

Challenges facing Our Heritage Railways

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CONTEMPT AND COMPLACENCY - CHALLENGES FACING OUR HERITAGE RAILWAYS – INTERFACE BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

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Summary

There are a number of challenges being faced by our heritage railways these days, especially the interface between old and new and the people aspects of this interface. I will concentrate on the cultural aspects related to credibility and complacency.

People and Infrastructure

They are **CREDIBILITY**, of the Health & Safety legislators in dealing with the sector, and **COMPLACENCY** of the volunteer workforce as it deals with the older technology.

Credibility

People / Regulatory Environment

What do I mean by "Credibility"? In the UK, it is an unfortunate fact of life that the media treats "Health and Safety" in general as a punchbag and a laughing stock. Sadly, it is assisted in this treatment by many bureaucrats and Insurance companies mis-interpreting legislation for their own ends and gold-plating whatever comes out of either Europe or the UK. Although railway legislation may be considered separate in some ways, in the public eye, it's all the same and the name "Elf 'n Safety" is commonly used to describe some of the more entertaining things which get published over there.

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The article shown is typical of the sort of coverage the UK Press gives to the more ludicrous Health & Safety issues. The problem, of course, is that the media will always concentrate on the negative side of any industry and this make our job that much more difficult when trying to persuade a sceptical audience that what we are trying to do is make things safer and not just more difficult.

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Australia isn't immune, either. In 2009 I visited Australia for the first time, with visions of "Tinnies"; "Sheilas" and of course, "Crocodile Dundee!".

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Imagine my surprise and horror, therefore, when I turn up at Darwin for the "Ghan" to find my luggage is regarded as too heavy for the poor mites at Great Southern Railways to lift! I've just flown half way around the World with my 26Kg of luggage being handled by every airport I've been in, INCLUDING Darwin! Yet a train company says my luggage is too heavy to lift on "Health & Safety" grounds! I had to unpack various things into another carrier bag [Kindly provided by the railway company!] until the bag reached 21Kg. What an embarrassing way to treat your customers! And it's not only GSR, I note that Countrylink has the same limitations. In all my World travels, this is the first time any railway company has limited luggage weight – even airlines don't limit weight, they just charge extra!

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It is this type of interpretation of Health & Safety which can bring disrepute upon the industry and engender contempt amongst those whom we are supposed to be protecting.

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We cannot separate “general” Health & Safety from “Railway” Health & Safety and for smaller organisations, this can become a problem when the plethora of “tick a box” regulations have to compete with Safety Critical and other railway regulations. There can be a danger that the responsible officers are so busy worrying about “pat testing” and other such regulations that they can miss other, far more important issues. One has to ask “Is the amount of “detail” regulatory regulation now impeding the more important issues?”

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I mentioned earlier, “interpretation”. I personally feel that it is this interpretation by Insurance Companies and “Risk-averse” lawyers that is the problem, rather than the legislation itself and my plea to those in positions of influence would be “Come out and SHOUT!” when people are mis-interpreting things in this manner. We do not often see our legislators publicly decrying some of these excesses and I for one feel they should be out on the streets rather more than they are, informing the various beaurocrats & lawyers that this particular piece of legislation isn’t supposed to be taken “this way”, it’s supposed to be taken “a different, more sensible” way!

That’s “CREDIBILITY”. What about “COMPLACENCY”?

People - Complacency

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“I am 57 years old and have been working on heritage railways since 1960, when at the age of 6 I was helping the late Fred Youell to re-open the first preserved standard gauge railway at Middleton, in Leeds. I joined as a working member in 1969 and here’s me at a youthful 15 firing a steam engine. My cleaner on the right was only 14!

I have cleaned toilets and floors; I have worked in shops and engineering workshops; I have worked my way up from cleaner through fireman to being a steam locomotive driver; I have served on a number of Boards of Directors and was Chairman of Middleton Railway for several years. I am now a Director of the Heritage Railway Association in addition to being managing Director of WATTRAIN.

What on EARTH can you people teach ME about safety on railways?? I was working on railways before many of you were born!! There’s nothing I don’t know about running railways so I don’t need you lot!”

As an example of complacency, that statement is hard to beat, yet it is an attitude which, if not rife within the heritage world, is one which I suspect many of us here are familiar with. In the paid world it’s easy - either do as I say or there’s the door! In the heritage railway world that isn’t always the best course to take, since you might very quickly run out of volunteers if you take such a hard line attitude!

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Our challenge is to persuade our volunteers that what we are doing IS the right thing and ISN’T a waste of time, which harks back to my first point again, the “credibility” aspect. If we can streamline the process and focus on what is really necessary instead of “let’s make EVERYTHING safe!”, then our volunteers are much more likely to come into line. We should always remember that the only safe railway is one which doesn’t move, carry passengers or do anything of any real use to mankind!

People / Regulatory Environment

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In the UK, one issue which has cropped up quite frequently is the need to keep good records of the use and maintenance of our locomotives and stock.

A very typical issue has involved one of my own organisations, the Vintage Carriages Trust, a railway museum attached to the Keighley & Worth Valley Railway.

The Trust owns two vintage steam locomotives, both of which are out stationed on heritage railways in the UK. However, whilst one locomotive has all the relevant paperwork available for inspection at any time, the other loco does not. VCT has tried for many months to access the correct records and are unable to do so and we have now been forced to take more serious action and “Stop” the locomotive until such time as the records are up to date. This is a classic scenario. The railway concerned takes very great care of the locomotive and we know this because the railways it has visited during the year all say so – THEIR records are fine! It’s quite simply a “culture” thing – this particular organisation has never had a records system and their members see no reason why they should have one “After all, we’ve been doing this for years and we know what we are doing!” Everyone knows the locomotive is in good order, but of course can’t prove it because there are no real records! VERY frustrating!

As an example of “Complacency” [And “not using brain first!], let me close with a story about my own experience.

I was driving this locomotive one day and had waited a little too long before oiling the steam brake, which is fed by a steam valve from the top of the boiler. As always, I checked that valve and being unable to move it either way, concluded it was shut and therefore I could go ahead and remove the filler plug to add the oil. As I did so, I noticed some steam coming out of that plug. Did I stop to think whether or not I’d done the right thing? No, I simply assumed there was some small steam leak and of course the inevitable happened – this thing shot out of the steam brake lubricator with 160lb of steam behind it.

I was lucky, the only thing that was hurt in this stupid incident was my own pride and it happened purely because I had become comfortable and complacent with my steam driver role. Nothing had happened before, so nothing would happen today – but it did! I now use this experience to remind others of the dangers of becoming complacent when on the railway - be careful you don’t get bitten!

CONCLUSION

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In Conclusion, my intention here has been to highlight the relationship between “ordinary” and “Railway” health and safety, to point out that our heritage railways have to cope with both types simultaneously and that this can be quite difficult for smaller groups. We need to concentrate our efforts towards making our railways safer by reducing the “tick a box” type legislation such as PAT testing etc and to concentrate on the major issues such as boilers, trackwork and of course passenger safety.

We also need to continue to educate our volunteers to be both aware of safety legislation and to take it seriously – the more relevant the legislation, the less likely it is that it will be ignored.

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