

G&T Consulting Ltd

Independent Consultancy

*Working for Heritage **and** People*

Planning Ahead for the Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust

Introduction

Since its inception as the Somerset & Dorset Circle in 1966 the Somerset & Dorset Railway Trust has kept alive the memory and heritage of one of Britain's best loved railways.

In the 43 years since closure of the line much has happened in the heritage railway sector and there have been several initiatives to establish a presence on sections of the former route. The Trust itself is a well-established feature on Britain's longest heritage railway and has acquired a substantial collection of archives, artefacts and rolling stock, of which S&DJR locomotive No. 88 is seen by many as a 'flagship'.

Members & Volunteers

Currently the single biggest challenge the Trust faces is a continuing decline in membership and volunteer numbers; the Trust is dependent on having suitable volunteers, both in number and ability, to fulfil its aims.

A volunteer policy and strategy should be developed and task descriptions written for all volunteer roles. Recruitment may be easier if volunteers are not required to be members of the Trust. However, volunteers will continue to be drawn from Trust membership, and it is vital to recruit younger members to ensure succession. Joint or concessionary membership schemes could be explored with the WSR and the other S&D interest groups. This could be as simple as offering reduced subscription rates for members of other specified organisations

No projects should be authorised by the Trust until it is confident that there will be sufficient volunteers to complete them. The Trust should establish clear work programmes and budgets for volunteer projects. Any carriages, etc that cannot be restored within a reasonable time by volunteers should be considered for completion on a commercial basis.

Museum & Heritage Assets

Located at a site off the former S&D railway route, the focus on the S&DJR in the museum displays at Washford is difficult to understand for many visitors. The level of interpretation and lack of inter-actives or multi-media means that

much of what is displayed only has real meaning to railway enthusiasts.

The displays need revitalisation including new themes and storytelling to appeal to a wider audience. Reducing the number of items on display at any one time and providing for rotation of objects through short-term exhibition will help to achieve this. An interpretation strategy is needed for the museum displays and the Washford site as a whole, with opportunities to explore wider railway themes. This would make it easier to provide an enjoyable experience for visitors, whatever their dwell time at Washford especially families and non-enthusiasts.

The acquisition and disposals policy needs to be re-written to match the format required by the MLA for the Accreditation Standard; this will not conflict with current Charity Registration. The focus of the collecting policy needs to reflect the long term vision for the Trust and its focus on the S&DJR. It may then be appropriate to review the collections of objects, archives and rolling stock to ensure that all items are relevant to the Trust's long term mission. In the meantime all locomotives and rolling stock should be de-accessioned and retained as non-museum items. Any items that are beyond any reasonable hope of restoration or conservation should be considered for disposal.

There is scope for arranging for the loan and exhibition of items from the collection to other S&D heritage railway sites, and at local museums along the route of the railway. The Trust could prepare suitable text for labels to ensure a consistent standard of interpretation and consider itself the guardian of S&DJR heritage wherever displayed. This could include working with local councils, amenity groups, etc to assist with *in situ* interpretation of the railway.

The digitisation of archives should be continued and made available via the Internet. Once digitised original archive material could be better cared for if deposited in relevant county record offices or specialist archive.

The Trust needs to secure professional advice on all aspects of museum work, including further guidance on what needs to be done to meet the national Accreditation Standard for collection management, including documentation and collection care. Combining the curator and archivist roles would help to ensure that all collections are looked after consistently; it may be easier to recruit someone to undertake this role if they do not need to be either trustee or member.

Washford and the WSR

Although the Trust provides added value to the Washford site, it has difficulty in providing volunteers at the station for all the WSR operating days. For this reason the WSR is unable to market the Trust's activities beyond providing a contact telephone number in the timetable for potential visitors to check

whether the museum is open.

The Trust needs to answer two important questions concerning the Washford site:

- What can the Trust do at Washford that it could not do as well or better elsewhere?
- What can the Trust do at Washford that the WSR could not do as well or better?

It is possible that the WSR will wish to re-gain some or all of the Washford site on termination of the lease in 2020; the yard part of the site is probably more important to the WSR, as it could provide space for storing and/or maintaining stock. It is possible that the Trust could continue to occupy the station only on similar lease terms, operating the museum and other visitor attractions, with perhaps some of the ex-S&D buildings re-located to the platform. This might be subject to the WSR being convinced that the Trust could regularly staff the station especially on intensive timetable days, perhaps by recruiting local people as volunteers.

The Trust should begin discussions with the WSR to consider options for the Washford site beyond 2020. It is unlikely that the WSR would permit the Trust to occupy the yard only. It seems highly unlikely that planning permission would be granted for building a museum extension on the strip of land owned by the Trust, even if sufficient funds were forthcoming. Returning this to allotment use may be the best option and would involve local people in the site.

Locomotive No. 88 is a valued part of the current WSR motive power and it can be assumed that the WSR will wish to exercise its option to extend the current long term hire agreement. It is also likely that the WSR would be interested in continuing to use the locomotive beyond 2020. The Trust should therefore begin discussions with the WSR to consider long-term options for No. 88.

Collaboration & Development

Whether the Trust continues to occupy any of the Washford site beyond 2020, there is a case for establishing some sort of presence at one or more locations on the former S&D railway if this can be achieved by working in partnership with the other S&D interest groups and the Trust should begin exploratory discussions with these groups.

By working in partnership with other organisations the Trust is more likely to be able to achieve its purposes. Developing strong partnerships with other organisations is also a good way of neutralising the efforts of those who seem

intent on frustrating the efforts of trustees and key volunteers.

The Trust must be open to the potential to evolve into a different type of organisation if necessary, making greater use of new technology to deliver its aims, and working with a new range of organisations and opportunities.

A Vision for the Future

It is suggested that long-term the main focus of the Trust should be the Somerset and Dorset Joint Railway, rather than old railways more generally; the following is suggested as a vision statement for the Trust:

Working in partnership with others to keep alive the memory of the Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway.

The following is offered as the basis for a future statement of purpose for the Trust:

To keep alive the history and importance of the Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway and its predecessor companies, through the preservation, custodianship, display and interpretation of material evidence (including artefacts, archives and oral testimony).

To promote and facilitate public understanding of the significance of the Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway as a major cross-country rail route, its importance to the communities through which it passed, and the social impact of its closure.

To promote dialogue, cooperation and coordination between all individuals and organisations concerned with the Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway.

Conclusions

To remain viable for the future the Trust needs to address several key issues:

Short Term (ie within 6-9 months)

- o Volunteer recruitment strategy
- o Membership drive
- o Re-vamp museum displays & interpretation

Medium Term (ie within 12-18 months)

- o Review collecting policy
- o Begin dialogue with WSR about Washford and No. 88
- o Informal discussions with other S&D interest groups, etc

Long Term (ie 2-5 years)

- o Review constitution and organisational structures
- o Identify opportunities for partnership and collaboration
- o Determine long-term options for Washford

It remains important that the Trust retains a high profile in all aspects of the former Somerset & Dorset Joint Railway and its predecessor companies, which may mean developing new approaches and structures to fulfil its aims and objectives.

Steph Gillett
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