

FINANCIAL ASPECTS OF LOCOMOTIVE AND ROLLING STOCK POLICY

Chas Meredith, Dublin

John Beaumont must be congratulated on his thoughtful and well-researched paper under this heading which accompanied the RPSI June 1995 News-Letter.

Almost everything John says makes abundant and self-evident sense; clearly, the public does prefer our 'older' coaching stock, particularly side-corridors and 'loose' chairs at tables; but equally clearly, in the absence of any other stock, we have no option but to continue to run our own. However, one remark in his paper prompts me to offer some alternative food for thought beyond that offered by John. In paragraph 3 he says "... 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."

This worries me.

I am very concerned that the acquisition of a rake of steel coaches may already have become received wisdom, cast in ingots of steel (rather than tablets of stone) and may have established a momentum of viewpoint incapable of seeing outside its own blinkers. In terms of simple financial arithmetic, two separate analyses must be carried out:

- (a) to establish, in relation to the acquisition and maintenance costs of a rake of steel coaches, whether even a capacity "Steam Enterprise" operation can pay for itself and make the requisite profit within a fare structure our market can afford; and
- (b) to establish the same cost/benefit comparison in relation to the use of a rake of steel coaches if used for all Whitehead-based running. As John has pointed out, wooden and steel stock cannot be mixed and I cannot imagine that the Society could afford, financially or in manpower, to maintain two Whitehead-based sets.

I have insufficient figures to carry out the necessary financial analysis on my own, but my experience of eight years of Dublin-based operations leaves me in considerable doubt as to whether a "Steam Enterprise" could ever justify the cost of maintenance of a rake of steel coaches. If such a train were to be filled exclusively with serious (and affluent) mainline steam enthusiasts (approximately 392 of them) would they pay a premium price well in excess of what we normally charge our present middle-of-the-road general public? Unless we could guarantee a whole train-load at an enhanced price, we must be limited in our fares to what we can charge ordinary passengers. At our ordinary charges, I cannot see a "Steam Enterprise" generating enough revenue to justify steel coaching stock.

There is a further unquantified problem, about which one can hardly even speculate - namely, where steam services will fit into an upgraded Belfast/Dublin main line, with faster and more frequent passenger trains and, presumably, increased freight workings.

At risk of seeming over-critical - and I hope I am not seen as throwing stones in glass houses - may I suggest that our existing historic vehicles could give us a great deal of valuable service and pleasure into the 21st century if (1) they earned more revenue and (2) had more tender loving care and maintenance devoted to them? It is clear that some of our trains fail to attract sufficient passengers to make a good enough profit. Instead of looking towards the 'pie in the sky' of a rake of steel coaches, is it unkind to suggest that all stops be pulled out to ensure that all our operations, using our historic and lovely coaches, generate maximum profit? I fear a mind-set is emerging which believes that everything would suddenly become financially sound 'if only we could run to Dublin'! A full train is a full train, whether it runs from Dublin to Rosslare, from Belfast to Dublin or from Belfast to Bangor. Our aim must be to ensure not only that all our trains run full, but also that all our trains are capable of making a worthwhile profit.

What about a 'think tank' to produce marketing ideas - no matter how zany or off the wall - which might result in the development of new products attractive to our public?

I hope John Beaumont and I will have stimulated more members to offer their own constructive analyses and suggestions.