

# Wight celebrations, slate jubilations and Premier triumphant at HRA Awards

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The Isle of Wight Steam Railway, Ffestiniog Railway, and Sittingbourne and Kemsley Light Railway were among the big winners at the heritage rail sectors 'Oscars'.

Heritage railways and tramways across the UK celebrated their successes at the HRA Annual Dinner and Awards in Birmingham on March 11. Nearly 200 of Britain's leading preservationists came together to highlight best practice in everything from income generation to waggon restoration over 12 award categories.

The top Railway of the Year award accolade is heading to Havenstreet on the Isle of Wight. Authentic locomotive restorations, iconic wooden carriages and exceptional visitor experience saw judges hand the prestigious honour to the Isle of Wight Steam Railway. Returning after a long-absence, the Railway of the Year award, sponsored by Hallett Steam Oils, was contested by a string of leading heritage railways and tramways, but the friendly welcome and booming visitor numbers at the IoWSR saw them edge into first place.

In Kent, the 2ft 6in gauge Sittingbourne and Kemsley Light Railway were the surprise winners of

the Coiley Award for Steam Locomotive Engineering for their restoration of 0-4-2ST *Premier*. The 1905-built Kerr Stuart was painstakingly returned to as-built condition from photographic evidence and returned to steam on the former papermill line. The level of detail shown and the commitment from a small team at the SKLR saw the little 'Brazil' class machine triumph over a string of more famous competitors.

Another project restoring and recreating a less glamorous aspect of Britain's railway heritage also came away with a top award. The gravity slate train project at the Ffestiniog Railway was awarded the prestigious Manisty Award on the night. The Welsh narrow gauge line picked up the trophy after showing excellence in restoration, developing and maintaining heritage skills, and operation. The project, which encompasses 200 waggons, has even seen the construction of a purpose-built storage shed and has done a great deal to advance thinking about waggon preservation in the sector as a whole.

Heritage Railway Association Chief Executive, Steve Oates, said: "We hear so much about how challenging times are in the heritage rail sector. But this awards event sends out a strong signal that it is still possible to get it right, to achieve great things and to really succeed as a heritage railway or tramway.

"The sheer variety of projects this year showed the strengths that the sector has; a real grasp of our history, huge volunteer commitment, and a level of dedication to the cause that so many will be envious of.

"I need to congratulate, not just the winners, but everyone who made it to the finals for showing that the future can be bright for railways, locomotives, carriages, viaducts and so many other aspects of our amazing heritage rail sector.

A new award for 2023 led to Peak Rail's volunteers picking up the Team of the Year trophy. In just under a year the volunteers have taken on the day-to-day running of the Derbyshire-based line and have seen a string of successes, while morale has reached an all-time high.

The Bodmin and Wenford Railway took the gong home in another new category, the HRA Award for Business Innovation. The line has created the Cornish Rail Coffee Co. brand and trading company to take their expertise well beyond the traditional boundaries of a heritage railway. The venture now encompasses coffee shops on the national rail network too and is rapidly expanding with its sights set on Devon too. The award was sponsored jointly by PNP Events and Trackside Magazine.

West Somerset Railway General Manager Kerry Noble left Birmingham with the HRA Award for Rising Stars, another new title, sponsored by Rail Signalling and Power. Judges were impressed by the way Kerry has taken on a string of initiatives to boost the financial performance of the WSR and her collaborative approach to working with a huge variety of stakeholders.

The HRA Award for Diesel and Electric Locomotion went to the Georail Heritage Volunteer Group for their restoration of Andrew Barclay 0-6-0DM *Duke of Edinburgh*. The group's submission shone through for the efforts they went to in reconstructing the badly damaged and complicated gearbox of the 1956-built locomotive, when so many others would have left the machine in a siding – or worse.

The Talylllyn Railway and its approach to building digital audiences means the HRA Award for Marketing

and Communications will be in the trophy cabinet at Tywyn this year. Initially spurred on by the coronavirus pandemic, the TR has gone on to make video production a huge part of its overall marketing activity – producing great results.

Another new award for 2023, the HRA Award for Infrastructure, sponsored by Volker Laser, was presented to the Hampton and Kempton Waterworks Railway. The London line has transformed its operations with a new coach shed and maintenance facility. The new building means the 2ft gauge railway has gone from looking after its fleet in converted shipping containers to having a purpose built facility, in a very short space of time.

The long-standing Morgan Award for Rolling Stock Preservation was presented to the Lincolnshire Coast Light Railway for their restoration of the Nocton Estates Railway 'Queen Mary' carriage. The 1927-built carriage, constructed using surplus War Department materials ended up as a scrap merchants office, before being rescued and restored.

The North Yorkshire Moors Railway won the HRA Award for Environmental Innovation for their Primrose Path project. The initiative has focused on the restoration, conservation and connection of two-miles of lineside. It has restored lost habitats and worked to protect species like the Duke of Burgundy butterfly and declining adder populations.

Always the most fiercely contested category at the event, the Lord Faulkner Award for Young Volunteers had no fewer than five finalists this year. The Keighley and Worth Valley Railway 19-year-old trustee and guard Oliver Harrison took the top honour this year for his excellent abilities as a role model for other young people joining the railway.

However, Ben Field from the Ecclesbourne Valley Railway, Alex Caulfield from the Gloucestershire Warwickshire Steam Railway, Liam Barnes from the East Lancashire Railway Preservation Society and Isaac Farnbank from the Isle of Wight Steam Railway all received special commendations in the category this year.

*Photo credit: Heritage Railway Association*