

New faces with new ideas...

Two Welsh narrow gauge railways have changed their managers. *Andrew Charman* talks to the new men.

Managers of Welsh heritage railways tend to be in post for the long haul, so the fact that two lines within 30 miles of each other have begun 2015 with a new man in the hot seat is somewhat unusual.

David Jones is now in charge at the Bala Lake Railway, taking over from Roger Hine who has retired after very many years with the line (though he can still be seen regularly on a quarry Hunslet footplate...). At the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway Charles Spencer has taken the helm following the retirement of Terry Turner, GM for 16 years. *NGW* sat down with both of the new men to learn more about them and their plans for the lines they now run.

Bala Lake: David Jones

To the uninitiated it may seem as if David Jones has moved from one quarry Hunslet-dominated rail environment to another, but a very different one in that the Llanberis Lake Railway, which he managed between 2005 and the end of 2014, was an all-paid staff no volunteer

operation whereas the Bala Lake line has just three permanent staff and relies on its volunteers.

David, however, knows very well how the volunteer scene works, having been one himself since childhood. Born in Porthmadog, he remembers watching Ffestiniog Railway trains from his pram. As soon as he was old enough he rode the trains whenever he could, and soon began volunteering firstly at the fledgling Welsh Highland Heritage Railway, which was at the end of the street where he lived, and then by the time he was 14 across town on the FR. He helped out at Harbour Station, progressed as his age allowed to the buffet cars and then trained as a fireman and a guard, even spending some time as one of the paid seasonal staff. And he still volunteers as a

guard on the Ffestiniog to this day.

David's professional career took him from a first class honours degree in mechanical engineering to British Railways, initially at Tyseley works in Birmingham – "It was great, I had to walk through the preservation society section each day to get to work". He progressed to the engineering headquarters of Regional Railways in Derby, where he planned overhauls for all the group's rolling stock.

Privatisation turned his section into The Engineering Link, a consultancy with David talking to depot staff about their problems and offering solutions. After a few years he and some colleagues decided it would be more productive reacting to a problem by designing and making the solutions needed then selling them, rather than selling just the info for others to make the components from.

Below: The new men in charge; David Jones (left) and Charles Spencer, photographed during the Winifred Returns event at the Bala Lake Railway on 13th April. All uncredited photos in feature by Andrew Charman



Within two years the business was producing an annual turnover of £3m for the Engineering Link and when David travels on a train today he can spot various items his team created. Just two examples are more robust track circuit indicators, once cited as one of the most unreliable elements of the railways, and redesigned sliding internal doors on High Speed Trains after it was found that in an accident the originals would jump off their hinges and jam, trapping passengers in the carriages.

In 2005, however, David made a major career change, becoming the manager of the Llanberis Lake Railway. "I desperately wanted to come back to Wales – Llanberis gave me an opportunity to do that and to take on new challenges".

The railway had just opened its extension into the town, opposite the Snowdon Mountain Railway which helped stem dwindling passenger numbers. However on his arrival the financial situation was less than rosy – the line typically had money at the end of the August high season, and the rest of the time ran in overdraft.

Addressing this became a major priority, firstly by improving the retail side. "We were able to significantly improve what the cafe did for example, increasing its turnover four-fold. And around half the passengers were getting on at Llanberis, not stopping at Gilfach Ddu and not seeing our shop, so a smaller one was added at Llanberis".

Extending the season and adding special events also helped boost finances. The line now runs at least two days a week from February half term onwards, while Santa trains, initiated during David's first year in charge, grew from one weekend to three plus four days for school parties. Other events were run too, at Easter, Halloween, and an enthusiasts' Gala.

Track renewals were also improved and when David left Llanberis last year the line was in a much better position than when he arrived.

Making more of a difference

Opportunities for major change remained limited, however. "I like to be able to achieve something, to make a difference – that sums me up. There was a much greater opportunity to do so here at Bala".

Claiming to have helped spark enthusiast Julian Birley's interest in narrow gauge with a footplate ride at Llanberis, David sees Julian's involvement in the Bala line, which has extended from buying and housing quarry Hunslet's 'Alice' and 'Winifred' on the line to joining the BLR board and masterminding the planned extension into Bala itself, as



hugely positive. "I'm fully into that, the chance to put Bala on the map."

There is much to do; "The extension is first and foremost in my mind, but likely five years away from coming to fruition. The carriages here are quirky but not that narrow gauge in style, so we need to add to them. We need a new workshop here at Llanuwchllyn, but there are also a lot of smaller things that we can achieve".

2015 has already brought special occasions, most notably the return to steam of Winifred for the first time since the loco left Penrhyn quarry for America in 1965, a restoration down mostly to Bala's 25-year-old engineer Rob Houghton. "What Rob has achieved with Winifred is brilliant," David says, also praising the efforts of his one other permanent staff member, Roger Hine's wife Bobbie, who acts as guard among her innumerable other roles. "It's a good team and a very friendly railway to work on and to come and visit".

Llanuwchllyn will be developed, aside from adding the new workshop, and before the extension is built, after which more traffic will come from Bala to Llanuwchllyn as a destination. Plans include a miniature railway, which is hoped to involve younger

potential volunteers before they are old enough to get on a loco footplate.

Interesting equipment is finding a home at Bala. A former Vale of Rheidol Wickham Trolley has just arrived, and later this year will be joined by Kerr Stuart 0-4-0T 'Diana', currently under restoration at the Rheidol. Items such as these will make the line more of a destination for *NGW* readers, though David is acutely aware that 90 per cent of his passengers are not enthusiasts and much has to be done to attract them, an example being the Easter Egg hunt run very successfully in April.

The biggest challenges remain money and volunteer resource. The former will come from more visitors, while David is keen to increase volunteer numbers, aiming to have the train service run as much as possible by volunteers so the paid staff can focus on other core duties.

So far, David believes, things are going to plan. Within days of arriving he had decided the line needed to open for the February half term, and this proved worthwhile. "There were fewer places open, the beaches less attractive and people who were here were looking for something to do".

Such changes all help to build the ➤

Above: Gala events, with demonstration slate trains such as here on 30th June 2012, were one of the innovations introduced to the Llanberis Lake Railway while David Jones was its manager.

Below: Soon after arriving at Bala David was able to enjoy the highly successful event marking the return to steam of quarry Hunslet 'Winifred', form which much positive publicity was gained.





business up. “We are making the railway more attractive for people to come to, and to work on. The message is getting round that things are happening here – this is a friendly railway and a good one to get involved with.”

Llanfair: Charles Spencer

When Charles Spencer told colleagues at the Welshpool & Llanfair Light Railway that he planned to apply for the general manager vacancy few likely took him that seriously. To his fellow volunteers, the writer included, Charles was our farthest-flung active member who flew in from his native Canada each year to spend a week on the railway. And on the face of it David Jones and Charles could not be more different – while David was an enthusiast from his earliest days with a career in railways, they played no role in the high-profile career Charles enjoyed in Canada, and he has come to preservation – and particularly narrow gauge – only recently.

However he reckons the interest was latent; “My great grandfather was general superintendent Eastern Lines of the Canadian Pacific Railway, a very big wheel, his father was a

conductor, and then there was a gap to me, but I guess it was genetic.”

Railways remained firmly in the background through an education focusing on history and foreign policy, and a 30-year career built in the Canadian banking industry. For the second half of this time Charles was a leading member of the Currency Department, overseeing Canadian bank notes from design to destruction. He was jointly responsible for a staff of 250 and gained a whole range of skills that while not railway focused, would prove very useful in his current role, from communicating with and educating the public to revitalising heritage and training staff.

Charles retired from banking in 2012, by which time the rail interest had re-emerged. Building a model railway for a godson led to the creation of his own in the loft of his home, and a growing interest in visiting railways. As a boy he had lived several years in Europe and had become used to travelling extensively by train in a way that simply isn't done in North America. So in 2007 while visiting his wife's family on the Isle of Man, he was given a week off

to tour north Wales and see several railways – an interest in industrial history helping to fuel this idea.

Arriving at the Welshpool line's Raven Square station, Charles was warmly greeted by the staff, when he arrived at Llanfair Caereinion further help was at hand to point him in the direction of The Goat public house where he'd booked a room, and over dinner that night he was given a membership form and the promise of a footplate ride the following morning. “I was hooked,” he says.

Charles admits that once he gets interested in something he wants to get involved in it – on that trip he was looking for a line to do things at. He soon became familiar to the regular Llanfair volunteers, initially his visits being once a year for several days at a time, during which he happily carried out general work around the line. The visits became more frequent, and he joined the footplate department, passing out as a fireman in 2014, while also in this period volunteering on the Groudle Glen Railway on the Isle of Man.

With Charles's wife being from the island there was a Spencer family desire to move back to this side of the Atlantic, and thus the retirement of Terry Turner from the manager's role on the W&LLR provided an opportunity, though Charles himself admits that he thought his lack of railway experience made his chances of getting the job a long shot. But when the railway's recruitment panel learnt not only of his strong business background but his leading involvement with a number of adult and youth volunteer projects, involving around 400 people at a time and budgets exceeding quarter of a million, and combined this with his familiarity with the railway, he was clearly a strong candidate. Easter 2015 found Charles settling into the office on Llanfair station platform.

Above: At the Bala Lake line Llanuwchllyn station will see significant changes before the extension into Bala comes into operation. Photo: Michael Chapman, 19th April 2015

Below: Both new managers are firmly focused on increasing their volunteer input, such as here with the Welshpool & Llanfair's very successful 'Hedgebash' gang. Photo: W&LLR



Using the skills available

One might think that his lack of professional railway experience provided the biggest challenge but that was not the case; “There are a number of railway people here, and I wanted to make sure I used them, benefited from their experience. The fact I don't know the technology as well as people here doesn't matter – I don't go into the workshop and tell the foreman how he should be restoring a 1944 steam locomotive. What I do is help him get the resources, the money, the volunteers, to keep the project going.”

An early lesson learned has been just how much goes on behind the scenes. The W&LLR has only four permanent paid staff, of which two

posts are currently vacant; "It's a tiny business in terms of those staff, who have to do a tremendous variety of things, a lot of which is quite hands-on. Kevin (*Kevin Heywood, Charles's deputy*) and I do at least 16 different things a day, a lot of which I'd never seen being done while I was volunteering. There's been a lot of learning what's involved – the volume and variety has been a surprise".

Charles believes he is now gaining an understanding of the many pieces that keep the W&LLR running; "It's too early just yet to see how they all fit together, but I'm getting there!"

Pleasing aspects he has learned include the general quality of much of the infrastructure, a tribute to the previous management; "I sense that we have one of the best eight miles of track in the narrow gauge business.

"We also have a really interesting collection of locomotives and carriages, British-built and repatriated and European. That's quite special, it appeals to me as a historian and is something to market."

Having been a man of finance, he's impressed with the line's solid financial footing; "It's very much solvent which says a lot these days.

"Also something I've always liked about this railway, is what it does – moving people up and down the valley, which it's done ever since it opened in 1903. The railway really feels as if it belongs in this valley."

No need to be an enthusiast

There are of course, challenges going forward, and top of the list is volunteers, recruiting them and retaining them; "There is so much to be done and while some volunteers need to be railway people, many don't. There's tons of stuff to do here that doesn't need railway enthusiasts. This is not just a railway, it is also a club, a social forum, a lovely place to visit, and if you are interested in such things the fact that a railway is involved is a bonus, whether you are working in the tearoom, painting, doing office work."

He's equally focused on building up the business, the traffic to keep the bills paid; "I think we can do more on the marketing front, telling people about us and getting them here to keep the railway prosperous.

"All the time, like all heritage railways, we also need to remain very vigilant concerning safety, for our own sake and of the visiting public".

So how is it going so far? While emphasising it's too early to have made a fundamental difference, he believes he has already made two significant contributions; "I've told the people that work on the railway that they can come and talk to me



and I want to hear from them – they know much more about the railway and the possibilities than I do, and the welcome I've had so far has been great, the ability to have those conversations really rewarding.

"Meanwhile, little things that have irritated me for the seven years I volunteered here I can now get fixed! For example the rather seedy-looking nameboard on Llanfair platform is being rebuilt. There were people available and willing to restore it.

"When people are enthusiastic about doing something, it gets done. While they are little things they make the railway look and feel better. It's important for both a tourist organisation and a volunteer one – people step back and say 'that didn't take very long to do and it made a real difference.'"

Going forward Charles has identified three core aims. "David has his Bala extension, so what's ours? We are not going to go back into the town. But I want to 'extend' the W&LLR experience – for volunteers and visitors. Particularly this will involve more history, the museum, more interpretation, more a sense of where we have been, what the railway's place has been locally."

He believes the railway can be

Above: Changes are afoot for the Llanfair line's annual Gala in September, and it will be the first of an expanded events calendar that Charles Spencer wants to see happen on the line.

Below: One major attraction of the Llanfair line in Charles Spencer's view is that it really looks as if it belongs in its mid-Wales valley.

marketed effectively to a wider audience than currently; "I look at other events, for example the Isle of Man TT, lots of German enthusiasts love the event and go to it each year. There are many narrow gauge enthusiasts in central and eastern Europe who we should be marketing to as a destination – not just us but several railways. We should be saying; 'Come to mid Wales for a week and visit all these railways...'"

Finally he expects the line to stage more events; "This will start this year with a more varied Gala, details of which we will be revealing soon, and there will certainly be more events in coming years".

These three aims he believes will not only keep the railway in the black but make it more interesting, not only for the visitors, but the volunteers working on it, who will keep coming back; "It is much more interesting to run a varied timetable than the same thing day in day out, and without our volunteers we are nothing..."

Summing up Charles says there will be differences, and they will become apparent especially from next year. "I arrived too late to do anything about this year's timetable, but I get to watch and learn for a year, and then to make changes..." **NGW**

