

Sandy Cove Sand Co.

'Well that seemed to go OK didn't it?' the management commented to the Property Manager. 'Yes. Marko did a good job. Don't forget to thank him,' she responded. 'No, no, indeed.'

The two of them were spending a few minutes strolling, somewhat idly, around the ruins at Friars Ambling admiring the complex twelfth century stonework by the low light of late afternoon winter sunshine which created both shadows and highlights. Marko had asked if he could have a few minutes with the custodian, Norman "Castle" – few people could remember his proper surname – about something which was nothing to do with the railway. As the three of them had driven over in Marko's car then there was time to mull over the last hour. In terms of the Whittlecreek and Eaton St Torpid Heritage Railway it was a major step forward in that everything was in place to draw up an agreement for the railway to lease a substantial part of the land at the side of the Friars Ambling ruins to allow both a terminus for the railway's three-foot gauge line and also a platform allowing visitors to board a two-foot gauge line into the sand mining museum.

The sand mining museum had its own trustees and budgets. But there was an understanding that the Whittlecreek and Eaton St Torpid Heritage Railway would operate the short section of two-foot gauge track as the sand mining enthusiasts were, understandably, not that well-versed in railways.

The bigger picture was that the Whittlecreek and Eaton St Torpid Heritage Railway would build a substantial extension from Eaton St Torpid all the way to Friars Ambling. This involved reinstating ten miles of trackbed, some of it over the aptly-named Canidringham Bog, and would need a bridge over the Creek River as the original one was made from timber and had been demolished in the 1970s. This proposed extension was nearly twice the total track length currently operating. Much of the land had yet to be acquired by the railway, and the cost of the trackbed was expected to run into millions. But other than that there was a good chance that one day this would progress.

Visitors to the railway would ride all the way from Eaton St Torpid to Friars Ambling. Before returning they could then visit both the ruins and the sand mining museum. Both, of course, were also accessible by road. But the local council was very keen

for there to be alternatives. Understandably, as the main coast road was more like a car park than a trunk route during the summer.

Marko had done a good job of preparing a track layout for the proposed terminus at Friars Ambling. The three-foot line came into one side of a simple platform and the two-foot gauge line would be boarded from the other side of the platform. It really was that simple. On the three-foot track there needed to be a run-around loop so locomotives could 'swap ends' and pull coaches there and also pull them back. Marko had also proposed a siding on the three-foot gauge side where a second train – or maybe just a second locomotive – could be parked up. This was indeed an optimal way of operating. But Marko, at the instigation of the Property Manager, had deliberately overestimated the length of the loop and siding that would be needed.

This was, even though the management had concurred, somewhat devious. But nevertheless, he acknowledged, rather delightfully. The Property Manager's real plan was to erect a café for visitors on the land leased to the railway. That way they could earn considerable extra income. But, understandably, the owner of Friars Ambling would be unlikely to lease them the land to build a café as he too could do the same and make money. So the real plan was to get a 99-year lease based on Marko's proposals for the track layout needed. Then, afterwards, to revise the track layout with a shortened run-around loop and siding, conveniently making room for a café.

And, indeed, during the hour-or-so meeting with the owner of Friars Ambling, Norman the custodian of the ruins, and the three people from the railway everything had gone remarkably smoothly. The proposal for Marko's track layout was accepted without any quibbling. Indeed it was very much welcomed as, although the ten miles of track to Eaton St Torpid might take a long time to complete, in the meantime the sand mining museum could get underway. And there would be real synergy between that and the Friars Ambling ruins. 'Win win' and all that.

Marko had now reappeared and asked if everyone was ready for the off, to which he got an affirmative reply. Once on the more-or-less straight stretch of the main road he said that Bill Wainwright, the head of railway's workshop, had come up with an interesting thought. Marko quickly outlined Bill's suggestion that making the fairly simple rolling stock for the sand mine's two-foot gauge line would make a useful 'training project' for the less experienced workshop volunteers. That way the skills of

the more experienced workshop volunteers could be shared. And, as such, Bill was keen to make a start as soon as funds could be made available.

The management said that this was a valuable suggestion and he was happy to talk to Bill about it, and get some idea of how much money might be needed. Marko then continued by asking if the railway would benefit from working with the college in Bishop's Snoring to set up some sort of government-approved apprenticeship course. Marko said he'd looked at the local council's web site for such schemes but, frankly, was little the wiser. But he did think that if the training focussed on workshop safety and the more basic aspects of engineering then it wouldn't matter that the railway's workshop mostly produced steam locomotives rather than repaired cars or made sophisticated robots.

The management simply said 'Leave it with me', his pet answer to situations which required a bit of fact-finding and deliberation. 'When I've had a chat to someone who runs these schemes then I'll ask Bill what he's got in mind.'

'Not sure he had,' replied Marko. 'It was me that suggested it to him. Frankly I've no idea if it would pan out. I just assumed it would be a way to get more people around here involved – especially youngsters – and maybe provide a bit more income for the railway. But I do agree that unless Bill's entirely happy then we shouldn't take it any further.'

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Frankly the response from the man who ran Norfolk's apprenticeship schemes was rather too full on. After repeatedly saying that he was sure the railway would be able to recruit as many apprentices as they wanted using 'his' web site he then said that perhaps the railway should set its sights higher and set up an academy partnership which also provided pre-employment training courses for job-seekers in tourism, catering and any of the other skills which were part of the railway's activities.

The management made a rather unenthusiastic remark, but this did not dampen the enthusiasm at the other end of the phone. In the end he had to say rather bluntly that it was as much as he could do to keep the railway operating without trying to run a training service as well. But if the apprenticeship scheme went well then it was

something for the future. This still didn't quell the eagerness so the management had to feign a reason to end the call, with the promise to phone again in a few days.



The management and the Property Manager had settled into a routine that – unless anything urgent cropped up – then about ten o'clock on Wednesday mornings the Property Manager would pop her head around the door of the management's office and enquire if more coffee was required. Usually the answer was yes and she would duly return with a mug of tea for herself and a strong black coffee for him. The management would almost always say 'It must be my turn to go to the kitchen' but this offer was dismissed as not necessary.

However some Wednesday mornings the reply was 'No. Let's go to The Alex.' Coincidentally it was always when the weather was suitable for a pleasant stroll. As well as being a break from the confines of the office, it was an excellent opportunity to talk over matters which didn't need too many interruptions, or were a bit too sensitive if anyone happened to be listening. This morning the management made this suggestion and then followed it by asking whether they should stop off at the railway's gift shop on the way. This was technically wrong, as the gift shop was a short distance in the opposite direction. But it made good sense.

The gift shop manager had once been deemed by the Property Manager as 'nice but useless'. She was still as useless but not quite so nice to either the management or the Property Manager since they'd put in checks to stop her ordering large numbers of remaindered cook books which, as it turned out, had been remaindered for a good reason: they didn't actually sell.

After the usual slightly frosty chat the Property Manager insisted that the gift shop needed to restock from local crafts people. These were strictly all on sale-or-return so there was no financial risk to the railway. But most sold quickly enough that this was a technicality. The gift shop manager nevertheless said that these were not what the visitors wanted to buy. The Property Manager had long twigged that this was just the shop manager's way of saying that she herself wouldn't give them house room and didn't understand why anyone else would.

After what was by now a customary conversation the management and the Property Manager walked away. As ever the management expressed his appreciation to the Property Manager for finding more tactful yet emphatic ways of dealing with a situation he himself found difficult.

On the way to The Alex the management said that the main reason he wanted a chat away from the office was to discuss how to use the Eaton Mill Fund. This was the money donated to the railway by Lao Weng's 'friends' – a euphemism for his more affluent Daoism students. The management and the Property Manager were the sole signatories to this account and maintained strict secrecy about the donors, as requested by Lao.

The total amount of money donated each year was the second-biggest source of income for the railway after ticket sales, and incurred little in the way of costs other than providing electricity and water for the mill, and paying the rates – which would need to be paid anyway. But how much money was donated was entirely outside the control of the railway. Indeed if Lao upped sticks or for other reasons stopped running retreats then the income would drop to nothing.

The management and Property Manager had agreed that it was impossible – and irresponsible – to plan to use this money in advance so would only make decisions on how to spend it after it was in the bank account. Nevertheless they maintained a 'hit list' of projects which needed funding. Before committing to a specific expenditure they reviewed other projects near the top of the list.

The Property Manager was of the opinion that maintenance of the railway's buildings was too important to be left to this rather ad hoc process so should be funded from the main budget of the railway – in other words, funded from ticket sales and profits from the café and shop. The Mill Fund would only be used if an unexpectedly large property repair was necessary. So far that had not arisen.

Marko had similarly insisted that there needed to be money available at reasonably short notice if either of the locomotives were ever to need expensive work, such as boiler repairs. Having either loco out of action for any length of time would significantly diminish ticket sales and other income. So a Reserve Fund had been set up which would cover the costs of repairs to either buildings or rolling stock which exceeded the usual maintenance budgets. While it was impossible to predict how

much such an eventuality might actually amount to, transferring money from the Mill Fund had allowed the Reserve Fund to be built up to what seemed an appropriate balance.

Another fund had been set up to put money away to fund the restoration of the track bed to Friars Ambling. This was known as the 'Southern Extension Fund' or SEF. The rate of progress of this massive project was still painfully slow. Indeed a big part of the Property Manager's workload was steadily working on all the landowners to acquire the land needed. While the county council expressed lots of support for this project, so far, such 'support' had amounted to words rather than grants. Other grant-giving bodies had been identified but as most only offered match-funding then there needed to be a lot more dosh sloshing around before a grant application would be worthwhile. At this stage putting money into the SEF would not speed up the construction.

The management asked the Property Manager to briefly summarise any developments or real challenges with getting all the land needed for the Southern Extension. That didn't take long but now they'd now arrived at the café inside the Alex and ordered drinks and Danish pastries. While consuming these they reviewed the other options for spending the funds now in the Mill Fund.

The Property Manager confirmed that, no matter how important the reserves and the SEF might be, they were no more important than keeping the workshop supplied with the materials needed by the volunteers to keep projects moving forwards. Without a variety of active projects the volunteers might drift away and that would be a major loss of skills right at the heart of the railway's operations. Indeed, so far nearly all the costs of materials needed to be bought in for new vehicles had been met by the Mill Fund. And, as the management wryly noted to the Property Manager, it was another two such projects he wanted to add near the top of the list as they were ideal opportunities for volunteers to enhance or widen their skills, either in practical ways or at project management.

He outlined the reasons why Bill – at Marko's instigation – wanted to construct an LPG-powered 'tram loco' with two more coaches. The Property Manager asked a few questions about why a tramway on the north coast of Ulster was in any way relevant to the north-west of Norfolk and the management did their best to remember Bill's enthusiastic remarks. Including Bill's paraphrase of Marko's suggestions that this

might be something the railway's marketing team could 'get their teeth into'. The Property Manager laughed and said 'Couldn't they just.'

The management took that as the Property Manager's broad agreement so moved on to Bill's second request. Which was to start on the two-foot gauge rolling stock for the sand mine line ahead of the track being laid as this would act as a training project. He deliberately did not mention the possibility of apprentices, although on some future occasion he would welcome the Property Manager's input. Right now the Property Manager was questioning how quickly the track would be laid now that the agreement as to where the platform would be situated was now imminent. The management said that he'd been told the sand mine museum's trustees were sitting on grants that had to be spent quite quickly else they would lapse. And most certainly the key people at the sand mine – along with the owner and custodian of the Friars Ambling ruins who stood to also benefit from this development —were fired up to get things underway.

The Property Manager said 'Well, I think that's enough "due diligence" for one coffee break. It's not my decision as to how the Mill Fund is allocated. But I can't see any reason for not transferring the money needed to start these two projects out of the Mill Fund. Bill's estimates are a bit higher than what's in there at the moment. But we can put the brakes on either or both the projects if for some reason we're short of readies when the last fifteen or twenty percent of the budget needs paying. At least with Bill we can be sure there won't be overspends, unless something goes seriously wrong.'

'Yes, indeed,' replied the management. "'Overspend" is an anathema to Bill and he'll do almost anything to avoid asking for more funds.'

Before leaving The Alex they maintained their tradition of wandering over to Cynthia, the curator of the gallery, for a quick word. She'd been manning the counter of the gift shop rather than sitting in her office, as was more usual. She greeted the management and the Property Manager with the slightly tongue in cheek question 'Are you two alright? Has someone died?'

'Yes, yes , we're fine,' replied the management. 'Why do you think we've been bereaved? Thankfully not.'

'Well because you two aren't usually so serious. You're usually joking and laughing about something or other. Though of course I can never hear what it might be,' replied Cynthia.

'No indeed,' replied the Property Manager. 'We come here to be out of earshot of anyone who might overhear our scheming and plotting.'

'And it was a very serious conversation,' continued the management. 'We were working out the best way to spend some money.'

'Pleased to hear you've got some,' retorted Cynthia. 'Any of it coming this way?'

'But of course. We're about to build more coaches to bring more visitors almost to your door,' quipped the Property Manager.

'Don't get me started on that one!' responded Cynthia in a more serious tone of voice. There was a long-standing 'understanding' – it was hardly a joke – that visitors to The Alex were only killing time before catching a train back to Whittlecreek. It wasn't entirely true as tourists came to Eaton St Torpid by car too. But it rankled Cynthia that there was, indeed, some truth in the remark.

Changing the conversation, Cynthia asked if the management had been approached by the chap from the council who organised apprenticeship schemes. The Property Manager looked blank. 'Yes, yes,' confirmed the management. 'I was talking to him only a few days ago. I promised to get back to him but haven't looked into all the online information.'

'Oh, so you might be to blame,' Cynthia responded. 'He's certainly difficult to get rid of once he's started.' The management smiled and nodded. 'If you manage to make any sense of the online griff then do let me know. Clear as mud to me.'