

Kent & East Sussex Railway appoints Robin Coombes as General Manager

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The Kent & East Sussex Railway (K&ESR) has appointed one of the heritage industry's most respected and experienced professionals as its new full time General Manager, taking over from Shaun Dewey who retired in July.

Robin Coombes has over 30 years' experience working with both the railways and in heritage tourism, latterly as the Company Secretary for the Vintage Trains Group. He has also worked in construction, in marketing and advised successive Governments on regional development.

Pledging to channel the spirit of the railway's founder, Colonel Stephens, Robin says: "In joining K&ESR, I'm fulfilling a true childhood ambition to one day become a railway General Manager, having first found a passion for trains watching tank engines from the platform of Cardiff General station.

"I've worked in many different fields and tackled many challenges in my career, but nothing has given me as much pleasure as being handed the opportunity to walk in the footsteps of one of the railway giants - Colonel Stephens. This is both a privilege and a responsibility which I am taking very seriously. As the original Light Railway, K&ESR holds a very special place in both railway and preservation history, and its

contribution to tourism, education and community cohesion should not be underestimated.”

Robin started his career at British Rail as an architect and project manager in the 1980s, moving into marketing for several BR networks and then transferring his skills to the National Welsh Omnibus Company. His next move took him to renowned international heritage tourism and sustainability consultancy Eres where he led landmark transformational projects both in the UK and abroad, including the 50-year masterplan for the Welsh History Museum.

However, a role as the Independent Review Chairman of the West Somerset Railway Association in 2014-15 reconnected him with his passion for rail. A full time PhD into governance and sustainability from 2016-2021 saw him assisting the Rail Regulator (ORR) to develop the heritage section of new industry standards. ORR subsequently adopted his ‘12 Tablets for Good Governance’ and the Rail Safety and Standards Board (RSSB) are set to roll this out to the wider rail industry.

Robin’s most recent role has been as a research fellow working on two heritage rail projects: the first at Birmingham University, for the reopening of the Jamaica State Railway, and the second at Northumbria University to establish the Heritage Rail Knowledge Network, funded by a grant from the National Environment Research Council.

Announcing the appointment K&ESR Chair Simon Marsh said: “We are delighted that Robin has agreed to join us and are excited for what this means for the future of the railway. He comes with a wealth of experience in the heritage railway sector and more widely. I am confident that he will successfully lead the K&ESR through all the challenges that we face as a heritage operator and take us to the next level in our development.”

Robin will take up his post as K&ESR General Manager on Monday 15th August 2022.

Photo credit: Taliesin Coombes