

Partnerships to create the difference

Stephen Middleton, Stately Trains: IATM conference, York, June 2007

My name is Stephen Middleton and my passion is old railway carriages. Let me tell you how I became interested. My father was a railway engineer. As a child in the early 1960s I travelled on the family privilege ticket from London to see relatives in Yorkshire. I recall sitting in a Pullman car awaiting departure from Kings Cross. As I settled with my Look and Learn magazine I switched on the light. Only it did not work. Father pointed out that I actually summoned the attendant who was busy preparing dinner. He would be so angry that he would throw me off the train in gasworks tunnel! In the event he switched the light on and offered me a drink. Even at that age I recognised the nobility of service and wanted to be a Pullman steward.

In the event it was not to be but my love of fine old railway carriages, gleaming wood and paint, splendid upholstery and their ability to transport you back in time led me to buy and 1889 carriage in 1993 for restoration. Nine more followed and partnership with heritage railways truly brings them to life. Visitors get a totally different impression riding in them rather than seeing them from the ground. Marketed under 'Stately Trains' passengers can have a glimpse of life as Royalty, railway directors, diners, first and third class passengers while in the move. This is just one example of partnership creating a real difference but let's look at less obvious examples.

Most museums are dedicated to a specialist subject. Others attract those interested in that subject and do little to interest the majority. Heritage railways see the preservation and use of locomotives as paramount. Only exceptional lines give similar consideration to carriages, wagons, buildings and even telegraph poles to create a more complete picture of 'how things were'. Even so we see little evidence of life beyond the railway. Notable exceptions are the horse events at the Severn Valley Railway and the complete experience at Beamish.

Partnerships can be between museums, funding bodies, groups and individuals with the intention of co-operating to achieve the conservation/restoration of an artefact, to improve interpretation or to combine resources to give a better visitor experience.

Partnership between the Severn Valley Railway and a local heavy horse group with sponsorship by EWS recreated the transport partner of railways for so long. Many new faces were drawn to the railway. Similar events involving 1940s themes, vintage vehicles, buses and 1960s cars pushed the scene to more recent times.

The main town at Beamish gives a truly complete early 1900s experience. Walk in to the bank and a clerk explains 'old money'. Trams, early cars, horses and railways are all there together with a farm, pubs, shops, a dentist, school and church. How can this complete vignette benefit from partnerships? Beamish co-operates with Tyne and Wear Museums and jointly attracted funding for a modern climate controlled warehouse to store items that otherwise were at the mercy of weather or insecure storage. Beamish also works closely with the Bowes Railway, the only surviving rope incline mineral line and tremendously under resourced. Beamish personnel advised and assisted Bowes, enabling grant aid for security and preservation of the incline. Bowes reciprocated by lending Beamish a working steam engine to add atmosphere to an otherwise still station area.

Working with Steam Railway magazine brought about the repaint of their largest locomotive (a J21) and then working with the North Norfolk Railway enabled the loan of a similar locomotive then the restoration of the J21. Other partnerships with funding bodies built the replica Puffing Billy to join other pre 1820 locomotives. This gives visitors the chance to experience the dawn of railways and for experts to learn new lessons from early technology.

Clearly many heritage lines need tourist passengers for the income and fear going to far down the strict museum line. We therefore see a dependence on non-authentic activities such as Santa and Thomas. The majority of income may come from these family events but for most of the year the railway may drift from one week to another with no real effort to show history. History could include demonstrating travel conditions for various classes of passengers, integration of road transport, the role of animals and mineral traffic etc.

Since most heritage lines are short of volunteers, this more specialist interpretation could be delegated to others with special interests. Owners of vintage cars, taxis, buses, horses and livestock, poster collections and so on love to enthuse about their particular aspect of yesterday, incorporating it in to the function of the railway. Crucially, they attract people to the railway or museum who would never think of visiting. They learn, spend money and if satisfied, will return and recommend the experience to friends.

My experience operating Victorian carriages on an otherwise 'Mk. 1 carriage/industrial tank' railway shows how the anorak/Thomas image can give way to an experience that the whole family can enjoy. While to date my carriages have given the Victorian excursion experience, with

strawberries and cream in six wheel carriages, more from my collection give the railway directors' experience and soon the Victorian Royal experience.



Let's look back at the cosy (true) story I told at the beginning. Those ten minutes taught me the value of service, the romance of railways, the splendour of fine wood, fabric and liveries and the sheer pleasure of eating while travelling in wonderful surroundings. It may surprise the true railway enthusiast to know that I do not

know or even care what was pulling the train, steam or diesel! That stage in childhood, as I am discovering with my young daughter, is so influential.

Soon, with the completion of an 1894 dining car, I would like to offer passengers of all ages that experience in partnership with others. Just imagine, vintage cars and a bus drop off passengers at the station where the train in gleaming wood awaits. Professional cooks have replicated a dining car menu from 100 years ago.

Passengers pay for their food in old pounds, shillings and pence handed to them and interpreted at time of booking. Courteous uniformed attendants serve the food, casually interpreting the journey along the way.

That can be the result of partnerships between several willing parties creating a superb enjoyable yet educational experience that the vast majority will appreciate. Long term there is only one partnership that will ensure the conservation and use of our work. That is the partnership with the younger generation. I hope we can be like that Pullman car steward and through grace and manner inspire life long interest in the young.

