



Audio transcript

## **The Rail & Road Pod - Episode 8: Collaborating with heritage railways to maximise safety**

On this, the second episode focusing on heritage railways, the Rail and Road Pod visits Aln Valley Railway in Northumberland to continue the discussion on how ORR and the heritage sector are collaborating to maximise safety.

Once again, host Kenny Walker, is joined in conversation 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.

The Pod is taken on a tour of Aln Valley to look at some of the recent safety improvements made and taken on a ride of one of the railway's Pacer services. The Pod also talks to members of Aln Valley staff on how the help of ORR has delivered better safety for its operations.

---

### **Kenny Walker, Host**

Hello folks. My name is Kenny Walker and you're listening to the Rail and Road Podcast. Back in April this year, we heard from 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.

And I'm pleased to say we are joined by Ian, Steve, and Michael once again, as we have taken the Rail and Road Pod to Aln Valley Railway for the second part of our heritage special.

## **Steve Oates, HRA**

There was absolutely a latent demand from the public to get out and about, and in fair that's not just at Heritage Railways but out in the economy generally. But the vast majority of Heritage Railways across the UK have been doing pretty well this year.

## **Ian Skinner, ORR**

We are happy with what the heritage railways have done, they've thought about it, they've developed the solutions, implemented them and then they started operations from my perspective safely.

## **Michael Proctor, Chair of Aln Valley**

Nobody wants to work in a place where they're concerned, either they're not safe or that they just patching things up rather than actually doing things properly.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

In the first episode, we heard how Covid-19 impacted the heritage rail sector and how helpful guidance from the Office of Rail and Road had been and how important in bringing operations set to resume safely.

So, if we can bring in Michael first. Michael, first of all, thanks for having us along to Aln Valley Railway today and thanks for having us on one of the Pacer trains, we're actually on it now and on the move. Can you just start things off by telling us how things have been since reopening?

## **Michael Proctor, Chair of Aln Valley**

Well, we didn't open until almost the end of June. But an awful lot of effort went into preparation and in particular, we train all of our train crew and since it had been such a long time since we last operated.

One of the challenges I think for us and certainly an area we benefit from being able to learn from the experience of other railways was how to keep people safe and separate while travelling on the train. We're fortunate in that our Mark 1 stock is all compartment stock.

So, we were able to keep each compartment down to family. But that proved to be quite challenging in itself, it meant that we had to introduce an advance booking system and to make sure that we sold our seats on a different basis in order to make sure that we keep people separate and safe.

As you can see, we took delivery of these Pacer trains at the end of December 2020, and we put an awful lot of effort over the early months of 2021 into reorganising the interior.

So, we've taken out all of the airline seating, and we rearranged in to facing seating, so it is much more suitable for family groups.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

Yeah, it is family friendly with what you've done with the seating and can see you've changed from the cattle classes.

## **Michael Proctor, Chair of Aln Valley**

Crucially, we've also put in partitions and signage. So, we have people enter from one door and leave through another door.

And like all other railways, we had to institute cleaning in between each service so that all the touch points are wiped down, to ensure that the compartments are feeling ready and then using a disinfectant fogger at the end of each day.

Having said all of that, it's been absolutely fabulous to be back there, really encouraged in the way that the visitors have come back to the railway particularly on steam days when we found that our trains have pretty much been fully booked before we actually open for the day.

That's obviously operating with a slightly reduced capacity, as I said we only have two coaches and that limits us to 12 compartments. That's twelve family groups on each train.

However, it has been great to have people back on the railway and to see some buzz about the place. We've also been able to operate some of our normal programme special events, which again have drawn in lots of extra visitors to the railway, so it's overall being a much better season than we could have hoped..

## Kenny Walker, Host

And Steve, as Chief Executive of the Heritage Railway Association, what are your thoughts on how the sectors reopened?

## Steve Oates, HRA

I think I'd echo what Michael's just said actually, there was absolutely a latent demand from the public to get out and about. In fairness not that's not just at heritage railways but out in the visitor economy generally.

But the vast majority of heritage railways across the UK have been doing pretty well this year. In some cases, exceptionally well, with some railways reporting best-ever ever months and best-ever quarters and that sort of thing.

A lot of railways reopened from step two, we're going right back to April, April the 12th then others opened from step three and the final few sort of came in from June/July onwards.

Virtually all are now re-open. Some are having to put on extra services because there is such demand there. Events are very much to the fore. But again, as Michael said, all done in a very safe and cautious manner.

So, with a number of the restrictions still in place in heritage coaches and around stations and so on, it's become a bit more challenging actually, for some of the operating teams and some of the platform staff and so on, because there's still various queuing systems in place, procedures for boarding trains and alighting from trains and so on. But overall, actually 2021, remarkably, is a first-class season so far.

## Kenny Walker, Host

We'll bring in Ian. We've heard from Michael and Steve. How do you think the sector has done? Do you think it's reacted as positively as both the guys have said?

## Ian Skinner, ORR

I think they have. I think Aln Valley is a good example of how heritage railways responded to the challenge of Covid in that they looked at what their capabilities were and what their capabilities weren't. And then from that they made a decision. Now in Aln Valley's case they decided to delay coming back into operation. But many railways went through that same process.

But what was characteristic I think of all the heritage Railways was that they were dynamic and agile, and they were able to think, how can I interpret the guidance coming out of HRA and Steve and coming out from ourselves? How can I make that fit my operation? And then because they are small and they have access to talented people, they can then adjust the service accordingly.

So, we look at this Pacer. You can see what Michael has done to make it Covid secure, to make a Covid safe to doing things that on the mainline might take them a long time to design, to specify, to install - Michael's done that quickly which is a good part of the heritage sector.

So, in general, we are happy with what the heritage railways have done. They thought about it, they developed the solutions, they've implemented them. And then they started operation from my perspective safely.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

A recent nationwide campaign, Love Your Railway, spearheaded by the North Yorkshire Moors Railway went some way to shine a spotlight on not only the important work heritage railways do with regards to conservation, education, research but highlighted how they've all been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in terms of reduced capacities and income.

Before we speak again to our guests, let's hear from some of Aln Valley staff about what heritage railways mean to them.

## **Aln Valley member of staff**

I like restoring things and making things that don't work, work. And it's quite a challenge. And I think I came to the railway industry or the heritage industry with no knowledge, really of railway coaches. And I've learned so much. And I think that's one of the beauties of working on a heritage railway.

You learn so much and you also work with a good gang of people, and you achieve things. You can see things running, you can see the smile on the faces of the public when they get in coaches or when they look at a locomotive and that's what I like about.

## **Aln Valley member of staff 2**

I've had a railway background all my life. My father used to work on the railway. So basically, when I was a kid, we got dragged from one heritage railway to another and I've always wanted to work on a heritage railway, be a volunteer.

And about 10 to 12 years ago when we used to live in Longhoughton, a village near here where the Aln Valley Railway had a base, my wife one day said: "Why don't you go and join that bunch at the other end of the railway."

So, which has got two advantages, one of them is that actually doing what I enjoy doing and I can blame the wife because it was her that told me to go. So, it's just the fun. It's enjoying doing different things and camaraderie working with other people.

And I think one of the best things I ever did was, we were playing with 360 digger one day and this little kid came up and he just sat there for 10 to 15 minutes and sat and watched and he had the biggest smile on his face.

And it's just seeing these little kids. They are our future, hopefully railway people in the future, come to us having a look and just enjoying themselves. And that's what brings a buzz is seeing all the visitors coming along.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

We've just heard some wonderful comments from Aln Valley Railway staff. Is there anything to add Michael just on the back of the campaign that ran?

## **Michael Proctor, Chair of Aln Valley**

I think we're fortunate in the heritage railway sector we have access to so many enthusiastic people. From our point of view, we're entirely run by volunteers, so we're entirely reliant on people wanting to come here and get their hands dirty and crawl around in the steam engines.

It is everything from that to doing the office work, working in the cafe and shop. I think as an entirely volunteer-run railway, yes it poses us challenges because you can't always fill the vacancies you have got but people's enthusiasm and commitment to what we are doing is second to none.

It's great to see, you know, you arrived here this morning in an absolute downpour (of rain) and there were people all over the site trying to do things and there's a huge enthusiasm and it is down to people like that, that we have heritage railways.

## Kenny Walker, Host

And Steve, I know the Heritage Railway Association were a big advocate of the Love Your Railway campaign. How successful was it?

## Steve Oates, HRA

I think it's massively successful it ran for six weeks end of July into early September and the majority of Heritage Railways got behind it. It was inspired by the North York Moors Railway and spread out across the whole of the UK and what it did it, as Michael said, I mean, it inspired volunteers and personnel who work within the railways - it inspired them to say actually, yeah we love our railways let's make sure Joe Public does as well.

And sure enough, they did. And it generated a lot of extra PR and publicity in national media as well. There were articles in national press, television, radio, masses of stuff online and so on.

And it was really interesting to see members of the public visiting railways. Perhaps going back to my early comment, it helped swell numbers. It had members of the public saying, well, what we heard about the campaign and actually we've not visited this railway before. So, we popped along to this one and it was a really good campaign.

I've got a feeling it may run each summer, actually, because it's a great boost for all of those people who keep the Heritage Railways going. We've got 22,000 volunteers across the sector, 4,000 members of staff.

There's a lot of people involved and currently, heritage railways attract about 13 million people. So, with campaigns like that, if we can keep swelling those numbers, then that's all to the good.

## Kenny Walker, Host

And I'm sure people listen to this podcast who haven't really much experience with the heritage railway sector that figure of 13 million visitors will be a bit of a shock. I think that's a lot more than some people would expect. Obviously, these campaigns can only help improve on that.

## Steve Oates, HRA

On absolutely and heritage railways have always been popular. And it's interesting you say that because I use that figure and the figures collected from our members, we tally it all up. For example, the work I have to do with the HRA.

Sometimes I'm talking to politicians, I'm talking to the media, I'm talking to the regulator, I'm talking to you guys. And actually, it's fair to say we're important. 13 million people want to come and visit us. We've got 4,000 members of staff. We're worth nearly half a billion quid in economic impact.

Those are quite powerful numbers, and it actually sets us up very well against other parts of the visitor economy in the cultural and heritage economy. And actually, beyond that, when you take certainly the steam icons, which actually don't really come into those figures.

When you see some of the Giants of steam, everybody knows Flying Scotsman, I mean Flying Scotsman is a national, in fact, an international icon. Goodness, what is the value of that when that - it is in Norfolk at the moment, I think as we speak, but it's made its way to various railways and so on. And when it's on the mainline, when it's at a heritage railway, it's always popular.

And there are other locomotives like that. So again, that also swells the interest. And there is a fondness for heritage railways. They've grown and grown and grown in their attractiveness since starting 70 years ago, this year, in 1951 when the first heritage railway in the world commenced.

## Kenny Walker, Host

Going from success to success by the sounds of it. So, we're currently at Lionheart Station, where Aln Valley has delivered a number of safety improvements. Michael, can you tell us what you have done to improve some of the safety on the site?

## Michael Proctor, Chair of Aln Valley

I think we started really with a very negative report from the ORR in just the summer of last year, it seems like a lifetime ago, and whilst that was hard to take, I think it gave us a very good route map of the areas where we needed to focus.

I think probably the biggest issue has been cultural, really, we have made, have been many changes to the leadership of the organisation and we have put safety as being of paramount importance.

So, it is at the centre of what we do and how we do things. I think the first part was to start, start working through all of the things that we knew were wrong and how to sort them out. But by far the most important, I think, is being instilling in people that we do not do anything unless it is safe to do and that we think about things before we launch into doing that.

And I think the example of how we brought the Pacers into operational use has been a very good example of that and we have Norman here, he managed a very detailed and comprehensive programme that looks at all of the things that we needed to do to be able to do it, do it safely.

The biggest bit of good news really is the sense in which people have responded very positively to that. Nobody wants to work in a place where they're concerned that either they're not safe or that they are just patching things up and rather than actually doing things properly and hopefully you've got the feel of that from seeing and talking to some of our volunteers around.

So, we've got through the deficiencies in our safety operation. Then we sort of focus on right, how do we open safely and operate over the summer? We're now at the stage where we're looking at.

OK we've got good foundations now, but we need to actually consolidate on that and put in place a number of additional measures to actually make sure that we have a sustainable approach to the safety that is built into the way that we do things rather than being an add on or something that people try to find ways around, which sadly has been the case at other points in the past.

I don't know if you want to bring Mark and Norman in here because they probably have more to say on the matter.

## **Mark - AIn Valley Railway staff**

I think, the biggest thing for me from a safety point of view is having that top cover. I can go to any of the senior managers now and I will be listened to and taken seriously.

And that's been the biggest thing and obviously going to the likes of Norman, who is now our general manager. We will discuss things and we'll see things through if there is an issue that needs to be dealt with.

## Kenny Walker, Host

And obviously, from the tour that we've just done today, you can see the safety measures in practise.

So, thanks again for the hospitality you've shown. ORR's recent Annual Health and Safety Report on Britain's Railways found that the heritage sector continues to demonstrate enthusiasm to manage their operations safely and bring back Ian. Would you say that's correct?

## Ian Skinner, ORR

Yeah. I'm yet to go to any heritage railway site where there's not an enthusiasm to learn and to improve and demanded safely even better than they're currently doing. Coming back to where we are today in Aln Valley, they are a great example of growth over the last 15 months. When I came here 15 months ago to meet a few of the volunteers and discuss, where could they go next?

I think they would reflect themselves they weren't in a good place. And when we come back here, now, they are in a much stronger place. You just walk into this building and feel the environment. Feel the culture of the volunteers who were here at lunchtime. And that comes back to the point that we put front and centre of our RM3 heritage topic set, which is what leadership and governance.

Leaders, having clear expectations of where they want to go and giving people the enthusiasm, the energy and the capability to then follow them in that direction. And we're seeing that today we heard from everyone we've spoken to so I think praise to Michael and his top team they've done very.

## Kenny Walker, Host

There was no heritage railway workforce fatalities in 2020-21. That's making it nine years now without any workforce fatalities. Thankfully. Steve, does this stat show just how safe the sector is.

## Steve Oates, HRA

It shows it is a safer sector. We're never complacent. Never should be complacent. Never will be complacent. But yeah, it's obviously terrific to be able to report that sort of stat. No one wants the horror of that sort of eventuality. And it is this constant progress.

And what's been really interesting just in those last few comments is some key words have come out there - things like leadership, culture, professionalism. These are all the areas where I think between us all, whether it's the HRA, the ORR, individual heritage railways, we're all working on those areas and really reassuringly after, via the ORR and Ian and myself working together to help put RM3 in place across heritage railways. What is number one on the RM3? The main document and the heritage rail topic set is leadership and governance.

It starts at the top, and that message is very firmly getting through. Still some way to go with a number of members and so on. But it's all about just lifting that professional, lifting the seriousness of what we're doing and actually what is in a fun, leisure, entertaining environment and we have to balance that. But safety is paramount.

Getting the standards right is paramount. So, it's still work in progress. But my goodness, there's been some progress which is terrific.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

If we can think back, I'm not trying to put you on the spot here, but towards the end of our previous podcast that we did earlier in the year, we asked, what do you like to see from the sector in a year's time. So that was only six months ago.

So just to remind you, Steve, you said you wanted to see lots of visitors with great governance and run safely. Michael, you said you wanted to see more sharing of ideas and learning between railways.

And Ian you said you wanted to see further collaboration too. So as a kind of halfway report now we're six months in. Have your thoughts changed or are they still the same? Now we'll start with Michael.

## **Michael Proctor, Chair of Aln Valley**

I think my thoughts haven't changed, in fact they've probably got stronger. I think there is a very real opportunity and I hope that maybe Steve and the HRA might be able to sort of help facilitate more of that, I think, to be able to be sharing learning and ideas, skills between Heritage Railways.

We were speaking earlier before some of you arrived - Ian and I we're talking about one of our big challenges is the lack of steam drivers, and because we've got relatively few to steam drivers, it takes a long time to train anybody because we can't put steam on very, very often.

So being able to, you know there must be some way, I'm sure other heritage railways have exactly the same problem there must be some way that collectively we can make use of expertise from elsewhere to actually turn up the pace at which we're able to actually get things like that done. But also sharing standards, sharing if you look at maintenance standards or whatever field you look at. We're all attempting to work out how to do these things for ourselves.

If you look at cultures of primary document comes from British Rail, and those were standards that were for operating at 100 miles an hour. And so, everyone has to interpret them in terms of what's appropriate.

Would it not be better if we actually had took a joint approach to that and had a you know, this is these are the maintenance standards that everybody should be, should be using. So, I think there's a great opportunity to do much more of that.

And I think we're at a point maybe the big, big boys in the heritage railway game don't feel that it's necessary to do that. But I think there are a lot of smaller on newer railways that would really benefit from being able to collaborate and learn from each other.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

Thanks very much, Michael. And any steam drivers listening, the AIn Valley Railway needs you. I'll go to you Steve.

## **Steve Oates, HRA**

We've had a pretty good summer. So, my dream of six months ago seems to have come true from that respect and long may that continue.

And actually, the signs are that as we go through the winter until Christmas period, through the winter period and peering ahead into 2022, it's estimated that staycation will still be prevalent. So yeah, with a fair wind 2022 will be good as well.

But actually, yeah, I'm going to expand on what I said last time I'm going to pick up on what Michael said, and I'm sure Ian will reflect this as well, because actually, it is now moving into a more serious world of standards.

The HRA has an Operating Safety Committee, which has provided a lot of guidance and some averaged on being standards for certain things.

Just before COVID hit actually on the subject of Mark 1 coaches, a lot of work got underway and effectively all became suspended because of COVID people being

furloughed. And then when they came back, it was all hands to the pump, to keep the railways operational. And what that has shown really is there needs to be perhaps some more formal and formatted approach to standards.

So the HRA, through a team of people, have scoped out a Heritage Rail Safety and Standards board, and it's important we try and get that in place. Of course, the magic thing about it is requiring funding, and I know Ian we will probably want to comment more on that.

But the heritage rail sector is the only part of the rail industry which doesn't have its own safety and standards board. And heritage rail does have its own peculiarities and unique ways of operating, and so on. It operates 25 miles an hour, it's operating heritage stock and so on.

There is commonality across a lot of heritage railways, like Michael, I'd like to see a lot more sharing of ideas. I actually think a number of the larger operators are happy to share. They do want to share.

They've got there are operations to run so actually, if we can do it through perhaps some more processed and formatted approach through a safety and standards board, then all to the good.

So yeah, if we're peering ahead 12 months, I'd like us to be pretty well down the road to having a Heritage Rail Safety and Standards board on the way to being established and and the finance in place. And that will be an enormous asset to the Heritage rail sector. And in fact, to the rail sector generally.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

And for the final words, Ian?

## **Ian Skinner, ORR**

I said six months ago, collaboration. Many things I want the heritage sector, but I think collaboration sums it all nicely together. It draws together what Michael's been talking about and gosh we've seen many examples today at Aln Valley where collaboration has helped them to get where they are today. Steve has talked about the Heritage Rail Safety and Standards body as a body that would help drive forward collaboration.

The heritage sector is made up of over 200 railways who all have their own individual expertise. Let's get some system to pull that together so that we have a common

idea on what good looks like and a common methodology to roll that out to everyone within the heritage sector.

Safety management systems should be the focus of how you manage safety on the railway. We need to help everyone get better at making sure that that helps them manage risk properly. And a safety and standards body would help with that. And I know the HRA, ourselves and government are in discussions about how that should be funded.

And I hope personally that like Steve, we get some resolution on that soon so at least the heritage sector know we're they're going next. But in the other sector that didn't have a safety standards body until recently, the light rail sector, they created their version, the Light Rail Safety and Standards Body, and that has brought new benefits to their sector in terms of collaboration and cooperation and a better understanding of risk. I hope we can achieve the same thing in the heritage sector.

## **Kenny Walker, Host**

Thanks Ian. And on that note, that's all we have time for today and brings to a close the second part of this heritage special.

Thanks to Michael, Norman and Mark from Aln Valley Railway, Steve from the Heritage Railway Association and Ian from ORR.

It's been great to have visited Aln Valley Railway today. And thanks again to the railway for hosting the Rail and Road Pod until next time. Goodbye.



Crown copyright 2021

This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit [nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3](https://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3)

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at [orr.gov.uk](https://orr.gov.uk)

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at [orr.gov.uk/contact-us](https://orr.gov.uk/contact-us)

