COLNE VALLEY RAILWAY

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STEAM DRIVING EXPERIENCE - 11th JUNE 2023

We arrived at the Colne Valley Railway (CVR) at 09:45 on Sunday 11th June, where we were greeted by Sally who was point of contact for our Steam Driving Experience. A treat for my 60th birthday year, I had specifically chosen CVR as they offer a session for exactly 3 people and I wanted to do this activity with two other family members.



Ellis, Dave and Nic + 2138 Swordfish

Importantly, the CVR is also a fairly short line of about a mile with the main station at the midpoint, and so the driving experience contains many starts, stops and reverses rather than a longer straight run.

This article describes our experience, and includes some hints and tips to help you enjoy your day should you decide to take to the rails at a future date!

Clothing is all-important – a cotton (*non-nylon*) boiler suit is ideal, along with a hat to keep the dirt out of your hair, a pair of standard gardening gloves, and stout hiking boots or steel toecaps. Make sure that you can bend down fully in the boiler suit which you will need to do when shovelling the coal; and if you have long hair then do make sure that it can be tied up and away from the flames of the firebox for your own safety.

We were introduced to Paul, Chair of CVR, who began by giving us a 45-minute talk in the waiting room on the history of CVR and the inner workings of a steam engine. Paying attention to this is very useful later as it will help you to appreciate what you are trying to control within the locomotive. Safety aspects were also covered, after which we stepped onto the platform to meet our instructors – Vernon the driver and Gary the fireman.



The experience was split into three 45-minute sessions where we each took on the role of fireman, driver and signalman, rotating through the roles in that order until each person had covered all three activities as described below.

For the footplate roles, you should be aware that you will first need to pass a basic agility test to show that you can get down from the footplate to track level in an emergency by descending the steps of the loco backwards, a descent of three to four feet; and then back up onto the footplate.

The day of our experience delivered really hot weather, but on the footplate the first thing you notice as you step on is the additional rise in temperature. This is nothing compared to the heat that you experience when the firebox door is opened, so it's important that you are able to tolerate this level of heat. All of this means that you will need to keep up your water intake, so do remember to take a good water bottle, there is ample room to stow this behind you on a shelf on the footplate during your session, and there is a facility to stop and refill it on the platform if needs be.



Up in the signal box, the signalling session (45 minutes) instructed by Paul covered signalling of the line, where you get to observe the progression of the locomotive on the illuminated track diagram, and operate the correct signals as it enters each section. You can ask lots of questions and discuss the workings of the box to a high level of detail, and you have a great view over the station and down the track in both directions. In most situations you can observe the signal change as you pull the required lever once you have learnt where to look.



The firing session (45 minutes) instructed by Gary covered observation of the boiler pressure, control of the water level and correct management of the firebox itself – all of which are critical to the safe progression of the locomotive.

The driving session (45 minutes) instructed by Vernon covered control of forward/reverse, braking and throttle, judging when to deploy these controls for smoothest progress, observing signals and hazards throughout, using the whistle correctly to warn others, monitoring your speed and stopping accurately at a specific point on the track.



As with all things that are enjoyable our time went really quickly, but we all agreed that we had enjoyed the experience immensely, mainly due to the friendly nature of our instructors and their expertise – it's a great way to try something completely different or to celebrate a special birthday, and of course it makes a valuable contribution to the funds that are required to keep the Colne Valley Railway up and running for future generations.

Free guest tickets are provided as part of the Experience, so having someone on the platform to capture the moment is a good idea. Many thanks therefore go to my wife and daughters for acting as photographers throughout, and for capturing the moment in the photos that I have included within this article.

Dave

