

Heritage railways receive Government grants to help with recoveries

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The [South Devon Railway](#) (SDR) and [Bluebell Railway](#) have been given Government grants to help them move towards reopening.

Nearly £400 million has been awarded to thousands of cultural organisations across the country in the latest round of support from the Culture Recovery Fund, the Culture Secretary announced today.

The total sum awarded to the Bluebell Railway not-for-profit heritage line in the second round of grants from the Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage (CRFH) is £272,400.

The SDR will now receive a CRFH Round 2 grant of £165,900, all of which will help the seven-mile former GWR branch line recover from the enforced closure of the railway since March 2020 during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the SDR has also been informed today that it has been offered an additional award up to a maximum of £257,800 award to re-inflate its cash reserves to a value of eight weeks, based on average annual turnover and projected unrestricted reserves at July 2021, which is a further significant boost to the

SDR.

Over £800 million in grants and loans has already been awarded to support almost 3,800 cinemas, performance venues, museums, heritage sites and other cultural organisations dealing with the immediate challenges of the coronavirus pandemic.

This brings the Government's total investment across grants, capital and repayable finance from the Culture Recovery Fund so far to more than £1.2 billion across over 5,000 individual cultural and heritage organisations and sites.

The second round of awards made today will help organisations to look ahead to the spring and summer and plan for reopening and recovery. After months of closures and cancellations to contain the virus and save lives, this funding will be a much-needed helping hand for organisations transitioning back to normal in the months ahead.

Culture Secretary, Oliver Dowden, said: "Our record breaking Culture Recovery Fund has already helped thousands of culture and heritage organisations across the country survive the biggest crisis they've ever faced.

"Now we're staying by their side as they prepare to welcome the public back through their doors – helping our cultural gems plan for reopening and thrive in the better times ahead."

Ros Kerslake, CEO of The National Lottery Heritage Fund, said: "Spring is definitely here, bringing not only sunshine but that sense of optimism and hope for the future. We are all looking forward to heritage places and other visitor attractions reopening and I am very pleased that we have been able to support DCMS in delivering this vital funding to ensure the UK's heritage sector can rebuild and thrive, boosting local economies, creating jobs and supporting personal wellbeing."

South Devon Railway

The 'Culture Recovery For Heritage' grant will fund staff costs and essential overheads through to June 30 2021. Importantly, the grants are being distributed by the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) in partnership with Historic England, based on criteria set by DCMS.

The funds have to be spent by this date and the SDR has put together an action plan to make sure that the organisation is viable in the future.

This includes a review of long-term objectives and strategy following the SDR's huge £2 million loss of revenue last year, and the changed operating environment due to the pandemic as well as staff re-training, volunteer recruitment and boosting longer-term fund-raising for capital projects.

Commenting on the grant award, SDR Chairman Jon Morton said: "We are all bowled over to have received this second round of grant support and offer towards our reserves thanks to the Department of Culture Media and Sport, the National Heritage Memorial Fund and Historic England. It's really fantastic news for us and so greatly appreciated!

“It will certainly provide us with the additional vital financial lifeline needed for the railway’s continued survival, and we are confident that all of the projects to gain support will help get the much-loved steam trains of the South Devon Railway running normally again very soon, hopefully in May.

“From all sources, including these latest grants, we have now raised or received a wonderful total of financial help all told of £1,325,194.03 and we are still raising money to try and get to our next fund raising target of £2.0 million!

“Also, we sold a valuable steam engine asset recently in ‘Dumbleton Hall’ which has added another useful six-figure sum to our war-chest for capital investment in the railway, so we’re well on the way now to hitting that target.

“This impressive total has been achieved via our own ‘SOS Appeal’ through donations, other grants and site income of £445,104.03; a smaller earlier Heritage Emergency Fund grant of £124,800; a larger initial CRFH grant of £332,300, and now this latest DCMS Culture Recovery Fund grant of £165,900, plus the DCMS Reserves grant of £257,800.

“All of this vitally needed money will be applied to safeguard the railway for the future and hopefully put us back on track for running steam trains in the future in 2021 and beyond, but we are not flush with money as some might now think – far from it!

“So, the really hard work for us starts soon, and we must carry on fund-raising for the future too, and like never before, in order to catch up with raising more cash for vital infrastructure investment which simply cannot be covered by our limited annual operating income alone.

“We plan to do this in 2021 with the launch of our new share appeal and changed status as a Charitable Community Benefit Society (CCBS).

“Raising funds never ends for us because heritage steam railways are increasingly expensive to run, and our new CCBS status will help us to achieve keeping bold ambition of running GWR era steam trains well into the future.”

[Click here for more details.](#)

Bluebell Railway

Vernon Blackburn, chairman of the Bluebell Railway Trust which is its charitable arm, said: “We are grateful to the Culture Recovery Fund for approving our Round 2 application in full. The money will help us ensure we have the people and resources to reopen in line with Government guidelines next month.”

The money will pay for some of the railway’s costs between April and June. It includes the salaries of skilled heritage staff including those working in the locomotive and carriage & wagon workshops who repair, maintain and overhaul the line’s fleet of historic steam engines and carriages.

Bluebell Railway Plc interim chairman Graham Flight said: “It is fantastic news that we have received this

money from the Culture Recovery Fund which will mean we can continue to provide our customers with the high level of service for which the Bluebell is renowned. We can't wait to welcome passengers back to the line."

The line, which runs on 11 miles of track from Sheffield Park in East Sussex to East Grinstead in West Sussex, was given £727,200 by the Culture Recovery Fund for Heritage last autumn to help it survive over the winter. Some of that money has been used on virtual tours which have helped the Railway to maintain its online presence while it has been closed.

The Bluebell Railway has set a provisional reopening date of Thursday 20 May in line with the Government's roadmap for easing out of lockdown. The railway last ran public train services on 24 December 2020 ahead of the whole of Sussex moving into Tier 4 on 26 December and then the national lockdown from January.

Details of the Bluebell Railway's services are at www.bluebell-railway.com

Photo credit: Andrew Strongitharm