

INFRASTRUCTURE YEAR IN REVIEW 2015

By Mike Hopps

A year of solid progress, with a few highlights worth mentioning ...

This has been a busy year for the Infrastructure Department, but as usual, much of what has been achieved is not particularly obvious as you whizz past in a train. However, those who travel the line regularly will be aware of a much smoother ride down Freshfield

Bank and at River Slip where the celebrated lurching to the west has now been eliminated following the first big job of 2015 during the January engineering closure. Ninety tons of concrete and eight deep piles later and we have a solid embankment that is to the Bluebell Railway what the new sea wall is to Dawlish – but thankfully without two high tides every day!

Other work has included the making of an exterior level indicator for the water tower at East Grinstead that was much needed and often requested. Not because anyone ever thought it might be empty with an automatic filling mechanism fitted; but a visual check just puts worried minds at rest. So a quick look now and again saves a climb up the tower to look inside and so replaces a useful bit of exercise and a former source of amusement between trains and selling tickets!

From April we were involved with moving a lot of Infrastructure supplies to the yard at West Hoathly as we started to tidy up and clear the Salt Yard in readiness for OP4. A new (well, new to us) mess room / cabin was also brought in and painted green to match the surroundings, while possibly trashing Banksy murals in the process. We also used the opportunity to burn a lot of old sleepers and Carriage and Wagon rubbish that even the woodworm had long given up on. The rather spectacular fires (doesn't creosote burn well!), were tended faithfully by our resident pyromaniac for reasons of safety—until we were forced to rethink the idea following a call from the Gatwick control tower!

Later on there was a bit of an emergency job with point 22 (the one by the box at Horsted Keynes at the south end of Platform 2), where the ground had got a bit soggy and trains had been forbidden to use 2 road. The whole crossing was lifted, ground scraped, layered with Terram, reballasted and relaid with all S & T services connected within the week. No doubt the next bridal party were more than a little pleased that they didn't have to negotiate the subway before the nuptials, and later on "Bittern" was delighted that it didn't have to watch its paintwork being scraped on platforms 4 and 5 during the Gala.



OP4 site cleared and ready for piling.



Piling rig in a sea of mud.

During the Summer, the loco department got quite excited when they heard that we were installing a turntable on the cripple siding at East Grinstead; but while they were considering just what to do with the locos on return at their end, it was realised that it was just a stunt for a filming job—and the rail vehicle arriving to do the testing was in fact a Smart car with flanged wheels. It is a shame that our locos aren't as easy to turn around, but if you raise the funds we will build a real one for you!



Mud, mud, glorious mud. The road railer nearly gets stuck.

More finishing off and snagging was done at the periphery of the tip, with the final run of fencing along the boundary line now separating us from the rest of West Sussex and causing some embarrassment when we realised that with only a single gate on to Imberhorne Lane, we couldn't get the diggers out. Double gates were made and installed rather quickly and you can't even see the join!

So after all the fun in the first half of the year, the remainder of our time has been spent clearing the Salt Yard ready for OP4. Work has progressed well despite the atrocious weather this Autumn and at times the mixture of mud and ash has at times resembled Belgium in 1918; even the road railer was struggling last week. Much of this endeavour has already been reported, but virtually the whole area is now clear apart from the Carriage & Wagon workshop stores container, which for operational reasons will have to be moved around a bit from time to time as construction work progresses.

The piling contractors were able to make a start last Monday, laying down temporary access roads with hardcore so that the piling rig doesn't get bogged down and on Tuesday they started laying out lines to mark the drilling positions. At the last minute it was discovered that the line of several piles coincided with the line of the gas supply to Carriage & Wagon heating, so yet another task was completed in haste burying a new pipe under Station Approach.

As we approach the festive season all the members of the Infrastructure team would like to send best wishes to all the train crews who merrily wave to us as they pass by wondering why we never seem to be doing anything. Well done lads—but can you remember to use a few more fingers next year!