

Carrickfergus Borough Council - Press Release (30th January 2007)

CARRICKFERGUS COUNCIL AND RAILWAY PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF IRELAND SIGN TERMS TO ENABLE SOCIETY TO ACQUIRE THE LAND ON WHICH ITS HEADQUARTERS IS LOCATED AT WHITEHEAD

It was full steam ahead today for the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland after the Society agreed terms with Carrickfergus Borough Council for the acquisition of the land upon which its headquarters at Whitehead is located.

For the past 40 years, the Society has rented Whitehead Excursion Station from Carrickfergus Council on a long-term lease but now an agreement has been signed to enable the RPSI to buy out its lease for £50,000.

The move means that the RPSI, a registered charity which has 1,000 members, is to become the owner-occupier of its three-acre site, which includes maintenance workshops, storage sheds, coal bunkers, track, platform and sidings.

RPSI chairman Johnny Glendinning said the agreement represented a further milestone for the Society, which now owns 12 historic steam engines and a fleet of more than 30 carriages.

“This agreement gives us security of tenure which is important as we make plans to expand our range of activities at Whitehead and develop the tourist potential of our headquarters,” he said.

“We are grateful to Carrickfergus Council and its predecessor Whitehead Council for their encouragement to us since we arrived in Whitehead in 1966.

“We appreciate the fact that Carrickfergus Council has been able to accommodate our application to buy out our lease and I would also like to record our gratitude to RPSI member Peter Montgomery who has helped to provide the financial support we needed to complete the transaction.

“When the Society first took up residence at Whitehead, the old engine shed was derelict and the sidings were overgrown with weeds, but crucially the excursion platform was connected to the Larne railway line.

“Deciding to locate at Whitehead was something of an act of faith by the founding fathers of the Society, but it has proved to be a prudent and far-sighted choice.

“Over the years the Society’s members have toiled hard to develop the buildings and trackwork, and have devoted countless hours of their free time to keep Ireland’s steam train heritage alive.

“The Society has also invested heavily in new buildings over the years and as a result, we now have a fully-equipped workshop with heavy-lift facilities where we can carry out overhauls of our steam engines.

“The site also includes two engine sheds and a carriage shed in which we can keep our steam locomotives and rolling stock protected from the weather. At Whitehead, we now have a steam locomotive restoration centre which is unique in Ireland.

Alderman Hilditch said Carrick Council had been delighted to be able to facilitate the Society in its work to preserve and operate historic steam trains.

He said: “The RPSI has long added to our tourist offering in the Carrick area and I am pleased by the way in which the Society has flourished over the years. I look forward to seeing the Society going from strength to strength at Whitehead.”

“Its activities, which range from the Easter Bunny train rides to the Portrush Flyer and the summer train rides at Whitehead, are already proving to be a popular attraction and are bringing many extra visitors to the area each year.”

Mr Glendinning said the Society was looking forward to a busy year in 2007 and paid tribute to Northern Ireland Railways and Iarnród Éireann for facilitating the Society’s activities and for providing professional crews to operate the steam trains.