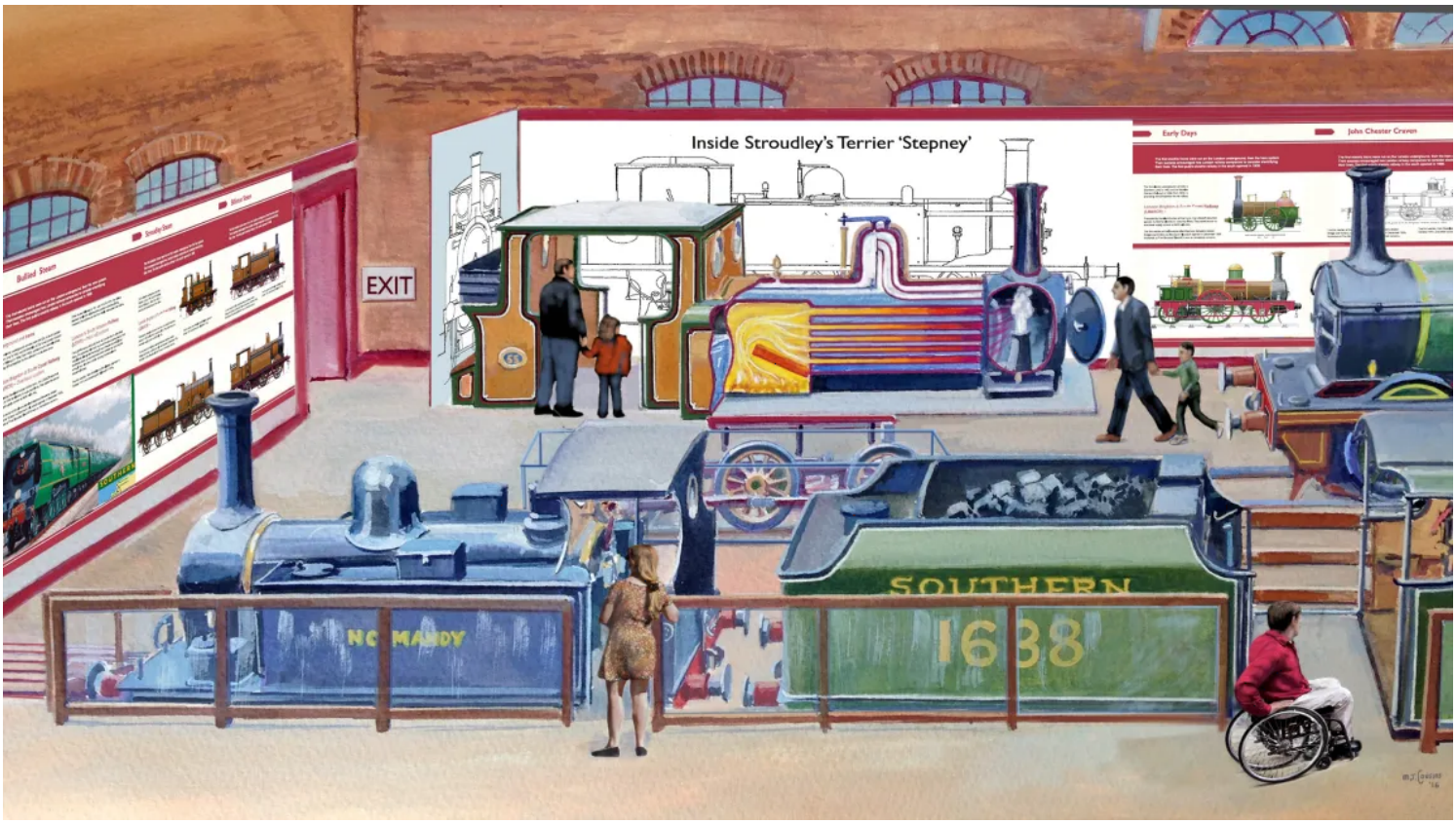


An artist's impression of the new Exhibition Hall at Bluebell Railway Matthew Cousins

Thanks to National Lottery players, the project aims to revitalise the way the Bluebell Railway exhibits its locomotives. It will see substantial repairs to the Running Shed, which will be partly converted and also extended at the side to create a new exhibition hall. This space will feature an exciting new exhibition of how steam engines work, plus footplate access by both pedestrians and wheelchair users to static locomotives. Visitors will also be able to take part in a footplate driving experience based on a mock-up of locomotive 55 Stepney, alongside the original engine which was built in 1875.

These exciting developments will also mean more space in the Running Shed for routine locomotive maintenance, and a new maintenance facility over the wash-out pit and adjacent siding in the locomotive yard. This will enhance the Railways' ability to maintain its locomotive fleet and also provide a better working environment for volunteers.

In addition to the HLF award, the Bluebell Railway will contribute £388,000 (including £214,000 raised from the Ash Appeal) in cash plus a substantial amount of effort in kind to be put in by many members of its 700-strong volunteer workforce. The three year project will see the exhibition opening in Spring 2018 after which it will run for a further two years with extensive plans to utilise the exhibition to engage the public and support the growth of visitor numbers.

The project also aims to increase the Bluebell's capacity to work with schools in developing their Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) curriculum, with a target of increasing school visits by 150% by 2020. An Interpretation and Education Development Manager will be employed for an initial three-year period and applications are already being sought to fill this post.

Roger Kelly, Funding Director, said: “This project is key to the sustainability and growth of the Bluebell Railway. Many visitors to Heritage Railways today, particularly the younger ones, want more than a ride on a train. They wish to be entertained. This project will not only do that but we hope ensure they leave better informed about steam power from the 19th to the 21st century".

Dick Fearn, Bluebell Railway plc Chairman, said: “The Bluebell Railway is fortunate to be custodian of one of Britain's most varied and historically important steam locomotive collections outside the National Railway Museum. This award will enable us to display and interpret the collection for the enjoyment all our visitors and to cherish and maintain it for the benefit of generations to come."

Stuart McLeod, Head of HLF South East England, said: “This is a heritage project that really has it all. What could be more exciting for visitors than actually getting on board the footplate of a working steam engine? The Bluebell Railway’s new project will make the story of steam travel accessible to everyone with exciting new exhibitions, interactive experiences, and restoration of new locomotives keeping the history of steam alive for visitors of all ages.”

Welcoming the news, Tracey Crouch MP, Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage, said: "Thanks to the generosity of our Lottery Players, even more people will now be able to explore and learn about our fascinating railway heritage. The new exhibitions will be an exciting addition to the Bluebell Railway offer and I am pleased that more partnerships with schools are to be formed too."

Councillor Nigel Enever, Chair of Lewes District Council, said: “This is fantastic news and we are delighted that the council was able to support Bluebell Railway in their successful application for Heritage Lottery Funding. Bluebell Railway is a popular and highly regarded visitor attraction in Sussex that entices over 160,000 visitors a year.”

Note to editors

Founded over 55 years ago The Bluebell Railway is the pioneer of standard gauge Heritage Steam Railway Preservation. It operates over 11 miles of track in Sussex from East Grinstead to its headquarters at Sheffield Park where the Exhibition will be located. It previously received an HLF grant in 2008 which provided covered accommodation for its working carriages and one of the few fully accredited museums associated with a Heritage Railway.

Further information

Roger Garman, Communications Director, Bluebell Railway Plc, via email: roger.garman@bluebell-railway.co.uk