

## **Report on Mid Norfolk Railway for 2024 Yaxham Parish Meeting**

The MNR continues to successfully recover from the financial and personal effects of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021. In those years there was a loss of income from the cancellation two major events and all normal activities, as well as the inability of volunteers to come to the railway. Matters were partially helped by Government grants, but overall this created a difficult situation. Things have now improved significantly.

The railway's major fundraiser, Polar Express, was an amazing success in 2023. The number of people wanting to come involved extending the length of trains to eight passenger carrying carriages. In addition there was the support coach for the actors, and with a locomotive on each end, making a total length of 264 meters (or 870 feet). To be able to get this into the station, the platform had to be extended, and a new permanent platform was built. A total of 92 trains ran to 'The North Pole' aka Thuxton, passing the illuminated signal box and station at Yaxham, and 47,000 passengers were carried. This event in 2024 may be even bigger.

Other family-based events have been the Dino Day, successfully creating a tribe of dinosaurs between Dereham and Thuxton, and more recently, Alice on the Wondertrain, created by Twisted Reality Productions, who are the people behind the actors on the Polar Express. Adults are not forgotten, with Murder Mystery trains, the 'Breckland Fryer' fish and chips trains and several other events.

At Dereham station, the tea room is now open on several days a week, and the tea room at County School is open at weekends. The Museum at the station has recently been completely re-organised and is well worth a visit.

Recent years have shown that heritage railways can no longer succeed by relying on enthusiasts coming for a ride. Several such railways have had financial problems since the pandemic, not helped by massive price increases in fuel, especially coal. Hence the need to move to a more general entertainment mode. By doing this, the MNR is making the sort of income necessary to maintain a long and expensive-to-maintain railway.

When MNR was able to purchase the railway, 27 years ago, the line had been minimally maintained for many years. Since then increasingly heavy use has caused assets to wear out. Thousands of sleepers have been replaced, worn rails changed and bridges repaired. One bridge in particular, at Crownthorpe north of Wymondham, needs major work, and trains have been unable to cross it for some time, so services are thus restricted to running between Dereham and Thuxton at present. Work has started on repairs to this bridge and also the replacement of worn rails in the area. Until that is completed, sadly there are no trains to Wymondham, but there are big plans for developments there.