

STOKESLEY PROBUS CLUB

Speaker Notes – Jack Brunton Room at Stokesley Town Hall Tuesday 15th July 2025 at 10.00am

The Chairman was very pleased to introduce Caroline Hardie to present her talk, “The Railway That Got the World on Track”.

Caroline, an archaeologist, has a keen interest in railways, and has carried out much work in this field particularly with the Stockton and Darlington Railway in connection with the bi-centennial celebration preparations. For this, she has prepared books and booklets, runs a podcast, gives talks (especially to children), and carried out site investigations along the route. A particular speciality of hers is the restoration of period buildings, and this she has applied to a number of historic buildings along the railway route.

Being A Friend of the S & D Railway, Caroline brought associated booklets to the meeting and encouraged Members to become involved.

Among the literature brought to the meeting was a pictorial history of the railway, a book she had written, copies of which were on sale to Members.

Caroline started by outlining the events of the railway opening day on 27th September 1825. The train comprised twenty five coal wagons adapted for passenger use, and a coach for the directors and VIP guests. George Stephenson was the engine driver with Timothy Hackworth performing guard duties. The journey commenced at Bishop Auckland, ran to Shildon, Darlington North Road, and terminated at Stockton Docks. The first five miles was hilly requiring several inclines to be negotiated by means of static engines at the top of each, which hauled trains up, and lowered them down the slopes. Etherley was the first, and many people turned out there to watch the first train, as they did along the whole route.

Before Shildon the train had to pass over the elegant cast iron Gaunless Bridge, quite a feat of engineering in its day. The first stop was Darlington North Road where some passengers left, and others joined the travelling party. Passing over the impressive structure of Skerne Bridge, the overcrowded train headed past Preston Park and arrived at the terminus on Stockton Quay.

The Directors and VIP guests then enjoyed a grand banquet at the Town Hall.

Celebrations to commemorate this 1825 historic first train journey were held in 1875, 1925, 1975, and again this year to mark the bi-centennial.

Why is the railway so special? Railways were already running in several parts of the country, in fact rails had been used since the 16th century to move goods. However, all these lines were relatively short and transported materials, sometimes passengers, between two points, and were designed for a specific purpose for use exclusively by the operators. Most were horse drawn, but some in the early 1800's were hauled by very primitive steam engines. The S & D Railway was unique in its day as it was the first large scale transport network that anyone could use upon payment to the owners. It linked towns over a wide area and allowed new industries to develop along the route followed by new towns. It was built with the vision that it could be extended potentially becoming a national network. The impact was enormous, and attracted attention from far and wide, and the principle was emulated around the world. In these respects, it is seen as the birthplace of railways.

Edward Pease was the man credited with the idea. In addition, he had the belief and the money to get things started, and soon many investors saw the potential and chose to get involved. An Act of Parliament was passed and work began.

George Stephenson, having been developing and building locomotives and static engines for colliery use, set up a company in his name to construct the engines and rolling stock in 1825. Leaving for overseas shortly after, it was left to his son, George, to run the business, which got off to a slow start. Enter Timothy Hackworth, locomotive engineer and maintenance specialist. He came up with successful designs, the first being The Royal George, a heavy locomotive very effective and reliable for hauling goods, especially coal. This was followed by lighter engines for passenger work.

Depots were set up along the route where goods were loaded, unloaded and were available for sale (mostly coal). Places of much activity they soon attracted an inn and other services creating a commercial hub.

Branch lines were soon developed, the most significant being one that ran to coal staithes on the south bank of the River Tees. Business there flourished and the town of Middlesbrough was born. It was an early example of zonal planning 100 years ahead of the Town Planning Act with areas designated for commercial, residential, recreation and religion being laid out.

Sadly, the D & S Railway has not been cherished over the years much of the original infrastructure having been demolished or left to decay. The Friends of the railway organisation was established to address this, and to promote interest in and prepare for centennial celebrations.

The strategy was to establish what buildings and structures survive, their condition, and whether they can be restored or replaced. Numerous recommendations were made to list those buildings and structures of special architectural or historical significance which deserved the protection afforded by this recognition. An agreement was made with the relevant planning authorities to respect and protect the whole route whether features exist or not.

To date the Friends have raised almost £50m of funding. This has been used to carry out much restoration work and to produce promotional materials. The major item of expenditure is the re-imagining of the Head of Steam museum and educational centre at North Road, Darlington. This is the main feature at the museum, which originally comprised only the old station building, but now encompasses numerous displays over a much larger site.

Of the many original buildings that are undergoing or have undergone renovation is Heighington station. The original inn on the site will be brought back to how it was in the 19th century. Furthermore, it will also operate as a pub in period fashion serving draft beer by jug.

Also, the original home of Edward Pease in North Road, which is owned by Darlington Council, is in a sad state of neglect. This also will undergo restoration and will include the decoration and furnishing of his study to show it as it was in his day. A significant painting of the Pease family found in the house is being restored and will be displayed in the room.

In preparation for the bi-centennial celebrations many of the Friends are clearing and cleaning the route, branded signage has been installed, booklets covering each section have been produced, books have been published, a programme of events prepared, and a podcast launched.

In addition, fringe events are being planned including an Ale Trail, walks along the route, etc.

Following several questions and thanks from the Chairman for a very polished and entertaining presentation, Members expressed their thanks and appreciation to Caroline in the customary manner with an enthusiastic round of applause.

JE 15.7.25