

Waking a sleeping giant

Change is coming to a line that has previously generated little coverage in *NGW*. Andrew Charman previews a new era on the Brecon Mountain Railway.

This writer will admit, the Brecon Mountain Railway has never really floated my boat, and I know I'm not the only enthusiast who feels that way. It's different to the norm, its spectacular scenery traversed by American locomotives, but this 1ft 11¾in gauge line, built on a standard gauge trackbed as a pure commercial operation, with its engineering and operational headquarters contained within an impressively large but bland single building at Pant just outside Merthyr Tydfil, has always appeared rather soulless.

Now, just over 45 years after it first opened, the BMR is facing the

biggest change in its history, with a tortuous process underway to sell the line to the Vale of Rheidol Railway – reviving, rather than establishing, a link, as we will see shortly.

To learn how wide-ranging this change could be, on a damp but busy October half term weekday *NGW* paid a visit to the Brecon line for the first time in many years, for a chat with the man who as general manager will head up the new era.

Stuart Williams will be a name familiar to many *NGW* readers. Between 2017 and 2023 he served as GM at the Talyllyn Railway before heading north to Orkney to head a development trust. "I always told the Talyllyn I would only do

five years and the Orkney post was really interesting but only ever intended to be short-term,"

Stuart told *NGW*.



"We always planned to move back closer to Sarah's (Stuart's partner) family once the right post came up. For once I've followed her instead of her following me."

The Rheidol planning to buy the BMR appeared to be just such an opportunity. "When the news broke I texted Llyr (ap Iolo, VoR managing director) suggesting he would need someone to run the new line and he said let's have a chat."

The upshot is that Stuart is now employed by the VoR, seconded to the BMR as general manager but also spending time at Aberystwyth. He supports the commercial and marketing strategy and assists with HR and operational processes, allowing Llyr, now CEO, to focus on the broader direction of the railways and the charity.

The missing link

The VoR has changed beyond all recognition in recent times and it's reasonable to expect similar might happen on the BMR, but why would the Rheidol want to buy another railway? What many do not realise is that the VoR owes its transformation to the line further south.

The link is Peter Rampton, a name back in the spotlight in recent times with the publication of the biography *Narrow Gauge Enigma*. While travelling much of the world acquiring the locos that became the famed Collection X, Peter also dreamed of building his own line, and in 1975 was much taken with a proposal from Tony Hills, a fellow enthusiast who had his own small collection of locos at Gilfach Ddu, Llanberis in north Wales.

Tony proposed building a line on the trackbed of the former Brecon and Merthyr Railway. Peter provided both finance and rail for the new line which he enthusiastically got involved in, at one time planning to operate some of the Isle of Man carriages in

Heading: A typical busy day at Pant, crowds brave the weather to watch loco no 1 being oiled round.

Below far left: The BMR's current steam fleet, seen here on a photo charter in October. Photo: Andrew Simmonds

Below left: Stuart Williams will oversee the new era. Photo: BMR

Above: Loco no 1 'Santa Teresa' is a powerful example of American motive power.

Below: Loco no 2 rests in the BMR's impressive works at Pant.

All photos by Andrew Charman, 21st October 2025, unless credited

his collection on the Brecon line, and potentially even a Garratt locomotive.

Then in 1988 when British Railways put the Rheidol line up for sale, Tony Hills persuaded Peter that it would be a good investment, and the successful tender for the line was made by the Brecon Mountain Railway. Peter would spend the next 30 years pouring millions of pounds of investment into the Rheidol and for some years the two lines were effectively operated as one, VoR locos overhauled in the BMR's impressive workshops and Tony Hills managing both lines for a period.

"The VoR is a well-funded railway, Peter Rampton left it a good legacy and one of the ways in which that legacy can be honoured is to spend it on acquiring the BMR," Stuart said.

"It does tick a lot of boxes to run two railways under one umbrella. They are run in very similar ways, paid staff with no volunteers, very different catchment areas but very similar operating methods."

Sleeping giant

Stuart regards the BMR as a sleeping giant of untapped potential. Tony Hills, who died in 2015, was an

enthusiast first and staff had even described the BMR as an engineering workshop with a five-mile test track.

"They were happy with their business, no-one pushing for growth, benefitting from a large trade each year with Santa Specials at Christmas. I'd never been here, never been interested in coming here, narrow gauge in South Wales with American stock running alongside a lake didn't do it for me. So Sarah and I had a day here – I walked in the door, around the workshop, liked that it was neat and tidy with no scrap hanging around, but thought as a whole it was very drab, no excitement, no information, but nice friendly staff."

"I thought I could do something here – I could see I could make a difference which got me quite excited. If you can't make a difference there's no point – if I went to the Rheidol now I would think what more could I do? It's also excited Llyr because we can make something special, especially as unlike Aberystwyth, or Tywyn, here you are in a huge catchment area."

Once the legalities over the purchase are concluded the two lines »





will effectively be run as one; “It will be the VoR trading as the BMR, the bills paid by one entity, everyone employed by the VoR”.

How quickly this will happen, however, remains to be seen, the current main sticking point being land ownership. While the BMR owns all of its station sites, much of the trackbed is owned by Dŵr Cymru, Welsh Water, which granted Tony Hills a lease to run on it. He tried to renew the lease some years ago but this was never concluded.

Stuart admitted dealing with Dŵr Cymru has been challenging, adding delays; “The VoR has charitable objectives, and as such it cannot buy a company, only the assets of a company. If it bought the assets without a new lease it would not have the authority to run a railway so as a charity you would not take that risk.

“It could all change very quickly, if Dŵr Cymru puts a new lease in front of the VoR team. Until then we cannot proceed but when it happens,

we can turn on the taps – and those taps change every day...”

Stuart is chomping at the bit to make what he describes as quick wins, such as tarmacing the entire car park at Pant and putting solar panels on the roof of the building; “that would tick a lot of the right boxes and save a lot of money”.

Capacity challenge

More significant is addressing the line’s capacity issues, a problem many other railways would like to have. “In August we ran at 97 per cent capacity for the month and on most days we were at 100 per cent. A new carriage is being built for us at Aberystwyth, but our platform at Pant is not long enough for more than six-carriage trains because of the run-round.”

When the BMR was built the original station site at Pant was not available so the new terminus was sited slightly further west, over the tunnel of the former branch to Dowlais – the tunnel ventilator

Above: Loco no 1 pauses its train on the return trip at Pontsticill, with passengers decamping to the lakeside tearoom that was installed in a pair of former newspaper vans as a temporary measure – 40 years ago.

Below: Stuart regards improving the catering facilities at Pontsticill as an early priority.



remains in the BMR car park. Currently a sharp right curve takes the line out of the station and onto the original trackbed.

Recently the opportunity arose for the BMR to acquire the parcel of land that includes the old station site. The standard gauge platforms still exist but are sadly just a bit too far away from today’s station building, but new longer platforms could be built on the land, also allowing the building of further covered stock accommodation on the current site.

Further measures would include moving the café, currently at the car park level of the two-storey building, up to platform level. “The café should be at this level, you can’t see anything downstairs. We’d keep the downstairs for interpretation, toilets and the museum and have all the retail upstairs.”

Stuart did admit that the scheme is “pie in the sky” thinking, the idea initially broached just days before *NGW*’s visit! “But it kind of makes sense – there is loads of room.”

The next major development area is at Pontsticill, at the southern end of the reservoir of the same name and terminus of the line when it opened in 1980. Operations were extended to Dol-y-gaer in 1995 and to today’s terminus of Torpantau in 2014, and the line has since operated in a similar way that the Tallylyn Railway uses its Abergynolwyn station.

Torpantau, like Nant Gwernol on the Tallylyn, is a terminus with no facilities located in the middle of nowhere – it only gained a small shelter in the last year thanks to a grant from Visit Wales. So trains simply run round and head back to Pontsticill where they pause for 35 minutes allowing passengers to use the café facilities.

“The café is two standard gauge newspaper wagons that were turned into a café on a temporary basis 40 years ago. They’re not fit for purpose, queuing is a perennial issue, and replacing them with a better building, probably wider, with windows overlooking the lake, is a high priority. In the summer it can be a lovely place to spend time at.”

Also at Pontsticill is the house that was Tony Hills’ home, a signal box and a building formerly used as a museum, all of which could be turned into holiday lets.

Going further?

Finally there is Torpantau itself, which Stuart believes has great potential. First, however, the new BMR team needed to establish whether there was any prospect of further extending the line towards Talybont-on-Usk, through the

666-yard Torpantau tunnel. Famed as the highest standard gauge tunnel in Great Britain, its portal stands a few hundred yards beyond the station.

“We walked the seven miles from Torpantau to Talybont just to see what was still there. There are many culverts, little bridges and a Naval training centre for officers which is on the old trackbed and would make for an interesting access issue.”

Stuart believes the route would provide an interesting run at a steady 1 in 38 gradient, but it would have to justify itself commercially. “We would do it if it made money and the only way that would happen would be if the grant-giving authorities said we want an epic groundbreaking project, here’s several million. If it did happen it would likely be run not with heritage trains but Swiss-style using battery-electric traction and carriages with overhead windows for the views”.

So any extension idea has been parked though Stuart did add “never say never”. There is, however, a Plan B, moving the present station over the road to Talybont, onto the site of the original station, closer to the tunnel. “We own the trackbed right up to the tunnel. I’d like to resurrect two platforms, and build a nice visitor centre, toilets, café and such.

“We could open the tunnel up to walking and cycling, offer electric bike hire. The tunnel is great – it’s carved straight out of stone so it’s in brilliant condition and both portals are listed structures. It’s currently full of water, which is just a case of sorting the drainage.”

The road will present an issue. Originally it crossed under the standard gauge line via a bridge, but when the line closed Powys County Council simply rerouted it across the trackbed. While Stuart would like to install a level crossing, in today’s environment he expects that a new bridge would be necessary.

“Even if we can’t do that then plan C would be to put something more substantial at the existing station – it’s a more natural stopping point, halfway through the return journey”.

More trains

Such developments could even result in the line operating a two-train service at certain times of the year. Currently one engine in steam is the norm, but the BMR team are acutely aware that they currently turn away visitors in the summer.

“We have only previously opened five days a week, so I’m planning in 2026 to switch to a typical five-six-seven format – five days in April and May, six from the May bank holiday and then if I can get the staff seven



Above: End of the line at Torpantau – a lovely spot in the right weather but with very little in the way of facilities.

Below: Running round the train at Torpantau – the recently installed grant-funded shelter can be seen at right.

for the summer before ramping back down again. Such a schedule makes it easier to recruit staff because you can give them meaningful employment”.

The demand is certainly there, the BMR over its main season reporting a 15 per cent increase in passengers and 22% in revenue compared to 2024.

A two-train service would require more carriage stock. Two more chassis are available to be sent to the VoR to have bodies built on them in due course, likely to follow an idea expressed by Tony Hills of building American-style clerestory carriages.

Stuart also enviously eyes the replica of a parlour car that ran on the Sandy River & Rangeley Lakes Railroad in Maine, USA, built by the late Adrian Shooter for his Beeches Light Railway and today at Statfold; “I’ve sold £25,000 worth of afternoon and cream teas this year, but not on the train – they would be much more

attractive on the train and such a vehicle could be perfect for that.”

Stateside potential

The American theme, the BMR’s USP (unique selling point) grew from the line’s two service steam locos being US prototypes, and Stuart intends to more heavily market it. “We’ll do an event for Independence Day. We have a cupola with its raised viewing window and we now offer rides in it – it’s most uncomfortable but offers great views.

“We have box cars among our stock so why not make use of them? People would pay to ride in them. They are currently only used at Christmas and on photo charters”.

What about motive power, however? For many years services relied on Orenstein & Koppel 0-6-2T ‘Graf Schwerin-Löwitz’ (1261/1908) but the extensions with their stiffer »

