

Steaming Through 60! 60th Anniversary Year & August Celebration

By Robert Hayward, Chairman, Diamond Anniversary Steering Group

We're here. We made it. We've reached our 60th anniversary year.

It's a big milestone, not just for us at the Bluebell Railway but for the whole of the heritage railway industry.

Many people in the early days thought the Railway wouldn't succeed or survive for very long. The pioneers who started the Railway were so focused on getting the line back in passenger use for steam-hauled services, they would hardly have had time to think about where it might be in 2020.

Yet here we are. Not only still running steam-hauled passenger trains but with a line running to East Grinstead and a connection to the main line.

New Year Resolutions

January is a month for reflection. We should all take a moment to look back at the last 60 years, and everyone should have a warm glow about what collectively we have achieved since 1960.

But before we get too nostalgic, the New Year is also a time for resolutions and our thoughts are turning to the plans for the year ahead.

We have already launched our 60th year with an excellent new Visitor Guide and a new tagline "Celebrating 60 Glorious Years", which you'll see on our publications and branding.

That's just the start, and all our activities this year will form part of the commemoration. It's a year of celebration and not just one weekend.

A big thank you to everyone who responded to our call for suggestions for how we can mark our milestone. They have all been considered by the Steering Group and many of them have been incorporated into the programme of events.

We—or rather you—have also decided the name for the big weekend of celebrations which will be held on 7-9 August. The Steering Group, which comprises staff and volunteers from across the Railway, held a "brainstorming" session and came up with various ideas, but none of them really stood out. So, in the spirit of consulting and involving the members in our decision-making, we put a handful of suggested names out to a public vote.

It wasn't quite *The X Factor* or *Strictly Come Dancing* but there was a clear winner. The overwhelming public vote was in favour of "Steaming Through 60" so that's what the event is now called.

It seems to me to sum up everything about this year: we still run steam trains as the pioneers planned, and we are still on a journey with the 60th year a stopping-off point on the route of railway preservation rather than a final destination.

Here Comes the Weekend

So what about the event itself? As mentioned, it will be over three days in August.

Friday 7 August marks the exact 60 years since the line re-opened as a standard gauge steam-hauled passenger heritage railway on 7 Aug., 1960. We've achieved so much since then, and we have a lot to celebrate. The celebrations will continue on Saturday 8 August and Sunday 9 August.

There'll be plenty to see and do for everyone from railway enthusiasts to tourists, from families to first-time visitors. We're encouraging people to come for more than one day, preferably on all three days because we think that there will be too much to do in one day.

We'll be showcasing:

- Each of our four stations
- The different railway activities at the stations
- The projects we are working on
- Our aspirations for the years ahead

In essence, this event is about the past, present, and future of railway preservation.

It's also about you—staff, members, and volunteers. We'll be using the weekend to tell the wider world about the fantastic contribution you all make to the success of the Bluebell Railway and also excite new volunteers.

There will be music, food and drink, locos, carriages, displays, activities, films—a big birthday bash.

Best of the Bluebell

The operational timetable for the weekend is still in the planning stage, but we can say now that we'll be running locomotives and carriages dating from the 1890s to the 1960s. It'll be the "Best of the Bluebell" on display.

Those of you who have attended previous "decadian" events at the Railway will recognise some of the successful features of past celebrations. This time, we can do something we haven't been able to do before: we'll be running trains and activities into the evenings on Friday and Saturday, including a music festival at Horsted Keynes.

The evening services will connect to the main line timetable at East Grinstead to allow visitors to get home by train after the event. That's something we can do only because of your hard work and dedication in allowing us to reach East Grinstead in 2013.

New Attractions & Passport to Success

Our 60th year also gives us a chance to introduce some new features to attract people who may have visited us in the past but not been back for a while. They include miniature railway rides at Kingscote around the edge of the play area, which should be running later this year.

We'll also be launching a "60 Things to See and Do" Bluebell Passport for the year. This is aimed at children (although we suspect many adults will also be taking part!) with a sticker or reward for ticking activities off the list.

There'll also be special fun activities for visitors during "Steaming Through 60" which will take them from station to station up and down the line.

Your Railway Needs You!

As you can imagine, the weekend will need a lot of people to make it a success. There are many roles that need to be filled, such as greeting and directing visitors, supervising activities, running display stands, car park marshals, and on-train guides, as well as all our normal duties such as train crew, platform staff, and signalling.

We need your help. We have more than 10,000 members and about 750 working volunteers. If each of you dedicated a small part of that weekend to helping out, you would all be contributing to the overall success of the 60th anniversary celebrations as well as being part of the Railway's history.

Whether you've been here for 60 years or have just joined, whether you're a regular volunteer or occasional visitor, there's a job for you.

If you would like to be involved, please contact Don Brewer either by email don.brewer@bluebell-railway.co.uk or phone 01825 724893 with details of your availability and what role you would like to carry out.

Saving the best until last

The finale of the weekend celebrations will be a cavalcade at Horsted Keynes on the Sunday afternoon. We'll be proudly showing off the Railway's locos and displaying 60 years of our achievement in railway preservation.

It'll be a spectacular sight and one not to be missed.

I'll provide regular updates throughout the year but for now make sure you:

- Save the date

- Spread the word to family and friends
- Offer to help over the weekend

We're the first preserved railway of our kind to reach 60 years. Other railways will be watching us. Diamond anniversaries are a chance to sparkle. With your help we can ensure the Bluebell Railway shines brightly in its 60th year.