

CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT (2022/23). November 2024 AGM

As I write this report to be presented at our 2024 AGM in November, a quick check of the calendar tells me that by this time next year the Bicentenary and its events will be over. Hopefully we'll all have thoroughly enjoyed a festival stretching from March to October and will have many wonderful memories. 2025 is not however the end of the work of the Friends of the S&DR it is in many ways just the start. Working and lobbying with our partners in local authorities, Historic England and others over the last decade we have achieved a great deal, and after 2025 we want to see the new museum facilities prospering, the S&DR walking/Cycling trail managed and cared for, events, education and historic structural conservation on-going.

I'm pleased to say that our on-going partnership with the councils of Durham, Darlington and Stockton continues and we are represented on the Rail Heritage Board which is steering 2025 and longer-term celebration and conservation of the S&DR. As in any partnership we are often required to keep many matters confidential. The board have been helpful in many and various ways to the Friends and have this year supported us financially and have secured the transfer of the privately owned Stockton & Darlington Railway trademark to the Friends for our future use.

Time this year has therefore been spent on a number of specific, long-term projects. The first of these is a bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund. With generous financial support from Durham, Darlington and Stockton Councils, we appointed Tricolor Associates to help us develop this bid to identify the best way to take forward long term management of the S&DR, evolving the Friends as a single focus charitable body to develop that long term approach. Well, I'm pleased to tell you that our bid was successful and we have been awarded a grant of £238,000 to help us develop a project to take this forward and make sure what we aspire to do is both sustainable and achievable. This will include the following broad areas over the next two years.

- Appointment of a full time Project officer.
- Enhanced hours for our current Secretary.
- Production of a Conservation Management Plan for the line and creation of a GIS database to manage it.
- In partnership with Durham, Darlington and Stockton Councils the creation of a Business Plan to identify how this will be managed and funded in the medium to long term..

Volunteers, supporters and partnerships will be a big part of this so we'll be consulting and asking everyone for their thoughts and help in the coming months. Parts of this development will also see us take forward a project with Darlington Council for the restoration of part of Edward Peases's house on Northgate. This will become our office and base, while the rear 'parlour' will be restored as it was in 1823 when painted by Arthur Rankley, a big improvement on its sad state at present and part of regenerating Northgate connecting town centre with Hopetown Railway Museum.

Further west our project to acquire and restore Heighington Station (the World's oldest railway station), has eaten up considerable time this year. We launched a campaign in early 2024 to raise the required funds and held discussions with several grant giving bodies. The problem is that while there are many keen to help when we own the building, finding support to buy it in the first place has been difficult. Our initial £500,000 project budget looked to be going well with public and other donations (including a fantastic offer of support from the Rail Heritage Trust), raising over £120,000 which we hoped to make up to the £500k with a bid to the Community Ownership Fund (COF). Our initial application was successful, but sadly due to an early General Election the COF has now been closed and we are left waiting for the new government to make announcements and left in limbo. We are pursuing other options and I'm still hopeful we will take this forward shortly. In the meantime, big thanks to the new Heighington Station volunteer group and their fantastic efforts to make the building look tidy on the outside. Fingers crossed we'll all still be able to enjoy food and drink in our own Georgian railway inn sometime soon!

After a year of preparation since her appointment, Niccy Hallifax the 2025 Festival Director together with her colleagues including Jill Read (S&DR 200 Coms manager), were finally able to release some of the detail for the 2025 festival at a press and publicity event at Darlington Hippodrome in September. This was an event aimed specifically at press, media and funders of the festival such as Arts Council and National Heritage Lottery Fund. I know many people were disappointed to not receive an invite and find out about the festival, but we have had input to the process through the Rail Heritage Board and we were invited to be represented, and also contribute towards the content of the press packs issued. Much detail still remains to be announced on the festival, but it will start with a major event in March and run right through to October with the journey of the 1975 replica Locomotion and its train the high point before a closing event at Stockton riverside. The programme is gradually being confirmed and filled out and people ought to check the official website and sign up for the newsletter here <https://www.sdr200.co.uk/>. Not everything we would have liked to see will happen, but the programme is looking exciting and will be part of nationwide celebrations of the bicentenary being organised by Network Rail <https://railway200.co.uk/>.

While the festival programme is now clearer there is I understand from many members worry that the event is not being advertised sufficiently and perhaps too late. Be reassured that we have been raising this issue for several years and promoting the S&DR far and wide from our own limited resources. I understand the regional tourist bodies have material ready to go early next year, and there has been a reluctance from national media to go overboard on articles and promotion too soon. Nevertheless there are many avenues being pursued to make sure S&DR200 and the heritage of our railway is widely promoted and celebrated next year.

While big S&DR festivals happen every 50 years (since 1875!), part of our plans for the future will be to hold more modest, but no less important festivals every year in September in future. This year's Festival Fringe for smaller events (<https://www.sdr200.co.uk/fringe-festival>) will provide an opportunity to develop this with a programme of guided walks, talks and other events. I'm really grateful to our members and volunteers helping to develop this and if you have bright ideas please do come forward.

Planning for the international Early Railways Conference continues where we are represented on the committee, and it will meet in Darlington in September 2025 between the evening of

Tuesday 23rd September and Friday 26th. Here all things S&DR as well as other research on other early railways will be presented and debated. You can find out more here <https://rchs.org.uk/early-railways-conference-combined/> and I do hope many of you will attend.

Our publications continue to sell well and I congratulate everyone who contributes to The Globe and has helped in reviewing and republishing our walk booklets. In addition to earning an income for future publications these are key to getting our message out to the public. In particular I draw your attention to the limited-edition S&DR art quality book being produced by ourselves at the moment as a fitting souvenir of 2025. With text by our own Caroline Hardie, photos by local photographer Peter Giroux and others and with multi-media content it's looking like excellent value for money...order yours before they are all snapped up! <https://www.sdr1825.org.uk/product/stockton-darlington-railway-book/>

I pay thanks to all of those volunteers along the 26 miles who continue to celebrate our rail heritage in whatever way they can, be it through repair works, guided walks, events, litter picking, tree planting or just trying to enthuse their neighbours and relatives to get involved. This year we marked the 199th anniversary of the S&DR opening with a well-attended public event at Toft Hill, and the launch of our revised walk booklet Shildon-Heighington, funded by our good Friends at Husqvarna, whose factory is beside the line at Newton Aycliffe. Husqvarna surpassed themselves with this event by providing the biggest most accurate 'cake' version of the S&DR possibly ever seen, as well as a second generous donation of £2500 which we will be using to re-write and publish an updated version of the Darlington circular walk.

As in previous years I once again take great pleasure in complementing our amazing volunteers and partners along the line for the work and passion they show in caring for our railway heritage. Our membership continues to grow and accounts are in healthy shape and as it seems every year I'm amazed at the passion and time given by our volunteers. There are once more too many people to thank individually, but my gratitude in particular goes to our trustees who work incredibly hard and without whom we wouldn't be pushing forward with such great promise as we are. Key to our ongoing work are our area groups who will be reporting elsewhere. But the sterling efforts of long-term groups at Etherley, West Auckland and Brusselton are now being complemented by a new group at Heighington, great progress in Darlington from the 'DIG' and a real difference to the site at Fighting Cocks, while at Stockton quayside plans are afoot to mark this key (Quay?!), part of the line in time for 2025.

Durham County Council have continued with the Levelling up Fund project to construct the S&DR walking/Cycling route with several sections now in place and completion due by early 2025. This will be accompanied by the new interpretation boards and signage running along the 26 miles. Part of the interpretation will be conventional panels, but a successful bid for just short of £250,000 to the National Lottery Heritage Fund will also allow Teesside University to produce some stunning computer graphics and VR models to enhance a journey down the line. Just as in 1825 the S&DR was the cutting edge of technology, hopefully this will attract new and different audiences to our story. One part of the new route involves the conservation of the Gaunless Bridge abutments and a new Corten steel deck across the river to carry the S&DR trail. Meanwhile the original Gaunless Bridge ironwork has been rescued from obscurity

at NRM York and stands in pride of place outside the New Hall at Locomotion, Shildon in a surprising green and white paint scheme, but based on analysis of the original bridge, this is what it looked like in 1825!

We and our partners have been fortunate to be supported in several ways by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (so keep buying those lottery tickets!). Our joint application with Darlington Borough Council was approved in late 2023, and we now have a team of three, Cait Barratt, Claire Skaife and Jess Woodley, working on community and volunteering projects along the line widening out involvement to children and the wider community. Making sure everyone along the line knows of and values the S&DR and its heritage is key to the future and ensuring our rail heritage is looked after and celebrated.

On that note I must mention 'Little Loco's Big Day' a children's book on the opening day of the S&DR written by my ever-inspiring wife Caroline Hardie. Although published independently this is allowing us to engage with a young audience and is available through the FSDR website where every purchase contributes to our charitable funds. <https://www.sdr1825.org.uk/product/little-locos-big-day/> . We are applying for grant aid to Durham Councillors at the moment to run class room sessions and give primary school children along the line free copies of the book as a 2025 keepsake.

Cait Barratt is also the coordinating project officer for the S&DR Community Grant Scheme. This has approximately £40,000 per year to give to worthwhile community projects which celebrate S&DR and rail heritage along the line. The applications are judged against published criteria and decisions made by a panel which includes the Friends. So far grants have been given for a railway mural at Fighting Cocks, a music project to recreate the sounds which would have been heard on the opening day in 1825, path improvements, creative writing and the restoration of railway vehicles. Drop Cait a line if you have an idea for a project and are interested in applying for a grant at s&drcommunitygrantsscheme@darlington.gov.uk

I conclude with some optimism for 2025 and the future. Funding for a variety of projects, NLHF bid, Pease's House, Heighington Station, education for schools, conservation management plan and many other exciting developments are all now happening or well moved forward. I also offer a note of caution however, while there is significant and substantial activity and funding from many partners large and small, if all our aspirations to have in place a world class visitor attraction are to be realised we need you our members and volunteers to keep supporting our work, and spreading the word near and far about the S&DR story and how this part of North East England changed the world.

Contacts to discuss anything in this report or anything S&DR related remain myself at Chair@sdr1825.org.uk and Jonathan Ratcliffe our Secretary at secretary@sdr1825.org.uk

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