

Too Old for Thomas, Too Young to Work?

Working with the 11-16 age group in heritage rail

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Introduction

The heritage railway movement was started by enthusiastic volunteers and though the proportion and contribution of paid staff has increased as the railways have developed and expanded, heritage rail is still strongly associated with volunteering. Indeed, it is doubtful that the movement as we know it could continue without volunteers for, as Tillman observed “running a traditional railway requires the same operational staff as the original” (Tillman, 2004: 39) – a hopelessly uneconomic proposition for a purely commercial enterprise. Unsurprisingly, there is concern about how the now ageing members of the “baby boomer” generation (i.e. those born between 1946 and 1963) will be replaced in sufficient numbers. This discussion report is concerned with the most recent of generations, the “i-genners” (i.e. those born between 1995 and 2012) who may or may not have replaced today’s 50/60+ year old army of volunteers by the year 2050.

The author is an emeritus professor of education with long and diverse experience of teaching and youth work -and also a working volunteer on two heritage railways. Were a researcher to ask the author why he devotes so many hours of his “retirement” to various somewhat demanding tasks on his two railways, that researcher would receive the reply “ever since I can remember, the steam age railway has been part of my soul. Don’t ask me why, it just has.” This qualitative datum point achieved through introspection will prove significant.

Why the i-genners? One reason is that they have been the focus of the author’s working life for over forty-five years and he knows them pretty well. Another is that

it [is] unlawful to employ young people under 16 on railways, and, as interpreted through later legislation, this has now been taken to include volunteers. No prosecution has ever been brought under section 1 of the Act, and the provision languished unnoticed on the statute book for many years, until it was brought to light in 2015. (APPGHR, p11)

As *Rail Staff* magazine commented in July 2018:

this obstruction, which has made managers reluctant to allow work to be taken by under 16-year-olds, risks losing this young demographic altogether to railways, as they find another outlet for their interests at a crucial stage in their lives. (*Rail Staff*, 27th July 2018)

Mindful that properly conducted research can often reveal findings that are counter-intuitive, the author approached the task of investigating “volunteering” on heritage railways by U16s with a degree of professional scepticism and two research questions:

1. Is the facilitation of opportunities to “volunteer” the best and most appropriate form of provision for 11 – 16s?
2. Can it be demonstrated that participation between the ages of 11 and 16 results in committed volunteering at adult level?

To this was inevitably added a compulsion to understand as much as possible why any 12-year-old, popularly believed to be immersed in and conditioned by social media, might want even to experience travel on a heritage railway, let alone aspire to work on one.

The Nature of Adult Volunteering

We will begin by considering briefly what volunteering is and why adults do it before moving on to consider the extent to which children might be different (or indeed similar). The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) defines volunteering as:

any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. Central to this definition is the fact that volunteering must be a choice freely made by each individual.

The key concept here is the self-sacrificing orientation to self-evidently “good cause” beneficiaries such as social groups in need or more latterly environmental protection. Academic studies such as Parker (2010) or Millar (1994) have found that heritage volunteering is more likely to be motivated by enjoyment of the resource itself than through social relations or feelings of obligation. This is particularly the case in heritage rail volunteering where Rhoden et al (2009) concluded that the primary motive of heritage rail volunteers was “selfish” i.e. derived from a personal interest in steam railways, although recognition of the role of the railways in giving others an enjoyable day out was also significant. Similar results were reported by Tillman (2002), Goddin (2002), Payne (2008) and Canning (2008). Payne cites as typical motivation “I’ve always loved trains” whilst Canning discusses the tension between the hedonism of “playing trains” and the “more noble” aim of presenting an accurate and educational account of history.

Are Children any Different?

The author was unable to locate any similar research with children¹. This may be the first serious attempt to tackle the issue and the short answer to the question appears to be “no”. Extended conversations with children at the railway where the author is leader of the Youth Development Scheme have been undertaken over a period of time, supplemented by quantitative data through a survey. Four other railways have been visited to date (the project is ongoing) and children have been spoken to, either informally during activity sessions or more formally in convened focus groups. Other railways have kindly supplied documentation and written responses. Some will be visited during 2019. The answers given could not be differentiated from those given by adults in other research (see above). For example, “I’ve always had a passion for it, for steam trains, since as young as I can remember” (14yo, Bluebell Railway). A preference for steam over modern traction amongst 11 - 14-year-olds was notable. There was no suggestion that interest in steam might fade as those old enough to remember it die off. “It’s the smell and the noise. I’m in love with trains” (13yo, Severn Valley Railway).

Concerning the “more noble” aim of presenting an accurate and educational account of history, at least some children seem explicitly signed up to the ideals of heritage. For example, another 13-year-old on the Severn Valley Railway: “It’s breathing history. I want to be part of that history”. It is clearly important to understand the source of this passion and it has been evident from the work so far that it is not the railways themselves. Children arrived at the railways with their enthusiasm already well-developed. None of the larger railways pro-actively recruited. Indeed, almost the reverse was the case. Both Severn Valley and Bluebell used waiting-lists to control numbers, ensuring that high

¹ The term “children” is used, although “boys” might more accurately reflect the very heavy gender bias observed (see end-note).

(typically 2:1) ratios of adult supervision could be maintained and sufficient quality activities provided. The railways' reputation was the key factor in the children seeking them out. The author's experience with his own youth team bears this out. Where children have turned up with an enthusiasm already formed, they have invariably stayed. Children brought to the railway from local schools to generate interest have generally not stayed.

Why should a modern child born after 2005 have a passion for steam engines? Here, the railways do have a key role to play. As one 13-year-old stated, "We haven't stopped using them". The sight, sound, smell and feel of a steam engine at work evidently had the same appeal to such a child as to a child born in the 1950s – the critical difference being that it was the heritage railways that provided the opportunity. As with the shed-bunking activities of their forebears in the 1950s, it seems that merely being close to the objects of their devotion suffices for some. A 12-year-old at the Bluebell Railway, excusing himself for not possessing a model railway at home (almost all the others did), explained that "I like steam trains and I come so that I can be amongst the engines and go where the public don't go." Does this need to be Thomas the Tank Engine? A 12-year-old at the Tanfield Railway explained the source of his interest by stating, "My Dad brought me here to see Thomas when I was five". However, according to a 13-year-old at the Severn Valley, "There's an unwritten law we don't talk about Thomas. It's an abomination. A train with a face that can drive itself. How does it do that?"

However, whilst Thomas may be of doubtful value, it would seem that miniature steam railways have much to offer 11 – 16s, being an environment where much practical learning can develop through activities that would necessarily be proscribed on the full-size railway. The most popular event of the year for the author's own youth team was a day's visit to the Ryedale Society of Model Engineers, home to a show piece GL5 (Ground Level) 5" gauge railway. The opportunity to drive the trains, responding to the complex mainline signalling system completely captured the young people's enthusiasm who clamour constantly for a repeat visit. This would appear to be the experience elsewhere. For example, the miniature railway at Kidderminster welcomes SVR children, readily finding jobs for them. According to their leader, "they get the chance to ride and drive. This goes down very well." The Bluebell Railway has an established relationship with two miniature railways that are visited regularly. Their leader's view was that "The kids like going and the railways like having them because they help with jobs. It's a less restrictive environment and they can get to drive trains, which is very popular."

Children were also found to be similar to adults with regard to activities such as restoration, another major attraction for heritage rail volunteers. This is a more difficult area for children with many health and safety issues and entry to heavy engineering workshops being proscribed. Nevertheless, a 13-year-old in the author's railway is campaigning for the youth team to restore their own wagon, an activity that was well-established for the Tanfield Railway youth when the author visited. Another 13-year-old on the author's railway who was allowed to help dismantle a steam locomotive rated this experience as his most enjoyed activity of the year. A similarly aged boy on the Severn Valley stated that carriage and wagon restoration was his main interest and appeared highly knowledgeable about the topic. Significantly, though, an area where the young people on all railways almost universally lacked knowledge was that of machine tools. Very few could describe a lathe or its function, let alone some of the less well-known tools found in a machine shop. This is partly a result of prohibitions on entering workshops but must also be a reflection on the collapse of traditional engineering and metalwork in schools.

Although popularly demonised as being interested in nothing but computer games and social media, the children observed were keen to be physically active. Labouring tasks such as shovelling ash were particularly popular. The children also want to learn traditional machine skills. A course in basic

engineering skills (including simple lathe work) was ranked top choice for new activities by those surveyed on the author's railway. How this might be organised and delivered is currently a matter of much thought. Collaboration with a local model engineering society is one possibility.

Finally, studies of adults have found the camaraderie of other volunteers to be important. The young people spoken to did not bring this topic up of their own volition, but their leaders felt the opportunity to associate with like-minded individuals was significant. There was some evidence that membership of a railway's junior club did bestow a sense of identity and esteem. For example, a thirteen-year-old on the Severn Valley described how he liked "being seen by members of the public in overalls". It was very rare to find two children from the same school together at a railway. Those spoken to were ambivalent about the degree they might talk about their interest at school. Some saw no particular issue with this, whilst others clearly felt that it wasn't a "cool" thing to be known for and probably best kept a secret at school. Whilst the children were observed generally to get on well with each other at the railways, sometimes engaging in friendly banter, specifically social activities were not particularly desired. On the author's railway, "A social event (e.g. Xmas party or similar)" received significantly the lowest survey rating. Although some railways encouraged the involvement of their young people in governance, e.g. through attending the AGM of the junior club, this was not a popular activity. At this stage in their careers, most young people would appear to want to get 'stuck in' with the 'hands-on' aspects such as cleaning pits and have little interest in 'railway politics'.

Where children and adults are different

A concept discussed in the academic literature that is almost certainly an important analytic tool is that of *serious leisure*. The concept of serious leisure was proposed by Stebbins (1982) and taken up enthusiastically by Parker (1992). Serious leisure differs from amateur activity and hobbyist pursuits in three important respects. There is a need to persevere at it and requirement to be committed to it. There is a tendency to have a "career" in it, i.e. to progress through grades as a result of necessary training and examination. There are durable benefits not offered by "unserious leisure" such as qualifications, feelings of accomplishment and enhancement of self-image but there is also a significant commitment. Adult volunteers must submit themselves to the roster, a very clear obligation to report for duty at the required time. There is also the question of ongoing competence demonstration with the prospect of significant sanctions in the event of errors. These, and other considerations applicable to safety critical operations such as increasingly rigorous training, testing and medical examination place clear water between adults and children. In this sense the child enthusiast can be likened to adult amateur hobbyists, but not to heritage volunteers. This is unproblematic for younger children if provision is conceived as what is effectively a hobby club. For older children, the situation becomes more complex.

The 14 – 16 problem

There is little doubt that the age of 14 is a key progression point. In the school curriculum, children pass from lower secondary (Key Stage 3) to their GCSE years (Key Stage 4) during the year they attain 14 years of age. Almost all the railways ascribed some significance to the 14th birthday although in law there is no difference between a thirteen-year-old and a fifteen-year-old. They are both "children" and the one no more eligible to volunteer than the other. There is thus a significant degree of tension between, on the one hand the desire to recognise increasing seniority, experience and maturity, offering increased responsibility and opportunity commensurate with this, and on the other the need to remain within the law. The solution favoured in HRA MO300 is the provision of work experience,

which is permitted by the 1996 Education Act. The Act defines an over 14-year-old as “in his last two years of compulsory schooling as from the beginning of the last two school years at his school during the whole or part of which he is of compulsory school age” (560, F1.2). This is not the same as the 14th birthday which occurs for almost all children during the previous school year.

The work experience or “employability training” solution has been in use at the author’s own railway for four years and data area available on the results. In summary, the scheme has resulted in a good working relationship with the local secondary school and favourable publicity for the railway in local media. It has not, however, resulted in any significant recruitment of young volunteers. Out of 20 young people who have been through the scheme, two have enrolled as youth members and one has gained part-time catering employment on the railway.

The possible reasons for this are considered by Tillman who observes that

Young people want interesting experiences that will contribute to their career development by offering opportunities to learn new skills, take on challenges, explore different careers and obtain work experience. (Tillman, 2004: 42).

This, indeed, is how the scheme has been presented by the author’s railway. It is stressed to the young people that the opportunities are generic and applicable across a wide range of industries, particularly tourism and leisure, on the grounds that a school assembly about “volunteering on the railway” would not appeal to many young people.

Rightly or wrongly, other railways have preferred to offer progression routes for their existing junior club members. The Bluebell adopts the approach of prolonging membership of the “9F club” until the age of 16. At this age, the young people can “retire” to seek such volunteering opportunities as are available for 16-year-olds but may also retain their links with the club through becoming “young leaders”. This appears to be a successful strategy as there is a good supply of older teenagers who act as role models and motivators for younger children and in some cases progress to becoming adult supervisors. The railway reports a very good retention rate with ex 9F members becoming working volunteers either on the Bluebell itself or other nearby “younger” railways where promotion can be quicker. Unfortunately, no actual hard data were available to quantify this.

Membership of the Severn Valley Junior Club ends on the fourteenth birthday and young people wishing to continue their career with the railway are passed to the Volunteer Liaison Officer who arranges carefully supervised placements for them. The railway is fortunate enough to possess a large number of “nominated volunteers” who are suitable and willing to mentor a young person. The mentors are rostered, and the young person may only attend when their mentor is present. The supervision ratio is extremely high, effectively 1:1. All departments take youngsters, though the VLO reports a preference for “playing trains” over work such as P Way. On train ticket inspection is a popular route. There is a grade of TTI trainer and several volunteers in this grade are willing to mentor U16s, resulting in a strong workforce in this department. The U16s also gain experience in on-train catering and stations, although the opportunities are carefully vetted. For example, U16s are not allowed at Highly station where there is a narrow platform and heavy footfall to the Engine House Visitor Centre.

There is no formal system of competences for the U16s, they are there very much in an introductory capacity, becoming known in their chosen departments through their presence and identification with their mentors. Places are found for them in both steam MPDs and diesel TMD. Although there is regular progression into steam, the VLO reported that the Kidderminster TMD was particularly popular. “The diesel groups are magnetic”. This is in part because the U16s are very much welcomed

there and able to associate with relatively young volunteers as well as retired teachers who create an atmosphere of knowing how to relate to young people. The occasional cab ride is a further incentive. Signalling is harder to manage, mainly owing to issues of lone working and the difficulties that attach to signallers being alone with minors. This is a problem that remains right up until age 18 and was also reported by the Bluebell, where accompanied observations in signal boxes were sometimes permitted. The Severn Valley has experimented with a new grade of “box boy” that is available to 16 - 18-year-olds, though only in certain signalboxes where there is a direct connection to the station platform.

There is no definite pattern of attendance by Severn Valley U16s, the availability of mentors being the crucial factor. Some attend weekly, other at less regular intervals. Although the railway has volunteer accommodation, this is not available to U16s who may need to be brought to the railway by parents much as U14s do. In one case the mother and son travel from Warwick and stay in a B&B. The majority of U16s are ex-junior club members, but not all. Some do come directly to the railway and although 14-year-olds can be accepted, the railway prefers the greater maturity of 15-year-olds. Interestingly the VLO reported that there are sometimes cases of sullen teenagers being pushed into it by parents, direct entrants being not always as committed as ex junior club graduates.

The North Norfolk Railway has provided comprehensive documentation, although a research visit to the railway remains pending at the time of writing. The documentation refers to a migration process where ex-members of the Young Volunteers Club can become at 14 “fully-fledged volunteers” through a “supervised transition process”, when “a number of different operating grades will be opened up”. Club membership is stated as available between 10 and 16. Formal training for footplate grades is not available until 16 although 14-16s are permitted to “see steam engines in action” and “have a go”. As with other railways, TTI is seen as a good progression route on the journey towards becoming a guard. Training can be commenced at 14 and it is stressed that it is a really good way of boosting confidence, a point that is also made in the author’s railway employability training scheme. Training for platform supervisor can also begin straight away at 14, with passing out in this grade possible on the 16th birthday. Juniors on the NNR are also invited to help with the Weybourne Model Railway. The popularity and significance of this in relation to miniature lines associated with other railways has yet to be established.

Discussion points pending future recommendations

The Value of Heritage Rail

- Comments received from the young people spoken to support the contention that a good heritage experience with historic rolling stock, stations and above all, steam locomotives, does speak to youth. For as long as the railways present a good heritage experience, there are children who will respond. There should not be undue “panic” about social media and sedentary computer-based lifestyles. It is only logical to recognise, welcome and nurture the interest that does exist in some young people.
- Notwithstanding the above, the research supports the proposition that it is not the heritage experience itself that creates the interest in the first place. As Gilbert Thomas wrote in 1947 “Mankind may divided into two categories those who are railway lovers and those who are not.” (cited in Carter, 2008). The reasons for this remain a psychological mystery well beyond the brief or competence of this paper to answer. What the paper has shown is that Thomas’s observation is ongoing and socially reproductive. Thus, whilst the railways may not create the disposition, they need to be open to it and do all they can to capture it for their own ends. It

is equally important that they avoid actions that discourage it or turn potential young volunteers in other directions.

- Events such as *Thomas the Tank Engine* may have some marginal value in that the latent interest of a young child who might not otherwise visit a railway is kindled. The research suggests, however, that where the recruitment of future volunteers is concerned, this is at best a secondary consideration. The primary need is to speak to the parents of children who already show significant and intelligent interest through, for example, the committed ownership of serious model railways.

Leadership

- Good and effective leadership is obviously important. This research has shown, however, that this comes overwhelmingly from parents and ex-parents. A persistent pattern is emerging whereby the most successful youth ventures are started by parents who are also themselves working volunteers, particularly in motive power departments. Whilst it might seem shrewd to make a case for creating roles such as railway youth leaders, the evidence supports the view that working volunteer parents have been and are very effective in the role. The qualities that count the most are the commitment to youth that comes from parenthood and the understanding of the railway environment that comes from rule-book competence. All the railways visited were meticulous in their attention to matters of child protection and the application of relevant health and safety legislation. It is doubtful that similar standards could be achieved by anybody unfamiliar with a railway rule-book.
- There is some evidence that the course of events is influenced by the nature of the volunteers that young people meet on the railways. Young people will go where there is encouragement. This encouragement may certainly come from relatively young, “cool” role model volunteers, but it may also come from “grandfather” figures who take an interest. Volunteers with teaching or youth work experience may help create the right environment provided their attitude has not become jaded (or power-crazed). A workshop full of “grumpy old men” is likely to have the opposite effect.

The age of 14 as a key progression point in under 16 provision.

- In many ways, the U14s appear the easier group to provide for. The most effective provision seems to be through the “junior club” approach. This might be called simply a “junior club” or it might be given a title such as “9F Club” on the Bluebell, “Sygnets” on the Swanage, or “Strivers” on the author’s own railway. Either way, it can be clear that the activity is a nurture group and interest club for children. Given the current concerns with the law on volunteering, inclusion of the word “volunteer” in any activity for U14s seems a needless distraction that is better avoided.
- Even with 14 – 16-year-olds, terminology such as “work experience/shadow” or “departmental placement” may be preferable to “volunteering”. Once a young person is committed by rostering to a defined role it is difficult to argue that they are not working and therefore potentially subject to bylaws requiring a local authority employment permit. However, there was little evidence that any of the railways visited required adult level roster

commitments. Mentoring schemes such as that operated by the Severn Valley clearly lend themselves to the concept of a departmental placement rather than kind of commitment that is made by adult volunteers. It is arguable that between the ages of 14 and 16, young people should begin to develop their own ideas as to whether they are content to be amateur railway hobbyists or wish to go down the road of “serious leisure” (see above) or even to seek apprenticeships or paid employment within the rail industry. To work shadow a dedicated mentor might be seen as an appropriate means of achieving this.

Is it Youth Work?

- Comparisons might be drawn between railway junior clubs and other youth opportunities such as scouting. The National Youth Agency (NYA) sees youth work as transformational, *harnessing skills of young people not fulfilled by formal education*. The Scout Association lists its principal aim as to actively engage and support young people in their personal development, empowering them to make a positive contribution to society. Heritage railways operate outside the formal education sector and can argue that they do harness skills of young people and develop a set of practical or technical skills and competences. There was little evidence, however, that any of the railways went as far as “exploring values, beliefs, ideas and issues” or enabling young people to “develop their voice, influence and place in society” (NYA, 2018). Whether or not they should is perhaps a moot point. None of the railways held the kind of weekly meetings familiar in Scouting or similar forms of youth work and little need or desire for this was elicited.

The need for hard data

3. Finally, all the railways visited were keen to stress high retention and conversion rates from junior club through youth volunteering to adult commitment. This was certainly evidenced by a number of introductions to young adult volunteers who had started as junior club members. Unfortunately, none of the railways kept hard data, which makes it more difficult to argue the case for junior clubs, or to answer with any kind of rigour the question “Can it be demonstrated that participation between the ages of 11 and 16 results in committed volunteering at adult level?”

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Appendix Railways reporting the existence of formally organised provision for U16s

- Those in bold have provision for U14s
- Those highlighted green have provided data
- Those highlighted darker green have been visited and observed.

Aln Valley Railway (Little Lionhearts)
Avon Valley
Bluebell Railway (9F Club)
Chinnor & Princes Risborough
Didcot Railway Centre
East Somerset Railway
Elsecar Heritage Railway
Ffestiniog Railway
Gloucestershire & Warwickshire Railway
Helston Railway
Isle of Wight Railway
Llangollen Railway
Leighton Buzzard Railway
Middleton Railway
Mid Hants (Watercress) Railway
North Yorkshire Moors Railway (2006)
NELPG

Nene Valley Railway
Northampton Steam Railway
North Norfolk Railway (1997)
Pontypool & Blaenavon
Romney, Hythe & Dymchurch
Severn Valley Railway (1990)
Sir Nigel Gresley Loco Trust
South Tynedale Railway (Strivers)
Stockton & Darlington Youth Team
Strathspey Railway
Swanage Railway (Sygnets)
Tallylyn Railway (Tracksiders)
Tanfield Railway
Welshpool & Llanfair Railway (1994)
West Somerset Railway
Wirral Heritage Tramway