

CHARTS Heritage Railways Good Practice Site Visit To The Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railway

Introduction

Railway Heritage was identified as one of the additional four good practices that the CHARTS project was required to consider. The Welsh Government was identified as the donor of this good practice and Partner 1 South Pelion and Partner 7 Vidzeme Tourism Association were identified as potential recipients on account of them both having heritage railways, and Partner 8 the National Institute for Research & Development in Tourism expressed interest in being an observer.

It was decided to add on a site visit to the Ffestiniog and Welsh Highland Railways to the first thematic workshop on Climate Change held in Conwy on the 24th of September, 2012. A day long visit on the 25th of September was organised by Cadw with ECTN assistance.

Background

Narrow Gauge Heritage Railways are an important of the Welsh tourism product. There are a total of 10 narrow gauge railways which collectively carry in excess of 600,000 passengers in 2011. They are mainly run by charitable organisations and are heavily dependent on volunteer labour. Most were built to transport minerals principally slate from the mines to the coastal ports. The most recent one to be rebuilt is the Welsh Highland Railway at the cost of £28m with the aid of volunteers reopening a 25 mile route between Caernarfon and Porthmadog.

The number of passengers carried by individual railways which reported figures for 2011 to the Welsh Government's annual visitor attractions survey are listed below:

Bala Lake Railway 20,420

Brecon Mountain Railway 72,439

Llanberis Lake Railway 73,539

Snowdon Mountain Railway 143,224

Talylllyn Railway 46,934

Vale of Rheidol Railway 41,319

The railways which did not submit figures were; Welshpool & Llanfair Railway, Ffestiniog Railway, Welsh Highland Railway and the Welsh Highland Heritage Railway.

The oldest of the Narrow Gauge Railways is the Ffestiniog which has carried passengers since the 1870s and which became a significant tourism attraction since the 1950s.

The Narrow Gauge Railways work together in a Welsh Marketing consortia 'Great Little Trains of Wales' whose web site:

www.greatlittletrainsofwales.co.uk/index.html provides a general description of the narrow gauge railways plus description of each of the individual railways.

The Ffestiniog Railway

The Ffestiniog Railway was established by an Act of Parliament in 1832 and is the oldest independent railway company in the world today. It was originally built to serve the slate industry of Blaenau Ffestiniog, the line used to be operated by gravity. Wagons laden with slate, rumbled down the hill side, kept under control by brakesmen. Steam locomotives of the 0-4-0 type were introduced in 1863 to allow longer slate trains. In 1865 it was the first narrow gauge railway in Britain to carry passengers and in 1869 the lines first double fairlie articulated locomotives were introduced and these double ended machines are one of the most widely recognised features. In the mid 20th century the use of the line for transporting slate ceased with closure of the line in 1946. In 1954 a group of volunteers purchased the company to run the line as a tourist attraction. In 1955 the line opened as far as Boston Lodge, but it was not until 1982.

The line is 21.7km long and runs from the harbour at Porthmadog to the slate mining town of Blaenau Ffestiniog, along a route with mountainous and forested scenery. The line is single track throughout with 4 intermediate passing places. The track gauge is 597mm (1ft 11.5ins).

The railway is owned by the Festiniog Railway Trust who is the majority shareholder of the Festiniog Railway Company, which employs the staff of the railway including the General Manager and the Commercial Manager and the engineering & technical staff at the Boston Lodge Works. Critical to the operation of the railway is the Ffestiniog Railway Society which was established in 1954 by preservation volunteers who wanted to replay a part in the rebirth of the railway. The society role is to provide volunteers and finance for the railway's development. The Society became a charity in 1997 and currently has over 5,000 members.

The Society has donated over £1million to the company over the last 10 years and provides over a 1,000 volunteers to work on the railway each year. Volunteers provide the engine drivers, firemen, guards, catering staff on the trains, operate the ticket sales at the station etc; thereby minimising the operating costs. The Society nominates a director for both the board of the Trust and for the Company.

A key initiative that the Society undertakes every year is to try and involve the younger generation in volunteering through their Kids Training week, for which they provide volunteer supervisors. Several generations of the same family can be involved in volunteering, the example being the Commercial Manager whose mother

was a volunteer fireman and who herself worked as a volunteer before she started working for the Company. To encourage volunteers to come and spend a week or more away from home the Company provides two hostels the Minfford with 42 beds and the Penrhyn with 14 beds. The Society subsidises the cost of running the hostels by 50%.

In 2011 the Railway Company published a vision document 'A Sustainable Future'. The document recognises that the company needs to consider its impact on the:

- Customers
- Supporters
- Local Community

'as it strives to become the best narrow gauge railway that there is – anywhere.'

The Society published a Framework Document setting out how the Society can help achieve these aspirations.

The Boston Lodge Works is a key element of the operation, as it is here that the Company services its engines and rolling stock, builds new carriages, undertakes major refurbishment of existing engines and builds new engines. The expertise they have developed in this field means that other narrow gauge railways send their engines to be repaired or refurbished here. They have built up a team of specialised engineers and technicians, offer apprenticeships and will use volunteers where they have technical skills. At the time of the visit they were building a steam engine for another narrow gauge railway with the help of volunteers for a cost of c £370,000. They were also refurbishing a late 19th century carriage for the Metropolitan Underground Railway in London. Existing coaches are repainted every 6 or 7 years to maintain their appearance.

The Ffestiniog Railway is part of an All Wales Marketing Consortia – Great Little Trains of Wales referred to earlier and participates in North Wales Tourism 'Great Days Out in North Wales' campaign. The Railway Company produces leaflets for the local market with a railway timetable and a joint leaflet with Welsh Highland Railway for the market further afield which provides detailed information on the two railways plus details on the local towns, where to stay, activities, attractions and events in the area. The Company also operates Ffestiniog Travel which markets rail based holiday journeys across the world.

The Ffestiniog Railway provided data on over the counter bookings for the period 2007 to 2011 and are listed below:

2007 - 124,139

2008 – 115,985
2009 - 131,767
2010 - 129,026
2011 - 122,938

23.4% of the bookings occurred during the month of August last year with August and the next most popular month July accounting for 39% of the 2011 bookings. The next two most popular months are June and September. These figures do not include the pre booked visits and are therefore an underestimate of the total bookings figures.

Welsh Highland Railway

The Welsh Highland Railway is operated by the Festiniog Railway Company and the Welsh Highland Railway Ltd between Caernarfon and Porthmadog a 40.2km (25 miles) route through the heart of the Snowdonia National Park. It is a narrow gauge railway with a 597mm gauge and was built by the North Wales Narrow Gauge Railway and was operated commercially between 1922 and 1937. It had developed from a number of earlier railways including the Nantlle horse drawn railway built to transport slate between Nantlle and Caernarfon, the Croesor Tramway built in 1864 to carry slate from Croesor to Porthmadog, and the North Wales Narrow Gauge Railway from Dinas to Rhyd Ddu which served the slate quarries at Bryngwy and Glan y Arfon and transported tourist wishing to visit Snowdon. In 1901 the Porthmadoc, Beddgelert and South Snowdon Railway took over the Croesor Tramway and extended the line to Nant Gwynant via Beddgelert to transport slate from the South Snowdon Slate Quarry.

The Welsh Highland Railway was created under a Light Railway Order of Parliament in 1922. The new company then constructed the missing link between Rhyd Ddu and the Croesor Junction. The Railway Company however generated insufficient revenue to pay its loans and was put into receivership in 1927. The railway generated enough revenue to keep operating and the Festiniog Railway Company put forward a proposal to operate both railways in 1934 and signed a 42 year lease, The railway continued to perform badly and the last passenger train ran in September 1936 and the line closed the following year.

The following is an extract from the Festiniog & Welsh Highland Railway web site describing the early attempts and the more recent successful rebuilding of the line.

“In the early 1960s the first determined efforts to revive the WHR began and in 1961 a group of enthusiasts formed a society which became the Welsh Highland Light Railway (1964) Co Ltd. Negotiations were opened with the liquidator, A. Thomas, but these efforts necessarily changed focus when he died and the assets were transferred to the Official Receiver in London. A base was

eventually established on a former standard gauge siding in Porthmadog and a short length of line was laid to Pen y Mount. A public service commenced in 1980.

WHLR (1964) Ltd opened negotiations with the local authorities and the Official Receiver but the company's efforts were complicated by the threat of road improvement schemes which apparently required portions of the trackbed too. In the late 1980s, the FR became again involved in WHR interests, having completed restoration of the FR route, including a 2½ mile deviation, to Blaenau Ffestiniog in 1982.

In 1989 it was a matter of some controversy when it became known that the FR had made a secret bid to acquire the WHR trackbed from the Official Receiver. The FR plan was to start at Caernarfon, rebuilding back to Porthmadog and connecting with the FR to create a 40 mile railway – a new ‘Great Railway Journey’.

In 1993 the Welsh Highland Railway Society was launched to focus volunteer efforts for the reconstruction of the WHR.

There then followed several years of legal arguments, a High Court hearing and three public inquiries, and an appeal before a decision that the reconstruction of the WHR was in the public interest was made and the necessary powers granted by means of a Transport & Works Order. Along the way a transfer order sanctioned the sale of the trackbed from the Official Receiver to the FR and a Light Railway Order authorised the Dinas-Caernarfon section.

Work started between Dinas and Caernarfon in 1997 and engineering contractor Mowlem made the trackbed ready for volunteer tracklayers. It was opened on 13th October 1997, with initial trains consisting of five new carriages. Subsequently a Pullman car, Bodysgallen, and two more semi-opens were added to the fleet. Some FR stock was also used and many FR locos have made appearances on the WHR from time-to-time.

From an early stage the railway was envisaged to be reconstructed to operate at as close to 25 mph as possible, to be operated by powerful locomotives capable of hauling 12 coaches up gradients of up to 1 in 40 and in such a way as to reduce long-term maintenance costs. A large amount of the necessary equipment was sourced from South Africa including two NG/G16 2-6-2+2-6-2 Beyer Garratts (Nos 138 and 143) and the Funkey diesel Castell Caernarfon. Another Funkey diesel was also imported and after a significant rebuild entered service on the FR as Vale of Ffestiniog. A third NG/G16, No 140, was donated to the cause in 1997 and two NG15 2-8-0s were subsequently obtained.

Funding was made available towards the estimated £9 million cost of rebuilding to Rhyd Ddu from the Millennium Commission (£4.3m), European Regional Development Fund, Welsh Development Agency, Wales Tourist Board and sponsorship from the WHR Society, Historic Houses Hotels and First Hydro.

The section to Waunfawr took about a year to finish, opening in August 2000 and work started almost immediately on the next section to Rhyd Ddu. However, progress was hampered by the national Foot and Mouth disease outbreak.

In early 2003, tracklaying started at Rhyd Ddu northwards to meet up with the section being laid from Waunfawr southwards. Following test running and a visit by HRH Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, the railway was opened to Rhyd Ddu on 18th August 2003.

Whilst these developments were taking place WHLR (1964) Co, now registered as the Welsh Highland Railway Ltd, reached agreement with the FR to rebuild the railway to Pont Croesor - and to operate trains of heritage rolling stock on this section of line until it was required for completing the route to Harbour Station. In 2003 work started for an initial extension to Traeth Mawr loop, about half way to Pont Croesor, but progress was also hampered by the Foot and Mouth outbreak. WHRL completed this initial section to Traeth Mawr loop and operated a regular service over it during the 2008 season.

In September 2004, the FR announced that funding of £5m had been forthcoming from the Welsh Assembly and the EU. This, together with funds from a hugely successful public appeal, finally meant that the full project would come to fruition.

Phase 4 involved the rebuilding of the railway from Rhyd Ddu through Beddgelert and Aberglaslyn to Porthmadog in one go. This final phase includes street running across Britannia Bridge to link with the FR at Harbour Station, four tunnels, four large river bridges, a crossing of the standard gauge Cambrian coast line on the level and over 12 miles of track.

Work started in summer 2005 with the completion of Rhyd Ddu station (with two new water towers, an extended platform and a small yard) in early 2006. Following clearance, drainage and ballasting works by contractors, volunteer tracklayers laid track all the way to Porthmadog, the missing bridges were replaced, the flat crossing over the Cambrian Coast line installed and road crossings have been built.

The railway's original fleet of two NG/G16 Beyer-Garratts - Nos.138 and 143 - has been augmented by the arrival of NG/G16 No.87, which has been rebuilt at the Ffestiniog Railway's Boston Lodge Works after a private donation covering the costs of purchase and restoration was forthcoming. This coal-fired locomotive entered service in early 2009.

Peter Waterman has bought a further NG/G16 - No.109 - which is being restored at his London and North Western Railway workshops in Crewe. When the restoration is complete No.109 will enter service on the Welsh Highland Railway. All NG/G16s, with the exception of number 138, will be coal fired due to the high price of fuel oil.

The Welsh Highland Railway Society is supporting a volunteer-led team restoring NG15 No.134. This 2-8-2 tender loco will provide an interesting contrast to the railway's fleet of articulated locos.

New carriages have also been built at Boston Lodge for use on the Welsh Highland Railway increasing the level of passenger comfort offered - as well as providing dedicated wheelchair accommodation and accessible seating. A new Observation Pullman Carriage entered service in 2009 and was named Glaslyn by Her Majesty the Queen when she visited the railway in early 2010. Further improvements have been the introduction of on-train toilets and new service cars with enhanced facilities for hot and cold buffet service.

The new Welsh Highland Railway has been developed on a much more substantial financial and engineering basis and is already making an environmentally-sensitive contribution to the economy of the area - independent research shows that the two railways generate over £15 million for the local economy each year and create more than 350 jobs in the surrounding area.

Public services started to Beddgelert, then Hafod y Llyn in 2009 and Pont Croesor in 2010. The final link to the FR has now opened, finally enabling through services to operate between Blaenau Ffestiniog and Caernarfon.

But even with the tracklaying phase complete, the railway is far from finished. There are station buildings to be completed, new carriages to be built and a major reconstruction of Harbour Station to allow trains from both railways to use the station simultaneously. All this will take time, effort and money, as will the never-ending task of maintaining a 40 mile railway and 80 miles of fencing.

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The railway is marketed in the same manner as the same manner as the Ffestiniog Railway with a joint Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland leaflet for the non- local market and a specific timetable leaflet for the local market together with participation in various market consortia as described earlier in respect of the Ffestiniog Railway.

The operating of the railway is heavily dependent on volunteers as was described earlier in respect of the Ffestiniog Railway. Volunteers are provided from the Welsh Highland Railway Society (Cymdeithas Rheilfford Eyri) and undertake the following tasks:

- Track work- most of the track was laid by volunteers
- Loco crew
- Loco maintenance
- Rolling stock maintenance
- Train crew- guards and buffet staff
- Gardening at the stations
- Stations and buildings maintenance

The over the counter bookings for the railway have been obtained from the Commercial Manager and are set out below:

2007- 44,768

2008- 43,606

2009 – 72,159

2010 – 64,082

2011 – 98,058

2011 was the first year that the complete route was opened. Again the most popular months were July and August with 33.6% of bookings.

Lessons Learned

1. The importance of having societies supporting the railways who can provide support through fund raising and volunteers

2. The need to involve the younger generation as volunteers through providing a 'kids training week'
3. To work with similar railways in marketing consortia, and to promote the other attractions of the area in marketing literature
4. Providing appeal envelopes in the carriages
5. To have a long term plan and vision in place
6. To measure the wider economic impact on the local communities in terms of jobs supported and additional visitor spend to justify public funding support and as a means of ensuring the support of the local community
7. Offering a quality experience to customers

Sources of Information

Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railway Web site – www.festrail.co.uk

Ffestiniog Railway Society web site – www.ffestiniograilway.org.uk/

Welsh Highland Railway Society web site -

<http://www.whrsoc.org.uk/?mn=19&sm=19-1>

Wikipedia web site -

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ffestiniog_Railway

Clare Britton Commercial Manager, Ffestiniog Railway

Great Little Trains of Wales web site -

www.greatlittletrainsofwales.co.uk/index.html

Visits To Tourist Attractions In Wales 2011 – Social Research Division, Welsh Government

Appendix

Participants In The Railways Visit

Kostas Papamarkakis	South Pelion Municipal Council, Greece
Mahi Kostiba	South Pelion Municipal Council, Greece
Sofia Aretha	South Pelion Municipal Council, Greece
Manos Vougioukas	MCU & South Pelion Municipal Council
Leva Treija	Vidzeme Tourism Association & MCU
Ernestis Libretis	Valka Municipal Council Latvia
Inese Timermane	Aloja Municipal Council Latvia
Laura Lulle	Gulbene Municipal Council, Latvia
Anna Kupce	Vidzeme Tourism Association, Latvia
Carlogea Alina	Nat. Institute for Research & Development in Tourism, Romania
Surugia Camelia	Nat. Institute for Research & Development in Tourism, Romania
Nigel Adams	European Cultural Tourism Network