

January News Update

FROM JOHN YULE – INTERIM CHAIRMAN

I am delighted to report that, and as you will see from the attached General Manager's Report, the Railway is going from strength to strength. We have spent the last year putting in place the people and processes to take the Railway to the next level and whilst considerable challenges remain, I and others believe we are on course to do so. The recent outstanding success of the ambitious Festive Services timetable is tangible evidence of this and again, I want to thank all of you across the Railway, who have helped and are helping to make this happen.

From a **Safety & Standards** perspective, I would bring two important events to your immediate notice. The **ORR** will visit the SR on the **11 and 12 March** to review various aspects of our operations including risk and competence management, and record keeping; we are working hard across the railway to prepare for this, including the use of an external consultant to help us to focus on and demonstrate delivery in key areas.

Inherent in the ORR's recommendations following the Flying Scotsman Incident, was the need to strengthen our Competence Management Systems across all our safety critical operations, not just the footplate. I am pleased to advise that the new **Competence Assurance Management Committee** is now up and running and already making a difference to our assurance overview. Designed in part to ensure a focused and standardised approach to the management of safety critical competence, this committee, in conjunction with the new Volunteer Coordination Group will also help us to deliver competent operational staff to meet our ambitious 2025 timetable and increased Royal Scotsman operations.

The second key S&S event is this year's **Pre-Season Operations Briefing** on the **22 March** in the Cairngorm Hotel, kicking off at **10.30 am**, for those with an operational responsibility or involvement in the running of the railway. Further details re. agenda, etc will be posted in due course, but please put this date in your diaries.

We have a very exciting year ahead of us, in this the **200th anniversary** of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway, the first true general carrier railway in the world. Events to celebrate this are being organised throughout the year and across the UK at a national and local level and were kicked off with a 1st of January noon Engine Whistle Up on the SR and several other heritage railways. We are in discussions to bring the Railway 200 Exhibition Train to the SR at some point in the anniversary year.

It is also the **75th anniversary** of the Carmyllie Pilot Co's Ivatt Class 2MT engine **46464**. We are planning to celebrate this with an event on the last weekend of March which will also involve our own Ivatt 46512.

Our **2025 Timetable** is now on the SR Webpage, and as indicated we have a very ambitious level of Steam Services planned. The timetable is designed to maximise our potential income, to allow us to try and better meet the considerable financial demands that are required simply to run the railway, particularly with respect to locomotive and rolling stock refurbishment and maintenance.

As diesel services remain a key part of our heritage mix not least in providing a competence path to Train Crews and Signallers to support the commercially important Royal Scotsman air-braked trains, the Operations Committee are developing plans to provide for this.

We continue to develop the skills etc definition for the new SRC board structure, but a focus on the resolution of other key corporate issues, means I have nothing further to update at present.

Having been appointed Company Secretary in 2017, **Duncan Gilmour has advised that he wishes to step down and retire by the end of this year.** If you are interested in taking over and becoming part of the management team, please let Duncan know and he will be happy to give you further details.

Finally, from me, a lot of good work happens across the railway carried out by various individuals and groups, and you can catch-up and keep tabs on a lot of what is going on by dipping into the various blogs – **links at the bottom of the SR and SRA webpages.**

Also, if you have any photos that you would like to share for general updates via social media or that might help the promotion and marketing of the railway, please send them to ellie.morgan@strathspeyrailway.co.uk.

All the best

John

GENERAL MANAGER'S REPORT

Festive Services Update: *Santa Trains*

A total of almost **7,500 passengers** were carried on **35 trains** (three trains a day over 13 days) between 30 November to 23 December. Light lunches and afternoon teas were augmented with gift bags for kids, entertainment from elves and, of course, Santa.

Santa trains generated income of **£157,000 against a target of £140,000**. Additional gross profit generated before normal operating costs was **£93,000**. The first weekend loadings were low, with the 17.00 services generally not very popular with some cancelled due to lack of demand.

Catering uptake with the exception of first class, which was pretty full all the time, on earlier services was also disappointing although the later dates 21, 22 and 23 December, like the whole train, were almost full.

We also added an additional first-class compartment carriage, 35069 (no catering) which was fairly popular.

Apart from a day when we had to run a diesel due to a breakdown, **feedback was generally good** although some comments were received about train décor, and length of time with the entertainers and Santa in particular. After the first feedback we increased the number of elves to four however, even so, on busy trains with eight carriages and a one and half hour journey time with it being difficult to increase times, we will need to consider size, timing, and number of trains.

Key points we definitely need to address are:

- Train décor - to source in January, some of ours is more than 12 years old.
- Lineside large décor /lighting again to be sourced in January.
- Gift -sourcing, hopefully a Thomas the Tank style SRC bespoke Santa Express train as the gift.
- Santa -Ken did a sterling job and Alan Rycroft and Diarmid McAuley also helped but it was a gruelling schedule.

Mince Pie Specials

Two trains a day were scheduled to run on seven days between 28 November and 5 January with six carriages, complimentary mince pies and hot drink, but no lunches, or afternoon tea. Goodie bags were provided for children.

Uptake was excellent with 1275 passengers generating sales of £31,600; the budget was £14,000.

We received no adverse feedback on prices with the 12.30 trains full on 28, 29 November and 1 and 2 January. The 15.00 service was not as popular with the result we cancelled these on 4 and 5 January.

For next year we will review timings, dates, and the number of carriages.

Operations:

2025 Timetable is now on-line with services every month and a total of **190 running days planned**, all steam hauled. Additional days have been added around school holidays (2024: Total - 172 of which eight were Diesel Fridays).

Whilst the diesel service was not particularly popular with the general public it did provide training opportunities for the diesel team and attracted enthusiasts; we are therefore considering adding some diesel services to the timetable.

We are expecting to bring the officers saloon back by the end of March this year and also replace the current RU with the refurbished one. Thanks to all those who have worked diligently on these projects.

A busy schedule yet again of **Royal Scotsman visits with 52 planned** so far this year (2024 - 48)

Marketing:

New posters have been designed for 2025 with more of a heritage/vintage style. We will also be producing leaflets for distribution through Landmark leaflet stands.

We are hopeful that the Traitors will be returning to film on the Railway as part of the next series.

It would be helpful for more people to engage with social media posts (a like, share or comment, etc.) as this helps the algorithms which give more exposure to the posts.

We also need more social media content from all departments – anecdotes, stories, updates, achievements, what are we working on, photos of work in progress. Viewers especially love news/images of the work we are doing in the engine shed.

Challenges:

We continue to face **challenges** across the Railway **with a need to attract more volunteers** especially with additional running days planned for 2025. Whilst we struggled at times to cover all areas in 2024, **thanks to the dedicated efforts by those we had, we managed to deliver all planned services** although we did on two occasions have to revert to diesel use due to the unavailability of footplate crew; **thanks are also due to the diesel crews who stepped in at short notice to provide cover.**

The lack of qualified staff placed a disproportionate burden on some key individuals to whom we were very grateful. Areas of particular concern are Footplate crews, and especially drivers and guards for the Royal Scotsman. We also need more volunteer station staff especially for Broomhill.

Volunteer Focus/Plans:

To address the issues mentioned above a **Volunteer Coordinator Group** has been formed. A meeting has already been held and an Action Plan formulated.

A new volunteer web page has been created on our Strathspey Railway website, with a jump box added to the home page of the website.

<https://strathspeyrailway.co.uk/volunteering.html>

A digital application form now allows prospective volunteers to apply online.

A more detailed guide to the various roles on the Railway has been produced by each department (**big thanks to those who took the time to produce this**) and added to 'learn more' buttons on the web page.

Initial assessment documents have been created for each department, with a breakdown of typical tasks for each job to assess if an applicant is suited to the role applied for, ensure understanding of role requirements, and to identify support needs. (**Thanks again to those who took the time to produce these**).

We have introduced a Volunteer 'Buddy' scheme to support new volunteers. **We have also identified the need for:**

- More buddies across all departments to share the load.
- News/updates from each department which would help in promoting the work that we do and our achievements inspiring others to get involved.
- More willing staff/volunteers to appear in video/photography for promotional use, particularly in the engineering department.
- The launch of a social media campaign, particularly targeting potential volunteers from the local community.
- Volunteer info posters for display at our stations.
- A volunteer /membership recruitment day.

2025 Budget and P&L Forecast:

With income growth and prudent management of expenses we believe this year's budget will allow us to stabilise our finances and generate a small surplus for reinvestment.

Income

Passenger train income is projected to be **£1.5M**. This is based on additional running days and an average price increase of 11% to 12% but with similar loadings per day. **This is an increase of over £0.5M from 2024.**

With catering sales and retail increases together with stabling charges, we have budgeted for overall trading income **£1.7M** which with other income of a further **£100K** makes total income of **£1.8M**.

Expenditure

Operating expenses are projected to increase in line with the additional number of running days and the cost of special events and festive trains. Salary costs which are a significant proportion of our expenses will be adversely impacted by the **increase in Employers' National Insurance** and the cost of attracting staff particularly where the lack of volunteers require functions to be covered by paid staff.

A lot of work was done over the past year on C&W to ensure that we had a reliable set of carriages for the running set; this allowed us to run seven coach trains at times of high demand. An excellent servicing and maintenance programme for our locos meant we only had two minor breakdowns on services which were quickly resolved. **As a result, we can hold expenditure in these key areas steady this year.**

P-Way works whilst not as extensive as we might like will include the lengthening of Broomhill platform on which work has already started.

Overall expenses are budgeted at £1.7M thus giving us a profit for reinvestment of £100K.

Projects Update:

The following is a summary of the various projects which are currently underway or planned.

Underway:

New RU: £10K funding from the SRA towards the overall cost should see a return to service at the end of March.

Officers Saloon: A preliminary refurbishment costing £15K (part funding of £10K from the SRA) will see a return to service in April. Further work is still required for a full refurbishment.

Extension of Broomhill Platform and associated works: Fully funded by the SRC with completion expected by March.

Loco No 9 – Restoration continuing with the foundation ring funded by one of our volunteers, Roddie McRae with the SRA/SRC funding the balance.

Planned:

Repainting of Broomhill and Boat of Garten stations: £5K funded by the SRA.

Blasting shed: This will allow us to reuse material and will be self-funded the help of a loan from the SRA.

Lathe Shed: Funding being sought.

Rebranding and signage for stations -Home of Highland Steam

Running Shed - Work ongoing on planning and budgeting, with funding sources to be confirmed.

Other Funding and Gifts received:

Accessibility carriage: The accessibility carriage entered service in mid-2023 and has been a great asset enabling us to provide facilities to many people with accessibility issues, supporting accessibility whilst also generating revenue. The £115K cost was payable in instalments and funded with the help of grants and a loan from the SRA.

Robel Rotamp units: For the P-way team funded by SRA.

Storage container for S&T: Funded by SRA.

Free Infrastructure items: Thanks to the good relations and contacts of some of our key members, we have received several donations of infrastructure equipment from Network Rail. These are extremely valuable gifts in kind and helps us complete many P-Way and signalling projects at minimal cost.

All of the above together with the dedicated labour support from our volunteers allow us to continue maintenance and development work at minimal cost.

Regards

Gordon



Santa making a quick getaway from Aviemore on 20 December 2024 – Malcolm Timperley