

## **Trustees Report AGM 8 February 2025**

This year has brought a number of changes and challenges to the Trust, as we begin the move from our first premises at the old diesel shed at Sharpness to our site at Oldminster Sidings. We have to complete this by August 2025 when the 10 year lease expires. The lease has been an expensive item for us and the shed building is now in a very poor state, but on the positive side we are right on the cusp of an exciting new chapter in our development.

We have been working hard to ensure the ground at the sidings can cope with heavy vehicles delivering and moving around the site. The 'haul road' down the west side of the site is essential to achieving this. It's proved more expensive than expected but it should be finished this winter. A lot of credit for the design of the site must go to members of the Oldminster Sidings Steering Group (OSG) for their expertise and knowledge regarding the best way to take this forward.

Our 'container city', made up of 10 (or maybe more) 20' containers, is now taking shape quite quickly, with most already on site. It has been designed to provide storage and work facilities to replace what we were previously doing at the shed. We should have enough space in these containers to continue working until we have the funds to build our permanent shed and workshops. We expect this part of the development to be completed in the next few months, despite the winter conditions!

The Portakabin has been renovated at speed for staff accommodation by the woodworking team, who are making a superb job of it. It is almost ready for habitation now although heating, lighting and water is still an issue. Since we are still 'off-grid', this requires some imaginative thinking, probably involving generators and solar energy.

The first items of rolling stock have now been delivered and we expect the remaining ones to arrive as soon in the new year as possible. One of our Pacer units is now at Oldminster. It starts but requires a lot attention after its 18 months in storage at Wishaw, to make it fully operational like its sister unit over at Llanelli.

The Planet and Ruston diesels arrived at the sidings after starring at the South Cerney show and there is an urgent need for them to be protected from the elements. To this end a temporary shed structure has been provided, generously sponsored by one of our members for this purpose.

This shed will also house the Andrew Barclay 0-4-0ST steam loco that arrived from the Swindon and Cricklade Railway earlier in the year. We are particularly pleased to welcome the small team of younger volunteers that accompany this loco, because they bring a variety of skills that we will need as we seek to develop our capacity to overhaul steam locomotives on site.

We have been compiling a planning application to Stroud Council for our all-important storage and maintenance shed. This has become very complicated, particularly when it has involved dealing with the very detailed environmental protections that all building projects must now adhere to. This was beyond our collective skill set and we made the decision to hire a planning consultant (Urban Vista Ltd) who understood our needs because of their experience of working with Network Rail. The application is almost complete and should be submitted any time now. We have also gained a volunteer architect who has advised us on design issues, so as soon as we gain approval, the building can be constructed. The specification, of course, will depend crucially on the success of our fundraising.

The fencing project around our Oldminster site has been a huge achievement. Over 100 panels have been erected to date along our eastern boundary, by a dogged team that have kept this activity going over the past year. The fence should serve to defy all but the most determined trespassers and provide peace of mind for our heritage assets. This work continues into 2025, with the end in sight probably in another 3 months.

Permanent Way work continues with a small but very enthusiastic team. Roads 5 and 6 were made fit to take rolling stock last summer and attention is now on replacing the timbers on our four points, to allow us to move rolling stock further down the site for storage, restoration and maintenance. Point timbers are expensive items and we welcome donations for this essential work.

Rolling stock movements at Oldminster depend on our application to Network Rail to use the headshunt beyond the boundary fence at the south end. They have raised no objections so we're now completing the paperwork that will, when submitted to the Office of Rail and Road, allow us to operate on the site. The next step up in this process would be to gain access to more of the branch line but that is still a long while away.

Other matters being progressed, albeit more slowly than we would like, are provision of an easement for water and electricity across Canal and River Trust land and for a permanent right of access to the site from Bridge Road. We note this is unlikely to occur until CRT have put forward a new master plan for the whole Sharpness estate, and we are working to convene a local stakeholder group so the views and perspectives of local groups such as local residents and ourselves can be integrated into the plan.

Following the disappointment of our departure from the Berkeley station site, relationships with Nuclear Transport Solutions (DRS) have become much more positive with two productive meetings held last year. This will assist our continuing efforts to gain access to the branch line in a few years' time.

A massive achievement in 2024 was the success of the Sharpness 150 celebrations, where a talented team of VoBR members worked with other local groups to host several events celebrating the anniversary of the opening of Sharpness New Dock. These

included a Sea Shanty Festival and the production of a video dramatising the opening of the Docks. This did a great deal to raise our profile within the community and develop excellent relationships, including with the Dockers Club, where we hope to host further events in 2025.

We also gained powerful and widespread publicity for the railway and the area in general, and we plan to take this work forward to really put Sharpness 'on the map' as a unique place to visit.

2025 will celebrate 'Railway 200' which is a national celebration of the birth of the modern railway era 200 years ago, when the Stockton and Darlington Railway ran its first trains in 1825. This is another great opportunity for us to gain welcome attention and support for our aims. We welcome imaginative ideas for what we might do to celebrate this throughout the year.

### **The next six months**

Some of you may have heard that there is currently a dispute between Andrew Goodman, a trustee and owner of Railway Support Services, and the rest of the Board. We are mindful that it was thanks to Andrew that the VoBR has been able to call the old diesel shed its home for the last ten years, and grateful for his support for the railway during that time. As he begins his withdrawal from the project, negotiations to achieve an equitable settlement are taking some time and are not without difficulty, but we are confident that we will ultimately reach a conclusion that will satisfy both parties.

In the meantime, our efforts to vacate the Shed and complete the Oldminster Sidings groundworks continue apace. The permanent way work should soon reach the stage when vehicles can move across at least some of the tracks and some rolling stock restoration will resume.

For 2025, we also aim to reach out to more people, both locally and further afield, by refreshing and increasing our presence online particularly in social media, to attract more members and volunteers – especially the younger generations who will be driving the VoBR forward in the decades to come.

Most importantly, we will be increasing our fund raising efforts so that we can start building and that's why the '**Buy the VoBR a Coffee Fund**' is so important. A purpose built machine and woodworking building is by far the most urgent item so that engineering work can be done in comfort and if the money continues to come in as we hope, the next stage after that will be building the 2-road shed.

2025 is shaping up to be an exciting if demanding year. Thank you for your continued support and please see if you can make a one-off or regular donation to help us set up Oldminster Sidings as a fully functioning railway depot and heritage centre for the future.