



Sunset Terrier, 4 March 2025 Photo: David Cable

The Bluebell Times

A Newsletter for Bluebell Railway Members, Staff and Supporters

March 2026

IN THIS ISSUE

After a winter of dismal wet weather that seemed never to end, it was good to be back over half term and see the Railway spring back to life. Most days we had three locomotives in steam, and around 18 or 19 carriages in traffic, the majority being grouping or pre-grouping era stock. For some railways that would be a gala, for us it was just the regular service. One of those carriages in use was the Hastings brake No. 3687, which has just been awarded the annual HRA Rolling Stock award – richly deserved by those who have laboured long and hard to bring it to its current jaw-dropping standard. There was also success for stock of a more modern vintage, with the Southern Electric Traction Group scooping the ‘Team of the Year’ award.

As this issue is published, it is only a week until our first enthusiast event of the year, the [Spring Steam Gala](#). We will have no fewer than eight locomotives in steam and a busy timetable, with plenty to see and do at the intermediate stations as well.

It is a cliché that every year is seen as pivotal in the Railway’s history, but 2026 does really look like it is shaping up to be one such year. We have a new Company Chairman, and an outgoing Society Chairman, and underpinning both a governance review that will define how the Railway is structured for perhaps decades to come. At the same time, the near continuous economic shocks that have convulsed the globe since 2020 show no signs of abating. As a supporter there are many ways that you can help, but why not start with the easiest of all: visit the Railway and take in all the splendours our little oasis in Sussex has to offer.

Tom James, Editor

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Watts Occurring

By Roy Watts, BRPS Chairman

And we are off! Not just because it's the Cheltenham Festival week, with the Grand National following hard on its heels, but another operating season begins. To continue with the equine theme, it will bring with it all the jumps and hurdles we will face this year, the lengths we will have to go to meet them on the course before a final charge down the straight to the finish line with the traditional festive services.

But like good jockeys, we need to control our speed and direction, guide the Railway safely and efficiently, ensure we have good strength and pace in our decision-making skills and not whip ourselves into an unnecessary frenzy or pull up short. Enough! Let's rein that in before getting saddled with a "get off!" label.

But in all honesty, what a start we have had!

We began the half term week with very busy passenger trains and a range of dining trains which had sold out well in advance, including that all-important Valentine's Day Golden Arrow.

We saw a week of packed trains as children built and created all manner of material wonders out of Lego. That really did have a big impact on our trade – something to improve and repeat in the future. Clearly parents wanted to get their children out of the house having been stuck indoors through weeks of inclement weather, which even the hardiest swan or duck must have truly got fed up with. We have often said that wet weather inside a warm carriage is a better option than a blustery sea front.

What we have seen though is the continuing trend towards daylight services and the slow uptake of evening/night services. I don't know if you have read the press – I only ask as it's so negative these days – but there is a genuine reluctance to drive during the hours of darkness due to the brightness of modern-day headlights, dazzling drivers especially on wet unlit roads. Mind you, with the current condition of our roads, it's more about dodging potholes that can cause terminal damage to tyres and suspension.



Above: 'Fenchurch' and Victorian carriages on a Jon Bowers photo charter, 4 March 2026

Photo: David Cable

So it's good to see a move to more daylight trains.

I note in the railway press that we are one of a number of railways that have held their fare structure at 2025 prices. It's a very difficult balance at the moment between attracting and deterring the intending visitors. In recent days we have seen just how events outside our control will influence the decisions of people as to how they will spend their money when budgets are tight. Those ripples of inflation spread far.

Thus it is even more important that we offer great service that's seen as good value for money.

On a more positive note, I have just returned from Llandudno after attending the [Heritage Railway Association's annual awards](#) where I am pleased to report that we won Rolling Stock Project of the Year for the return to service of Maunsell Hastings line brake 3687. As one judge put it, simply stunning. Take a bow, members of the Carriage and Wagon Department, for two successive years of winning. To me and others, after some 30 years, a fitting tribute to Frank Ferris and the late David Wigley.

In another category, the Southern Electric Traction Group deservedly won the Team of the Year award for their sterling work in maintaining and operating our 4VEP unit, 3417, to exceptionally high standards. An award our late President would have firmly endorsed!

(And of course 3417 has now been joined by another EMU representing another era of

commuting history. I wish I could remember its name. 😊)

We also received a highly commended award for our Railzoo event.

So we go forward into a new year in testing times. How can we really predict the future in these turbulent days? Who knows what the tenant in the White House plans next on the world stage?

I do know that the Trustees and the Directors are doing what they can to safeguard our Railway and you would hope that the strong performance we saw in the second half of last year and the start of this will continue. But as on other railways, its sustainability relies on delivering a solid revenue stream, hence the continuing work on restructuring the Railway.

For me, you will be pleased to know that you only have 93 days to go before I hand over the reins of this prestigious office and I would like to think that it will be on a platform of stability and growth.

Do remember that if you wish to forward your name to become an elected Officer or Trustee of the Society, you need to be quick as we are rapidly approaching the deadline.

Thank you all for the drive, the passion and the depth of commitment you give to the Bluebell – 66 years young this year.

We need to pull together as a team, going that extra furlong, united by one goal of ensuring your award-winning Railway continues to flourish.

From the Chair

By Paul Everington, Chairman, Bluebell Railway Plc

It is a tremendous honour to have been appointed Chairman of Bluebell Railway Plc in January. These first five weeks have been both energising and immensely rewarding, and I am deeply grateful for the warmth, enthusiasm and openness shown by everyone I have met.

As we look ahead, my immediate focus has been on understanding the business in detail and identifying where we can strengthen our foundations. The proposed restructuring, if approved, will give us a valuable platform for progress – but our ambitions must reach further.

We have a real opportunity to bring more visitors through East Grinstead and to create an even richer, more memorable experience that encourages people to stay longer, return often, and share the magic of the Railway with others. I have already begun building relationships with local businesses which are as excited as we are about the potential for shared success.

Our heritage work remains at the heart of who we are. During a recent networking event in Brighton, the response to our heritage mission – and especially to the craft skills we preserve and pass on to volunteers – was incredibly encouraging. There is real pride and admiration for the work we do, and it reinforces the importance of planning well for the future.

To support this, we will be working on understanding long-term costs and strengthening our case when seeking funding for preservation and growth.



Surveyors have also been assessing the Pump House and the wider estate, giving us the insight we need to develop a robust 15-year infrastructure plan – one that will help secure the Railway's future for the next generation of enthusiasts, volunteers and visitors.

It has been an inspiring start to my time as Chairman, and I am excited to meet many more of you in the weeks and months ahead. Your ideas, passion and commitment are what make Bluebell Railway the extraordinary place it is today.

Double Triumph at Annual HRA Awards

There was double success for the Bluebell at the recent Heritage Railway Association Awards, held in Llandudno on 7 March. Maunsell Brake 3rd No. 3687 won the prestigious Rolling Stock Award, while the Southern Electric Traction Group – the team responsible for the preservation and operation of Bluebell-owned 4-VEP No. 3417 'Gordon Pettitt' – won the Team of the Year award. We were also very pleased to receive a 'Highly Commended' in the Events category for our preparations for, and the series of Railway200 events we ran, last year. This included a major refurbishment of platform 1 at Horsted Keynes to enable it to host the Railway200 Inspiration Train, along with education work and a variety of linked exhibitions and events through the year.

ROLLING STOCK AWARD

We are delighted that the restoration of Southern Railway Hastings-gauge [Maunsell Brake Third No. 3687](#) was awarded the Heritage Railway Association's award for Rolling Stock Preservation. We appear to be on a winning streak, following last year when Pullman Car 54 won the same award.

This award is very much a tribute to the decades of work undertaken by the late David Wigley along with Frank Ferris who transformed the coach from a stripped-out shell. The restoration was brought to fruition thanks to Tony Clements' coordination, working alongside David, with a great team of volunteers who are now going on to restore Maunsell Restaurant Car 7864. Our thanks are also due to The Bluebell Railway Trust which covered the costs of materials to complete the restoration.

We must also acknowledge the three other short-listed projects, any of which would also have been worthy winners:

- Talylyn Railway – replica gunpowder van built by the line's young members group.
- Severn Valley Railway – conversion of Great Western Railway carriage into accessible buffet car No. 9581.
- Bala Lake Railway – replica Penrhyn saloon carriage.



Above: Hastings Maunsell Brake 3687 on its launch day, 31 May 2025

Photo: Richard Salmon

Below: Roy Watts receives the award on behalf of the Bluebell Railway

Photo: Heritage Railway Association



TEAM OF THE YEAR - SETG

The Bluebell congratulates SETG – custodians of Bluebell-owned 4VEP unit 3417 – on a fantastic award.

The [Southern Electric Traction Group](#) (SETG) has been named “Team of the Year” at the Heritage Railway Association Awards 2026, recognising more than a decade of volunteer-led work preserving and operating historic Southern electric traction.

The award celebrates the people behind the organisation — the volunteers, members and supporters whose shared ambition has enabled SETG to keep an important part of Britain’s railway story alive.

For many years, the Group has been responsible for the preservation and operation of 4VEP unit 3417 “Gordon Pettitt”, the United Kingdom’s only preserved mainline-registered electric multiple unit. Through the dedication of the team, the unit continues to demonstrate the engineering and operational legacy of the Southern Region’s electric railway.

The award also comes at a particularly significant moment for the organisation. The Group has recently become the owner of Class 455 unit 455871 “Roy Watts”, securing the preservation of a further generation of Southern electric traction and marking an important milestone in SETG’s ongoing work to ensure modern electric units are represented within the heritage movement.

Speaking following the award, Minion at Large Steve Upton said:

“ This award is a testament to the ambition of our team. It shows the genuine passion and love that exists for the SETG mission. I can’t help but think of those who cannot be here tonight — Gwill, Maggie and of course Gordon himself. This organisation is built on their spirit, love and determination, and we carry that with us every day. Tonight we stand a little taller, seeing further on the shoulders of those giants who helped shape our cause.”



*The SETG team, at Sheffield Park on 8 September 2025, during the event to celebrate the life of the late President of the BRPS, Gordon Pettitt, after whom the Bluebell's 4VEP unit No.3417 is named
Photo: James Cummins*

Reflecting on the organisation's journey, CME Minion Chris Buckland added:

“ Over ten years ago a small team sat in a pub hatching an idea that has become the SETG. It feels entirely fitting that we celebrate the team we are today with a pint in hand, surrounded by titans of the preservation industry. The challenges we face are not small, but this award shows that we are approaching them the right way — and at the heart of everything we do is the team.”

The Heritage Railway Association Awards recognise the very best work taking place across the UK's heritage railway sector, and to be recognised in this way by fellow organisations across the movement is a tremendous honour for everyone involved with SETG.

The Group is keen to emphasise that this moment belongs not only to the volunteers working behind the scenes, but also to the many supporters, sponsors and donors whose belief in the organisation has helped make its work possible. Their encouragement and support form an essential part of the journey and they share fully in this achievement.



Left: The SETG team, at Strawberry Hill depot, following the arrival of 455 871, which has been named 'Roy Watts MBE' – in honour of the BRPS Chairman – by Chris Green

Below: The SETG team, with Roy Watts alongside, receives the HRA Team of the Year award on 7 March 2026



Maunsell Locomotives Overhaul Update

By Steve Pilcher and Chris Hunford, Maunsell Locomotive Society

Q CLASS NO 541

Leaky Finders continue their work on the boiler, focusing on three key areas: grate carrier brackets, foundation ring corner rivets and inner firebox lap seams.

The fire grate carrier brackets have been repaired and were bolted in place to allow the riveting of the foundation ring. Now that work is complete, the bolts have been removed, and the brackets themselves can be riveted into place. As each of these is completed the adjacent foundation ring corner rivets are installed with a special C-type rivet.

The localised work on the inner firebox lap seams is now complete so the fitting of the new patch screws can take place. *See photo right.*

Work on the chassis is focused on the right-hand side frame insert and we previously reported this had been skimmed. The insert has now had all the required holes pilot drilled and weld prepping is underway. Once complete the horn blocks can be fitted and the insert welded in place.

Meanwhile back at Sheffield Park, Dave Cox and Bob Butcher are continuing to progress the painting of the exterior of the tender tank. They have started applying the first coat of gloss black.

Maunsell Locomotive Society volunteers and other workshop volunteers have concluded painting the tender wheelsets into a second coat of gloss black top coat along with axleboxes and other brake gear components.

A start has been made on cleaning up 541's larger motion components.



Top: Riveting work on 541's firebox.
Photo: Leaky Finders

Bottom: Tender tank starting to go into the first coat of glass black paint.
Photo: Steve Pilcher

SCHOOLS CLASS NO 928 STOWE

East Coast Castings continue to progress the production of the new pattern for the left-hand cylinder casting that is required for Stowe. This rather tricky piece of carpentry is coming together well now as shown in the photos. These demonstrate the complex radii involved while also showing the outline shape of the cylinder.

Although we had the finance in place for the pattern and casting, we still need to conclude fundraising to machine the casting. We need to raise £15,000 and as at the end of January we are getting close to the target with over £1,500 being received in January. Many thanks to all those who have been so generous with their donations thus far.

CAN YOU HELP PLEASE?

The [Maunsell Locomotive Society](#) still needs to raise the final £3,000 or so. All extra donations will be gratefully received, preferably via the *Stowe* appeal in the Bluebell Railway Trust – or contact the MLS Treasurer, Steve Pilcher, jstepilcher@yahoo.co.uk for further details.



Above: 541's tender tool boxes now in gloss paint.
Photo: Steve Pilcher

Below: Work on the patterns for Stowe's new left hand cylinder block.

Photo: East Coast Castings



Vintage, by Day and Night

Two days of photo charters showcased our Victorian heritage in a series of stunning photos.



No. 65 draws into Sheffield Park showcasing its Victorian splendour.

Photo: Dave Bowles

The loco simmers at the platform.

Photo: Nick Gilliam





The Bluebell at its finest? Unique locomotive, Victorian carriages, immaculate linesides, sumptuous scenery.

Photo: David Cable

The following day, it was 'Fenchurch' that took the limelight, seen here heading south from Horsted Keynes.

Photo: David Cable



Carriage Shop Donates £500

By Chris Wilson, Carriage Shop volunteer

This month, the Carriage Shop team is delighted to donate £500 to the 1305 Oxted Thumper Gang to support the restoration of Oxted DEMU 1305 'Brighton Royal Pavilion'.

Project leader Ben Wetherall said: "We would like to say another huge thanks to the Carriage Shop team and Matthew Cousins for this generous donation to 1305. We have a few big spends coming up, with the bogie amongst other things, so this will help no end!"

Also keep your eyes peeled in the future as there may well be some artwork from Matthew in the pipeline with an Oxted vibe to it!"

More information on this project can be found at www.bluebell-railway.com/trust-project/oxted-demu-1305/ and facebook.com/p/1305-Oxted-Thumper-Gang-100087447292229/

The Carriage Shop is open every weekend and on all days of the Spring Gala (20-22 March). For up-to-date opening dates and times, please visit: facebook.com/BluebellRailwayCarriageShop

The Carriage Shop was established in 1989 and is fully operated by volunteers, with the sole purpose of raising funds to support projects across the Bluebell Railway.

We are still looking for donations of model railway items, Thomas the Tank Engine books or toys, and railway and transport books. If you can help, please get in touch:

bluebellrailwaycarriageshop@gmail.com

Below: Members of the 1305 Oxted Thumper Gang, left to right: Simon Grainger, Richard Phillips, Ben Wetherall, Tom Thorn, Sam Portnoi, Andrew Brock and Stuart Fielder.



Archive Update: New Photos and a New Website

By Chris Wilson, Bluebell Railway archive volunteer

The Bluebell Railway Museum – Southern Railways Archive is the new and more accurate name for the Archive, reflecting the full range of material we hold, including documents, photographs, plans and publications relating to the railways of Southern England.

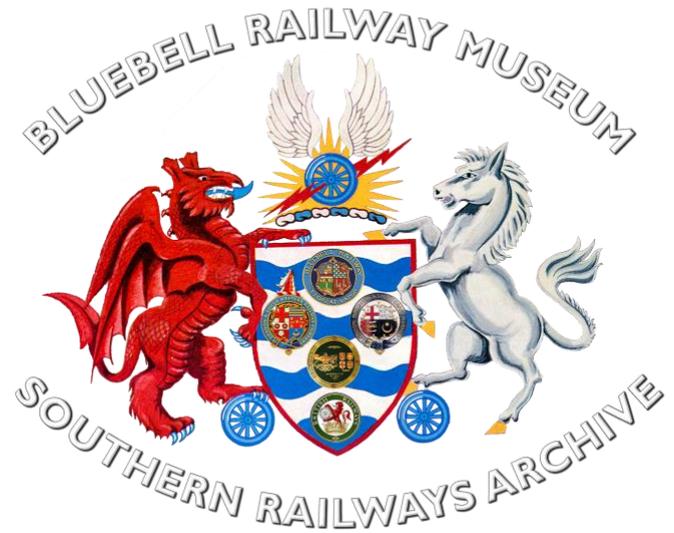
Our new website includes information about the Archive, the collections we hold, and how you can visit and support us. You can explore it at: southern-railways-archive.com

This month we have added a further 140 images to the new Archive website, bringing the total now available to 30,207. All of these colour images were taken by John J. Smith and include many views of signals and signal boxes, both internal and external, as well as diesel traction at various locations across the UK.

All photographs currently available to purchase can be viewed in our Archive Online Store: southern-railways-archive.com/shop/

There are various ways to search for images on the new website, including a quick search that looks across the photograph description. There are also more specific search options for class, number, name, location and date, together with filters for photographer and tag. Tags include coaches, Pullmans, signals and signal boxes, stations, and many other subjects.

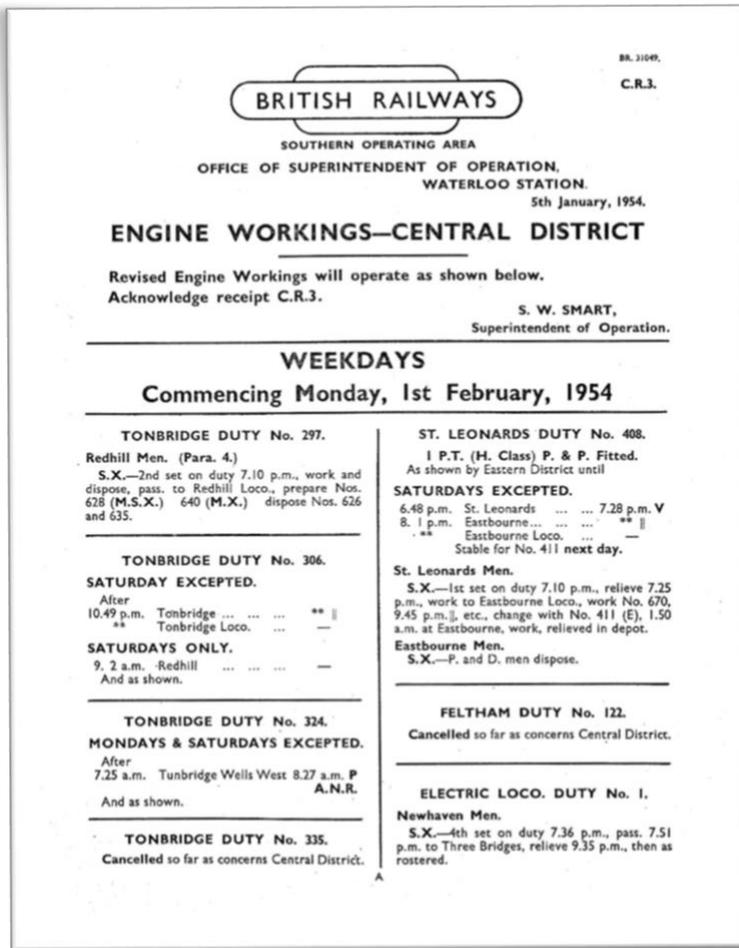
Every photograph sold directly helps the Photograph Archive, providing much-needed funds for conservation and storage materials.



We are grateful to have recently received a number of interesting collections of negatives and photographs. These are currently being catalogued and, where appropriate, will be scanned and added to the website in due course.

If you have a collection of photographs, negatives, slides or digital images that you would be interested in depositing with the Archive, so that they can be preserved for the future, please get in touch by emailing enquiries@southern-railways-archive.com

The new website has also allowed us to begin adding the first selection of digitised documents. We now have 123 Southern Railway and Southern Region Engine Working Notices available to purchase as PDF downloads.



Left: Southern Engine Workings, Central Division, weekdays from 1 February 1954. One of the many Engine Working Notices now available from the [Archive Online Store](#).

Below right: Bollo Lane Junction Signal Box, on Saturday 22 Aug 1970

Photo: J.J. Smith [o60727]

Below left: Internal view of Bollo Lane Junction Signal Box, on Saturday 22 Aug 1970

Photo: J.J. Smith [o60728]



On This Day, March 13

By Tony Hillman, Deputy Curator

The Archive photographs this month were taken on the morning of 13th March 1957 at East Grinstead and West Hoathly by R. C. (Dick) Riley. They provide an interesting contrast to how these places look today. Thanks to Martin Elms, Richard Peirce, Chris Sutton, Roger Merry-Price and Chris Wilson for finding the pictures and researching the notes; and to Dick Riley for donating his Bluebell photographs to the Archive.



Left: This photograph taken around 10.15am at East Grinstead Low Level shows ex-LBSCR E4 Class 0-6-2T 32504 standing at the up platform with a single coach. The locomotive, which was first introduced in 1900 and finally withdrawn in November 1961, was allocated to Brighton Shed (75A) at the time. It is thought that the engine is on Brighton Duty 762 and the train is the 9.30am from Lewes.

The photograph shows the view looking south. Imberhorne Viaduct is in the background; East Grinstead South signal box is behind the locomotive and the goods sidings are off to the left. A C2X can be seen shunting in the yard. The whole scene is surprisingly rural with none of the development on the hill across the viaduct that is visible today. [105540]

Right: A little later the Signalman looks out of East Grinstead South Box as 32442 slowly backs past him onto the unseen single push/pull coach in the low-level platform forming the 10.28am passenger train to Lewes. The train formed part of Brighton Duty 761 specified for a C2X to be steam heat fitted. Having stabled overnight at Norwood Shed it arrived at East Grinstead working the 7.5am freight from Norwood Yard and after arrival at Lewes worked 12.10pm freight on to Newhaven. 32442 was allocated to Brighton (75A) from April 1951 until withdrawal from there in February/March 1960.

The track layout at East Grinstead Low Level was modified to handle more traffic with the closure of the high-level station together with the line from Three Bridges to Ashurst Junction in January 1967. By then these services were largely DEMU operated apart from a few peak hour loco hauled trains. A new station building was constructed in 1970 and replaced in 2013. The Goods Yard was closed in 1970 and the site used for a Sainsbury's supermarket. In 2010 the Bluebell Railway arrived. [105536]





Left: Taken at West Hoathly station looking north with what is almost certainly the 11.30am Lewes to East Grinstead service waiting to depart. The motive power is ex-LBSCR C2X 0-6-0 32440 which was allocated to Brighton Shed (75A). Working Duty 768 the locomotive, upon arrival at East Grinstead, will work the 12.40pm freight northwards to Oxted, subsequently being stabled overnight at Norwood Junction Shed (75C).

32440 was built by the Vulcan Foundry, to a design by Robert Billinton for the LBSCR as a C2 class in May 1893. D.E. Marsh upgraded the boilers to the class and No. 440, as then numbered, became a C2X in December 1911. It was withdrawn in October 1958.

The passenger coach depicted in the photographs is ex-LBSCR Second Brake Push Pull S3847S built in December 1921. Originally part of PP 2-car set 715 it became a 'loose coach' in 1952 for use on the Midhurst branch. It was withdrawn in August 1960. [105532]

Right: After shunting East Grinstead Yard from 10.30am - 12.00pm, Duty 762 involved a return passenger working to Lewes at 12.28pm. The photographer has captured 32504 leaving West Hoathly on that service. The picture is looking north with a rather lavish fully enclosed and glazed footbridge for such a minor station, prominent in the foreground. The signalbox is visible at the far end of the down platform probably unstaffed with the signals 'pulled off'.

Today the scene at this location is dramatically different. By 1967 all the station infrastructure had been removed and the main building demolished. The edge slabs were removed but the platforms left intact and allowed to grass over. The Bluebell purchased the site in 1974, and in 1992 restored a single line, away from the platforms. [105535]





Photo: John Beston

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*The Bluebell Times is published
monthly on the second Friday
of each month. The next issue
is scheduled to be available
on 10 April 2026 from
bluebell-railway.com/bluebell-times*

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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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