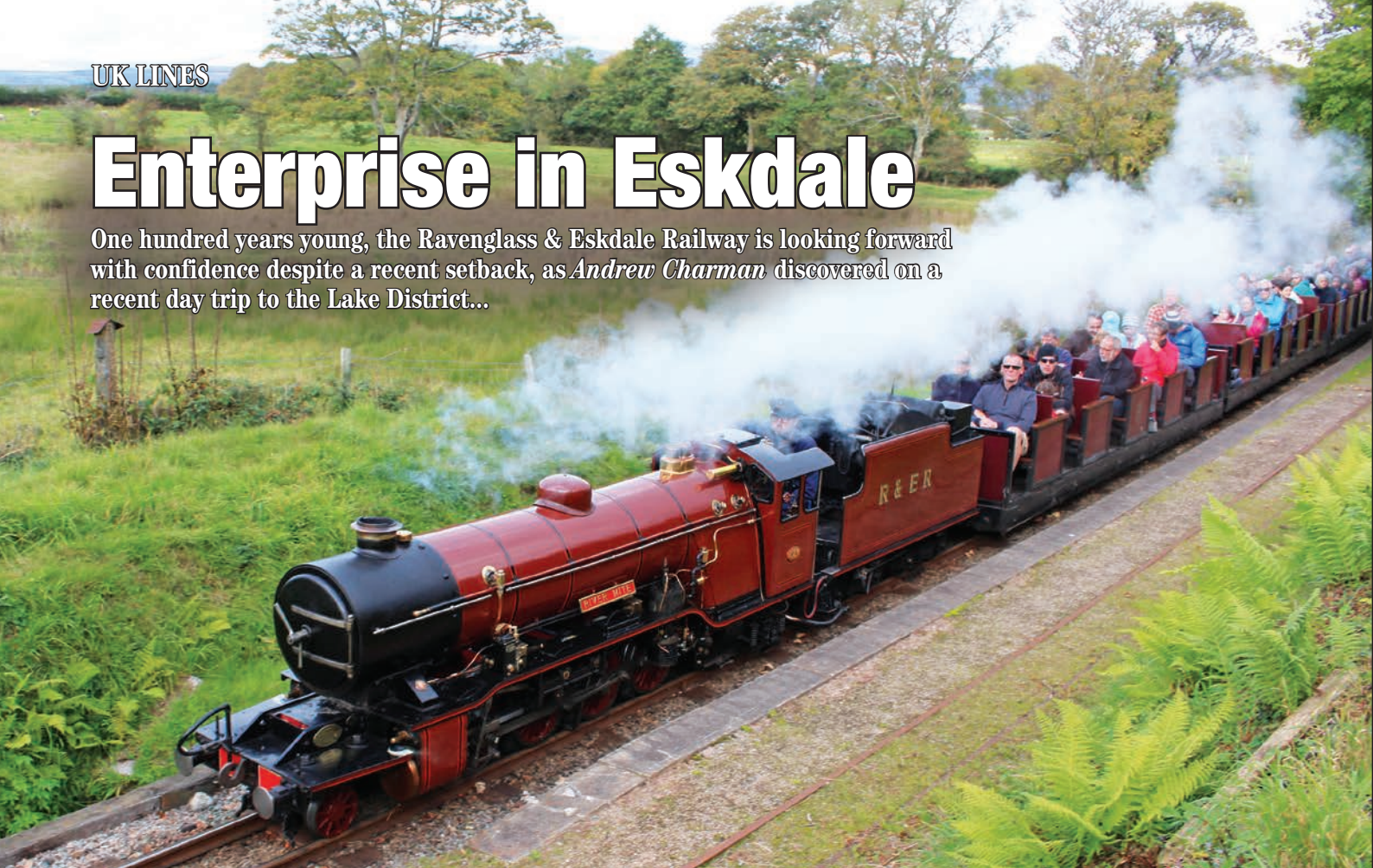


Enterprise in Eskdale

One hundred years young, the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway is looking forward with confidence despite a recent setback, as *Andrew Charman* discovered on a recent day trip to the Lake District...



'River Mite' is slipping... The combination of a bright but dewy early Autumn day in this part of the southern Lake district, what appears to this observer to be a long train for this time of the season, and the tree-lined section of Ravenglass & Eskdale route leading to Miteside loop sees driver Keith Herbert losing his battle with the rail head.

From the first fully open carriage, about halfway along the train, I watch the scene with interest, as does, sat just ahead of me, the guard. As our pace slows to a crawl he produces from his rucksack the solution – a plastic milk bottle filled with sand. He hops off, sprints along the train and dribbles the magic mineral on the rails ahead of the loco, and

Above: With another well-loaded train, 'River Mite' passes Muncaster Mill Halt on the way back to Ravenglass.

Below: Sprinkling sand rescues grip on the early morning journey to Dalegarth.

All photos in this feature taken by Andrew Charman, 13th October 2015.



progress is restored. "I try not to do that too soon," he tells me, retaking his seat. "I always worry that the driver won't see me get off, find some grip and leave me behind..."

It's perhaps not surprising that the early trains today include this extra entertainment – the trains appear busy, and as the day goes on they just get busier, fully justifying a timetable requiring the use of two train sets, two steam locos and a diesel.

As many *NGW* readers will know, particularly those who saw our Gala report in last month's issue, the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway, or the 'Ratty' as it is colloquially known, has now been attracting crowds of visitors to its little bit of the Lake District for 100 years. Its early history is well-known, the line coming into being in 1915 when miniature loco builders Wenman Bassett-Lowke and Robert Proctor-Mitchell, looking for a proper route on which to operate their 15-inch gauge creations, took over a moribund 3ft gauge line in Cumbria, opened in 1875 to carry iron ore and closed in 1913 when the mineral and passenger market dropped away.

Bassett-Lowke and Proctor-Mitchell converted the line to 15-inch gauge, in similar manner to what was happening on a beach in mid Wales with the Fairbourne Railway, and the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway began a new life as a minimum gauge line, an era that was to see lots of passengers and much innovation.

The story almost came to an end in 1960, when the quarries that still provided granite traffic closed and the line was put up for sale, the scrapman waiting in the wings. Enthusiasts banded together, the Ravenglass & Eskdale Railway Society was born, and joined forces with stockbroker Colin Gilbert and Sir Wavell Wakefield MP, owner of the steamship operator on Ullswater at the top end of the Lake District. The line was secured for £12,000 and passed into private ownership, Colin Gilbert becoming chairman of the new company and pointing it towards a secure and successful future, which it has enjoyed ever since.

Some of the reasons for that success are evident as I join Keith on the footplate of River Mite for the return to Ravenglass. He is typical of those running the line, attracted at an early age, taken on to the permanent staff and for many years the regular driver of the line's oldest service loco, Heywood 0-8-2 'River Irt', built in 1897. Some work required on the Irt sees Keith today crewing the much younger River Mite, built for the line in 1966 and paid for by the Preservation Society.

As we head back down the line, the sun is now shining and another major appeal of this railway highly evident – it is without doubt the most scenic of the small crop of 15-inch gauge routes in these isles, and with gradients of up to 1 in 40

boasts enough to both challenge the crews and entertain the travellers.

The R&ER is nothing if not innovative, either. At places on our trip I spot under the rails the 'Ecotrax' recycled sleepers that in places have replaced traditional hardwood versions. As we wait at Fisherground loop to cross the up train hauled by 'Northern Rock' – a 2-6-2 built by the railway in 1976 and followed by two more of the same design for a line in Japan – I am fascinated by the radio-based train control system. No staffs and tickets here – drivers obtain permission to enter each section by radio messages to the controller in Ravenglass, progress recorded on neat little notepad-sized charts on the footplate. It's a system that was being used by the Ratty long before something similar appeared across many parts of Network Rail.

I understand entirely how those such as Keith could be attracted to the Ratty – I've had a personal affinity with this particular line ever since being abandoned at Ravenglass for the day by my parents in the early 1970s while they went off to visit Muncaster Castle. I was 13 at the time and one couldn't imagine that happening today...

Quiet progress

While most people know this line, it seems in recent years to have charted its successful path without making too many headlines, so perhaps how it operates today is less known – so on my return a cuppa and a chat with general manager Trevor Stockton is certainly in order.

Innocently asking how long Trevor has been at the line produces laughter from his management team, one suggesting he was born at the regulator of an Eskdale loco. And it transpires he was another who started volunteering at a young age. He joined the permanent staff in 1973, passed out as a driver the following year and among other things spent a decade as permanent way supervisor before taking up the GM's post 15 years ago. And he is still very hands-on, one of his duties being to train future drivers.

As Trevor explains, the Ratty is very much a family business – on the death of Colin Gilbert in 1968 the now Lord Wakefield purchased his share of the business and became chairman. The line has remained, with its sister attraction the Ullswater Steamers, in the Wakefield family ever since.

Today the railway company and Preservation Society have what Trevor describes as an excellent working relationship. "We deal with all the concerns a business has, such as



"It is without doubt the most scenic of the small crop of 15-inch gauge lines in these isles..."

Above: Heading back to Ravenglass, a meeting with the line's youngest locomotive 'Northern Rock' at Fisherground loop in Eskdale.

Above right: Trevor Stockton has been the line's manager for 15 years and a driver for more than 40.

Right: Keith Herbert oils round River Mite at Dalegarth. In the cab can be seen the pad of the radio-based train reporting system.

health and safety for example, and that allows the preservation company volunteers to come along and join in and not have to worry about such matters," he says.

Volunteers can train initially as a guard, progressing to shunter, diesel driver and steam driver; "Mr, Mrs or Miss Fred Bloggs can walk in off the street and eventually become a steam driver on the line."

The Society has a nominated director on the railway board, and by invitation Trevor attends Society council meetings, held quarterly. The Preservation Society has around 1800 members of which around 70 are registered as active volunteers; "Predominantly they guard trains, but they have 12-14 registered diesel

drivers and four registered steam drivers. Some help in the workshop while, some just like to come and »





while away a few hours at intermediate stations.”

The railway’s salaried staff numbers around 20, along with another 25 waged employees who cover such seasonal duties as in the catering outlets, and Trevor says this staff level is essential to run what is a major tourist attraction in this part of Cumbria.

“It’s a unique tourist attraction that happens to be a steam railway,” he says. “We can’t compete with big lines such as the North York Moors, Severn Valley, we can’t get ‘Tornado’ in for the weekend and make an event out of it, so we have to major on our selling points of steam and scenery.

Perhaps unnoticed by the enthusiast market, the railway has invested heavily in recent years, putting it in a very healthy position going into its second centenary. The café at Dalegarth was completely rebuilt 10 years ago, as was that at Ravenglass five years ago. The first phase of the museum is open and appeals to both the casual visitor, with clever interactive attractions

making use of modern iPad technology, and the enthusiast, with artifacts and memorabilia stretching back to the earliest 3ft gauge days.

Enthusiasts will look forward to the second phase, dubbed ‘The Train Shed’ and designed to display historic working locos such as ‘Synolda’, a Bassett-Lowke 4-4-2 built in 1912 and sister to ‘Sans Pariel’ which was the first 15-inch gauge loco to run at Ravenglass, and ‘Katie’, effectively a new-build on the frames of the 1896 Heywood 0-4-0T that worked at Ravenglass between 1916 and 1919. Trevor hopes that the second phase will start very shortly.

Recent progress, however, has been greatly affected by a fire in 2013 that virtually destroyed the line’s workshops, housed in a former Furness Railway goods shed adjacent to the Cumbrian main line. “It was a massive setback, trying to run a business without a workshop was very difficult,” Trevor says. “We were lucky to secure rent of a workshop up in Workington and looking back it has given us an opportunity to



Above: River Mite is turned at the seemingly never-quiet Ravenglass station, the line’s headquarters.

Below: While devastating for the line at the time, the 2013 workshop fire has enabled the building of a much more impressive and useful facility. The extension to the building is clearly visible in the exterior picture.

Facing page: Two views of Northern Rock returning from Dalegarth, near Beckfoot and The Green stations, and showing why the Ratty is famed for its scenery.

expand, we’ve now got a bigger and much more modern workshop which will hopefully cater for what we need to do and bring in outside work in the future.”

The new workshop was effectively opened at the centenary gala and is certainly impressive – many a heritage railway engineering manager would appreciate the interior height and the travelling crane running the full internal length of the building, but Trevor adds that the railway will not be fully recovered from the fire until locomotive ‘River Esk’ returns to service, hopefully next summer. The Esk, a Greenly 2-8-2 dating from 1923, was stripped for overhaul in the workshop at the time of the fire and suffered serious damage. With just three other steam locos in the service fleet, it has been a challenge to keep the intensive timetable running. Locomotives hired in from such lines as the Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch helped initially, while the timetable has been cleverly tailored to ensure that except in high summer, it can be run with just two steam locos and a diesel, allowing the other loco to be out for maintenance or repair as needed.

Tabled for the traffic

The intensive timetable – on my October day there were seven return trips and these rise to 13 in high summer – is necessary, Trevor says firstly because the traffic is there, despite the area not being an obvious tourist hot spot. “We work hard on constant publicity, we have the benefit of our sister attraction and we push each other. We are in the unspoilt part of the Lake District, the only part where the National Park touches the sea.”

The railway also makes no bones about the fact that it is not exactly simple to get to, the last 20 miles to Ravenglass being along twisting single-carriageway A-road where it is easy to get stuck for a long time behind a slow-moving lorry; “That’s part of the reason we run an intensive service, to ensure people don’t miss out on a train ride if they are delayed getting here – we offer options.”

And as a glance at Ravenglass station platform on this October day confirms, the policy works. Not all



the trains, each carrying around 160-200 passengers, are full, but some are, and the rest very well patronised – so far, Trevor tells me, the Ratty has carried 108,000 passengers this year, and he hopes to get to 115,000 by season's end.

Meanwhile, the investment goes on, with the next likely area of focus being the rolling stock. "We'd



particularly like to improve our saloons – they need more space, more legroom. Kiddy buggies are getting bigger as are wheelchairs."

Initial ideas for a new-build are now being drawn up, and Trevor believes that this is a project that could involve the workshop, putting together a prototype. "We'll never lose our heritage though, the semi-open and open stock. People always like to sit in the open carriages first, they don't actually fight over them but it is a bit like putting towels on beaches..."

It is no secret, either, that the Preservation Society is proposing the building of a new locomotive. Consultation has taken place, particularly with the drivers, and drawings have been created for what would likely be a modern evolution of the Northern Rock 2-6-2 design.

Once any build is approved, the project would be funded by the Preservation Society, as was the build of River Mite in 1966. The company would then hire the loco, as it does with Mite and bo-bo diesel 'Douglas Ferreira', built in 1994 by TMA Engineering and named after the general manager who served the line

for 34 years. Trevor thinks a new loco could be running on the Ratty in around five years, though it would not necessarily be built at the line. "I assume the Society would go to tender for the work."

Trevor is firm in his belief that the Ratty is going into its next century in rude health; "Key to businesses such as ours is sustainability. We are always working hard to maintain that – we have good cafés, clean toilets, a good train service, the extra free attraction of the museum, we are continuing to promote such areas as walks around the line, so with all that going on, we should be fine."

It's hard to argue against such views and as another pleasantly-full train departs Ravenglass, this enthusiast at least is glad to see that the Ratty certainly does appear to be in rude health, having overcome the setback of the fire and invested wisely for its future, while still maintaining the unique appeal that first attracted me to the line four decades ago. **NGW**

More Information

For more on the railway go to <http://ravenglass-railway.co.uk/>
The Preservation Society is at <http://rerps.co.uk/>

