



Chair's Report/activity for February 2023

Dear Friends,

February is a short month but nevertheless lots still going on. At recent Friends monthly meetings I've been asked for more detailed feedback on plans for 2025 and so in future we will have this as a separate agenda item for our monthly meetings. Clearly delivery of events for 2025 is not the sole responsibility of the Friends and our partners at Durham, Darlington and Stockton Councils together with NRM are doing the 'heavy lifting' on this. We do through our membership of the Rail Heritage Board Executive group have input on the delivery and we will of course be playing our part in a variety of ways. In particular if you as members have specific ideas or wish to develop and arrange events yourself then please let me know. While there won't be resources and funding to support all ideas, we can at least make sure we avoid duplication of effort and where possible put like minded people in touch with each other to ensure complimentary support and thinking and best use of funds. A 2025 Festival Director has now been appointed by Stockton Council whose remit will be to work along the full 26 miles and bring together wide-ranging ideas for the best celebration possible in 2025. The Festival Director is due to take up post soon and we'll make an announcement and introduction as soon as we can, very hopefully they'll attend one of our monthly meetings. The focus this post can hopefully bring to the many ideas circulating at present will I think provide reassurance on delivery of an excellent 2025.

Funding as ever is the key to making many things happen, and after the failure of Darlington's levelling up bid the Rail Heritage Board team have been looking at other options. Opportunities often come from often unexpected sources and we're pleased to have identified an opportunity through an environmental fund provided by Highways England. Richie Starrs the S&DR Project Delivery Officer has developed an Expression of Interest for this fund and we keep our fingers crossed for a positive decision in the next few months which will help deliver large parts of the interpretation and public access we want to see.

The shape of live steam/rail events for 2025 continues to develop around a core of a three day event using the restored 1975 replica Locomotion No.1 and some new replica chaldrons/carriages which will travel from Shildon to Stockton, crossing the Skerne Bridge of 27th September. There are multiple technical issues with this to sort before Network Rail will allow the replica train on live line. I'm pleased to report that there is substantial good will for this and lots of people working behind the scenes. Network Rail, through their Chair Lord Peter Hendy are also making plans for a national programme of events to celebrate 200 years of passenger rail. What form Rail 200 will take is not clear yet, but the organisers of this are now communicating with our own Rail Heritage Board to see where common ground exists and provided a short presentation in February.

Meetings have taken place of the S&DR RHB meeting at Locomotion, the RHB Executive and the Live Steam Sub-Group. Much of this is procedural business, but it is worth noting that communications has not surprisingly risen to the top of the agenda as so many people want to know what is going on and being planned for. A new communication officer should be in post soon (hosted by Darlington Council) and the delivery of regular public updates will be a key part of their work we'll be pushing for. In the meantime we've been asked to arrange three public meetings along the line where myself, Richie Starrs and Reuben Kench as Chair of the S&R Rail Heritage Board will provide short presentations and answer questions. As

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soon as we have dates and venues arranged we'll make an announcement, please tell your friends and families and bring them along!

In the short space I have here I can only touch in brief at other things going on. DCC proposals for walking/cycling after months of negotiation with land owners on the preferred route for walking/cycling are due to be announced very soon and be completed by mid 2024. This will include a new deck and across the Gaunless Bridge abutments which will be restored with a substantial grant from Historic England. The National Lottery Heritage Fund grant for the Darlington Railway Heritage Quarter was officially launched on 7th of February, and we look forward to the recruitment of the first community heritage officer post soon to work along the line.

Member activity continues to be excellent and I'm really pleased we now have a Darlington Area Group who are meeting and developing great ideas and have their own Facebook page. Similarly I met with members and other concerned parties to consider how we might 'save' Heighington Station for 2025. The world's oldest railway station is our biggest worry and also perhaps one of our biggest opportunities and action is urgently needed. Brusselton Incline Group are making good use of our grant from DCC and we've had contractors on site at Brusselton and Masons Arms crossing opening out views and carrying out maintenance under supervision.

Once again I remind people that following the resignation at our AGM of our long-standing secretary Alan McNab, we desperately need to find an efficient and organised person to take on this role. The formal advert for this will be issued in March but please if you are interested don't be shy, please call me to discuss and find out what it involves. This can be a voluntary post or in part salaried as a part time employment.

Thanks as ever to Eric Brance-Instone at Historic England who has been researching and reviewing protection/designation proposals for new listings/protection. The Rescheduling of the first five miles from Etherley to Shildon is now complete and much more detailed, while there is a consultation out on the wonderfully preserved early stretch of the S&DR through Preston Park which we hope will be legally protected soon.

As ever I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at monthly meetings and events, but please do drop me a line if you want to discuss anything else S&DR related.

All the best. Niall Hammond, Chair
Friends of the S&DR. 27/02/2023.

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