

Wylam Parish Council - 11 November 2020

Report: George Stephenson's Birthplace – Discussion with National Trust

Members will recall that discussions, workshops and meetings were held with or included representatives of the National Trust after closure of George Stephenson's Birthplace (GSB) in January 2017. Some of these were under the banner of Wylam: Past, Present and Future. Programmes of action were agreed and some resulting initiatives were implemented in 2017 and 2018. These included research commissioned by the Trust into (a) Wylam social history in the time of GS and (b) the possible tourism and heritage 'offer' in the village, plus guided walks and a small number of special openings.

Actions on both sides stalled then for a number of reasons, but Andrew Poad from the Trust contacted me recently to restart discussions and to explore joint working again. We agreed that the bicentenary of the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 2025 (with its very strong George Stephenson link) provided the impetus to achieve both short and longer term actions that would link in to its quite high profile celebrations (which have already started in effect with a [History and Heritage Festival 2020](#) in the last month).

We had an informal phone discussion today on how we might move forward again jointly and with others, including the Tyne Valley Community Rail Partnership. He said the Trust and its staff were obviously going through a difficult period, with the impact of the Coronavirus leading to major changes in how they would be working in future. Without minimising how serious these impacts were he said some positives could be identified, one being the success of the online booking system for visitors to sites.

Although not able to give any commitments, he thought use of a such booking system here at GSB might allow a reopening sooner rather than later, as it would be more flexible and thus more viable than the fixed opening system they had before, which was unable to respond quickly to changes in demand. He confirmed that the building would be staying in the Trust's ownership and that they were looking now at how to reimagine GS and the village in his time here and reopen the house as soon as possible having done this.

He also said the Trust was increasingly working in formal partnership with other organisations in relation to sites not in their ownership; Dunston Staithes and urban green spaces in Newcastle were two very local examples. He would welcome exploring further whether such an arrangement in Wylam might work, given both the Parish Council's general interest in promoting heritage, but also the fact that it had the Railway Museum to run. He was hoping to commission some further work on the way forward from the consultant who did some work for them (and shared with us) in 2018.

I said that the Parish Council was looking to prepare a village or Parish Council plan/strategy soon and that heritage would of course feature, so his suggestion was timely. We might also have some resources through the money held or might realise soon as originally gifted by the Reece Foundation for safeguarding the Post Office. I agreed with him that a meeting soon with the Chair and me from the PC and Andrew and his manager Robyn Brown from the Trust would be good to establish the basis for joint working.

Andrew said that following publicity recently in the press he was seeking to meet local political representatives to brief them on what was happening and seek their backing.

Colin Percy, Councillor