



2013 Branch Meeting Survey

Background

In 2005 the Development Sub-Committee sent a questionnaire to each branch requesting information on branch meeting activities. This was in an effort to assess what we as a Society can do better and improve the way we handle a number of things at Branch Meetings.

The survey provided some very useful information however but as time goes by branches change and by now the society has opened new branches in various parts of the country which were not included in the 2005 survey.

At the last Development Sub-Committee meeting some issues were raised concerning some branches and it was thought that a survey of all branches would again be useful. The 2013 survey will give us, the Development Sub-Committee, an opportunity to get a clear understanding of the way we at branch level operate.

Format

The 2013 survey consists of nineteen questions, based on and developed from those asked in 2005. To aid collation and reporting of results, each question required a simple Yes/No or Value to be entered, with one exception. Branches were given the opportunity to add additional comments if they so wished. It was agreed at the February DSC meeting that the survey should be conducted by post, and to encourage prompt response, each survey was accompanied by a stamped addressed envelope for its return. The survey questions are attached as Appendix 1.

Timescale

Surveys were sent out to branch secretaries in the first week of March, and it was requested that the replies were returned by Friday 29 March to permit sufficient time for the results to be analysed before the next Development Sub-Committee meeting on Thursday 13 June.

Returns

It is pleasing to report that all branches have embraced the survey, and returns had been received from all branches by 02 April, when the last three were received. Happily, the results confirm a lot of what the Development Sub-Committee know, or hope, is happening in the various branches, and there are not too many surprises from the results returned.

Analysis of Returns

Working through the survey, the answers are analysed as follows:

Question 1: DO YOU CHARGE AN ENTRANCE DONATION AT THE DOOR?

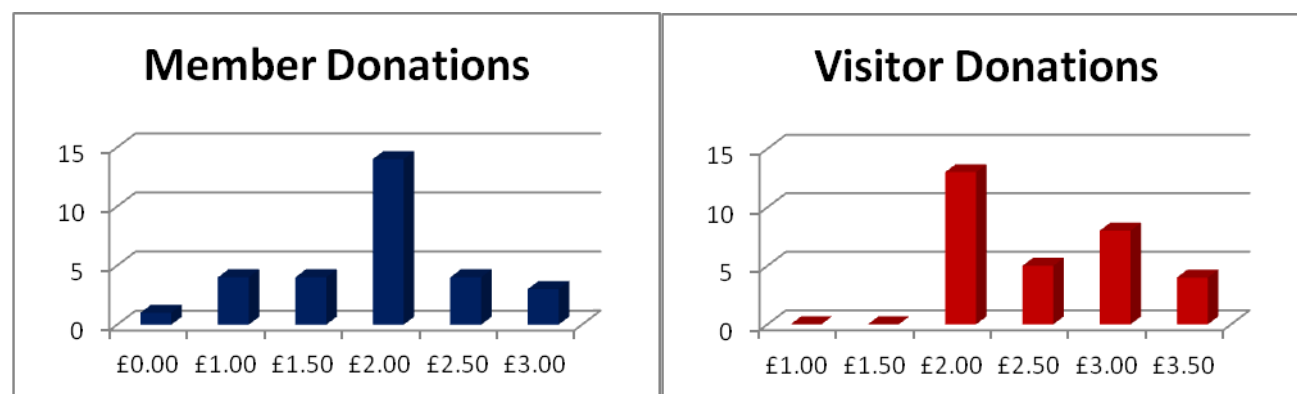
All branches replied "YES" to this question, it is worth noting at this point that three branches picked up on the wording of this and the next two questions with a comment reinforcing the fact that branches do not charge an entrance fee, instead requesting an appropriate donation.

Question 2: WHAT DO YOU CHARGE MEMBERS?

This question fielded six different responses, from Zero for one branch (MCN) to £3.00 for three branches. The most common donation requested is £2.00, requested in fourteen branches, with an overall average of £1.90.

Question 3: WHAT DO YOU CHARGE VISITORS?

There were four different responses here, ranging between £2.00 (again the most common) and £3.50 (four branches). The average rate requested is £2.55. At nine branches, the requested rate is the same as that for members, while at thirteen it is £1.00 more.



Question 4: WHAT DO YOU PAY FOR ROOM HIRE?

It was clear that a large variety of room hire rates would be found, reflecting the different premises used in terms of type, size and condition. This is confirmed in the replies received, which show that branches pay between £14 (Sussex- shared cost with the LCGB) to £75 (South East) to hire rooms for their meetings. The average room hire cost across all branches is £34.60.



These first four questions reveal that there are no regional patterns in the variance of donations requested or venue hire charges paid.

Question 5: DO YOU HOLD AFTERNOON MEETINGS?

Nine branches presently hold afternoon meetings. From information posted elsewhere, these are commonly in alternative locations to the evening meetings, in order to reach different audiences. Branches holding afternoon meetings are Croydon & South London, East Midlands, Hitchin, Ipswich, Northampton, Scottish, Sheffield, West Midlands and West Riding.

Question 6: DO YOU OFFER A 'SEASON TICKET' FACILITY?

Only Cheltenham and Thames Valley branches offer a season ticket facility. It is not known whether any other branches have considered or tried this in the past, but the advantage is twofold. Firstly, it improves cash flow (bringing in subscriptions early in each season before the meetings take place), and secondly, encourages attendance as once paid for, a member will not want their investment to go to waste.

Question 7: DO YOU HAVE A GENERAL SALES STAND AT MEETINGS?

Seventeen branches indicated that they have a general sales stand, however this outcome may have been interpreted in different ways, based on the results of questions eight and ten.

Question 8: DO YOU SELL SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS?

Society Publications are a great way to promote the Society and sales are beneficial to branches as well. Twenty four branches sell our publications at their meetings, however it is surprising that those which do not include long established branches such as Northampton and West Riding. Others are Chichester, Furness, Lakes & Lune, Scottish and Sussex.

Question 9: DO YOU SELL SLIDES / PHOTOGRAPHS?

Nine branches sell slides or photographs at meetings. A number of others do so at exhibitions only. Once very popular, demand appears to have declined to just a third of branches.

Question 10: DO YOU SELL SECOND-HAND BOOKS?

Sales of secondhand books are an important way to raise branch funds, and also provide a platform for members to sell on their own unwanted titles. Twenty five branches sell books at meetings, with no sales at Lancs. & North West, Northampton, Peterborough, Scottish and Sussex.

Question 11: OTHER MERCHANDISE SOLD?

Nine branches have other items for sale, typically including DVDs, Signal Box Diagrams and maps.

Question 12: DO YOU HAVE A REFRESHMENT BREAK?

The break is an ideal opportunity for everyone to chat amongst each other over refreshment, and many connections can be made at this time. For many branches this can be the only chance, as time before and after meetings is spent setting up or clearing away. It is also a good time to generate sales for the branch. It is not surprising that a break is held at all branches, with the exception of in Scotland.

Question 13: DO YOU SERVE TEA / COFFEE / BISCUITS?

Twenty branches serve tea / coffee at their meeting break, and one branch (Sheffield) indicated "Soft drinks available". Where this is not served, the venue has bar facilities (see Q15). In some cases tea/coffee is only served at afternoon meetings.

Question 14: IS THIS INCLUDED IN YOUR ADMISSION DONATION?

At most branches Tea/ Coffee is complementary as part of the admission donation. In the four branches where this is not the case, it is provided by a third party, i.e. venue bar.

Question 15: DO YOU HAVE BAR FACILITIES AT YOUR MEETINGS?

Provision of a bar is another way to enhance the social interaction between attendees, and is available on site at fourteen meeting locations. It follows that these are all at evening meetings.

Question 16: DO YOU HAVE A DRAW / RAFFLE AT YOUR MEETINGS?

Eighteen branches hold a raffle at their meetings. With the opportunity to win a prize, this is a good lever to attract members and visitors to come back again and again.

Question 17: DO YOU ACTIVELY RECRUIT NEW MEMBERS AT MEETINGS?

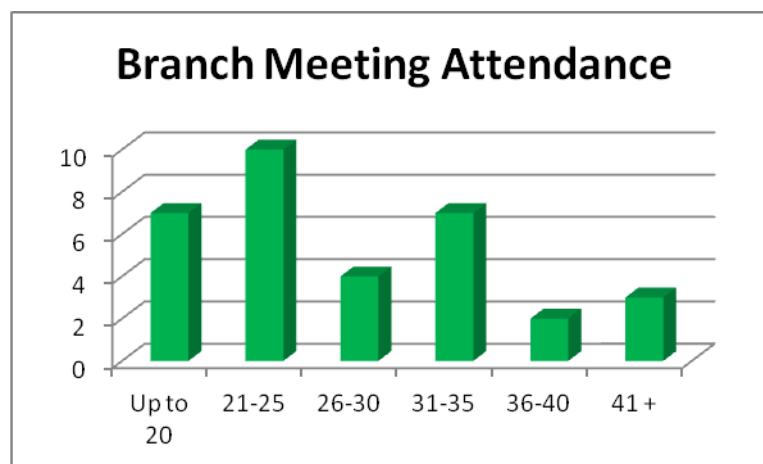
A fundamental activity to promote the growth of the Society, it is important that branches promote the benefits of membership and seek to recruit new members at their meetings. With a captive audience who are clearly interested in railways, branch meetings are an ideal opportunity to recruit new members. It is pleasing to record that twenty eight branches do actively recruit at meetings, the only two negative responses were received from Cambridge and Sussex.

Question 18: DOES YOUR VENUE HAVE GOOD CAR PARKING FACILITIES?

Regardless of whether a meeting location is near to public transport links, it is important to have car parking on or near the venue as well. The relatively low number of branches tied with the spread of the membership means some members may travel a distance to meetings, and in the evenings often means that using public transport is not possible. Twenty six branches have indicated that parking is available, the remaining four (East Midlands, North East, Sheffield and Sussex) have explained that the lack of parking is due to their location being in busy City Centres.

Question 19: AVERAGE ATTENDANCES AT MEETINGS FOR CURRENT YEAR?

Meeting attendance is one good indicator of how a branch is performing. As expected, there is a wide range of responses, from the lowest of 13 in Sussex, to 45 at Bristol and Ipswich. The average meeting attendance across all branches is 28.17. It is concerning to see branches such as Cheltenham (20), and Peterborough (18) with low figures, but likewise extremely encouraging that newer branches such as Chichester (33) and South Wales (41) are doing so well.



The average branch

So what constitutes an average branch meeting of the RCTS? The results of this survey have provided a valuable snapshot of our branch meetings as they stand in 2013 and have enabled us to understand what the branches are doing, and what you can find in a typical branch.

The first thing one would expect from a branch meeting is a warm and friendly welcome. The cliché about first impressions is true, and if we are to attract new members and retain our existing ones, then we need to get it right from the moment they walk through the door of one of our meeting venues. A smile and a few words of introduction cost nothing, and may well make the right connection that tells the visitor to the branch that they want to join the Society, or the current member that they want to renew.

As a Society member, one would be requested to make a donation of around £2.00. Visitors may be asked for a little more. This is to cover expenses and normally includes a cup of tea or coffee at the refreshment break, plus entry to a raffle. A bar is available at half of branch meeting venues. Meetings are typically held in the evening, but there are some held in the afternoon which may suit some members more. Society publications will be on display for perusal and purchase, along with a range of secondhand books donated by members. There will be information available about joining the Society, and branch officers often engage with visitors to see if they would be interested in joining. In most cases, you can park nearby if not using public transport to get to the meeting.

Conclusions

The 2013 survey has shown that each branch of the Society is different in the way it conducts its meetings and the range of facilities that are offered. This variation is good, however, and demonstrates how each branch has developed over time based on what works for them. There are clearly some branches that are performing really well, reflected in high attendances and several additional services (such as book sales) being offered. In contrast, some branches appear to be struggling, but continue to fulfil an important role in the areas in which they operate.

David Goddard
June 2013

Appendices:

Appendix 1: Branch Meeting Survey Form

Appendix 2: Additional Comments provided by branches



2013 BRANCH MEETINGS SURVEY

In an effort to assess what we as a Society can do better and improve the way we handle a number of things at Branch Level, including at Branch Meetings, we ask that you take a little time to complete this survey. This will give us, the Development Sub-Committee, an opportunity to get a clear understanding of the way we operate at branch level.

YOUR BRANCH

Please tick only *one* box where there is an option and complete other details as requested.

	YES	NO
DO YOU CHARGE AN ENTRANCE DONATION AT THE DOOR?	☐	☐
WHAT DO YOU CHARGE MEMBERS?	£	
WHAT DO YOU CHARGE VISITORS?	£	
WHAT DO YOU PAY FOR ROOM HIRE? (per meeting, excl. any VAT)	£	
DO YOU HOLD AFTERNOON MEETINGS?	☐	☐
DO YOU OFFER A 'SEASON TICKET' FACILITY?	☐	☐
DO YOU HAVE A GENERAL SALES STAND AT MEETINGS?	☐	☐
DO YOU SELL SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS?	☐	☐
DO YOU SELL SLIDES / PHOTOGRAPHS?	☐	☐
DO YOU SELL SECOND-HAND BOOKS?	☐	☐
OTHER MERCHANDISE SOLD		
DO YOU HAVE A REFRESHMENT BREAK?	☐	☐
DO YOU SERVE TEA / COFFEE / BISCUITS?	☐	☐
IS THIS INCLUDED IN YOUR ADMISSION DONATION?	☐	☐
DO YOU HAVE BAR FACILITIES AT YOUR MEETINGS?	☐	☐
DO YOU HAVE A DRAW / RAFFLE AT YOUR MEETINGS?	☐	☐
DO YOU ACTIVELY RECRUIT NEW MEMBERS AT MEETINGS?	☐	☐
DOES YOUR VENUE HAVE GOOD CAR PARKING FACILITIES?	☐	☐
AVERAGE ATTENDANCES AT MEETINGS FOR CURRENT YEAR?		

Please use the other side of this sheet to make any comments, ideas or suggestions, or detail anything else you do at your branch meetings that you might think we would find of interest.

Appendix 2: Additional Comments provided by branches

- BTL Have onsite parking for speaker, disabled, book stock member etc.
- CSL At our branch AGM this year a member suggested that as we belong to a transport society we should make every effort to travel to meetings by public transport rather than by car. On a show of hands less than a quarter of those present (admittedly a low turnout) had travelled to the meeting by car. It is likely that many members and visitors who attend our meetings don't even have a car, including two of the three new members we have signed up this year. A further question in the meeting survey might be therefore, is your venue close to public transport? For CSL branch both our evening (Croydon) and afternoon (Redhill) venues are within easy walking distance of trains, buses and in the case of Croydon, trams. Perhaps in these days of concern about exercise and the environment another question might be about bicycle storage at the venue. A further question might be concerned with access to meetings venues for disabled members/visitors.
- EMD Street Parking is limited but venue is in the City Centre close to bus routes and tram.
- FLL Top notch hotel facility is used, which offers a carvery facility and accommodation.
- HSD Although we do not sell at our branch meetings, we have for the last fifteen or twenty years had a highly successful campaign at open days and model railway shows. Being one of the top two branches for the level of sales. We attend major shows at Doncaster, York, Pontefract, none of which come within the boundaries of our branch. Over the years I have been to thirty different locations selling books. Is this a society record? Reluctantly I have to inform you that we are now winding up our sales efforts due to there being no younger members in our branch to take over plus a steady trickle of our older members going to live in the big roundhouse in the sky.
- HTC The attendance at evening and afternoon meetings is about 95% a different group of enthusiasts. Can think of only two who regularly attend both meetings apart from officers and committee.
- LNW Just a question of semantics regarding entry costs. We prefer to request donations rather than charge so as to remain aloof of those vulgar types of the tax offices.
- MCN Since the 2005 survey this branch has halved its meeting venues to one (Chester). The reasons were largely to reduce the pressures on committee members at two indoor meetings a month and to save the effort of finding additional speakers and topics for meetings. As a result we have lost out on some members unable to reach Chester by train. The venue is satisfactory although there have been problems about the room being double booked due to inefficient in-house diary keeping. Meeting room charges in Chester are generally sky high and we are fortunate that our venue is still good value for money. There are some requests for afternoon indoor meetings but when the suggestion is made that others could organise them with branch backing things go quiet, however the monthly station observations can attain double figure attendances and the RCTS social contact is therefore maintained.
A £1 meeting donation proposal was met with some hostility but due to the branch benefitting from the sales of late members' ROs and books that proposal was deferred.
At one stage earlier this year there were serious thought about closing the branch down at the end of the 2013-14 indoor meetings season due to the lack of volunteers to serve on the committee and to continuing ill health on the part of some of the committee. That thought has now been averted.
- MHD We advertise the meetings of adjacent branches and other local railway Societies
We advertise and promote the society's national events
We promote the launch of new Society publications
We promote and sell society merchandise, including clothing and RO Binders
We arrange outdoor visits & days out
We embrace the Society's support of The Railway Children charity with a collecting tin at the welcome desk and by making donation when we have speakers who do not request expenses.

RCTS 2013 Branch Meeting Survey

- NEA The North East branch meets at two separate venues 30 miles apart so completed two copies of survey. We intend to move to rather better venues for the 2013-14 season at both ends which is being organised by new Chairman Tony Skinner. Tony has some new and more modern ideas for the branch which I feel are long overdue and I think we have a bright future with our new Chairman. The main reason for changing venues is cost, lack of bar and poor heating at Darlington and lack of bar and presence of oddball characters on the premises. There is no sensible parking facilities anywhere in Central Newcastle but the Metro is available.
- PBR Question the use of the word charge in q1-3. Understand that any admission charge is liable to VAT. Therefore branches were asked to ask members and visitors for donations to cover the meeting room cost and expenses. This is the policy at Peterborough. We request a minimum donation of £2 per person and with our current costs and average attendance this is enough to maintain our bank balance. We do not keep a record of individual donations.
- SOE We hold joint meetings with the Mid Hants Railway. As such we realise that occasional visitors can be MHR members and we have to be careful when talking with them. We do not want to undermine our relationship with the MHR
- SSX Please note we have joint meetings with Brighton LCGB. All income and expenses from meetings is shared and we make a small profit each year. Teas/coffees etc is dealt with by a third party (who we rent room from). They take money/provide refreshments separately from us. We only have about six regular RCTS members attend and they are the same people each meeting. Same can be said for LCGB and a few visitors.
- WEN Rather than spending funds on posting this and the return, why was it not emailed out for branches to complete. In the 21st Century Pen and ink is costly!
- WMD We are now in our second full season of afternoon meetings in Birmingham. Attendances have been lower than we hoped and expected but numbers are gradually increasing with both members and visitors. Some are also regulars at Coventry, while some now attending the afternoon meetings because they find it difficult to travel to the Coventry venue by public transport. Given the size of Birmingham and the number of members living there we expected more at these afternoon meetings. Suggested entrance donations cover the room hire charges, and some of the other meeting expenses (speakers exps etc) at both venues. Society books are on sale at branch meetings, together with secondhand books donated by members or bequeathed by deceased members. Proceeds from sales help to boost branch funds including covering meeting expenses. Funds are also boosted by donations for tea/coffee/biscuits at Birmingham meetings. We do not wish to push membership too much with visitors as we feel that actively pushing recruitment may be counterproductive with some. Instead we use a more subtle approach. Branch committee members make a point of speaking to visitors pointing out some of the benefits of membership such as the RO, discount on new society publications, visits to railway installations, a saving of £8 (8 Birmingham meetings) or £9 (9 Coventry meetings) on subscriptions as members are charged less than visitors for entrance donations etc. Society membership packs and threefold leaflets together with branch programmes are always available at branch meetings to aid recruitment. We also have heritage railway timetables and brochures and meeting programmes for other local railway societies on display at meetings. Coventry Venue - the meeting room at The Maudslay is on the first floor. Maybe we as a committee should suggest to members that it would be helpful if they helped a little more often to carry projection and sound equipment, boxes of books for sale etc up and down stairs!