

Giving children a taste for rail

By John Ginns

jwginns@whsurf.net

With winter upon us Railfuture readers not familiar with heritage railways may be forgiven for supposing those steam locomotive fires have long been let out and their boilers cold, ancient carriages left to gather dust and their owners, drivers and supporters gone into hibernation to brood over the past.

True, with autumn half-term school holidays and enthusiasts' late galas over, a few heritage lines may pull down the blinds until the daffodils come up smiling again. But apart from a November or January lull, for many lines it is a season that never ends.

As with the national rail network, there is essential work that cannot be done while trains are running. But unlike the national network heritage railways cannot divert trains to other routes and lay on buses while they re-lay track. So apart from routine maintenance and emergency work any significant heritage track work has to be done out of season. As for their workshops – their work never ceases.

In late September, even as the late summer tourists are still enjoying their steam railway rides, other minds behind closed doors are counting down the weeks, contacting their local toy stores, checking last year's volunteers rota, recalling where they put the station and carriage decorations and that special costume. By the time you read this Santa Specials will be running again on many a heritage railway.

Which heritage railway invented Santa Specials? Was it the Talylyn, the Bluebell, the Severn Valley or the East Lancashire? Perhaps some reader in-the-know can tell us. Whichever railway it was, they could now be wishing they had taken out a patent on the idea, for Santa Specials are big business for heritage trains.

You, parents and guardians that is, have to book well in advance. Bookings often start in September and some lines are well booked up even before the shops set out their



A 19th century railway doing a 21st century job. Our picture shows the front of the 500-strong crocodile of children on their way from the Llangollen Railway's special train to the International Music Festival in July, as reported in *Railwatch* 101. By the time the loco had run round the train, the crocodile was still passing. Like many other heritage lines, the Llangollen Railway will be running Santa Specials this Christmas. More information: www.llangollen-railway.co.uk/

Picture: JOHN GINNS

stalls for Christmas. Santa Specials aren't cheap to ride on either.

But parents or grandparents happily fork out a small fortune to celebrate Christmas on the railway, or as some may say, to bestow upon their children the security of railway Christmases past. But in my experience, as long as you enter into the spirit of things you get excellent value for your money.

Santa Specials vary but the broad picture is more or less the same. You turn up with the family and your pre-booked tickets, in good time for your pre-booked train. You just don't turn up "on spec" for Santa Specials – it isn't done.

Christmas lights, music and the station Christmas tree welcome you. You meet Santa and children receive a gift. Or maybe you board the train first. Your family group will have an assured group of seats somewhere on board and as it is Christmas, and not a Network Rail train, you won't have to challenge someone who has taken your seats.

Maybe the grown-ups are given a present as well, or Christmas cake, or mince pies, or a drink. It is five minutes late starting, but somehow speed doesn't seem to matter. Who

invented this obsession with speed and milli-second punctuality? Santa himself may well make his way along the train, as it clatters along through countryside that once upon a time was always covered in snow at this time of year. Thoughts pass through your mind – things aren't what they used to be . . .

The down side of Santa Specials is that (just like our "proper" journeys on the national network) they generate additional car traffic, in this case at a time of year when they are least wanted. Where is this peace on earth and good will to all?

So at this time of year there is no less need to encourage heritage railways to offer promotional travel-there-by-rail concessions where they are sufficiently close to Network Rail stations.

How naive it all seems and it has to be admitted that with the car-indoctrinated mind so firmly bolted in place, very few car-bound Santa Special families are likely to switch to rail, come what may. And the very idea of advance booking in September for a Network Rail journey to be made in December raises the eyebrows.

So, from heritage railways, we are back to the great challenge, how

to work public transport miracles on the car-mind, especially when pro-rail and pro-bus groups at national level are barely on speaking terms. Some dilemma, but we never give up.

Meanwhile it's three cheers and my total support for the heritage railways people at Christmas, but if only more of them thought total transport instead of nurturing the ideas that yesterday is for ever, that there is no tomorrow and modern railways are a thing of the past.

By the time you read this it is almost certainly too late to book the family on your nearest heritage railway Santa Specials for this year – but you never know your luck. They do have cancellations.

But in any event why not go along and just take a look at what Santa Specials are all about? You may be in for some pleasant surprises.

Like Network Rail and the train operating companies, the heritage railway season never stops.

Several useful national guides detailing UK Heritage Railways are available from book shops.

A simplified Heritage Railways List, indicating the nearest Network Rail bus access will shortly be available for Railfuture members.

Keep in touch with Railfuture action by email

By David Harby *Railway Cuttings* editor

We want to tell you about Railfuture campaigns, events and meetings, about things we'd like to get your views on such as consultation documents, about urgent news such as station closure proposals and about up-to-the-minute Railfuture news.

The Data Protection Act gives us all protection from the misuse of our personal information. Unfortunately, it also makes it very difficult for Railfuture to give you information and assistance to campaign effectively. We often need to contact you quickly but *Railwatch* is only published four times a year. We need your permission to tell you earlier about important issues. To address this problem we email *Railway Cuttings* to Railfuture activists. If you would like to be added to the distribution list just email dav-

id.harby@ntlworld.com giving us your permission to send *Railway Cuttings* to you by email. To avoid your email being deleted as *spam* please make sure that *Railway Cuttings* is in the Subject Line.

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Winning ways

Winners of the Railfuture national lottery drawn at the rail users conference in Birming-

ham were as follows: Mrs M Waide, Shrewsbury £50, D Gammage, Isle of Wight £200, Mr and Mrs C Bourner, Stockport £100, R J Caston, Gwent £50, Mr and Mrs F A Connolly, Ely, R H Perkins, Southsea, W Ebbett, Bath, R Foster, Caerleon, I Yates, Colchester, P Hobart, Warrington, J Tucker, Leamington and W Stoneham, Maidstone £10 each.

Winners of the Railfuture monthly lottery were as follows: September: Alan Cushion, Wirral £56, Peter Lugg, Bourne End £35, Dr Ian Appleyard, Rushden £21, David Townsend, Oxford £14, Mark Edgell, Rotherham £7, Mrs H M Stone, Bristol £7.

October: Dr Ian Appleyard, Rushden £56, R Burrows, Hassocks £35, R Burrows, Hassocks £21, F K Farrell, Chertsey £14, Bill Stoneham, Maidstone £7, Andrew Bull, Macclesfield £7.