

Severn Valley Railway's Class 50 Alliance scoops HRA award

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Members of the Severn Valley Railway-based Class 50 Alliance are celebrating after winning the first-ever diesel preservation award in the Heritage Railway Association's 2021 scheme.

Over the last 30 years, the Class 50 Alliance has acquired five Class 50 diesel electric locos with a sixth on long-term loan. The overhaul, restoration, preservation and operational work of this volunteer-only group has enabled many memorable events, including more than 85 main line railtours and the famous SVR Class 50 Golden Jubilee Gala in 2015, attracting nearly 4,000 visitors.

Jonathan Dunster, chairman of the SVR diesels committee was delighted with the result: "It was a great privilege to have been nominated for this award, and I would like to thank the dedicated volunteers of the Class 50 Alliance and our many supporters over the years for helping us to achieve this wonderful fleet. I would also like to mention the Severn Valley Railway, without whose support and incredible diesel depot, we would not be able to continue doing what we love so much.

"The Class 50 Alliance are a remarkable team who have continued to achieve amazing things over the last three decades and uniquely for a group of volunteers have restored four locomotives to main line

condition. Something which is without equal in the UK heritage railway movement, either for steam or diesel.”

Presenting the award on behalf of the HRA, Paul Lewin, general manager of the Ffestiniog Railway, highlighted the key role that diesel plays in the heritage railway movement:

“For myself and many others, the preservation of diesels on our heritage railways is so very important. Many of us grew up seeing the very first diesels in action on the national network, and as a result they mean a lot to us. Like many others, I’m very grateful for the immense effort that’s put into looking after our heritage diesel fleet in the UK.”

Following purchase of the first preserved Class 50 locomotive, 50035 Ark Royal in April 1991, the next three decades saw many remarkable achievements by the Class 50 Alliance team.

Initially formed as the Fifty Fund after 50035 was secured, two other locomotives, 50044 and 50031, were added to the fleet by the end of 1991. The first task was to restore 50035 and 50044 from scrapyard condition to operational order, and this took six years for 035 and three years for 044.

50031 became the first preserved member of the class to operate a public passenger train when it appeared at the Severn Valley Railway Diesel Gala in May 1992. Thus began an association between the Class 50 Alliance and the SVR that became permanent in 1994, and which continues today.

50044 followed, making its inaugural passenger operation at the SVR in May 1994 and 50035 did similar in September 1996.

A year later saw a major achievement, as 50031 returned to the main line in November 1997, and became the first diesel locomotive to be restored to this condition solely by volunteers. 50044 followed 18 months later in 1999.

The same year saw 50049 joining the Kidderminster-based fleet, and the Class 50 Alliance structure was formed to enable the locomotives to operate commercially on the main line network. 50049 was also restored to main line condition in 2000.

Since 1995, the locomotives have operated at many of the country’s heritage railways as well as working scheduled passenger and charter trains on the main line network. Some 85 rail tours have seen the locomotives appear all over the UK, from Penzance to Thurso, Aberystwyth to Ipswich and many points in between.

Members of the Class 50 Alliance team were heavily involved in the design and project management of the SVR’s award-winning diesel depot which opened in 2016. Two years later, the highly-acclaimed Class 50 Golden Jubilee Gala took place on the SVR. This was organised by the Class 50 Alliance, and saw nearly 4000 visitors. It was widely recognised as the most ambitious and successful diesel event held on a heritage railway.

A further addition to the fleet came in 2017, when 50007 Hercules joined the fleet and was also restored to

main line condition. Not content with this, the team also took 50033 Glorious on loan from Tyseley Railway Museum in May 2018, and restored it to fully operational order in a record time of six months.

Photo credit: Paul Fisher