

Chairman's Report

Progress since May 2009.

Much more has happened since the end of the financial year. At Llyncllys, a successful operating season is drawing to a close, with Santa Specials still to come, and a lot of work has been done on the rolling stock and infrastructure. But in addition we are faced with the clearance of over five miles of neglected and seriously overgrown railway. Our volunteers have made huge efforts to tackle this task, concentrating mainly on the length between Llyncllys Junction and the A483 level crossing at Weston, and as a result it is now possible to get access to most of this track to inspect it properly and assess the work that needs doing before we can run trains on it. Yesterday we walked this length of track with David Keays from HMRI, who offered very valuable and encouraging advice.

The line through Oswestry station has also been cleared, and it is planned to carry out further work to the track and platform over the winter so that passenger trains can be run on it next year, in order to give visible proof to Oswestry people that we mean business, and to raise our public profile. On the section of line through the town, we are having to confront a number of issues which need careful handling, including nuisance from trespassers, problems with neighbours' fences, overshadowing trees, graffiti, and accumulated litter.

But some of the work being done behind the scenes is perhaps even more important in the long run. A surprisingly difficult task has been to clarify on paper our management structure, departmental responsibilities, and job descriptions, and to set up sub-groups to deal with particular issues and report back to the Trustees. This structure now puts us in a stronger position to work more effectively and face the challenges ahead, but it will continue to develop. In particular we hope that every post will have deputies and assistants in order to share the workload and reduce the reliance on a few overworked individuals - so do please consider what play you could part. We are also developing our health & safety systems in accordance with HRA guidance. This may sometimes be unpopular with volunteers, but it is essential to cover our legal responsibilities, and our aim to make compliance as straightforward as possible. Do please ask if there's any aspects you'd like to discuss, or seek help with.

I have already mentioned that the Trust and Society are working together under the name Cambrian Heritage Railways. Under the guidance of Nigel Davies, the Cross-Border Tourism Development Officer, we have recently set up Cambrian Heritage Railways Ltd. as a company, and have agreed that publicity and grant applications will be made in the name of this company, in order to avoid the confusion and doubts which would inevitably remain if two bodies were running one project. Initially the directors of the new company are Nigel and directors of CRT, CRS, and the Oswestry

Station Building Trust; pending formal consideration by the Trustees it is suggested that every member of CRT and CRS automatically becomes a member of CHR too, in order to ensure control remains in your hands as members. We will be interested to hear what your thoughts are on this – but so far I am pleasantly surprised at how positive the reaction has been from almost everybody I have discussed it with. When the set-up has been confirmed, things can move on as quickly or as slowly as we want; the Trust and Society are already, for example, working together on developing a unified Safety Management System; but on the other hand I don't think members will want to rush into transferring assets to CHR just yet.

What we all want most is to extend the operating railway, concentrating initially on Llynclys to Oswestry, but a lot of things still need to happen before we can achieve this:

- Although we have a Lease Agreement with Shropshire Council, the lease itself cannot be completed until the Land Registry finishes its work, and some plots still remain unregistered.
- At Oswestry our present lease agreement covers the former Network Rail land, but we are negotiating for the additional land we need for the platforms etc. which is now owned by Shropshire Council.
- At Llynclys station, we need to buy or lease the trackbed and platforms to connect the land we already own either side, and we are working on ways to achieve this as soon as possible. It seems very unlikely that any grants will be available for this purpose, so we propose to set up a scheme inviting supporters to loan money at a commercial interest rate – we are taking advice on the details of this, and we'll be circulating them to you very shortly. Hopefully we can give you an attractive alternative for some of the funds you've got sitting in a Building Society account!
- Also at Llynclys, we cannot proceed with either work on the trackbed up to the junction, or work on the carriage shed site, until a revised Great Crested Newt Licence has been obtained from Natural England, which is proving frustratingly difficult.
- We need to obtain a Transport & Works Act Order before we can run any passenger trains which pass over or under public rights of way. Much of the legal work has already been done, but much more remains, public exhibitions need to be mounted, and every neighbour and interest group needs to be identified and consulted. Additional funding is being sought to help with this.
- Professional assessment of the underbridges is needed, and repair or strengthening works arranged.

- Details for reinstating the A483 crossing must be worked out, and a Level Crossing Order applied for.
- A Listed Building Consent Application is being prepared for the up platform at Oswestry.
- We are working on surveys to demonstrate support from businesses and the public, marketing strategies, a revised business plan, schemes to demonstrate education benefits, community involvement, heritage value, etc. etc., all of which are essential for successful grant applications.
- While working towards major grant applications, we are continuing to seek out and apply for smaller amounts of money to make progress on elements of the project wherever opportunities arise.

At the same time we are looking further ahead, for example at Gobowen where we have agreed in principle that we will lease part of the coal yard, and we have had an encouraging initial meeting with Network Rail about the additional land we need – although getting it is unlikely to be an easy process. We are also researching opportunities for a Community Rail service.

An issue which has caused a disproportionate amount of trouble over the years is the clearance of vegetation and the felling of trees, but we are now beginning to turn this from a problem to an opportunity, with the involvement of Shropshire Wildlife Trust in making botanical surveys, the arrangement of bat surveys, and the development of overall plans to manage the lineside to improve its ecological value. By viewing the railway corridor as a linear wildlife site we can add a lot of interest for our visitors, and we can improve our image with some of the local residents who might otherwise be unsympathetic.

While pushing ahead with our main project to extend the railway, there are some short-term improvements we can get on with. For example, over the winter we intend to construct the platform and access at Penygareg Halt, which can be done with relatively modest funds but will transform visitor perception of the line – instead of just being a trip there and back, passengers will be able to alight and have a walk along the canal.

Finally, this project has tremendous potential and will bring great benefits to the town and the whole area - so a big thank you to everybody who has worked so hard to get where we are now – and I hope that even more members will offer their support during the coming year.