

THE EARL



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

No 53 – May 2020

Safety First...Safety First...S

Being alone...

■ **Charles Spencer** writes: It seems odd, when we're all in isolation, to be thinking about lone working, but that's actually why it's a relevant subject.

With very few people at the railway, and then only for security and essential maintenance, it's even more important than usual not to expose ourselves to the risks of lone working. When using power tools and the like, it is absolutely essential not to work alone. Peter Malim is cutting the grass at Llanfair, for example, but only when he has a 'minder' on site.

Anyone who has had a site induction recently will also remember us talking about the risks of simply walking around the railway. No matter how tidy we are, there are potential trip hazards everywhere, just as in any industrial setting. And even if the chances of encountering a moving train are very slim (!), the sleepers are still slippery and checkrails, rodding or signal wires are waiting to catch out the unwary.

For this reason we're also putting up special signs to warn of the dangers of trespass on the line, even with no trains running, and it would be great if local members could spread the word about the risks of doing that.

Informed is safe

Even if I'm just coming across to check the post, I arrange not to be alone, or for someone to know where I am and how long I'll be. We have a rota of volunteers who are checking both Llanfair and Raven Square daily, but each of them calls or emails me when they're safely clear of the site.

It's also extremely important that you don't come to the railway unannounced – if we don't know you're there, we can't make sure you're safe. Remember that Keyse Cottage is closed for the duration, except for security visits and repairs.

If you live with other family members, after five weeks you're probably longing to be alone. But if you live alone or know someone who does, you're probably doing the same as I do at the office, and making sure you keep in touch (virtually, not physically) to make sure you and others are still safe.

While some of you have enforced free time at home, it's also worth bearing safety in mind when getting on with those long-postponed chores. This is not a good time to pitch up at A&E having fallen off a ladder or with paint spray in your eye...



■ **Trains running on the W&LLR? Not quite – part of our 'due diligence' while we are locked down involved chairman Steve Clews, who lives locally, attending the railway on Tuesday 28th April to fire up the diesels and give them short runs within station limits, ensuring they stay lubricated and ready for when we next need them.**

Photo: Charles Spencer

Tracks to Recovery on track with £31K raised

We are delighted to reveal that our 'Tracks to Recovery' appeal to raise funds to cover expenses during closure has had a very strong response, thanks greatly to an attention-getting social media posting campaign coordinated by Olly Edwards.

Every day those browsing Facebook have seen at least one new post from the railway, including scenic and archive pictures, plus some videos, and attracting a superb response with the reach of each often hitting five figures. Andrew Charman has also been putting many of the posts on our Twitter feed @Llanfairline.

As of the beginning of this week the appeal has now topped £31,000, a great contribution towards paying the railway's fixed costs while it is closed. There have been the additional benefits of several dozen new memberships signed up for and very positive comments from our many fans.

A couple of people have asked, "what are these expenses that don't stop when trains do?" General manager Charles Spencer replies

that this is a good question and explains that realistically in a typical year more than 70 per cent of our expenses are fixed, whether we run trains or not.

"In addition to the GM's (reduced) salary, and just like in your house, in April we have paid electricity, water and rates bills (the latter significantly reduced for charities, however). One refuse bin still has to get collected weekly, the alarm company needs paying for monitoring, and there are always minor repair bills when electrical or plumbing equipment goes wrong – you can't tell a leaky pipe, 'we'll fix you when we get trains running again'".

Charles adds that long-term leases such as the tearoom coffee machine and the degreaser in the workshop don't stop when we do. And with bank accounts come bank charges. Eventually there are also annual bills, such as insurance, accounting and inspections.

"It's all boring stuff, but after turning off everything we can, they are still left to pay. Your support for the appeal has been critical in maintaining our reserves for when we reopen."

We hope two new fund-raising schemes will come on stream shortly. We are looking at offering online sales of a small package of railway souvenirs and a selection of new books through our website. And the separate story over the page announces the rapid publication of a book of W&LLR photographs, again co-ordinated by Olly and some of which even the best read of us will not have seen in print before.



No surprise – closure goes on until at least mid May

■ **Charles Spencer writes:** In my last message, I reported that the railway was closed due to the COVID-19 outbreak and that we would review the situation at the end of April. Well here we are, the review is done and, to no one's surprise I'm sure, I can now announce that we will be planning no train operations until a further review by 15th May.

Apart from myself, the paid staff remain on furlough into May, and railway sites are out of bounds except for security visits and essential maintenance. But there is a great deal of work going on behind the scenes.

As Steve reports, the board have been very busy following up sources of emergency funding and protecting the railway's interests in many ways. I'm maintaining communications with volunteer leaders, members, partners and suppliers, closely managing spending, having first discussions with our insurers and making sure the railway's assets and reputation are protected. Together, we're also filling out surveys and helping to advocate for support for heritage railways and the tourism sector.

As I said last time, the next important project is planning the reopening. When? Who knows. In what circumstances? Who knows. But it is becoming clearer that 'normal' is a long way off.

When we start running trains again, it will likely be with COVID-19 still around, meaning continuing physical separation and hygiene considerations. It will be without some volunteers who, being considered vulnerable, will be unable to help out while the risks to them are still there. And it will be in a difficult market – family visitors perhaps suffering economic hardship from the shutdown and older visitors, like some volunteers, being too vulnerable to come out.

A pair of lists

We're working on two 'to do' lists. One is the regular pre-season maintenance that didn't get done before we had to close. Winter trackwork isn't (quite) finished, locomotives and carriages need annual inspections and cleaning and, after a long winter hiatus and a cancelled second crew meeting, safety-critical staff will

need briefings and refreshers before taking up their duties.

There's also a category of undoing some of the shutdown processes – recharging the water systems, restocking operating and retail supplies, restarting the marketing programme, sorting out the deferred advance bookings.

That's a long-enough list to start with, and it will need a great effort once we are clear when and how we can reopen. And there won't be much notice – we'll have to hope volunteers can step up (and paid staff on their return) and throw themselves into the effort quickly.

A second, more challenging list is the special measures to operate in the new environment we're trying to predict. It almost certainly includes more hygiene provision. We'll need ways to conform with whatever physical separation is recommended, including limiting the number of passengers on individual trains, perhaps new ways of operating the tearoom and shops. Who knows if we'll need supermarket-style glass screens at retail and booking office counters? In case we do, we're ordering them.

We'll also have decisions to make about where to pick up our calendar of special events, and whether they will need to be adapted to the new circumstances. Keyse Cottage probably won't be able to hold as many volunteers as before, either in the bedrooms or the mess – how will we adapt?

So lots of questions, but we're working hard on plans to answer them, with great input from departments and teams, and I'm sure that together we'll find a way through the maze.

The W&LLR way

All the while, we will want to make sure we can reopen quickly, attract visitors back and show them our traditional W&LLR welcome. We want their company and we need their spending. We want them to enjoy themselves and learn about the railway – that's why we preserve and operate it.

And finally, of course, we want the pleasure of having the railway family back together. Last week, Olly Edwards posted Dan Abbott's wonderful video on volunteers, rebranded to support the 'Tracks to Recovery' appeal. The theme throughout volunteers' comments on the video was "it's the people". That's why we are all here.

Dan Abbott's video featuring several of our volunteers emphasises what we have to look forward to when we get back to work. You can view the video on the W&LLR's official Facebook page.



It's also the people as well, the people that I work with.

WELSHPOOL & LLANFAIR LIGHT RAILWAY THROUGH THE YEARS

by Oliver Edwards



Book of funds...

There is a new book about the railway soon to go on sale, and it's come about courtesy of a kind fund-raising offer made to heritage railways by Iain McCall, owner of publishing house Mainline & Maritime which many members will be familiar with.

In very short order *Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway Through The Years* has been put together, with Olly Edwards co-ordinating the gathering of material on behalf of the W&LLR.

The book will feature 80 archive and modern images of the railway with snippets of our history in interesting captions – as Charles reports on page 1 some of the pictures will be unfamiliar even to long-term W&LLR fans.

First copies are expected to be delivered in early June, at a cost of £16.95 with £5 from each sale going to our Tracks to Recovery appeal. If you want your own copy you can order it at <https://mainline-maritime.myshopify.com/collections/railways/products/welshpool-llanfair-light-railway-through-the-years>

Project news – or not

Railway closed, most projects shut down. Little has changed since we reported in early April on the overhauls of 'The Earl', 'Sir Drefaldwyn', the tamber and carriage B14, nor will it until both we and the Vale of Rheidol Railway can reopen our workshops.

Even the Welshpool sheds proved on inspection to have a couple of small jobs needing completion before we can sign them off with the contractor. But sites and equipment are looked at regularly, and the diesels are turned over so they will be ready when we need them. The Earl's boiler, Beyer gauge frames, Zillertal brake blocks and tamber parts are ready to roll when we are.

The biggest continuing project is in communications. Olly's Facebook campaign posting evocative current and historical photos has the railway in front of the public as well as promoting our Tracks to Recovery appeal. Most posts have reached between 4,000 and 10,000 viewers and attracted universally positive comments.

An Easter weekend colouring competition garnered a number of entries, with the winner earning a family ticket upon reopening. Tim Abbott assisted with editing and scripting videos for posting. Anything that readers can do to keep the railway visible and in a positive light will be a great help – and keep those creative photo-shopped liveries coming!

■ One of the casualties of the railway shutdown was our now traditional celebration of Sierra Leone Independence Day on 25th April – the highlighting of our strong links with the West African nation should have been particularly prominent this year following the recent twinning of the W&LLR with the Sierra Leone National Railway Museum, fully reported in the April *Journal*.

Sadly it was not to be but W&LLR member William Bickers-Jones, also a member of the museum's UK-based Friends group, ensured the day did not pass unmarked by running some suitably-adorned W&LLR trains on his 16mm scale garden railway. Well done William!



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

Unprecedented times – but the work from before shutdown must continue

A lot has happened since I last put pen to paper for *The Earl*.

Back in the middle of March I was in Sierra Leone for a liaison ceremony with the Sierra Leone National Railway Museum. We watched with great concern from a country with no cases of COVID-19 (but taking lots of precautions) as the Coronavirus spread across Europe.

Our main concern was whether we would actually get back home? I got back on 15th March having suffered far more rigour in getting into Freetown airport than I did getting into the UK. Just over a week later came the lockdown.

For that week and ever since the pace of change has been unprecedented and unpredictable. It has kept Charles and several members of the board fully occupied for five weeks organising the closing of the railway, furloughing of staff, working out cashflow and what grants, loans and support we could claim for. Not to mention the amount of work that it takes to put together viable grant applications. Meanwhile others have been busy ensuring our effective presence on social media.

This is going to be a tough year for the heritage rail industry – a very tough year. It comes at a time of year when everyone's reserves are at their lowest ebb and it looks highly unlikely that the industry will get back to normal in 2020. That means cash is needed to see us through next winter as well as surviving this summer. Some railways are asking for fabulous amounts of money in donations. Our needs may be somewhat less, but we do need as much help as we can get.

One thing is clear that when we do come to reactivate the railway it will not be like flicking a switch. As Charles describes in his column, there will be much preparatory work to complete before we run passenger trains. Any help in this will of course be gratefully received. We will let people know how things are progressing and when we need help – obviously at present we just do not know

when this will happen.

We held our last face-to-face board meeting on 21st March and held our next meeting at the end of April remotely using the Zoom online program, which we found very effective. We will meet more regularly whilst the situation is changing so rapidly.

One casualty of the close-down has been the AGM. We decided to postpone this until August, the latest we are able to hold it under the railway's governing articles. However, it is still not clear whether this will have to have an element of virtual attendance as well.

We finally finished the annual review of the risk registers in January, only to realise that though we identified foot and mouth disease as a risk we hadn't really identified all the effects involved with a pandemic. We have now.

Before the current crisis, the board continued to look at strategy and how to improve the organisation, just as we did back in 2013-14. At our January meeting we spent an afternoon analysing what we need to ensure survival of the railway.

Once the COVID-19 crisis is past we will need to review this work. It included looking at how much we operate, what we offer (the mix of straight service and special events), reliability and how we present the railway.

Significantly we were identifying how much we needed to raise over and above our operational income to actually run the railway sustainably. It has always been the case, but we now have a greater understanding of the actual amount.

We are moving into an era of increasing regulation, increasing focus from regulators and increasing expectation amongst the public. I have heard us described as 'an Edwardian experience with 21st century safety and environmental values'. Pressure on our income has never been so high from so many external factors.

Part of the strategy work that was identified and which is continuing through the current

shutdown is to look at our management structure. This was last done by a small team of trustees in 2014. A small group of trustees and the general manager have dusted off that study and are now looking at what we need to do as an organisation and how we actually achieve it.

Finally, I'd like to thank all those taking a part in all the activities that we have had to do to close the railway, apply for support and maintain security of our sites during the closure. This is completely unprecedented activity, and everyone has responded marvellously. And finally spare a thought for all those either furloughed or isolated who can't come to Llanfair to get their railway fix.

And finally, finally, this shutdown is saving me quite a bit in petrol money and that will go to the railway.

Keeping in touch...

The April issue of the *Journal* was understandably delayed until we knew what we could say about the suspension of operations, but it headed to the post on 24th April ensuring, subject to Post Office restrictions, most members should have it before the end of the publication month on the cover.

We make no bones about issuing another reminder that especially while volunteers and members can't visit the railway, *The Earl* is the best way to keep in touch with Llanfair, as we can get news out almost instantly – conceivably with regard to major news we can inform our members on the same day that a decision is made.

Several hundred are on the mailing list for *The Earl* but that's still a lot less than there are W&LLR members, so please spread the word that sending an email address to the editor is all it takes to stay plugged in.



Put in on record! We want to hear your memories...

Paul Wixey makes plenty of suggestions of ways to beat lockdown boredom in his piece at right, and we have another – give us your W&LLR memories!

We are talking particularly to our longest-standing members here, but we will be happy to have anyone join in this programme. As the railway moves on, and the earlier and particularly formative years of preservation slip further back into time, it's never been more important to ensure that the memories of those that were there are recorded.

There are several reasons for this, firstly that we will be able to add such memories to the railway's archives, and potentially make use of them as we grow the displays in our Llanfair Connections visitor centre.

Secondly, all memories we receive will be written down – some might find their way into future episodes of 'Tales from Llanfair Yard' in the *Journal*. And *Journal* editor Andrew Charman has also begun preliminary work on a long-planned book focusing on the story of the railway's preservation, told by those who were there, as a future fundraiser.

Spoken word

It is really easy to record your memories – you don't even need to write them down! Though we hasten to add that we'd be happy to receive written contributions if you would prefer.

Most modern smartphones include a feature allowing you to record voice memos – and if you don't have the right app on your phone, you can easily obtain one from an app store either for free or at very low cost.

All we need you to do is to simply sit back, make yourself comfortable and record some memories for us, and then send the sound file to andrewcharman@macace.net – please ensure we know who the file has come from, probably the easiest way is to begin your recording by saying who you are.

We don't mind if you send one file or many. There's never been a better time to do it, with many of us forced to spend time at home doing not a lot, and by putting these memories down you will be contributing greatly to the history of our railway.

A picture in words...

*Fire-maker
Water-boiler
Steam-creator
Smoke-emitter
Rail-rider
People-puller
Livestock-carrier
Goods-mover
Whistle-blower
Noisy chuffer*

*What am I?
I am The Earl*

Alexander Hall, aged 8

We understand this was Alexander's first effort when asked to write a piece of Kenning poetry for home schooling... Talented child!



Bored? Set a new course...

Wondering how to keep busy in a time of isolation? Paul Wixey has ideas...

On occasions whilst travelling back from West Africa, other people on the aircraft were taken seriously ill – Lassa fever (halfway between Weils' disease and Ebola), typhoid and tuberculosis were the more exotic. On one occasion we were taken directly off the aircraft to the Aerial Hotel at Heathrow, with the others it was a day or two later when the NHS had traced us and we were ambulated off to the nearest isolation hospital.

The internet had yet to be invented, there was no telly in the hospital and only Jimmy Young on the radio, though this was better than the seven days spent recovering from malaria in Ikeja General Hospital.

So, it was books, magazines, mosquito nets (although I have never seen a mosquito in Rhos-on-Sea) and schoolwork (although I found out later that none of the schoolwork had been marked, the teachers were scared of catching whichever disease from the books!). It was boring, I mean real boring, even the brush strokes in the paintwork got counted!

Keeping your mind active and positive at a time like this is just as important as taking your daily one hour physical exercise.

Open opportunity

These days there are a many great options for those who are stuck in isolation at home or hospital. How about the Open University? They have hundreds of FREE courses (<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/free-courses/full-catalogue>) some of which have certificates (and who doesn't like a shiny new certificate!)

The range includes such wonders as 'Animals at the Extreme: Hibernation and Torpor' (to help us understand the habits of Keyse Cottage residents?), 'Energy resources: Coal', and 'Engineering: the challenge of heat' (for firemen and drivers?).

Those from the other side of Hadrian's Wall might be tempted by 'Dundee, Jute and Empire', or 'Art and Life in Ancient Egypt' (childhood memories of the track gang?).

I haven't forgotten the Operating Department – 'Croeso; beginners Welsh' or perhaps 'Working with Diagrams' while no railway workshop could run efficiently without 'What is a Metal?' or 'Toys and Engineering Materials'. And to help the board in their financial deliberations there is a choice of Babylonian or Egyptian Mathematics but unfortunately no Double-Dutch.

Signal your options

For anyone who fancies the idea of being a Signaller you could try PCRail Simulations (<https://pcrail.co.uk/index.php>), these inexpensive (£5-£35) simulations let you run the likes of Euston in the 1950s or the winter timetable at Bristol Temple Meads in 2009/10. I found them invaluable whilst invigilating exams, the the hours would fly by.

Whilst Glasgow and Clyde NHS Trust are persuading you to take a stair-climb challenge to keep you fit, you could perhaps try www.si.com where you can take part in a virtual climb of Everest.

I don't know about the rest of the UK (or the rest of the world for that matter) but the weather in Mid Wales has been glorious ever since we were sent home. Which means it's time for all those DIY jobs you've been putting off for years – painting the windows, cleaning the gutters and getting out into the garden and greenhouse can now be done. But every time you use a ladder think of Willy Field and when using a hammer don't take your eye off the nail – you'll hit your thumb instead.

I was supposed to be repainting our narrowboat at the beginning of May but that looks unlikely now, so I've decided to learn a new skill – sign writing. We had a professional do the sign writing originally, but she's now retired and after 10 years, thousands of locks and overhanging trees, the 'Dragon' is looking a bit the worse for wear. Search the internet, find everything you need for a starter kit and it's all delivered by DPD next working day...

Picture worth a thousand words...

The question is – was it the fact that everyone is currently sitting at home with time on their hands, or simply the fact that *Alan Barnes's* picture of the track gang was a particularly inspiring one?

Whatever, the response to the caption contest in the last issue of *The Earl* was astounding, with so many excellent suggestions that we've decided just this once to give most of a page over to them (unless we get the same response to this month's...). Hopefully some of what follows will put a smile on your face – and these were by no means all of them...

"He always wanted to see the Puffing Billy railway..." *Mervyn Pritchard*

KEVIN! *Willy Field*

"I have found that lost Hedgebasher..." *Willy Field (again)*

"You've got to find it, Kev, it's the last tin of mulligatawny..." *Dave Arden*

"My God lads, it's a jam buttie mine!" *Roy Wilkinson*

"Pass me the torch, gents, I think I've found Tony Thorndike's green flag..." *more from Roy*

"I think we'll have to get Otis here, it looks like it was a medieval lift shaft..." *yet more from Roy*

"Rumour has it that parts of the Resita were buried here..." *you are getting naughty now Roy...*

"Who told Kev his desk stapler was at the bottom?" *Sarah Stanbridge*

"Must be a mighty strong rabbit to pull ferret and handler down its hole..." *Alan Butcher*

"Whilst it's a good idea to bury signaling cable underground, you'd have thought the junction box would be above ground..." *Alan again*

"Well Al, Australia is down here somewhere..." *Bill Fowler*

"I know how to solve the coal crisis, we'll dig our own mine here" *Colin Tighe*

"So Richard, where exactly did you drop the diesel keys? I want to go home..." *Graham Hall*

"He should have gone to Specsavers..." *Martin Aldred*

"Are you sure you dropped your 10p down here?" *David Fisher*

"It's what he would have wanted..." *David Jones*

"I know flights are currently cancelled, but surely there must be an easier way of getting to the Puffing Billy than this?" *Roy Laverick*

Finally a special mention for the GM's much better half Lizzy Ann Spencer who despite being a key worker and not sitting at home all day, came up with a whole host of suggestions of which the following are just some!

"The warren was deep, but the team were convinced they'd finally found the Easter Bunny's secret egg stash..."

"The length of the upper body of an average homo sapiens – when upended – is an accurate measure of the depth of the average hole dug by the track gang..."

"The time capsule was located ensuring that the desperate loo-roll shortage was finally over! Five loo-rolls, four packs of pasta, three bars of soap, two cans of beer, and a box of teabags!"

"In a spirit of heightened environmental awareness, the team investigated geothermal energy as an alternative to coal..."

"The elf-on-the-shelf had really gone too far this time..."

"With Colin's removal of the stake, Worzel Gummidge was now a sorry sight..."



"There was hope that this exciting geological discovery meant that the railway could now be self-sufficient in coal..."

"D'you want one lump, or two?"

The team's mission was to illustrate the indeterminate Venn Diagram subset between heritage artifacts and archeological crap...

"The hole was indeed big enough for all five of them, but social distancing decreed they should only enter one at a time..."

■ You are all brilliant! So how about this issue's challenge? For a change we go back in the midsts of time for this pic from the archives. What on earth did *Dick Johnson* capture here? Answers to the usual email address!



Diary – suspension goes on for now

With no change in the overall situation and lockdown rules since the last edition there remains little point in publishing a diary of future events and so this feature remains suspended – as soon as we have confirmed dates to publish they will return to *The Earl*.

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
Members Facebook	www.facebook.com/LlanfairLine
Railway Twitter feed	@LlanfairLine
Office:	01938 810441, info@wllr.org.uk
Volunteer Liaison Officer	Robert Robinson, 01938 811378, volunteerliaison@wllr.org.uk
Loco Crew Officer	Graham Hall, 07725 746785, locoofficers@wllr.org.uk
Loco Crew Rosters	James Newby, 07753 483687, locoroster@wllr.org.uk
Mechanical Eng Manager	Richard Featherstone, Richard.Featherstone@wllr.org.uk
Operations Officer	Martin Rich, 01938 559350, martin.rich@wllr.org.uk
Ops Dept Rosters	Dick Hewett, 01794 500523, rbhewett@gmail.com
Tearoom/shops rosters	Jeremy Roberts, 07973 329838, shoproster@wllr.org.uk
Press Officer, Earl/Journal editor	Andrew Charman, 01938 810592, andrewcharman@macace.net
Company Secretary	Michael Reilly, michael.reilly@wllr.org.uk
Young Members	Henry Robinson, 07826 332113, ymg@wllr.org.uk