



*The Cavalcade begins to form at the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala, 10 August 2025. Photo: Peter Edwards*

# The Bluebell Times

*A Newsletter for Bluebell Railway Members, Staff and Supporters*

## September 2025

### IN THIS ISSUE

Our Society Chairman has – just occasionally! – referred to his other passion of following the fortunes of Crystal Palace FC, so will no doubt be fully familiar with the concept of playing home and away fixtures. This summer has seen that concept well and truly replicated on the Bluebell. We have sent our team to away venues at Toddington, Willesden, Minehead, Ashford, Didcot and elsewhere – even as I write, 'Fenchurch' is tucked up in Blaenavon, probably the first Terrier ever to steam in Wales. Meanwhile, in turn we have welcomed several "away" teams – not just for the Diesel gala (see page 7) but a Crompton and the Hastings DEMU have spent the summer on the railway, playing an important part in running services through this Railway 200 summer. No sooner had the diesels and DEMU departed than another visitor has arrived, this time No. 2999 'Lady of Legend', an early arrival for [Giants of Steam](#), which this year is celebrating new-build steam.

Such events are important beyond the ability to experience new traction in unfamiliar settings. Each visit creates new relationships, or solidifies existing ones, within the wider railway community, both heritage and mainline. Given the uncertain economic outlook and the financial pressures experienced by all heritage railways, our strength comes from the mutual support we can offer each other. When everything aligns, special things happen, as at the recent celebration of the life of Gordon Pettitt, in which Bluebell and SETG volunteers, and colleagues from the wider railway community came together to deliver a rousing send off. So here is to a future Bluebell – home and away.

Tom James, Editor

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# Watts Occurring

By Roy Watts, BRPS Chairman

And that ladies and gentlemen, was your summer holidays flying past once more!

Back to school is the priority and already mince pies and other early sale Christmas lines such as confectionery are appearing in shops – why do those once massive tubs of chocolates seem so pathetically small? – as the Festive Season begins it's slow but gradual build up!

To be honest, Bluebell is really no exception as our festive services have been on sale for a while and indeed, believe it or not, some services are already sold out which is a very encouraging start at this early stage and goes to emphasise that no matter what, the Man in Red has a vital role to play and is still of great importance to us and the income it generates which we are so reliant on to see us through the winter.

As I write, both Santa and Steamlights services are selling well considering this is the beginning of September and already, over half of the New Years Eve train has sold. So fingers crossed for a successful year end and why not? Our Santa services are a real, well-polished product, one that needs little adjustment to the format because why fix something that is not broken? It never ceases to amaze me just who appears to have the better time – the adults or the children? Albeit, Kingscote and East Grinstead sadly do not feature.

But looking back over the last few weeks, it would be fair to say that our visitor numbers during the summer have been very good and bolstered by some of the more popular “add-ons” such as Dinosaurs and other character figures, and it would be a very reasonable assumption that as a



No. 65 in the unfamiliar surroundings of Didcot Railway Centre. Photo: David Cable

whole, the Railway's performance has been very good.

Looking back over the last few weeks, we have celebrated Rail200, our own 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a 3-day diesel gala and finally the life of one of the Railway Greats, our very own late President, Gordon Pettitt OBE.

Our 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary featuring all operational motive power and rolling stock was a pure, home-grown event but was a great success, in particular, it bought the families out. Maybe such events that showcase the very best that Bluebell has to offer across its broad portfolio of restoration work is a blueprint for future galas?

Rail 200 bought a variety of experiences to the Railway, and I think it goes without saying that having the Hastings unit for that period proved the value of that early service and something we can look forward to once our very own Thumper unit comes into traffic. I have been making the point of having an early service from East Grinstead purely to bring people in from the north and benefit from having the opportunity to see more of the Railway than being restricted to just a fleeting glimpse! Under the skin there is a lot we can offer.

The Diesel Gala proved a success this year in terms of overall revenue performance. Certainly, unlike last year's biblical weather conditions, this year's was in stark contrast and add in the combination of a very flexible timetable offering multiple options of traction travel and rolling stock choice made it a worthwhile event and we have clearly set ourselves a target for next year!

It was just a pity that there no mainline trains on the Sunday, but we did sell quite a few [Rapido 01s](#)!

Over the summer, there have been many "offers" available to the public either via vouchers or special travel with say fish and chips as the incentive all of which have contributed to a successful summer season. Yes, they haven't always bought significant returns but you don't find these things without trying them and if they do not work, try something new.

However, from me as Chairman of the Society, I would like to take this opportunity to thank

everyone who worked so hard to keep the operations safely on track. Those few hundred people who keep things moving and ensure the special events and galas are delivered to the exceptionally high standards we adhere to and what we endorse for the safety and comfort of our visitors.

That commitment by "The Few" must be recognised as it shows pride and true support for what we do. My most sincere respect to you and thank you for the devotion to duty.

Likewise, that spirit was clearly demonstrated on Monday 8 September when the Bluebell hosted the family of our late President, Gordon Pettitt and many members dare I say of the great and the good from right across the railway world, some travelling from Scotland just for the day to pay their respects to a giant of the industry.

Some 200 people gathered at Sheffield Park to share in the day with stories, memories and tributes. Clearly the "Guvnor" was held in such high esteem at all levels within the industry. It was also good to see that representatives from the various charities that Gordon supported were present adding their personal contributions.

The weather was kind, "Sir's Train" was in sparkling condition as you would expect and all I will say that all the planning, preparation, co-ordination, teamwork when against the odds paid off handsomely and Bluebell did itself proud that day. When things got tough, the rallying call was duly answered and respect to those who answered – and also to the chef who provided the bacon rolls!

I'd like to quote David Ward, former BR Director of Special Trains:

“ I write to congratulate and thank you for all the arrangements you made for Gordon's farewell. They were organised and carried out to perfection and Gordon would have been very pleased.

It used to be said there were three organisations in this country capable of organising major events – the church, the military and the railways. The railways lost



this accolade with fragmentation at privatisation. You, with the Bluebell Railway have reinstated how to do it properly. Very well done. ”

Worthy praise indeed.

But it's not just at home but we have seen our roving ambassadors of *Fenchurch, Sir Archibald Sinclair* and O1, No. 65 depart for carrying the Bluebell name to areas such classes not normally seen and 73082, *Camelot* also about to visit the Severn Valley Railway later this month.

We too can look forward to seeing some different steam power at our upcoming [Giants of Steam](#) event featuring the "New Builds" and judging by the way advance ticket sales are going, promises to be one of the highlights of this year so make a note in your diary!

Finally, I cannot finish without mention of the departure of our recently appointed PLC chairman, Paul Seller. It was very disappointing to receive his resignation but at least it was made in all honesty and Paul realising the enormous job he faced and the actual time he felt able to give versus his own personal requirements.

Paul had started a number of work streams which will be taken forward but even in his short tenure,

Paul demanded accountability from his fellow directors and did not accept sub-standard practice.

So, it's been a mix time for us all but the most important factor has to be our financial performance which, whilst much improved still has a way to go and we cannot afford to rest on our laurels.

It is up to all of us, we know why we joined and the expectation it's "their job" to keep the Railway going is completely naive. As mentioned earlier, it's a team effort, nothing less.

Thanks as always for the support you give the Bluebell because we are just the component parts in the big jigsaw that keeps our piece of Sussex functioning. We know the goals and objectives but we become a force to reckon with when we work collectively and respect others' views and develop and inspire. Those characteristics begin with good communication and a mutual sharing of knowledge.

Now, did I mention to you that a certain team called Crystal Palace had also added another trophy by winning the Charity Shield?

Look after yourselves!



Hastings Unit 1001 at Kingscote. Photo: James Cummins

# Gordon Pettitt – a Celebration

Photos by James Cummins

*On 8 September at The Bluebell Railway, we came together to honour and celebrate the life of a true railway legend – Gordon Pettitt OBE.*

*With the help of our incredible Bluebell volunteers and staff, members of the [SETG](#), and many other friends, the day was made into something truly special. 3417, the 4-VEP EMU that carries his name, looked immaculate in the sunshine. It was a fitting tribute filled with warmth, respect, and admiration for a man whose impact on the railway world will never be forgotten.*

*It was a great success, and we couldn't be prouder of everyone who pulled together to make it happen. Thank you to all who contributed to this wonderful celebration of Gordon's remarkable life.*





# 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Scrapbook

*A selection of photos taken over the three days of the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala.*



*New meets old: The Bluebell's youngest and oldest locomotives meet at Sheffield Park.  
Photo: Owen Hayward*

*No. 80151 heads south from Horsted Keynes. Photo: Rob Howard*



*No. 34059 approaching Kingscote Station with the 1:30pm train from Horsted Keynes, 9 August. Photo: Peter Edwards*





# Diesel Gala

By Mike Hawkins

The 2025 diesel gala kicked off with the arrival of 50008 dragging 47715 and our own immaculate 4 VEP from its home at Strawberry Hill on Wednesday 3 September.

The following day saw the arrival of 25 262 from the South Devon Railway, with the remaining line up of Crompton No. 33108, ED No. 73133 and the Hastings short set already present as they had been helping over the summer season.

The timetable this year was focused on bringing in traffic from East Grinstead with the Hastings set starting from Horsted Keynes and working north allowing a 9am departure off East Grinstead.

Friday ran like clockwork. Saturday was also going well until the class 50 suffered a brake issue and was detached at Kingscote which left the ED to

work its 6-car train on its own back to Sheffield Park, which it did faultlessly.

The ED then returned to Kingscote light engine to collect the class 50, but the decision was made to leave it off Sunday's Diagram so that the brake fault could be repaired to enable the stock move back out onto the national network on the Monday.

Sunday saw the class 25 and class 47 working the two main sets with Crompton and ED working with the 4-VEP on the Sheffield Park to Horsted Keynes shuttles and the Hastings unit operating Horsted Keynes to East Grinstead shuttles.

Friday was only the second time in 12 years that the East Grinstead ticket office generated more revenue than Sheffield Park showing that our connection to the national network was worth it.



No. 25262 approaches Horsted Keynes. Photo: Rob Howard

I would like to say a big thank you to the owning groups for allowing us to operate their locomotives and multiple units over the weekend.

Also all the Bluebell staff from train crews, guards, shunters, signalmen, station staff, catering, carriage cleaners, buffet stewards, roster clerks and everyone who played a part.

The positive feedback I've had from the owning groups is unbelievable on how welcoming all the staff made them feel, the quality of the track the station presentation and how picturesque the Bluebell line is, making the event a great success.



*End of a successful event: Bluebell crews and owning group representatives gather at Sheffield Park as the sun sets.  
Photo: Phil Smith*



# Q Class 541 Overhaul Progress

By Steve Pilcher and Chris Hunford, Maunsell Locomotive Society

The tender tank has been dismantled from the chassis and placed on the ground again in the workshop. This has enabled the underside to be painted by workshop and Maunsell Locomotive Society (MLS) volunteers.

The workshop staff have been busy refurbishing various components of the tender brake gear and workshop and MLS volunteers painted some of the components, including brake cylinders and brake beam. *[Photos right – courtesy Steve Pilcher]*

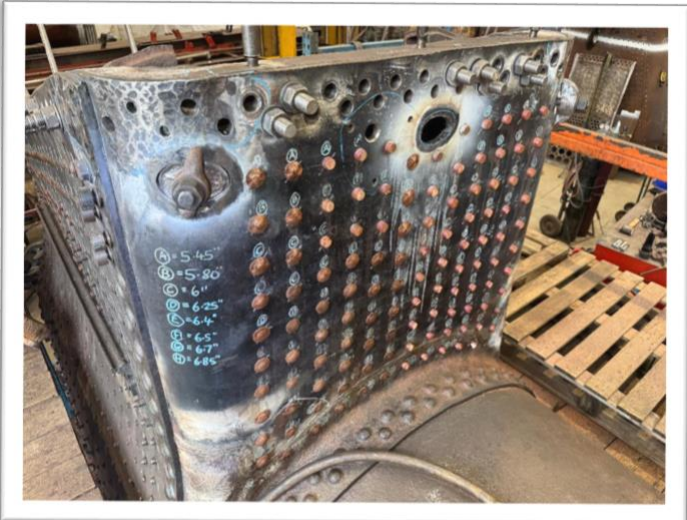
Down at Leaky Finder's works in Devon, all the copper stays are now machined, fitted and headed over on the fireside, with half of them headed over in the outside.

The two front mud hole doors have been repaired and fitted to the corresponding openings in the throat plate. Middle door is being worked on at the minute. *[Photo below – courtesy Leaky Finders]*

A countersunk hole and stud holes have been drilled in the throat plate for the blow down.

The driving wheel horn blocks are away at a specialist contractor having some cast iron welding repairs which is taking place as this report is being written.

The MLS volunteers have continued cleaning and priming various sections of the loco's boiler cladding that are present at Sheffield Park.



# Bells Ring Out for Two Railway Stalwarts

By Steve Loeber, Bluebell Railway signalman / Tower Captain, Thaxted

A special bell ring was performed on Sunday 15 June 2025 at St John the Baptist Church, Thaxted, Essex to commemorate the lives of two stalwart members of the Railway.

The Rounds & Call Changes were dedicated to Trevor Bance (Signalling Inspector Bluebell Railway) on request of his partner Russell Pearce; and also to Mick Sargeant (S&T Supervisor Bluebell Railway) dedicated by his wife Pam Sargeant. Both liked the sound of the bells but have sadly passed away.

The team are shown in the photo; the author is on the right.



## Camelot at 70

Photo by Owen Hayward

No. 73082 'Camelot' has recently returned to service following a problem earlier in the summer with its superheater. It is seen here pulling away from Horsted Keynes, taken at the 65<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Gala.





# News From Our Twin

Words and photos by Roger Price

I recently spent an enjoyable long weekend at Hoorn in the Netherlands on the occasion of the annual Bello Festival organised by the [Museum Stoomtram Hoorn-Medemblik](#) (MSHM). Their special timetable for each day was similar to our Branch Line Weekend in that the steam trams mainly ran short hops so that to reach the end of the line at Medemblik you had to change both at Wognum and Twisk. At each of these stations there were extra activities to keep the visiting families amused so they were not bored waiting for the connecting tram. The museum line was delighted with the 2,750 visitors over the weekend. On Saturday there was a main line special train from Rotterdam and Amsterdam hauled by a German class 23 locomotive which ran on to Enkhuizen before returning to Hoorn for its layover. For the first time a tram engine in steam was taken on a low loader through the streets of Hoorn to stand for the three days in the main square recalling the past days when a tramway ran down to the harbour.

This was my first visit in seven years but as always I was made most welcome by members past and present. I was able to have meals with both Rene Van de Broeke the current general manager and Jaap Nieweg the previous manager and a driver on the tramway.

It is now 27 years since the twinning of our two railways was established and throughout that time I have been in the lead in organising visits and even exchange of locomotives and carriages. But I feel with my advancing years that it is time someone younger should take over. The MSHM have the same view and on our Giants of Steam weekend 3 young volunteers in their twenties from the tramway will be visiting Bluebell and it would be great for them to meet up with some of our younger members at that time. If you would like to help with this, please let me know (email [rogerprice@aol.com](mailto:rogerprice@aol.com)). Also if you would like to know more about MSHM I can let you have plenty of information. Perhaps next year I can organise a visit for those who are interested?



## Top to Bottom:

7742 Bello arrives at Wognum

6513 and 26 arrive at Twisk

The mainline special at Hoorn

Visiting tram 607 in Hoorn main square

# Ashford Open Day

By Chris Sutton, Bluebell Railway Archive Volunteer

On Sunday 24 August, as part of the ongoing Railway 200 celebrations, Southeastern held an open day at its Ashford maintenance depot. Paul Frost, Roger Merry Price and Chris Sutton from the 'Bluebell Railway Museum – Southern Railways Archive' manned a stand at the event to display some of the documents related to the history of railways in the Ashford area.

Included in the collection were original South Eastern Railway timetables from the 1850s, a special traffic notice for the opening of the Maidstone East to Ashford line in 1884, the SECR Engine repairs book from 1899 and an original spares manual for a Class 70 'Booster' electric locomotive. As well as a large collection of maps and charts showing Ashford Works over the years were two digital displays of photographs from the Southern Railways Archive: locomotives built at Ashford and images of women working at the works during the Second World War.

The stand created a lot of interest and was busy with visitors throughout the day.

*Other groups present from the Bluebell included the Little Loco Group, fundraising to support the restoration of P class No. 27; and 'Stepney' also represented the railway – Ed.*



**Left:** The Archive stand at Ashford.  
Photo: Paul Frost

**Below:** Stepney  
Photo: James Cummins





# Carriage Shop Donates £1500

By Chris Wilson, Carriage Shop Volunteer

The Carriage Shop team are pleased to have been able to make donations to support three Bluebell Railway projects.

- £500 to the Project 27 team to assist with the work in restoring SECR P-class No. 27. You can find out more about this venture by visiting <https://www.bluebell-railway.com/trust-project/p27/> and <https://www.facebook.com/littlelocogroup/>
- £500 to the Awake the Giant appeal to restore the Standard 9F locomotive No. 92240. More information on this project can found at <https://www.bluebell-railway.com/trust-project/awake-the-giant/> and their Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100088214553936>
- £500 to the 1305 Oxted Thumper Gang to support the restoration of Oxted DEMU 1305 'Brighton Royal Pavilion'. More information on this can be found at <https://www.bluebell-railway.com/trust-project/oxted-demu-1305/> and <https://www.facebook.com/p/1305-Oxted-Thumper-Gang-100087447292229/>

The Carriage Shop at Horsted Keynes station is open every weekend in September and October.

We currently have a selection of Horsted Keynes exclusive souvenirs, model railway items, railway and transport books and Railway Art by Matthew Cousins. We are also supporting the 1305 Thumper Gang, Bluebell Railway Goods Division and the Fenchurch Fund by stocking a small selection of their items in the shop.

We are in need of donations of Model Railway items, if you can help please get in touch: [bluebellrailwaycarriageshop@gmail.com](mailto:bluebellrailwaycarriageshop@gmail.com)

For our opening times and news please visit our [Facebook page](#).



# Photos From The Museum Website

By Chris Wilson, Bluebell Railway archive volunteer

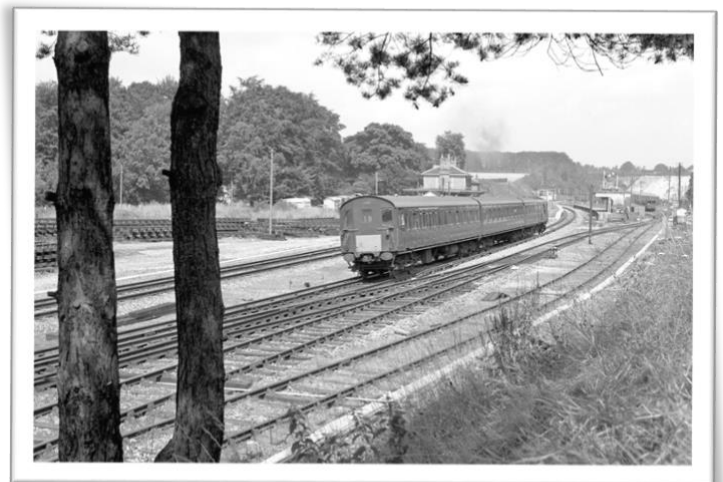
This month we have added a further 200 images to the Bluebell Railway Museum website bringing the total now available to 28,421.

Hot on the heels of the Bluebell Railway Diesel Gala weekend, these new additions all feature Diesel Multiple Units and were taken by John Scrace.

Every photograph sale directly helps the Photograph Archive giving us much needed funds to invest in conservation and storage materials. The information needed to pay for orders online by BACS is now included on every order form.

To view and order go to [www.brm-archive.co.uk](http://www.brm-archive.co.uk). There are various searching methods, including by locomotive number or class and location. The content key search allows you to see all the images of a particular type, for example, all the images taken of Pullmans. Use the New key to see all the latest images including those mentioned and shown here.

If you have a collection of photographs, negatives, slides or digital images you are interested in depositing with the Archive and preserving for the future please get in touch with us by emailing [photos@bluebell-railway-museum.co.uk](mailto:photos@bluebell-railway-museum.co.uk).



## Top to Bottom:

*BR(S) Class 207 No. 1305 at Tunbridge Wells West with the 12.35pm Eridge – Tonbridge service, on 3 September 1969. Photo: John Scrace [233187]*

*BR(S) Class 205 No. 1132 at Micheldever with the 11.53am Reading General - Southampton Terminus service, on 15 August 1966. Photo: John Scrace [233064]*

*Class 201 No. 1001 at Ore station with the 11.11am Hastings – Ashford service, on 6 September 1969. Photo: John Scrace [233191]*



# On This Day - 12 September

By Tony Hillman, Deputy Curator

*Pictures from the Bluebell Photographic Archive taken on the 12 September. Thanks to John Creed, Martin Elms, Richard Peirce, Chris Sutton, Roger Merry-Price and Chris Wilson for finding the pictures and researching the notes.*



## SLADE GREEN

Slade Green, near Dartford in Kent, had a relatively short existence as a steam shed. It was opened by the South Eastern and Chatham Railway (SECR) in October 1899, but by 1926 it had been fully converted to an electric depot. 'Slades Green' as it was originally known, had a capacity of more than 100 locomotives and was one of the largest on the SECR system. Yet, the electrification of the North Kent suburban lines in the years following the creation of the Southern Railway in 1923 made its allocation of tank locomotives largely redundant. Extensively modernised in the early 1990s, the depot is now operated by Southeastern.

Exactly one hundred years ago, on 12 September 1925, H C Casserley visited Slade Green and took a series of photographs. Two of them are featured here. Inside the repair shed, sitting in a line of other engines, is SECR Class Q, 0-4-4T 417. Entering traffic in 1897, 417 was one of the last of 118 Q Class locomotives built from 1881 to a design by James Stirling. Although not one of the 55 rebuilt to Class Q1, it survived along with 31 other un-modified examples into Southern Railway ownership. 417 itself was withdrawn in 1926 and by 1929 the whole class was extinct.

Seen inside the main shed is SECR Class P 0-6-0T 27. Designed by Harry Wainwright and constructed by Ashford in 1909/10, the eight P Class engines were initially used on motor trains

but later mainly employed on shunting and station/shed pilot duties. 27 itself spent a lot of its life at Dover. Having become 31027 in 1948, it was withdrawn from Dover Marine (73H) in March 1961 and came to the Bluebell the same year, becoming 'Primrose' for a short while. After serving the railway extremely well in the early years, it was

withdrawn and dismantled in the early 1980s. Now, after a long pause, work is underway to restore it to working order – see <https://www.bluebell-railway.com/trust-project/p27/>

*Photos: H.C. Casserley [270327 & 270329]*



### ASHURST AND GROOMBRIDGE SIGNALBOXES

On Saturday 12 September 1959, Joe Kent photographed two "signal boxes" at stations in the Kent Countryside. Just over 2 miles apart in distance they were 24 years apart in age.

**Ashurst:** While not immediately recognisable as a signal box, it did indeed perform that function. The elderly looking lever frame, surrounded by a spiked railing with instruments on the wall behind and access to the station building, belied its age, being opened on 14 February 1934, replacing a conventional signal box dating from the opening of the line. It was part of economies introduced by the Southern Railway in the 1930s whereby smaller stations could be worked by one man. It

was equipped with a second hand South Eastern lever frame of 17 levers. In later years other such installations were boxed in to look like signal boxes, but Ashurst remained as seen here until closure on 8 July 1976.

**Groombridge:** This was one of the last new mechanical signal boxes opened on the Southern Region. Replacing Groombridge Station and Groombridge Junction, there was also a small Ground Frame controlling the exit from the Up Loop because the points were too far from the Station Box to be controlled mechanically. The box was equipped with a 32 Lever Westinghouse A3 type lever frame and opened on 23 November 1958 replacing both boxes and the ground frame.



It closed on 6 January 1969 after a life of just over 10 years!

The line through Ashurst between Hurst Green and Uckfield remains open today, controlled by the Panel Signal box at Oxted. That through Groombridge survived until 12 August 1985, although traffic dwindled until it became just a

shuttle plus some empty stock workings as the sidings at Tunbridge Well West were used to stable DEMUs. It was eventually reopened as the Spa Valley Railway in 1996, now operating between Tunbridge Wells West and Eridge.

*Photos: Joe Kent [200415 & 200426]*



# The Ghost Train

25 - 31 OCTOBER 2025

Built in 1882 across the ancient land of the High Weald, it is hardly surprising that the Bluebell Railway has its own ghost stories. The ethereal nun, the demon station master and the tragic tale of the newly-weds. The past and present collide at the famous heritage railway.

Steam locomotives have their own tales to tell too, with fatal accidents in the distant past and loyal crew who never leave them. Now you can experience the darker side of a historic place which normally offers wholesome family days out. Be warned, you may never come back!

## The Theatre of Steam

New for 2025, and the first of its kind in the UK, this is a show like no other featuring a full-size steam ghost train. This isn't a fairground ride, it's tangible, it's real...or is it?

Be shocked to the core as the demonic ghost train appears, piercing the night with its haunting cry.

Step aboard and meet the ghosts of the Bluebell Railway in a spine-tingling immersive theatrical experience, unlike anything ever seen on a heritage railway in the UK.

Roam the dark platforms of a station of yesteryear. Where are you? Is this purgatory? Experience the chilling finale, but make it safely back to the real world – or will you?

Recommended for adults or families with older children only. Go to [www.bluebell-railway.com/special/the-ghost-train/](http://www.bluebell-railway.com/special/the-ghost-train/) to book tickets.







## Tail Lamp

If you've enjoyed this issue of *The Bluebell Times*, feel free to pass it on to other people you think might also want to read it.

To find out when the next issue is out and for other updates about the Bluebell Railway, check our [website](#) or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).

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## The Bluebell Times

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