



This is an excerpt from the current issue of The Contactor.

# How Do You Solve A Problem Like ...

**Flashback to May 2018, the Electric Railway Museum has closed and the collection is being dispersed to various sites across the country.**

**Many items are quickly snapped up and their owning groups start to relocate them to their new homes, others are sold to new owners with no connection to the ERM, but then there are those items that are hard to find homes for, the ones in poor condition with little prospect of being useable and the ones that don't come with a supporting workforce. The SUB and the 503 units both fit into this category, despite being two of the most iconic sets on the site. They have both struggled to be supported in preservation and now find themselves unwanted and at real risk of being lost forever.**

The 503 has had numerous false starts in preservation. It was initially to have been displayed as a complete unit in the Wirral Transport Museum at Pacific Road in Birkenhead. The unit was stored from 1988 on the national network for seven years until a change of plan meant that only one coach was required, the other two cars were offered 'free to a good home'

and it was the fledgling Mersey & Tyneside Electric Preservationists who took them to the Coventry Steam Railway Centre where there was an initial flurry of activity but the familiar story of people drifting away when they realised the sheer scale of the project was to happen within the following two years and that put the project into hiatus. Wirral's Pacific Road transport museum offloaded their car in 2003 and had the SERA not offered to take it there and then it was scheduled to be burned out and scrapped the following week. This meant all three vehicles were back on the same site for the first time in six years but all was not well at Coventry and the site was a regular target for vandals. No work was done to any of the stock for as soon as it was the vandals undid it. Work was focussed on improving site security, not what anybody signed up for. Then in 2007 the Electric Railway Museum was created and work became focussed on improving the now secure site and opening it to the public, by 2010 this was achieved and to improve matters the 503 vehicles were together on the same side of the site, but not yet marshalled in its correct formation, that didn't happen

for another 12 months. This gave fresh impetus to the project and with the units 75th birthday approaching a new fundraiser was launched to restore the driving trailer. This met with a fair degree of success, donations came in, merchandise was made and sold. Then restoration work was both planned and carried out; welding to the bodywork, replacement of the gutters and renovation of some of the interior woodwork. Whilst this was happening to the driving trailer the driving motor coach was even opened to the public on the museum site's open days so they could see the interior of one of the most stylish and ahead of its time electric units in the country. It was all going so well until fate once more intervened. The first problem was that of internal politics. In 2013, elements within the management of the ERM were not happy with a project they didn't own or manage raising funds and having a profile on the site, there was open hostility towards some of the volunteers working on the 503 and friction between trustees of the ERM over the direction of the museum towards the items on site. These squabbles paled into insignificance compared to the external threats that were to raise their head shortly after with site occupied by ERM earmarked for industrial development. Work on the 503 stopped again and has to this date never re-started. Those with a functioning crystal ball knew that there was a strong chance that ERM was doomed and



**The 503 – the last of its kind.** Possibly one of the last photos taken of it at Margate on May 26th 2023. Had events gone to plan the unit would now be residing at Sellindge.

Photo: Graeme Gleaves

*Continued on page 16, column 1*





# How Do You Solve A Problem Like ...

Continued on page 14

the remaining funds that had been raised for the 503 would be better held onto and spent relocating the unit when the time came, which it did four years later in 2017 when the museum's closure was announced. So at the start of 2018 there was a need to find a new home for a stalled and rather tired looking unit. Those that knew it could see both its history and its potential but to everyone else it was just a complete wreck that probably needed putting out of its misery. The same was said of the SUB unit. Disposal was a very real prospect for both units with no body wanting them; during the dispersal process nobody even asked about the 503.

The answer to this was to group these two iconic but troubled projects under one new organisation, The Heritage Electric Trains Trust. The new organisation was to be run by a fresh team of Trustees, all of whom knew and understood the scale of the project they were to

undertake and were not afraid to make the decisions needed to make the project work. These were not pocket money projects to be tackled by well intentioned volunteers but major engineering that would need professional renovation. The organisation would need to be a charity to stand any chance of securing the budget needed to restore just one coach of the seven it was taking on.

The cost of moving the 503 to secure undercover storage in Margate was mostly in the bank thanks to the residual monies held by the old 503 project, coupled with fresh donations made through crowdfunding and other appeals. By the time the three vehicles rolled off the lorry into the One:One collection building there was just over £100 left in the 503 kitty and that was passed to HETT along with ownership of the unit. HETT became a registered charity in 2019 and began promoting its aims for the 4-SUB. The 503 sat in

the shadows, no one asked about it though it was made know the unit was part of the portfolio. The 503 had come to HETT with no next to no supporters in tow and there was nothing that implied this was ever going to change. It was a tough gig for this unit from the outset under its new owners.

It had been hoped that by moving the unit into the best home it had had during the last 30 years would prompt those who still regarded the unit with fond memories to step up and support the not inconsiderable cost of keeping it there. In September 2019 when 750 Supply was launched to fund the costs of storage at Margate there was a notable silence from the 503 admirers, despite the scheme being publicised on the units dedicated Facebook page several times. It was made clear from the outset that HETT was willing to work with anyone in any realistic capacity to provide a future for it better than the one HETT could currently offer, either under the continued ownership of the HETT charity or by donating it to any other organisation. To date there hasn't been a single sensible offer or suggestion. It was obvious that with support for the SUB being solid it would be that unit we put forward to One:One Collection as a potential exhibit, it had the necessary funds and a base of supporters who would engage with us, the 503 remained ignored or forgotten.

HETT being a charity has a common pot of money and whilst the units were stored, as no funds needed to be specifically allocated as there was a single storage cost, during this period since July 2018 the 503 was responsible for less than 3% of HETT's income. Going

forward to the next phase where we were looking at restoration and not storage this was going to be a problem. If someone donates funds then they have an expectation that those funds are going to go directly to the project they are donating to, not subsidising another one who's supporters have gone AWOL. The decision was taken that the 503 would leave Margate when its period of storage came to an end and this would ensure the funds raised for the SUB would only be spent on the SUB. The 503 would have to go to another site that was more suited to its budget, which was next to nothing.

## **This period of change and the delays experienced in getting the 503 out of Margate has given the HETT trustees a chance to reflect on where they are with the project, what are the options for the future of the 503, is there even a future for the 503?**

We feel the unit belongs on Merseyside/The Wirral and solutions need to be driven from there, not by a team of trustees, most of which have never ridden on a 503. There are no sites in that area that can accommodate the unit, and yes we have asked. Putting the emotional arguments to one side and ignoring the pipe dreams, fantasy preservation scenarios and simple failures to accept the reality of the situation options going forward would need people to be willing to either join the team and be pro-active or start a fresh project which can take on the unit separate from the HETT. As we see it these options can be broken down to these:

Continued





After nearly 5 years together inside the One:One collection building, the SUB and 503 are going their separate ways — for how long we cannot say.

**Opposite Page [top]**

How the 503 looked when it was first seen by those wishing to preserve it, pictured at Kirkdale depot in early 1996. The unit had been in store for over 7 years and hadn't worked in that time. The middle vehicle was the driving trailer that would be going to the Pacific Road tram shed.

**Opposite Page [bottom]**

The Electric Railway Museum held an open weekend over the 1st-2nd of May 2011. The cab front was cleaned prior to opening on the second day and the contrast with the rather jaded bodyside is visible.

Photos : Graeme Gleaves

- > A new organisation is formed and the unit is gifted to them, that new organisation removes the 503 from Margate to their chosen location where they will base their project. HETT has no further involvement with the 503.
- > New people with skills and the time to devote to the 503 project join the HETT board of trustees and take on the management of the project.
- > A new friends group is established to fundraise for the project. This group won't own the unit but will be a public face in terms of promotion, sales etc. ... (similar to the 4-SUB Association).
- > The 503 is moved to any site that can take offer it space and is affordable, continuing to be stored, mothballed and forgotten about for the foreseeable future, until another plan can replace this option.

Just to be clear there is no chance that we want to scrap the unit, despite what the doom and gloom merchants online predict. At present we are looking for a suitable option four, but an option three could be started to build from there to improve the lot of this iconic train. The Heritage Electric Trains Trust has used this as an opportunity to highlight the utter lack of support for this unit amongst those who supposedly

'have fond memories of it' and are actively calling on them to step up. One of the hardest parts of this task is to remind everyone who is concerned or even 'outraged' at the reality of the situation, the 503 isn't being moved out because of some vendetta or lack of love for it and as for moving it back to the north-west which is mentioned frequently there are no suitable sites in its native area where it can be stored or even displayed, even once restored, so the argument that it 'needs to come home' is meaningless; the Mersey area really has no real estate to offer at the current time, no matter how difficult a pill that is to swallow it is the undeniable truth of the situation. To make matters worse a siding was laid at Sellindge to hold the unit and the move was meant to go ahead but the landowner has intervened and declared a stop to more inactive vehicles being stored on the site so all the work to provide this space has now gone to waste and we are back to square one.

**Be under no illusions, the 503 is at real risk. It's current situation is a direct result of the lack of support it has received and it would be good to think that its continued survival could be turned around and funded by those who want to see it survive. We have to start somewhere, we need to find that somewhere and we need it fast.**

**To contact us for more information please visit: [www.hett.org.uk](http://www.hett.org.uk)**