

RPSI PRESS RELEASE (14th March 2013)

Plans by the Railway Preservation Society of Ireland to develop its Whitehead base as a major tourist and heritage centre today took a significant step forward.

The Whitehead 2020 project has received offers of funding amounting to £2.4m from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and GROW South Antrim.

HLF is committing £1.6m to the scheme, while £800,000 is being provided by GROW (Generating Rural Opportunities Within South Antrim) through the Northern Ireland Rural Development Programme.

Head of HLF Northern Ireland, Paul Mullan, said: "This project will secure the railway heritage in Ireland for generations by enhancing the conservation and engineering facilities at the RPSI's accredited Museum in Whitehead.

"The improved visitor facilities will draw more people into the Whitehead area to view and learn about our railway heritage.

"An extensive programme of interpretation, education and events will be delivered including additional mainline excursions on new routes, living history and themed days and a schools programme.

"Guided and self-guided tours of the Whitehead site and railway workshop will be offered and opportunities for volunteers to get involved in the project will also be created."

The project will major on the RPSI's collection which includes 10 steam locomotives along with historic carriages and wagons formerly used on railway systems throughout Ireland from the 1880s to the 1980s.

Denis Grimshaw, the RPSI vice-chairman, welcomed news of the funding boost, saying that it was a "red-letter day" for the Society.

He said: "We are tremendously grateful for the commitment that HLF and GROW are making to this landmark project.

"We are in the final stages of negotiations to secure a further major grant to complete our funding requirements, and we hope to have everything in place within the next few weeks."

Mr Grimshaw said the project would transform RPSI Whitehead from an industrial workshop and storage facility into a national railway museum and major tourist attraction.

He said: "Our aim is to create further employment, including apprenticeships, and promote the passing on of valuable industrial heritage skills to the next generation.

"We hope to start work early next year and complete the project by the end of 2014, which means it will be the focal point of celebrations to mark the 50th anniversary of the establishment in 1964 of the RPSI.

"This funding will go towards vastly enhanced visitor facilities including a small exhibits museum, a workshop viewing gallery, a historic carriage exhibition building, interactive displays, an extension to our workshops and a locomotive turntable."

Mr Grimshaw said the development would put Whitehead on the map not just for the railway enthusiast fraternity but also for wider tourist market.

"Whitehead is already the only operational mainline steam depot in Ireland, and this working museum and heritage centre will complement the important static display at the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Cultra.

"Visitors to our centre will be able to see engines and carriages undergoing restoration - as well as taking a trip on our steam trains from Whitehead to destinations such as Portrush, Bangor and Dublin.

"This ground-breaking development will complement a £269,000 station building which was mainly funded by GROW and which is approaching completion on our platform at Whitehead. The station will include a café and other visitor facilities.

The RPSI boasts the largest historic railway collection anywhere in Ireland. Its workshop facilities, which visitors will be able to see in action, include an overhead transporter crane, heavy-lift sheer-leg cranes, a huge lathe for re-profiling locomotive wheels and a jobbing foundry.

Whitehead Development page: http://www.steamtrainsireland.com/whitehead_2020

Footnote

DUBLIN 2020

The recent HLF and GROW announcements show what can be done when a group of concerned local enthusiasts get together to bring their minds to bear on the problem of future developments and how to fund them.

There is currently such a problem in Dublin, and the matter of identifying and funding facilities there for our carriages and locomotives is such that not finding a solution could seriously threaten our activities in that area.

So, it can be done - we just need the concerned local enthusiasts to step forward and grasp the nettle! And, there will be plenty of advice available from those who have already done it.

