

Midlands Volunteers for the Railways Praised for their Innovation

December 2, 2022



Lord Digby Jones of Birmingham has praised Midlands-based volunteers for their community work along one of the region's well-known railway routes. The Friends of the Shakespeare Line (FoSL) are a group of 80 volunteers who help to upgrade every railway station on the Shakespeare Line between Birmingham and Stratford upon Avon.

Lord Jones, who is Patron of FoSL, a Community Station Partnership, has highlighted in particular the group's work in helping to facilitate the first railway-based vocational qualification anywhere in the United Kingdom. Woodrush Academy arranged for a group across their Years 7-13 students to be enlisted by West Midlands Railway as station volunteers to landscape the grounds and display student artwork at nearby Wythall railway station. The Academy are now offering a City & Guilds vocational qualification, through the alternative curriculum, to the enthused and talented students engaged in the volunteer works.

Lord Jones said: "I am passionate about young people having every chance and opportunity to make a decent life for themselves. That's why I strongly support any means that enable modern apprenticeships, vocational training and qualification for those students that do not wish to pursue wholly academic or university studies. I am reliably informed that there will likely be more exciting developments for students

and the railway in the forthcoming year too, so I look forward to learning about that.”

The praise came as the volunteer group’s Annual Report for 2022 was published. The report sets out an impressive number of achievements for a voluntarily managed organisation formed at the height of the Covid Pandemic. Bringing some twenty communities together between Stratford upon Avon and the heart of Birmingham, Friends of the Shakespeare Line help install planters & arts displays on the platform areas and develop a green corridor all the way down the line at the 22 stations involved.

Jay Barber, Headteacher at Woodrush High School, Wythall said: “The train station project has been a jewel in the crown for Woodrush’s community curriculum over the past year. It is a rare thing to have enriching out-of-school learning opportunities for students outside of health or early years education settings. The partnership between The Friends of the Shakespeare Line, West Midlands Trains and Woodrush High School has forged an innovative collaborative that is making a real difference to local people and is inspiring and empowering our young people to be proud, active and enterprising stakeholders in their local railway.”

A significant renovation project, led by volunteers, has been launched at Henley in Arden station and the programme will see the original 1908 Great Western Railway station building, which has been empty and boarded up for two decades, renovated and repurposed as a community enterprise facility and visitor attraction. The Annual Report also outlines the breath-taking level of activity that has taken place over the past twelve months, the works have included every station being adorned with red, white and blue planting and unique celebratory Platinum Jubilee banners. In addition, the volunteers along the Shakespeare Line collaborated with Network Rail to use their skills and energies to bring summer planting to the frontage of Birmingham’s New Street station.

Denise Wetton, Director of Central Route at Network Rail, said: “Our rail stations are absolutely vital in making the network a brighter and inviting place, and I’m so pleased to have seen our relationship with the Friends of the Shakespeare line go from strength to strength over the past year. The group and the volunteers have made such a huge impact on our stations between Birmingham and Stratford upon Avon and beyond – in particular ahead of the Commonwealth Games and the Queen’s Platinum Jubilee.”

The CSP has also worked on many economic and social regeneration projects, including programmes to support inner-city communities classed within the top 10% of the most socially deprived areas of the UK. The group are also supporting the local communities at Small Heath and Sparkbrook by working with West Midlands railway stakeholders to lobby for step-free access at Small Heath & Sparkbrook station. Such a facility would unlock a high level of latent demand for the rail services and support the communities to access jobs and training opportunities along the line in Birmingham.

The energies and abilities of this small army of volunteers were also put to excellent use in June when the group were asked to help create a makeover at Birmingham’s Moor Street station ahead of the Commonwealth Games. The result was a stunning display of a dozen super-size planters and innovative daycation posters encouraging people to visit local station destinations and bring passengers to the railways and support the local economy.

The group says its aims are simple, “It’s all about the passengers, improving the quality of their journeys

and highlighting to them, the train's environmental benefit. The overall aim is to bring the railway closer to the people it serves and help make train travel a great customer experience, positively encouraging modal shift."

Plans for 2023 are already in place that will see a community and visitor information facility at Stratford upon Avon, a community facility at Wythall, and landscaping and structural improvements elsewhere at many stations along the line. Key rail and transport industry stakeholders have added their commendations for the results achieved and the thousands of hours the volunteers give to the rail industry to help encourage people to use the train.

Malcolm Holmes Executive Director of West Midlands Rail Executive said: "This year I have witnessed the exceptional quality posters at Small Heath and Birmingham Moor Street, and seen incredible work at Wythall by the young adopters there. All of those, and many more schemes across The Shakespeare Line are making a real difference to passengers, rail staff and local communities. In these challenging times it makes the work of rail community volunteers ever more important, bringing brightness to lives, stations and communities all along the line."

The Cabinet Member for Transport on Birmingham City Council added: "The imaginative artwork installed at Small Heath & Sparkbrook station and similar plans for Tyseley station are significant steps towards attracting more people to the train in those areas. The work of the voluntarily managed and operated Community Station Partnership, known as the Friends of Shakespeare Line, has been a catalyst by unlocking communication channels and getting real engagement between local communities and the railway."

Jonny Wiseman, Customer Experience Director at train operator West Midlands Trains, said: "I have been inspired to see so many students producing artwork for the station and getting involved in planting, watering and litter picking.

"At a time when anti-social behaviour is increasing, and we face difficult economic times, this relationship with young people is all the more positive. Not only does this relationship clearly benefit the local community and those that use the railway, but it also benefits those young people by providing them with transferable skills in communications, enterprise, horticulture and customer service. Work has already begun developing a City & Guilds qualification based on station adoption aimed at students' special educational needs, a project funded through the West Midlands Trains Customer and Community Improvement Fund (CCIF)."

Geoff Grant, Stakeholder Manager for Transport Focus adds: "I have seen first-hand the outstanding work that The Friends of The Shakespeare Line (FoSL) have been integral to delivering over the last year. Every project FoSL engages in benefits from boundless enthusiasm, energy, and innovation, which could not be further removed from the traditional view of what community rail is. Whether working in central Birmingham or a more rural setting, on a large project like the Commonwealth Games or at a local station, three things consistently shine through:

- A passion for rail and for growing use of, and access to the railway by passengers

- A sense of community that is an exemplar to others
- A rare combination of energy, passion and commitment balanced by entrepreneurial flair and business acumen”

Fraser Pithie is the Chair of Friends of the Shakespeare Line group, commenting on the volunteers and the year he said: “We could not have envisaged the scale of the innovation and commitment we have unlocked through the relationships we have brokered. As you read this second Annual Report, you will see the strength and depth of the outputs that volunteering has and is delivering. We have shown that the private sector can and will wholly or part fund and support soundly based and sustainable improved community facilities and importantly partner with the railway.

“What is especially rewarding is that FoSL has been and remains an agent of social value and improvement. FoSL has shown what can be achieved and crucially how it can be delivered with a Value for Money approach that is a highly efficient model that currently cannot be surpassed. We are determined to ensure that the most socially disadvantaged communities along part of the Shakespeare Line, within the inner city of Birmingham, are equally included and get the opportunities and chances that more affluent suburban and rural areas already enjoy.”

Photo credit: Mark Williamson