



Chair's Report/activity for February 2022

February is a short month, but still quite a lot has gone on since we last met.

I've met with Jo Potter of Darlington for Culture and Mike Crawshaw of Darlington Council to look at how we get the wider community aware of the bicentenary and stimulated to take on the roles of walk guides, produce events and art works, put in place hospitality and generally make 2025 a big event. As a group we can't do everything and working with partners such as Darlington for Culture provides capacity and spreads the enthusiasm for our cause.

I've spent some time discussing with Richie Starrs the S&DR Heritage Action Zone Officer the third and final year of our capacity building grant from Historic England. Members can look forward to support to complete **walking the line** surveys of the Haggerleases, Black Boy and Surtees branch lines. This will mean we have surveyed all of the S&DR built from 1825-30, its key period with the information then passed on to councils to help inform and protect the line through planning. I'm also pleased to say that using the Historic England grant, trustees have approved the publication and printing of the excellent Yarm Branch Line study undertaken by our own members, more on this and a launch date in due course. Other planned work for 2022/3 will include a volunteer supported survey of **Heritage Crime** along the line so we know where to put resources into better management and working with the police and other agencies; **Schools' education** working with the three museums and using our excellent definitive booklet; a **Photo memory** project where we hope to curate the growing collection of photos posted to our Facebook page and collected by us to launch a competition with a small prize fund for new artistic responses to the S&DR (photos, paintings etc); We intend to upload more material to **Archives / Community Museum** pages on our website and look at how a larger digitisation project of S&DR material held at The National Archives, NRM Search Engine, County Durham Record Office and elsewhere can be made available to all. We have some grant available to help our newly formed Darlington group get going as a part of which we'd like to sponsor some work on the **Quaker heritage** and how and how they were important to the S&DR. Finally, as ever we hope to sponsor and help with **anniversary events** in September to mark the S&DRs birthday.

Speaking of special dates' this May 23rd marks the 200th anniversary of the official start of building the S&DR with the laying of the first rail at Stockton. We would like to mark this event, but as ever ideas and help will make it bigger and better so please come forward and volunteer if you'd like to help out.

Having now received planning permission the building and conservation works at the Darlington Railway Heritage Quarter in Darlington will have formally started by the time we meet on Thursday 3rd March, with a symbolic cutting of the first turf ceremony earlier that day to which I've been invited on behalf of the Friends.

We continue to develop our plans for the Fighting Cocks 'Heritage Hub' with a mixture of conservation works and partnership with MSG parish Council. This includes discussions

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on possible land acquisition and a bid to the National Lottery. Thinking through how we support and finance works such as that planned at Fighting Cocks has also led to trustees agreeing a small grant at the site in recognition of the long-term support and work of a neighbouring landowner in caring for S&DR heritage. We hope that this will be the first such grant of many, and although our resources are limited, to be something we make available to other worthy causes along the line in future.

Despite it being imminent for at least a few months we're still waiting for the final issued version of the Branding and Wayfinding strategy! Members were asked for input on installations (such as art works or replica chaldrons) this month as part of finalising the report. The next Rail Heritage Board Executive meeting will discuss this and look to how the expected cost of around £1.8 million pounds will be found to instal new interpretation all along the line.

Eric Branse-Instone of Historic England continues his work to redesignate the S&DR. This month he is looking at the first five miles from Witton Park to Shildon. As well as the historical research (ably helped by our members), he now also needs to speak or at least write to nearly 125 different landowners who either own or are immediately adjacent to the line to keep them informed!

Extra staff to help with the growing work on S&DR projects is sorely needed and in addition to the imminent appointment of a rights of way officer for the 26 miles to be hosted by Durham County Council, Stockton Council are now taking forward plans to appoint an officer whose role will be to develop and coordinate the events of 2025 itself, something we've long urged our partners to take forward.

Finally, our definitive booklet on the S&DR has been warmly welcomed and we want to make sure copies get to all those who need to and should know about the S&DR. We are both selling and distributing copies, but if you have any suggestions for people whose hearts and minds we should be winning over, then let me know and we'll send them a copy.

All the best

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Friends of the S&DR. 28/2/2022.

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