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PASSENGERS UP, SALES UP. 2008 ON THE GREAT CENTRAL RAILWAY

Year of the Express Engines draws crowds. “Oliver Cromwell” and “Tornado” are particularly strong attractions.

At the end of its 2008 financial year the Great Central Railway has disclosed extraordinary passenger growth despite the tough economic climate. The award winning Leicestershire line has also seen strong sales growth on a number of its products including Santa Specials and Drive A Locomotive Experience.

Visitor numbers were up 12% and the total booking office sales were up 11% on the 2007 financial year taking the lines turnover well over the million and a half pounds mark.

“These results are a tribute to the hard work of our staff and volunteers,” said the GCR president Bill Ford. “They pulled out the stops in 2008 to deliver an ambitious programme of special events when we welcomed a number of large visiting locomotives. Our promotion 'The Year Of Express Engines' really worked as a way of bringing in visitors despite the economic background.”

The strong growth is being attributed particularly to the visit of Tornado, Britain's brand new steam engine which came to Leicestershire line for running in trials in August 2008. Also, in May 2008 “Oliver Cromwell” an engine which is synonymous with the end of UK main line steam was re-commissioned after a lengthy overhaul. Other locomotives from the national collection including “City Of Truro” and “Lord Nelson” also visited.

However, income from Drive A Locomotive experience courses also rose by 4%, and Santa Specials by the same amount. Platform ticket sales were almost double the 2007 figure. The railway also developed new attractions like Ellis's Tea Room at Rothley and implemented new family friendly initiatives like the talking tour guide.

“Clearly there were a number of features in 2008 which are unlikely to be repeated,” continued Bill, “so the strong growth is of course welcome but isn't guaranteed to continue. As a note of caution, our costs are always rising. The price of coal and utility bills are just two examples. Operating heritage infrastructure always means you have to run a little bit faster every year just to stand still as maintenance costs will always rise. Our outgoings in 2008 will have also increased over the previous year. However, I'm glad we're going into 2009 and the continuing economic uncertainty in this position than if all the excitements of 2008 hadn't happened.”

Other passenger improvements are planned for 2009 like the addition of a canopy at Leicester North station and guest engines are being lined up for special events. There will be a tank engine gala at Easter and in May the line will celebrate 40 years of preservation.

The railway will make its traditional financial report, including the profit and loss accounts, to shareholders in late June.

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