

# REPORT OF SOCIETY MEETING

## RETURN TO METROLAND

by Richard Salmon

**A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House**

**on Tuesday 8 March 2016**

The society welcomed Richard Salmon from the Bluebell Ashbury Supporters & Helpers (BASH). He first gave an outline history of the Bluebell Railway:

The Lewes & East Grinstead Railway, opened in the 1880s, was closed in 1955, but re-opened after a campaign by local residents, since the original act had specified that four trains a day must run. So the original act had to be repealed, and this was then done, enabling the second closure in 1958. The publicity generated (during which the name 'Bluebell Line' became firmly attached in the public eye) led to the formation of the Lewes & East Grinstead Railway Society in 1959, quickly renamed the Bluebell Railway Preservation Society once it was apparent that only a portion of the line could be saved.

Trains first ran in 1960 from Sheffield Park to just south of Horsted Keynes as the branch to Ardingly was still open and electrified. A few years later they got access to a platform face at Horsted Keynes and ran into the station. Ardingly to Horsted Keynes closed in 1963, isolating the line from the national network.

The main task in the 1960s was to purchase the line from British Rail as it was initially only leased. This was achieved in 1968. In the early-1970s thoughts turned to reopening a link to BR in one direction or the other, the favoured option being towards East Grinstead. 1974 saw the purchase of West Hoathly station site but planning permission to extend the railway to there was refused. Other applications were also refused. An application to reopen the whole line went to a public enquiry (this was a planning enquiry as well as a Department of Transport public enquiry into the light railway order to operate the line). Finally, in 1986 the secretaries of state for transport and environment overruled the inquiry inspector and granted permission "in the national interest" to re-open the line to East Grinstead. Almost at the same time the government announced the electrification of the BR line to East Grinstead: the eventual reopening of the Bluebell line probably tipped the economic balance for electrification.

Some landowners would not sell land to the railway while others were much more amenable. Starting with a ¾-mile shuttle service past Sheffield Park, West Hoathly was reached in 1992 via Sharpthorne Tunnel, the longest on a heritage railway at 731 yards. West Hoathly station had been demolished and there was no permission to rebuild. In 1994 the railway reached Kingscote where the station had been restored, having been purchased by the Bluebell in 1984. Substantial work was undertaken to restore the building and the second platform which had been demolished for a swimming pool that was never built.

After this the railway started thinking of extending to East Grinstead which brought two major problems: First was that there were 12 separate landowners, some of whom did not want to sell, and 100,000 tons of domestic waste in Imberthorne Tip, East Grinstead council having used the cutting as a rubbish tip in the 1970s. The extension to East Grinstead was opened in 2013, costing £12-million in 2013 prices. A third of this was the removal of the rubbish which was achieved by train over the national network. In fact, some of the rubbish was not removed, as inert domestic waste it did not have the risks industrial waste would have. A channel was cut through the tip for the track. This included slightly steepening the gradient at either end.

Richard then moved on to his main topic: The restoration and operation of the former Metropolitan Railway carriages.

The Metropolitan 'Bogie-stock' coaches being described by Richard were built between 1898 and 1900 by Ashbury (Manchester) or Cravens (Sheffield) as well as six at Neasden works. They were built for steam haulage but from 1906 onwards were converted to electric multiple unit cars, which ran on the Metropolitan until withdrawal in 1939 and were then kept in reserve. 1940 saw the conversion of six vehicles back to steam haulage (including airbrakes replaced by vacuum equipment from Dreadnought stock). These ran as two three coach push-pull sets for another 20 years on the Chesham shuttle.

After withdrawal in 1960 coach 519 (ex-6703 originally Met. No.400) went to the London Transport Museum. The Bluebell bought four at £60 each plus £5 delivery, compared with coaches from BR which would have been £200 each. These were 512, 515, 516 and 518, ex-2761, 9702, 9705 and 6702 and originally Met. 387, 368, 412 and 394.

(The sixth coach, was scrapped. This was 513, ex-2763, originally Metropolitan 418 and part of the experimental electric train of 1899).

The four Met. coaches carried the majority of Bluebell passengers in the early- and mid-1960s. They also returned to London for the Centenary celebrations at Neasden in 1963 where they were seen with the now preserved L44 having been painted in a representation of MR teak livery with cream panels.

By the end of the decade their condition meant they had to be withdrawn from service and when the railway built a carriage shed they were stored inside it.

In 1972 the coaches were used for John Betjeman's 'Metroland' film which was filmed in part on the Bluebell Line.

After some years being used for storage the vehicles were used for a BBC Sherlock Holmes programme in the 1980s and this led to discussion as to their future. Sale to another railway was considered as was external storage under tarpaulins. Instead it was decided to restore them, and, with no funding available from the Bluebell, £40,000 was raised over the 15 years of the project to pay for materials.

Restoration of 394 included rebuilding to original seven compartment condition with the removal of the cab from push-pull days, that end needing rebuilding due to dry rot in any case. The coach in the LT Museum still represents the form it had previously. Brake coach 387 had lost one set of ventilators during a filming job, and so the ventilators from its days as a driving motor were replaced by teak panels.

1999 saw the completion of 387 and 394. The end vehicles had to be completed first as they are close coupled within the set with conventional couplings only on the outer ends.

Composite 368 was in the worst condition and was worked on next. There was severe dry rot and the coach was stripped to the frame. The (teak) frame itself was in good condition apart from needing treatment to prevent dry rot. 368 was finished in 2003.

412, built by Cravens, was the last vehicle to be restored. The first class compartments of both composites required lincrusta wallpaper at £150 per roll plus special glue costing £30 per tub (2001 prices) and American walnut mouldings with gold leaf round the edges.

The brakes, which required rebushing and some new fabrication, and some other mechanical work was done largely in house, including making patterns for replacement castings. The tribolite moquette is the last of the LT series from 1940 and the adverts are digital scans of the originals with damage removed. Some luggage racks had to be made new. The mechanisms from Southern Railway Bulleid armrests (one per pair of seats) were used to replace those removed by LT when the coach was downgraded to all third. The plain blue moquette for the first class came from surplus Network SouthEast inventory.

412 was ready for traffic in December 2006. The Bluebell now realised the value of these coaches, since it was important that 412 was completed then so it could add extra capacity as part of the set on 'Victorian Christmas Specials' that month, earning very worthwhile extra income.

After this some remedial work was required on the other three coaches. For example, gold leaf had been damaged when film companies had stuck other railway names on the coaches.

368 needed tyre turning and fitting of luggage racks which had not been done in 2003. 387 needed roof repairs after a plastic material used proved inadequate.

Handrails were added to the end of the Brake coach, not having been done in the initial restoration.



**Left:** Ray Medhurst puts the finishing touches to a first-class compartment in No.412. Note the re-instated arm rest, the lincrusta ceiling, new luggage racks and American Walnut interior trim.

**Photo: Richard Salmon**

The coaches were the overall winner of the Heritage Railway Association carriage and wagon award in 2007. On 28 July that year the set was officially relaunched into service with Metropolitan Railway steam loco No.1.

Richard then showed some pictures of the overnight test run in the Earl's Court area in January 2013 in preparation for the Metropolitan 150 event and illustrated what had to be done to ready the vehicles for the sub surface railway, including ultrasonic testing which revealed some cracks that required coupler bars to be replaced.

As original material specifications were not available, those indicated on A Stock drawings were used.

It was hoped that the coaches could transfer by rail but the East Grinstead connection was not ready in time and four low loaders were used. This was a complex operation as all 32 axle boxes had to be checked on arrival to make sure the bearings had not shifted in transit.



Richard provided some excellent shots from a variety of contributors of the special train on 10 January 2013, including one in the Circle Line platforms at Baker Street. The photo (Left) shows the Met 150 event overnight test train at Edgware Road on 10 January 2013.

Then subsequent outings on LT metals were shown including the Chesham branch in August 2014. The pictures showed haulage by Sarah Siddons and 'L150' (GWR 5521) as well as Metropolitan No.1. GBRF Class 73 locos were seen transferring the coaches to London.

Wheel and tyre work for the Bluebell is done on the South Devon Railway and Richard showed the temporary storage of 387 on trestles last year while new tyres were fitted to the wheels, in addition to replacing four of the brake cylinders with new ones supplied from India, before concluding with pictures from the 'Watford 90' event in September 2015 and mentioning that due to further brake-cylinder replacement and door-lock renewal being required the coaches were unlikely to run in 2016 but this work was being planned, and they would definitely be back.

Richard was rewarded with a generous round of applause and then took questions.

**Martin Bauman**





**Above:** The 'Met 150' special train approaching Kensington Olympia on 13 January 2013, headed by No.12 'Sarah Siddons' behind which are the four restored Metropolitan coaches, first class Jubilee coach, Metropolitan Railway Milk Van and E class steam loco No.1.

**Left:** The 'Chesham' coaches back 'home' at Chesham seen on 16 August 2014. This event celebrated 90 years of the Watford branch under the guise of 'Watford 90'.

**All photos:  
Richard Salmon**