

# Celebrating heritage railways in the UK

July 26, 2021



A six-week nationwide campaign has been launched to shine a spotlight on not only the important work heritage railways do with regards to conservation, education and research, but also highlight how they have all been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of reduced capacities and income.

‘Love Your Railway’ is being spearheaded by the North Yorkshire Moors Railway, collaborating with over 35 other heritage railway organisations from as far afield as Cornwall, Suffolk, North Wales, North East Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Among those backing the campaign is Dick Wood, a member of both the [South Devon Railway \(SDR\)](#) and [West Somerset Railway \(WSR\)](#). He joined the Dart Valley Railway Association in 1971. He has been a volunteer and supporter of the SDR for 50 years, as well as a driver and long-serving volunteer on the WSR, and also worked for the Tyne & Wear PTE and underground Metro system in and around Newcastle.

“It has been a lifetime’s love and work, one that is extremely enjoyable and satisfying and one in which the good days have outweighed the bad ones,” he said, reflecting on his railway career.

“My late grandfather was a railwayman. He was a permanent way ganger in the north west of England in a little town called Millom but which once had a massive iron and steel set up in Cumbria.

"I remember saying to my late parents when I was a little boy that I wanted to be an engine driver. They both said 'no, no, no' then, but when I was a child that was all I wanted to be, so I got my way in the end and my Mum saw me drive steam engines on the WSR and SDR."

There are more than 150 operational heritage railways, running trains over nearly 600 miles of track, which protect, conserve and

bring to life part of the nation's rich cultural heritage – giving enjoyment and learning to thousands of people every year.

But life has been particularly tough for heritage railways during the pandemic. Services were decimated for large parts, without any services running in between lockdowns, or doing so with reduced capacity.

"It has been tough and a real battle quite frankly," said Dick, reflecting on business before trains started back up again in May this year. "The last SDR steam trains ran virtually empty on Tuesday 17th March 2020 just ahead of the first lockdown. This dramatic change came straight after a very popular weekend SDR steam gala event.

"I don't think any of us could have predicted what was going to happen following the announcement of the first lockdown, and that applied universally. In fact, the only certainty of the last year has been uncertainty."

The closure is the longest period the former Great Western Railway branch line has been closed in its 52-year history. The pandemic has hit heritage railways hard. SDR alone has revealed that just 1,750 passengers travelled on the line in 2020 compared to 83,527 in 2019 – a staggering drop of 98 per cent. It's led to around a £2 million reduction in overall revenue. The WSR fared similarly but with bigger figures as the longer line.

But in true heritage railway style, the dedicated and passionate staff and friends have rallied round to save the seven-mile stretch of the SDR which was built in 1872, re-opening as a tourist railway in 1969 following closure by British Railways in 1962.

Around £1.3 million has been raised through a combination of grants from government, local councils and SOS appeals with people from far and wide donating to help the railway through the most challenging of times.

Dick, who is also Chairman of Devon Association of Tourist Attractions (DATA), said: "To take that level of financial hit is significant. The only bit of our business that has carried on is the engineering side. We have a contract engineering business operating from the workshop, and we supply and fit tyres on heritage locomotives, some coaching stock and also to some train operating company locomotives, plus contract boiler works too.

"Across the railway large numbers of staff were inevitably furloughed and that has obviously had an effect on the ability to do certain tasks, such as routine maintenance. Taking a £2 million hit is pretty bad for business, but luckily we've been able to generate £1.3 million thus far which has been really good and

helped save us so far.

“There has been an outpouring of support from members of the public. People do love heritage railways and I think it is because a sufficient number of people remember steam trains running, or are at least familiar with them, and they are a much loved and prized part of our nation’s heritage.”

The nationwide ‘Love Your Railway’ campaign includes six themed weeks – Heritage, Education, Volunteers, Family, Sustainability and Future.

SDR Trust Chairman Jon Morton said: “We’re delighted to support the laudable ‘Love Your Railway’ campaign to highlight the work that heritage lines all over the country do to conserve, protect, promote, entertain and educate people about Britain’s rich 200-year railway history and culture.

“Heritage railways in the South West, and across the country, have all had a rotten time during the COVID-19 pandemic with restricted operations and mounting financial losses, so we need people to visit us now like never before just to survive and keep the wheels turning.

Click [here South Devon Railway \(SDR\)](#) and [here for more details about West Somerset Railway \(WSR\)](#).

*Photo credit: Colin Wallace*