# MID HANTS RAILWAY
# WATERCRESS LINE

## CASE STUDY

**A premier league heritage steam railway that needed a heavyweight booking system.**

**Back in November 2006 we got a call from the reservations department at the Mid-Hants Railway in Alresford, Hampshire. They wanted to try and automate some of the many manual tasks associated with administering the taking of bookings, processing of payments and the production of tickets for special events.**



Watercress Line 2.0.1
Administration System

Aside from standard day to day travel, the railway runs several special events and dining trains which require advance booking. At the time everything was being done manually by one part-time employee and a small army of volunteers. For certain events such as the Day Out With Thomas™ and Santa Specials, the work was stretching resources to breaking point.

The railway was also concerned that their existing website, which was largely geared towards information about the railway and locos, wasn't commercial enough for the many thousands of visitors who wanted to be able to book for their favourite events online.

One reason the railway had never looked at an automated system in the past was because their internal procedures were not documented or fully identified. Their 'system' worked for the people who used it but they found it hard to detail all the steps being taken and therefore couldn't express everything they would have wanted a new system to do.

Online Ticketing first undertook a programme of consultancy with all relevant personnel to break down and detail all the tasks that were being performed and why. This achieved two very important objectives. Firstly it helped draw up an outline specification for what the new system needed to do and secondly it created a bond between the people at the railway

and the 'outsiders' looking to implement new systems. Many people see a new system as simply more work for them so it was crucial to ensure they felt valued and heard throughout the process. It's a critical step that is often missed.

After completing the consultancy, Online Ticketing drew up a detailed system specification and gained approval to proceed. As areas of the system were completed they were presented to the reservations department for comments and suggestions.
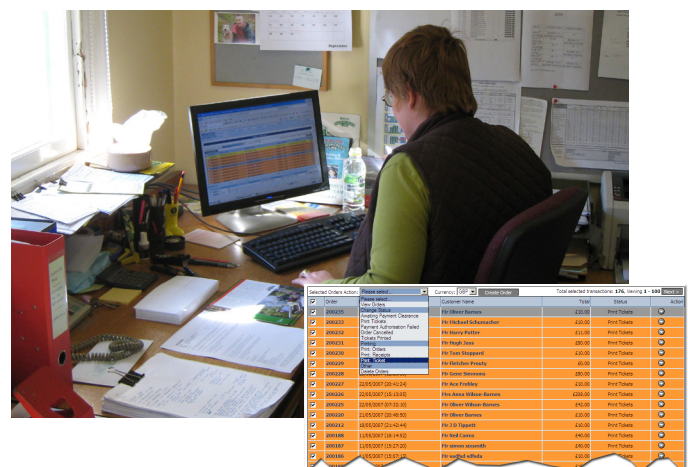


This is also a crucial stage of development because as the client gains more knowledge of what the system is capable of, they will request additional features which can then go further than the basic spec. Typically we then categorise these into 'nice to have' or 'must have' features and then decide whether they'll be included in the initial build, or saved for a future revision.
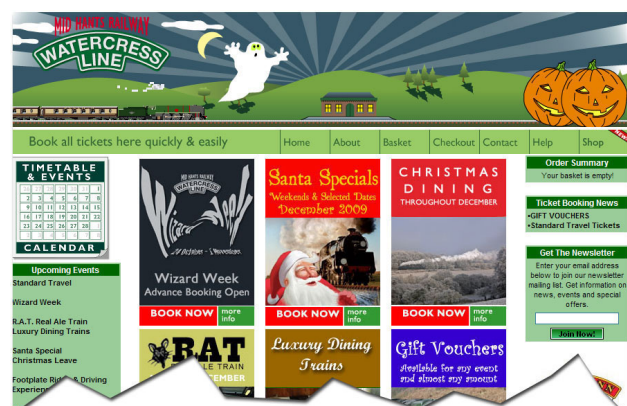
While the development was proceeding, Online Ticketing's graphic designer was working with the reservations and marketing teams to create a design for both their new thermal tickets and wallets to hold them in. They began with preferred styles and colours, collected key images that the railway wanted to use and produced artwork for approval. Just a few changes were needed before the tickets and wallets were sent for printing, ready for the system live date.

It was decided to keep the railway's existing information site, with its wealth of content, completely separate from the booking system. The new site would be based on an e-commerce ethos as opposed to catering purely for railway enthusiasts. The result from Online Ticketing's designers was a fun, easy to navigate site geared to providing all the information people needed before booking. One key advantage was the inclusion of a simple Content Management System (CMS) to allow the railway to update news items and general information themselves within minutes.

The system quickly came together with Online Ticketing making it possible for the railway to efficiently sell tickets for all their events including Day Out With Thomas™, Wizard Week, Ivor The Engine and War On The Line as well as the famous Santa Specials which attract around 18,000 passengers alone every December.



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Going beyond the original requirement, the system also provided a sales outlet for the many dining trains run by the railway as well as the popular Real Ale Trains (RAT). All of these sell out well in advance so automating the whole process was a huge relief for the staff and volunteers. Finally the railway's experience days and gift vouchers were made available to book online.
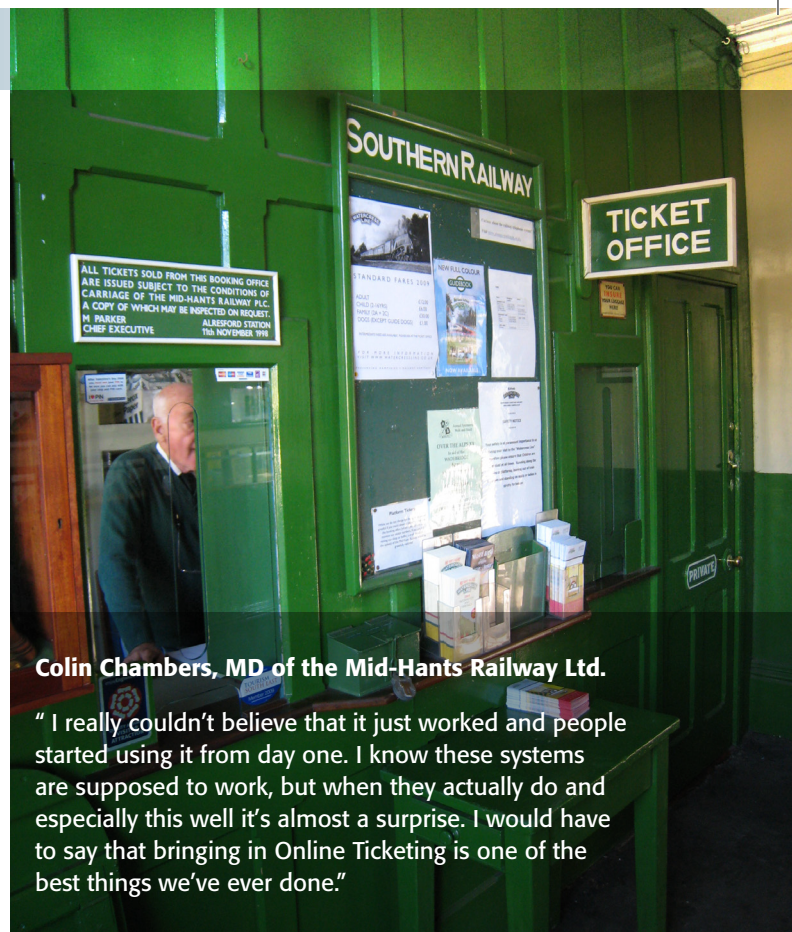


**Colin Chambers, MD of the Mid-Hants Railway Ltd.**

" I really couldn't believe that it just worked and people started using it from day one. I know these systems are supposed to work, but when they actually do and especially this well it's almost a surprise. I would have to say that bringing in Online Ticketing is one of the best things we've ever done."

The system went live in June 2007 with bookings being taken the first day. For the first major event, August's Day Out With Thomas™, an astonishing 1,726 (70%) of the 2,450 bookings were made online directly by the public. Every one of those bookings was either a telephone call the railway didn't have to take, or an envelope someone didn't have to open. For Santa that year the figure for online sales was an incredible 85% of the total bookings.

Despite concerns about how an age-old paper system could be converted to a web-based solution, Online Ticketing's vTicket was a huge success from day one and continues to help increase the railway's overall ticket sales.

Finally vTicket's integrated reporting and email newsletter system has allowed the railway to target information to people who really want it on a regular basis. More than two years later the booking system is busier than ever.





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