



## General Manager's AGM Report 2022

In July 2022 I became a paid-up member of the Kent and East Sussex Railway, so this is my first AGM report as General Manager and therefore just a little daunting after less than four months in the role!

If I was sitting in the audience of this year's AGM what would I want to know from the leadership team of the railway and specifically from me as your new GM?

The first thing I would want is to have confidence in that leadership and to ask: are they competent; are they a safe pair of hands to look after 'my' ... 'our' railway; have they got a grip on all the issues, and have they identified and mitigated all the risks and challenges that the railway faces?

My next question would be: what are the plans for next year and beyond? Are all the opportunities being fully grasped?

My final question would be: what can I do to help?

As the railway's new General Manager, I need to be able to respond and answer those questions.

To do that fully, let me take you with me on my journey so far: what I've found at the railway, my subsequent objectives, the railway's proposals for next year and how you all can most certainly help to secure the future of one of the most important of all the preserved railways.

When our Chairman Simon rang me on 27 July 2022 to say that the Kent and East Sussex Railway wished to appoint me as their General Manager – my heart skipped a beat – and in a single moment an ambition was realised.





At 4.00am on 15 August 2022 I left my home in Cardiff and at 8.00am, with much anticipation, I walked up the path from the car park to Tenterden Town Railway Station to begin a new career. I arrived in a summer of blazing heat and an extreme fire risk.

That was just ninety days ago. Queen Elizabeth II was still our monarch, the only monarch I had ever known; Boris Johnson was in No10. Today our Monarch is King Charles III and we are on our third PM plus we have spiralling energy costs, a climate emergency, a cost-of-living crisis, a war in Europe, and a pandemic that is continuing to linger. No wonder the Word of the Year is “permacrisis”.

In my new world, Tenterden is the jewel of the beautiful Weald of Kent, which I am now discovering. It is a relatively remote and rural area, hence why the first official Light Railway was built to connect it to the outside world so that it would not be economically disadvantaged in the world of 1900.



In 2022 Tenterden, Northiam and Bodiam cannot escape the impact of global events. Forces outside our control will determine our future, focus and fortune in 2023. But that does not mean we should allow ourselves to be tossed, rudderless, on the waves of the gathering storm.

Like never before, we are going to have to knuckle down, draw on every last resource, think in totally new ways, be prepared to make changes, do things in new ways and, most importantly, support each other. We may be the custodians of our yesterdays, but we need to be here and relevant for the todays and tomorrows of our staff, volunteers, members, visitors and local communities.

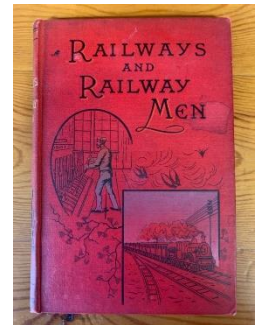




Our locomotives are important and get us all excited. We can all argue over their liveries or which company's engines were the best, but our people are even more important, and that will be my focus, supporting everyone to give of their best and most importantly to enjoy themselves.

So, returning to 15 August, just what does a General Manager do, what has he done so far and what is he going to do? I will quote from the famous red book of 1892 - Railways and Railway Men.

*"The position of general manager on a railway is the highest in the service; but before any man attains it, he will have had many experiences of common every-day railway work, and in all probably have attained his meridian of life."*



Well, I have certainly attained my meridian of life – I have almost 20 years' experience of railways from a BR project and marketing manager to a TOC Company Secretary, but I have also run an international consultancy for 25 years in economic development and environmental sustainability and for the last five years I have studied for the first doctorate in heritage railway research. I have volunteered for 34 years as a magistrate and spent many years volunteering on heritage railways with many more spent lineside with my camera. I 'get' what preserved railways are, I recognise it can be hard work, but we do it because it is important to us and we have to enjoy doing it and have fun with good friends.

I will continue with the quote:

*"Jealousy, which is a fault not uncommon amongst generals, does sometimes exist in the upper grades of railway service, and each officer is quick to put his foot down on an interference from his equal in another department. The general manager has these differences to settle, and his power is such that no single individual can override his ruling. He is head over all, and only an order from the Board of Directors can supersede his decisions. He is responsible for the whole management of the line. The esprit de corps of the whole service depends very much on the character of this official."*

For me power brings responsibility so I will never shy from making tough decisions, but they will only ever be reached after consulting with those that can and need to contribute. I am also happy to listen to other's honestly held opinions and my door will always be open, but

it will be evidence that will drive decisions and I will willingly give reasons for all decisions made.



Kindness, compassionate and respect are also part of the process but in the end, it is what is in the best interest of the railway, not an individual or a lobby group. As members you first need the truth – no bullshit or waffle – and confidence that the railway is in good and safe hands. Trust has to be built and earned. I am ready to commit every ounce of effort over the next five years to first ensure our survival and then make the Kent and East Sussex Railway the best persevered railway it can be.

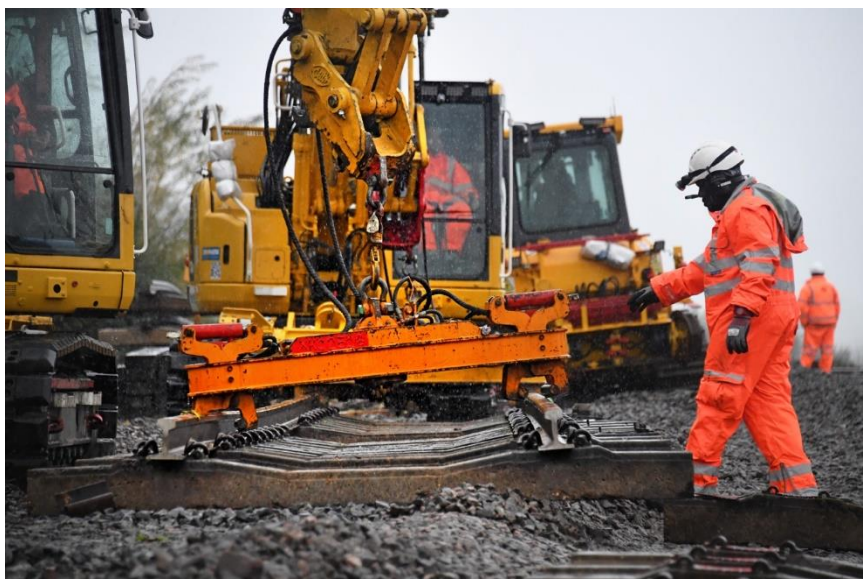
So, what have I found in my first 90 days and what is going to happen next?

First and foremost, we have a fabulous railway, with so many strengths, the greatest of which is the friendliness of the welcome passengers receive, delivered by dedicated and passionate staff and volunteers – something that is mentioned again and again in TripAdvisor reviews. I believe that we also deliver the best Pullman Service of any heritage railway.



A lot has been happening too:-

1. We have just completed the Permanent Way Institution's fifth prestigious Practical Trackwork Challenge – the first time it has taken place in the South East and with the largest project to date, delivering track renewals at the south end of Northiam and replacement sleepers at Rother Bridge.



2. We've arranged a host of community events, including a pop-up cinema, and I am keen to bring the town to the railway and the railway to the town. We also took 'Poplar to Poplar', giving many inner-city kids their first experience of a steam locomotive.
3. We have upped our game on PR, achieving major coverage on TV and on destination/influencer websites as well as in a number of railway and community magazines, including a 6-page feature in Trackside on the restoration of the GWR Railcar W20.



But what are my objectives and goals going forward? From the get-go, I set myself 100 tasks in 100 days and I am still in the listening and learning phase. Overall, though, as GM I need to manage 8 pillars of sustainability:

- Property
- Assets
- Operations and safety
- Environment
- Governance
- Staff and volunteers
- Visitors
- Money

Every railway is only as strong as its weakest link. We can have the best most shiny loco fleet, but a broken rail means we don't run, and vice versa; a brilliant PWay is not much use without locos and coaches to run on it.

So, as fabulous as our railway is, it is faced with a number of challenges – all I believe are fixable:-

Firstly, there has been underinvestment for too many years. Make do and mend will only last so long; the box of Colonel Stephens emergency sticking plasters is running pretty low.

- There are too many points of single point failure
- There is room for improvement in our safety culture
- The loco strategy has been changed so many times we need to start again
- Our carriage fleet is operating on a wing and a prayer
- Our web site is not fit for purpose
- There are too many tasks for too few people

Also, like the whole industry, we need to reset how we talk about each other and our railway. Now more than ever we need to be inclusive and draw on the support of one another if we are to weather the external storms coming our way.



At this month's HRA conference, Chris Price CEO NYMR and Vice Chair HRA urged everyone to call out bad behaviour, bullying, misogyny and mischief-making across the movement.

I am four-square behind this. We are lucky, we have little of this here. We have published values and, as I have already said in previous communications, I will come down very hard on anyone not upholding them.

Why does this matter? It matters because we need to attract a new generation of members and active volunteers. The old-style banter, 'to man up', or accept certain behaviours, no longer applies. Likewise, negative comments from a small minority about parts of our railway family – mostly based on rumour or opinion rather than fact - can have a wide impact, draining energy and causing frustration and distress.



Looking to that future, I suspect what you most want to know is how are we going to get through the next two years.

In corner conversations many heritage railways are saying that the winter of 23/24 will be the crunch financially. Therefore, what are my plans to improve the business?

Let's start with a reminder of why we exist. We are a Charity: a charity created for public good to develop education and community wellbeing through the experiences generated by the preservation and operation of a rural light railway between Robertsbridge and Tenterden, together with its associated historic assets, systems and artefacts.



The railway is in the business of creating experiences, both for its volunteers and its visitors. For volunteers it's an opportunity to be part of a living history, a safe and fun place to be. For visitors it's a chance to live a romantic train journey on a 1920's Pullman or experience Victorian train travel, a time to go beer-tasting with mates or for children to re-enact a war time evacuation or join in a Teddy Bear's picnic.

At heart we are a community that shares a passionate desire to keep the idea and legacy of a Light Railway running across the Weald of Kent. We are not a mini-Disney theme park. We are not run by spreadsheets. We are a safety-critical, regulated railway with a big heart that brings much benefit – social, economic and environmental – to the area. But we should use every lesson Disney can teach us and spreadsheets are useful tools, as much



as a set of kitchen knives, or a fishplate spanner. We need to look back to the past, because with that we offer a safer, secure world of nostalgia, but we must live in the present, and be ready to face the future, and most certainly if we do not renew ourselves, we will die.

The Commercial Department's purpose will be to generate sufficient funding to ensure the Charity is financially viable and sustainable.

It achieves this, where appropriate, by monetarising the experiences which must be related to the charitable purposes of education and well-being together with seeking membership fees, gifts, donations and grants from benefactors.

This means we give both our passengers and volunteers rewarding and fulfilling living history experiences so that everyone can to learn about our past and take away good memories of 'a great day', out on the railway.

To achieve this, I basically have two levers. Think of them as being a brake and a regulator or accelerator. One lever is cost, the other is revenue. The cost lever is already pulled back pretty hard. Geoff Crouch runs a very tight ship, so there are limited opportunities to save much more. There is always one less photocopy to make and one more light to turn off, but these are not big-ticket items with which to make major savings.

Our biggest costs are wages, energy and insurance. Energy prices are spiralling; our electric bill has already risen from £35,000 to £105,000. Our insurers have pulled out of the market, so we have had to find a new broker at the last minute. This is a future red risk that heritage railways may not be able to find, let alone afford, cover. On wages, redundancy will be my last resort, and is always the elephant in the room but, if need be, I would recommend my own redundancy if that was best for the railway.



What that means is that we have to push the revenue lever into full forward gear. Easy to say, hard to do. I can talk about 'innovative marketing' and better 'targeting strategies' and I can blind everyone with theory, but let's get real. Whatever we do we will be running against the tide. In the life cycle of almost anything there are the stages of inception, development growth, maturity, decline and death.

To avoid death, you have to reinvent the business once you pass the mature stage, otherwise you have to manage decline; that phase can last many years, or it can be short and very sharp – going over the edge of a cliff.

Heritage railways have passed their peak and visitor numbers are, in general, declining. There are exceptions: our neighbours, the Spa Valley, are doing well. But, taken across the movement, the visitor and revenue figures speak for themselves. Our own railway has only managed 59,000 visitors this year, down more than 30% on 2019, the last 'so called' normal year. 59,000 visitors this year equals a loss of about a quarter of a million pounds plus. That is not sustainable, especially with costs rapidly rising.

So just to stand still, we are going to have to really work hard. What we need is more people, paying more money. It really is that simple. The 'how do we do it' is the difficult bit. For example, on what basis do we set ticket prices for next year. My description that we are into the realms of 'informed guessing' seems to have been picked up by several other railways.

First, I will be stealing every good idea I can from other railways and there is now an increasing willingness for heritage railways to talk to each other. Do not be surprised to see one joint leaflet for the Bluebell, Spa and K&ESR next year: it will save design costs, printing costs and, critically, the eye-watering distribution costs.



Next, if we think about our market and products, there are three potential markets: People will still want to take holidays and go for days out. Some will not be able to afford these, full-stop, so we have lost that segment whatever we do. Therefore, even to maintain our existing numbers, we have to replace this lost market with a new one.



For the second market, most will do fewer trips, travel shorter distances and want to spend less so will be far more discerning, looking for free experiences or getting added value for every penny spent. The third market will just carry on as normal because they are able to afford it.

Therefore, we have to (a) focus on the most resilient end of the market and (b) be innovative when it comes to added value.

The Group Travel Market has been a traditionally important part of our business and this a key target to secure and then grow.



Here are a few new ideas for next year which we are considering, these are not yet certain, I am very wary of over promising and under delivering. I will only promise once we have properly costed each idea and market tested it:-

- Champagne / cream teas in your very own Victorian Family Saloon: experience how Downton Abbey's Lord and Lady Grantham might have travelled
- Dine in pure luxury in an original Art Deco Pullman Train with silver service
- Spend a day on a one-to-one personal tour of the railway with its General Manager
- Corporate events: hire your own train or carriage as a unique setting for your corporate event
- Hire a train for your wedding
- Take one of our guided tours of several attractions on a Vintage steam train and motor coach, a choice of visits to Bodiam Castle, Great Dixter, Oastbrook Winery.
- Victorian Gentlemen's excursion, in an exclusive first-class compartment on our Vintage Train with Fortum and Mason Hamper.
- The Edwardian Railway Children's day out to the countryside
- See the railway from alongside the driver in a heritage diesel locomotive
- Drive and fire a steam locomotive
- A combined rail and nature walk with your own guide
- Enjoy the taste of the best of England's award-winning wines onboard an evening train travelling through the sunlit Kent Countryside
- An exclusive Family Victoria Father Christmas experience
- Train and sunset cruise
- Haunting experiences: a murder mystery at a lonely railway halt and see the ghost in the signal box
- A day out with Colonel Stephens: immerse yourself in the history of the Colonel's railways
- The Farmer's Line experience: travel on a mixed train and learn how goods and passengers arrived at Tenterden in 1905.



There will of course be the familiar and popular "five a day", themes of Real Ale, Fish and Chips, Bangers and Mash, themed events such as the 40's weekend, Steampunk, Santa, car rallies, traction engines etc.



And how about this.....

This vehicle is known as the "Rider".

Continuing to "say old, stay old" will just not do: we have to be innovative. A ride in a Mark 1 coach from one end of the line to the other is not that exciting, so we have to make it exciting in other ways and this could be one way of doing that.

The Commercial Team and I do not have a monopoly on good ideas so if you know of something that is working elsewhere, then please tell us.

For example, I had a suggestion yesterday for an 'Instagram guide' to the railway using the 'three-word' locator to identify the exact spot for the photograph.

And yes, before anyone says it, I know our website is not the best, and I know that it has consumed much blood, sweat and tears. I would love to start again. Unfortunately, life is not that simple. Building a good, high-functioning website is an expensive, time-consuming exercise. So, if you can help, please get in touch.

So, what about our timetable next year - what is different? The plan is to run less published days but have more 'hold' days which can be used as experiments, for example using the vintage set on a return to Wittersham Road in the morning and then an RXD in the afternoon. Timings will be slightly different, too, based on feedback from our visitors. The reasoning is that we run on our published days, but if things go well, we will add days rather than cancel days from a fuller timetable, which would damage our reputation.



The good news is that, thanks to the hard work of our Commercial and Operating Departments, the Board has signed off the 2023 Timetable which will now drive our rosters for locos and crews, signallers, station staff and others, our advance ticket booking system and visitor information far earlier than last year.

Hopefully, with both fingers crossed, there will not be the last-minute chopping and changing which I am told frustrated so many this year, albeit due to genuine reasons and exceptional circumstances.

Despite all the challenges there were very few, if any, cancellations last year, except for the days of record-breaking temperatures so an enormous 'thank you' is due to everyone who delivered the service.



What about the locomotives? Everyone wants to know about locomotives.

I was, like probably everyone else, heartbroken to find out that a Railway that had two Terriers in steam in May for the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, had none by August. 'Knowle' was stopped for repairs and 'Poplar' had damage to its motion. An independent report was commissioned on 'Knowle' and it

does not make pleasant reading. Basically, think of 'Knowle' as your lovely, sweet grandmother. She is a frail elderly lady who now needs a total bottom end rebuild. Think six figures and a year to undertake the work. Meanwhile, one option for her until funding is available would be as a roving static ambassador for the railway.

'Poplar', on the other hand, can hopefully be repaired as part of an insurance claim, so I am not giving up on my objective to have a Terrier, the GWR Railcar and the Ford Diesel available to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the reopening of the line on 3 February 2024.



My first challenge on arriving was to find out we were two steam locos and three coaches short for the Santa season.

We have now secured Sapper, which arrived this week, and Jessie which is scheduled to arrive next week. Three coaches have been hired and will be arriving by the end of the month - one from the Great Central and two from the Bluebell.

Next year we will have No 25 and 'Swiftsure' on long term hire. USA Tank 65 will be completed sometime during the year and hopefully 4253 will also be steamed before the year end, thanks to the amazing work and team spirit of the 4253 group through the leadership of Charlie and Jerry, and I will be buying a share. They have also proved my theory wrong that you can no longer build a standard gauge steam locomotive in a garden shed!



All that being the case we should be okay for four steam locomotives for next year's Santa season; if one is late, then it will be a hire in. But we are short of a Class 5 steam locomotive until 65 enters service. 'Hastings' is scheduled to return before the year end to provide Class 2 power.

This year has woken up the heritage railway movement to the impacts of climate change. Now you may think Climate Change is a conspiracy theory, and it will probably rain every day next summer, but I prefer to plan for the real world which means that the weather in 2022 will prove not to be an exception but the new rule.



The implications are stark. I can't expect anyone to fire in temperatures of thirty degrees or more, regardless of any risk from sparks setting off lineside fires. Heat exhaustion becomes a very real risk. Equally, without air conditioning who is going to want to bake inside a Mark 1 carriage or even be in the cab of a diesel locomotive with a diesel engine generating heat behind you.

As a minimum, we should have the capability and capacity to operate non-steam services in July and August. This means having diesels available, which in turn means ensuring competencies and that means training, as well as servicing facilities, so it is not as simple as just getting a locomotive in at the last moment. Yes, I know we did have a Class 33 based on the railway which was let go and we do still have an unrestored Class 25, but that is not going to solve the problem for next year or the year after.

We need to forget whatever loco strategies have and have not been published in the past, we are where we are. Going forward I am recommending the formation of a Traction and Rolling Stock Committee to advise me and the Board on loco policy and the practicality of implementing it at a detailed level. I have drafted a remit which an embryo group has discussed this week.



Other locomotives to mention:-

- 1638 is at Leaky Finders for bottom end work, the work is far more extensive than was originally authorised, so to help them in their own workload planning and to give me time to assess the options, work has been paused for the moment.
- There was a meeting on 6619 earlier today.
- Work is continuing, as and when resources are available, on the P Class and Charwelton. There will be renewed effort of Charwelton next year.
- Norwegian and Austerity 23 are safely in storage in the carriage shed and they will be included in the loco plan going forward; the other USA tank 300 is a longer-term prospect.



- Restoration of the GWR Railcar is progressing well inside Carriage and Wagon at Tenterden, and there is now a detailed plan to complete the work. Fund raising is now well underway with the '20 for 20' Appeal, which I am delighted to report has already passed the half-way mark and which I would urge people to support. This is one vehicle that really would give the railway a 'Unique Selling Point'. Nowhere else in the UK can you take a ten-mile ride along a rural branch line in a 1930 Art Deco Railcar. It will also be very practical operationally to give added flexibility and availability.

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- On our coaching stock, the Family Saloon was out-shopped just after I arrived, and this really is a gorgeous vehicle, loving restored. It hosted the 25-year long service award train, and next year it will play a key role in offering exclusive packages for visitors.
- The next vehicle to go into traffic will be the RU, the kitchen car, which will swop with Diana at the year end to allow Diana to receive much needed TLC (Tender Loving Care).
- The focus of Carriage & Wagon will be to maintain the current fleet particularly the Mark 1 coaches but if I am allowed to dream I would love to start work on Aries, as the third Pullman, and there are other vehicles in the queue, such as the Maunsell 'lowlight' CK number 55 and the Balcony Saloon. All I need is a lot of cash, space and a group with time and skills. So, if you are up for a challenge and willing to lead a group, to fund and resource these projects, now is the time to step forward. If not, then maybe none of us will see them run in our lifetime.



Looking beyond 2023, I am restarting the planning process for Field 51 at Rolvenden which had stalled. This is an important project for all sorts of reasons. Even if I waved a magic wand, with proper project planning and design, approvals and agreements, we would not put a spade in the ground for two years and probably with a phased construction plan it would be completed over say 3 - 5 years. Meanwhile, the buildings and facilities at Rolvenden have long since passed their sell-by-date and are bluntly no longer fit for purpose - certainly not as a 21st century mixed traffic running depot, with potentially a loco and carriage workshop. We need to start planning now because this is going to be a 'ten million'

pound project, so if the opportunity to take advantage of a grant, legacy, loan, gift comes our way we must be ready to go.

This principle applies to every station along the line. Each station needs to have its own 20-year masterplan which fits into the overall masterplan for the whole line. The process will need to embrace a full sustainability plan for which there will be an environmental plan; an overall asset management plan; a collection plan for which there will be a conservation plan for each asset in the collection plan. The reasons why all these are important are not just for good governance, to guide and give a framework for day-to-day decisions, but without these documents in place we cannot access grant funding from sources such as the National Lottery.



Then we come to Robertsbridge. The outcome of the planning inquiry held in 2020 is still awaited which will result in a Transport and Works Order (TWO). I have no inside knowledge, but I am working on the belief that it will be approved and signed.

That means a 60-year dream is going to suddenly become very real and imminent. In 2026 we could be operating the first full season of services from Tenterden and Robertsbridge. I realised on my first visit to Robertsbridge, seeing what has already been achieved, that this is going to have a massive impact on the Railway.

It is not just a further 3 miles of track and another station. While Tenterden is an incredibly attractive town, I know from personal experience that it is remote with poor accessibility particularly by public transport. Anyone living in Southampton, Bristol, Birmingham, London or Royal Tunbridge Wells indeed anyone north, south or west who wants to visit KESR will travel straight down or up the A21.

That means if nothing else we will have a two ended railway and the focus will inevitably shift from Tenterden to Robertsbridge for people beginning and ending their journeys. It all means that K&ESR has better overall accessibility which includes a mainline connection. This means stepping up our long-term planning.

I now come back to the final one of my earlier questions: what, as a member, can I do to help?

First, I want to say an enormous 'thank you' to all the volunteers who, despite many challenges, delivered our service this year without one cancellation. A record you can be justly proud of. One certainly that is the envy of the 'big' railway as they face waves of strikes and organisational uncertainty.

And remember: it is not just the frontline volunteers and staff that deliver the visitor service; it is train planners, marketers, sales staff, carriage and wagon, loco fitters, S&T technicians, forestry and conservation, catering and retail, buildings and infrastructure, PWay, the Colonel Stephens' Museum and the Board itself. Each Director and Trustee is also a volunteer, a fact which sometimes is too easily forgotten. Coming from the outside and having worked with many different Boards over the years, I can assure you that you have a very good one. They work incredible hard on what are often thankless tasks, without seeking the limelight. In addition to Board duties, most are also active volunteers on the footplate, guarding, or in one of the 'day' gangs. So, I would like to take the opportunity to applaud and thank them for all that they do.





Volunteers give so much to the railway, without them there would be no railway. The most important thing is that volunteers also get something in return – that there are valued and appreciated, everyone needs to enjoy what they are doing, quite simply to have fun with like minded people. It is the role of paid staff, lead by me, to help facilitate that experience. We are here to help not hinder, within the framework of a regulated, safety-critical railway.

I love my job, I love the railway and I love the people, all I need is a few more people and a bit more money.

Let me expand on that. Around 25% of the membership claim to be active volunteers but it is around 10% that do 80% of the rostered turns. I want to run lots more events next year, build on some of our success stories such as the Pullman. The reality is I am restrained by the number of volunteers I can call upon. It is chicken and egg. More volunteers mean we can do more things, doing more things mean we can earn more money; more money means more capital to invest in our future and build resilience and ensure our legacy passes on to the next generation.

And for those that can't volunteer then more money helps us survive. The reality is that whatever I do we will never generate sufficient funds from ticket sales alone: there are only three heritage railways that achieve that because of their structure and unique location – The Paignton and Dartmouth, Snowdon and Lakeside.

Let me illustrate that with some simple calculations.



We have around 2,500 members - some are juniors, and some are families.

For next year, a £25 adult membership provides £100 in benefits from travel, magazine, discounts etc. That on anyone's reckoning is a good deal. Charities often work on the basis of a ratio of 1:5, i.e. a member gives five times the benefits received so around £500. Most active volunteers donate way in excess of £500-worth of free labour. But what of the armchair member? If each of our 2,500 members gave a further £10 per week, less than the cost of two pints, that would generate £1m. Imagine what a difference that would make to the budget.

Now I am not for the moment suggesting any changes to the way membership works, but I think it is something that deserves a conversation, should we seek to increase membership for a bigger pool of resources to draw upon – be that skills, knowledge, labour or money. For any savvy visitor, it is better to purchase membership than buy a ticket! Should we, like the National Trust, push sales of membership rather than tickets?

In conclusion I hope I have answered the three questions I posed from myself as a member, to myself as your General Manager.

Next year will be tough, scary and uncertain. We have battened down the hatches, have a reasonable level of provisions in the store cupboard. We now just have to weather the storm with the hope we find calmer waters before our provisions run out. Our watchword is to be agile and look out for where there may be a lull in the storm to take advantage of opportunities.

Finally, I need your help. We need everyone onboard. Now is not the time to distract the team with trivia, petty jealousies, or point scoring. Put simply if I stand before you in a year's time, we will have survived and that I will take as success.



In the meantime, I have one big plea. You'll be aware that our first scheduled 'Santa Special' departure of 2022 will soon be upon us. This year we have reached a new peak: over 14,000 seats have been sold, generating a ticket income exceeding 25% of our annual turnover - in just ten days of trading!

To deliver this, we have secured 3 extra coaches and 2 additional locos. This leaves one flashing red risk: do we have sufficient colleagues available to deliver the experience that our visitors are expecting? As always, we are in need of every possible pair of hands to help us deliver.

Our customers have placed their trust in us, but we have only one chance to provide them with their anticipated Christmas experience. If we get this wrong, a few bad reports on review sites & social media could destroy the years of work we've put in to building our enviable reputation.

So, we urgently need your help. There are a wide variety of tasks, from marshalling cars in the visitor car park, helping in the shop, the buffet or elsewhere, we must ensure our visitors expectations are met or exceeded - plus of course providing them with further opportunities to spend money!

Your support of the K&ESR is greatly appreciated - your continued membership alone is hugely important to us. But if you, or your aunty, brother, sister, cousin, nephew, niece or neighbour could help us at this critical time, please do get in touch with your roster clerks or via <https://kesr.org.uk/santa-volunteering-2022/>

Being a part of the Santa's team is hugely rewarding - and great FUN!

See you on the Gallopers!

**Robin Coombes, General Manager  
Kent & East Sussex Railway, November 2022**