Major milestone passed in historic ambulance train



Expert painter Adrian Ashby carefully applies a red cross emblem to the side of a 1907 railway carriage

The transformation of a 1907 railway carriage which will be the centrepiece of a major First World War exhibition reached a milestone last week, as heritage painter Adrian Ashby painted on the iconic neutral sign of the red cross emblem, marking the completion of the exterior work.

The 2016 exhibition at York's National Railway Museum will tell the forgotten story of First World War ambulance trains, which transported the sick and injured to hospitals across Europe, the UK and beyond. The carriage will be used to recreate the atmosphere of these trains using sound, film and recreated fixtures and fittings. The exhibition also uses a rich treasure trove of archive material to explore the experiences of the millions of sick and injured men who travelled on board during the 1914-1918 conflict.

[quote=Jane Sparkes, Interpretation Developer]"The crucial role of these trains has until now been little known, but research by our curators and archivists has gradually uncovered this forgotten piece of history."[/quote]

The exhibition, supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, opens on 7 July next year to mark the centenary of the busiest day of ambulance train traffic, which occurred during the Battle of the Somme. Millions of men were brought back from the Front via these hospitals on wheels, which included fully-equipped wards, pharmacies and kitchens, were manned by resident medical officers, orderlies and nurses and could be up to a third of a mile long.

The carriage which was once owned by the Ministry of Defence, was built in 1907 for the London & South Western Railway, and is of the type which would have been converted for use in an ambulance train. The exterior painting of the carriage by the conservation team including heritage painter Adrian Ashby is now complete, marking a major milestone in its transformation.

Jane Sparkes, Interpretation Developer, said: “The crucial role of these trains has until now been little known, but research by our curators and archivists has gradually uncovered this forgotten piece of history. In our exhibition we will for the first time bring together photographs, technical drawings, letters and diaries to tell the story of the railway workers who built the trains at an incredible speed, the injured passengers who carried their memories as well as their wounds, and the staff who worked long hours to provide treatment and care. The mass casualties of the First World War called for evacuation of the injured on a scale never seen before; this evacuation simply could not have happened without ambulance trains.”

Explaining the importance of the National Railway Museum’s project to tell the story of ambulance trains and the HLF’s support, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Yorkshire and the Humber, Fiona Spiers, said: “The impact of the First World War touched every corner of the UK. The Heritage Lottery Fund has invested more than £70million in projects – large and small - that are marking this global Centenary. The National Railway Museum’s exhibition will help to investigate and share the history and stories of the railways within the First World War, enabling communities to gain a deeper understanding of the far-reaching impacts of the conflict.”

The project is also funded by Yorventure, via Yorwaste through the Landfill Communities fund. The use of the red cross emblem on the train carriage has been authorised by the British Red Cross and the UK Ministry of Defence.

For more information visit the National Railway Museum website.

Notes to editors

The National Railway Museum in York has the largest collection of railway objects in the world and attracts over 700,000 visitors per year. The collection includes over 300 locomotives and rolling stock, 628 coins and medals, 4899 pieces of railway uniform and costume, railway equipment, documents, records, artwork and railway related photographs. The museum houses a world class collection of Royal trains, which includes a collection of Royal carriages, from those used by Queen Victoria to Queen Elizabeth II. The National Railway Museum’s vast art collection comprises of 11,270 posters, 2,358 prints and drawings, 1052 paintings, and 1,750,000 photographs, many of which have never been on public display.

The National Railway Museum forms part of the Science Museum Group, along with the Science Museum in London, the Museum of Science and Industry (MOSI) in Manchester, the National Media Museum in Bradford and the National Railway Museum in Shildon. Admission to the National Railway Museum is free. For more information follow them on Twitter or Facebook.

The red cross emblem is a special sign of neutrality and protection. Its primary use is to signify military medical personnel and objects, including transports, which must be respected and protected in armed conflicts. Its use is restricted by law. Further information aboiut the Red Cross emblem is available at the British Red Cross website.

Further information

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