

The RPSI Diesel Project

Introduction

The RPSI Council has been aware for some time that the Iarnród Éireann network is changing to a passenger railcar railway and that the days of diesel locomotive hauled trains are disappearing. Also, if the Society is to preserve a GM locomotive then the first generation GMs should be the first preference. The B141 class have traversed most routes in Ireland - indeed they were no strangers to the GNR Derry road in its later days! The Council agreed in September 2008 to purchase 141 following a very generous offer from Murphy's Models to fund it. Then last year we received another offer to fund 142.

In parallel to Council considerations, a group of interested people, some of whom are RPSI members, were looking into the possibility of preserving a number of BGMs. The group brought its findings to the RPSI Council in January this year and, after a meeting, presentation and due deliberation, the Council decided to proceed with the groups proposals.

The Proposals

The group's approach was based on the fact that the RPSI has demonstrated over the last forty the attraction of heritage train travel. While steam is the main selling point to the public, there is a market for a limited number of diesel heritage trains. This has been demonstrated by the successful use of diesel haulage during the recent May railtours. For instance, the 2009 "Comeragh Diesel Tour" which carried over 200 passengers - on a Friday.

It has not been possible to organise diesel-hauled trips on Iarnród Éireann in the last few years and the short supply has created an element of pent up demand in the current marketplace. Whilst this is unlikely to be sustainable, there is the potential to develop new markets for diesel heritage trains, especially short haul evening trips and corporate days out. There could in the future be a need for heritage diesel haulage in support of existing steam tours, such as pilot operations, steam back up and stock movements, etc.

The RPSI could also make use of a diesel for contract hire. There are a number of major renewal projects planned by both Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann, which are likely to be let to outside contractors. Similar to the steam locomotive hire for the Larne line and Bleach Green to Antrim relays, the Society has something the contractors might want.

The above provides the basis for the proposals that the Society should maintain a small fleet of operational diesel locomotives and an operational base.

The Fleet

The fleet of Heritage Diesels should be about three or four locomotives. All locomotives acquired will be owned by the RPSI. The fleet would consist of the, now withdrawn, 121 and 141 class numbers 134, 141, 142 and another 141. The forerunners, now renumbered B141 and B142, are already destined for Society ownership thanks to the already mentioned exceedingly generous external funding.

The next step is to get our Railway Safety Case modified to include the operation of diesel locomotives on Irish Rail which are owned and maintained by the RPSI. Likewise, we will need to fit AWS/TPWS and OTMR to these locomotives to meet the DRD legislation before we can use them on passenger work on Northern Ireland Railways.

The Base

An initial search for a rail-connected base identified Charleville goods shed as a suitable location for maintaining and overhauling any diesel locomotives that come into RPSI ownership. The siding connecting the shed to the main line has recently been renewed. The shed is secure, is in reasonable repair, and has sufficient room to hold two BGMs under cover. The Society will shortly start negotiation with CIÉ property for a lease. Once the Society gets the go ahead from IÉ/CIÉ, work will commence on preparing the shed as a diesel workshop.

With a pool of potentially three or four locomotives, it is envisaged that at any one time no more than two locomotives would normally be based at Charleville. Charleville will be the location where the fleet will be maintained and overhauled. At least one of the other locomotives will be based semi-permanently with the RPSI carriages and steam locomotive in the Dublin area, while the fourth locomotive would be based at Whitehead. It is also envisaged that locomotives would be rotated as needed and when required to fulfil maintenance regimes.

The Funding

The RPSI members who are involved in this diesel project, will begin straight away to raise funds to purchase the remaining locomotives and to set up Charleville as the RPSI Diesel Workshop.

However, ultimately the diesel locomotives will have to be budgeted for from RPSI funds. Of course it is hoped that more operations will be possible because of the diesel railtours and therefore more money generated. Also, income will come through donations by our supporters, one-off grants from local, regional and national bodies in both the Republic and Northern Ireland. The RPSI, being an accredited Museum in both the Republic and Northern Ireland, should be eligible for heritage type grants both in jurisdictions.

The Volunteers

A significant number of the members proposing the diesel group are based in the Cork and Limerick areas and it is hoped that their numbers will be sufficient to develop and sustain the interest in working the base at Charleville.

If the interest in the recent “Diesel Do” railtour to Longford is an indication then there are a large number of diesel enthusiasts who might be potential volunteers for the Charleville squad.