

There will always be a place for train tourism

CILT is well aware of the tourism potential in our transport heritage, and before the lockdown was pleased to catch up with the Scottish Railway Preservation Society, which operates three facilities from its base since 1981 at Bo'ness:

Friday, 24th April 2020, 7:00 am



06-05-2019. Picture Michael Gillen. WHITECROSS. 60009 Union of South Africa steam locomotive at Whitecross while on visit to Bo'ness and Kenneil Railway. Copyright: JPIMedia

There's a heritage railway providing steam and diesel-hauled trains linking Bo'ness with Manuel. Plus, the Scottish Railway Collection, Britain's largest display of rolling stock and other items outwith the National Railway Museum. And SRPS Railtours, making it the UK's only example of a heritage railway that also operates on the main line.

Founded in 1961 as the hopes of the Modernisation Plan were descending towards the fears of Beeching, SRPS was inspired by then Scottish Region general manager James Ness, who encouraged it to move to a fire-damaged shed at Falkirk. With Ness's retirement, BR was turning away from any heritage sympathies but was also disposing of Mk1 coaches, and was asked for authority to have these registered to run in SRPS ownership onto the main line. To some people's disbelief, on 23 May 1970 the first train ran with four such vehicles from the Falkirk depot.

The fleet came to comprise Mk1 vehicles that are dual-heated and dual-braked, and when a restaurant car came up for sale from BR in 1988 it was acquired for just £100, but with a £12,000 liability for removal of asbestos.

Falkirk had to be vacated for development, and Perth provided a temporary staging-point until BR were able to provide a trailing connection from the Society's new heritage railway at Bo'ness Junction.

During the 2019 season steam excursions behind celebrated LNER Pacifics Flying Scotsman and Union of South Africa were the highlight. Bookings for August steam specials behind a Black Five on the Borders Railway and September tours to Inverness and Fort William were significantly down on the previous two years, perhaps because of the entry into the market of Tornado Railtours from Edinburgh to Aberdeen (resourced but not managed by SRPS). Despite this, the revenue for SRPS Railtours' 50th season was the highest ever. That achievement was due to the efforts of the many volunteers who maintained the coaches, planned and organised the tours and stewarded the trains.

Tours are run in partnership with a mainline operator, nowadays West Coast Railways, and entail dealing with the rest of the railway community through timetabling conferences, which means taking account of engineering possessions and pathing constraints. The Mk1 carriages are nowadays of inferior crashworthiness and will have to be fitted by 2023 with central door-locking and toilet retention-tanks. A couple of fatalities involving people leaning out of mainline train windows have caused the Railway Inspectorate to become understandably hawkish about safety signage and about how much droplight windows can be opened.

As the programme approaches its 50th anniversary, the Society is having to address the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic. The coming weeks and months will tell in what form its mainline activities can survive. CILT wishes SRPS and all our other tourism providers well as we feel our way towards an uncertain future.

John Yellowlees, Scottish chair, CILT