



Minutes of the Officers' Conference

**Sunday 24 October 2021 at
Holiday Inn Taunton TA1 2UA**

Please note that the full list of those present and apologies given are included at the end of the minutes as Appendix 1.

1 Opening of Conference by Society Chairman

The Conference was opened by Society Chairman Callum MacLeod promptly at 09.15 as there was a tight schedule for the day. Those who were attending Conference for the first time were welcomed (Steve Dexter – Milton Keynes; Paul Treby – Merseyside, Cheshire and North Wales; Matthew Shaw – Trustee; Geoff Brockett – South Essex; Eric Willis – South Wales).

Callum confirmed the value of including a request for donations in the membership renewals letters in that almost £2700 had been received including a single donation of £1000. With Gift Aid this could be worth 25% more. A certificate of Appreciation – the first, has been issued to David Beeken who has been a member of West Riding Branch since 1971 and has spent 50 years as branch treasurer there. The certificate was given to West Riding Branch Secretary Bob Green to present to David. Quote from Bob Green "David is worth it".

2 Apologies for Absence

As there was a long list of apologies, these were not read out. Four Trustees had tendered their apologies, the remaining seven were present. The full list of apologies is included as part of Appendix 1 to these minutes. No further apologies were received at the Conference.

3 President's Address

We were delighted to welcome our President to Conference this year. Brian outlined the initial planning and vision for this year's Members' Weekend and the work that had been put in by Roger Newman (*lost to Covid in 2020*) and Paul Udey both of whom had had issues. Brian thanked Reg and Jacky Wood for taking over and for their extraordinary efforts. That it has been a successful and enjoyable event is largely down to Roger's organisation which gave Reg a base to work on – but with much work still to be done. Thanks were given to everyone who has contributed.

Brian emphasised how important it is to get back together to rebuild; that it is important for branches to have face to face meetings where possible. At Bristol, they were initially fearful but were amazed that 46 people attended the September meeting – people were delighted to be there. We are beginning to move forward.

Brian wanted to say this, to be encouraging. We are now in a good place, in good spirit facing a new normality but we cannot let our guard down and we must still be careful. He said simply thank you for commitment, time and vision. It is superb that we are visiting the Lynton & Barnstable Railway this afternoon.

Thank you and keep up the good work.

4 Confirmation of the 2019 Minutes

There were no objections or matters arising. Acceptance was proposed by David Goddard (21347 – Windsor & Maidenhead), seconded Steve Ollive (14617 – Windsor & Maidenhead), and unanimously accepted by all present. Guest Lorraine Green was introduced.

5a) Brief Discussion of Activities over the Past 18 months

(Notes to help the discussion had been circulated with the agenda in advance of Conference)

This was led by the Chairman who began by saying that it had been nearer 2 years now rather than 18 months. Over that time Zoom has been used a lot for virtual meetings. The Board of Trustees (BoT) has met by Zoom several times and about half of the branches have used or are using Zoom with some international attendances enabled as a result of the virtual format. The RO Editorial Conference via Zoom meant that RO Topic Editor Andrew Lait who lives in Canada could attend.

Recruitment is currently good and David Goddard (Membership) confirmed that there were 2710 members at the end of September 2021. There had already been some returns from the renewals process. Donations via Zoom had also been excellent (David handles the virtual meeting donations via the website).

Scottish Branch has not been holding virtual meetings but had been reasonably active; they had also received a bequest of books that has already made some money from online sales. The branch plans to restart daytime meetings in January 2022.

5b) Meetings going forward

There was considerable discussion with many different experiences shared and many points raised.

Some speakers prefer to present face to face and not into a computer as they get better immediate feedback from the audience; others simply do not like virtual meetings. Attendances at physical meetings, where they have restarted, may not be up to pre-Covid levels but many felt that people will become less nervous as time goes on, and it is hoped that the situation will improve. Others were more pessimistic. There was comment on how free and easy it seems to be in England with less Covid restrictions at present when compared with Scotland. The more pessimistic outlook concerned a dispersed membership who may still be reluctant to go out and about which would impact on the viability of some branches. This is particularly concerning where the branch relies heavily on one or two committee members. As some are aging and/or suffering from ill health, they may wish to step down but it is harder to recruit new committee members when there are lower attendances. Not everyone in the Society is 'tech minded' so this too has had an effect. One example concerned a branch having to move venue at short notice that prompted a key committee member into stepping down and wishing to shut the branch down at the same time.

There was further discussion on dispersed membership, the potential risk to branches, and the possibility of 'mini meetings' with small face to face groups within one branch perhaps linking up via

Zoom to try and get the benefits of both physical and virtual meetings at once. This alternative might help where branch membership is particularly dispersed but there is a desire for physical meetings.

Recruiting volunteers to branch committees is a common issue and the overall conclusion is that a general appeal rarely seems to work. The best way seems to be to pick out an individual and speak to them directly. Although this does not always work the results are generally more successful. It was also noted that asking for volunteers for specific jobs is better than a general appeal.

Branch programme cards/leaflets can help to keep branch membership interested although care must be taken not to infringe copyright when using photographs, and care must be taken with proof reading before printing them. In the same vein the subject of branch newsletters was raised. These have helped to maintain branch cohesion during lockdowns, and afterwards, while people are still cautious about venturing out. Some branches have continued book sales online through the pandemic. The example of branch involvement in a Facebook group on railways has resulted in bringing in new younger members and provided a wider access.

One response here noted that we should not assume that all are equally capable of accessing the technology. Not all members are computer literate or confident and we need to keep them included.

Statistics of who attends Zoom meetings was raised including how many attending a branch Zoom meeting are from that branch when compared with members from other branches and non-members attending the meeting. For a small branch, Zoom meetings can produce really good attendances.

Discussion moved on to branch membership lists and email addresses. Sometimes members do not update these [email addresses] at branch level but add a new email address with their renewal highlighting the importance to branches of regular updates to branch membership lists. *(These go to branch secretaries periodically and updates can be requested at any time within reason)*. This led back to virtual meetings, decisions to continue with these for the rest of 2021 for some branches, and the importance of having up to date email addresses. The subject of contacting branch members via email being much cheaper and quicker than by printed letters and post was also raised.

Thanks were given to Jeremy Harrison and David Jackman for all the work they had done with hosting many virtual branch meetings using the Society's two Zoom licences.

A query was raised about donations for virtual meetings and when these funds will be forwarded to the relevant branches. This is being done quarterly and earlier problems with delayed payments have now been rectified. Society Treasurer Reg Wood responded here and explained some of the difficulties with regards to donations and tax - sometimes causing the process to be rather slow. There was further discussion about requesting donations for virtual meetings and how this could be encouraged. Branches still need to raise funds to help cover costs even for virtual meetings.

There was further debate about successful Zoom meetings over the past 12 months and the dilemma on whether to return to face to face meetings or to continue with Zoom now that most restrictions have been lifted in England. Many branches have asked their branch members for their opinions on going back to physical meetings, continuing with virtual meetings or having a mix of both. Not all branches can do hybrid meetings as they need suitable equipment and the venue needs to have good WiFi. There is a need to test the set up for hybrid meetings in advance, but where everything required is in place and tested it can work very well. *(For an explanation of hybrid meetings please see Officers Newsletter 207 from August 2021.)*

There were many examples of how branches had managed through the pandemic, the problems faced over meetings going forward eg face to face, virtual or hybrid, how to keep in touch with all

branch members - not just those attending either virtual or physical meetings, and those not keen on virtual meetings. At this point Brian spoke of some of his experience as a parish priest which were very relevant to the discussions above.

5c) Society Publications

Publications Officer David Bird showed the new Michael Mensing book and was pleased to announce that over 300 had already been sold out of 500 copies printed although with little publicity. The Brush book had also been selling quite well. He asked for feedback on producing a paperback photographic book and asked those present their opinion on hardback or softback format. There were some very favourable comments about the Mensing book as well as the earlier publication of the book of Stuart Warr black and white photographs. The Mensing book was printed abroad as UK printers were considerably more expensive. It was felt that hardback was an important point. Work on a second Mensing book has already started and there was support for this from Conference. It was suggested that being able to see the photographic books helped with sales.

The manuscript for the 8F Royal Scots book is now with David Bird with suitable photographs to be selected. These are likely to be black and white because there are few good colour photographs. It is hoped that the book will be ready in the first half of 2022.

5d) Conclusions about the Way Forward

National virtual meetings were raised at this point and their purpose was questioned. Many branch Zoom meetings have high numbers of non-branch members attending so they are effectively national as they are open to all. The response was that the idea of national meetings is to cover for those branches not holding virtual meetings, especially where there is an expectation that more branches will be returning to face to face meetings. So national Zoom meetings will help to cover a perceived gap and should not detract from the branches. Jeremy Harrison confirmed that the aim is to have high profile names and that this has been supported by the Trustees. Irene Rabbitts suggested that it might be productive to involve the branches as some branches in particular have contacts for some very good speakers. It was also highlighted that virtual meetings tended to attract higher numbers of attendees than face to face meetings. It was stated that national meetings are intended to complement the branch meeting programmes.

National Exhibitions Officer Steve Lacey, who took over that role just before the pandemic, asked that branches let him know which exhibitions they are attending – to avoid duplication. He had brought spare RCTS tablecloths to Conference for any branches that would like to take one back with them.

6 Upgrades to the Website and demo on group emails using Mailjet

The Chairman introduced new Society Webmaster Matthew Shaw. Matthew explained that the time was too short for a full teaching session so this would be a general overview in two parts: Part 1 would introduce Mailjet – for sending bulk emails; Part 2 would cover changes to the website.

Part 1 Mailjet

It is a challenge to reach all the membership because not everyone can be reached in all ways so various methods are required. The *Railway Observer (RO)* is available to all members either by hard copy through the post or by accessing it electronically via the website. It is much easier and quicker to circulate breaking news via email but there are issues with sending ordinary email to large numbers in one go. Mailjet manages the email list automatically and Matthew has been working with

the Membership Secretary to compile an up to date list of members on email. There are various criteria that can be used when setting up an email list using Mailjet eg all members, branch members, other select groups - together with the possibility of producing statistics regarding who has read what. This was demonstrated on screen to those present showing how many emails had been successfully delivered and what percentage had been opened. Other statistics can show what links have been followed. The Society-wide emails that have been circulated as RCTS News are timed to provide an alert on when the latest edition of the *RO* is posted on the website. Emails can still be blocked and there is still some room for improvement. The advantages are that you do not need to worry about email lists as there are various ways to set up the required circulation list. It is a tool to be used and Matthew can help. There are templates for laying out an email, the logo can be built in, photographs can be easily added, it is very visual and there is, of course, an unsubscribe facility.

This is a licenced product so anyone interested in using this should contact Matthew in the first instance.

Questions included branch email lists which can include members from other branches as well as non-members. There would have to be a way of identifying members of other branches. It is relatively complex to include non-members as there would have to be a level of signing up so it may not be appropriate for lists that include non-members. The importance of the 'unsubscribe' link was raised and that this would apply to the RCTS email list generally and not just for a single campaign. The importance of not sending too much too often via email was raised as it could then be treated as spam. Another question asked if the information can be taken out and put in an ordinary email to others not on the list. Answer – yes, a link can be used to send it to others but this must include the facility to unsubscribe.

Matthew is seeking collaboration for this project.

Part 2 RCTS Website

Matthew confirmed that he had inherited a website that works very well, a result of 15 years of evolution but requiring some 'tidying up'. It is now being developed to go on into the future still using WordPress. It will have more pictures and be more visual, will work better on smartphones and tablets, all current features will be maintained.

An essential part of the changes is to strip out all custom code that is making our current website work, which means that the 'key man dependency' will be removed. This makes it easier for anyone reasonably computer literate to maintain the website without the need for very specialist knowledge. A lot of work is going on 'behind the scenes' prior to going live with the new website.

The new format was demonstrated to Conference showing the effect of scrolling rather than the use of fiddly menus making it easier for using on smartphones and tablets, so the look is very different with images at different points. These can be renewed regularly to refresh the appearance. The website has a dual purpose – to serve the membership and to serve as our shop window so an easy to view format can help. The members' area was explained with members continuing to use their existing logins.

Branch pages are intended for branches to use and update themselves laid out using a standard template that can be adapted as required regarding photographs, what's on, venue details, meeting reports, newsletters, contact details etc. It was suggested that each branch could use a photograph specific to the branch/branch area on the branch home page as a 'hook' to generate interest. It is much easier to use a picture as part of the event set-up with the same, or additional photographs, included in the event report.

Matthew requested feedback and reminded everyone that this is intended to work without so much customisation, not dependant on one person only, and easier for branches and others to manage their own sections.

Questions included the comment that if you cannot find something quickly, you would get fed up. Matthew confirmed that you should not have to go to more than one page as selecting from the headings should take you where you wish to go.

Any issues or queries, please contact Matthew.

(Post meeting note: The new website has successfully gone live and Matthew has uploaded a number of training videos for those with editing permissions.)

7 Date and venue for 2022 Members' Weekend and Officers' Conference

Three branches had been talking informally and would be looking at the possibility of arranging the event based in Reading. The branches involved were Surrey, Windsor & Maidenhead and Thames Valley. Steve Ollive (Chair W&M Branch) spoke briefly on behalf of the group and said that it would be delighted to step back if a more northerly branch or group of branches would like to step forward rather than having a more southerly event for a second year running. The group would be very happy to provide support to anyone taking on the task.

8 Date and Venue for 2022 Society AGM

Prior to the pandemic this had been held for 3 years running at the Welcome Centre in Coventry. Unfortunately, there had been difficulty in getting any response so an alternative venue had been considered – The Grand Station Conference Centre at Wolverhampton (which still has a short section of broad gauge track). The date has had to be changed to 9 April 2022 as the later April date was not available. The event will be a Members' day comprised of a late morning presentation/talk, followed by the AGM, and completed with a talk from a Society member – details of the presentations/talks to be confirmed.

It was asked if this could be a hybrid meeting.

9 Closing Remarks

Chairman Callum MacLeod thanked everyone for attending and hoped that all would take away ideas from other branches. He thanked Matthew Shaw (Webmaster). Callum too was thanked.

Everyone was advised that the coaches would be ready for the afternoon visit in 20 minutes.

Appendix 1

Officers' Conference 24 October 2021

Attendance and Apologies

Branch	Abbreviation	Present	Apologies Given
Bristol	BTL	Tony Horstman	Paul Udey
		Rev Brian Arman (President)	Stewart Jolly
		Reg Wood (Trustee)	
Cambridge	CBR		Robert Bartlett
			Jim Crane
Cheltenham	CHM	Richard Morris	Richard Neale
			Stephen Wilson
Chichester	CHR		Roger Sandford
			Geoff May
Croydon & South London	CSL	Jeremy Harrison	Chris Meredith
			Peter Wilson
East Midlands	EMD		Robin Gibbons
			Dave Coxon
			Rodney Allen
			John Hitchens
South Essex	ESX	Geoff Brockett*	David Couzens-Howard
Furness, Lakes & Lune	FLL	Alan Sattenstall	
Humberside	HSD		John Foreman
			Carey Vessey
Hitchin	HTC	Steve Lacey	Paul Holloway
Ipswich	IPS		Dave Beecroft
			John Day
			Bev Steele
			Chris Ignatowicz
			Nigel Moffitt
Lancs & North West	LNW		Ian Derrick
Merseyside, Cheshire & North Wales	MCNW	Paul Treby*	Alan Turton
			Jon Penn
			Dave Douglas
			John Cashen
			John Cowlshaw
			Peter Young
Windsor & Maidenhead	MHD	Steve Ollive	Sally Goddard
		David Goddard (Trustee)	John Fitzgerald
		Alan Cooke	Bob Horner
Milton Keynes	MKY	Steve Dexter*	Mark Richards
North East	NEA	Malcolm Hammond	Jim Sedgwick
			Margaret Fraser
Northampton	NHN	Jack Knights	

Peterborough	PBR	Robert Warburton	Barry Butler
			Alan Burgess
			Colin Greatrex
Scottish	SCT	Ronnie McAdam	Richard Thorburn
			Ken Falconer
			William Miller
South East	SEA	Mike Woodward	David Blackman
		John Holloway	
Sheffield	SFD		Derek Stuckey
			Jim Bryant
			Alan Hardman
			Robert Pritchard
			Mike Brownhill
			David Munday
Solent	SOE		John Godfrey
			Peter Ifold
Surrey	SRY	Andy Davies (Trustee)	Richard Whitehead
		Irene Rabbitts (Trustee)	
		Bob Ellison	
		Tom Kolisch	
		Peter Bosomworth	
South Wales	SWL	Eric Willis*	
Thames Valley	TVY	Denis Horsman	Phil Darlaston
			Stuart Hicks
			Dennis Brown
			Andrew Jenkins
			Gordon Adams
West of England	WEN		Charles Woodland
			Dave Dornom
			David Mitchell
Watford	WFD	Geoff Plumb	Rob Davidson
			Richard Dyett
			Larry King
			Lizzie Davidson
			Rob Freeman
West Midlands	WMD		Derek Huntriss
West Riding	WRD	Bob Green	C Jagger
			Dave Beeken
			J Holroyd
			M Hold
Trustees not listed elsewhere		Callum MacLeod	Geoff Adams
		David Bird	Mike Robinson
		Matthew Shaw*	James Milne
			John redgate
RO Team not listed elsewhere			Andrew Lait
			Paddy Carey
			Phil Deaves
			Steve Batty
National Officers not listed elsewhere			Rodney Lissenden
			Terry Silcock
Guests		Lorraine Green	
* denotes attending for the first time			