



Guard remembered: (left to right) Network Rail Chairman Sir Peter Hendy; David Daniels, Community Rail Development Officer, North Downs Line CRP; and Matthew Golton, Interim Managing Director of Great Western Railway with the special train at Reading on 29 February 2020. Inset: Jessie's Seat.

JESSIE'S SEAT

ON LEAP Day, 29 February 1892, a South Eastern & Chatham Railway goods train travelling between Redhill and Guildford on what is now known as the North Downs line became divided and the rear portion made up of 40 wagons caught up with and collided with the main train on the approach to Chilworth (formerly Chilworth and Albury) station. Sadly, the guard – Henry Wicks – was killed in the accident, and in his memory the planting of a box bush was organised at the lineside as a topiary memorial by his son and daughter-in-law. The topiary survives in 2020 on the south side of the line and is lovingly cared for by Network Rail volunteers.

The topiary is known as Jessie's Seat after the guard's daughter-in-law and comprises a seat upon which Guard Wicks' spirit can sit, and a pheasant perches on the back of the seat. Less respectfully, it is also known to some railway staff as the Chilworth Chicken.

Leap days at weekends are rare, but this year 29 February fell on a Saturday. To mark the occasion,

the North Downs Line Community Rail Partnership and Great Western organised a special train from Reading to Redhill and back, which paused adjacent to Jessie's Seat in both directions. A minute's silence was observed on the outward journey, and a posy of primroses was placed on the seat by the driver on the return journey.

Amongst the passengers on board were Sir Peter Hendy (Chairman of Network Rail); Matthew Golton (Acting MD of GWR); John Ellis (the last General Manager of the Southern Region of BR); and representatives of the CRP and local communities. Class 165 No 165124 was adorned with a headboard at Reading, but unfortunately the absence of a lamp bracket on a Class 165 and modern Health and Safety requirements meant it had to be removed before the train left.

It is hoped that the headboard will in due course be erected either next to the topiary or at Chilworth station. *Chris Heaps*