**Music Trains – a guide *16.04.23***

**Summary**

Music Trains or Folk Trains or any trains with music on them promote the railway, attract people to use it and, above all, are *fun. Fun* for the passengers, *fun* for the musicians, *good* for the pubs and (mostly) *fun* for the organisers.

A group of people get on the train, go to the pub and back, and hear live music both on the train and at the pub. An organiser puts the project together, persuades the CRP to allocate a budget, talks to the railway company, plans a route that ends up at a pub, talks to the pub, books a band and publicises the event. The organiser or someone else ‘hosts’ the event from start to finish. In these metric-driven times a Music Train has the added benefit that you can calculate the fare revenue generated and show how it compares with the cost of the music.

***Small print***

*This note is based on experience with one Line’s programme over fifteen years, in which time we have built up to arranging around seventeen Music Trains in the seven summer months of the year, with three different packages of journey and pub, an average attendance of around 35 and income to the railway of over three times the cost to the CRP budget.*

*The original idea was imported from the Penistone Line and the High Peak and Hope Valley Lines, and then modified for the Mid Cheshire Line. (That’s why they are ‘Music Trains’ in Cheshire and ‘Folk trains’ elsewhere). Different people and different lines will have different experiences. And remember (in the words of Captain Sparrow) these are only guidelines, not rules.*

*This note refers to the pre-Covid world. There will no doubt be changes when trains and pubs are back to something like normal and public singing is allowed again.*

**The basics**

Train

Pub

Passengers

Music

Budget

Organisers

**Train, Route and Timing**

Thirty minutes to an hour on the train is about right. Less than thirty minutes and you don’t get much music on the train (which is the magical part of the event) because of setting up at the beginning and tidying up at the end. Over an hour is asking too much of the musicians and gets the wrong balance between travelling time and eating and drinking time at the pub.

Choose a time when the train is fairly empty if possible. (Having said that, one of our most successful packages starts at Altrincham on a commuter service, where we can only just fit on our group of forty people and musicians. So we don’t start the music until most of the commuters have got off - which is after for four stops, but still leaves forty-five minutes of train travel with music). Avoid trains used by lots of schoolchildren. We aim to bring extra business to the pubs when they are quiet which will be on weekdays.

We have a gap of about two to two-and-a-half hours between the train’s arrival and the departure of the return train. This allows for walking to and from the pub, ordering drinks and food while the band sets up, a couple of forty minute music sessions with a gap between for the band to eat, and the return walk to the station.

We don’t catch the last train back from the countryside stations, just in case there is a problem with the service and a long delay. We do do that from Chester itself where the station is big enough to wait in if there should be a delay.

Talk to the rail company through the CRP. Northern have a risk assessment which they apply – its requirements are common sense. The key points are:

Notify the rail company of the programme in advance

Musicians can’t use the train’s electric supply. If they bring battery-powered amps then any cables must be out of the gangway.

You are using a public train – you don’t have exclusive use of a train or carriage and have to allow for ‘normal’ passengers.

Make sure the conductor and passengers can always get through the carriage and don’t obstruct the exit doors and access to the toilet.

You must have insurance against third party risks.

(More information about practicalities is given under ‘host’).

**The pub**

Identify a pub near the station (it may well be the Railway Inn or maybe it used to be the Railway Inn before it changed its name to something more ‘modern’). Have a look round and then talk to the landlord or manager.

They will like the business you bring, but they also need to be happy with the music and with a large group coming through the door all at once. The group will be expecting to be served drinks and to order food quickly. The places we go to are well-prepared, may bring in extra staff and can do that for a group of fifty within fifteen minutes (and that includes the drinks for the band – very important).

We have one pub – a large, managed pub with a restaurant – which can cope with any number. On one occasion there were over eighty of us. Forty to fifty is quite normal for those events. A smaller pub we go to, which would be overwhelmed by a large group, can cater for pre-booked groups of about thirty. And we go to another bar which can cater for a larger group – up to fifty - with food pre-booked.

In the pub there needs to be a place for the musicians to play from which they can heard by your group. This needs to be reserved for them by the pub. The tables nearby need to be kept free for your group or the ‘normal’ customers need to be warned!

The pub may find it simpler to offer a reduced or special menu to cope with the number of orders arriving at the same time. (In one pub it is the Pensioners’ Special, suitably rebranded).

**Passengers**

You have to build up an audience through:

* Posters on community rail notice boards. We have one A4 poster to describe what a Music Train is and another one to give the month’s programme of two or three trains
* Your website – where you can explain more about what a Music Train is and how it works,
* News releases and social media – though remember that not everyone lives their lives online, so don’t just rely on these methods
* CRP contact networks
* A mailing list – we send out a mailing four five times a year to about 200 people
* Targeting groups like Women’s Institutes, the U3A, parish newsletters
* Bands, their own ‘home’ venue (like a folk club) and their own followers

It’s slow at the beginning – one of our early Music Trains had only five in the audience, just outnumbering the band – but it will build up.

We have three different packages.

‘Open’ Music Trains from Chester to the Golden Pheasant at Plumley. No pre-booking required – anyone can turn up and join the train. The Golden Pheasant is a big, brewery-managed pub with a restaurant. There is no pre-booking – people just come along either to Chester or join the Music Train at the stations along the Line. In the month that the Knutsford Music Festival is running we go to the Angel in Knutsford instead.

‘Open’ pre-booked Music Trains from Altrincham to Alexanders Café-Bar in Chester. Anyone can come along but they have to book a package in advance with Alexander’s which covers taxis from and to the station and a meal at Alexander’s. Currently about £18 plus the train ticket. We manage the numbers to 45 customers which is the capacity of the bar but also the practical maximum we can fit onto the train along with the commuters for the first four stops.

‘Group’ pre-booked Music Trains either Chester to the Railway Inn at Mobberley in the daytime or the same plan as the ‘open’ Music Trains from Altrincham to Chester or from Chester to Plumley. The Railway Inn is a small, family-owned village pub. This package can accommodate special-interest groups like the U3A or WI special groups like a support group for people with disabilities (which, of course, require extra liaison with Northern).

‘Group’ Music Trains are arranged for any group which can be ‘reasonably confident’ of bringing 30 people. They then make the arrangements direct with Alexander’s or the Railway Inn. The minimum of thirty is to justify the effort in setting up the event and the band’s fee, as well meeting the minimum for the pub’s contribution (see below). It’s also a good number to aim at for atmosphere. If they don’t quite manage thirty the Music Train still runs and there are no recriminations.

Note that these arrangements do not involve the Music train organiser or the host in receiving or making any bookings or handling money – either the group organiser or the group members make their food bookings direct with the venue.

**Music**

Mid Cheshire Line events are Music Trains because we get a wide range of music as well as folk – jazz, swing, bluegrass, blues and sea shanties. We even had a very popular string quarter for some years who we found through contacting the RNCM. Experience is that you need to aim for at least three performers to get a good sound and for them to be able to sustain it for a whole evening. Having said that, we have a couple of duos who have the power to be heard in a train (even in the late-unlamented Pacers). The musicians normally play for thirty to forty minutes on the train each way and a couple of forty minute sessions at the venue. The largest band we have has seven members. Four or five is more normal.

Bands cannot access the train’s electricity supply so they must be acoustic on the train. In recent years some have brought battery-powered amplifiers both for the train and at the pub. These are mostly linked to radio microphones, avoiding trailing wires which have to be kept out of the way on trains.

You need to use contacts to find music at the beginning. Once established word of mouth will bring you more options. They do need to be well-established performers with a wide repertoire.

**Budget and finance**

We pay the band a fee and in addition give them the proceeds of a collection on the train on the way back. All bands receive the same payment. The band gives a receipt for the fee and the money is reclaimed by the organiser from the CRP. The fee needs to be paid in cash so that, if they wish, the band can share it out straightaway. Quite reasonably, musicians are generally not be prepared to accept the delays and paperwork involved in local government payment systems or other formal systems of payment.

The pub makes a contribution. This varies according to the nature of the venue and the numbers involved. At the minimum this is ‘two drinks for up to four band members plus sandwiches’. (If there are more than four in the band then we work something out with the pub). In addition, there may be an agreed cash contribution related to numbers which then reduces the cost of the band to the CRP. This can be ‘per head’ or a fixed sum depending on what works best in the circumstances of that venue.

The Music Trains programme has an overall budget for the year set by the CRP which would cover up to 20 Music Trains.

**Organisers**

You will need someone to organise the programme and a ‘host’ for each Music Train (who can also be the main organiser, of course). The key requirements for all people involved are a sympathetic understanding of how the railway works. In addition, they will also need the wisdom of Solomon and the patience of Job plus high-level admin and people skills.

Host

The host is the interface between the railway, the musicians, the audience and the venue. Fortunately most of the time it all works well and is straightforward.

Equipment

Rail pass for self and band

Name badge with CRP logo

Hat for collection

Carrier bag to empty the collection hat into and give to the band

Cash for band’s fee

Receipt form for the band to sign

Receipt form to give to the pub for their contribution (if relevant)

Carriage signs (A4 size, double-sided, printed and laminated with ‘Music Train’ and name of band). These identify the carriage to get into at intermediate stations and help to explain what is going on to normal passengers

‘White tac’ (not blue) to stick up signs

Any CRP handouts or giveaways

Hi viz tabard

Torch

Clipboard and pen

Filing cards or similar for taking band drinks orders, names for mailing list and anything else that crops up

At the starting station

Meet the band twenty minutes early. Get on the train with the audience about ten minutes in advance if it is the terminus.

At the train

Identify yourself to the conductor and identify the carriage to be used by the group, which should not be the front carriage. Although the conductor should have been warned that a Music Train group is joining the train the message does not always get through. If you know someone is coming in a wheelchair tell the conductor, so that they can get the ramps out and knows they will be needed at the destination.

In the carriage.

Identify where the band will be playing, check this with the conductor and settle them there. If there are any passengers already in the carriage remember that they have every right to be there – the carriage is not reserved. Tell them what is happening. Some will stay and some will go to the other carriage(s). Remind band and your group to leave the gangway, wheelchair spaces, exit doors and access to the passenger toilet clear of obstructions. And make sure this happens.

At the beginning of the journey

Let the band set up. Put up the carriage signs with white tak - at least two on the interior partitions so that the group and ordinary passengers can see them. At least two on the outside window so that passengers at intermediate stations can see which carriage it is. Welcome the group. If relevant tell them that the conductor will be coming through to sell tickets. Sit back and relax.

At intermediate stations

Stand at the doorway to show people which carriage to get into. If they are ‘normal’ members of the public explain to them what is happening.

Approaching the end station

Warn the passengers and the band. Tell them how to get to the pub, including any necessary road safety warnings, and what the arrangements are when they arrive. (A group of people may not be as careful in crossing a road as they would be individually). Tell people the time of the train back.

Take down the carriage signs and remove white tack from windows and partitions.

At the end station

Thank the conductor. Try to stand by the gate out of the station to point out the pub, count the number in the group and reinforce any road safety warnings.

At the pub

Show the band where to set up and get their drinks orders. Fetch the drinks but let the passenger group order first. Tell the band the timing of sessions and, crucially, when to finish. Get a drink for yourself!

After the band has played about 30 minutes ask the pub to bring out their sandwiches. Time the second session to end with plenty of time for people to go to the toilets and get to the station.

Remind people when the music will stop and when the train leaves. Check Real Time Trains to see if there is any delay to the train. Thank the pub staff. Collect any financial contribution and give your receipt for it.

At the station

Make sure people stay well back from the platform edge. Move them to the approximate location of the carriage. Check Real Time Trains again and warn people if there is any delay

Getting on the train

As above for ‘at the train’.

On the train

Make a collection once the band has started playing. A beanie hat is ideal – something that can be passed along a row of seats and which does not show up any individual contribution. Tip the collection into a carrier bag.

At the final station

Thanks the conductor. Hand the collection bag to the band. Pay the fee and ask them to sign a receipt.

Next day

Send report to organiser including number of passengers.

Send signed receipt and rail pass to organiser.

Organiser

Organise the programme, book the bands, make arrangements with the pubs. We have fixed on Wednesdays as the usual day but Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday are also possible while avoiding the busy weekends and dull Mondays. (We do, though, run one on a Friday as part of Knutsford Music festival weekend).

Think about other events along the Line and avoid them. In our case there are Chester Races which overload the rail system for three days in early May and Delamere Forest concerts which affect a weekend. Avoid planned Network Rail maintenance – we have maintenance on a six-weekly cycle. In those weeks the last trains are replaced by buses which, unsurprisingly, are not popular with Music Train patrons.

Make a note of access for people with disabilities - you will be asked about this. Are there steps to the platform at the station where you get on the train? Are there steps from the platform at the destination station? How far is the walk to the venue? Does the venue have a disabled toilet? Is it wheelchair-friendly? Ask people to let you know if they are coming in a wheelchair – although you can’t rely on knowing this in advance.

Notify Northern of the programme.

Get passes through Northern CRP contact for ‘bearer and band (up to six musicians)’ for Music Trains. Get a second pass if it might be needed – eg if there might be two trains on the same night or on dates close together - when it might be difficult to pass a single pass from one host to the other in the time available.

Arrange publicity.

Prepare advice about the best fares and the methods of buying tickets that apply to this journey. You will be asked this. If unsure yourself then find a ticketing enthusiast (they do exist) in the CRP or rail user group to help.

Comply with any other requirements from Northern eg details of third party insurance

Contact the band a week in advance as a gentle reminder and to find out any dietary requirements for sandwiches eg how many vegetarians or vegans.

Contact the pub a couple of days in advance to make sure all is well and give dietary requirements for band sandwiches.

One or two days in advance remind Northern of the details. (This is the best timing for the message to get through to the conductor on the day). If you know of any passengers having mobility problems then tell Northern so that the conductor is prepared (if the message gets through).

Arrange for the host to pay the band and then pay them back quickly afterwards.

Thank the band

Invoice the CRP at appropriate intervals for band fees

Write reports for CRP meetings

Michael Ross

Music Trains Organiser

Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership

80 Lache Lane

Chester CH4 7LS

01244 683477

0781 408 0550

[mkk.ross@outlook.com](mailto:mkk.ross@outlook.com)