

Still steaming on Snowdon

Rumours of the demise of steam working on the UK's world-renowned rack railway are premature, as **Andrew Charman** discovered on the first Snowdon 'Heritage Steam Experience.'



In *NGW* 85 we reported the arrival of four brand-new carriages on the Snowdon Mountain Railway – ultra-modern, higher capacity vehicles, costing more than £300,000 each.

Less widely publicised, however, was the fact that these new vehicles cannot be used with the eight steam locomotives that have been climbing Snowdon since 1896. So was this the end for steam on the mountain? Some clearly thought so, one website claiming only in recent weeks that all but one of the Snowdon locos have already been withdrawn.

The reality is rather different, and rather better. Almost as the web piece appeared *NGW* was riding to Snowdon summit propelled by loco no 2 'Enid', one of those said to be already out of service. The occasion was the launch of the line's new Heritage Steam Experience, designed to complement the diesel services, and crucially to run as part of the daily timetable...

Meeting demand

Many enthusiasts find it easy to get the wrong idea about the Snowdon Mountain Railway. While located smack in the middle of 'Great Little Trains of Wales' country, it is not a heritage railway as such. The line sees around 140,000 return journeys each year, and perennially faces a problem most lines would like to have – finding enough seats for all those who want to travel. But likely nine out of 10 of these travellers ride not because they want to experience a

steam locomotive journey, but simply because they want to get to the summit of the 3,560ft (1,085m) mountain. And with the steam locos costing at least 10 times more to run than the Hunslet-supplied quartet of diesels, the economics for retaining steam simply don't add up.

Far from killing off steam, however, the new carriages have boosted its chances. They seat 74 passengers each, compared to 56 of the previous vehicles, and effectively accommodate 90 per cent of service needs – opening a window for the steam locos to cover the other 10 per cent. The result is the Heritage Steam Experience, launched in June, and a part of the regular timetable with two daily return trips to the summit.

Heritage carriage

Specifically for this service, the railway has commissioned a new 'heritage-style' carriage body, built on the underframe of carriage no 2 that dates from 1896. Replacing a body fitted in the early 1950s, the new shell is not a replica of the 1896 original, merely designed to evoke it, visually similar from the outside with the biggest difference a lack of compartment doors. According to SMR Engineering Manager Mike Robertshaw these were sacrificed to preserve structural integrity, and instead a tram-style central aisle design used inside to allow easy access through doors on each corner.

While looking the part – retaining original brass door fittings and

Background photo: Steam will still be climbing to Snowdon summit in the future.

Below: Loco no 2 'Enid', one of the 1896 originals, rests at Clogwyn.

Facing page, clockwise from top left: The new carriage includes facsimiles of the 1896 destination boards and logo.

The tram-style interior offers good views of the mountain through large windows.

Locos 'Padarn' and 'Snowdon' will likely not run this year but do have a future.

Enid and the heritage carriage, continuing a daily steam service on the mountain.

Most passengers will still travel in contemporary carriages pushed by diesels.

All photos by Andrew Charman

handles, finished in a plain wood livery with 'Snowdon Mountain Tramroad & Hotels Company Ltd' destination boards as worn in 1896, the body is in fact just as new tech as its contemporary counterparts, and from the same builder. Garmendale Engineering Ltd is based in Ilkeston, Derbyshire and best known for making rides for major theme parks.

The carriage was delivered to the SMR depot at Llanberis on 13th May and no time lost in commissioning it. Clearly the line is expecting big things of this service – Robertshaw told us that the same lorry that delivered the carriage had taken back another underframe, which Garmendale will store with the intention of building a second vehicle.

Four locomotives

So where does this leave the fleet of steam locomotives? According to Robertshaw the intention is to maintain a service fleet of four – three running and one under overhaul. The 1895 originals Enid and no 3 'Wyddfa' are currently in service and will be joined by no 4 'Snowdon' of 1896 and no 6 'Padarn' of the later 1922 class.

No 5 'Moel Siabod' of 1896 and 1923-built pair no 7 'Ralph' and no 8 'Eryri', all unused for many years and for a long time stored boiler-less in the open, have been moved offsite





to undercover storage – Robertshaw admits their future is undecided.

The Snowdon Mountain Railway's delicate balancing of heritage versus modern economics and capacity may not please all, but **NGW** for one thinks the scheme worthy of praise – for the foreseeable future steam locos will still be powering to the top of a Welsh mountain... **NGW**

More Information

The Heritage Steam Experience runs at 10.30 and 1.30 each day and costs £8 more than the diesel services – however passengers get an hour at the summit instead of the usual half-hour. Pre-booking, especially in summer, is advised at www.snowdonrailway.co.uk



"The plan is to maintain a service fleet of four steam locos – three running and one under overhaul..."

