

Heritage Railway Association members get hot weather advice from Australian steam line

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Expertise from the other side of the world is helping British heritage railways to revise their hot weather plans following a long, hot summer.

The famous Puffing Billy Railway, based near Melbourne in Australia, has shared some of its extensive fire risk management documents with Heritage Railway Association members.

After several weeks of dry and hot weather, heritage railways across the UK are looking again at how they operate during such extreme weather conditions. The Puffing Billy Railway has extensive experience of operations during extremes of weather that are still rare in the UK.

Thanks to strong relationships with UK-based Heritage Railway Association members, the Puffing Billy team have agreed to share some of the documents used to inform how they run trains during hot and dry weather. The documents include the PBR's 'Bushfire Management Plan', their 'Fire Patrollers Guide' and the 'Role Description' for their volunteer fire patrollers, alongside relevant inspection paperwork for locomotives.

The documents are full of practical solutions that the PBR have devised to ensure that they can run trains safely in periods of hot and dry weather during Australian summers.

The PBR runs for some 15 miles, with heavy gradients, through the Dandenong Ranges from Belgrave to Gembrook. The 2ft 6in gauge railway depends almost entirely upon steam traction, with most trains in the hands of the iconic 'NA' Class 2-6-2T's, originally designed by Baldwin. The line was welcoming up to 500,000 passengers pre-covid annually and is widely regarded as the leading preserved railway in Australia.

Peter Abbott – Chief Executive Officer from Puffing Billy Railway, said: “Certainly operating a heritage railway in a high fire risk zones has challenges – but ones that Puffing Billy Railway has long history in managing. We have offered any expertise and documented knowledge we have on hand to our colleagues in the UK heritage rail sector. Puffing Billy Railway learns a great deal from the UK heritage rail sector and so we felt offering our expertise in this way could be of assistance.”

Policy and Communications Manager at the Heritage Railway Association, Mark Pearce, said: “We’re really grateful that our colleagues on the other side of the world at Puffing Billy have been so generous in sharing their knowledge and experience. Thankfully, such extreme weather is still relatively rare in the UK, but if such high temperatures do become more common in the years ahead, our members will need to find new ways to ensure that they can continue to operate safely.

“I hope these documents from Puffing Billy will be really useful for HRA members and perhaps give a different perspective to the challenges being faced – and some of the potential solutions.”

The Puffing Billy documents have been made available to all Heritage Railway Association members on the new members section of the new HRA website.