



Heighington Station in early the '50s courtesy of Trevor Robinson

# Right on *Track*

An appeal to save the world's oldest railway station has been launched by the Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway.

Living North discover the history of Heighington Station and learn why it's so important to take pride in our heritage

**H**eighington Station currently lies in a derelict state in Newton Aycliffe, and it's been estimated that £500,000 is needed to buy and stabilise it prior to the railway's 200th anniversary next year. It's hoped that £400,000 of that fund can be raised through grant applications, so the Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway are appealing to members of the public and local companies to help raise the remaining £100,000.

The Stockton & Darlington Railway was built by the engineer George Stephenson, and is regarded as the first modern railway in the world (having opened in 1825). The Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway is a charity that was set up in 2013 to safeguard and promote the heritage of the railway. 'It consists of people from all walks of life who had independently realised that the Stockton & Darlington Railway was internationally important because it was the start of our modern railway network,' says Caroline Hardie (trustee, editor and webmaster for the charity). 'Although there had been railways before, they tended to be small-scale, privately-run and maybe associated with quarries or mines.'



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‘The Stockton & Darlington Railway was the start of something completely different. It was permanent, large-scale, available for anybody to use and to carry anything that they like, and it was timetabled, so it’s really an amazing heritage asset. It was 26 miles long with lots of branch lines in 1825 and it went on to extend right across the North of England by 1863, by which time of course there were lots of other railways [which had] learned all the lessons.’

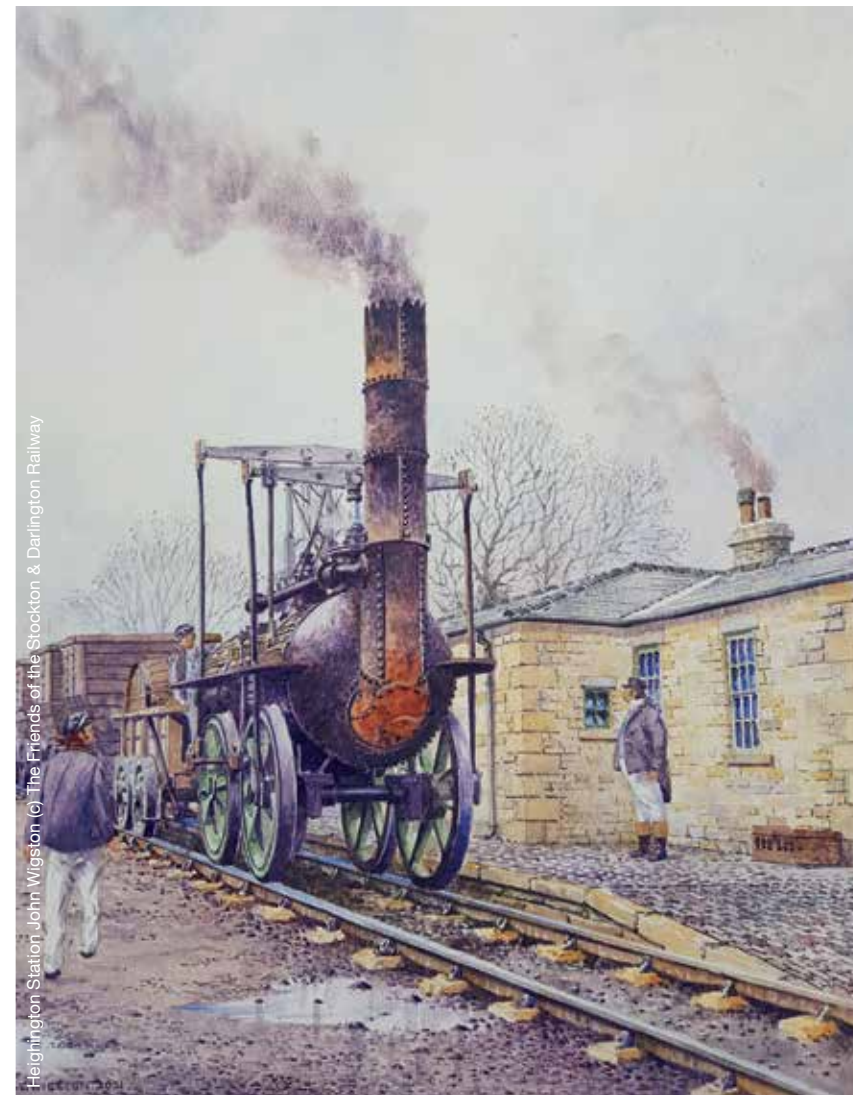
Sadly, more recently parts of the Stockton & Darlington Railway have been under threat, with some key areas being hit by vandalism and criminal damage and becoming derelict, and others suffering the natural processes of decay and erosion. Thankfully, large parts of it are legally protected and cared for. ‘In the past people had realised how important the Stockton & Darlington Railway was and every 50 years there’d be big anniversary events and people would come from across the world, even other railway companies, to pay homage to where it all started. So we’re looking at these discarded sofas and trolleys and thinking ‘this is going to be embarrassing’.

The Friends knew something needed to be done before the railway’s 200th anniversary in 2025 and that’s why they’re appealing to save Heighington Station. The building is Grade II\* listed (in the top eight percent of English Historic buildings), and officially ‘at risk’. But to understand the significance of this station, we first need to dive into the history of the railway itself.

‘The railway was up and running at a time when railway stations hadn’t been invented yet so they were really pioneering and taking forward things we take for granted today like the stations, station masters and signal boxes,’ says Caroline. ‘The railway had already started building depots along the line and built one at Heighington where people could bring what I think of as freight, so coal, gravel, lime, stone and other building materials. There’s a level crossing there, so you’ve got access to the site from the road and the railway which is quite important and in fact, for that reason (before the railway even opened) it was designed to be powered by steam engines which was quite advanced for its time.’



Courtesy of Trevor Robinson



Heighington Station John Wigston © The Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway

Robert Stephenson and Company was set up in Newcastle to make locomotives and steam engines and the company’s first engine was Locomotion No. 1. ‘It was delivered on 16th September 1825 at this very point [at Heighington] where the level crossing was, because it’s not far from the Great North Road (or the A1 as we call it now) and it was brought on big horse-drawn wagons and put together at this point. Lots of people had heard about this thing coming, they were calling it the Iron Horse and they gathered at the level crossing to watch it being built and the boiler being lit, and that included three young boys. They wanted to help so they were told to go and fill buckets of water from a nearby stream and to fill up the water barrel on the back of Locomotion No. 1. Because they’d helped, once the steam engine was up and running, they were given a ride on it and they were therefore the first passengers of the first modern railway in the world.’

At this time, there was no shelter and nowhere for passengers to get refreshments at Heighington, so a tavern was built. ‘They made that decision only a few months after the railway had opened,’ says Caroline. ‘They employed a local mason, John Carter from Heighington, to oversee the works and they employed a landlord and his family to run both the depot and the tavern. At this point that’s just a pub, it’s not a station, but what’s actually going on there are many of the functions of a station. The reason we know that is because at the beginning they applied for a license to sell alcohol (of course fundamental to being a pub) and it was refused because some of the magistrates who tended to be representatives of the wealthier elements of society had investments in the turnpike road system and earned money from that, so they saw the railway as a threat. That meant there was an appeal and witnesses came along and said what they used the site for and that’s when it was discovered that, yes it was a shelter and yes it was being used for hospitality (albeit without



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alcohol to begin with), but also people were using it for collecting parcels and packages and waiting on a train because it was right next to a line. In fact there was a cobbled platform area there that was allegedly the earliest railway platform in the world, so when you put together all of these things, it’s much more than just a pub.’

The station remained in use until the 1970s, when it sadly became derelict. It was restored in 1984 and reopened as the Locomotion No 1 inn, but since its closure in 2017, it has been hit by vandalism and criminal damage. A number of attempts by local authorities to rescue it have failed, and now the Friends are stepping in. ‘We’re trying to get something off the ground to at least make it look cared for on the outside before 2025, then hopefully shortly afterwards functioning as a well-maintained economic unit once again,’ says Caroline.

In the short term the Friends are asking members of the public to head to their website to donate to the campaign so they can carry out some emergency measures to secure it, but there’s also a petition to sign that will help them apply to various organisations and charities for additional funding. ‘If they can see that we’ve got a lot of support behind us, they’ll be much more likely to look on our project favourably,’ Caroline explains. ‘We’re also looking ultimately for people with skills that they could be prepared to offer such as qualified surveyors and people with traditional building skills.’

As part of the bicentenary celebrations, a 26-mile walking and cycling route is being developed along the route of the Stockton & Darlington Railway



as it was in 1825, and it’ll pass by the building at Heighington which sits halfway between Locomotion (the railway museum in Shildon) and Hopetown (the railway museum in Darlington, formerly Head of Steam, opening in summer 2024). ‘So whether you’re walking, cycling or indeed catching a train between these two honeypot sites, Heighington is right in the middle and hopefully sometime in the next few years you’ll get drinks and refreshments as it was designed originally,’ Caroline adds. ‘What we’d like to do is make a Georgian-themed inn selling local ales – and maybe the staff will be dressed up, who knows? That’s our preference but the bottom line is: we will go down any route where the building is allowed to make enough money to look after itself, so we have to keep our options open. We don’t have a choice in this. It’s the earliest railway station in the world, we can’t lose it on our watch.’

*All details of the appeal are on the Friends’ website [sdr1825.org.uk](http://sdr1825.org.uk) where a Save Heighington Station tab will direct you to a JustGiving page to make donations or to a form where you can sign the petition. Any private or business sponsors wanting more information can email [chair@sdr1825.org.uk](mailto:chair@sdr1825.org.uk).*