



Chair's Report/Activity for May 2024

Dear Friends,

Warmer days and better weather are on the way and with them many of our volunteer groups are getting out and doing things, as well as more visitors along the S&DR. Lots of projects and initiatives continue to bubble under towards development and exciting conclusions, the question is for some things will they be delivered in time for 2025?

One project that has been completed is New Hall at Locomotion, Shildon which opened on 23rd of May. An excellent opening event was attended by partners from along the line and further afield and it was a great opportunity to catch up with people and make the case for many initiatives close to our hearts. The excellent New Hall is well worth a visit, and we look forward to the improved story of the S&DR and Shildon which space in the original building can now accommodate. Well done to all our friends at Locomotion and the NRM on the conclusion of an excellent project. Despite all the wonderful rail vehicles under cover, my own highlight is seeing the Gaunless Bridge back close to where it belongs and painted in surprisingly 'bright' Georgian colours of green and white, all accurate and informed by paint scrapes.

A little east along the line at Heighington we continue our project to buy and restore the site, the world's earliest railway station. Donations keep coming in with over £15k pledged by several hundred people, £10,000 from the Headly Trust and several other applications submitted. We now need to submit our major grant application to the Community Ownership Fund by 26th June and if successful we will hear by early September. Lots of work still to do on the business plan, but all is looking promising with much appreciated support from Durham County Council. Thirty or so members and volunteers undertook a fantastic tidy up around the building on Saturday 25th May, thanks to them all and to Margaret Fenwick and John Raw for organising. Please do continue to circulate the webpage details (<https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/save-heighington-station>) to everyone you know and spread the word. If you can't afford to donate then you can show your support by signing our petition at <https://forms.office.com/r/9sfYKNLbHr>

In Darlington we look forward to the imminent completion and opening of the revamped and extended North Road Railway Museum as 'Hopetown' on the 16th June. I was pleased to have a walking meeting with Councillor Chris McEwan Deputy leader of Darlington Council and a long phone conversation with Councillor Steve Harker about a number of things. In particular we identified concern over the state and security of the Lime Cells on Hopetown Lane, the opportunity being discussed with Network Rail regarding the site of the 1827 Merchandise Station (directly opposite the new entrance to Hopetown) to remove rubbish and display the site properly; and the other opportunities of Dobbin View (a mini park where John Dobbin's famous view could be recreated), and the future of Edward Pease's house. With regard to the Pease house we continue to discuss with Darlington council its restoration and possible use by the Friends as our offices. Our local Darlington Interest Group (DIG), continue to flourish and my congratulations on their enthusiasm with litter picks, walks, repairs to the Haughton Road

**Chair, Friends of the S&DR CIO, Marian Cottage, Lartington, Barnard
Castle, Co. Durham, DL12 9BP.**

Email: chair@sdr1825.org.uk

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Coal Depot wall and the re-setting of stone sleeper stones along Tornado Way being fantastic examples of their recent work.

We continue to revise and update our self-guided walk booklets and hope to have all of these done by 2025. Each book for revisions, design and print costs around £2500 Husqvarna have kindly sponsored the Shildon-Heighington book and we'd be delighted to talk to any other businesses along the line if they would like to sponsor as well. The revised booklet was 'tested out' by a volunteer group recently guided by our walk booklet author and editor Caroline Hardie and should be in print very soon.

Caroline also provided a talk and briefing session for North East Blue Badge guides held at Locomotion on 20th May. The Blue Badge Guides intend to provide a bespoke guide service for tourists and visitors in 2025, all part of making the S&DR an established visitor attraction.

I continue to give illustrated talks on requests and recently spoke to Wylam Mens' group (which do allow women as well!) Fantastic to visit Wylam with its strong railway links to Hedley, Stephenson and Hackworth. A really worthwhile conversation afterwards may lead to possible NE Region heritage rail promotion.

Our recent Trustee meeting lasted a marathon 2.5 hrs and we enjoyed a presentation from Jill Read (S&DR Communications and Stakeholder Mgr with Stockton on Tees Borough Council), and from Richie Starrs the S&DR Programme Manager who confirmed a bid for digital interpretation along the S&DR has been submitted to the National Lottery Heritage Fund and we should have an answer in around eight weeks. Other key topics at trustees included the consideration of Insurance and risk assessment for the Friends as our business and ownership of property continues to develop. On the subject of risk assessment for activities. I'm grateful for member Gerry Wilkinson's help and support in this area, a great example of the wide range of skills and expertise within the Friends. If you have skills you feel we can use please do offer to help in any way you can. Trustees also warmly welcomed member Yvonne Richardson as a co-opted trustee and we look forward to her enthusiasm and contacts adding to our work.

Our future business planning project supported by the local authorities and being supported by Tricolor Associates is moving towards a lottery bid in July to provide funds for future development work.

At Fighting Cocks the new mural was completed and an opening day on Saturday 27th of April went well, only being marred by the weather. Here as with everywhere along the line my thanks goes out to all our volunteers and trustees without which none of our work would be possible. We can of course always do with more active workers so if you have time or skills you can spare to help with then please do get in touch.

2025 Planning.

Again we are still waiting for September when the official 2025 Festival programme is announced.

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And finally a reminder for contacts:

Cait Barratt the 'S&DR Heritage & Community Participation Manager' is the person to talk to regarding the S&DR community Fund which can provide grants of a few hundred to a few thousand pounds and which are available over the next 4 years to help people celebrate and conserve the S&DR. If you have an idea then get in touch with Cait and she will provide initial feedback on your idea and if it fits the community grant objectives encourage you to submit an application. Ideas can be submitted to Cait on the following email address s&drcommunitygrantsscheme@darlington.gov.uk. Cait also now has two officers supporting her in volunteer and education development and we hope to meet them at our March monthly meeting, contact details to follow.

The team of various officers in the local authorities including Niccy Hallifax the 2025 Festival Director, can all now be contacted through one single email address which is info@sdr200.co.uk which people should use for any general enquiries.

As ever if you want to discuss anything S&DR related drop me a line at Chair@sdr1825.org.uk.

All the best.

Niall Hammond,
Chair, Friends of the S&DR. 30/05/2024.

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