



RPSI 50

Robin Morton, convenor of the RPSI 50 Committee, gave an update to the members present at the AGM on the plans to mark the Society's golden jubilee in 2014.

Robin Morton reminded members that the RPSI had been founded at a meeting at the Presbyterian Hostel in Belfast on 30th September 1964. The RPSI Board, he said, had invited him to form a sub-committee to make plans to mark the Society's 50th Anniversary and under the chairmanship of Derek Young, they had been meeting monthly since September 2013. The membership comprised Dr Joan Smyth, Denis Grimshaw, John Lockett, Phil Lockett, Mark Walsh, Sullivan Boomer, Charles Friel, Joe McKeown, Mervyn Darragh and Dermot Mackie, as well as Derek Young and himself.

He noted that a number of the founder members who were present at that inaugural meeting, himself included, remained active in the Society. The RPSI had celebrated its 20th, 30th and 40th anniversaries but the 50th promised to be something special. He said the committee was recommending that all RPSI activities during the year should be branded as RPSI 50 events.

A special RPSI logo had been designed and this would be replicated on headboards which would, it was hoped, be carried by all the Society's trains during the course of 2014. As a first step, lapel badges featuring the yellow and red "RPSI 50" logo had been produced and these were now on sale at £2 a time (from the usual Sales address). It was hoped that members would wear these badges with pride during the year.

Robin Morton said that the celebration was designed to embrace the members. He said it was very much the Society's own celebration, a chance to reflect on the achievements to date and also to look to the future. The RPSI 50 had established two firm goals - to increase the membership of the Society by 50 during the year, and to convert 50 existing members into working members as well.

He explained that plans were in hand to produce an RPSI 50 film by Mike Beckett which would cover the past, present and future of the Society. Already, several interviews had been conducted but what was still needed was digitally prepared film of the RPSI's early days and early railtours. He appealed for anyone with such footage to get in touch. The plan was for the film to be launched at Whitehead on Wednesday 26th March, when a ceremony would be held to mark the formal start of the RPSI 50 events.

RPSI archivist Charles Friel, he added, was adopting the same theme for three RPSI 50 illustrated talks, the first of which would take place at the meeting at Parke Hall, Orangefield, in Belfast on Wednesday 12th March. The talk would then be repeated in Dublin and London during the autumn.

A major event would be the RPSI 50 dinner in Dublin on Saturday 17th May, the weekend of the RPSI's international railtour. Joe McKeown was heading up a committee which was organising the event in conjunction with Vice-Presidents Robert Guinness and Nora Owen. At present, discussions were taking place on a venue, with the Guinness Hopstore being the front runner. Robert Guinness had kindly agreed to act as MC at the function in the absence of Lord O'Neill.

During the summer the Society's special trains, such as the Portrush Flyer, would carry the RPSI 50 headboard. In addition, there were plans to reinstate into the programme a Schools' Day at Whitehead, probably in June.

All this, Robin Morton said, would lead up to the grand gala dinner which was taking place at Belfast City Hall on Saturday 13th September. Lord O'Neill had agreed to act as MC at this function, which was being held in conjunction with the GB-based Heritage Railway Association, which was holding its autumn meeting in Northern Ireland. It was expected that around 80 delegates would be present, and they would be attending the dinner.

But Robin Morton said the dinner was very much planned with the RPSI's own membership in mind. The event, he said, was a chance for the RPSI's members - and their spouses - to come along and celebrate. There would be a reception, and a dinner and then a number of speeches. He said that in view of this being a 50th anniversary, Belfast City Council had kindly granted the use of the venue at no cost.

The following day, he announced, it was planned to run a special steam train from Whitehead to Portrush in order to mark the anniversary. So far plans were still being discussed with Northern Ireland Railways, but it was likely that Compound No.85 "Merlin" would haul the train.

Robin Morton told members that anniversaries were popular with the media, and he suggested that the 50th would be a valuable opportunity to raise the Society's profile. He said that in turn, funders appreciated publicity so the general 'feel good' atmosphere should be of further benefit to the RPSI.

Robin Morton advised members that regular updates about the RPSI 50 programme would be carried the RPSI email, news-letters and on the website. He said this would help keep the membership informed.

In closing, Robin Morton underlined that the celebrations were primarily designed for the members themselves and urged all members to support the various activities. He said already the RPSI's 50th anniversary had generated publicity in Steam Railway magazine, and he said he was confident it would be a big year for the Society.