

the
Benthamline
LEEDS - MORECAMBE COMMUNITY RAIL PARTNERSHIP

The Bentham Line



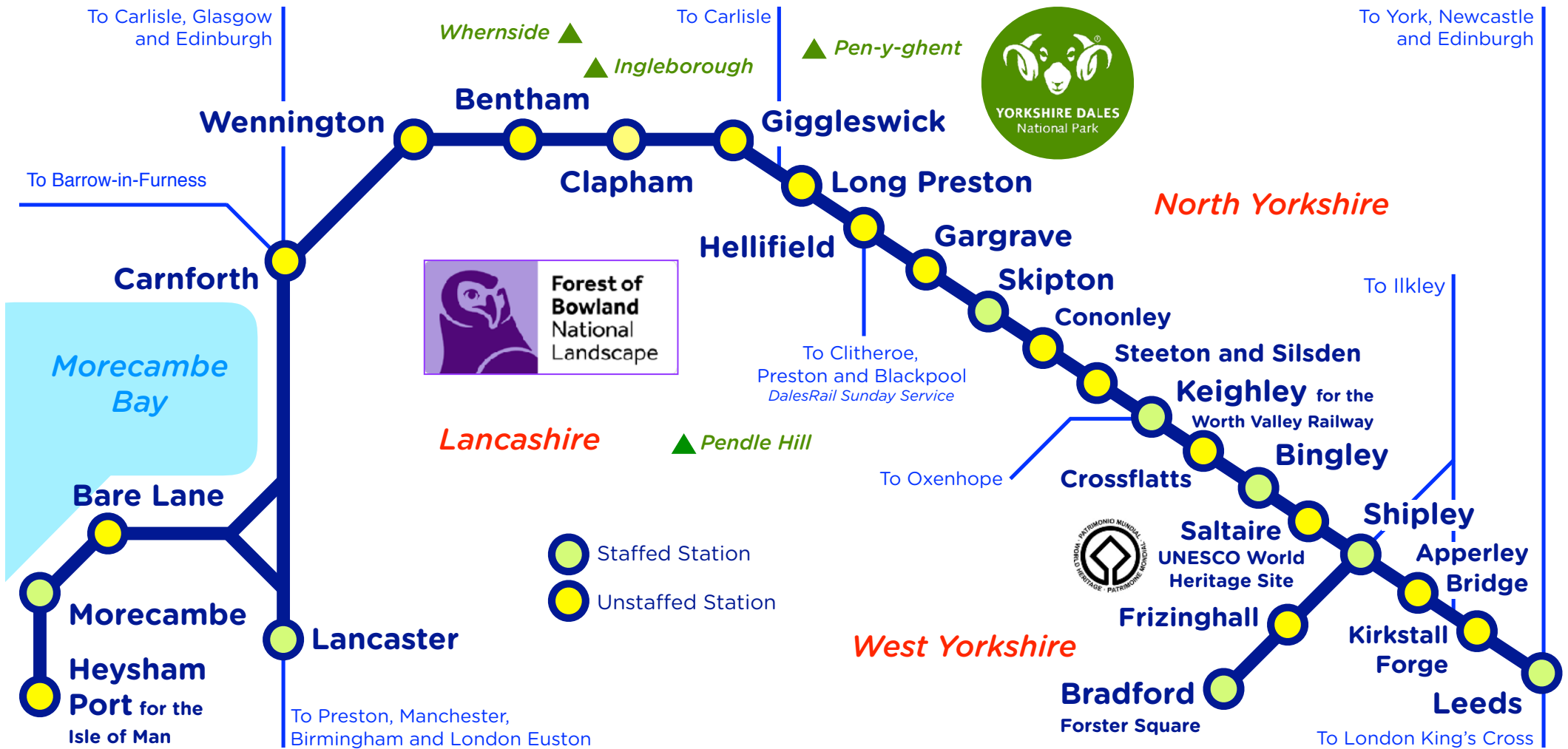
Chairman's Report 2024 - 25
Leeds-Morecambe Community Rail Partnership



Community Rail
Accredited Partnership



The Bentham Line



A Window on the Dales and Bowland

The Bentham Line - Chairman's Report 2024 - 25



On the 1st June 1850, the then 'Little' North Western Railway opened the final section of its route between Clapham and Bentham to make rail travel possible between Leeds and Morecambe. This year we are celebrating not only 200 years of the passenger railway but also but also the 175th anniversary of the route, now the Bentham Line.

This is my 11th annual report as chairman and covers the period from August 2024 until now. In this summer report, I outline the major developments for the Leeds-Morecambe Community Rail Partnership and the Bentham Line during the past twelve months. We are now into our nineteenth year of working with the train operating companies in the North of England and the communities and organisations along the Bentham Line. This report reflects on a further busy and rewarding year for the partnership.

The core funders of the partnership remain Northern Trains Ltd., along with CrossCountry, the London North Eastern Railway, the Avanti West Coast Partnership, TransPennine Trains along with North Yorkshire Council. However, for the financial year 2025/26 TransPennine Trains have opted to offer project funding, to which the partnership have made a successful application.

A sound level of funding for the Partnership has continued, making it possible to extend the part-time partnership officer contract for Brian Haworth for a further year. Thus for a seventh year, there will be 44 hours of officer time available each week.

Last autumn, we welcomed a new member to the partnership, the Friends of Cononley Station. They are represented by Marten Lougee. With the closure of the British Transport Police Station at Lancaster Castle station, following the retirement of Sgt. David Grant, we have

lost our local BTP representative. Last September, Richard Rollins, past Chairman of the CRP, director and Lancaster & Skipton Rail User Group representative, stood down. All parties expressed their sincere thanks for his longtime support for the line. Martyn Moore is the new representative of LASRUG.

Northern and our other funders have maintained a genuine all-round interest in the work of the partnership. We were pleased to attend and contribute to the community rail and stakeholder conferences arranged by all the above mentioned train operating companies, during the past 12 months, either in person or online. The Partnership also continues to be a frequent attendee at in-person conferences and online gatherings organised by the Community Rail Network. This year we have again been particularly interested in the tourism and integrated transport seminars. We have also been a regular attendee at Northern's community rail education network, each quarter.

The LMCRP remains an active member of the Community Rail Network and the Chairman continues his role with Northern's Community Rail Executive Group, representing the East Area Community Rail Partnerships. The Partnership has also maintained its membership of Co-operatives UK and the Bentham and District Dementia Friendly Community.

I was particularly pleased to attend a reception for Community Rail at the Houses of Parliament, which was addressed by the Rail Minister, Lord Hendy MP. He



clearly saw great possibilities for the future of Community Rail as a key partner in the new Great British Railway. It was also an opportunity to meet a number of MPs supporting the grass-roots organisation, including Lizzi Collinge the MP for Morecambe and Lunesdale.

The latest re-accreditation was successfully completed in October 2024; the next is scheduled for October 2025. After several positive annual re-accreditations it would now seem to be a suitable time to extend the period between re-accreditations.

The Bentham Line Strategy to 2042, is now playing its part in the development of future projects for the line and beyond, particularly the Eden North project at Morecambe and the TriLink projects for the West Coast Main Line north of Crewe.

For six years we have had a very successful working relationship with Northern's training department and their Year-in-Industry university students from across the country, which has seen the partnership introduce the world of Community Rail and the Bentham Line, Sadly, the powers that be have decided that the students should now spend all their time within the train operator.

All six groups, a total of over 60 university students, have displayed a lively and positive outlook towards developing their own community initiatives and played a constructive part in the work of the partnership. Over the years, their projects have been entered into the National Community Rail Awards and they have all been short-listed with some being placed. They have left a legacy of projects which continue to serve the Partnership well in their work with schools and communities. As well as providing extended themes with new avenues to explore, their ideas have blended well with those of the CRP.

It is always pleasing to note student's degree success and read about their careers via Linked In. Many have returned to join the rail industry in some guise.

Our Class 150 DMU, No.150 214, has continued her travels across the North and has now covered over 1,000,000 miles carrying its 'dementia-awareness' message, since its naming in 2019. Its daily journeys continue to be recorded, by Phil Wallis, on the unit's Facebook page, which also receives photographs of our unit in action.



I-Creation continues to help us in developing our dynamic website to promote both the line and the work of the Partnership to the wider world. The site reflects the many initiatives of the CRP and includes many opportunities to download and print items, such as the station history panels, the 'Rail to Trail' walks and cycling routes, and the Access for All and Destination Wellbeing literature.

Early in the new year, after some technical challenges, I-Creation was able to integrate the newest version of Google Analytics into the site. We now receive a host of statistics about those who use the site and there have been 5,600 sessions on the site in the first six months. Most users head to the site directly, whilst others are referrals from Scenic Rail Britain and other travel and tourism sites.

We continue to make progress with the development of our social media, which now includes Instagram and Tic Tok. We have now taken out a subscription to the professional version of 'Canva'. It is proving to be a useful tool for creating posts suitable for the variety of media channels we use and a good way of developing a new animated style of posts. The posts frequently relate to topical and national themes and given a Bentham Line twist by Catherine.

Bentham station, as well as being home to the Partnership and Friends Group (FOBS), remains a focal point for, and a window on, the community. The Bentham News group have continued their regular schedule of monthly meetings and editing sessions in the building. The Lancaster and Skipton Rail User Group, LASRUG, have bi-monthly meetings at the station. There continue to be other one-off users, giving a community flavour to the building.

The volunteer station adopters at Heysham Port, Morecambe, Bare Lane, Bentham, Clapham, Cononley, Keighley and Bingley have continued their endeavours to enhance their stations, on both the gardening and information fronts. The Bare Lane adopters have now created numerous history panels about the station, whilst the Bingley adopters have created new artwork for the front of their station.



The staff and pupils at St. Peters Primary School in Heysham have become station adopters at Heysham Port, with the assistance of the CRP. They received a Northern grant and CRP funding for planters, shrubs and seasonal planting at the station.

The partnership is also looking to support a new adoption group, in the process of being formed at Carnforth.

The Friends of Bentham Station continues to hold coffee mornings and other events in Bentham Town Hall to raise funds for their activities.

FOBS' plans for the development of festive celebration at the station came to fruition. The volunteers sent out loads of new decoration blanks to local schools and community groups for them to decorate as they wished. The final effect was impressive with over 160 completed decorations adorning the eight trees created by the volunteers from recycled pallets, bringing colour to the station through December. The display was appreciated by the both the community and Bentham line passengers.

You may recall, that a previous summer's planting was unable to take place because of the lack of water at Bentham station, however, FOBS has returned with a vengeance and a blaze of colour this spring and summer. The colours for summer's display, was based on the logos for the two railway anniversaries. FOBS has also been successful with two grant applications, to Northern and Bentham Town Council, for funds to purchase and install an automatic watering system to the baskets and planters along the front of the station building.

FOBS held their own Bentham Station 175 celebration on 2nd May this year, exactly 175 years to the day since the railway first arrived in Bentham from Wennington. A display of historical



photographs marked the event, along with the unveiling of a commemorative plaque.

A few weeks ago volunteers from ISS, Northern and the LMCPR came together with FOBS to have a volunteer day at Bentham. Sanding and painting, deep cleaning, shrub and tree trimming and installation of the watering system all took place. A highly productive day.



Here at Bentham station, we have had more water in the right places during the past 12 months, with the cold water supply back in action and a new drain in the car park courtesy of Network Rail.

The partnership officers have continued to meet with myself at Bentham at least once per week throughout the year with numerous video and telephone calls in-between. It is always good to be out and about along the line meeting stakeholders and groups. In particular, it is always encouraging to visiting schools, to deliver presentations and activities, and also to welcome school groups to the railway for educational journeys.

Brian Haworth CRPO continues his work with and for schools, supported by local professional artist Alastair Nicholson, where appropriate.

He has returned to work with St. Peter's Primary School at Heysham, but this time he was keen to involve all 240 pupils in the school, and the staff too. The classes at the school are all named after birds to be found on and around Morecambe Bay. Each individual created their



class bird and these were combined by Alastair into class flocks each based around a letter of 'WELCOME!'.

Each of the one-metre square panels was linked to the others by creating a seascape of Morecambe Bay to the background, thus forming an impressive 24-meter long mural for Heysham Port station and a copy for the school. A presentation assembly and installation will take place early this coming September, when the new school year starts.



Brian has also established links to Cedar House Special School in Low Bentham. Small classes from each year at the school have regularly visited Bentham station for rail safety and history presentations. Some classes have been out on the train to Skipton too. A number of the pupils contributed to the FOBS Christmas display.



The biodiversity work with the Year One and Two pupils from Gargrave Primary School has continued with a colourful bird and mini beast panel to accompany their bugs hotel at the station. With copies of the original children's book now very low, we are now planning a reprint. A sequel, 'A Grand Day Out to the City' has now



been prepared and about to head off to the printers. Alastair has prepared the beautiful artwork for this.

This time our intrepid band of original characters, and new ones too, begin their rail journey at Heysham Port and tackle, safety, heritage, community, and biodiversity themes along the way to Leeds.

The LMCRP has continued its work with the Forest of Bowland on a new active-leisure programme for the National Landscape and the neighbouring National Landscape at Arnside and Silverdale, called 'Eco Escapes', with the local community railways a key element of exemplar itineraries which have now been expanded from six to twelve itineraries. The folks at Bowland kindly included an extensive article in their brochure for 2025 about our 175th anniversary.

It is always nice to have support in promoting the Bentham Line not only locally and nationally, but also internationally. It came as a surprise to see several members of the national and regional press giving space over to promoting the uniqueness of the Bentham Line at the start of 2026. This had resulted from a release to the Press Association by the Lonely Planet Group about our inclusion in the 'Lonely Planet's Best in Travel 2025 Guide'. We were one of only a handful of entries from the United Kingdom and were included in their new Train-Hopping



category. Others in the category were The Skeena (Prince Rupert to Jasper in Canada) and The Sunset Limited (New Orleans to Los Angeles in the USA). We were stated to be a 'near-secret scenic railway' and a gateway to cosy communities and beautiful walks. Thanks Lonely Planet, we may now be a little less secret.

I recently welcomed Paul Bigland to the line and Bentham from the 'Rail' magazine. He is writing an article for the magazine, to be published in September, about the community approach to the line and the partnership's work on being inclusive to all resulting from our dementia project.

The CRP and the Friends of Bentham Station were once again short-listed for the Community Rail Awards, in two categories, but the final three was out of grasp this time around. The Partnership and associates have had a wide variety of short listings over the past decade and been placed in the final three in most of the award categories.

It has been great to see increasingly larger numbers of passengers returning to our line during 2023-24 and 2024-25, with a lot of trains well loaded, heading both west and east. There appear to be more families, walkers, cyclists and dogs using the services. Let us hope that these are signs of a green-travel revolution, with more active leisure travel. Walkers are to be seen on most services, frequently making use of the Partnership's 'Rail to Trail' programme of walks.

The latest footfall figures, for the financial year 2023/24, were published by the Operator of Road and Rail in December 2024. This provided a better opportunity to compare the post-pandemic figures to earlier ones. Usage figures for the line are continuing to rise, with many commuter journeys having been replaced by ones for leisure. All the rural stations between Carnforth and Skipton have seen growth beyond the pre-Covid levels, but the larger towns and cities at

both ends of the line have yet to fully make up lost numbers of passengers.

Benthamers continue to make the greatest number of local journeys within the route and have shown considerable resilience to the industrial actions. In fact, the number of people using Bentham station post pandemic is 22.9% higher, at almost 37,000 journeys, than the 29,000 trips before Covid.

The number of students on our route and the number of connections being made to and from the Furness Line has again increased. Our line continues to prove popular for journeys between Scotland and West Yorkshire with the good connections at Lancaster.

Back in summer 2023 the partnership was approached by the Communities and Stations Team at Network Rail LNW with a view to the repurposing of the upper floor of the now disused signal box at Hest Bank level crossing, adjacent to the shore of Morecambe Bay. The aim was to create an educational centre to look at themes of rail safety, operation and history. However, the box is uniquely sited and opens up the possibility of many ecological, environmental and biodiversity activities, related to the shore and Morecambe Bay itself. The CRP was pleased to prepare two detailed papers about the possibilities for the unique experiences which could be made available.



Initial tidying and internal preparation has taken place, and quotes for the final internal works and safety fencing have been sought by Network Rail. Once these are complete the educational preparations will commence. TransPennine, Avanti and Northern have been approached to support the funding of this aspect.



The LMCRP and the Furness Line CRP have been meeting together, at two-monthly intervals, to look at ways of improving the outlook for Carnforth station. Soon after the initial meeting there was an announcement from the station Heritage Centre about closing, but thankfully a new group of people stepped in to run it.



With help from Northern, Network Rail and Lancashire County Council, the CRPs were able to encourage positive improvements to the environment at the station. The whole car park was tidied up with a severe shrubbery trim, tactile paving and yellow lining added to the platforms, new bicycle lockers installed and recently the painting of the station was brought forward in the scheme and is underway.

Thanks to LCC better joint rail and bus information has been put in place at the station and nearby bus stops. Real-time information screens have also been arranged for the stops and station. Use of the parking payment app has proved problematic for sometime, so payment through the ticket vending machines has also been introduced. There's much more that still could be done.

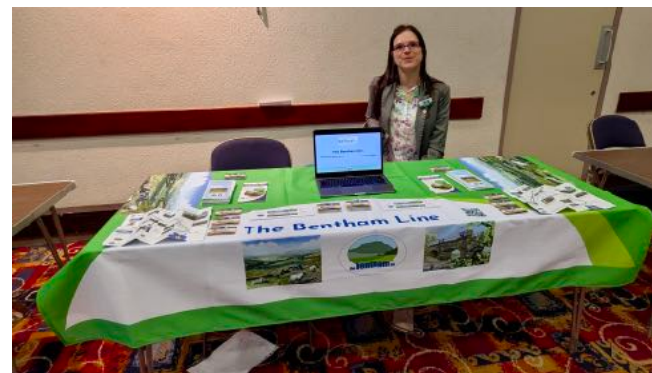
We continue, this summer, to have some of the local dementia groups and lunch clubs travelling on the line for their own 'Grand Days Out'. There have already been a number of bookings, including returning groups, and enquiries for new visits from groups in Leeds.

The onboard Northern staff are exceptionally supportive of the group visits and we have again demonstrated that successful journeys for those with hidden disabilities are a definite possibility.

The Partnership participated in both Dementia Action Week and Community Rail Week this May. They were the same week this year. We were invited by Network Rail to have a stall on the concourse at Manchester Piccadilly again this year. This proved very successful with our materials 'flying' off the stall and a great many positive conversation about the line and Community Rail.



We were pleased to be able to invite along our friends from the Forest of Bowland National Landscape. They were amazed at the interest shown by the travellers, particularly, in their 'Eco-Escapes' initiative, which now offers twelve itineraries based around rail travel.



We made a particular point of operating one of our group days out that week, as well as taking part in a dementia organisation gathering at Pudsey, in Leeds, for all the groups in the area offering support. Our new leaflet, which gives details of possible itineraries was on display.



We were delighted to welcome a Calderdale dementia group from beyond the line. The lively collection of Yorkshire folk from Halifax were met by Catherine and accompanied all the way to Morecambe. Sunshine all the way, and fish and chips made their day. They were welcomed to the resort by Lancaster City Councillor Gerry Blaikie who travelled with them for the last leg of the journey.



In May, we were also joined by a reporter from the Alzheimer's Society magazine who did an in-depth article and podcast on our dementia project including interviews with the CRP, a Northern guard and some of our passengers living with dementia.

I was invited to create a podcast for Railway 200 too, on the Bentham Line and our dementia awareness work. This is one of the Great Rail Tales to be found on the Railway 200 website.

The CRP has worked with Northern's East Area Team for some considerable time on trying to improve the 06:41 service from Bradford Forster Square to Carnforth, by extending it to Lancaster to give an 08:35 arrival and a much better onward connection to Bare Lane and Morecambe. I am pleased to say this was introduced in May this year.

Unfortunately, at the other end of the day, on weekdays, the last service from Lancaster to Skipton now has had its journey time extended by two minutes to a 22:46 arrival, but the intended onward connection to Leeds still departs Skipton at 22:49. This means it no longer appears as a connection in online searches. Northern has been asked to reverse this unhelpful situation.

Northern's services over the past twelve months have continued to be disrupted in the western area, particularly on Sundays, because of . These include our local services between Lancaster, Bare Lane, Morecambe and Heysham Port. making the service unreliable at a time when Morecambe is looking to reviving its fortunes with the new Eden Project.

The CRP is supporting an initiative on improving integrated transport in the Craven District Corridor. An initial meeting last summer brought together interested parties at Bentham station, including bus and train officers from North Yorkshire and Lancashire Councils, the Dales and

Bowland CIC, operator of many Dales bus services and the Settle-Carlisle CRP. Discussions centred on a better understanding of the periods needed for timetable setting in the rail and bus industries and how the setters could better link with each other. Two examples of bus services have been chosen, one from each line, to develop future joint promotions. A joint bus and rail timetable has been produced for this summer and Hawes and Ingleton are being looked at as Rail-bus destinations.

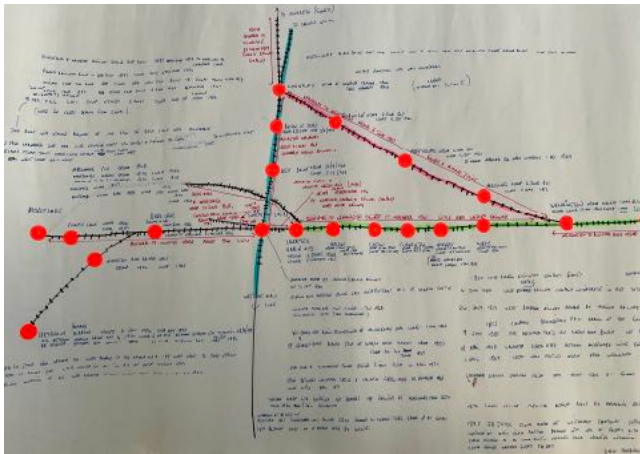
Back in September last year we were approached by Pioneer Projects, an arts charity in Bentham, and asked if we could support a young man, Max, who has hidden disabilities and needed additional support, has a great passion for anything connected with railways. He had not coped with the pandemic well and consequently had become very reserved. We were only too pleased to help and glad that it didn't take very long to 'crack his shell' and get him back on track, by working together to develop his ideas to create a children's story based on the fictional Mallamdale Light Railway,



featuring two narrow gauge locomotives, Cove and Tarn. He has written three stories and illustrations are now in development.

Max has volunteered with us for at least three hours each week since then and supported numerous activities. He is an ideal partner for Brian Haworth when it comes to developing materials of an historical nature. Together they have created the materials for history panels

for our West Yorkshire stations, as well as two further panels for the waiting room at Lancaster station about the Glasson Dock Branch and Lancaster's Locomotive Legacy. To reflect the railway celebrations they have also created timelines to reflect the creation and development of the Bentham Line. All these are now to be prepared for printing prior to public display.



Following initial discussions with Northern and the Partnership the ladies of 'Outside it is Beautiful' joined us last autumn to undertake an initial trial for their whole-line project, aiming to bring the passengers closer to the line's communities and the beautiful surroundings. They engaged with pupils in Bolton-le-Sands, former prisoners in Leeds, a dementia group in Bentham and passengers on the trains, amongst others. This was



rounded off by creating a short ghost story with a Settle group.

The group is now looking to undertake the full project this autumn and has applied for a substantial grant from the Arts Council. They are looking to expand their engagement to a far wider range community groups and local residents. Ultimately they are planning to create a smart app for our route where a GPS signal triggers stories by local people about the communities and surrounding scenery.



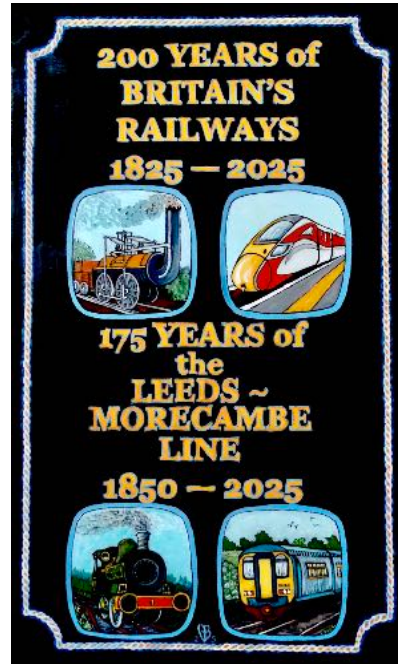
The highlight of the year has been the celebrations for Bentham Line 175. A lot of work went in to the preparations with most completed in-house.

Anniversary logo, bunting and banner designs (page 3) were prepared last winter, then printed and displayed on alternate station sides, along the length of the line from early spring. Thanks go to Northern for supporting the printing of the banners and the main event.





FOBS held their event in May (mentioned previously) and LASRUG commissioned a colourful commemorative panel combining both our anniversary and Railway 200. Jack Warbrick, LASRUG Membership Secretary, has written a collection of poems about the rural stations on the route to mark the anniversaries. These will be published in a booklet entitled 'Line by Line' and will also be on display at the appropriate station.



The main event, 'A Grand Day Out to the Seaside' - a recreation of a 1960s day to Morecambe - was held on Sunday 1st June 2025 exactly 175 years to the day since the line opened.

Guests joined the 08:31 from Leeds to Morecambe at stations all along the route, not knowing all that was in store for them. It was pleasing to welcome on board Bentham Line stakeholders, rail groups, local councillors and supporters, along with representatives from the many community organisations we have supported during our first two decades.

Lancaster City Brass were at Morecambe station to welcome the train and give a short concert. The guests then boarded a vintage Ribble double decker (courtesy of the Ribble Vehicle Preservation Trust) for a trip to Heysham Village for a morning break. The bus then headed along the promenade to Happy Mount Park at Bare. Guests then enjoyed free time in the resort.





On the return train journey guests were served an afternoon tea, created by the 'baking belles' at Country Harvest Bakery in Bentham, by the children participating in the visit.

Both the Bentham station and the Grand Day Out events attracted interest

from BBC York. After an online interview, the reporter joined us at Bentham to meet members of FOBS and the CRP news items, a podcast and website article. All have been well received. The items were shared with, and broadcast by, BBC radio stations across the north of England over the 1st June weekend.

My sincere thanks go to all the directors, management committee members, Northern, CrossCountry, Avanti, LNER, TransPennine Express, Network Rail, rail user group members, friends groups, station adopters, sponsors and the many additional volunteers who have together contributed a vast amount of time to developing the Bentham Line and enhancing its stations, as well as helping to secure a brighter future for the line with a considerable emphasis on the communities it serves.

May I offer my personal thanks to Catherine Huddleston (CRPO), Brian Haworth (CRPO), Hugh Turner (Treasurer) and Rod Tickner (Vice Chair and Secretary) and Max (volunteer) for their support and help with all the ideas and schemes and to all who assisted in bringing our many projects to fruition. Thank you to Ollie and Phil and others who send us wonderful photographs from along the line for our

My thanks also go to Darren Allsopp and Richard Isaac and Jessica Clarke of Northern's East Area team who have continued to support the work of the partnership.

To accompany this report there is a photographic slideshow reflecting on the past year of Bentham Line activities. This can be found on YouTube by searching 'The Bentham Line 2024/25' or by visiting our website.

The partnership is now looking forward to 2026 and the 20th anniversary of its formation in April and the 10th year of our successful Dementia and Community Rail project.

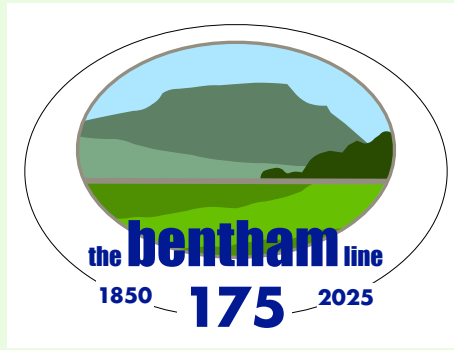
After 175 years, the Bentham Line is still here for the benefit of all.

Gerald Townson

Gerald Townson
Chairman, LMCRP Co. Ltd.

July 2025.









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*Photographs courtesy of Ollie Rouse, Brian Haworth,
Phil Wallis and Gerald Townson*