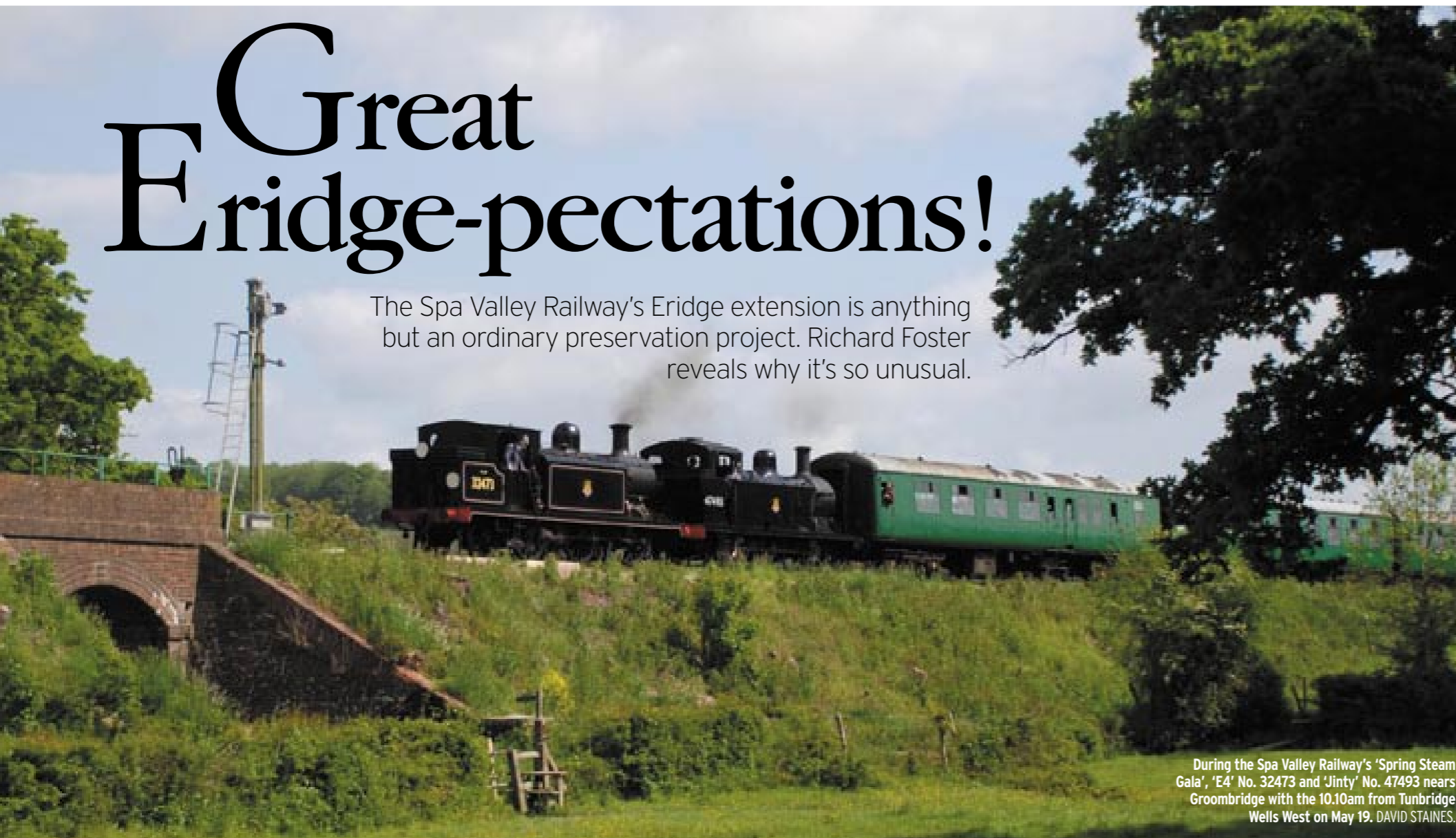


# Great Eridge-pectations!

The Spa Valley Railway's Eridge extension is anything but an ordinary preservation project. Richard Foster reveals why it's so unusual.



During the Spa Valley Railway's 'Spring Steam Gala', 'E4' No. 32473 and 'Jinty' No. 47493 nears Groombridge with the 10.10am from Tunbridge Wells West on May 19. DAVID STAINES.

The Bluebell Railway is a mature railway, at 47 years old. It's slowly working towards a connection with the main line at East Grinstead with nearly half a century of experience behind it. Just over 20 miles away, however, there's a young whippersnapper of a railway with a main line connection firmly in sight... but could the young upstart Spa Valley Railway be the first to connect to the 'big railway'? This year is a big one for the Spa Valley. Of course, as a former Southern line, marking the 40th anniversary of the end of SR steam is important, but not as important perhaps as the SVR's tenth birthday. And

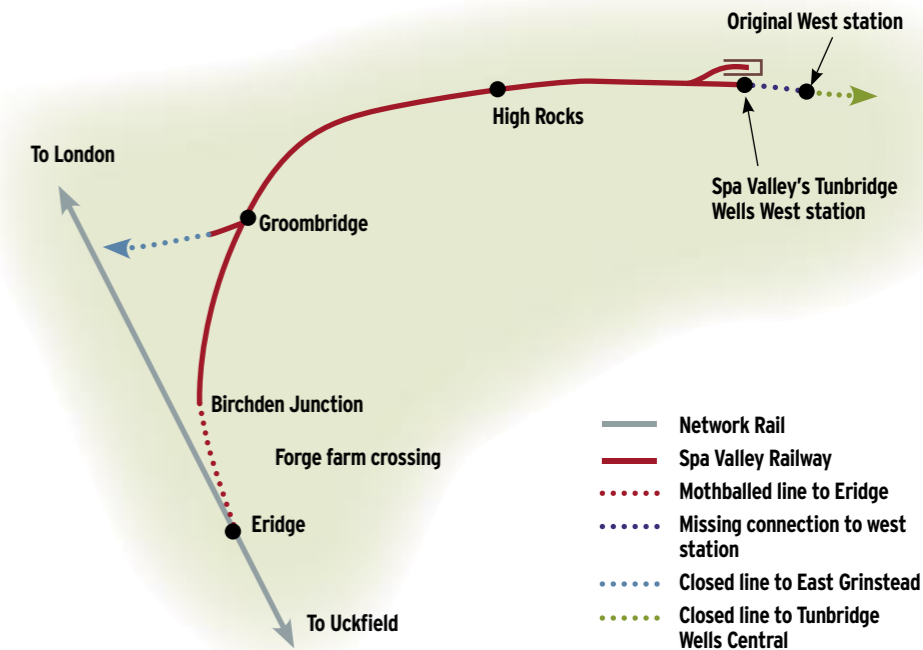
for a birthday present, it has been given a corker: a letter of intent from Network Rail to say that the national infrastructure company has given its support to the SVR's ambition to reinstate services to Eridge. The extension to Eridge is a unique project in British railway preservation. The usual recipe for an extension is tried and tested: acquire derelict trackbed; clear vegetation; volunteers gradually lay reclaimed track materials over several years; gain approval from HM Railway Inspectorate; open. However, although this formula has worked for the majority of Britain's preserved lines, the Spa Valley has

to do something different. The SVR isn't trying to relay track on some long-closed rural line. In fact, the track is already there. What makes this project different is that it is to reopen one mile of line which is next door to a 75mph main line... which means a new approach. For a start, the Spa Valley has to be professional. That's not to say other railways aren't but it means that everything the SVR does has to be to the latest NR specifications. So, for example, volunteers can't start work on clearing the old 'down main' to Eridge. It has to be done by NR-approved contractors (see panel). But why go to such lengths? "Eridge is the jewel in the crown," Project Engineer Paul Carpenter told STEAM RAILWAY. Eridge station does not serve a major population centre; it lies about a mile from Eridge Green in a quiet, pretty corner of East Sussex, a few miles from the Kent border. So why do it, especially as Eridge is unlikely to generate much traffic by itself? What it gives the SVR is a cross-platform connection with the main line. "The concept," Paul says, "is to provide an extra attraction for the London tourist market. You

## Who made it happen?

"The driving force was Bob Ashbee who sadly died last year. He was our answer to Fred Dibnah - a real powerhouse." Paul Carpenter is quick to praise Bob's efforts in pushing the railway towards Eridge, but he is also keen to acknowledge all the help that the line has had both from its own members as well as 'friends' in the hierarchy of Network Rail. "We obviously can't mention all by name,"

says Paul, "but we owe a debt of thanks to them and they know who they are! We also have a core of London Underground senior engineers who have provided the valuable technical advice and assistance to ensure that current railway standards are adhered to." However, one person who can be named is Janet Small, General Manager of the Barry Island Railway, which shares a bridge with NR. "Janet has been extremely helpful in sharing information on how they've managed this."



## Heading east from West...

When trains return to Eridge, the Spa Valley will have reinstated almost all the former line from Tunbridge Wells West. However, a crucial bit is missing - the few hundred yards into the grand West station itself!

The original station is a spectacular building and would be one of the most impressive on any preserved railway. However, it has been restored as a restaurant and the SVR terminates at a platform next to the old steam shed. Access to the old station is, Paul Carpenter says, a nice dream but is unlikely as access to the busy supermarket crosses the old trackbed.

The LBSCR's West station was once connected to the SECR's Central station. This link has also disappeared but there have been several proposals to reinstate it, although none of them have been serious.

## What the partners say

The Eridge project has reached a milestone. With Network Rail's 'letter of intent', it means that the project is gaining momentum. However, the next approach is based on 'partnering' with key stakeholders like, for example, Network Rail. But what do the 'partners' think of the project? Jerry Swift, Account Director for Community Rail told STEAM RAILWAY: "Network Rail has been working in partnership with the Spa Valley Railway for some time on developing proposals to return heritage railway services to Eridge. There remain issues to be resolved and I don't want to understate the complexities of some of them, but the Spa Valley have shown the determination and flexibility that will hopefully lead to a positive result for everyone involved."

Train operator Southern are another important 'partner' as the SVR plans to run into the bay platform at Eridge which it runs. Southern spokesperson Yvonne Leslie told STEAM RAILWAY: "The Spa Valley Railway has been talking to us about how the project is progressing and it really seems to be gathering pace now and we congratulate them on getting this far. We'll be working

with them to see how we can support the project in the future."

As the SVR cannot undertake trackwork on the Eridge section using volunteers, it has secured the services of infrastructure company Gramm Interlink Rail. Engineering Director Mark Carroll told STEAM RAILWAY: "We're proud to be supporting the long term ambitions of the Spa Valley Railway Team in providing a full railway service between Tunbridge Wells and Eridge. Through dedication, hardwork and the support of volunteers the extension will provide a valuable and historic transport link for the local community."

## Spa Valley: a brief history

"One day, we'd love to find the bit of paper that states that the trackbed must be maintained for railway use!" jokes Paul Carpenter.

He's referring to the strange arrangement at Groombridge where houses have been built on half of the old double-track alignment. This has meant that a series of sharp curves carries the line around the 'blockage' and into a new station. As the trackbed is in a cutting, the platform takes up part of the trackbed and leaves a single 'road'. The necessary 'run-round' loop is on the Birchden Junction side.

The Spa Valley Railway as it is today was formed with the merger of the Tunbridge Wells & Eridge Railway Preservation Society - TWERPS - which aimed to reinstate the Tunbridge Wells West to Eridge line, and the North Downs Steam Railway which had set up on a greenfield site near Dartford.

The railway's initial operations were based in the former Tunbridge Wells West steam shed but in 1997 the mothballed line to Groombridge was reopened. Birchden Junction was reopened in 2005 (SR312).

The line to Tunbridge Wells West was opened by the LBSCR in 1866: it connected the Kent town to a triangular junction at Groombridge with one line heading south to Eridge, one heading west to East Grinstead and also north to a junction with the SECR north of Edenbridge. It closed to traffic on

## Spa Valley Railway extension



**Right: Eridge station on May 20: SVR trains are likely to run into the bay platform. Southern services use the far platform face. DAVID STAINES.**

**Left: Looking to the future: only a missing panel of track separates the Spa Valley Railway from Network Rail. RICHARD FOSTER/SR.**



**Right: The layout of Groombridge station on May 16: the housing development has obliterated part of the double-track formation - note the tight curves. The original station building can be seen through the bridge. RICHARD FOSTER/SR.**



**Right: The self operated Forge Farm crossing - making this safe for twin track operation was one of the major stumbling blocks. DAVID STAINES.**



discuss the terms of the lease on the old 'down main', Paul explains. "That should hopefully be signed in the near future. We've had track walks with NR to agree on the scope of the work needed to bring the line into operational use."

The results of these investigations were revealed at a meeting on May 21. The railway has announced an appeal to raise £½m so that services might start from 2008.

The biggest stumbling block has been the self-activated Forge Farm Crossing between the current limit of operations at Birchden Junction and Eridge. The crossing is not heavily used but is currently set up for one line - albeit bi-directional. However, in July 2006, the SVR, NR, HMRI and Invensys (formerly Westinghouse) inspected the crossing and new equipment is to be provided by Invensys to modify it for two-line running.


Making a physical connection to Eridge is

one thing; making it work is quite another. "At the moment, trains depart every 75 minutes with the length of line we have," Paul says. "But running trains from Eridge means a two-hour gap which is too long. The only way around that is for two-train running, resulting in an hourly service."

The Spa Valley has always been a 'one engine in steam' railway but that is beginning to change. Groombridge will eventually become a passing loop to allow two-train operation. This means new signalling is being installed at Groombridge and, like other developments on the railway, it is being done to the latest specifications.

Not only is the SVR aiming to attract more tourists, it also wants to encourage the enthusiast market. "We want to get away from this image of an industrial-run railway," Paul says. So far, the SVR has three ex-BR engines (see panel). However, several high-profile visitors are set to visit - or have

already visited. Dennis Howells' BR-built '94XX' 0-6-0PT No. 9466 and Bressingham's 'Terrier' No. 662 Martello are due at the line later this year, and this follows the recent visit of 'E4' 0-6-2T No. 32473 from the Bluebell and Beattie 'Well Tank' No. 30587 for its Spring Steam Gala (see News).

"The new line will give an ideal journey time for passengers," Paul says, "but it will also give our locomotives and drivers an interesting 'turn'. We also hope the extended line will attract visiting locomotives." 

### How to donate?

Donations to the 'Return to Eridge Appeal' can be sent to Spa Valley Railway, Tunbridge Wells West Station, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN2 5QY. Go to [www.spavalleyrailway.co.uk](http://www.spavalleyrailway.co.uk) for more information on the time.

### Tunbridge traction

Although the SVR wants to break away from its 'industrial' image, it does have an eclectic collection of main line steam, albeit of the 0-6-0 tank engine variety.

Flagship of the fleet is Barry Buckfield's 'Jinty' No. 47493. After a move from the East Somerset Railway in 2000, it returned to service in 2004. In mid-May, the engine was temporarily withdrawn, needing a retube but is expected to return during the summer.

The railway is also home to an ex-LBSCR engine, 'AIX' No. 62650 'Sutton'. The 'Terrier' is undergoing a major overhaul. The boiler is in reasonably good condition after an

inspection but new cylinders have been made as well as new frame stretchers.

The other 0-6-0T is, in fact, an 0-6-0ST: genuine 'J94' No. 68077. On loan from the Keighley & Worth Valley Railway, it is currently stripped down. Its overhaul is expected to take five years.

There is one other main line engine at Tunbridge Wells West: Swedish 2-6-4T No. 1928. Owned by a private individual, it is currently stored in a dismantled condition although it is too large for the SVR's loading gauge and is, therefore, up for sale.

The SVR does have two continental locomotives: Polish 'TKh' 0-6-0Ts Nos. 2944 Hotspur and 3135 Spartan. Spartan is

undergoing boiler repairs and Hotspur is stored pending overhaul.

The rest of the fleet comprises British industrials: Peckett 0-6-0ST Fonnon is temporarily out of traffic after suffering a failed coupling rod bearing; Barclay 0-4-0ST Lady Ingrid is in service; RSH 0-6-0T North Downs and RSH 'Ugly' 0-6-0ST Samson are currently under overhaul, and Bagnall 0-6-0ST Topham is stored.

The SVR also has an 'honorary steam engine': BR class '12' 0-6-0DE No. 15224. The diesel-electric was turned out from Ashford works in 1949, a modified English Electric design but with Bulleid Firth Brown 'Boxpok' wheels, and is the sole survivor of 26 built.