

UK first as support pledged for steam railway campaign

By Geoff Courtney

IN A UK first, British enthusiasts have formed a support group to provide expertise and funds to campaigners aiming to reopen a former steam line in mainland Europe.

The group, which was formally established at a meeting in a Birmingham hotel on March 23, has been set up to give impetus to preservationists dedicated to reopening the 38-mile Sibiu-Agnita railway in central Romania.

Closed only 10 years ago, the railway was once part of a 68-mile line linking the city of Sibiu with Sighisoara. Built to 760mm (2ft 6in) gauge, it was opened in 1910 to carry both passengers and freight and survived intact until 1965, when the 30-mile section between Sighisoara and Agnita was closed and the track lifted.

However, the Agnita-Sibiu section remained open until September 2001, with steam, including 0-8-0T locomotives, continuing to be used until being replaced by diesels in the 1970s, although steam could still be found at the head of tourist trains even in the late-1990s. Most of the track has survived the decade since closure, and volunteers have restored just over a mile of the line at Agnita station.

The entire route from Agnita to Sibiu has been declared a national monument by the government, giving it legally protected status, but – in a sign that the Romanian preservation movement lacks the sophistication and support of that in the UK – this hasn't prevented the recent removal, without consultation, of the line's three remaining steam locomotives from the sheds in Sibiu, where they had been stored, to another depot in Mures.

David Allan was elected



Romanian steam: On June 8, 1995, No 764-155 heads a train away from Agnita on the 2ft 6in gauge line to Sibiu. The train is a tourist special, but the opportunity has been taken to add some freight wagons, carrying timber, behind the three carriages. Built at the delightfully named August 23 works in Bucharest in 1949 (works number 521), the 0-8-0T was withdrawn in 1997 and stored at the narrow gauge depot in Sibiu, but with two other steam locos has recently been unexpectedly moved to another site. JIM BALLANTYNE

chairman of the UK support group at the Birmingham meeting. Calling itself the Sibiu to Agnita Railway UK Supporters' Group (SARUK), it has four principal objectives – raising awareness of the railway, helping financially, providing expertise, and reminding officials in Romania and elsewhere of the tourist and public transport potential of narrow gauge railways.

"We are the first UK organisation set up to support the renovation of a line in a foreign country," said David, who is also chairman of the Welsh Highland Railway Heritage Group. "Railway preservation in Romania is in its infancy, but the infectious enthusiasm and desire to preserve the culture and heritage is strong. The line closed only 10 years ago and most of the track remains,

but dereliction and vandalism have taken their toll on the infrastructure."

He said that Romanian preservationists had themselves formed a group dedicated to re-opening the line and had carried out work at Agnita under the patronage of Bill Parker, of the Flour Mill workshop in the Forest of Dean, with help from the British-based New Europe Railway Heritage Trust and the joint UK-Romanian charity Mihai Eminescu Trust.

"The long-term aim is to reopen the line between Agnita and Sibiu, in short stages following the British pattern. A goods shed on the line due for demolition has been purchased and will be re-erected near Agnita for use as an HQ and covered accommodation for stock, and a vandalised water tower is to be rebuilt."

SARUK has drawn up a 'shopping list' for the venture, and this includes the acquisition of lightweight 2ft 6in gauge rolling stock suitable for track maintenance and a small diesel for operating with the line's sole carriage.

"The potential is enormous, the scenery magnificent and the people very friendly," said David. "It's Boston Lodge (the Ffestiniog Railway's depot) in the 1950s – a mixture of hope and expectation – and with our experienced and enthusiastic team we can help with both advice and expertise."

"I would strongly recommend a visit to Agnita for anyone wishing to relive those nostalgic and evocative early days of UK railway preservation."

Further information may be obtained from David on david.allan132@ntlworld.com

Rebuilt Bulleid light Pacific overhauls make progress

THE overhaul of Great Central Railway-based Bulleid West Country Pacific No. 34039 *Boscastle* is proceeding well, with recent work including the manufacture and fitting of a new front buffer beam and the refitting of the buffers and

drawgear. The bogie horn guides have also been machined and the three slidebars fitted and aligned.

At Grosmont, the mechanical overhaul of sister No. 34101 *Hartland* is well advanced and work on the boiler is beginning to gather pace with the inner firebox

sides now tacked in place ready for welding up.

The firebox on this engine is being extensively replaced and will be virtually all new once complete. At Herston Works on the Swanage Railway, Southern Locomotives Ltd are in the final

stages of restoring Battle of Britain Pacific No. 34053 *Sir Keith Park*, once a donor locomotive for Jeremy Hosking's No. 34046 *Braunton*, and its new smokebox has now been fitted, albeit with the hole for the chimney yet to be cut in it.