



Chair's Report/Activity for February 2024

Dear Friends,

2024 is already speeding away and before you can blink an eye we will be in the bicentenary year of 2025. Lots going on, but lots left to do, not just for the 200th anniversary but to make sure that from 2026 onwards we put in place a lasting legacy of conservation, access, interpretation and education for the S&DR to give it the profile and status it deserves.

Work on the **S&DR walking/cycling route** continues which will link together the museums and sites along the line in one continuous path from Phoenix Row to Stockton. It's fair to say the better funding available in Durham will see this section built to the best standard including a new bridge over the Gaunless abutments at St Helen Auckland (for which we are expecting a public consultation design soon), as well as new landscaping at the Masons Arms Crossing, marking the place Locomotion set off from in September 1825. After commenting on earlier versions of the interpretation boards we're waiting to see final text. Work still goes on in Darlington and Stockton to try and achieve the best possible route within finances/time, but as long as the trail is suable for 2025 then we can always seek further improvements in yeas to come.

The major investment at **Hopetown/North Road** and for the **New Hall at Locomotion, Shildon** are both progressing well and should be open by the end of 2024, ready for the bicentenary year. A recent meeting with Network Rail over the new **Bank Top Station** (and works to original station) as part of East Coast Mainline improvements all look promising, but the timetable is tight for completion only by mid-2025 ready to welcome visitors for our bicentenary in September. Impressive how much research and thought has been put into necessary alterations to the historic station and there is a big fat history report available if anyone wants to read it, we can send a digital copy.

By the time many of you read this we will have had our first start up meeting with Tricolor Consultants on developing our **future Business Plan**. Supported by Durham, Darlington and Stockton Councils, this is an essential piece of work to carefully design and agree a long-term work plan for ourselves as Guardians of the Line, ensuring conservation, interpretation, access and interpretation are supported well into the future right through to the 250th celebrations! There will be a chance for all members to input t this process, but if you have thoughts, ideas and feeling about what we should be doing, how to finance it and engage as many people as possible do please come forward and help develop this plan.

Our campaign to purchase and restore **Heighington Station** launched just over a week ago with a major feature in the Northern Echo, since when we've had really good coverage across TV and printed news programmes both in the UK and overseas. We have a 'justgiving' donation page which has reached nearly £5,000 in the first week, and we've been contacted by a wide range of people and organisations who would like to

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support and help us. These include private individuals, business and charity trusts all inspired by the story of the S&DR and the world's oldest railway station. A lot of application forms and correspondence to follow up on now to turn interest into grants, but real hope we can reach our fund-raising target in time for 2025. Please do circulate the webpage details (<https://www.justgiving.com/campaign/save-heighington-station>) to everyone you know and spread the word. If you can't afford to donate then you can show your support by signing our petition at <https://forms.office.com/r/9sfYKNLbHr>

Members will recall the on-going concern and debate about the 'Hopetown name' for the revamped North Road Railway Museum. I've had additional talks with politicians at Darlington Council about this, but we still await a formal response. It would also be nice if they used the regional spelling waggon, rather than wagon in the name of the planned children's play area (Wagon Woods), but no one is responding to our request on this one either!

Interest in our work and the S&DR continues to grow and I have provided talks/lectures attended meetings, and corresponded with a variety of groups including the Rail Heritage Trust, Historic England, Hitachi Rail, Husqvarna, Shildon Railway Institute (well done on the launch of Dave Reynolds new book on the history of the Stute!), National Lottery Heritage Fund and of course our partners in Durham, Darlington and Stockton councils amongst many others. Interest and support from our local MPs and prospective parliamentary candidates is good and I'm grateful on behalf of the Friends for all of their interest.

We continue to work with Darlington Council on the restoration and possible acquisition of **Edward Pease's House** on Northgate in Darlington, both as an historic building fundamental to the S&DR story, and as an office/premises for the Friends. This would also help with the regeneration of Northgate. We have identified a long list of questions/repairs needed to the building before we feel we can take it on without placing ourselves in a difficult financial position, and look forward to working with the Towns Fund officer Chris Mains and Napper Architects on taking this forward during the next year.

As every month my thanks goes out to all our volunteers and trustees without which none of our work would be possible. We can of course always do with more active workers so if you have time or skills you can spare to help with then please do get in touch

2025 Planning.

Very little to specifically report on the 2025 Festival this month as we wait for the festival director Niccy Hallifax to bring all her planning together for a big launch this September.

As a reminder for contacts:

Cait Barratt the 'S&DR Heritage & Community Participation Manager' is the person to talk to regarding the S&DR community Fund which can provide 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

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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. Cait also now has two officers supporting her in volunteer and education development and we hope to meet them at our March monthly meeting, contact details to follow.

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.

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. 04/03/2024.

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