

Taking it all in: Aaron Denny learns about the boiler with Tom Ashcroft and BESTT trainer Lawrence Donaldson, removing wash-out plugs in the smokebox during the BESTT Boiler Wash Out and Examination course at Stephenson Steam Railway. DAVID GRINDLEY

# STEPHENSON SKILLS FOR THE THIRD CENTURY OF STEAM

The skills forming the backbone of preservation are imperative for keeping heritage railways alive. **Sally Clifford** finds out how the young volunteers at North Tyneside's Stephenson Steam Railway – which is dedicated to railway pioneers George and Robert Stephenson – are playing their part to help keep this industry on track into the future.

Keeping the railway legacy alive is something David Grindley is passionate about. It was through involvement in the heritage sector that David, who previously worked as a steam technician at Beamish Museum for six years, recognised the need for skills to be passed on.

"Doing a heritage skills course many years ago highlighted the necessity of transferring skills from senior volunteers to younger ones so they can take over in years to come. It's all about the progression of the railway."

David's arrival in 2019 at the Stephenson Steam Railway in North Shields, where he is now engineering and railway operations manager, brought about an important change.

"When I first started, there was no established youth group, no young volunteers as such," he recalled.

In 2021, as normality began to resume following the lockdowns which took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, he established a youth group.

"After coming out of lockdown and everything went back to

normal, many young volunteers came forward. Many wanted to work in the rail industry, so they came here for experience and knowledge.

"We are almost like a stepping stone to get them experience on their CV," David explained.

He outlined how previous young volunteers are now driving and training drivers for the Tyne & Wear Metro, proving just how beneficial volunteering can be, both to the railways and to those giving their spare time to support this important part of our past – and future.

Since setting up the group, the railway now has a total of 14 young volunteers on board, ranging in age from 13 to 18.

David said they come to the railway on a designated day, usually a Saturday, and participate in tasks as varied as general DIY through to track maintenance.

As well as learning new skills and boosting their CVs, being a part of the group brings many other advantages, such as helping them improve communication and social abilities. "One of the benefits of volunteering



**On the footplate:** Left to right are diesel driver Neville Bilton with Benjamin Wood, Muhammad Aadil Majumder and Tom Ashcroft. DAVID GRINDLEY



**Boiler work:** Muhammad washes out the boiler foundation ring, removing sludge and scale. DAVID GRINDLEY



**Hands on:** Benjamin fits a mudhole door and checks alignment. DAVID GRINDLEY



**Practical:** Tom fits a mudhole door with a new door joint. DAVID GRINDLEY

is engaging with like-minded people," he added.

For those seeking a career on the railway, helping out behind the scenes gives them an insight into exactly how it works and equips them with transferable skills. Training is imperative to enable them to help keep the railway running and the legacy alive.

David explained that the Wellesley Community Trust Fund grant, which the railway received over a period of three years, enabled the line to put its young volunteers through

a recent boiler wash-out and examination course.

"It is a really good course," he said. "It gives participants an understanding of how the boiler works and how important it is to keep the boiler maintained. It also helps them in progressing to be a fireman or a driver. They get to know the principles of the working boiler."

Run by BESTT, the Boiler and Engineering Skills Training Trust, the four-day course specialises in providing hands-on, practical experience. One volunteer spoke of finding it

useful for their progression as a steam locomotive maintenance engineer and engineman.

Inspecting a steam engine and its mechanical parts, and then participating in a fitness-to-run examination and assessment, are just some of the elements of the course, which was delivered by Lawrence Donaldson, training consultant and trainer with BESTT.

Lawrence, who is an engineering assistant at the Kent & East Sussex Railway, was reminded of his own childhood days as a young volunteer. His

interest was stoked through accompanying his railwayman father to work in a railway repair works.

"One thing made me think with the youths I was training," he said. "The youngest was 14 and most of them were about 17, and broadly speaking, I was doing what they were doing 50 years ago."

"I wish I'd had that level of training when I was that age. Now there is an opportunity for more structured, more formal training that wasn't around back then."



Tom provides light for a visual inspection.  
DAVID GRINDLEY



Back to school: In the classroom with BESTT trainer Lawrence Donaldson. DAVID GRINDLEY

He explained how the course is customised to suit those who take part.

"I have always believed that training has to be timely and relevant. Volunteers on the railway commit their time and energy and it's only right that the organisation seeks to develop their capabilities and skills

with their abilities and their commitment," he added.

"If you have young volunteers with a good, regular commitment, you should really have in place a system to develop that because there is always a need for new staff and capabilities. With the nationwide skills shortage, we are also losing heritage skills.

"Training and experience are both stepping stones towards becoming competent.

"If you can lead and guide them, and then apply them, and get them practising these functions and recognise their commitment to the railway, then with some training and instruction, they will know what they are doing, and their commitment will increase accordingly. It is a series of steps to gain commitment, confidence and competence.

"I would urge any railway to have a system in place to accommodate young people. The railways must devote time and energy to young people on that basis."

Launched in 2006, BESTT aims to provide skilled and

professional training and, ultimately, ensure that knowledge is passed on to the next generation and not lost.

Chairman Gordon Newton said it is the first course BESTT has run for anyone under the age of 18.

He said that as well as being an achievement for the participants involved, he also hopes it will encourage other young volunteers to get involved with their local railway.

"It is difficult getting volunteers," he said, "and this may be an incentive to get them and keep them. The message to railways is to look after your volunteers - because they can be the future people who keep the railways running." **HR**

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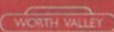
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Benjamin removes fusible plugs for inspection. DAVID GRINDLEY