

2024 K&ESR AGM

General Manager's

2024 Annual Report

"Celebrating 50 Years of Heritage and Looking to the Future"

“2024 has been a remarkable year for the Kent and East Sussex Railway, marking a half-century of preservation and passion. We have reached significant milestones, expanded our heritage footprint, and faced new challenges with resilience. In this report, we reflect on our accomplishments while addressing the hurdles we must overcome to secure a sustainable future. As we celebrate 50 years, we invite you to look ahead with us, standing together as stewards of this cherished railway’s legacy.”

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Executive Summary

2024 marked a significant milestone for the Kent and East Sussex Railway, celebrating 50 years of dedicated preservation, community engagement, and growth. This year has been filled with remarkable accomplishments, reflecting our commitment to both safeguarding our heritage and creating unforgettable experiences for visitors. Yet, these successes come with challenges that require our collective strength and support.

Key Achievements:

- **Commemorating 50 Years of Heritage:** This milestone year has been celebrated with a range of successful events and visitor experiences, reinforcing our mission to keep railway history alive.
- **Robertsbridge Extension Progress:** Major strides were made towards the Robertsbridge extension, moving us closer to realising the long-held vision of connecting Tenterden to Robertsbridge. This expansion represents a transformative step for the railway, with projected benefits for both tourism and heritage.
- **Increased Visitor Engagement:** Our events, including the annual Santa services, continued to attract and delight visitors of all ages. Positive feedback and high attendance reinforce our reputation as a cherished part of the community and a destination of choice for heritage experiences.

Challenges Faced:

- **Rising Operational Costs:** While revenues have increased, operating costs, including maintenance, compliance, and general upkeep, are growing at a faster rate. Managing these financial demands remains an ongoing challenge.
- **Volunteer Shortages:** Our volunteers are the backbone of K&ESR, yet we have faced significant shortages this year, impacting the workload and morale of our dedicated team. Ensuring we have the hands needed to sustain our services is vital.
- **Balancing Growth with Daily Operations:** As we continue with ambitious projects like Robertsbridge, we must also manage the day-to-day demands of running a heritage railway. This balance requires efficient resource allocation and sustained community support.

Looking Ahead:

Our priority is to continue building on our successes while addressing the areas where we face difficulties. The future vision for K&ESR includes:

- **Volunteer Recruitment and Retention:** Expanding and supporting our volunteer base will be essential in ensuring smooth operations and a positive experience for both visitors and team members.
- **Securing Financial Support:** Through fundraising campaigns, partnerships, and community engagement, we aim to close the gap between rising costs and revenue, with a focus on long-term sustainability.

- **Progressing the Robertsbridge Extension:** We remain committed to completing the Robertsbridge extension, which promises to enhance both our reach and impact, reinforcing K&ESR's role as a living part of our region's heritage.

As we look forward, we acknowledge the collective strength that has brought us this far. With the continued dedication of our volunteers, members, and supporters, we can face these challenges and embrace the opportunities ahead to ensure K&ESR's legacy endures for generations to come.

The Report

1. A Personal Message to Volunteers and Members Gratitude & Reflection on the 50th Anniversary

This year marks an incredible milestone—**50 years of preserving the Kent and East Sussex Railway**. We celebrate not only the history we’ve kept alive but the remarkable community that has made it possible. Each of you—volunteers, members, and supporters—contributes to this legacy. Your commitment has been instrumental in reaching new heights, from **achievements like awards and positive reviews to progress on the Robertsbridge extension**, which is bringing us closer to realising a vision decades in the making.

This year has also been filled with unique and memorable events, with thousands of visitors experiencing everything from gala celebrations to family-friendly themed days. These moments reflect not only the dedication of our team but the enduring appeal and spirit of K&ESR.

Facing Challenges Together

Of course, these achievements come with challenges. Rising operational costs and ongoing volunteer shortages test us daily, reminding us of the importance of both teamwork and new support. Many have voiced concerns around resources, leadership, and the railway’s future. Let me reassure you—I hear you. While these issues are complex, we’re committed to addressing them transparently and with your input.

Our Future: Growth, Sustainability, and Support

Looking ahead, we’re focused on three core priorities: growing our volunteer base, strengthening financial stability, and improving the experience for both visitors and team members. Our continued success depends on expanding our team and securing additional funding so we can maintain our heritage while adapting to the needs of the future.

Together, we’ve shown what’s possible, and with your support, we can continue to build on this momentum. Thank you for your dedication to making K&ESR a thriving piece of living history.

2. Achievements and Milestones Events and Visitor Experience

This year, our events brought thousands of visitors to the Kent and East Sussex Railway, each reinforcing our mission to celebrate and share railway heritage. **Notable events**, such as the 50th Anniversary Gala and Family Fun Days with characters like Dinosaurs

and Peter Rabbit—made possible through our partnership with Fox and Edwards—allowed visitors of all ages to experience the magic of historic rail travel. Themed events added variety, bringing both new and returning guests, and deepening our connections within the community.

We also took bold steps in **innovation**. The launch of the **Mr Doodle Train**, an exciting addition to our offerings, brought a creative artistic edge to our railway. This event captured the public’s imagination and demonstrated our commitment to evolving with our audience’s tastes for this particular event while remaining true to our heritage roots.

Recognition from Our Peers and Beyond

Our achievements have not gone unnoticed. We were honoured with multiple awards, including two awards for our **Santa services**, celebrating the dedication that goes into creating these magical experiences for families. In addition, we received an award for **environmental innovation**, judged by our peers at the HRA, which recognises our proactive efforts to adopt more sustainable practices—essential to the future of both the railway and the heritage sector.

Global Recognition on TripAdvisor

The icing on the cake this year came in the form of a **TripAdvisor Visitor Award**, placing us among the **top 10% of visitor attractions worldwide**. This award is not just a testament to the experiences we provide but a reflection of our team’s dedication to maintaining high standards and ensuring every visitor leaves with lasting memories. Being ranked at this level, globally, shows we’re not just meeting standards—we’re setting them.

These events and recognitions aren’t simply items on our calendar; they’re vital to our growth. Each one raises awareness, strengthens our financial foundation, and reinforces the value we bring to our community. They remind us that we’re not only preserving history but also setting a course for the future, unafraid to innovate and consistently aiming to be up there with the very best.

Volunteer Contributions

Our volunteers are the heart of K&ESR, and their commitment drives every success we achieve. From maintaining engines and carriages to welcoming visitors, volunteers ensure our operations run smoothly, often going above and beyond to create memorable experiences. This year’s **Santa Services** have highlighted this dedication: with volunteer shortages, many have stepped up to fill critical roles, particularly in catering and visitor services, ensuring our most anticipated event can continue to delight families.

We cannot overstate the importance of our volunteers—they make K&ESR what it is today, and their resilience and passion are what carry us forward.

Community Engagement & Partnerships

Our partnerships and community engagements are essential to K&ESR’s impact beyond the railway itself. Through collaborations with local organisations, schools, and heritage

groups, we've expanded our reach and strengthened our support network. Engaging with our **Southern Six heritage railway partners** has also allowed us to share resources, pool expertise, and build a more resilient community of heritage railways.

These partnerships bring invaluable benefits—not only in operational support but also in ensuring that K&ESR remains a cherished part of our region's cultural and historical fabric.

3. Financial Overview and Sustainability Focus

Financial Health Summary

In 2024, our income sources were diverse, with ticket sales, donations, special events, and membership fees contributing to our revenue. The **50th Anniversary events** significantly boosted both visitor engagement and income, underscoring the value of milestone celebrations in attracting support. However, despite these positive gains, **operational costs** continue to rise, driven by expenses for maintenance, fuel, and compliance with modern regulations, which impact our ability to reinvest in future growth.

Cost Management & Future Strategy

In response to these rising costs K&ESR has implemented wherever possible, and where safety is not compromised, cost-saving measures across all key areas. Energy savings and not filling certain vacancies have helped to reduce our expenses, though not without consequences in spreading workload. However, further work is still needed to ensure longer term sustainable cost controls. We are also exploring ways to streamline some processes and improve resource allocation, enabling us to meet immediate needs while planning for long-term stability.

Future Financial Goals

Looking ahead, our financial strategy is focused on expanding revenue streams beyond our core visitor market through **targeted funding campaigns** and **new partnerships**. Plans for more **themed events** and collaborative community activities will help diversify our income sources. Additionally, we aim to launch specific fundraising efforts that directly support capital projects essential to K&ESR's future.

Our financial goals are driven by a commitment to long-term sustainability. By actively managing costs and pursuing innovative revenue opportunities, we are building a foundation that will allow K&ESR to thrive for years to come.

4. The Robertsbridge Extension and Strategic Plans for 2025 Progress Update

The **Robertsbridge extension** remains one of K&ESR's most transformative projects, set to expand our reach and secure the railway's long-term viability. Once completed, this extension will open new opportunities for both visitor growth and heritage tourism, creating a seamless connection from Tenterden to Robertsbridge. This vision has been decades in the making, and RVR have made significant strides this year, from advancing technical preparations, such as level crossings, to formalising collaboration with the K&ESR through the signing of a **Memorandum of Understanding** on 31 May 2024.

Balancing this ambitious project with day-to-day operations remains a priority. With rising costs and volunteer shortages, it's critical to allocate resources effectively, ensuring both the continuation of current services and steady progress on Robertsbridge.

Looking Ahead to 2025

Our goals for 2025 focus on preparing K&ESR for sustainable growth. Key areas of focus include:

- **Volunteer Recruitment and Retention:** Recruiting and supporting a larger volunteer base is essential for managing increased demand and achieving our operational goals. Our strategy includes targeted outreach and retention efforts to make volunteering accessible, rewarding, and community-focused.
- **Event Expansion:** Building on the success of this year's events, we plan to broaden our event offerings, with more themed experiences and seasonal highlights that appeal to a wide audience. Expanding events will not only bring in additional revenue but also strengthen our community ties and visitor engagement. These include a Diesel Gala, Midgets of Steam and a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the opening to Bodiam.
- **Infrastructure Improvements:** Alongside the Robertsbridge extension, we will continue essential infrastructure upgrades across the railway. This includes ongoing track and facility maintenance, improvements to visitor amenities, and enhancements to operational safety and efficiency.

2025 promises to be a pivotal year as we pursue these goals to strengthen K&ESR's foundation and prepare for the next phase of growth. With a collaborative spirit and focused approach, we can turn our vision for K&ESR into a sustainable reality.

5. Core Values: Why We Do What We Do Heritage Preservation and Experience

At the heart of the Kent and East Sussex Railway is a commitment to preserving a unique piece of railway history. Our mission is to:

- **Preserve Our Heritage:** Every locomotive, carriage, and station tells a story, and our role is to safeguard these historical treasures for future generations.

- **Enrich Visitor Experiences:** We aim to provide visitors with more than just a train ride; we offer a journey through history, where guests of all ages can connect with the past in a meaningful and memorable way.
- **Foster Community Pride:** K&ESR is more than a railway; it's a part of our community's identity. By involving local residents and visitors alike, we strengthen our community ties and instil a shared pride in our heritage.

Safety, Professionalism, and Pride

Our values of safety, professionalism, and pride define how we approach our mission each day. These principles guide every interaction and decision:

- **Safety First:** Ensuring the safety of our visitors, volunteers, and staff is our highest priority. From handling equipment to managing train operations, safety is at the core of everything we do.
- **Professionalism and Communication:** We are dedicated to maintaining a high standard of professionalism, with clear communication and respect as the foundation for how we work together and with the public.
- **Pride in Our Work:** Attention to detail, from polished brass to tidy grounds, reflects our pride in the railway. Every team member's contribution helps us present K&ESR at its best, creating a welcoming environment for all.

These core values unite us in our mission, ensuring that the Kent and East Sussex Railway continues to thrive as a beacon of heritage, community, and dedication for years to come.

6. Concluding Message: Call for Support An Appeal for Volunteers and Funding

As we look to the future, the Kent and East Sussex Railway faces both exciting opportunities and pressing challenges. To sustain and grow, we need your support more than ever. **Volunteers are the backbone of K&ESR**, and we're seeking additional help, particularly during peak events and seasonal highlights like our Santa Services. Every volunteer, in every role, directly contributes to keeping our railway running and enhancing the visitor experience.

Equally vital is the financial support that enables us to preserve our heritage, meet rising operational costs, and advance projects like the Robertsbridge extension. This year, we have a special focus on **locomotive 1638**, an important part of our fleet that has in the past been central to our operations and embodies the spirit of our railway. Through our **50th Anniversary Appeal**, we are inviting members and supporters to sign up for a monthly contribution of **£16.38**, directly supporting the restoration and upkeep of 1638 and ensuring it remains a symbol of our heritage for years to come.

Donations, membership renewals, and contributions to this special appeal are essential to closing the gap between our revenue and the demands of maintaining and expanding the railway. Every contribution, no matter the size, brings us closer to securing K&ESR's future, while supporting specific projects like the 1638 restoration keeps our legacy in

motion. Your support makes a tangible difference, allowing us to continue sharing the unique magic of heritage railway with visitors of all ages.

Closing Remarks

I want to personally thank each of you—volunteers, members, supporters, and partners—for the commitment and passion you bring to the Kent and East Sussex Railway. Your dedication has been instrumental in achieving the milestones we celebrate today, and it is this same spirit that will carry us through the challenges ahead.

We face the future with optimism, knowing that with your continued involvement, we can overcome obstacles, embrace opportunities, and ensure that K&ESR remains a thriving part of our heritage and community for generations to come. Let's continue building on our legacy together—preserving history, fostering community, and creating memorable experiences for all who journey with us.

Thank you for standing with us. Together, we can keep the spirit and legacy of the Kent and East Sussex Railway alive.

Dr Robin Coombes
General Manager
Kent and East Sussex Railway

Tenterden October 2024