

We joined Saturday's 1025 BL departure to distribute souvenir glasses, programmes and beer tokens to eager festival goers and the train seemed more like a London commuter service, with happy folk clogging the aisles in all eight coaches. We passed the 1015 MD at Williton and were pleased to see it very well loaded with many festival customers who had booked accommodation in Minehead, but were taking advantage of the generous CAMRA members' discounted fare and riding the train to BL before returning to enjoy excellent beer and scrummy cider.

Final figures aren't available yet but all indications are that Saturday was likely to have produced record results. Numbers were lower on Sunday but we were very pleased to have 17 of the 120 beers still available at closing time. However, all of those 17 casks could easily be picked up and carried in one hand when we took the stillage down. The beer equivalent of running on fumes!

No excessive fumes emitted from our featured locomotive (D832 Onslaught), no doubt because of the frequent use she has enjoyed this year. The Warship looked and sounded superb, proudly displaying our newly commissioned CAMRA headboard throughout the weekend. Driver Neil McCannon was caught posing for a photo next to a cask of a specially commissioned festival ale from Draycott Brewery, appropriately named 'Onslaught'. It is 12 years since any diesel featured on festival paraphernalia so I hope we have made amends with DEPG!

We repeated last year's very successful experiment by setting up a dedicated cider bar in the carriage Lorna Doone. 27 ciders and perrys were available, mostly sourced from Somerset and some from Dorset. Perhaps we should call it The Pines Express Cider Bar.

Somewhere in the region of 9,000 pints of beer and cider were supped over the weekend, helped down by several hundred Cornish pasties and hog roast baps, a shoal of fish (& chips) and much more. The live music went down a storm and a very good time was had by all, as the various published photos will no doubt prove. Talking of photos, we are anticipating a review in the next edition of Somerset County Gazette.

Three hours after the last beer was served all CAMRA kit had been removed and Minehead Station restored to its familiar configuration. Once the empty casks have been removed in the next day or two there will be no evidence we had even been there.

We have now enjoyed 15 excellent and ever improving Real Ale & Cider Festivals at Minehead Station. Although most heritage railways now have a real ale event of some sort, we reckon no other railway does it quite as well as the Wizzer. The location of our event brings special challenges over and above those of a regular CAMRA festival and those challenges must be managed effectively. This is achieved by cooperation and detailed negotiation between Somerset CAMRA and the West Somerset Railway. Several departments are involved and all play their part in the overall success of the event, none more so than Minehead Station staff who make us very welcome, despite the fact that we turn their environment upside down for four days! Special thanks are due to Minehead Stationmaster Pamela Hawkins for bravely hosting the event without ever having experienced our festival before, to Gordon who must have worn out several broom heads on CAMRA Sunday mornings over the years, to Fenton and Ian for crewing the late DMU service and the signalmen who also stayed on duty until after midnight to enable the DMU to run. Also to John Tooke and his colleagues at DEPG for making our new headboard. And last but not least, Jacquie Green, my counterpart at WSR. In fact, Somerset CAMRA sincerely thank all WSR staff that work so hard on festival weekends. Without you we could not hold this event at what must be considered the best possible venue in our branch area, the County of Somerset.

The railway operates at capacity on festival Saturdays bringing great pleasure to many, many passengers who would never otherwise consider visiting our wonderful railway. We know many of those people return time and time again and like us, have booked their hotel rooms for 12th & 13th September 2015. Every festival also brings new people visiting for the first time, but overall numbers attending seem to be broadly similar year on year. There is simply no more room for any more beer or any more customers so we are very content to maintain the status quo.

When I first proposed linking my two volunteering pastimes in this way I had expected it to be a much more difficult task to sell the idea to the Railway. In the event, and to my great surprise, it proved rather harder to convince my colleagues at Somerset CAMRA to go with it! 15 years later the original format has been tweaked here and there, and we have three times as much beer available, but essentially the basic 'shoulders of the season' event continues to work admirably. It's easy to come up with an idea but much more satisfying to make it happen, and see it succeed time and again.

Planning for the 2015 event starts at the beginning of November. Until then,

Cheers and Beers!

Barrie Childs  
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Campaign for Real Ale