

Severn Valley Railway: Spring Steam Gala is a 'triumph'

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Severn Valley Railway (SVR) says last weekend's Spring Steam Gala surpassed expectations and highlighted the line as a major attraction for heritage railway enthusiasts from across the country.

"The SVR is famous for the quality of its enthusiast events and our first Gala this year showed exactly why," said managing director Jonathan 'Gus' Dunster. "It has been a triumph of planning, passion and sheer hard work. The intensive timetable ran late into the evenings on both the Friday and Saturday, and we had a truly enviable selection of operational locomotives, both as special guests and from our home fleet.

"Our volunteers and paid staff can be extremely proud of what we've achieved with this event. They've pulled out all the stops, in true SVR style, and quite honestly it's a great privilege to be involved with the Railway right now."

Diane Malyon is the chair of the SVR Company Limited, which recruits and provides volunteers to operate the railway. She echoed the managing director's comments:

"It has been absolutely fantastic to see the railway come alive once more, showcasing exactly what we do best. It was particularly pleasing to see so many people stepping in to help in areas they'd not previously volunteered in. The end result was a credit to everyone and certainly led to plenty of positive comments, both in person and online. Congratulations all round!"

Although the weather was mixed across the three days, people came in their thousands. The visiting guest roster proved very popular, with 4079 'Pendennis Castle' appearing alongside GWR Small Prairie 4555 and British Railways Standard Class 2 78018. The event had a GW theme, and home-based locomotives 4930 'Hagley Hall' and 7812 'Erlestoke Manor' also proved strong crowd-pullers.

The railway has confirmed it exceeded its budget for paying passengers by almost 18 per cent, with 5,002 people buying tickets across the three days, along with hundreds of shareholders and members who also attended. Secondary spend was also very impressive across the railway's commercial outlets.

On the final afternoon of the Gala, a decision was made by the representative of owners the Doon Valley Railway to withdraw 4555 because of a defective piston gland and warm little end. The impact of this was minimal, leading only to the cancellation of one local service.

SVR bosses acknowledged that the success of the Spring Steam Gala brought a much-needed boost to morale, as they anticipate their next enthusiast event, the Spring Diesel Festival. Running for four days between 18th and 21st May, this promises the biggest-ever line-up of heritage and modern traction at one event, brought together to celebrate 50 years of diesel preservation.

"Our good fortune has a very positive knock-on effect to the local economy," said the SVR's interim chair Chris Walton. "I know that overnight accommodation was fully booked for miles around and will be during our next event too. Plus there are massive benefits to food and beverage businesses adjacent to the SVR.

"However, as we celebrate the success of the Spring Steam Gala, it's important we continue to acknowledge the significant challenges that the railway faces in the coming year. We must remember that heritage rail enthusiasts make up just 10% of our total passenger numbers across the year. We need to see sustained success on both regular running days, and non-enthusiast special events such as this summer's Step Back to the 1940s weekends and our Christmas services.

"Last week, we launched a £1.5 million Survival Fund appeal. Donations are already flowing in, with £67,000 secured in the appeal's first few days. We are extremely grateful to everyone who has donated. It is absolutely necessary that we have gone out for financial support in this way, because, along with all the other cost-saving and revenue-attracting measures we're taking, the Survival Fund will make all the difference to the SVR's ongoing viability."

Donations to the SVR Survival Fund can be made at svr.co.uk.

Photo credit: Kevin Whitehurst