Befriending Leamington Spa station 2002-2017

Purpose of this article

To help those who want to make their station a more attractive and useful place. For more details go to www.leamingtonstationfriends.org

Our station

The station was rebuilt in Art Deco style by the Great Western Railway in the 1930s. Chiltern's management have an ongoing affection for the spirit of the GWR, exemplified in colour schemes and a general sense of historical context.

The gardens on the platform and the embankments have 60 metres of lawns, beds, hedges and so on. They make a big impression on visitors: for better or worse. The station buildings and gardens were neglected by 2000, with loss of features and graffiti in places. All this has changed now, the result of years of volunteer efforts as well as investments from Chiltern and Network Rail.

2002; First efforts

Residents had become concerned with the down-at-heel appearance of the station and the gardens. Local Soroptomists had already been tending the flower tubs and some members of the Leamington Society took matters into their own hands in the gardens. On hearing of unsympathetic plans to develop parts of the buildings by Railtrack they applied for and were granted Grade ll Listed building status.

The Friends organisation

Ian Baxter, Northern Area Manager of Chiltern Railways, gave a talk in 2004 to the Leamington Society and called for the establishment of a "friends' organisation". Under the leadership of Archie Pitts and with considerable help from Chiltern this has since met bi-monthly, co-ordinating the efforts of gardeners and others for numerous projects. As well as the gardening, the Friends have raised money for, restored and replaced GWR platform benches, posters, the booking hall clock, the lamp hut, running-in boards, mirrors, replacement planters, and so on.

Friends have held fund raising railway-themed talks each year, and arranged visits, to railway or garden venues, all in the cause of maintaining a sense of identity and comradeship.

Raising money and winning awards

The chief sponsors have been the Railway Heritage Trust, Royal Leamington Spa Town Council, Chiltern Railways, the Leamington Society and many private individuals who have given their time and money. Some of the awards have required systematic efforts, some just appeared! They definitely help in maintaining the momentum, and it's been most impressive how sufficient people have turned out week after week over the years to develop the lovely gardens as they now are.

Success factors, lessons, pitfalls

Our background makes for unique opportunities and challenges. The Friends have had consistent support from both Chiltern top management and staff, history to refer to and be influenced by, and restrictions on what we could do because of listed building status.

So here are some generalised recommendations:

- Determined and systematic leadership is essential, together with systematic record keeping.

- Set up a clear structure and build relationships with local councils as well as the Train Operating Company.
- Respect the disciplines of working in a railway environment.
- Build recognition and appreciation for the volunteers.
- The Friends operate as a subgroup of the Leamington Society; this avoids separate banking arrangements and takes advantage of Gift Aid.

Beware of
- Taking on too much at once.
- Getting involved with how the station is run or the trains operated.

In conclusion

The community is delighted with what's been achieved. The successful start led to a change of attitude toward the station, and both Chiltern and Network Rail have invested in improvements to the buildings: there are many stations competing for these resources and it must help the justification for the money that the Leamington community is so active with their station.

Do please come and visit. Have a look at our website and arrange a date: one of us would be delighted to show you round.

Jan Gillett and Marianne Pitts

Leamington Society, March 2017