



Chair's Report/Activity for September 2024

Dear Friends,

As I write this, I see from the newspapers that today is the last day of coal fired power production in the UK as the Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station is turned off. Coal powered the UK's industrial revolution and gave us steam locomotives and railways. The burning of fossil fuels for over 200 years has however left us with a troubled future, but as much as railways caused this problem, they are a future way of saving us from it. The vision of the founders of the S&DR back in 1821 may have been to create wealth through exploiting coal reserves, but they very rapidly saw the potential of railways for cheaply and easily carrying a wide range of goods and passengers, laying this out in two Acts of parliament. As much about celebrating the past and our heritage, the S&DR and its forthcoming bicentenary, now only a year away, are ways of building the future by inspiring those in education, encouraging community pride and helping local business to prosper.

October looks like it will be a month of collectively keeping our fingers crossed as we wait for an answer to our bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund; for a successful planning application for the restoration of Edward Pease's house in Northgate, Darlington; and (with baited breath) an announcement in the Government's October budget to see if the Community Ownership Fund will be reborn so that we can continue our fund raising for Heighington Station.

Our Heighington Station appeal and project continues to make good if slow progress. Thanks to all the volunteers who have turned out on several occasions to keep the site looking as tidy and cared for as possible pending more substantial works. Thanks to all those who have donated, large and small, to the appeal, our original project budget was £500,000 of which we needed to raise 20%, as of today we have over £120,000...we now just need that decision by government on community ownership funds. The money we have raised so far has allowed for various surveys, the appointment of an architect and development of a business plan...all essential if we are to make the project work and save the building. Please do continue to circulate the webpage details (<https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/save-heighington-station>) to everyone you know, encourage donations 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>

Thankyou to all members who have renewed or joined for the first time at the start of our membership year which starts on the 27<sup>th</sup> September (for obvious reasons!). Please do use our website, or preferably set up a standing order to make it easier for all of us in future years.

This September 27<sup>th</sup>, we celebrated the 199<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the S&DR with a fine selection of events taking place. In particular thanks to our Etherley and West Auckland/St Helens groups for organising gatherings and walks, and to Husqvarna for the launch party at Locomotion (Shildon) for our new self-guided walk booklet from Shildon to Heighington, a great turn out with a truly memorable cake (over 1.2m long and modelled on the railway line!). I also need to thank Husqvarna for their generous sponsorship of this and another

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wonderful donation of £2500 which we will seek to use wisely on future re-writes of our walking guides.

Also, on the 27<sup>th</sup>, there was the official opening of Hopetown in Darlington. Clearly this has been successfully trading for several months, but all venues need an official launch! A well-attended event helped spread the word to a wide variety of invited guests about the virtues of the site, and also provide a great opportunity to network with people and have some useful conversations about the work of the Friends and our future ambitions.

Elsewhere we've had useful meetings with the Rail Heritage Trust, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Hitachi and several others about future joint working or projects. I've had the pleasure of giving talks to U3A in Darlington, the Aycliffe lodge of the Masons (to whom a big thank you for your donation to the Heighington appeal), and imminently to a NASUWT (teaching union), Durham and Northumberland Retired Members group in Middridge. We are also grateful to our local MPs for continuing interest in the project and asking questions on our behalf. In particular Sam Rushworth MP (Bishop Auckland) and Alan Strickland MP (Sedgefield and Spennymoor) for looking into community ownership funds; and Lola MacAvoy MP (Darlington), who is writing on our behalf about the condition of the Skerne Bridge. This has alarmed a number of members and wider community as with now less than a year before the bicentenary it is still covered in invasive vegetation and with some stonework issues, we would like to see investigated so it looks it's best for 2025.

### 2025 Planning.

Following many months of rumours and secret keeping, the official launch for the 2025 festival took place on September 19<sup>th</sup> at a special event at Darlington Hippodrome Theatre. While I think it would have been preferred by many to make this a more accessible event with a wider audience, a decision was taken by the Rail Heritage Board to keep this to an invited audience only event. I have addressed members concerns of the visibility of our role in the partnership with the festival director and at the launch were regularly name checked, our logo appeared on key slides, and our publications were included in issued press packs. I have huge admiration for the hours and spirit of our volunteers and will always ensure these are reflected in public announcements and we get due recognition. On the 19<sup>th</sup> Journalists, media and 'London types' were brought up first class thanks to LNER sponsorship and in the company of local poet Lizzie Lovejoy who captured their thoughts on the journey and performed a new poem. Master of ceremonies for the event was TV presenter and local girl Steph McGovern. The shape and broad content of the festival are now clear, opening with a grand show at the Kynryn arena at Bishop Auckland in March, and then with lots of stuff going on through to September and the Locomotion No.1 recreated journey on 26/27/28 before a final huge show at Stockton Riverside. Keep checking the festival website for more detail as it emerges <https://www.sdr200.co.uk/article/15619/S-DR200-programme-unveiled> . It was also clear at the event on the 19<sup>th</sup>, that the S&DR was the centre of the Railway200 national celebrations celebrating the birth of passenger rail <https://railway200.co.uk/> .

The Friends of the S&DR will be contributing to many aspects of the festival and festival fringe, in particular we will be putting together a Walking Festival for 2025 with a variety of advertised guided walks and some illustrated talks and events. If you'd like to be a part

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of this either in organisation or by being a walk leader please do get in touch. We have a training session for walk leaders at Locomotion Museum on October 14<sup>th</sup>, places are still available so do get in touch if you'd like to participate. You'll need to be a member of the FSDR to ensure our public liability insurance covers you.

And finally, the reminder of 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](mailto: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, Richie Starrs the Project Officer, and Jill Read the Communications and Partnerships Officer can all now be contacted through one single email address which is [info@sdr200.co.uk](mailto: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](mailto:Chair@sdr1825.org.uk).

All the best.

Niall Hammond, Chair, Friends of the S&DR. 30/09/2024.

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