



A DESTINATION AT EVERY STATION!



# Commercial Information Pack

## **Before closure...**

The railways grew up fast across Great Britain during the 19th and early 20th century. The train was a popular mode of transport and allowed many, for the first time, to explore other towns and cities.

Tunbridge Wells had two stations built by rival companies; Tunbridge Wells Central, opened in 1845 by the South Eastern Railway, which is now the sole mainline station, and Tunbridge Wells West, which was opened by the London Brighton & South Coast Railway in 1866. This latter is the headquarters of today's Spa Valley Railway. Around 1876, these two stations were linked by a tunnel enabling connections between the London to Brighton and the London to Hastings lines. From Tunbridge Wells West there were direct services to the south coast at Brighton and Eastbourne and northbound to London Victoria.

Passing into the ownership of the Southern railway in 1923, the route became a very popular cross country link with over 100 trains passing a day. Following nationalisation of the railways in 1948, Groombridge station was re-signalled a decade later, and steam finally gave way to diesel multiple units in the mid 1960s. Gradually lines began to close all around – the Eridge to Hailsham branch (the Cuckoo Line) in 1965, East Grinstead to Groombridge in 1967, and then Uckfield to Lewes in 1969.

Unfortunately as the popularity of the motor car increased, train services were severely cut back due to the lack of patronage and the Tunbridge Wells to Eridge section closed on 6th July 1985. The depot at Tunbridge Wells West did survive for another month with frequent empty coaching stock moves taking place on the line from Eridge.

The link to the mainline at Birchden Junction was finally removed in the early 1990s following the re-signalling of the Uckfield line. This resulted in the closure of numerous signal boxes and saw the line to Uckfield singled in places with passing loops installed at strategic locations. However this was to benefit the fledgling Tunbridge Wells & Eridge Railway Preservation Society later on...

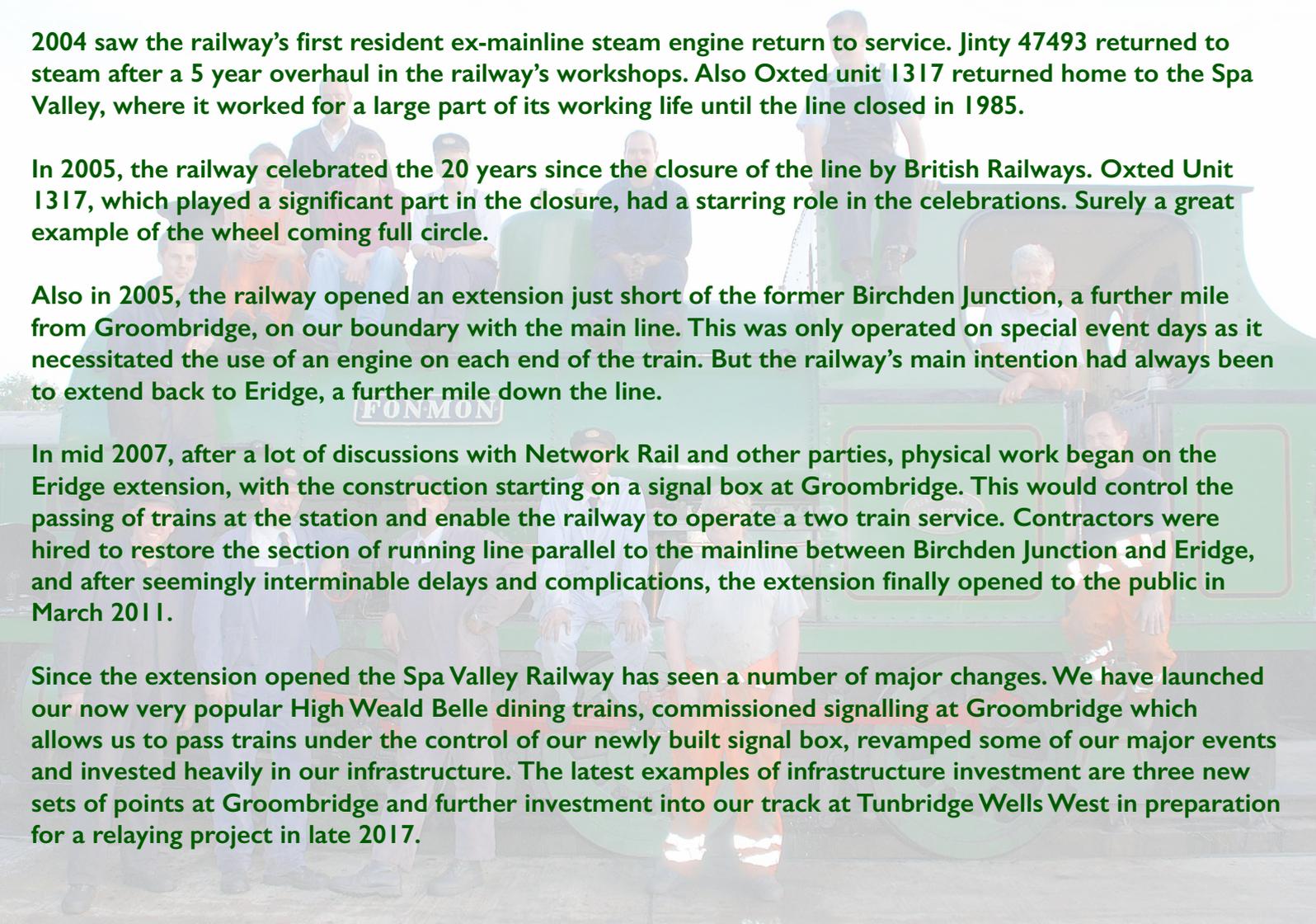
## Preservation...

Following closure and a hastily-convened meeting in Groombridge village hall, a charitable society was quickly established to fight for the reopening of the Tunbridge Wells to Eridge line. The group, blissfully unaware of the fact that anyone would use such an acronym to poke fun at them, named itself the “Tunbridge Wells and Eridge Railway Preservation Society” (TWERPS).

The next few years were a long, hard struggle against the ravages of vegetation, disinterest and outright hostility from some quarters, but in 1994, with a generous loan from Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, the society acquired the line. By winter 1996 they were running trains along half a mile of track towards Groombridge, hauled by RSH 0-6-0T “North Downs”. This was helped by a merger between TWERPS and the North Downs Steam Railway at Dartford, whose own long story is told elsewhere. Suffice to say the TWERPS had both the railway and the people who didn’t have the first idea about how to run it, and the NDSR had the trains and people who pretended to know how they worked. It was a marriage made in heaven, and the Spa Valley Railway was born.

After an amazing effort by members, the line was reopened through to Groombridge in August 1997, which took the total length up to three and a half miles. News spread about the route and passenger numbers rose. The owner of the High Rocks Inn built a station at High Rocks, half way between Tunbridge Wells and Groombridge which opened in August 1998.

Many improvements have been made since then including the introduction of new steam locomotives and rolling stock. Developments at Groombridge have seen a brand new station building, a signal box, refreshment kiosk and two canopies recovered from Gravesend West Street station, all being erected to a fine standard by a small group of volunteers since 1997.



2004 saw the railway's first resident ex-mainline steam engine return to service. Jinty 47493 returned to steam after a 5 year overhaul in the railway's workshops. Also Oxted unit 1317 returned home to the Spa Valley, where it worked for a large part of its working life until the line closed in 1985.

In 2005, the railway celebrated the 20 years since the closure of the line by British Railways. Oxted Unit 1317, which played a significant part in the closure, had a starring role in the celebrations. Surely a great example of the wheel coming full circle.

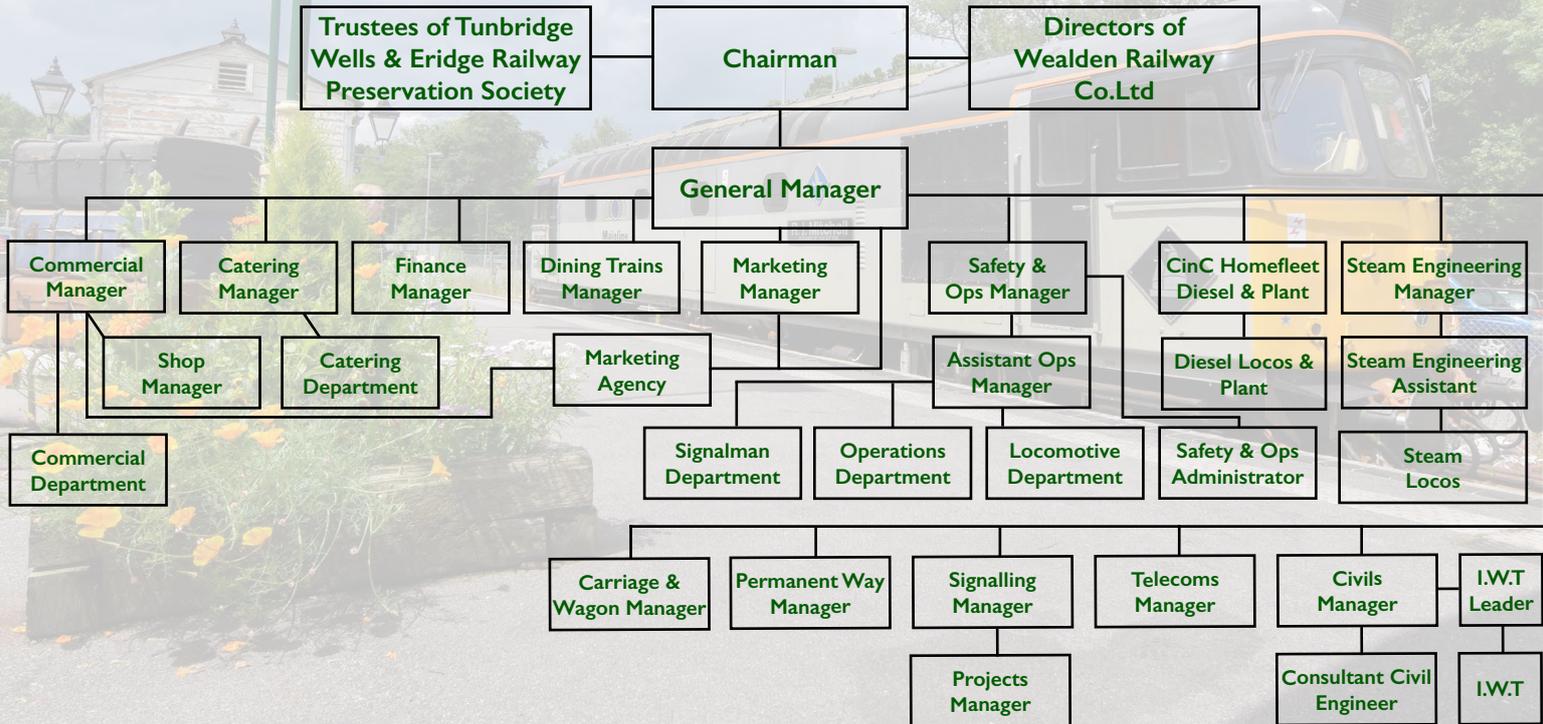
Also in 2005, the railway opened an extension just short of the former Birchden Junction, a further mile from Groombridge, on our boundary with the main line. This was only operated on special event days as it necessitated the use of an engine on each end of the train. But the railway's main intention had always been to extend back to Eridge, a further mile down the line.

In mid 2007, after a lot of discussions with Network Rail and other parties, physical work began on the Eridge extension, with the construction starting on a signal box at Groombridge. This would control the passing of trains at the station and enable the railway to operate a two train service. Contractors were hired to restore the section of running line parallel to the mainline between Birchden Junction and Eridge, and after seemingly interminable delays and complications, the extension finally opened to the public in March 2011.

Since the extension opened the Spa Valley Railway has seen a number of major changes. We have launched our now very popular High Weald Belle dining trains, commissioned signalling at Groombridge which allows us to pass trains under the control of our newly built signal box, revamped some of our major events and invested heavily in our infrastructure. The latest examples of infrastructure investment are three new sets of points at Groombridge and further investment into our track at Tunbridge Wells West in preparation for a relaying project in late 2017.

## The railways structure

The Spa Valley Railway is owned & operated by the Wealden Railway Co. Ltd, this is supported and majority share owned by the Tunbridge Wells & Eridge Railway Preservation Society Ltd. The railway is governed and managed by the Leadership Team, on which all managers are entitled to sit.



## Spa Valley Railway's Products

The organisation prides itself in offering high quality products to the customers throughout the year. A large events package is produced annually by the General Manager and then actively marketed by our Marketing Manager and Marketing Agency.

### **Dining products:**

- High Weald Belle Sunday Luncheon & Dining
- Afternoon Teas
- Cream Teas
- Fish & Chip Evening Suppers & Luncheons
- Murder Mystery Fish & Chip Suppers
- Curry Express
- Pie, Mash & a Pint nights
- Real Ale trains

### **Family products**

- See \*Character\* Weekends
- Day Out With Thomas (4 weekends per annum)
- Kids for a Quid
- Easter Specials
- Santa Specials
- Mince Pie Specials

All of these products are run at varying times of the year. It is vitally important to the business that these are run to the highest standard which will result in repeat custom, a continued good reputation and encourage all important 5-star reviews to be placed on review sites.

### **Enthusiast products:**

- Spring Diesel Weekend
- Summer Diesel Gala
- Autumn Diesel Gala
- CAMRA Real Ale & Cider Festival
- Spring Steam Weekend
- Summer Steam Festival

### **Railway Experience products:**

- Steam Locomotive Driver Experience
- Diesel Locomotive Driver Experience
- Diesel Multiple Unit Driver Experience
- Signaller/Signal Box Experience
- Footplate/Cab Rides

## **Spa Valley Railway Marketing**

The railway appointed a Marketing Manager (on a part time basis) and Marketing Agency (on a budget) in 2016. Along with group bookings these accounted for a 41% increase in visitor numbers for the Spa Valley Railway. Such a increase resulted in a large upturn in visitors (30,000 to 43,126) meant we were able to increase our budget for the marketing agency in 2017.

The Spa Valley Railway actively advertises using social media and now has over 14,000 likes on Facebook and 2,285 followers on Twitter. Advertising in magazines is undertaken when the price is right for us and we have received some amazing deals and promotions through our marketing agency.

We have made use of external providers, for example some of our dining experiences are sold through an external company which results in a larger audience and greater uptake. The number of High Weald Belle seats for 2016 had to increase from 48 to 78 by adding bar car 'Kate' to our formation.

Marketing is vital to the railways existence, without it the line would simply not exist. It is by far the greatest outgoing we face each year but does pay dividends with increased visitor numbers. The areas we market in are and will continue to be West Kent, East Kent (limited), East Sussex, West Sussex & Surrey.

In immediate surrounding areas such as Royal Tunbridge Wells, Tonbridge, Sevenoaks, Maidstone, Hastings, Brighton, Eastbourne, Lewes, Crowborough & Uckfield particular attention should be paid.

The current marketing programme is worthwhile and functioning as desired resulting in greater visitor numbers, however it will be reviewed on a monthly basis to ensure it remains current and effective.

## Spa Valley Railway Online

The railway started taking online bookings during January 2013 with the launch of our new website. This has proved very popular with large numbers of passengers choosing to book in advance and save time at ticket offices.

A big issue this created was the large amount of administrative work required behind the scenes to make it happen, thus a further change was launched in May 2016. The system now used is provided by Wilson Digital and is known as vTicket. This has helped ease the administrative load on our small team as the system now records all ticket sales using different reporting methods. It also provides e-Tickets or if selected the customer can receive tickets in the post – the resulting administrative work being managed by vTicket.

In 2017 the website will be revamped once again to be of a much more railway themed format. It will remain with vTicket and it is vital that the user friendliness is retained. The Spa Valley Railway follows the three click principle – the customer arrives onto the homepage and within three clicks they should be at the checkout stage and without needing to hunt for the product.

Data is collected through vTicket when a booking is made which shows how customers find the website. This provides us with useful knowledge of where our online marketing is working, such as Facebook or Google searches.

We will always monitor our website to ensure that it is modern and continuously up to date. In the modern age our website is the most important marketing tool and is such an easy way for us to receive advanced bookings.

To develop our on-site digital railway a new ticketing & EPOS system is to be introduced during 2017. This project, to find the best software for our railway, has been underway for three years.

## Spa Valley Railway Dining Trains

Fish & Chip specials were the railway's first dining adventure around ten years ago, since then we have taken them to a higher level with the introduction of Saturday Evening & Sunday Luncheon three course meal dining trains. The High Weald Belle, as these trains are known, was launched in 2013 and has grown increasingly popular ever since. The rise in popularity resulted in the need to increase capacity from 48 to 78 in late 2016. This has continued into 2017 with 78 seats now being available on all High Weald Belle services. The demand however is still growing and our trains are regularly now selling out without any marketing being required.

An addition to our 2016 calendar was Afternoon Tea on the train, this currently has a capacity of 30 seats however is likely to increase to 48 during 2017. This service has proved incredibly popular in a short space of time and will continue well into the future with a large number of dates in our calendar for 2017.

As part of the expansion of our on-train dining services the railway purchased a MKI Brake Gangway carriage in 2014 for conversion into a kitchen car. This carriage now has sufficient funds for the work to commence however is waiting for shed space. Once complete the kitchen car will operate with our current dining carriage.

With this kitchen car another MKI SO or FO will be acquired to increase our dining capabilities, this will then form its own three car train which could in time grow to four cars if required.

Dining is a vital part of the Spa Valley Railway's income and one that we now concentrate heavily on. We will continue to do so well into the future.

## **The Trains**

Having started operating in December 1996 the organisation has developed a heritage theme to the trains. Steam and diesels both have a place at the Spa Valley, the latter gives us a unique selling point as we're one of the only lines in the South East to operate diesel hauled trains and events on a regular basis.

This aspect of our operation proves very popular and will continue well into the future.

## **Retail outlets**

Currently the Spa Valley Railway has only one shop, located at Tunbridge Wells West - this provides us with a good source of income. A development plan of the Tunbridge Wells West site will lead to a much larger open-plan shop making it much more free-flowing than at present.

## **Catering outlets**

The railway offers catering at all stations and where possible on all trains, this is a much needed aspect of income. The static buffet at Tunbridge Wells West – 'Emily' – is capable of providing light hot snacks as well as the usual light refreshments. With the increase in visitor numbers we need this outlet to be open more often than it is at present and it should continue to develop its offering.

Groombridge's outlet is serving us well however it is envisaged that a new catering outlet will be constructed in the near future to continue improving our offering to the customer.

Eridge it is planned will receive a restored box van acting as the stations catering outlet in the near future, this will also sell a small variety of shop products such as branded souvenirs.

## Strategic Vision

A 2020 vision document was published during 2011 at the time the railway opened to Eridge. It has since been reviewed with a lot of the tasks listed having been completed or as a result of urgent actions having been superseded.

One big impact on the railway has been the landslip just to the west of Tunbridge Wells. Although we have never been in a situations where we've had to cancel services as a result of the slip we have been faced with a 5mph speed restriction through the site since this slip took place.

Throughout 2017 our 'Strategic Vision' document was written and is to be presented to the Leadership Team late this year for comments and to start the reviewing process.

Once published it will then be our time to concentrate on its priorities and deliver the strategic vision in a structured manner. As part of this document the railway's General Manager identified the need to seek a voluntary Commercial Manager which in time may result in part time employment.

This role was advertised in March 2017 and this document has been produced to provide potential candidates with a brief background of the Spa Valley Railway's commercial areas.

Upon their successful appointment to the railway, the Commercial Manager will be a vital component of delivering the Strategic Vision enabling the Spa Valley Railway to continue expanding well into the next twenty years.

The Spa Valley Railway at the present time is a 100% voluntary run organisation.

## The Immediate Future

2017 has been a very challenging year for the Spa Valley Railway so far, visitor numbers continue to be balanced with 2016, which has been assisted by opening early in our season and only being closed to the public for a period of around 3 weeks.

Dining trains have sold extremely well, with additional ones being added throughout the year to cope with demand. However in September 2017, one of our bridges located at Broom Lane near Langton Green was struck by a vehicle which damaged the bridge to the extent it prevented train movements over it for two weeks. This was a very difficult time for the Spa Valley Railway however with our determined volunteers we were able to keep on operating between Tunbridge Wells West and the closed bridge whilst repairs were planned in and undertaken by specialist contractors.

On a positive note however Driving Experience packages are constantly being improved to keep them fresh and also affordable for members of the public. Recent advertising has shown that the best days to undertake these experiences are at weekends – with the benefit of Groombridge Signal Box being in operation this is now possible at any time throughout the year.

The planning ahead for 2018 is nearly complete with events decided and changes to our operation agreed. Next season will also see the introduction of a new retail system throughout the railway.

All departments of the Spa Valley Railway welcome new volunteers throughout the year and full training will be given in every area where possible.

If you would like to join us please visit <http://www.spavalleyrailway.co.uk/article.php/8/volunteering>

We look forward to welcoming you into our railway family!