

Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway.
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Chair's Report/activity for October/November 2023

Dear Friends,

October and November have as ever been busy months, with a very successful AGM held at the Georgian Theatre in Stockton this year on the 28th (meaning there was no ordinary meeting for November which would have been just a few days later).

Quite a lot of time in the last few months has been taken up with correspondence on the re-branding of Darlington Railway Museum. We had known for several years that the old name of Head of Steam would most likely go, and Rail Heritage Quarter was a working name, but we had along with many other expected that we might be involved or at least consulted on the new 'brand'. Instead to our surprise (and many others), 'Hopetown' suddenly dropped to a mixed and bewildered audience. Many had no idea the area around North Road was called Hopetown, the text and logo say nothing about railways and the design itself has been compared to a coffee house to a wild west saloon. Substantial and well argued, but largely negative comments were made on our Facebook page and in the Northern Echo, and at members request I spoke to and wrote to the leader of Darlington Council who to be fair had only been briefed about this a very short time in advance of it going public himself. At members request we have written formally (copy attached to the end of this report), and we still await a response.

As previously reported, we now own the land of the former S&DR coal depot at Fighting Cocks. The proposed meeting to discuss our future Fighting Cocks 'Heritage Hub' projects with Middleton St George Parish Council and other partners did take place but wasn't the open meeting we had anticipated, instead a select group of invitees from various local societies and groups attended and discussed ways forward. Ideally we hope to have a much more open and public meeting in the spring. By early 2024 we hope to be able to announce progress on several things at Fighting Cocks building on the excellent clearance and management works already going on with volunteers. These are likely to include artwork, masonry conservation and interpretation.

Cait Barratt the 'S&DR Heritage & Community Participation Manager' has now opened the S&DR community Fund for applications, grants of a few hundred to a few thousand pounds and which are available over the next 4 years to help people celebrate and conserve the S&DR, If you have an idea then get in touch with Cait and she will provide initial feedback on your idea and if it fits the community grant objectives encourage you to submit an application. Ideas can be submitted to Cait on the following email address s&drcommunitygrantsscheme@darlington.gov.uk. Consideration of the first few applications by a panel (on which the Friends have a place), have raised a few issues about the best way to deliver things, but this has been very useful in seeing a bigger picture where for instance groups/people at various locations may all independently want to do similar things (interpretation panels, or schools education) and it might be better to provide some professional support for a single bigger project with similar design and standards than fund lots of small ones.

The team of various officers in the local authorities including Niccy Hallifax the 2025 Festival Director, can all now be contacted through one single email address which is info@sdr200.co.uk which people should use for any general enquiries.

**Chair, Friends of the S&DR CIO, Marian Cottage, Lartington, Barnard
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As members will recall, following an in depth study a decision was taken by the three local authorities and S&DR trustees to progress work to see the Friends develop into a well resourced charitable organisation capable of managing and maintaining the heritage of the S&DR after 2025. While major museums at Shildon, Darlington and Preston Park will stay under the control of statutory bodies, the heritage in between these needs a single focus body to conserve and manage it, develop education and tourism and support volunteers. This needs a robust business plan and we have financial support from Durham, Darlington and Stockton Councils to pursue a bid to the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF), for this. We have received a proposal from Tricolor Associates and hope to commission them early in the New Year to take this forward once NLHF re-open their grant application process.

Part of our development is looking at how we might conserve and use buildings of S&DR heritage, both to save them and where possible to see how bringing them to life can generate income to further our work. Two projects we have been involved with are Heighington Station and Edward Pease's House on Northgate, Darlington. If you recall, courtesy of a major National Lottery Heritage Fund grant which we supported by Darlington Council, one such building The Lime Cells on Hopetown Lane, were meant to be restored for our offices/storage. For this we would have paid an annual subsidised rent and been responsible for costs of power/heat and cleaning. Following some protracted negotiation with Darlington Council over detail on the use of the Lime Cells and concern over how useful the building might be based on the architect's scheme provided by DBC, we've now been told that because of budget overruns on the whole DRHQ project that conversion of the lime cells to a usable space will not now be for several years. Instead DBC have presented us with an alternative option/opportunity at Edward Pease's former house on Northgate.

The **Edward Pease house project** is financed through a separate government grant called the Towns Fund which Darlington received to undertake a number of projects around Northgate and the centre of the town. Through the Towns Fund there was money allocated to buy and restore Edward Pease's house, which was divided in 1866 into four units after EP's death. Darlington have however only managed to buy one part and with time running out to spend the Towns Fund grant (2024), they are moving the money away to other projects. Chris Mains the DBC officer in charge does however want to see the project taken forward and we have an offer that following significant (but not complete), restoration of the part Darlington have bought, that this would be transferred in full to the Friends ownership. Clearly this is a building of huge S&DR significance where Edward Pease lived, met and negotiated regularly with George Stephenson. It will provide office and storage which we need and opportunities for public engagement and further development in a building with a key part to play in the rail heritage of the S&DR. The ownership and restoration of a listed building will also be a major development in how grant giving bodies and others positively view the FSDR to our future benefit. Clearly there are a number of issues to resolve before we agree to take the building on, but trustees have provisionally agreed taking the project forward with a final decision only being made if the terms and business case are successfully developed in the next 6 months or so.

In 2018 the FSDR approached the Architectural Heritage Fund for a grant to investigate the feasibility of purchasing and restoring **Heighington Station**. At the time the then Head of Planning at Durham County Council effectively told us to stand down and that DCC would investigate this instead. Five years later DCC finally decided they could not buy the property and instead offered to provide support to us to take the matter forward. Earlier in 2023 a meeting was arranged for local supporters and Cllrs and held in Aycliffe to explore how this

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might be taken forward and negotiations opened with the current owner. Since then the building has been upgraded to Grade II* protection meaning it is also now eligible for Historic England support. Funding the project is best divided into two elements. Purchase and then restoration similar to the recent and successful restoration of Wingfield Station in Derbyshire <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijlE--tm7ko&list=PLRMnzCoR11TOSXOoh8qpl3vwr4WyAP1Vm&index=13>

Members may like to note that we are in negotiation with the owner and have had an initial Expression of interest for a grant to cover some of the costs through the Community Ownership Fund approved. The remaining purchase money would be the subject of a fund-raising campaign, based on saving the world's oldest railway 'station'. If you'd like to be involved in this let me know.

As ever no month goes by without attending plenty of meetings to lobby for our cause. My thanks also to Vice Chair Alan Townsend for his valuable support in making sure we are represented at as many meetings as possible.

2025 Planning.

Progress on the replica train for 2025 continues, with North Bay Engineering pressing on with waggon replicas no the first one had had successful trials at beamish and the design given the green light. The replica Experiment coach is nearly complete and will be ready for painting soon. All still under wraps, but hopefully in the New Year and once the 1975 Locomotion replica is returned to steam, we hope to bring some spectacular pictures of the full train. There is also a possibility that in September 2025 we will need trained volunteer re-enactors to sit in waggons and coach, if you fancy participating let me know.

As mentioned previously we are aware of a significant area of area concern relating to the perceived lack of live steam events for 2025. We are reassured there will be the three-day journey of the 1975 replica Locomotion and a series of events at Shildon and Darlington Museums. The prospect of significant live steam is still uncertain, but a first meeting has taken place of a group of heritage rail groups and discussions on how something might be delivered. I'm grateful to trustee Norman Hugill for attending this on our behalf. Once there is some substantive news, I'll be only too pleased to let everyone know.

A reminder that nationally Lord Peter Hendy and Network Rail are delivering what they are calling RAIL200, firmly stamping this as the 200th anniversary of passenger travel (please note L&MR ☺). Clearly the S&DR and L&MR are both key developments in railways, but Network Rail have chosen to mark 2025 nationally as the year when the modern railway began. You can read about RAIL200 here <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/stories/all-aboard-railway-200/> .

I look forward to seeing many of you at our Christmas gathering at the railway Tavern, Northgate, Darlington on Thursday 7th of December, and wish you all a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year. No monthly meeting in January, so weather permitting see you all in February. As ever if you want to discuss anything S&DR related drop me a line at Chair@sdr1825.org.uk.

All the best.

Niall Hammond,

Chair, Friends of the S&DR. 04/12/2023.

Chair, Friends of the S&DR CIO, Marian Cottage, Lartington, Barnard Castle, Co. Durham, DL12 9BP.

Email: chair@sdr1825.org.uk



Open Letter to Councillor Steve Harker, Leader of Darlington Borough Council.

2023-11-05

Dear Steve

Railway Heritage; 'Hopetown' Rebranding.

I'm writing to you at the request of our membership and in light of an unprecedented number of comments we have received to our Facebook page on the recent announcement of the Hopetown brand for the Darlington Rail Heritage Quarter.

Firstly, let me say that the Friends of the S&DR and indeed the vast majority of the comments we have received are hugely supportive of the work your council and officers are undertaking to provide Darlington with a first class visitor destination and recognise its unique historic position as part of the 1825 Stockton & Darlington Railway. For too long we have as a region underestimated the global reach of the S&DR story and the way the railway age it ushered in changed the world. The investment in DRHQ is therefore timely and enjoys significant support as we approach the 200th anniversary in 2025.

Clearly in the development of any new attraction there will be debate and on occasion disagreement on direction, but we hope the views and collected expertise of the FSDR over the past years has been offered and directed only at making the attraction better. We very much want to see the site thrive and become financially sustainable to the advantage of visitors, the tourist economy, the cultural pride of Darlington and the enthusiasm the story can bring to our young in education. We would hope that the investment the people of Darlington have in their rail heritage should mean that they feel involved in the development of the site and so can in due course be powerful advocates to audiences far and wide.

The particular issue in this instance is that while it has been known for some while the DRHQ would have a popular name, many expected to be consulted and be 'taken on the journey' of informing it. Instead, the name, logo and brand dropped with no forewarning much to the surprise of everyone, resulting in an unprecedented level of negative comment in our and other local social media platforms, rather than a welcoming roar of approval which could have been achieved with more preparation and consultation. On a positive note, many of the comments were polite and thoughtful rather than rude, but overall there was disappointment rather than the good news story it should have been. While in the grand scheme of things we are reflecting on the comments of only a few hundred people, these are your core audience, all of whom have children, families and relatives and would...will, if they feel ownership and involvement, be your most powerful advocates and create many, many repeat visits to the site. Please do read all of the comments on our Facebook page, but in summary I think there are a few core points;

A feeling of lack of consultation, we have as yet found no one who was spoken to by your consultants.

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The Hopetown name mystifies many, even locals who don't know where it is. Collectively there is general agreement it is probably as good as any name, but it needs explanation otherwise local and distant visitors will ignore or not respond to it.

The name needs a tagline beneath it 'Hopetown Darlington' is not enough, to this should be added some reference to railways to make it clearer what the site is about.

The logo as it stands provides no clue or clarification as to what the site/attraction is. Added to the lack of any reference to railways in the name this many feel will again not attract or guide potential visitors to make the journey. The logo and name at present have been compared by several people to looking like anything from a coffee brand to a wild west saloon. The typeface/font used represents the later 19th century when our USP is as a Georgian Railway. This could be rectified by replacement of the letter 'O' in Hopetown with 'plugwheels' (as on Locomotion No.1 and much of the cast metal seating/street furniture around Darlington), perhaps with the tops of uprights given crenelations as on the funnel of No.1 reflecting the town coat of arms etc.

In conclusion we urge you to not drop the new brand, but instead evolve it over coming months before the site reopens in 2024. In time we hope Hopetown means something on its own, but it has taken many years for other museums/attractions to trade on a single name, time we fear Hopetown might not have if it is to prove financially sustainable and achieve its potential in the short term. This is a once in a generation opportunity to make the most of our world class railway heritage which we should not waste.

As ever the Friends of the S&DR are here to assist and support, so please let me know if there is any help our members can provide.

Your sincerely,

Niall Hammond (Chair) and Trustees of the Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway.

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