example HOPS has many modules but we need to determine which ones are required for our business and which ones need modifying before we use them. Technology needs to support the business not the business support technology.
- Efficiency: This will cover many areas.
  - The commercial plan will be as efficient as possible. We will stay with fewer events and build more monthly themed activities around our standard operation. Efficient use of resources is essential.
  - The reservation system is currently under review to obtain improvements across the board from set up to reporting.
  - We will drive online pre booked sales for all products.
  - The Adventures Glamping Coach will be put into service.
  - With the Kitchen Car moving to the Pullman next year, Diana will move to the A set allowing us to introduce a new **branded, mid range, on-train dining Hospitality offering** which is excuse the pun is a bit of a mouthful but we have not yet finalised the brand name. Any suggestions are most welcome. This new service will concentrate on delivering pre booked breakfast, lunch and afternoon teas, a fundamental change to our catering product which will now be concentrating on “on-train” services, including restarting click and collect, backed up by a simpler station offering.
  - We will be more efficient and safety conscious in how we use, maintain and overhaul our locos, carriages and general infrastructure.
  - Loco will aim to complete existing overhauls. No 22, P Class, and Charwelton are all regarded as essential to complete prior to starting the next overhaul of 6619.
  - Overhaul standards meanwhile are also being improved so in future locos can maintain a 10 year cycle in line with boiler certification.

- We also look forward to 4253 being completed at the end of next year, maybe in time for Santa 22.
- C&W has a growing input list including but not limited to Family Saloon, Kitchen Car, Diana, Petros, Pullman and GWRailcar. To achieve these, resourcing and facilities will need to be reviewed to ensure safe and efficient environment.
- The repair to Rother Bridge has taken a great deal of time to plan but a realistic and efficient workscope is now in place and our thanks go to Playfoot Engineering for their support on this project.

Overall, “What a Year”, but that is now almost behind us, for the Railway is in good shape, and I look forward to 2022, as I hope you do also.

**Shaun Dewey**  
**General Manager**  
**November 2021**