

South Devon Railway hopeful Thomas the Tank Engine™ character 'Oliver' may return to steam again for the line's 150th anniversary year in 2022

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Two weeks ago saw the 'Family' theme week in the fourth of the six-week long, nationwide 'Love Your Railway' campaign from July 26 to September 6, and in which the [South Devon Railway](#) (SDR) has been actively involved very successfully.

So, mention of the overhaul of one of the classic steam loco characters from the late Rev. Wilbert Awdry's now world-famous Thomas the Tank Engine™ series of children's books is fitting as the engine is hopefully getting closer to completion of a 15-year overhaul this year at the SDR.

The overhaul should now speed up thanks to a recent grant of £5,000 from the Veronica Awdry Charitable Trust towards new boiler stays for the final restoration of former GWR Collett designed auto-tank 0-4-2 No. 1420, AKA 'Oliver' in the Thomas the Tank Engine™ children's books.

Veronica Awdry is the daughter of the late Rev.W Awdry and her charitable trust helpfully distributes some royalty funds regularly for appropriate heritage railway projects, and which has been vital in the Covid 19 period with limited income and big losses suffered on all heritage railways.

Veronica Awdry comments: "Steam loco No. 1420 is a truly iconic engine for the South Devon Railway because members of the class were seen in use on the quintessential GWR branch line from the 1930's right up until its closure as a freight railway in 1962, and then under the Dart Valley and South Devon Railway's 52-year operation of the scenic seven-mile line from 1969 to date. Featuring as 'Oliver' in the Thomas series of books, I know he was one of my late father's favourite characters.

"And, with the SDR celebrating its 150th anniversary year in 2022 having first opened in 1872, there is a concerted effort underway to complete the overhaul. SDR supporters are hoping to see 'Oliver' finished in time for service next year, although quite a lot of work is still needed. The popular engine is owned by the SDR Association and it last ran on the SDR in 2006 when it was stopped for a protracted overhaul mainly due to a leaking boiler foundation ring and other faults."

Last year, a further £22,180 grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) was made towards moving the overhaul of No.1420 forward to cover the manufacture of the remaining, vital firebox boiler plates and a new foundation ring, which was critical to enable the SDR to re-build the new boiler using its own skilled staff and to keep the loco restoration timeline on track to maintain future operations.

The earlier NLHF grant was made possible by money raised by National Lottery players, and was a considerable boost to the SDR which sadly was simply unable to run any trains last year.

Although steam loco No. 1420, AKA 'Oliver' is nearing completion in the SDR's Buckfastleigh workshops with the wheels and frames having already been restored, plus considerable boiler work, there is still a long list of work to be completed and funds raised to pay for it so further specific donations towards finishing the tasks would be warmly welcomed by the SDR.

The outstanding works include fitting a new boiler barrel, foundation ring, tube plate and completion of a roughly assembled firebox which is being drilled for assembly with new stays. And, although the chassis is now back on its wheels, none of the valves, pistons and motion are fitted and nothing has been done yet to overhaul these parts. Boiler fittings now in use on other SDR locos will need to be found, and there is the small issue of the loco requiring new side tanks which will take some making as they are riveted, but completely different designs left and right due to the reverser.

The South Devon Railway is the oldest heritage railway in the West Country having re-opened in 1969, and usually welcomes up to 100,000 visitors every year. Last year, it carried only 1,750 passengers to March and incurred losses of some £2 million, offset by Government and Council grants and an 'SOS' fund-raising campaign which raised almost £1.4 million.

It is a registered charity and has a small number of some 26 paid staff and over 600 volunteers who usually run the railway every day from March to October, plus at Christmas and New Year too.

The SDR has an extensive, well-equipped workshop which repairs the line's own locomotives as well as

undertaking complex, contract engineering jobs for other heritage railways and owners, plus main-line Train Operating Companies too.

As a result, it is well placed to complete the largely new boiler for GWR loco No.1420 and help bring the popular steam engine back to life again soon, hopefully in 2022.

The SDR has a number of other 'Family' related elements around the railway's footprint, including a large play area, miniature railway around the 12-acre site and a Riverside walk at Buckfastleigh, along with the Dartmoor Otters and Buckfast Butterfly centre, plus the Totnes Rare Breeds Farm, and Pixie Falls en-route near Totnes. It's a family friendly attraction wherever you look.

Visit <https://www.southdevonrailway.co.uk/> for more details.

Photo credit: South Devon Railway