Shift … Adapt … Succeed
HRA Autumn Conference 2025
Day 1 - Tuesday 3 November 2026
Birmingham Conference & Exhibition Centre

Programme is subject to amendment as circumstances may dictate **– Last updated 26-10-26**

Kindly sponsored by Steam Railway Magazine

'Adapting to change when the world around us already has'

Two days of learning, reflection and inspiration with the opportunity to take-away ideas and real-life examples to keep your railway, tramway or rolling stock group on the front foot:

- Useable ideas to adapt to our changing weather patterns
- Actionable insights and opportunities to maximise visitor spend
- Strategies for engaging, inspiring and motivating volunteers
- Expert guidance on new legislation
- Meaningful connections to collaborate and help tackle the tough issues

Agenda - *Day 1*

08.30 Arrival, registration and refreshments

Main Hall

09.00 Welcome and introduction to the day

Steve Oates Chief Exec, HRA

09.10 "I don't regret it for one moment …" – Moving to oil burning – A case study

Paul Middleton Director of Mechanical Engineering, North Yorkshire Moors Railway

Completion of the first full-size steam locomotive oil conversion in the UK since the end of steam, the return to steam of USATC **No. 2253 *Omaha*** following its conversion to oil-burning is seen as a crucial step forward in future-proofing the busiest heritage railway in the country.

With no regrets on undertaking the project and wishing he'd done it sooner, Paul is very clear of the benefits of conversion in helping to reduce reliance on coal, reducing particulate emissions, and bringing resilience during hot weather periods.

09.40 Managing Track for Hot Weather

David Ventry Chairman of the Talyllyn Railway Company and former Head of Track Engineering at Network Rail

The recent heatwave across Europe has already caused track buckles on heritage railways, affecting several members. David will share his expertise on how to manage track to avoid buckles occurring and what to do if they happen.

10.10 **Developing a robust fire risk prevention system**

Matt Bell Chief Operations Officer, North Yorkshire Moors Railway

Lineside fires and, more widely, the risk of wildfires in very hot, dry conditions are presenting new challenges for heritage railways.

With lessons and tips for every heritage railway, Matt sets-out the work undertaken over the last few years at the NYMR to meet those challenges and develop a robust fire risk prevention system with multiple mitigations, covering equipment, lineside and conservation work, training, building positive relationships with the fire service, volunteer recruitment and training, and their leadership and management structures.

10.40 **Developing and implementing a severe weather plan**

Jonathan Dunster Managing Director, Severn Valley Railway

During a severe storm in January last year, a tree fell damaging and partially collapsing one of the wing walls of Mor Brook bridge on the Severn Valley Railway, causing a landslip, discharging material into the brook and severing the line and seriously restricting operations for six months.

Learning from Mor Brook and other weather events, Gus takes us through the SVR's Severe Weather Plan to enhance safety, reduce operational risk and minimise the impact of weather hazards on passengers, staff and volunteers

11.10 **Break - Tea/Coffee and an opportunity to Connect with Colleagues**

11.30 **Hot stuff from Tywyn**
– All steamed up! But keeping our cool: Staff wellbeing and safety in hot weather

Lorraine Simkiss and Liz Porrett Joint GMs, Talyllyn Railway

12.00 **Dartmouth Steam Railway Fire Train**

Nick Dunn Director of H&S and Railway Operating Manager, Dartmouth Steam Railway

12.30 **The Panel**

A selection of speakers from this mornings' sessions reflect on the issues and challenges raised …

13:00 **Lunch** … and the opportunity to **Connect with Colleagues**

14.00 Choice of Afternoon Sessions in Main Conference Hall, Break Out Room and Bar Area

14.00 to 16.00 Bar Area

Grants & Funding drop-in 'Advice Surgery'

Sian Mexsom Mexsom Associates Limited, Fundraising consultancy and interim management and **Edmund Southworth Chair** HRA Museums Committee

14.00 to 16.45 Main Hall

14.00 Preserving the past - inspiring the future

Michael Whitehouse Chairman of HRA premier Partner Vintage Trains

Costs are rising and some heritage railways are struggling with reducing passenger numbers, aging volunteers and engineering expertise. But there are solutions in co-operation and collaboration which the mainline tour the day before the conference – a collaboration between Vintage Trains, Severn Valley Railway and the HRA to mark 75 years of heritage rail volunteering - will demonstrate.

With Vintage Trains also about to enter an MoU with the Talyllyn to celebrate and develop their pioneer connections, Michael discusses opportunities for the future with collaboration and different thinking,

14.30 The Regulatory Bit! - Managing Health and Safety During Challenging Times

Simon Barber HM Principal Inspector of Railways, ORR

With a variety of different challenges facing heritage railways, the ORR will provide their view on key areas of focus to ensure your heritage railway continues to operate safely.

15.00 Break - Tea/Coffee and an opportunity to Connect with Colleagues

15.20 Lessons learned from the investigation into the derailment on the Churnet Valley Railway

Greg Wilson General Manager, Churnet Valley Railway

15.45 **Heritage Railways and the New Planning Landscape – Risks and Opportunities from changes to the NPPF**

Simon Hickman Heritage Director, Avalon Planning and Trustee, Avon Valley Railway

Simon explores the Government's increasing emphasis on economic growth, investment, infrastructure, tourism, regeneration and rural prosperity, and contends that the railways that flourish over the coming decades will be those that understand how to position themselves not only as heritage assets, but as economic assets - Not only as guardians of the past, but as contributors to the future. And above all, those that engage with the planning system early enough to shape it rather than simply react to it.

16.15 **Suspend Disbelief! – And prepare for 'Martyn's Law'**

John Bailey Chair, HRA Legal and Parliamentary Advisory Committee

There is no avoiding the additional regulatory burden that the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 imposes. So many organisations - from modest village halls to major concert venues to heritage railways - are within its scope. John assesses the implications for heritage railways and tramways, and highlights the need to be preparing now in readiness for the Act coming into force in April.

14.00 to 16.00 Break-out Room

14.00 **Making the most of your Commercial Partnership**

Jo Silsbury HRA Business Development & Membership Manager
An interactive workshop for commercial partners

14.20 **Leveraging the Benefits from the Network Rail Supply Chain**

Steven Kendell Staytite and **Rob Taylor** Interflon

14.40 **Optimising your Revenue from Events and Passengers**

Joan Lind Managing Director, TryBooking
An interactive workshop to hear and share new ideas

15.00 **Break - Tea/Coffee and an opportunity to Connect with Colleagues**

15.20 **It isn't all bad!**

Olly Edwards General Manager and **Nick Brodrick** Deputy General Manager, Fox & Edwards Events

Head-to-head in conversation, Olly and Nick explore key commercial insights from their own programme that can help your railway's visitor numbers and revenue.

15.40 **AI Search is here – are you ready?**

Neil Lewin Managing Director, Semantic

AI Search is here, are you ready? More and more visitors are now using tools like ChatGPT, Google AI Overviews and Perplexity to plan days out, and these tools decide which attractions to recommend. This session looks at how AI search works, what it means for heritage railways and visitor attractions, and the practical steps you can take now to make sure your website and content are found.

Main Hall

16.45 **Round-up and Close**

Steve Oates HRA Chief Exec

16.50 **The HRA Members and Partners Drinks Reception Hosted by Steam Railway Magazine with canapes kindly sponsored by Rail Events Inc**

- Drinks Reception and the opportunity for all delegates and exhibitors to **Connect with Colleagues**, kindly supported by Steam Railway Magazine and Rail Events

18.30 **End**

Please Note: Programme is subject to amendment as circumstances may dictate. The timings are approximate throughout the day and may be subject to change as necessary.

The 'nominated pub' for evening meeting and networking is the Old Joint Stock, 4 Temple Row, Birmingham