

# The Dartmoor Pony *Express*

## ***Annual General Meeting***

The restrictions imposed by the pandemic prevented us from holding an Annual General Meeting in April or May as we would have hoped to do. A physical meeting is still not possible, and we anticipate low engagement with a Zoom type meeting, so we are holding the AGM using email and post. This newsletter constitutes the AGM annual report. It is accompanied by a ballot paper, the 2020 annual accounts and 2019 draft AGM minutes. The ballot paper contains instructions for replying; please note the cut-off date.

## ***2019 report***

2019 seems a very long time ago, and almost irrelevant in the light of subsequent events, but we note that it was the last year of any operations under the aegis of the Dartmoor Railway, the Christmas operations ran pretty much as usual, and the 2019 heritage services between Okehampton and Meldon attracted 2758 passengers who paid a total of £10697.50. 2019 also saw an Okehampton – Gunnislake bus service operating in support of the summer Sunday rail service, enabling a Dartmoor circumnavigation by public transport, and the ‘*Okehampton Castle*’ special HST charter ran to Weymouth in September.

## ***2020 Report***

You will already know that at the beginning of the year Dartmoor Railway, along with the Weardale Railway and RMS Locotec, were placed into administration as a result of problems experienced by Iowa Pacific, the parent company in America.

During the period of administration, the upside main station buildings at Okehampton have been locked out of use with all locks changed. The Carriage and Wagon shed at Meldon is also locked, preventing access for our C&W volunteers. Fortunately, the downside station buildings that we rent from Devon County Council (DCC) are outwith the administration arrangements so our station maintenance volunteers still have access. Unfortunately our shop and the museum cannot be opened to the general public as the whole station is closed to the public, but our activity ensures that the station looks well-maintained rather than abandoned – something that DCC has applauded us for.

Since the initial administration arrangements were made, RMS Locotec has been bought by Proviso Holdings Limited and thus taken out of administration. It also appears that all Dartmoor Railway rolling stock may be included in the purchase – including coaches and wagons and rail vans, though it has been difficult to verify the true

situation with the administrators. Our own rolling stock should not be affected, though some of the vehicles we currently use for storage purposes at Okehampton may be removed. The DR Christmas Train has been in Okehampton platform 2 since the end of last year, but all rolling stock needs to be moved to Meldon for onward removal by road. Reliable information is difficult to come by, particularly from FRP Advisory, the administrators, and Walker Singleton, the sales agents, but several rumoured deadlines for the stock removal have come and gone. At the time of writing there has been no sign of movement.

On a positive note Aggregate Industries (AI) is again permitting access to Meldon Quarry for our C&W volunteers, though the administrators are preventing access to the C&W shed until the asset sale to Proviso Holdings Limited is complete.

Importantly, there is now significant progress to report on the proposed reopening of the whole line through to Exeter on a regular daily basis. Despite the difficulties caused by the pandemic, there have been a number of meetings (some virtual) between local MPs, AI, GWR, Network Rail (NR), DCC, and Okerail. Some of these meetings have included DRSA representation. Network Rail has also carried out investigatory walks of the entire line to Meldon together with drone examinations of the line. The feedback we have received is that the NR examination revealed no insurmountable problems, though some track relaying, de-vegetating, drainage and fencing issues are necessary. In addition there is a requirement for better signalling arrangements and GSMR communication masts. There has also been



*Visit of Network Rail on August 21<sup>st</sup>. Left to right: Tom Baxter, DRSA committee member, Jon Kelsey, DRSA secretary and website editor, Ian Joslin, NR Head of Track Maintenance between Bridgewater and Penzance, Sue Baxter, DRSA acting chair, Christian Irwin, NR Industry Programme Director for Devon and Cornwall, Mike Gallop, NR Western Route Director. Photo by Toby Elliott, NR Head of Communication for the Western Route.*

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positive comment at Prime Ministerial level on railway re-openings in general and this can only work in favour of the efforts being made to reopen the line.

On 21<sup>st</sup> August, 4 senior Network Rail officials, came to Okehampton during a day taking an overview of the line all the way from Crediton via Sampford Courtenay station. They were keen to be shown round our station. They are pleased to find a station which already has such wide volunteer support, and are keen to engage further with us. Their initial costings are based on taking over the whole of Platform 3 and the North side of the station. It would appear that DCC would remain the owner of the footbridge and all the South side. Although there would be modern lighting and fixtures

such as Information screens and Help points, the 1950's station ambience, paint colours and heritage features would be respected. Keeping the footbridge open for public access throughout was a key point of discussion and it seems this will be possible. The complete business case is to be presented to the Department for Transport this autumn in time for a decision to be made early next year.

Meanwhile, we have had discussions with the OkeRail Forum which is keen to push for the eventual re-opening of the entire line to Plymouth, and in the shorter term to develop Okehampton station as a "Destination Station" to enhance tourism opportunities for the area as a whole. They are keen for DRSA to work with them in this context. This could work well with a changed role for DRSA which may be more along the lines of Community Rail support for the line. This might lead to a need to change the name of the association in due course to reflect a different status. We have been exploring the options for setting up a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) which would increase our effectiveness and weight. The committee has tasked Jon Kelsey, Geoff Horner and Sue Baxter to go ahead with making the application to form a CIO (Foundation Level). Advice we have sought from the Heritage Railway Association has confirmed that this is our best route, to a future with many possibilities such as entering into lease and other agreements.

For the immediate future, however, there is no likelihood that DRSA will be able to run heritage trains between Okehampton and Meldon. This is for a number of reasons some of which are outside our

control e.g. the need for a new Safety Case, the different and more stringent conditions in respect of working on NR track and land, lack of traction, and the requirement for additional skills. Heritage train operation will remain as a longer-term goal. On the plus side, and unlike a number of the larger heritage rail organisations, we are fortunate that the effects of the current pandemic have not had a significant effect on our finances.

### *The Reverend Philip Wagstaff*

Having battled with the inconvenience of chairmanship whilst based in Crewkerne, a move still further away to Hastings has forced Philip to give up the unequal struggle, and regrettably he has stood down. We would like to record our gratitude to Philip for his many years of service to the association, both as secretary and latterly as chairman. Instinctively democratic, fair and inclusive, he was a fine frontman for the organisation, bringing to bear extensive knowledge of the ins and outs of local politics and organisations. Philip intends to remain a member and follow the fortunes of the association from afar, and we hope to find opportunities to draw on his wisdom. The committee was pleased to present him with a Bluebell Railway voucher in July.

Vice-chair Sue Baxter has stepped up to acting chair.

With Philip's departure, Dave Clegg is the last link on the committee with DRSA's predecessor organisation, the Friends of Dartmoor Railway. When Okehampton Station reopens to the public, Dave will be going on display in the museum.

## ***Membership & Volunteer Matters***

To every one of our 193 members (slightly down from the 202 members at the end of 2019) goes a sincere vote of thanks for your support of the DRSA in these uncertain times. As we try to unravel what our future might be it is important that we can demonstrate to other organisations the level of support that DRSA enjoys.

Because of the current Covid 19 restrictions this year's AGM has to be carried out by email and post but this does have the advantage that every member, no matter how far away they live, can 'attend' and participate in the meeting. There are important decisions to be made and the committee hope that all members will take the opportunity and submit their votes and views.



Turning now to volunteer activity since the end of the 2019 season this has been limited by circumstances to the continuing security watch plus Station Maintenance (SMT) work at Okehampton station and some carriage and wagon (CW) work at Meldon.

SMT have been working hard ensuring that the whole station keeps its 'in use' look with the platforms clear of weeds and litter and the flower beds and boxes tended. Much hard work has also been done repairing and painting the fencing and gate along the access ramp leading

from the youth hostel car park to platform 2.

For their part CW have commenced the work of repainting the exterior of our Lab11 carriage with most of the filling and rubbing down now completed. Grey undercoat will then be applied to give protection through the winter in case it has to remain stored in the open. The choice of livery for the final topcoat is one of the matters on which your vote or opinion is sort. The options are: the present orange & blue Derby test train livery, BR Brunswick green to match the FK, or BR maroon lined in black and yellow, possibly its original livery. Voting details on the AGM paperwork. It is your vehicle so please do respond.

A small team has also been attending to some repairs in our 'FK' carriage. The ex LMS guards brake van is at present languishing at the far west end of Meldon yard where it was left by DRCIC after Christmas while the ex SR van is in the shed but inaccessible to us until the DRCIC administration is settled and the shed reverts back to Aggregate Industries control.

*Geoff Horner, Membership  
Secretary/Volunteer Coordinator*

## ***DRSA Contact Details***

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