



Audio transcript

The Rail & Road Pod – Episode 5: Reopening heritage railways safely

In this, the first of a two-part episode, the Rail and Road Pod hears about how heritage railways are safely returning for passengers and how one particular railway has delivered improvements over the last year.

To discuss, the Pod is joined by Ian Skinner, Office of Rail and Road's Head of Non-Mainline and lead for Heritage Railway safety; Steve Oates, chief executive of the Heritage Railway Association; and Michael Proctor, chairman of Aln Valley Railway in Northumberland.

Kenny Walker, host

Hello, folks, my name is Kenny Walker, and you're listening to the Rail and Road podcast. On this, the first of a two part episode, we're looking at how heritage railways are safely returning for passengers and finding out about how one particular railway has delivered major improvements.

But first of all, let me introduce our guests. I'm joined today by Ian Skinner, Office of Rail and Road, head of non-mainline railways, and lead for heritage rail safety, Steve Oates, chief executive of the Heritage Railway Association, and Michael Proctor, chairman of Aln Valley Railway in Northumberland.

And for those listening, minor and heritage railways are lines of local interest, museum, railways or tourist railways that preserve, recreate or simulate railways of the past, or demonstrate appropriate historical or spatial types of more of part a rolling stock. There are more than 200 such railways operating across Great Britain.

As everyone knows, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a substantial impact on the railways and many heritage railway operators who find themselves in financial peril due to Covid-19, with some of them topping into the UK government's culture recovery fund.

All were forced to close railway operations, shops and cafes on the pandemic's. long term impact on heritage railways is still unknown. Many heritage railways during this time of work to improve how they run for passengers, especially with improving the safety of their railways.

So firstly, let's bring in Steve Oates from the Heritage Railway Association. Steve, can you tell us a little bit more about how Covid-19 has impacted the heritage sector?

Steve Oates, chief executive of the Heritage Railway Association

Yes, although actually your introduction has done a pretty good job because although I'd use one additional word above what you've already said, and that word is devastated, like so much of the I suppose the transport sector, the cultural sector, the visitor economy and so on, heritage railways is basically just devastated by the onset of the pandemic, which what was it, just over 13 months ago. And from the moment it hits, I suppose, like everybody else, nobody could be sure what was coming next.

And it absolutely changed everything. It hit right at the start of the tourist season, just at the point as some heritage railways had already opened in the middle of March. One or two started in February last year, Easter was around the corner, and then suddenly everything stopped. And within the space of literally twenty, twenty-four. Forty-eight hours - something like that, everything stopped operating, not knowing when they'd be able to operate again.

And if those sorts of situations, you get everybody looking at each other and going, where is life going next, whether you're an employee or a volunteer? And bearing in mind the heritage sector employees, around 4000 people, jobs were on the line. General managers thinking, what do I do next? Where's the cash coming from? Everything was just turned off at source and we ended up with months of enforced closure. And in terms of working on the railways, no chance of getting any serious work done on restoration work, and maintenance work and so on.

Bills are still mounting up. As we all know, the furlough scheme came in and other sources of help came in, but nothing to make up the shortfalls. And really, it was also

part of, you know, when you look back, you're thinking, you know, this is week by week, month by month. When is this going to end? And eventually we got the signal that rallies could last year from the fourth of July, a number of them got straight back into it.

And luckily, the economy, what was what was available for 2020 did pick up very quickly. But massive restrictions in the ways of operation, a whole range of new Covid secure ways of working that had to be put in place for train operations, for loading and unloading passengers, for catering facilities on train catering and so on. Special events were pretty much a no-no. One of the events can be a major source of income at retail was all affected and so on, and just general ways of working.

But the one thing I did have to say is a heritage railways did show massive resilience and an absolute eagerness and determination that they would continue, whether that was the employed staff, the volunteers, the board of trustees and so on. The resilience and the determination has been massive. External sources of funding and loans have been grabbed wherever possible. And bar one, everybody is still there, are still smiling, and they're coming back. And that was a bit better for 2021.

But they're coming back in there and they're already a lot of them already back in, stayed back operating, but still having to operate in a covid secure manner. So overall started off by being devastating. Lots of lessons learnt, but thankfully everybody is still just about there and peering into the future, I think with some hope, maybe not optimism yet, but well-founded hope.

Kenny, host

Yes, so as you say a devastating impact. But resilience has been shown and the hope and optimism is just over the hill, I can take from what you've just said.

Can you bring in Ian from the ORR. In the last year, the Office of Rail and Road provided advice and guidance to heritage railways, but also conducted a number of inspections to help tell us why safety is so important as the railways return.

Ian Skinner, head of non-mainline railways, Office of Rail and Road

Yeah, well, why is safety important? So I think it's the first of all important to recognise that the work of the rail inspectorate. We want the heritage sector to be successful and to get back to recreate the vibrancy that existed prior to the onset of Covid in 2020. But we also want them to be safe. We need them to be safe, to maintain the excellent safety record the heritage sector has had over recent years.

The public passengers, volunteers and staff operators, railways expect railways to be safe.

They don't go there with the possibility of being harmed. They go there thinking it is safe, and it is safe.

Kenny, host

Any inspections with the Heritage Railway? Can you give any examples are of what you find on these inspections?

Ian Skinner, head of non-mainline railways, Office of Rail and Road

Yeah, I think the most interesting part of our work, the heritage sector, is that Heritage Railways are both buried in scale and in size in terms of the size of the assets that we have and in terms of the numbers of volunteers and paid staff that we have helping them control safety. What we've found from all of our inspections over the last couple of years, actually, is that all of the railways have a dedicated bunch of leaders and staff who want to do the right thing at the right time through quality, which is really a great place to start.

We've also seen, particularly over the last year, there are a number of increasing challenges being created due to the ageing aspect of the process that rolling stock encourages. Be that are civil engineering assets such as bridges and track, or b the signalling systems. We've also started to see a change in profile and volunteers and I think the sector needs to think about that. And finally, the impact of financial constraints. Obviously, Steve has talked about the impact of Covid-19 on the financial aspects of many railways, and that is starting to trickle through into how they manage their assets. So all of this means, is that railways really need to be able to demonstrate that they are monitoring safety risk in a systematic manner. And what we have found over the last 12 months is that most railways are controlling risk, but they're not necessarily able to demonstrate how they're doing that. So we have asked the sector to stop and think. Think about the risks are controlling. Do they understand the risks to understand how to control them and they do that through the quality of the safety management system, a fundamental requirement for all railways with disaster relief to think is my estimate as complete as I expect it to be? Is it relevant? Is it doing what I think it should be doing? And from that, that will help them understand the condition of the bridges, the track and the siganalling equipment, the competency of the staff.

We actually have done a lot of great work over the last 12 months supporting heritage railways, develop the competency of the staff and that work should be continuing into 2021 and beyond. And finally, the safety of the staff and volunteers, working in the workshops, working on the locomotives, working in the carriages, how were the control of those risks?

And we provided advice through the year to help people get better in that area.

Kenny, host

Thanks very much indeed. So now let's turn to our Aln Valley railway. Michael, we've heard already about the financial impacts of Covid-19 and ORR's inspection work, why safety is important, the expectations of passengers and volunteers, as he has just described. Could you tell us how this has all impacted Aln Valley Railway?

Michael Proctor, chairman of Aln Valley Railway in Northumberland

Yes, I think it's probably fair to say that 20/21 was a perfect storm for the railway and it was probably the culmination of a lot of problems that have been bubbling under the surface for a number of years.

Covid-19 was, in some respects, a blessed relief too because it gave us some breathing space. But if I start, maybe everybody just give you a little bit of a summary for those that don't know the Aln Valley railway. We're essentially restoring the Anneck branch, which runs from above station on the East Coast mainline into town of about a total of about three miles. And we actually started with a greenfield site in 2011 because it was no longer possible to reach the station due to an A1 bypass, which unfortunately severed the line in 1968.

And at the present we have about a mile and a quarter of track from then to a temporary halt, which is near enough to the halfway mark. So we've grown from nothing in 2011 to a functioning railway, which has been a very rapid growth. So what we've been doing since then is fundamentally looking at every aspect of the railway, how it should operate, what it needs to do in order to operate safely. We're now at the point where I think we've now filled in all of the gaps in our safety management system.

We've got policies I think I'm very happy with, which will be sort of is now up for consultation internally we'll be able to get signed off by the board by the end of next month. Fundamentally, I think the thing which we've done and that's one of the things that's most pleased of in a sense our report is now functioning, is that we have

attempted to do everything openly and honestly with involved volunteers across the organisation. We've involved a wider membership because we are a membership organisation.

First and foremost, we work working on the basis of safety. First, we don't do anything unless we are sure that whatever is safe and we have understood the risks and setting out to manage. So I think we're now in a fundamentally much, much better place. And I think probably the input of the ORR was the turning point for us.

Kenny, host

That's good to hear. How were our inspections help deliver some change for the good. And it's good to hear that you are in a much better place as well at the minute. Michael, can you just explain how vital the volunteers are to the safety of services?

Michael Proctor, chairman of AIn Valley Railway in Northumberland

Well, that's fundamental. I mean, we don't employ any staff. We are entirely reliant on volunteers. And one of the benefits of that is that, you know, people are there because they want to be there. They're not there to earn a living and they bring a huge amount of commitment and enthusiasm to the work. Our volunteers, I think our strongest point,

Kenny, host

The Office of Rail and Road, recently launched that sector specific risk management model for how it is really to help achieve excellence when controlling health and safety risks. ORR worked with the heritage sector to develop topics set one of its risk management maturity model RM3 to be a tool to help organisations understand the maturity of their safety management system to improve reliability, performance and overall satisfaction of staff and passengers.

Michael, I'll come to you first. Do you think this will help you improve further?

Michael Proctor, chairman of AIn Valley Railway in Northumberland

I'm absolutely certain that we were actually an early adopter of the RM3 and we did use the full version of the RM3 two years than a couple of years ago. Now, as a means of attempting to take gives the leadership of the organisation an insight into

its weaknesses. And it proved, I think, to be a very enlightening exercise. I was just speaking to our health and safety advisor earlier on to just to get a summary of what he thought about his view was that there were no real surprises in the findings.

But actually, one of the biggest surprises were the best new restaurant ones and twos in some key areas. But significantly, some of the leadership was going as far as advice, which should perhaps have been a sign that we needed to do some what we what we have been doing over the course of the last few months is we've drawn quite heavily on the 12 tablets of governance which form part of the RM3 as a means of looking at how we as a board should be leading the organisation. Now that we have the final version of the heritage section, our intention is to use that as a means of auditing progress in the coming years, and we have actually just written that into our safety management system that we will be using as part of our audit and monitoring processes.

Kenny, host

Steve, are you pleased to see this as well?

Steve Oates, chief executive of the Heritage Railway Association

Definitely, yeah.

And as Michael said, half of railways we're using the full version for a short while. And as RM3 was introduced to the heritage sector, in fact, the HRA worked with the ORR within and set up a series of six seminars which are extremely well attended. Well over a hundred are represented. Well over one hundred heritage railways attended RM3, day-long sessions with presentations by Ian and colleagues at the ORR and also an exercise part of the session.

And when we put these together and I remember liaising with it and thinking how well these will go down, will anybody actually want to come to these RM3 meetings. And pretty much everybody said, I get it now. This is the way to go. And whilst the implementation of RM3 as a management tool is being rolled out, bit by bit, I had to contend with in the interim it is being used and the new topic set, the heritage topic set that is already being widely used.

And in fact, although it's my full-time role as chief executive of HA, I have a volunteer on a heritage railway and I'm on the board of trustees of a heritage railway. And just last weekend I spent a happy three or four hours with the board on some training on particularly on the items on leadership and governance. And we did a full session.

So from that point of view, I've got first-hand experience of using it within the heritage railway.

And actually it was a very good session and it did everything it said on the box and everything I remember Ian saying a year or two ago during those seminars in terms of that discussion and that real digging into the issues and understanding and getting the evidence. So I think it's a really, really important tool for heritage railways. And I'm really pleased to see the sector starting to use it. .

Kenny, host

And finally Ian, just following on from both Michael and Steve, they've both explained the importance of it. Can you just tie it all together for us?

Ian Skinner, head of non-mainline railways, Office of Rail and Road

Yeah, I think for me, Kenny, when I came into the heritage sector at the beginning of 2018, I saw many railways exhibited some of the characteristics that Michael described, his honest and frank description of the charges Aln Valley were going through.

And I was looking for a tool or a way to help railways reflect on their strengths and weaknesses and then provide them with a roadmap to improve themselves. And I clearly, through discussions with many people in the sector, realised that the full fat version of our entry 2019, the ORR produced in 2019 was maybe not quite the right tool, wasn't quite aimed at the light level and the topics that concept came about.

And through working with Steve and HRA and many Heritage Railways, we produced something which is far more accessible and uses examples I think the heritage railways can relate to, to help them understand how good they are or perhaps some gaps where leaders need to take action.

I'm really pleased that many of the railways are now taking this on board to help them understand through self-reflection, without the need for me to get involved as to where can they improve and then take ownership of that and move forwards. And it is particularly aimed at leaders and boards of railways who I think have a key role in helping the sector move forwards, which is why we have the 12 tablets of governance within that document, which is aimed at helping people understand the importance of governance, the role of governance and the role of leaders and board members and making sure that it happens.

And only through doing that will railways continue to survive and become more successful, both in terms of safety risk control. But actually, in the widest concept as a business.

Kenny, host

In addition to Covid-19 and safety, another issue impacting the sector is coal, and the environmental issues that that brings with it has been talked about quite a lot. Can I ask your thoughts on that, Steve can I go to you on that question first, then we'll bring in Michael.

Steve Oates, chief executive of the Heritage Railway Association

You could do a podcast on this subject just alone, a whole series on coal and environmental issues.

Yeah, coal is a major, major problem. It's a major worry for heritage railways and in fact, heritage steam, because actually we're all we're all in this together with the exception of one mine still operating in South Wales, the mining of bituminous lump coal in the UK has ended and that mine in South Wales is due to finish at the end of next year. Now, at the moment, our focus or in the past couple of years our focus has been just trying to make sure we're known about and see if we can help mining companies retain some form of mining in the UK.

That hasn't come to pass and as I said, that the Ffos-y-fran mine in South Wales is due to close in the next year. And as it happens for this year and next year, actually, there's plenty of coal around. Not much was used last year, obviously, and still being stocks used up from the last mine in Scotland, which closed last year. The stock's been used up from there, plus Ffos-y-fran, plus a few imports coming in. So this year and next year, there's coal available.

It's after that that we start to get concerned with where is the coal coming from? The Heritage Railway Association's being facing itself behind the scenes. And we've linked up with an import partner, a firm who are used to importing aggregates and so on. And a couple of sources of very high-quality coal from Russia have been sourced, trial loads have been brought in, tested on five different heritage railways. So far, so good. So we know there's coal out there.

We know there's an import partner ready and willing to work with us. So in the longer term, you think, okay, yeah, we can we can sort this out that this should be OK. The

very firmly related issue is the wider environmental issue, because we all have to take on environmental responsibilities very seriously. The Heritage Railway Association have been saying to railways and indeed other sectors such as road, steam and maritime and steam and so on, is that we have to mitigate our use and we have to use it sensibly.

We are there to demonstrate the power of steam and steam. Coal powered steam drove the industrialisation not just in the UK, but of the world. You know, it's massive from an educational and heritage cultural point of view. But nonetheless, we still have a responsibility to do it properly. So the way we're moving forward is making sure that we are heard in the four parliaments, not just the UK government, but in the Welsh Assembly as well as the Welsh government, and Scottish government and the Northern Irish Assembly, all of whom look after public health issues and clean air issues and so on, to make sure that our voice is heard, that we can still carry on burning coal, to demonstrate heritage steam as much as anything from an educational point of view, it is about enjoyment, but it's about learning as well. A lot of heritage railways are museums, they are cultural institutions, they're part of the UK's industrial heritage. A lot of them are accredited museums, the whole line is a museum. So it's very much moving in the direction of saying, yeah, we can get the coal supplies. That's fine. We use the minimum required to demonstrate from an educational and learning and enjoyment perspective, you know, the power of steam using this once massive fuel which was used in just about everything which actually powered the world, and it started right here in the UK.

So that's the sort of message we're now putting out, I'm relaying to governments and other partners and so on. There's also related to that we're working on we're supporting work on alternative coals. What's the alternative to coal? Things like bio coal and coal substitutes. very early days yet this is probably a five-to-ten-year R&D project for a number of firms. But there's various firms coming in and seeking funding and coming into the into the R&D area.

And we're working with them in some cases next month. There's some trials on a Heritage Railway Association member in East Anglia, the Bure Valley Railway, they're trialling a couple of types of alternative fuel. And again, that's part of our responsibility. We've got an obligation to do that, to make sure it's not just about continuing to burn the cheapest coal, if there's an alternative coal which could be created, vegetation matter and so on and so and so forth, and we've got an obligation to support that work.

It's a tough challenge, it's a very tough challenge, because coal is compressed energy and it's perfect for the job. But as I say there are, after all, groups now

working on alternatives. So, yeah, it's not a great situation, but we're working with it. And actually the future isn't looking too bad, but we're not complacent.

Kenny, host

Thanks, Steve. Do you have anything to add, Michael?

Michael Proctor, chairman of Aln Valley Railway in Northumberland It's difficult to add much to that I think. I grew up in a town called Ashington in Northumberland, which was for many years that the largest mining village and certainly in the UK, and that allegedly was more widely. So it's kind of difficult to be thinking that we've reached the point where there are no longer any coal mines, from our point of view, we've been used up until last year, our coal has travelled over 20 miles up the road from the larger site, just a little further down, the A1 .We use the opportunity a block down to have a fundraising effort amongst our membership, bulked up as much coal as we could have sold for that mine closed.

So I think we're in a comfortable position of having enough to see it through the next couple of years, which by which time, hopefully, as Steve says, we'll have a clear idea of what the actual viable alternatives are and how we go forward from there.

Kenny, host

Ian just finally, on the subject of coal, have you any final comments or any position that the ORR take on this?

Ian Skinner, head of non-mainline railways, Office of Rail and Road

I think from a safety perspective, I put in terms of my mantra, stop and think, I don't think anything that focuses on how the heritage sector uses its coal is a good thing because there are safety opportunities there. I've heard Steve talk in the past about the importance of making sure that we burn coal, that we burn it efficiently, we make best use of the steam that we create.

And I think railways and locomotive orders locomotive fires when the steam ahead they stop and think about how can I best use of the coal that I have, let's not waste the energy. There are then safety opportunities. They are just to make sure that we are doing what we think we're doing that the kit we've got is working the way that is meant to be working. That whole concept of review will always reap safety benefits.

And it's a good illustration of how safety risk control being good is good business risk control.

Kenny, host

And thanks all for your comments on the issue of coal, I was going to say the burning issue of coal, but that's just a pun too far. So, listen, this has been a very interesting discussion and we're almost out of time. But if there was one thing you'd want to see in the next year on the heritage railways, what would it be? I'll just open the floor.

Steve Oates, chief executive of the Heritage Railway Association

I'll jump in if you like.

I suppose straight just I want to see lots and lots and lots of visitors because I want to see heritage railways re-emerging back to where they should be and where they want to be. But of course, that has to be in the context that they are run competently with strong leadership, great governance, and that they are run safely. But we want to see heritage railways back to where they are. As Michael said earlier on, Covid did, despite everything else, provide some time for reflection for boards and leadership and management teams to reflect and think: do we need to do things differently for financial models to change and so on, opportunities to change safety management systems or update them and so on. Improve competency. So long may that continue. And I'm looking forward to 2021, and into 2022. Again, seeing railways re-emerge as first class, safe and popular visitor attractions.

Kenny, host

What about yourself, Michael?

Michael Proctor, chairman of AIn Valley Railway in Northumberland

I think I'd like to see more sharing of ideas and knowledge and learning between railways. And I think one of the things which we haven't done well in the past was in that we kind of worked in glorious isolation. One of the things the position has pushed us into is that we've had to go to a number of railways and ask for guidance, suggestions and copies of any documents that they have that might be helpful to us.

And that's been a constructive exercise and I think that most have been quite open to that some have been quite open to admitting that they didn't actually have the things that we were looking for, which was also quite, quite illuminating. I think one of the things which has been a benefit, of course, is the extent to which we've got to shift towards using technologies like Zoom and Teams and so on. And certainly some of the things that the HRA have organised this year that have been run by it, via Teams, just illustrate that the extent to which there is an enthusiasm for that sort of thing.

And I believe that the numbers attending being far higher than they ever were when you are actually having an event and calling people to it. So I'd like to hope that we'll use these things a lot more constructively and positively in the future.

Kenny, host

OK, Ian, a final word to yourself.

Ian Skinner, head of non-mainline railways, Office of Rail and Road

And I think both Michael and Steve are quite right. There have been many horrible things have come about because of Covid-19. But I think Covid-19 did provide a slight glimmer of light in that it gave a period of reflection where heritage could reflect where are the strengths, where are the weaknesses and I've certainly seen over the 12 or 12 months far greater examples of cooperation where railways have come together to support each other, proving how they manage risk or safety risk. And I think that's what I'd like to see continue going forward, is that increased levels of cooperation and leadership from HRA and from individual member railways as they share knowledge.

There's lots of knowledge out there, and if 200 separate railways were to share that together they could become a stronger group working together going forwards.

Kenny, Host

Thanks, Steve. Thanks, Ian. Thanks, Michael. And that's all we have time for today. Look out for part two of this podcast in the coming months as the Rail and Road pod visits Aln Valley Railway to see some of the work that you've heard about today and also be speaking to some of the passengers and volunteers.

Thanks for listening.



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