

The UK's National Railway Museum

Steve Davies MBE

Introduction

It is a little while since my predecessor, Andrew Scott CBE, wrote an article on developments and philosophy at the National Railway Museum (NRM), and I therefore welcome this opportunity to contribute a short thesis on the current situation at York. It also gives me the chance to explain some of my own thinking on how we are to take forward this amazing institution, and to provide some detail on our plans for the next 5+ years.

Against this background, many will recognize that the NRM, like many other railway museums around the world, finds itself in the midst of fundamental change. A challenging national economic situation cannot be ignored. But this does not mean that we must limit our ambitions and indeed money will always be available for stunningly exciting projects that capture the imagination of our public. So, from that clear start-point, we must look beyond the immediate challenges that the economic situation might bring, towards the development of a museum supremely well placed to compete for the attentions of an increasingly discerning audience.

The UK government pursues an enlightened policy of supporting free access to national museums. Free entry, however, is no longer the panacea it might once have been, despite economic uncertainty. The public has a choice. A fundamental desire to be stimulated, educated, engaged, entertained, and excited, often collectively as a family, will feature highly in deciding how they spend their leisure time—and their money. The salient point here is that the NRM of the future must position itself at the very high quality end of the visitor-experience spectrum. This is not just about galleries, bricks and mortar. It is about the whole experience, in-museum and online, from initial awareness, through enquiry, arrival, experience, eating and shopping, underpinned with positive personal engagement with the collections and our staff, all resulting in high levels of personal giving and spend, repeat visits and recommendations to friends. We must give our staff the tools to do the job, and a museum they are proud to be a part of.

NRM Mission, Vision and Brand Values

The NRM needs to bring greater focus and substance to our relationship with the contemporary and future railway story. We tell the story of the past well; we must get better at engaging with the present and the future. This sits naturally and comfortably with existing broader museum objectives, and provides the firm *what's-in-it-for-them* basis for a successful and collaborative, financial and sponsorship relationship with the modern rail industry.

At any one time, a single railway museum somewhere in the world lays legitimate claim to being the premier establishment amongst its peers. In this context, 'premier' means the museum with the best *balance* of offer, given that no single railway museum is likely to be able to claim that *everything* it has on offer is the world's best. The NRM is quite rightly viewed as an excellent institution by many in Japan, but we cannot allow ourselves to become complacent if we are to lay legitimate claim to have achieved, on balance, world premier status. We must not be too proud to learn from our international partners, and it is noteworthy that the NRM derives much inspiration from its Japanese colleagues. But we know what we have to do, and our plans will get us there. And it is worth emphasising at this point that when we discuss the NRM we mean both at York *and* Shildon. A little appreciated fact outside the UK is that we are in fact two museums. *Locomotion* is the NRM at the historic railway town of Shildon, inextricably linked with the Stockton & Darlington Railway of 1825, and of course the famous early railway engineer, Timothy Hackworth (1786–1850).

The above analysis therefore gives context to the NRM's new mission and vision summarized below:

Mission:

A museum that enables people to explore the story of railways and of how they fit into that story. Through life enhancing experiences, the visitor will gain greater appreciation of railways as a form of transport through an exciting, educational and memorable series of complementary galleries, interactive, web and learning experiences, telling the story of railways past, present and future.

Vision:

The NRM will become the world's premier, most exciting railway museum, achieving national and international acclaim, and a must-visit reputation.

Therefore, we can see that our combined mission and vision provide a crisp, clear, focused and *achievable* set of guidelines for our future journey, hand-in-glove with the simple yet effective Brand Essence and Values. The latter are critically important to the way we shape our business, and for completeness they are reproduced below:

NRM Brand Essence:

Connecting Generations – connecting generations through the wonderful stories of railways and how they shape our world.

NRM Brand Values:

- **Exploring**—we don't just 'tell', we let you explore the story of Railways, immersing you in a journey through the past, present and future.
- **Confident Fun**—you will learn many fascinating things about railways and we always start from the principle that learning should be fun for all our visitors.
- **Drive**—railways don't stand still and neither do we. We move with the times to bring you new insights into the world of railways.
- **Make it Live**—we bring railways to life, setting all our railway stories in the wider context of people's lives.
- **Big Wows, Little Wows**—we'll wow you with the big stories and the little stories of the railways in big and little ways.
- **Custodianship**—we actively preserve both our collection and knowledge to ensure we remain one of the world's leading authorities on railways, and act as a connection between past, present and future generations.

Our Philosophy

A key thread to note in our mission and vision, and brand essence and values, is the emphasis on past, present and future. We have, I believe, a part to play in *promoting* railways, and our audience should at the very least gain a greater appreciation of railways as an efficient form of transport. This is a central pillar in promoting a relationship with the contemporary railway industry. Guided by a clear understanding of our audiences, we must also ensure that our collections tell coherent and compelling *stories*, that they are visually stunning, engage the mind, and are fundamentally entertaining. In this respect, we must focus on the family audience, and also overcome any sense that

we are a 'static' attraction. An operational experience—both live and simulated—is therefore a key element of our strategy. We must also meet people's expectations about where, when, and how they want to connect with our collections and stories—making full use of web, mobile, and other emerging technologies to extend our reach, capture new audiences and engage them in new ways. The focus on the family audience and the exciting interaction of our visitors with our collections must not, though, be allowed to undermine the fact that we are a serious museum with equally serious purpose as guardian of our nation's priceless railway heritage and knowledge. In other words, everything we undertake must not upset or offend the fundamental dignity of our purpose.

So Where Are We Going?

A number of developmental threads will shape our business over the coming years. Some are a natural consequence of our audience research; some reflect business-in-hand; others are a product of the Director's well-trailed personal judgment in determining how we are going to achieve enhanced national and international acclaim. Collectively, they amount to a vision of a museum that gives the public genuine choice in deciding how to spend its leisure time, offering a broad range of activities, a genuine family experience, an experience that extends well beyond the physical visit via the web, and a reputation for academic, intellectual, and cultural excellence. The individual policy objectives designed to help shape our journey to those goals are outlined below. Every department in our museum is involved in delivering a range of cultural programmes for all of our audiences—exhibitions, events, talks, tours, workshops, shows, etc. We must exploit the full synergy that comes from working together to exploit the expertise of our learning, cultural planning, and exhibition teams. The Cultural Planning Group within the NRM ensures that coordination takes place across all departments, but we must nevertheless strive to identify ever better ways of delivering a programme that fully incorporates, and takes into account, the needs and contribution of all departments, and—significantly—the needs of our audiences. Key to this is the articulation of our cultural programme many years ahead so that planning is structured and timely, and not short term or reactive.

Simulation

Simulation and digital interpretation must be a feature of our future offer. We have already begun a dialogue with Japanese counterparts, including Mr Araki at The Railway Museum in Omiya, Japan, with a view to developing a steam locomotive

driving simulator, the eye-catching central feature of a driver experience gallery that will also include modern traction driving simulators. There would be a commercial return on this investment. In addition, we seek to better interpret the sectioned Pacific Merchant Navy Class locomotive *Ellerman Lines*. This unit is the product of an earlier technological age (sectioned in the early 1970s) and requires interpretation by explainers to bring it to life for a modern, non-expert, audience. Digital projection methods, perhaps including modern audiovisual technology, will be investigated to bring this important feature up to today's standards.

Railway Operations

The NRM will continue to play a full part in main-line operations, both steam, diesel and, potentially, electric. But this will only occur when we know we have a sound business case, and that the NRM is in a position to reap full credit for what it does. This means that we will increasingly focus on locomotives that have unique appeal, in order not to

duplicate already crowded markets (the UK main-line steam operation is very busy). The South Yard operational location will feature in our future ambition to allow the public closer access to the spectacle of locomotive servicing. We will also continue to loan locomotives for operation on preserved railways, but under increasingly tight contractual conditions to ensure that engines are not irreversibly damaged during the period of loan. We will also further develop the standard-gauge train ride experience, and introduce a new 2-ft, narrow-gauge track, as described in the section on South Yard. We will also maintain a miniature railway.

Engineering and Conservation Capacity

We have developed an outstanding engineering and conservation facility, whose capacity has been recently enhanced to ensure the successful on-time delivery of *Flying Scotsman*. It is our intention to maintain this capacity, and to move on to other projects beyond *Flying Scotsman's* completion. Our engineering facility must be



A3 Class Pacific steam locomotive *Flying Scotsman* at its formal public unveiling

(NRM)

justified primarily on the basis of the statutory responsibility placed upon us to maintain the National Collection in good condition—preserved railways have a choice in this respect; the NRM does not.

Academic

We are guardians of the nation's priceless railway collections and knowledge. There is therefore very serious purpose to what we do, and we already give unparalleled access opportunity to the general public and specialist alike in a number of ways; the *Search Engine* archive retrieval facility is notable in this respect. We also promote academic understanding of railway history through our partnership with York University. The Institute of Railway Studies and Transport History (IRS & TH) delivers high-quality academic and research facilities, and is an integral element of everything that we do. It also has a major role in singling out the NRM for special recognition internationally. Two policy strands must therefore be pursued: first, we will ensure that the IRS & TH

is absolutely central to everything the NRM does, including being in at the very beginning of all project and event planning, in order to help underpin accuracy and interpretation, and to ensure intellectual rigour in the face of very discerning academic audiences; second, we will work hard to develop its national and international reputation.

Loans and Partnerships

Traditionally, we loan items and rolling stock from our collections both in recognition of the lack of display space available at NRM sites, and as an active element of outreach objectives. If one considers the NRM to be as much a national and international concept as it is a fixed geographical location, then it is in our continuing interest to reach out to a broader audience through an active loans policy. However, we must do this in a way that achieves public recognition for the NRM given, for example, that many people travel behind one of our engines on a preserved line but have absolutely no idea that it is in the National Collection. We currently



Duchess Class streamlined Pacific steam locomotive *Duchess of Hamilton*

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have 43 locomotives on loan at 21 locations, the majority being a single unit. Four locations have four or more of our engines, and are thus better placed to give us the brand recognition we deserve. Therefore, it is our objective over time to reduce the number of loan locations, but to increase the number of units placed with those partners we continue to do business with, thus enabling greater NRM recognition opportunities. This will be achieved in a carefully managed way, with redistribution coinciding, where possible, with the end of existing loan agreements. In a small number of cases, we will develop particularly strong partnerships, and seek to establish formal footprints across a broad range of locations further to spread the NRM brand. As described earlier, we will continue to engage in main-line operations. This is an excellent way of contextually interpreting the operational prowess and history of the principal members of our fleet. However, we must recognize that access to the main line may one day cease or become prohibitively expensive to maintain. This may be an unduly pessimistic outlook, but we must nevertheless, in my judgment, consider alternatives to the main line to allow a number of our locomotives to operate in an appropriate setting, context, and at realistic speeds.

Finally, on partnerships, we should be clear about the enduring strength of our association with the Friends of the National Railway Museum (FNRM), the support group of some 2000 members who actively support the NRM. Given the NRM's subject matter, ours is an especially close friendship, born of mutual trust and respect, and a significant record of support to the Museum. In fact, the depth and breadth of our relationship is possibly unique within the UK museum sector. We will therefore ensure that FNRM are appropriately integrated into the business of the NRM and are enabled to make their voice heard, so that they might make fully informed investment decisions, and that they may act as ambassadors on our behalf.

International Relations

As the country that gave the railway to the world, I need hardly reinforce the point that we deserve a strong international profile. This will be fostered through reputation, as well as the active pursuit of international policy objectives, the principal one being the development of formal relations with a number of our international contemporaries. We are in great demand to be associated with a significant number of museums and preserved railway operations across the world, but we must be particularly focused on limiting the number of partners with whom we develop relationships in depth. Japan features highly on our list of priorities. It is my intention that a broad range of staff should be engaged with such international partners, and that this does not become viewed as the privilege of senior management. There is

much we can learn practically from each other in our quest to become the world's premier railway museum, and we should not be afraid or too proud to adopt some techniques we find elsewhere.

NRM Site Developments

Planning for the refreshment of Station Hall, a former freight warehouse displaying trains in an authentic station setting, is ongoing. The Royal Trains will receive greater prominence, potentially through re-positioning of the display, and the opportunity will be taken to improve visitor flow paths and vistas. Station Hall will be developed with the intention of providing an even better main-line station feel and experience. We will ensure that the space is optimized for events and commercial gain. This work is intended to ensure that Station Hall does not require additional attention for at least 5 years.

South Yard is a major external space and deserves a significant facelift and we now have an opportunity to generate something operationally spectacular. The Great Hall has had much alteration and modification since it closed as an operational steam locomotive servicing shed in 1967 and this makes it difficult to interpret it as a former engine shed. Add to that the observation that we are viewed as 'static', and the opportunity therefore presents itself to develop a major operational feature in South Yard. Illustrative designs and artist's impressions are at an advanced stage which will see the following elements potentially contribute to a major family and enthusiast-focused experience:

- A half roundhouse, served by a brand new turntable, potentially incorporating tiered seating. This facility will enable close access to our operational fleet of locomotives, and those visiting for service. It will provide support facilities for main-line operations. The seating feature would enable shows—science, railway and theatrical performance—to be conducted in conjunction with regional and city partners. This would be the principal central feature of the South Yard development.
- Station Hall would be rail-served by a new traverser that can be demonstrated to visitors.
- A closed-loop, 2-ft narrow gauge railway, some 900-m long, would provide an exciting large-scale ride. This could be operated by 'guest' engines, such as from the Welsh Highland/Ffestiniog Railway.
- An extended standard-gauge ride, potentially reaching to the main-line connection with the East Coast Main Line. A new station would be required. This line would have to be capable of handling main-line rail tours.
- Exciting public realm spaces, and play areas.
- Commercial, retail, and hotel facilities.



Series 0 Shinkansen in Japanese Railway Exhibition in Great Hall

(NRM)

Such a development will need to have a major commercial focus, but its achievement will undoubtedly be a major complementary element to our offer, and would give us a real competitive edge within the leisure sector. It would also expunge what is currently a grim post-industrial eyesore in favour of a high-quality experience, in keeping with where we want to be.

Summary

The NRM highly values its partnerships and sisterhoods with Japan, and I feel it important that your readers have a broad understanding of where we are going over the next 5+ years. Last year marked the 10th anniversary of our sisterhood with JR West, and of course this year marks the 10th anniversary of the arrival of the Series 0 shinkansen at the NRM. It is therefore doubly fitting that I extend the NRM's warmest and most sincere greetings to its Japanese friends and we look forward to a further period of prosperous partnership. ■



Steve Davies MBE

Mr Steve Davies was appointed Director NRM in February 2010. He previously enjoyed a distinguished 33 year military career achieving the rank of full Colonel. A lifelong railway enthusiast, among his many achievements was the establishment of the Sierra Leone National Railway Museum whilst engaged in military duties in West Africa.