

# The Bluebell Railway passes out youngest ever steam locomotive driver

January 5, 2024



The **Bluebell Railway** has played host to an extra special occasion with Ben Gray, aged 21, becoming the youngest driver to be passed out to drive steam locomotives in the heritage railway's 64-year history.

Ben, son of the Bluebell Railway's Locomotive Engineering Director, Tim Gray, began his career at the railway at the age of nine, although railways were firmly in his blood from an even younger age. His first ever drive of a steam locomotive was at the Evesham Vale Light Railway (at the end of a day and when the railway was closed) at the ripe old age of five.

His progression at The Bluebell Railway was rapid. Having excelled and obtained his necessary badges being part of 'The 9F Club', Ben joined the locomotive department as a cleaner at sixteen. From there, he continued his journey, becoming a passed fireman in late 2020 a year later.

During this time, Ben worked on various turns on different locomotive types at the railway, as well as visiting gala engines such as Cheltenham, Clan Line & Flying Scotsman for example.

After several years honing his skills as a fireman, Ben was then recommended to be added to the Bluebell

Railway's driver training programme in early 2023, with a view to an assessment later in the year.

The assessment is spread out over several days, giving those assessing to look at various aspects of locomotive working, practical handling, and footplate knowledge of those who wish to progress and pass for driving.

Being broken down into different steps, Ben first took an exam on shunting duties and smaller locomotives handling in October, this being carried out on SECR No. 65 (O1). The latter exam was undertaken on December 30th, on his twenty-first birthday, working on a larger locomotive- 6989 'Wightwick Hall' - on a regular Bluebell Railway passenger working along the full length of the line, which Ben successfully completed.

At the end of the exam, he was officially passed out by Bluebell Railway Inspector Chris Suitters at Sheffield Park.

This shows The Bluebell Railway's vision and drive to encourage more younger volunteers to follow in his footsteps so that they too can reach their full potential like Ben has in becoming the railway's youngest ever passed driver. The railway is extremely lucky to have a range of younger volunteers who like Ben, wish to keep steam alive. To ensure that The Bluebell Railway continues to bring enjoyment for future generations to pass on.



*Start them young! A five-year-old Ben at the controls of a locomotive at the Evesham Vale Light Railway . Photo credit: Tim Gray*