

The next platform to arrive at a train will be...

MAGHERAFELT may no longer have its railways but that does not mean it hasn't played its part in keeping the memory of them alive.

For some far-sighted individuals at the town's Roads Service Depot, formerly the town's railway station complex, went to great lengths to conserve the surface tiles from the station's platform when they were re-surfacing it with tarmac.

The tiles are about 8 inches by 4 and contain a distinctive non-slip diamond pattern, once seen covering platforms throughout the Northern Counties Railway System. Upon removal from the platform where they had sat for over 100 years unblemished by time, luggage barrows or hard soled clogs, the tiles were placed on pallets for storage.

Along with Magherafelt, the Northern Counties Railway also served the town of Whitehead in County Antrim, which had both a mainline station and a separate platform for excursion trains full of tourists.

Today this Whitehead Excursion Station is the engineering base of the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland (RPSI) who run mainline steam trains from Belfast, Dublin and other towns on the railway system.

The RPSI has long-term aims of improving its site and has been on the lookout for ways to improve the platform area in particular.

When Des McFarlane of the Roads Service Depot in

Magherafelt got in touch with the RPSI to seek a home for the tiles they were only too keen and last Friday the tiles were delivered to Whitehead.

Said Mark Walsh, a volunteer and Council Officer of the RPSI: "These tiles are just the sort of thing we're looking for. They are authentic and of the exact type passengers to Whitehead Excursion Station would once have stepped off trains onto. Most would never have noticed such a small detail as they rushed off to begin their holidays in the Glens of Antrim - but when we install these tiles it will add a small piece of atmosphere to our site which has been missing for many years."

Des McFarlane was pleased that the tiles had made it safely to the RPSI site: "When we (Roads Service) decided to re-surface the old platform in our yard it was with regret that we had to remove these tiles.

"We made sure they were carefully stored on pallets and contacted the RPSI. It is nice to know they have gone to a good home.

For those in Mid-Ulster who fancy sampling the delights of mainline steam travel a good opportunity will be the RPSI's 'Ballymena Santa', which will operate from Ballymena to Antrim on Saturday December 1, with children getting a present from Santa.

Details of this run can be found on the RPSI's web-site at www.steamtrainsireland.com



Mark Walsh of the RPSI holds up some of the tiles kindly donated by the Roads Service in Magherafelt, to the door of a coach that once served that town. Coach Number 68 is now under restoration at Whitehead. MM39 505con

FACTFILE:

Magherafelt was owned by the London, Midland and Scottish Railway, but governed by their Northern Counties Committee. For this reason the Company's title was mostly abbreviated to LMS (NCC) or simply NCC.

Until 1950 trains from Magherafelt could go in any of four directions - to Belfast, Coleraine, Cookstown or Draperstown.

In 1949 the Ulster Transport Authority (UTA) took over control of Northern Ireland's railways. Under them the railway system was drastically reduced and the passenger service to Magherafelt stopped in 1950 and the goods service in 1959.

The Railway Preservation Society of Ireland (RPSI) was set up in 1964 to preserve Ireland's Railway Heritage and keep steam trains running on the mainline.