

VoBR Trustees Report 2023 v1.1

The AGM is a little later than usual this year as for the past few months we have been focussed on achieving key milestones that will at last enable us to build our new facilities at Oldminster Sidings.

In many ways this has been one of our most difficult years, even more so than during the pandemic when at least the whole of society was impacted by an outside influence over which no-one seemed to have much control.

The year for us got off to a bad start when, after several years of what we had thought was a positive relationship with Direct Rail Services, who lease the Berkeley Station site from Network Rail, we were given notice to leave the site. This was very likely due to changes of key people within DRS although uncertainties over nuclear energy policy may have contributed.

The world outside our railway cocoon is in a state of flux, as we know. Economic circumstances remain very challenging and are affecting everyone on a personal as well as institutional basis. People working for organisations that we must interact with such as local authorities, the Canal and River Trust, Network Rail and Direct Rail Services are under a lot of pressure, both financial and organisational. Some have seemingly become very cautious and risk averse and have shed staff which has directly impacted us. As well as at DRS the key people at the Canal and River Trust have also changed and they have lost much of their Government funding which it seems has led to redundancies and which pushed us well down their list of priorities. CRT own Sharpness Docks and we are critically dependent on them for actually being able to access the land that we lease from Network Rail at Oldminster Sidings. This has been the most difficult aspect of our work as a Trust this past year.

Whilst dealing with what have sometimes felt like impossible and existential (for the VoBR) issues, we have benefitted hugely by enlisting the help of key supporters such as our local MP and councillors. This was not done lightly as it is not something that can be done often, but it seems to be working; the critical access agreement with CRT is almost there now and the groundworks for our new facilities at Oldminster Sidings are, at last, now able to start. Our wider aims for bringing a heritage attraction to the area appear in the Stroud District Council Local Plan and our planning application is being progressed with Stroud District Council and we have received helpful advice from local Planning Officers.

Grant applications are being made to various bodies; we are confident that construction of the new engine shed and workshops at Oldminster Sidings will start in the summer. This will enable us to move out of the building that we have been leasing from CRT in 2025, which will save us close to £20,000 per year which can instead be invested in developing our railway project. There is also a glimmer of hope regarding our relationship with DRS, again thanks to the support that we asked for and have received, and it is hoped that we will soon meet with DRS to talk about shared use of the branch line.

Most importantly, we have attracted new, active members and some new Trustees who are helping to take the Trust forward with a lot of enthusiasm and vitality. Several of them bring new skills, increase our diversity and offer wider perspectives that go beyond our

immediate interests in restoring vehicles and artefacts, permanent way, railway infrastructure etc. The impact of this is to start to open up new funding opportunities for us to support what we do next year.

It has brought the realisation that, in order to win funding in the much-changed world in which we all now live, we must widen our outlook and strengthen how we fit into our community and how we create real benefit for the area around us. We have fantastic support from many local people, local councillors, our MP Siobhan Baillie and the many others we meet every week but their support increasingly forces us to address bigger questions: Why should they support us? What will we do in return for the local community? What is the point of heritage and history anyway? It's something that almost all heritage organisations now must address if they wish to be successful in gaining funds and we are actively on the case.

The chance to celebrate 150 years of Sharpness New Dock this coming year is one that both helps the community and helps us at the same time. Our team of VoBR people is working with community groups like SVTEC, the Berkeley History Group and Gloucester Archives to identify events and activities for the celebrations ahead and it is going to be quite exciting. Anyone who values the industrial and social history in the area is very welcome indeed to join us.

This doesn't mean that the more traditional aspects of railway preservation have been left behind. We have continued to build up our capacity in the engineering field with outside contract work for the workshops, we are actively restoring two locomotives (one steam, one diesel) and 3 wagons (with others in the queue) that tell an important part of local history. One of our two Pacers is working at the Llanelli & Mynydd Mawr Railway and we shall bring the other from storage to Oldminster Sidings as soon as the site there is fully secure. In addition we have just completed the purchase of a Rushton diesel shunter which will arrive at Sharpness any day now.

During the year, the 8F group finally left us and this enabled us to remodel the Engine Shed and yard. It gives us more space but the clock is ticking on our lease, which ends in summer 2025 and we have started the process of moving items over to Oldminster Sidings.

We should remember that the VoBR is not a small organisation. We have close to 400 members and about 100 people who give their time in some way and we believe that in itself improves individual's mental health by enabling us to meet like-minded people for some worthwhile, enjoyable activities and a chat over lunch and coffee. Volunteering is good for you!

We are in a great position to really make a difference in this little corner of Gloucestershire. This time next year we should have a functioning site at Oldminster and seeing building work proceeding will hopefully make more people curious enough to want to join us.

In conclusion, whilst at times since last year's AGM it seemed that the problems were insurmountable and the future of the VoBR was at risk, we have prevailed and have last started to build our new home at Oldminster Sidings.

