



CHAIR'S ANNUAL REPORT; SEPTEMBER 2021 AGM

The last year has been exceptionally hard for all of us as the Covid pandemic has made life at the least difficult and for some brought tragedy and heartbreak and I offer my best wishes to all who have been affected. Against this background of lockdowns and self-isolation the work of the Friends of the S&DR and our many partners has continued as we look forward to and try to plan for better times ahead.

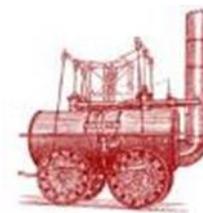
Our membership continues to hold steady and I pay thanks to all of those volunteers along the 26 miles who continue to celebrate our rail heritage in whatever way they can, be it through repair works, guided walks, litter picking, tree planting or just trying to enthuse their neighbours and relatives to get involved. While all of these efforts should be applauded special mention this last year should go to the Brusselton Incline Group for their fantastic installation of sleeper blocks, rails and interpretation at the Masons' Arms Crossing in Shildon, and to supporters at Middleton St George with the on-going clearance and landscaping works at Fighting Cocks.

Much of the work of myself and the Trustees is not so obvious but is absolutely essential in building partnerships, commenting on and steering planning applications along the line and providing guidance on solid factual information on the S&DR and early railways to ensure our story is told properly.

In particular we are now not only members of the wider S&DR Rail Heritage Board, but also the Executive group along with Durham, Darlington and Stockton councils, the TVCA and Historic England. The Exec group steers the wide range of projects for 2025 and the legacy it will provide beyond. Two key current projects are the Branding and Interpretation Strategy being undertaken by Bright White Consultants of York, and the S&DR Economic Impact Assessment by Hatch Associates. The branding work will deliver an overall style/design of interpretation along the line linking the 26 miles as one continuous story for the first time. Initial designs will be complete later in 2021 with hopefully the first on the ground installations in late 2022. The EIA work is a statistical wonder, but its primary task is to provide hard evidence for funders and decision makers that if significant sums of money are spent on the S&DR this will have real socio-economic benefits for the communities and business along the line and wider region. It will be a powerful tool in gaining support in future years.

We were awarded a substantial grant from the Culture Recovery Fund (CRF) early in 2021 and this has allowed us to undertake detailed studies of fund-raising opportunities, volunteering, business planning and re-designing our website which now includes a substantial archive section of documents, maps and photos...it is the

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place to go for S&DR information. We also used the CRF funding to look at our future business planning and on a practical level buy some PPE, tools, display boards and a marquee for use at events.

We are also fortunate to be receiving grant aid for specific projects from Historic England through a three-year capacity grant delivered through the Heritage Action Zone. This is allowing us to look at and address issues such as heritage crime and education, start surveys of some of the smaller branch lines and produce what will hopefully be a definitive, well referenced but engaging booklet on just why the S&DR is so important and which will be used to help develop an education programme and teaching aids.

Aside from our own direct work, we're also working with and supporting a wide range of likeminded people such as the Stories Along the Line Project with Citizen Songwriters and Shildon Heritage Alliance with the 'Save our Stute' campaign.

The last year has seen some controversial and quite frankly very disappointing developments. The decision made by the Science Museum Group through the National Railway Museum to not re-new the loan of Locomotion No.1 to Darlington proved not unexpectedly controversial. After carefully examining the legal position on ownership, the FSDR Trustees decide to remain neutral on the matter. While acknowledging the deep emotional and cultural symbolism of No.1 being in Darlington, our concern is for the whole 26 miles. We engaged with all those involved in a number of phone calls and emails and ultimately the solution of confirmed loans, including the 1975 replica, from the NRM to Darlington and the return of No.1 for the first 6 months of 2025, appeared a successful compromise. It did sadden us that this situation arose at all at such short notice and we hope partners will in future discuss such matters on a longer timetable to allow a sensible debate. I would also like to assure FSDR members that at no time did your trustees express an opinion for or against Shildon or Darlington, a misunderstanding in NRM internal emails set this rabbit running and we have since received an apology and clarification on this matter from the NRM.

The other deeply disappointing development of the last year was the granting of planning permission by Darlington Council to allow the Fighting Cocks pub to be turned into a convenience store. The early railway Inns of the S&DR are of considerable significance to its heritage and the loss of the Fighting Cocks was fiercely fought by ourselves and local groups. We are on record at being appalled by this poor decision by DBC but once granted there are no avenues for us to pursue to have it overturned. On a more positive note we continue to work with a number of partners at Fighting Cocks to see some significant restoration of railway character and interpretation.

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There is a growing amount of correspondence from other heritage railways about what is happening in 2025 and how can they join in. In particular we now have an active correspondence with the Tanfield and Stainmore railways. To help spread the word we have also joined the Heritage Railway Association (<https://www.hra.uk.com/>). Again to help with support and advice we have also become members of the <https://www.heritagetrustnetwork.org.uk/>.

While we value all our members, I feel I ought to make a special mention of Brendan Boyle who we sadly lost after a long illness this year. Many of you will be familiar with his well-researched articles in the Globe, especially those on railway taverns where his twin loves of railways and beer met. Brendan will be sadly missed. On a positive note much of his research together with information from many other members is currently being passed onto Historic England, where their casework officer Eric Brance-Instone is reviewing legal protection for S&DR buildings and structures. This has recently seen Hackworth's House and the Coal Drops at Shildon elevated to Grade II*, with other buildings added to the list for the first time. In a related project two casework officers have been appointed to talk to communities about 'local listing', buildings not quite important enough for national designation, but which should be identified and protected through the planning process. Look out for more on this from September through to January 22.

Looking forward to the next year there are potentially some exciting developments. We are working on a bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund in partnership with Darlington Council to provide substantial support for our work along the line, Durham County Council should hear in October about a bid for 'Levelling Up' grant which will help build the S&DR walking/cycling route and restore some key buildings, and survey work is underway at Edward Pease's house on Northgate to inform a restoration. Also during the next year outline plans for the events of 2025 such as an international exhibition of early locomotives should become clearer. In our own work we hope to help the research of our members on the Yarm branch line become published and undertake research on branch lines, Quakers and the early history of this the most significant of railways.

Every year I'm amazed at the passion and time given by our volunteers and there are frankly 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.

Niall Hammond, Chair, Friends of the S&DR.