



The Friends of the National Railway Museum

Briefing 3

South of England Group
Vice President - Captain Bill Smith VRD, RNR

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Andrew Scott addresses the South of England Group

On Monday 18th October, Andrew Scott, the Head of the NRM, met 22 members of the South of England Group of the Friends. In his presentation he gave a fascinating insight into the activities and plans of the NRM and included a number of observations on the role of the Friends.

History Repeats Itself

Unfortunately, his first news was not good. That very morning, BR Standard 4MT 75014, which had arrived at the NRM the previous evening, had split one of its cylinders when being moved. This accident appears to be due to water in the cylinder although this still needs to be confirmed. If so, history has repeated itself; the Museum's LNWR Super D No 485, ended its BR career in a similar way and has only just been repaired.

Storage Problems

Andrew moved onto happier matters, describing the role of the Museum as the trustee of the nation's collection of railway artifacts. This begins with the acquisition of historic items, most of which are smaller, but far more numerous, than the prestige collection of locomotives. Everyday articles such as spoons and buttons share the storage space at Leeman Road with models, artwork, platform furniture, engineering drawings, documents and photographs. The mobile items don't all roll on flanged wheels, as the Museum also has a fleet of road vehicles; more of them than GWR locomotives! The latest item adds to this imbalance - an early mechanical dray, one of the earliest self-propelled railway delivery vehicles.

It's all very well having a large collection, but it's not much good unless everyone knows what's in it. This is a major problem for the Museum. It has been collecting articles quicker than it has been possible to catalogue and document them. Much material has arrived following the demise of various parts of the railway industry in this country. Drawings and photographs, if they are not properly scheduled by their previous owner, remain unsorted, awaiting identification and presentation to the researcher, enthusiast and visitor. This is an area where modern technology can play an important role but, as Andrew points out, computers are only a tool. People must first identify, interpret and, only then, record the information.

Once documented, the Museum must conserve the collection for future generations. This not only involves repair of damage, such as the current work on the Super D, but essential "finishing touches" such as the correct paint to produce an authentic livery. The Museum's painter is, probably, the country's leading expert in railway liveries and paint composition, and spends more time answering questions than applying paint to items in the collection. Volunteers from the Friends also play their role; such as their recent restoration of a NER Box Van.

Making Sense of the Collection

Big improvements are needed in the interpretation of the collection for the non-specialist visitor. The layout, apart from parts of the Peter Allen Building, does not present any easily

understood story. The collection must also provide services for disparate groups; school-children, the disabled, as well as families. The information service manned by the York Friends helps rectify some of these problems, but the Museum needs to do more itself. With this in mind, more interactive presentations are being provided, such as "name-plate rubbing" and theatre shows. Plans are currently being laid for a new generation of displays which will focus much more closely on the railway story, rather than relying just on artifacts. In particular, a new display will give an overview for visitors of the magnitude of the railway story. Even if the Museum were able to store all its exhibits at York, Andrew still believes in loaning some of the best displays to preservation sites across the UK, so that as many people as possible can enjoy them. The Friends have an important role here, acting as NRM "ambassadors" to draw attention to the items as part of the National Collection.

The NRM is addressing the needs of researchers, both through the library (used by 7 or 8 researchers each day) and the new Institute of Railway Studies at York University, headed by Prof. Colin Divall. Private funding is supporting 2 research associates, studying for Ph.D.s, and the first overseas (Australian) Ph.D. student. The Institute has also launched two courses, a Masters course and a Diploma

Questions and Answers

There was a lively discussion following Andrew's talk. The closure of the York works may impact on the Museum in an unusual way - the possible loss of their facilities for low-loader access (the low bridges on Leeman Road prevent transfer of exhibits at the Museum). Andrew also amplified on his comments about the help Friends can give to document the collection. On the use of NRM engines on the main-line, he would like to continue this, but the experiences of the last year show that this is becoming increasingly difficult. Coaching stock is another headache. Some time ago, the Museum obtained duplicate Gresley and Stanier coaches, with the idea of making up two authentic trains. Use of wooden bodied stock on the main-line is now ruled out, and with space at a premium, some have been released to other centres who can give them a better home. The Royal Coaches are a major problem since few other locations have the resources to keep them under-cover and in good condition. On the introductory presentation, several ideas were suggested by the audience, including, audio-visual displays alongside the ticket queues, loaned audio-tapes and headphones. The NRM has just appointed Sandra Bicknell as display manager, and she will be looking at these options. Finally, Andrew gave some details of visitor numbers. About 20% of visitors are non-UK residents with most of the remainder drawn from a very wide catchment area. It appears that the lowest numbers come from the immediate residents around York! The decline in attendance at the Museum also reflects the reduction in York as a tourist centre. In the past, as each new attraction has opened (the NRM included), York has benefited from a tourist boom. With the Jorvik centre now over 10 years old, it now seems that the city is in need of something new (or is it old!) in the heritage industry.