

Operations Report – February 2022

Mike Williams – Operations Director

So where does one start?

We have risen like the phoenix from the abyss and are back on the map, so to speak. We are back doing what we like, running trains and enjoying our hobby.

So much has been accomplished in a relative short space of time and there are so many people to thank, both individuals and groups. A lot of hard work has been done in so many areas and departments to get us where we currently are and I would like to thank everyone who has made this possible.

Our volunteers have come back, albeit in decreased numbers, and our customers have returned despite the Covid pandemic and its ever-changing rules, regulations, guidance and legislation. The decrease in volunteer numbers seems to be a common scenario throughout the Heritage Sector, with many organisations reporting a 40% reduction in their volunteer base. Hopefully more will drift back as the pandemic wanes and life continues to get back to normal. The board will be looking into our volunteer offering and are seriously looking into how we can attract new volunteers to come and join us.

As I write this we are preparing for a new year of operations with the railway in a sound and stable financial position. The railway is probably in a better financial position than it has ever been and this is purely down to the management of costs and overheads. With ever increasing costs we can not afford to be complacent and the 2022 Operations reflect this. We will not run train services for the sake of it and all operations must adhere to a 'break-even' point and within agreed budgets. We will continue to monitor costs and overheads and adjust our operations accordingly. The board are constantly looking into ways to reduce our overheads and Managers & HOD's, where appropriate, will be asked to assist the board with management and setting up of departmental budgets.

Governance, yes, the word everyone wishes would go away, is going to be key if this railway can continue and survive in the long term. Without good Governance this railway will eventually struggle to survive and possibly die. Throughout the heritage railway sector, it is becoming increasingly difficult to make ends meet, and with energy and coal prices soaring to unprecedented levels the struggles can only get worse. It is therefore vital that the business model changes if we are to survive long term. If we are to survive, we need to engage with the outside agencies who if we get our governance right could provide us with financial grants to undertake so many vital projects across the railway and give us long term stability.

With governance being at the forefront of where we need to be, the board have recruited additional members and will be looking to recruit additional board members where required with the appropriate skillsets to enhance the successful management of the railway. Tom Taylor has been offered and accepted the position of Trust Manager and I would like to pledge my full support to Tom and look forward to a successful working relationship. The board will be looking to recruit a Commercial/Marketing Manager. After all we are the best kept secret in North Wales.

Yes, we have risen from the ashes and survived. There is still a way to go, but the future is bright if we all work together.

This is our railway – **One Railway**. Let's all get On-Board and enjoy the trip.

Once again, a big thank you to everyone who has helped to make 2021 a successful year for the railway.

2021 Operations

The ORR carried out an inspection on July 8th, and subject to a few caveats, we got the green light to re-start operations the following day. As we were still undertaking essential maintenance and inspections along the line, we re-started train services with a limited service between Llangollen and Berwyn, and it was pleasing to see how well we were supported. Our passengers returned in encouraging numbers.

As the engineering works & inspections progressed, more of the line became available and the services were extended first to Glyndyfrdwy and finally Carrog.

Due to a shortage of alternative motive power, our Diesel Railcars provided all the services in July and were the backbone of services for the remainder of the summer season.

I would like to thank the Railcar Group for everything they have done to run the intense schedule I sort of imposed on them during the season. They also covered several days at short notice when asked.

Steam and Diesel hauled services were introduced as they became available, primarily running on the weekends and bank holidays when we were likely to get sufficient numbers of passengers to ensure passenger numbers and revenue were above the breakeven point.

With the exception of one weekend, we managed to run as scheduled throughout the summer season and our passengers kept coming back in encouraging numbers, with all but a handful of services during October and November providing us with revenue the right side of the breakeven line.

From our re-opening in July to the end of the season in November we ran for 91 days in total and sold over 17,300 passenger tickets equating to a revenue of £ 184,622 which was supplemented by another £26,000 of income from Coach & Tour operators.

Santa Specials

Firstly, I would like to thank everyone from the MPD and C&W who worked tirelessly to get the loco and carriages ready for the Santa running. There was an enormous amount of work required to both our steam loco and our carriage stock to get things ready for the festive season.

I also need to sincerely thank every volunteer who worked and took part, whether it was station staff, train stewards, elves, guards, signalmen, loco crews and of course our two Santa's. It was challenging and hard work with three trains of six coaches per day. The tight timetable proved difficult at times, but lessons have been learnt and future running will be changed as appropriate. But by all working together we got through it and it was rewarding to see our visitors with happy faces.

The Santa's proved to be a great success with our customer going away happy and providing us with very positive feedback.

During the nine days of running the Santa's we carried nearly 7200 passengers which generated a revenue of over £ 170,700. This just goes to show and prove how important the Santa Specials are to the railway providing much needed revenue.

2022 Operations

The plan for 2022 is to build on our success of last year. We will again run services ensuring we balance the books, work within budgets and ensure viable running. Our Cash Flow Forecast, which is updated as our costs and overheads change, is based upon an estimate for our passenger revenue. The problem is we do not have any viable data on passenger numbers other than 2018/2019, so with last years figures adding to the calculations we have a basis with which to work with. The tourist sector appears to be reporting record bookings for this year, which is probably due to continual concerns over Covid with reservations still encouraging the Staycation. We will continue to monitor the situation and if required make appropriate changes to our operations.

I have received a number of questions regarding the 2022 Operations & Timetables. Hopefully I can answer these queries here and now. During the later part of last year and the winter maintenance programme it has become apparent that our P/Way is suffering from a lack of investment over a long period of time. So, the lack of running on Mondays, Tuesdays & Wednesdays in the Off-Peak is simply there to allow time for essential maintenance to be carried out. To put this into some sort of perspective we need to spend something in the region of £ 160K on our P/Way over the next 18 months to 2 years. Also, if we look at the passenger numbers it is not viable to run trains with the number of passengers visiting. People visit the area have 'X' amount of money to spend and the experience of last year has shown that if we are closed on a certain day the customer will more than likely come on another day. As we now have an Internet and Social Presence it is easier for our customers to make their choice of day to visit.

Continuing on the P/Way side of the operation, a few major issues have been identified at Deeside Halt. The first being the West End Point Crossover being 'Out of Gauge' and being a serious risk. As such the P/Way team have removed the West End Point Crossover and this has been replaced with straight track on the Up/Down Main Line. Deeside Loop is for the time being a Siding, accessed from the East End Points which in turn are Clipped and Scotched for the Up/Down Main Line. The Loop will be re-instated when time, materials and budget allow. The second safety issue at Deeside is the Halt Platform which on examination has shown the timbers supporting and on the platform are extremely rotten which is allowing the platform to creep towards the running line. Obviously, the danger is a possible collapse of the platform onto the running line. Work will take place to make the platform safe for train operations which may include the total removal of the platform. Again, this will be re-instated when time and budget allow. With the current situation and issues at Deeside, together with Deeside Box not being used for the best part of 2 years a decision has been made to mothball Deeside Box for the foreseeable future. There will now be a single section between GJ and GY. S&T will remove all Deeside Tokens from GJ and GY Signal Boxes.

Following the PLC Administration and the subsequent Sale of Assets the railway was left with seven operational MK1 coaches, most of which are privately owned. Yet again these have suffered from a lack of investment and only received attention when

something broke. So now we are putting in place a schedule and budget to bring these coaches up to a decent standard which will enhance our customers experience. Whilst on coaches I need to thank C&W for the brilliant job they did in getting the rake presentable for the Santa's. A fantastic job was done on all but especially on the FK which we sold as First Class at a premium fare and which sold out on virtually every train.

On the up side we are looking to re-introduce a number of events into this year's calendar. Currently we have the Diesel Weekend in September and the Railcar Weekend in October. Also, in the calendar is the Classic Transport Weekend, booked for the first weekend in July. A Halloween Train will run on October 29th and the Ride the Rocket Train on November 5th. It looks like we may also be in a position to start running Real Ale Trains after an offer from Tez Pickthall, Iain Ross & Pete Edwards to take these on.

Corwen

All being well we can expect the opening of Corwen Station sometime in the second half of the year. Currently a Tamper is booked to arrive in late April and the track into Corwen will be tamped and levelled. We have a supply of ballast to complement what has already been put down so with a bit of welding the track should be good to go. That will leave the S&T and a few essential works to be completed plus any snags which come to light before a sign off from the HRMI. We all know about the Levelling Up Grant which will pay for the Canopy and Completion of the station. Currently, there appears to be a lack of procedures between the UK and Welsh Governments and Denbighshire CC as to how these funds are accessed. However, Tom Taylor is on the case and it looks like Denbighshire CC might consider bank rolling the project until the funds are released. So, work hopefully might move on sooner rather than later.

Corwen has the potential to open up our catchment area to the West and with the right marketing have a dramatic effect on our passenger numbers.

Bring it on.

Heritage

The board & myself constantly hear about the many ideas members and volunteers have regarding heritage projects. The board are more than willing to look at any ideas and/or projects the membership may have. But these ideas and/or projects need to be documented and/or a proposal created and presented to the board. When our governance re-structuring is complete, we may be in a position to apply for HLF, or similar, funding for any such idea/project.

This year will I'm sure have its challenges, but in comparison to the last two years I'm confident we can overcome anything thrown at us.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions or require further information.

So, as we get ready for the new season lets all work together and continue to move in the right direction. Here's to 2022.