

FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF LOCOMOTIVE AND ROLLING STOCK POLICY

John Beaumont (Treasurer)

I have noted with interest the ongoing debate in recent years about whether the Society should spend money and time on wooden carriages, or steel ones; whether we should see locomotives as a priority, or as an equal to carriages, and so on.

Doubtless many of us have our personal opinions on these matters, but the purpose of this article is to point out the extent to which the Society's Council has been guided by practical matters, in particular financially.

I have heard it suggested that Council has "fobbed off" members with insufficient reasons, or even wrong arguments, about why we spend money on our existing sets of "wooden" carriages. My first thought is to wonder what possible interest Council would ever have in "fobbing" anyone off with anything, but leaving that aside, it is appropriate to point out the facts that have shaped our thinking.

1. The public prefer the coaches we have to more modern ones. I refer to passenger surveys which have been done in the last two years, (and which we will see more and more of from now on). Also, both myself and several other Council members have heard frequent comments from our passengers to this effect. I can honestly say I have never once heard a single comment from anybody other than a small minority of railway enthusiasts, who would express anything other than preference for the stock we have now. It is obviously in our interest therefore to run these coaches on whatever lines we are able to, for as long as we are able. Should a day come when this is not possible, then we have to be prepared for this in other ways, but I will deal with this further on. The point here is that to suddenly get rid of, or at any rate stop running, our existing stock would not make sense.
2. Even if there was no particular public preference, or indeed even if the public preferred steel coaches, there are at present none available for us to purchase. So at present, we must use our stock, or we don't run.

So why don't we hire coaches from the railway companies, in advance of their becoming available for sale to us? This would remove the need to spend any more money on wooden stock, after all, wouldn't it? Because (a) the railways have not got the stock to hire to us, and (b) even if they had, the cost of doing so would wipe out the profit on almost every trip we ran. If we pursue this path, not a single Whitehead based train would operate, and in Dublin at best one "Sea Breeze" and one Santa might be feasible, along with the annual railtour. Not only

would that make the steam engines at Whitehead redundant, it would be our last year in business as the profits on those few trips would be negligible due to hire charges. This is not idle Treasurer's Pessimism, this is sound financial fact. So, again we are back to maximising our income and keeping tour costs low - common sense.

3. I think it is important at this stage to point out that when steel stock becomes available, we will be straight in to discuss acquisition of the same at the very earliest moment. This has always been Council policy - but with none available thus far it should not come as a surprise that we haven't bought any! It certainly does not imply that we have no interest, or we are not looking far enough ahead, or we have some abstract notion that we can run our own stock everywhere forever. Further, we have a prioritised list of wooden vehicles to be maintained which is based on sensible traffic requirements, and we have no plans to officially "preserve" any not on that list. Some seven coaches have been either disposed of or earmarked for disposal at the time of writing, and others are likely to follow, Thus the old argument that we "have all that old stuff just lying around" at Whitehead is no longer appropriate, even if it was in the past. Far from shirking the acquisition of steel stock, or waiting too long to get decent ones, I would point out that even if we are someday told we can run wooden stock forever on all lines available at present, it is still in our interest to get a full rake of steel coaches as soon as possible in order to restart the financially lucrative "Steam Enterprise" operations.
4. It has been suggested that Council did not pursue the acquisition of ex-BR Mk1 coaches a few years ago, with (I presume) the implication that ERDF funds would have been better spent on such a project, rather than repairing wooden stock. In addition to the points stated before, there are other reasons why this would not have worked: the cost of buying, restoring, re-gauging and transporting them to Ireland would have been of the order of £90,000 per vehicle. Had we tried to pursue that course of action, we would now have 3 ex-BR steel coaches at most, but no carriage shed to keep them (or anything else) in; No.85 would most definitely not be in traffic No.171's tender would not be rebuilt, and also no maintenance would have been done on the other wooden coaches, so that only one running set would be available, and that a mix of steel and wood. Such a mixture, for those who don't know, can not even be seen as "a start in the right direction" -unless we have a full steel rake we can't run it, as health and safety requirements absolutely prohibit a train made up of a mixture. So we'd be out of business, with no train to earn money -we might have two incompatible half-trains! I would also point out that to run a three coach Flyer would require a fare pitched at something like £25 - £30 per head. I can't see the public swallowing

that, and I wouldn't blame them.

ERDF funds were needed to bring maintenance up to date on our existing running sets, indeed this specific requirement was one of the designated ERDF projects. As has been very well put by my colleagues in the Locomotive Department, ERDF was never intended to be a "magic wand". To get a steel set of coaches, it would have needed to be!

5. Suggestions have been made that Council has had a loose, haphazard attitude to carriage spending over the last few years. The reasoning is that while we had two full sets of coaches a few years ago, we can barely muster them now, despite three years of ERDF. The facts are:

- a) Our carriages, like this argument, get older every year. To again quote our Locomotive Officer, we are in the business of keeping life expired machinery working, long after normal economic interests wrote them off. Thus, to imply that they can go on with minimal maintenance, or even a similar level of maintenance, is ridiculous. The older they get, locomotives, steel and wooden coaches alike, the dearer they are to keep. Until recently, the storage of our coaches entirely in the open simply accelerated this process.
- b) The vast majority of our carriages were traffic-worthy, or nearly so, when we got them, and it is only now that time and wear and tear are making more comprehensive work necessary on them. While we have no other option available for seating our passengers, we have to absorb whatever it costs to keep them roadworthy, and that's that!
- c) Railway authorities and our insurers are increasingly particular about stringent maintenance and safety requirements, and rightly so. But this all adds to the cost, and make no mistake, will continue to.
- d) Exactly the same applies to our locomotives.

As far as Council's lack of direction or policy is concerned, it is quite clear that Councils have *acted within constraints* imposed on them, not least by the Treasurer! Some five or six years ago, when the Society was in a somewhat unhealthy financial state, the decision was taken to cut carriage and locomotive spending just to what was necessary to get No.461 finished to replace No.4, and keep the two rakes of carriages just about going. Luckily, the Dublin set didn't need much work at the time - had it done so, there would have been only one set in use that year, which would have made financial matters worse. There was criticism at the time from the "carriage fraternity", but this was the only responsible thing to do. However, it meant that it was necessary to drastically increase carriage spending when the ERDF funds came along, and needless to say

that provoked criticism from the "locomotive fraternity"! You can't please all of the people all of the time. But as a result of these actions, we pulled out of it. ERDF simply allowed a lot of necessary work to take place which would not have been done otherwise. That, by the way, indicates how poor finances were 5 or 6 years ago, and shows a clear pointer for the future.

6. I have heard it said that the Society was formed to preserve locomotives, not carriages. A quick look at the Society's Articles of Association shows that this is wrong to start with, but even if it was correct the argument is irrelevant. The RPSI was formed a third of a century ago, when operating conditions were very different. Like the world in general, we adapt or die. We can't afford to cling on to some romantic notion which our founding fathers had. When we started to acquire wooden bodied coaches, whatever perceived "moral duty" some of us might have felt to preserve them, and whether we were right or wrong in assuming such a right, it is just as well we did, or we would not be in business today.
7. It is worth pointing out that even if and when we do get a set of steel coaches, there is every likelihood that maintenance costs for these will be higher, as less work will be able to be done on them by unskilled volunteers. What will critics of carriage policy say when welders and all sorts of tin-bending merchants have to be paid for to get a train ready for a "Portrush Flyer"?
8. Nobody, to my knowledge, has ever advanced the argument that too much is spent on locomotives, or on the sites, or anything else significant; or that we would be in any way wrong to do so. If they did, the exact same arguments apply. The public prefer steam to diesel, the very same passenger surveys show this clearly, and therefore we must keep steam going to make money. And if it costs more and more to maintain steam engines, as I have no doubt it will, we just have to grin and bear it.

I would defend all aspects of our operations equally. The old coach versus locomotive argument is like the equally old cry that "if you are not with us you're against us" - and it is as ridiculous in this context as in any other. I would close by saying that it is the general public who pay our way. Unfortunately there is not on this island a sufficiently large (or affluent) railway enthusiast market to keep us going. We must listen to the day trippers on a Flyer or Santa or a "Sea Breeze", and make their preferences a priority. Unpalatable as that may sound, that's the way it is. Personally, we all have our opinions on what railway-oriented content means most to us on a trip, but the RPSI is not owed a living by anyone - we must survive.

On behalf of the present Council, I hope I have clarified some of what I know are genuine concerns of some members.