Railway Heritage Project Receives Lottery Boost

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HLF awarded a first-round pass* and a £165,500 development grant for the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland (RPSI) proposals which involve a major extension and upgrading of its museum, secure storage and main engineering base at Whitehead, County Antrim. Heritage engineering and operating skills will developed and passed to the next generation through the recruitment and training of an increased workforce, and partnerships will be developed with local community groups and colleges. An educational programme for schools which will link into the curriculum will be developed, along with new opportunities for visitors to learn about the railway collection through the establishment of high quality access and viewing facilities.

The announcement means that the RPSI can now progress to the second round of the application process, where they have up to two years to submit more detailed plans to secure the full £1.8m HLF grant they are seeking for the project.

The award builds upon HLF's previous investment in Northern Ireland's railway heritage, including the £450,500 grant for Downpatrick and County Down Museum which was announced in August.

Commenting on today's announcement, Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: "This project provides an excellent opportunity to secure the long term future of Ireland's railway heritage. The ambitious plans to upgrade the existing engineering facilities will conserve this important heritage for generations to come, and through the enhanced visitor experience and volunteer programmes, more people will be able to learn about the social, political and economic significance of the railways in Ireland."

The RPSI has been the leading guardian of Ireland's railway heritage since 1964 and the sole operator of all main-line stream train operations throughout Ireland. It is heavily involved in the restoration of Ireland's railway assets and owns over half of all surviving heritage stock. Its collection includes 92 locomotives, carriages, wagons and departmental vehicles which date from the 1880s to the 1980s. The museum holds many treasures of national importance including a Saloon Coach made for the company's original directors which was partially refitted for use by the Queen, and an early 20th-century tricomposite Coach which contains separate travelling sections for the upper, middle and lower classes.

The improvements to the Whitehead site include extensions to the Carriage Shed, Running Shed and Engineering Workshop. This will enable the RPSI to maintain and conserve its own collections, increase conservation work for other organisations and allow the general public to view and learn more about the restoration process. The station building, locomotive turntable and period signal box will also be restored to their former glory.

Extensive outreach and educational activities are planned to encourage people to become involved in, and learn about the heritage. More volunteers and apprentices will be recruited and trained to undertake restoration work, give talks to visitors, lead guided tours and arrange community events.

David Houston, Chairman of the RPSI, welcomed the HLF announcement and said it was a "major vote of confidence" in the society and its future.

"We are grateful to HLF for the encouragement and support the organisation has given us to date and for the close

interest its officials have taken in our activities.

“Securing this development grant is a major step forward for the RPSI and the funding will enable us to commission more detailed business plans for the £3.2m redevelopment of our headquarters at Whitehead.

“Since we set up shop at Whitehead in 1966, we have always believed there was tremendous scope for expanding our heritage engineering centre, where we store, maintain and overhaul our historic steam locomotives and carriages.

“We are proud of what we have achieved but this support will enable us to take a crucial step towards developing a project which will move the Society onto a new level.

“Now that we have got the green light from HLF, we will be actively progressing our plans so that we can submit detailed plans for the full £1.8m HLF grant for which we have made application.

“The scheme encompasses extensions to the existing locomotive workshop and carriage shed, along with the provision of a new carriage works, a turntable and a signal cabin.

“This will enable us to create further employment opportunities at Whitehead and preserve heritage engineering skills, for the benefit of the community at large as well as for the restoration and maintenance of the RPSI collection.

“In addition, we intend to exploit the educational and interpretative potential of RPSI Whitehead by providing, for the first time, purpose-built visitor facilities.”

Mr Houston said such a project would enable the RPSI to increase the number of mainline steam trains it operates, and would boost the tourist potential of Whitehead.

With the co-operation of Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnrod Eireann, the Society operates an annual programme of public steam train trips throughout Ireland.

For more information about HLF's grants programmes or call 028 9031 0120.

Notes to editors

* A first-round pass means the project meets our criteria for funding and we believe it has potential to deliver high-quality benefits and value for Lottery money. The application was in competition with other supportable projects, so a first-round pass is an endorsement of outline proposals. Having been awarded a first-round pass, the project now has up to two years to submit fully developed proposals to compete for a firm award.

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage.

Since 1994 the Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £135 million to projects across Northern Ireland.