

A behind the scenes tour of the newly renovated Boston Lodge. Credit: Chris Parry.

Boston Lodge shows that investing in people and skills can inspire visitors, boost volunteering and transform heritage.

Sitting at the heart of the Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways in the historic slate landscape of north Wales, Boston Lodge is the oldest continuously operating railway engineering works in the world.

Here, steam trains have been repaired for nearly 200 years. But it's by empowering people that railways will keep this heritage alive for 200 more.

The recently completed Interpretation and Boston Lodge project, which we awarded £3.9million, engaged nearly 600 volunteers. More than 100 of them were new to the railway. Paul Lewin, Director and General Manager of Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways, explains how they did it.

People-powered heritage

"Very simply, people listen to people," Paul says. "With things like interpretation panels, you've got to work really hard to bring the history to life and capture visitors' interest. In a busy world where people are bombarded with information all the time, connecting with them counts more than anything."

With this in mind, the project offered staff and volunteers training on how to curate and tell the stories of the railway.



The Boston Lodge team. Credit: Chris Parry.

Turning visitors into volunteers

Focusing on human connections has also helped Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways keep people engaged throughout the journey from visitor to volunteer.

“You can easily lose people along the way,” Paul says, “so we needed a plan for seeing those relationships through.

“Now if someone goes for a ride on one of our trains, from the moment they arrive on the platform, they’ll meet one of our hosts who will know about the railway and how to talk about it.

“If they want to know more, they can go on the Boston Lodge tour where they’ll learn from other volunteers. Then, if at the end of it they think ‘yeah, I want to become a member or a volunteer’ we have teams that can pick that up.”

Building skills

Paul believes that putting the focus back on volunteering has involved “understanding what makes volunteers tick”: the chance to build confidence and develop skills.

As an operational engineering works, Boston Lodge provides unique opportunities for people to get stuck in and gain practical experience.



The project has run workshops on welding, lathing, painting, signwriting and hot riveting. Credit: Ffestiniog & Welsh Highland Railways.

“People are excited by going to a place that's the real thing. If you come and work with us, it's going to be dirty and smelly and noisy at times, but people are attracted to that. They want the real deal.

“They enjoy being part of something that's actually happening. If you're helping mend a locomotive or a carriage, it has a purpose – it’s going to be used.”

From storytelling to engineering, Paul reckons the project has given hundreds of people the chance to learn a new skill.

“I think there will have been skills that people have learned from working with the railway that they’ll carry with them the rest of their lives.”

Do you work with volunteers?

Find more tips for recruiting and engaging volunteers in our volunteering good practice guidance.

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[future of Boston Lodge](#)

Ffestiniog Railway. Credit: Christ Parry.



[Highland Railways](#)

The yard at Amgueddfa Lechi Cymru. Credit: Amgueddfa Cymru.

Unlocking the living gateway to Wales' slate story