

A Silver Lining !

Many WSR supporters were disappointed that we were not successful in buying the original Dunster station sign at the delayed Great Central Railwayana auction on 10th March 2018. It was bought for £1,550, plus commission, by a private collector. I was privileged to be asked to lead on the attempt to acquire the sign for our Railway under the auspices of the West Somerset Steam Railway Trust, and I was humbled by the support received. Approximately a thousand pounds was pledged for the sign purchase in only 48 hours or so.



However, the cloud of not obtaining the sign has brought a silver lining. Brian Oldford, who makes casting patterns for the Severn Valley Railway, and I discussed the position the day after the auction and Brian gave a remarkably reasonable quotation to make up three casting patterns for these distinctive Brunellian signs which are a significant part of WSR , GWR and B&E history.

A little history

These signs were erected on many original Brunel-designed stations on the original Great Western Railway, and the Bristol and Exeter Railway, the parents for both the West Somerset Railway (Taunton to Watchet 1862) and the Minehead Railway (Watchet to Minehead 1874). They are often referred to as 'running-in boards' following the later tradition of erecting large station signs at the arrival part of station platforms, so that they can be easily read by all passengers of arriving trains. However, in the 1860's and 70's, trains were much shorter, and so these station name signs were normally only provided singly, at the middle of platforms.

The signs are all two feet high and 9 feet long, and use a distinctive 'font' or letterhead, also used on a number of other cast iron signs by the GWR and B&E (see the photographs on the next page). They are cast in one piece, as a shallow trough with a raised frame around the letters. They pre-date the later GWR style of wooden back boards with screw-on cast iron letters.

The present WSR is blessed with original Brunellian signs at Dunster (one sadly missing, of course), Washford and Williton (both platforms there). Wooden replicas attempting to copy the style exist at Watchet, Stogumber (two), and Dunster has recently installed a plastic version of a station sign in a 1960's style between the old rail posts which held the sign which has now passed beyond the Railway's grasp.

Brian Oldford's work can be seen in the replacement Brunellian sign at Sandford and Banwell Station, also in Somerset, which serves as a history centre for the local area. He assures me that we have all the information available from the existing signs to make up the four missing ones, which would be a tremendous leap forward in heritage terms for the Railway.

Given that the new signs will be very faithful replicas rather than historic originals, the WSRA is the appropriate body to work through on this occasion.

Pledges from WSR supporters brought in the funds necessary for the patterns in only 24 hours. The pattern maker has specified the information he needs to produce the patterns and this will be provided to him by the end of March. It is to be hoped that we would be ready to cast the new signs in June. Casting the envisaged four signs themselves will cost approximately a further £500 each, and would be best done as a group.

Anyone able to make a contribution to the casting stage of the project, or who would like to discuss the project should feel free to contact me, either by e-mail robin215white@btinternet.com, or mobile speaking telegraph 07710 336 807.

Robin Moira White

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