

Boost for steam railway as top brass supports campaign

EXCLUSIVE

By Geoff Courtney

BRITISH preservationists who are spearheading a campaign to reopen an iconic European steam railway have received a major boost following support from a top UK diplomat.

The group has set its sights on bringing back steam this year to a stretch of a 2ft 6in gauge line that ran from Sibiu to Agnita in central Romania. The railway opened in 1910 and closed in 2001, but the Sibiu to Agnita Railway UK Supporters' Group (SARUK) is working with its counterparts in the eastern European country to restore a 4½ mile section midway along the original 38 mile route prior to its long-term aim of reopening the entire line.

Top-level meeting

Central to the campaign is gaining support from local and national politicians in Romania, and in a major step forward a delegation from the UK sat down with influential officials in Bucharest on February 25 at a top-level meeting which was organised by Paul Brummell, Britain's ambassador to the country.

The delegation from Britain included David Morgan, president of the European Federation of Museum & Tourist Railways, Neil McGregor, a British solicitor who practises in Bucharest, and SARUK chairman David

Meeting of minds: David Morgan in Bucharest before his top-level meeting with representatives of the Romanian government on February 25. Behind him is Calugareni, the oldest surviving steam locomotive in Romania, a 2-4-0 built by Thomas Brassey of Birkenhead in 1869 which, despite being a 146-year-old veteran, is still in working order.
MIHAI BLOTOR



Allan; while high-powered attendees from Romania included Ioan Rus, the country's transport minister, and Macarie Moldovan, general director of Romania's state railway CFR.

Others sitting round the table included the ambassador and Mihai Blotor, chairman of the Romanian preservation group working with SARUK to reopen the line.

Ioan Rus told the meeting that a draft transport master plan recently adopted by the Romanian government contained no fewer than six tourist railways, of which the Sibiu-Agnita line was top of the list, and this was being sent to the EU Commission for a funding assessment.

A stumbling block over the reopening plans is the administration of the line, and David Morgan urged that serious consideration be given to

a proposal that it be transferred to a consortium of local authorities, which would open the door for other sources of funding. However, there are legal problems, but officials at the meeting indicated that if necessary they would ask the Romanian parliament for powers to enable such a transfer.

Economic benefits

Paul Brummell, who took up his post last September, spoke at the meeting of the strength of the UK heritage railway sector and the economic benefits it brought to regions, especially with tourism, and also emphasised the interest in the UK in the Sibiu-Agnita line proposals.

David Allan said of the meeting: "In general it was very positive, and if nothing else the pressure has catapulted the tourist potential of the

line, and indeed other lines, into the forefront of the government.

"The transport master plan is the first time there has been any official recognition of the possibility of restoring the line as a tourist railway, and the line is now well and truly on the political map. We await developments from Brussels."

Meanwhile, the UK and Romanian preservationists are working towards the landmark of returning steam to the 4½ mile midway stretch of the line between Cornatel and Hosman in a steam festival over the weekend of September 26-27.

A SARUK working party is travelling to Romania in May to restore the track and carry out other tasks ahead of the event; and, in a major boost, both the British ambassador and the head of the Romanian state railway have said they hoped to attend the festival.

In addition, the European Federation of Museum & Tourist Railways is to hold its autumn meeting in Sibiu over that weekend to show support for the proposals for the line, and local businessman and railway enthusiast George Hocevar has agreed to provide a steam locomotive for the festival.

"These are exciting times for this iconic line, now a designated national monument, and our progress is testimony to the hard work of a number of people both in the UK and Romania," said David Allan. "There is a long way to go, but the festival will be a major step forward."

Somerset's 'secret' heritage railway enhanced

THE small band of volunteers at Westonzoyland Pumping Station, the museum of steam power and land drainage on the Somerset Levels which has its own little-known 2ft gauge industrial railway, has been extremely active over the winter.

Some jobs like installing an underground broadband and new telephone connection (01278 691595) provide no visible evidence of the work undertaken. But an extension to the main building with enhanced visitor facilities and the relaying of the railway, typical of lines which were once used in peat works on the levels, are more noticeable.

The old track has been replaced by 35lb/yard rail laid on metal trough sleepers and neatly ballasted for much of its length. Sections where people and vehicles cross the rails have been set into the ground and grassed over.

Two points have been installed on the running line to form a passing loop. One of the points was brought all the way south from the Leadhills & Wanlockhead Railway and completely refurbished before installation.

The loop is still to be completed as further finance is having to be raised to buy more track fixings. The railway

conveys scrap timber from a stockpile by the entrance the length of the site to the static Marshall portable boiler which powers the museum's large collection of working steam engines.

It is therefore in use during every monthly steam day and provides a rare opportunity for visitors to observe a genuine industrial narrow gauge railway in operation.

The new track has been installed to increase the scope of operations by accepting heavier, visiting locos in future, hopefully to include steam. The line is normally operated with a Lister and a Motor Rail diesel.

It is hoped to have the track completed for the museum's main annual event, Steam on the Levels, on May 16-17. This increasingly popular event attracts stationary engines, steam and diesel, vintage tractors, commercials, classic cars and motorcycles, traction engines and visiting narrow gauge locomotives, as well as trade and craft stands.

The site is open every Sunday for viewing throughout the year, 1-5pm, with free admission. There is an admission charge for in-steam and special events which are held regularly from April to October. For further details see website www.wzlet.org



The first train to run over the new point (acquired from the Leadhills & Wanlockhead Railway) and the newly laid and ballasted track on March 18 comprises Lister No. 34758 – which originates from the Fisons (Eclipse) peat works on the Somerset Levels – and a National Coal Board long-wheelbase four-wheel manrider which arrived at Westonzoyland two days previously having been acquired from the Bala Lake Railway where it is believed to have lain out of use for about 25 years. It is hoped that it can be rebuilt to form the first passenger carriage for the railway. On the left is the short, demonstration incline worked by a steam winch which was used by the dairy at Hemyock to pull milk tank wagons from the end of the GWR branch and into the dairy. PETER NICHOLSON