



Chair's Report/activity for September 2021

September is always a busy month with lots of ordinary business continuing with the added excitement and commitment to celebrating the S&DR anniversary on the 27<sup>th</sup> (or thereabouts depending on which day of the week it falls!)

The work of Bright White Ltd on the design of branding, wayfinding and interpretation is drawing to a close with weekly Tuesday morning progress meetings between BW, myself and the Heritage Action Zone officer Richie Starrs and Kirsty Weston from Tees Valley Combined Authority. Designs, locations for interpretation and budgets are now largely in place and being 'tested' with focus groups including the FSDR. Our October meeting will include a presentation from Chris Walker of Bright White with an opportunity to make points and ask questions.

The Economic Impact Assessment for the S&DR continues, with exceptionally detailed work being undertaken by Hatch Associates (myself and Alan Townsend attended meetings on 2<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of September). This will lay out a case for why investment should take place in the S&DR for 2025 and beyond and identify the social and economic benefits to the communities and business along the line. It will be an essential tool in persuading substantial investment.

On Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> of September along with many others I attended the unveiling of the 'rediscovered' Timothy Hackworth portrait and a railway/local history fair at the Railway Institute in Shildon. A fantastic event in its own right, but also another small but important step in the project to restore the fortunes of the 'Stute'

Over the weekend of the 11/12<sup>th</sup> I had great pleasure in helping Peter Bainbridge and Jane Hackworth-Young erect our brand new FSDR gazebo at Tees Cottage water works, Darlington for their steam weekend. The gazebo was purchased with grant aid from the Culture Recovery Fund and will allow us our own wet weather cover to attend fairs and displays.

Planning and meetings for various related projects at the Fighting Cocks 'Heritage Hub' continues and while we still are smarting from the bitter disappointment of losing the planning case for conversion of the pub to a convenience store, we are taking forward a number of initiatives here including art works, restoration of the Waiting Shed, interpretation and general management.

Work on protecting the physical remains of the S&DR continues with correspondence with Historic England on new listings (latest proposals are a series of bridges between Shildon and Darlington, once thought to be mid-19<sup>th</sup> century but now identified as 1830's). Discussions on possible Conservation Area status for S&DR (as enjoyed by

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the Settle and Carlisle Railway for instance), continue as part of a working group with Historic England and local authority conservation officers. While Durham and Darlington are supportive of this, we are disappointed that Stockton are at present not persuaded. We are also involved in a 'Local Listing' project for the S&DR being run from Durham CC. This will allow ourselves and any member of the public to nominate buildings, structures, signs or archaeological sites associated with the S&DR for protection. Georgia Cundick the project officer will provide a presentation on this at our October meeting.

I attended a meeting of the Rail Heritage Board Executive group on 21<sup>st</sup> September and while I can't at present share details with you there was very promising correspondence with Network Rail, and reports on major international exhibitions and events for 2025 involving early railway engines and live steam.

This years' 196<sup>th</sup> anniversary events went off wonderfully after nearly two years of covid restrictions. Huge congratulations to all concerned to those who organised events, walks and talks. Always unfair to mention specific people and not mention others but of particular note were the event at Toft Hill community centre, the amazing 'Beer and Bread' street theatre featuring two S&DR navvys in Stockton, and of course the twice delayed Railway Fair on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> in Stockton Market Place, where for the first time all of our wonderful area groups and volunteers were present in a row allowing the nearly 2000 visitors for the day to 'travel down the line', amazing!

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of September I met with the HAZ officer and DCC conservation regarding landscaping plans for the line through St Helens Auckland. The track through St Helens and down to the Gaunless Bridge is both overgrown and subject to fly tipping and vandalism. DCC have drawn up a landscaping plan to significantly improve this and supported by FSDR will hold an event on 2/3<sup>rd</sup> November to show the public the plans and get feedback. The event will be advertised.

While 2025 is our own 'big event', it is also worth noting that County Durham has now also been shortlisted for the competition to be the 'City of Culture' that year. This may be an additional help in our cause, but it could also be a challenge with other cultural and heritage events in the county also requiring investment. A final decision will be made in May next year.

In Darlington our joint bid with the council for National Lottery Heritage Fund grant has been submitted and will be considered by the committee at the NLHF December meeting. If the decision is positive we will begin work on the development phase and a round 2 application in August 2022. If this succeeds then we will have a new office at the Lime Cells and officer support and small grants available to really help all our wonderful volunteers along the line.

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