



News in brief for volunteers and supporters of the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway

No 54 – June 2020

Safety First...Safety First...S

Public footpath we are not...

■ *Charles Spencer writes:* With very little physical activity at the railway, the main safety story is our ongoing work to keep the railway secure. In the last issue I wrote about the daily security patrols and I am grateful to the local volunteers who are using their daily exercise 'allowance' to check both ends of the line several times a day.

In the good weather, trespass has been a problem. There has been no damage to the railway, but there is always a risk with unauthorized and inexperienced people walking the line – it's not a footpath.

We have posted additional warning signs at all access points and erected fences across the railway at key spots to deter people from venturing onto bridges and other potentially dangerous areas of the line. And even with the railway closed, there are still trains (whose crews have to drop those fences!).

Having done a detailed line inspection on foot, we've been able to run a light engine along the line and retrieve the water wagon from Raven Square, in preparation for our annual weedkilling – essential to keep growth under control and the railway safe for our own workers. So we will continue to monitor the line closely and make it clear that it is never safe for the public to walk along it.

Safety work also continues behind the scenes – we're working on risk assessments both for current activities and for the process of reopening, whenever that comes. Everything new that we do requires a risk assessment and, often, documentation on a Safe System of Work.

And finally, a particularly useful piece of safety documentation came from the ORR (Office of Rail & Road) this month – a 35-point primer on the safety areas which heritage railways need to consider in their reopening plans. We flatter ourselves that we had already thought of most of it, but it is a great checklist to ensure that we have safety standards in place for our normal operations and for the special challenges of protecting staff and the public from Covid-19.

If you have spare time (!) and would like to see what we have to cover for reopening, through a safety lens, the ORR report is recommended reading. You can find it at https://orr.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/42877/heritage-railway-recovery-plan-in-response-to-Covid-19.pdf



■ 'The Earl' departing for its overhaul at the Vale of Rheidol on 24th June last year. Due to the recent challenging times, when the loco returns to us, and in what order, is in the hands of our members and supporters.
Photo: Phil Ellis

Keep The Earl on track!

No not this newsletter, our original locomotive No. 1 'The Earl', which is more than halfway through its 10-year overhaul with our friends at the Vale of Rheidol Railway in Aberystwyth. Until the Covid-19 outbreak stopped all work (*writes appeals director Iain McLean*), the overhaul was going well – on time and on budget. We had planned to have The Earl back in service just after The Countess reaches its 10-year limit of service in February 2021.

Thanks to uncommitted funds from a recent large legacy we were able to contract out The Earl's overhaul, so that our workshop staff and volunteers could focus on completing the restoration of No. 10, 699-01 'Sir Drefaldwyn', and other critical in-house projects.

But now that we have no income from railway operations since February 2020, we have to ask for support to get The Earl back.

With the boiler, axle boxes and much of the plating complete, there is £95,000 of work left to do at the Vale of Rheidol. A critical next step is to reassemble The Earl as a rolling chassis. If we can raise £30,000 by the time the Vale of Rheidol workshop (and we) reopen, we can ask our contractors to do that straight away.

If we can raise the whole £95,000, we can ask our contractors to finish the job off, so

that The Earl can be back in service in 2021 and feature at the 2021 Steam Gala. That way, after The Countess steps aside for its refit, we will still have one of our original historic locomotives available.

The fallback would be to set the rolling chassis aside until funds permitted the job to be completed, but that would probably mean The Earl wouldn't see service at all in 2021.

By around the end of this month (June) we have to let the VoR know which option to go for. If we can't be confident of raising at least the first £30,000, we may have to ask them to return The Earl as a 'kit of parts', which would lead to a long delay before we can have an original engine back in service.

Strong start to appeal

It's up to you. We need your help! The good news is that to kickstart this appeal we have a donation of £5,000, which will amount to over £6,000 once Gift Aid is reclaimed. You may send us a cheque for any amount, to the Railway at The Station, Llanfair Caereinion, SY21 0SF. Remember to sign a Gift Aid form, available from our home page, if you are a UK taxpayer who has not already done so.

For donations up to £300, there is also a one-click way to give, via the CAF (Charities Aid Foundation) page that has been linked from our Covid emergency page at <https://www.wllr.org.uk/>.

The initial phase of our Covid appeal, 'Tracks to Recovery', has been a brilliant success with more than £50,000 raised since late March. Let's keep up the momentum and keep The Earl on track!





Purchases that will help our funds

Thanks to the Charman Mail Order Company, we've built on our Christmas card facility to start offering products for sale on our website.

The starter for 10 (£11.75 actually) is a package of four W&LLR souvenirs, including a new tea towel featuring our Zillertal visitor (pictured above). If you want one simply go to <https://www.wllr.org.uk/card-shop>

John Forman has also lined up some book offerings – these will be on the website soon.

Meanwhile the fund-raising book published by Mainline & Maritime and written by trustee Oliver Edwards is now available, and early buyers have been highly complimentary of the selection of period and modern views of the railway contained within its 80 pages.

The book costs £16.95 with £5 from each sale going to our appeal. You can order it at <https://mainline-maritime.myshopify.com/collections/railways/products/welshpool-llanfair-light-railway-through-the-years>



■ And the work goes on... Recent warm weather has seen very low river levels and provided perfect conditions for a detailed inspection of the Banwy Bridge, which was duly carried out on 28th May.

Photo: Charles Spencer

From the General Manager....From the General Manager....From the

Planning for reopening...

■ **Charles Spencer** writes: There's a pattern here. In the last issue of *The Earl*, I announced that the railway would remain closed until at least mid-May. Then in the press release, which was sent to the newsletter distribution list with a covering note from me, we noted there was no easing of the shutdown in Wales (in distinction to England) and said that, like the Welsh Government, we would be reviewing the situation again in early June.

The pattern is uncertainty. We simply don't know when governments and people will be able to decide it's possible to return to some kind of normality. One railway which I can't name has already told me they are dealing with the uncertainty by deciding they won't run trains in 2020. We can't really afford to do that, nor do we want to. But when? It now seems safe to say, "not likely in June either".

If we can't be sure of 'when', we can at least work on 'what'. Unless there's a Trumpian miracle, Covid-19 is going to be with us for a while. But we're planning how to run in that environment once we can.

I discussed some basic principles for reopening with the Board last weekend. Boiled down to just three areas, they are first and foremost, to run only when it is safe for staff and visitors (and is seen to be safe). Second, it has to be practical, and third, it has to be financially viable.

Safe means that we meet government guidelines at a minimum, and that in addition we satisfy our own judgement about distancing, hygiene and personal protection. We need to explain carefully the measures we're taking so volunteers know they will be safe in their role. We need to reassure visitors that it's safe to come, and also make sure they help keep us safe by observing our procedures and following our directions.

Logistical overload

Being practical involves a lot of logistics. We need to change working methods, refresher training, online booking, customer contact, cleaning, train seating and our shop and tearoom arrangements. We need to make sure we have the capacity – the volunteers – to operate the plan.

We will start small – walk before we run,

as the ORR suggests. That way we can test our new arrangements and make adjustments to the service and the offering to the public. We can expand if things are working, or pull back if the environment changes. That will be a challenge for rosters, but we're going to need flexibility to deal with this very unusual situation. Local volunteers are also going to be key, just as they have been in the essential maintenance going on now.

We're also continuing to evaluate our planned special events, and the latest casualty is the second weekend of Welsh Tea trains in July. We can't see any logistics that would allow this service to go ahead safely, so we'll shortly be contacting everyone who booked to let them know. If you're among them, we share your disappointment that we can't run this brilliant service.

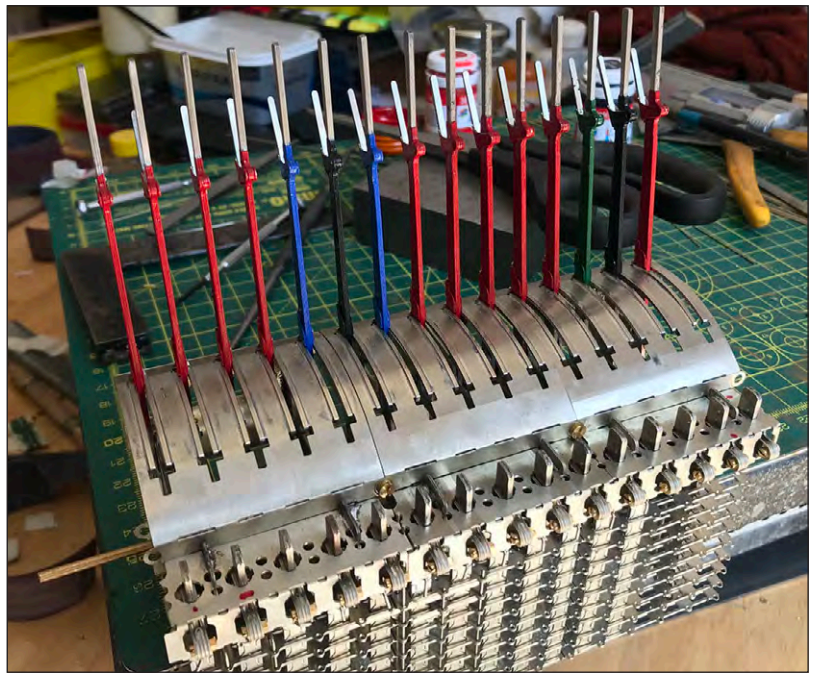
Finally, the dreaded question of money. The railway has had great support from members and others on the Tracks to Recovery appeal, which topped £50,000 this past week, enough to cover a lot of our closure costs. We've also just been awarded a further £25,200 as an emergency grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, intended to be used specifically for the costs of preparing for reopening with no revenue coming in.

Running trains as soon as we can is another way we can sustain the railway financially. Obviously we won't run if it's at a loss, but every pound we earn over the direct costs of running the service will contribute to the unavoidable annual overhead costs and protect our financial reserves. Remember that at best we're going to have a short summer and then as usual another winter with its inevitable expenses and no revenue.

So when – 'when' – the call goes out to help with reopening and running the service, I hope everyone will do what they can. It will be different and difficult, but it will be safe and practical and it will help preserve the railway for the future.

Below: Glorious weather as 'Chattenden' descends Castle bank while returning the water wagon to Llanfair in advance of the planned and highly necessary weed-killing train on 2nd June. Photo: Charles Spencer





■ Our mechanical engineering assistant Joe Gunby is making good use of his furloughed time, following the rules and not working for the railway – but he's doing some work for himself in miniature. His current project is a recreation of the Llanfair lever frame from Scalefour Society etches, compressed to 15 levers but also with some improvements! He's even consulted with professional signaller Graham Hall. Joe brought his work in progress down to show us at the office this week, complete with the first tappets and bars of the fully functioning interlocking.

Journal copy? Send it in now...

Straight after sending out this edition of *The Earl* editor Andrew Charman was moving on to producing the July edition of the *Llanfair Railway Journal*.

The next edition will be rather different to normal as unsurprisingly there will be far fewer departmental reports, as most of them have nothing over the past three months to tell us about!

If you have any potential content for the *Journal*, please send it in now – the more Andrew has to select from and fill the pages, the happier he will be!

First Aid training pays off on Zoom!

Geoﬀ Gauntlett paid W&LLR safety officer Paul Wixey a nice compliment earlier this month, reporting that he put Emergency First Aid At Work training he undertook at Llanfair last year into practice, on the online meeting app Zoom.

While on a Zoom call Geoff realized that one of the participants was clearly unwell. Geoff knew she was diabetic and decided she was probably having a hypo. Another person who thought she knew where a spare key to the woman's house was hidden under a plant pot set off from her home and Geoff followed a few minutes later. Their efforts to persuade her to take some sugar were futile and she started to become aggressive so a 999 call was made and three paramedics attended.

Cutting a long story short they got her blood-sugar level back to normal, took her to hospital for observation and Geoff picked her up and took her home later in the day.

Geoff credits the W&LLR course with giving him the confidence to get stuck in.

Plans fixed for W&LLR AGM

The Annual General Meeting of the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway will take place as re-scheduled on Sunday 9th August at Llanfair station (*writes company secretary Michael Reilly*).

Some members have asked why we are still holding an AGM given the coronavirus restrictions. The simple answer is that we are legally obliged to do so. As a company owned by its members, the annual report and accounts must be approved by members and a general meeting be held for this. Our Articles of Association further state that a minimum of five people must be personally present for the meeting to be valid.

Attendance considerations

In view of the exceptional circumstances, however, we are asking members to consider carefully whether to attend the AGM in person. Capacity of the venue will be severely restricted due to social distancing measures and to ensure that we have adequate protection arrangements in place on the day, those who do wish to attend will need to register in advance. Details of how to do so will be given in the formal notification of the meeting, which will be sent to all paid-up members in the usual way. For similar reasons, there will be no refreshments provided at the meeting.

Traditionally, the AGM is followed by a members' forum. While members are probably even more anxious for an opportunity to hear first-hand from the GM and board members about developments in these exceptional times, unlike the AGM, the forum is not a legal requirement and we have to balance interest in holding it against the safety of members and any restrictions that may remain in place. A decision on whether to proceed with it or to postpone it until later in the season will therefore be taken nearer the time.

Even if you do not attend the AGM,

your vote remains very important. The great majority of votes are normally cast by postal proxy, using the forms sent in advance to all paid-up members. These arrangements will be in place this year as usual and we encourage members to cast their votes this way.

Questions from the floor

This year we will also be inviting members not attending in person to submit any questions they may wish to put to either the chairman or finance director at the meeting by e-mail beforehand. We will ensure they are answered on the day.

Some members have asked whether we could not resort to technology and hold a 'virtual' conference by video-link or similar. We have considered this. But to ensure a secure and reliable link would cost money, which in the current economic circumstances could be put to better use on higher priorities.

Live feed

We do plan to arrange a live streaming feed of the meeting, so that those not attending in person will be able to follow the proceedings remotely (as mentioned, all questions will be submitted in advance). Again, details will be given in the formal meeting notice.

The 2019 Annual Report and Accounts should be available on the website from early in June – you will find it under the 'Help Us' heading. Printed copies will also be available on request in due course.

If anyone would like to stand for election to the board but has not already submitted their nomination and acceptance, another opportunity to do so will be open between 10th and 28th June. If you are interested in standing please contact me as soon as possible at Michael.Reilly@wllr.org.uk. Nominations that I have already received remain valid and no further action is necessary for now.



■ If you are quick you should still be able to obtain the June edition of *Railway Modeller* magazine, which includes as its cover feature 'Welshpool' a remarkable layout in 7mm scale portraying the W&LLR. The finely detailed and highly accurate model includes Welshpool's BR station and yard with exchange sidings and the W&LLR motive power depot, the town centre with the line running through it, and Llanfair Caereinion.

The truly excellent extra news is that the builder of the model, Ralph Seymour, has been in touch with us and there is a plan in place for the model to eventually form one of the displays in Llanfair Connections. This won't happen for some time, but all those who have seen the model agree it will be a major attraction, and we are very grateful to Ralph for his kind offer.

From the Chairman....From the Chairman....From the Chairman....From the Chairman....From the Chair

Work goes on behind the closed doors

As I write this, we have been in lockdown for 65 days. The railway, of course, remains shut and as with the rest of the industry is now having to cope with the uncertainty of the situation. The issues we are now managing we have never seen before and in fact would never have thought could occur.

Many people have contributed to managing this crisis. We have stepped up our social media posts, keeping the railway in the public eye as best we can, particularly to encourage help through the 'Tracks to Recovery' appeal.

Others have been kept very busy working out what financial help we can get through the various government schemes. The appeal and grants have brought in very welcome finance to help pay for all the costs which do not go away just because we are not operating. Just getting our heads around the various schemes was an achievement in itself.

We have held monthly board meetings

through Zoom since March to enable us to understand the impact of the shutdown and the cash flow that we have and can predict. It is now quite obvious that unless we manage to generate some income before the year end it will affect our spending well into 2021.

Several projects will have to go on hold until we are sure of our income. One of those will be the rebuild of 'The Earl'. We rely on our income in the summer to see us through the winter. If we have no, or even very low, income it could be just like having three winters in a row.

Balancing the need

At the last board meeting we agreed with Charles the principles for re-opening the railway. We do need to balance our need to generate income with safe operation both in protecting our staff and visitors from Covid-19 but also in reactivating the railway with

equipment that has not been used for some time and staff who also haven't been used for some time. I would ask that all staff support Charles in any way they can through what will be a difficult time when we reactivate. We may well have to get used to some different operating processes.

Other activities which have been undertaken during the shutdown are regular safety and security checks and gardening. The latter may not seem important but to make a site look occupied and cared for is vital for security.

We have also made sure that we have locomotives and wagons which can be taken down the line if necessary, for security and safety issues as we know we have suffered with cases of trespass. This has meant inspecting, lubricating and testing them. The lockdown coming at the start of the season meant that almost all our vehicles were due an annual inspection.

A quiet place

Attendance at Llanfair for whatever reason is a different experience these days. There is almost no-one to have a tea break or lunch with, to the extent you often forget to have a break; there are not even any magazines in Keyse to read.

The board has been making good progress with our review of the management structure but progress on the update of the business plan has been put on hold. We do not know what the long-term effect on the business will be following 2020 and thus we will probably have to rebase the business plan. There has been a prediction that the economy will bounce back but that seems to be tempered with caution and now there is no doubt that the tourism industry will be hit hard.

I will finish by sparing a thought for the paid staff who have been on furlough for the past two months, and the volunteers who normally spend a significant number of days a week at the railway. We will get back to normal eventually although it will be a somewhat different normal.



■ Anti-trespass mesh fencing at the Banwy Bridge. A volunteer was recently approached in Llanfair town by a member of the public complaining about the walking surface on the bridge – to which the answer may have been, "what the @#\$& were you doing there?"

Welsh at no cost and big benefits

In the most recent edition of *The Earl* (writes **Michael Reilly**) Paul Wixey made a host of practical suggestions for beating boredom and staying occupied during the lockdown, including taking a course in the Welsh language.

That particular suggestion may have been light-hearted but doing just that is a very practical way of helping your railway and keeping occupied during the lockdown, and best of all it can be done at no cost!

Members should need no reminding of the TAIS grant that we were awarded under the EU-funded Welsh Government's Rural Development Programme in late 2018. Thanks to this we have installed the Electric Vehicle re-charging points at Llanfair, and moved forward with re-instatement of the siding at Cyfronydd.

Other projects, including re-instating the loop at Sylfaen and the fit-out of the extended Welshpool shed were also covered by the grant but are currently on hold due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the restrictions that have resulted from it.

The Welsh Government is keen to promote the use of the Welsh language throughout the country, including at tourist destinations. The aim is to encourage its use, not to make it mandatory, but a condition of receiving the TAIS grant is that we put in place a Welsh language policy on the railway. Work on this is currently in hand but rest assured,



we have no plans to start operating the railway on a bilingual basis.

On the other hand, being able to welcome visitors or deal with simple enquiries from them in Welsh can only enhance our already strong image as a welcoming and friendly venue. Naturally, too, we want to show the

Welsh government that we are responsive to their objectives – after all, we may be seeking further grants from them in the future. The railway has already signed up as a member of LearnWelsh. cymru, and we were the first heritage railway to do so. This initiative offers free online access to a range of Welsh courses for members of registered organisations – the courses are tailored to cover a range of needs, including those of the transport and tourism sectors and our trustees have already been trying the Welcome: Tourism course. Why not join them?

It's free, it's fun, it helps the railway and it can be done in your own pace and time. The homepage is at <https://learnwelsh.cymru/learning/online-taster-courses/>. Once you've created an account, you can choose any of the online courses to try although the tourism industry one is most geared to our needs. Beth am roi cynnig arni? Pob lwc! (Why not give it a try? Good luck!).



■ A reminder to social media users that both the railway's official and members and supporters pages are continuing to publish fascinating photos on an almost daily basis, and encouraging support for our appeal at the same time. Trustee Oliver Edwards has been co-ordinating the official page and Geoff Gauntlett posting on members and supporters – both are seeing huge responses to their posts, Geoff reporting engagement of close to 10,000!



Following the huge response to what was rather a special caption competition picture in *The Earl* 52 we did not expect anything like as many suggestions for our latest offering taken by Dick Johnson (above), but we still received a healthy offering – and none of them remarking on the staff member's less than PC hand signal!

Highlights included the rather clever "Poor-ker Stuart" from Alan Pennell and from 'chef' Dave Arden, "The track gang want bacon butties today!"

Mervyn Pritchard set himself up for a tough time on his next workshop visit with a caption referencing the star created by a certain TV series on the North Yorkshire Moors Railway; "The W&LLR workshop manager is a big pig, not a piglet like another railway". Mervyn insists he is casting no aspersions on our Richard Featherstone!

Michael Denholm used his knowledge of the railway's surroundings with his suggestion... "Well, I got the engine at Smithfield Market.

Don't know where the pig's from, though," while Alan Barnes offered "Well it's a bit small but we can use it for shunting..."

All good stuff! So let's have your suggestions for the picture at right, which was taken at last year's Gala by **Andrew Charman**. Send them in to the usual address...



Useful information

NOTE – in the current situation phones are not always monitored, particularly the office line. For a swift reply email is the best option.

Railway website	www.wllr.org.uk
Railway Facebook	www.facebook.com/WelshpoolSteamRailway
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