Historic engine back on tracks

13/10/2011

No. 461, which was built in 1922 for the Dublin and South Eastern Railway, was launched back into operation at a ceremony at Whitehead. To mark the occasion, Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) chairman Ronnie Spence drove the steam locomotive through a ceremonial tape. The engine has been re-liveried and its first operation is expected to be a Broomstick Belle Hallowe'en train from Belfast to Whitehead on Sunday 30 October 2011.

No. 461, which was presented by CIE to the RPSI in 1977, was last out on the main line in 2001 and since then has been undergoing an extensive overhaul at the RPSI's Dunleath workshops. It is the last surviving member of the Dublin and South Eastern Railway fleet and was built in 1922, operating mainly on the Dublin to Wexford and Rosslare line.

At the ceremony it was announced that a proposed £4m development project at the RPSI's Whitehead centre has taken a significant step forward. Thanks to support from HLF, the RPSI has now been able to appoint a design team to progress the scheme.

John Lockett, vice-chairman of the RPSI, said: "Our objective is to transform Whitehead into a heritage engineering centre which will become a tourist attraction in its own right.

"Among our plans are a new station building, a turntable, and to enhance and enlarge the locomotive and carriage workshops and rolling stock storage facilities as well as providing a visitor reception area."

Mr Spence said: "We are pleased to be able to offer the RPSI assistance for what we believe is a scheme with enormous potential, both in terms of heritage engineering skills and in developing Whitehead.

"The Society has achieved a lot during the past 50 years and this expansion of its centre will really put it on the map."

The project has also won backing from Carrickfergus Borough Council, GROW South Antrim and Ulster Garden Villages.

Also launched back into service today was carriage no. 68, which was one of a batch originally sent to Belfast by the LMS to replace rolling stock lost in the Belfast Blitz of 1941. With funding support from the Northern Ireland Museums Council, the coach has been restored to its former glory by the RPSI's youth team. The wooden-bodied side-corridor coach will now operate on train ride operations at Whitehead.

Lexie Scott, chairman of NIMC, said they had been delighted to be able to support the restoration project. He said: "Coach no. 68 is of particular historic merit and we are impressed by the standard of restoration work achieved by the RPSI's younger members. It bodes well for the future not just of the Society but of railway preservation in general."

Since 1964 the RPSI has been the main guardian of Ireland's railway heritage, and the sole operator of all main-line stream train operations throughout Ireland.