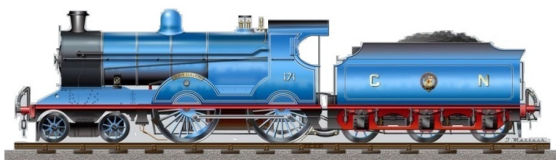


# Railway Preservation Society of Ireland



January 2026

## NEWS LETTER

### APPEAL

**LMS (NCC) Locomotive Appeal:** The Society has launched a new appeal to raise funds to overhaul 2-6-4 WT No.4 for a return to traffic, and to complete the restoration of our 2-6-0 W Mogul.

You are invited to make a donation.

Full details, including progress videos, are on the Appeals page of our website, or we can post an appeal form on request.

Thank you!

### LOCOMOTIVES

**No.3BG "Guinness":** The little tank engine earned its keep over the Christmas period. In fact, Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> December saw No.3BG in steam for the fifth day in a row, shunting carriages and moving No.186 and No.85 to combat static bearing damage.

**No.171 "Slieve Gullion":** Just before 10am on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> November, a vision of Edwardian steam locomotive elegance slipped from the engine shed at Dublin's Connolly station. Amidst the rain and early morning gloom, and in clouds of lingering steam, she crept over to Platform 3. The deep, refined note of the whistle, together with the striking blue livery, gold leaf numerals, red buffer beams and valences was something from another age. The locomotive drew admiring gasps from the group of railway enthusiasts at the end of the platform watching its approach.

The vision could have been mistaken as being some sort of ghostly apparition of a long scrapped steam engine, emerging ethereally from the same shed that it and its classmates inhabited over a century ago. However, the rain and the cold helped bring your writer out of his early morning daydreams to realise that this was a very real survivor of the steam age, which had been resurrected from so much cold, dead steel and iron back to its former fire breathing, almost alive in its own right, self.

The engine, ex Great Northern Railway (Ireland) 4-4-0 'S' Class No.171 "Slieve Gullion", was built in Manchester in 1913, rebuilt at Dundalk in 1938, and retired from active duty in 1965.

Her classmates were sold off to the scrapman, who wanted them for the resale value of their brass, steel and copper. Thanks to the efforts of the RPSI's founding members, No.171 took up an active retirement, operating railtours all over the island of Ireland. Her generally worn out condition, and mechanical quirks, often taxed the fledgling volunteer society. Some members proudly referred to No.171 as the organisation's flagship, while others pointed to her technical problems and stating she was never a good example of her type.

Over the years the engineering know how, and the tools and equipment, grew at Whitehead. The old blue engine became a reliable and much loved main line performer. Apart from a few years in the 1990s when her boiler was lifted from the frames for the first time in preservation, No.171 was in use most years between 1966 and 2002. By 2002,

she was ready for another boiler overhaul, which would require that the boiler be craned from the frames again. As is often the case with a locomotive approaching the end of its boiler life, it was said at the time that she was running very well, and it was a shame to withdraw her from use. However, rules are rules, and "Slieve Gullion" was driven for the last time into No.2 Road in the old red brick engine shed at Whitehead, her future uncertain.

Strangely enough, all this time the locomotive was owned by the state! No.171 was leased from the Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company from 1966 until the RPSI took ownership in 2003.

Funding - from the generosity of RPSI members putting their hands in their pockets, and a grant from GROW South Antrim - was raised in the early 2010s to get No.171 back in working order. Funding from external bodies like GROW come with terms, conditions and deadlines. With a completion deadline that Whitehead simply could not meet while No.131 was already in the Dunleath Workshop, the RPSI contracted out the overhaul of a locomotive to a third party. No.171, partially dismantled, left Whitehead on a lorry to head to the north east of England to a contractor's workshop in 2014. Sadly the contractor encountered financial difficulties and in 2015, the RPSI's locomotive department organised the retrieval of "Slieve Gullion", only partially overhauled, back to Whitehead. The rescued engine made a poor contrast with No.131, back in working order and sporting a smart grey undercoat. No.171's parts were loosely reassembled and the locomotive became a museum exhibit in the newly-opened Whitehead Railway Museum. With a coat of blue undercoat on her boiler, and stick-on temporary numbers on her buffer beam, No.171 presented a sad sight, inexpertly taxidermied for public display.

Rust and time are constant companions to the RPSI fleet, and with the locomotives in working order coming due for their own overhauls, thoughts turned to getting No.171 readied to take her turn in the active fleet again. Things got moving in 2019 when the

locomotive was removed from display and again dismantled to her component parts. The boiler, motion, brake gear and many other parts were subject to non-destructive testing to identify flaws and cracks not visible to the naked eye. The huge driving wheels, 6 foot 7 inch diameter, had their tyre profiles restored on the wheel lathe. Axleboxes and other bearings were remetalled with new white metal and bedded in on their respective journals. A lot of work was carried out on the pistons, piston rods, crossheads and slidebars. In cold weather, No.171 had been notorious for leaking piston glands, with steam issuing in clouds from between the frames and drifting out under her boiler. The work to the components in this area to get everything straight, parallel, and back to original clearances, gave the new white metal gland packing the support it needed to do its job effectively.

Just after her 4-4-0 cousins No.85 and No.131 had shone on the epic 2023 "Steam Dreams" charter, covering a large percentage of the Irish Rail network, the Whitehead locomotive department got back to work on No.171 and lowered her frames back on to her wheels. Work then continued reassembling the brake gear, motion and springs. Work continued on the boiler, with the well-trodden path of retubing, hydraulic and steam testing taking place before the boiler was put back in the frames during a horrendously wet day in February 2024. The locomotive looked largely complete, but the next few months were taken up with the tricky job of reassembling all the small and fiddly parts. First the new insulation was wired in place round the boiler, then the boiler cladding sheets - heavy, awkward curved sheets of steel that never seem to go back exactly where they came from - went on, and were adjusted and tweaked until they were straight, parallel and concentric. Next came the cab, craned into place, having been overhauled and painted while sitting face down on a works bogie. The familiar cab controls, freshly overhauled, took up their positions in the cab, and the various copper pipes were annealed, repaired and put back in place.

Next the careful adjustment of the valve timing and weight distribution, and getting the correct spring tension on each of the engine's eight wheels. Adjusting the valve timing was carried out by equalising the valve travel in full gear and two turns of the reverser up from full gear. Each set of measurements taken was followed by some calculations to work out what shims to put in where, remembering that the rocker arms in the valve gear reversed the direction of the linkage - and their unequal length meant that a short movement at the expansion link was translated into a longer movement at the valve head.

Test steamings followed, with No.171 moving under her own power for the first time in July 2024. Then, a high profile guest - The Duke of Gloucester - was invited to relaunch the locomotive in September, so the Whitehead locomotive department got stuck in to sanding, painting and lining, while continuing to reassemble minor pipe clips, adjust pipework and work through the long snagging list. No.171's blue paint, which of course has no effect on how well the engine steams or pulls, is the most striking feature of the locomotive, and I am happy to report that the stunning paint finish was completed entirely in-house, including the intricate lining and the gold leaf numerals.

Once Prince Richard had his turn at the regulator, it was time to consider how to get No.171 out hauling trains and earning her keep again.

The unfortunate position of no crew being available to operate steam on the main line in Northern Ireland left the locomotive department with few options to commission No.171 for main line use. Normally, a locomotive fresh from overhaul would run from Whitehead to Carrickfergus or York Road light engine, and if all went well, would pick up a short train of carriages later that day or the following weekend, and do a couple of trips to Belfast Central Station (or Lanyon Place, as it is now known). Invariably during this process a bearing would run hot, or some other defect would come to light that might need a week's work to rectify. The process is called 'running in' because the

bearings literally polish themselves in to the profile they will assume for the next 20,000 - 30,000 miles of main line running. Moving up and down the Whitehead yard at 5mph is no substitute for attaching a rake of carriages behind the tender, and setting off for a test run over perhaps 15 miles.

None of the above was possible from Whitehead in 2025, apart from the possibility of moving No.171 light engine at reduced speed all the way from Whitehead to Dublin Connolly shed. This was discounted on the basis that every bearing on the locomotive was untried, and previous experience indicated that the locomotive would probably run hot at an inconvenient place far from help, or even a siding to get into off the main line. Reluctantly (and expensively), it was decided to move No.171 to Dublin by road.

With a deadline approaching, work focussed on reinstating the steam heat pipework, and wiring in the headlights and speedometer.

In January 2025, No.171 was loaded on to a lorry trailer and moved to Dublin's Inchicore Works. There, No.85 and the tender which had previously been attached to "Merlin" were already waiting. No.85 was to move back to Whitehead. Tender No.73 received attention at Inchicore, including a fantastic paint job, fully the match of the new paint applied to No.171 at Whitehead, and a visit to the wheel lathe. On arrival at Inchicore, No.171 and tender 73 were coupled together, and "Slieve Gullion" was hauled to Connolly Shed at the first opportunity in the spring.

Running in trips were arranged in April and August 2025, on the line to Maynooth from Connolly Shed. The locomotive department was kept busy rectifying faults and fettling No.171 in between trips. In particular, the left hand big end and connecting rod made a return visit to Whitehead after the April trip, and the coupling rod also made a visit back to the Dunleath Workshop following the August run. For more minor jobs, the Whitehead workshop team made countless trips to Connolly shed with parts, tools and equipment, each day's work supported by

the Dublin locomotive department.

The big test was in mid-November 2025, when No.171 hauled a train of 6 Cravens carriages along with the BR van to Maynooth. An 071 class diesel shadowed the steam train for the first return trip, a helpful presence in case something was to go wrong. The bearing temperatures were good, the crew were reporting good steaming and riding - perhaps No.171 could assist Santa in December?

We are now back to the start of our story. 29<sup>th</sup> November dawned with both No.171 and No.131 in steam. Some final adjustments to No.171 had still to be proven, so No.131 was readied in case No.171 did not pass her pre-trip examination. However, all was well, and No.131 was sent back to bed while "Slieve Gullion" took charge of her first mainline passenger trains since 2002.

Over the three weekends, No.171 hauled the 8 coaches plus BR Van (effectively a 9 coach train) on twelve return trips to Maynooth, with No.131 waiting in the wings to take over should a problem occur - but No.171's performance was fully up to scratch, and No.131 was not required. Bearing temperatures were monitored over the 6 running days, and oil feeds adjusted to suit each bearing. The Irish Rail crew were happy with their 'new' steed, reporting that she steamed well, even climbing through Glasnevin Junction in the big valve, with the steam heat running.

So, on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> December, as No.171 cools down in Connolly Shed, gently blowing steam through her draincocks, the embers of her fire slowly dying away, you can be assured that "Slieve Gullion" is well and truly back in action - fully 'run in' - and ready for whatever adventures RPSI Operations have planned for her in 2026.

A big thank you to everyone who contributed - to the members who put their hands in their pockets and donated to the appeals, both back in the early 2010s, and more recently since 2019 to get the job finished. Thank you to the locomotive department volunteers who got stuck in to the tedious, the mundane, the skilled, and the itchy jobs

to the attendees at the Thursday night Tech Class who made and refurbished components; to the electrical squad who not only wire in and maintain the Whitehead workshop machines, but who helped run wires on the locomotive herself; the full time workshop crew who fitted boiler tubes, struggled with boiler cladding, annealed and fitted copper pipes, and planned and project managed every aspect of the overhaul at Whitehead; the site squad who helped in various ways, perhaps most obviously in pouring the smokebox floor which it may surprise you to hear is concrete; the carriage and wagon department who as ever helped with steam heating components and lent a hand when required; the Dublin locomotive department who arranged the work on the tender, and the running in trips, lit up, disposed and travelled with the locomotive on the main line, and assisted the Whitehead locomotive department in the snagging work.

Thanks to everyone - the job is finished, and is a credit to you all.

**Mogul:** A new page of photos outlining work on the NCC Mogul has been added to the News section of the Members Area.

**Fireman Training:** As part of our ongoing commitment to training and progression of competence through the footplate grades, a Fireman Training session was run on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> October, hosted by one of our RPSI Fireman Mentors.

Three trainees were given a thorough theoretical overview of the traditional role of Fireman, the role of RPSI Footplate Representative, and the theory behind the components that they will use in these roles (lubricators, injectors, etc).

No.3BG "Guinness" was in light steam to allow each person practical application of their learning. The trainees will undertake further supervised hands-on experience and, with time and experience, undergo both theory and practical assessments before they could be deemed competent Firemen.

If you would be interested in volunteering for our locomotive footplate grades, please do get in contact.

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## TRAINS & EVENTS

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***Emerald Pullman:*** For this diesel-hauled tour, a virtual repeat of that in June, the vehicles were 3173 (van) 1541, 1506, 1522 (diner), 1514 (bar), 1505 and 1532. The van was placed on the Dublin end so that it would be in the correct position when we returned to Dublin.

***Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> September:*** Dublin Connolly - Waterford - Tipperary - Limerick Junction - Killarney.

***Monday 8<sup>th</sup> September:*** Killarney - Mallow - Cork - Mallow - Killarney

***Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> September:*** Killarney - Limerick - Athenry - Galway - (empty) Athlone - Westport.

***Friday 12<sup>th</sup> September:*** Westport - Dublin Connolly.

Total mileage for this tour was 913 miles.

***European Heritage Open Day:*** On Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> September Whitehead Railway Museum's summer programme finished on a high note with a successful European Heritage Open Day (EHOD) event. Admission to the museum was free for the day while steam train rides were on offer at a reduced rate of £5 for adults and £3 for children.

In total, 13 trains operated between 11am and 3:30pm - relief trains were run to accommodate passengers who missed their slots and those who decided to trade up to a train ride, having intended to visit only the museum.

The heritage train was hauled by No.3BG "Guinness" (built in 1919) and comprised LMS NCC side-corridor composite 68 (1922) and the GNR(I) brake van 81 'Ivan' (1945).

The steam engine went back on shed at 3pm but a hurriedly planned overspill run at 3:30pm was hauled by GM B142 (1962) making a special guest appearance.

***Mighty Kingdom:*** This diesel tour, planned for Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> October, unfortunately had to be cancelled.

When our operating licence came up for

renewal with the Commission for Railway Regulation (CRR), they had received legal advice that our current structure was no longer valid to hold a licence in Ireland. The main issue is that our company is registered in the UK and is no longer in the EU, as it was when the first licence was granted.

Work had been underway since it was established that we have additional legal and Companies Registration Office requirements to renew our licence. Despite our very best efforts this was not achieved this in time for the tour.

***Evacuation Trial:*** On a bright Sunday (21<sup>st</sup> September) morning at 09:00 about 25 RPSI volunteers and IÉ staff boarded a 2900 class railcar and set off for Connolly sidings.

The objective was a joint training exercise in train-to-train evacuation between an IÉ train and an RPSI train.

An 071 locomotive had hauled van 3173 plus two Cravens carriages from Inchicore.

The railcar stopped with its leading door aligned with the double doors of 3173, whereupon a wheelchair ramp was set up as a bridge between the two trains. The 'passengers' crossed into the RPSI train where they were guided by RPSI stewards to their seats. The exercise was then repeated in the opposite direction.

The railcar then returned to Platform 2 and the RPSI train returned to Inchicore.

A CRR inspector attended as an observer, and three Whitehead volunteers also attended.

The object of this exercise was to work out what we would do if the need to evacuate occurred in real life.

***Halloween:*** On Friday 31<sup>st</sup> October, the "Wings and Whistles" event took place at Whitehead, with the "Paws and Scales" event on Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> November.

On both days, visitors began with a train ride in coach LMS NCC 68 behind locomotive No.3BG "Guinness" and then proceeded to the Stables building. Over the two days, more than 350 passengers were carried.

***Victorian Street Fair:*** On the morning of Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> November our annual Charity Santa event took place, with the Salvation Army arranging families to partake of our event.

In the afternoon, as part of the annual Street Fair in Whitehead, there were steam train rides - discounted to attract families from the Fair. And very popular it was.

***Santa Special (Dublin):*** As always, tickets for these trains sold out very quickly with demand vastly exceeding availability.

Both No.131 and No.171 "Slieve Gullion" were in steam on the morning of Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> November. After No.171's recent repairs, it was thought wise to have No.131 on hand in case of issues.

In the event, No.171 proved to be a match for the heavy Santa trains, hauling its first revenue-earning mainline trips since 2002.

In fact, No.171 hauled 12 of the 18 Santa trains (the rest being diesel as usual).

***All Aboard For Christmas:*** The Christmas train ride season at Whitehead finished on a high note on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> December with a first - four consecutive days of train ride operation at Whitehead.

No. 3BG "Guinness" barely had time to cool down from first being lit up on the Friday afternoon to having the fire dropped at teatime on Monday. The locomotive performed flawlessly throughout and thanks to careful firing, rarely blew off.

In total, 44 train rides were operated over 10 days spanning three weekends.

The new formula worked exceptionally well - steam train ride, visit to Santa, followed by the hands-on activities of making up a little packet of reindeer food and decorating a gingerbread man. Also on offer was an optional visit to the carriage gallery, something that a lot of visitors took up.

Opening on the Monday proved to be a master stroke as the school holidays had started and many parents were on leave. The Monday had been fully booked for several days.

***Santa Thanks:*** I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to all our incredible volunteers who have supported our Christmas events at Dublin and Whitehead (despite the weather). Your dedication, enthusiasm and hard work are truly what make these events so special.

A particular word of appreciation must go to our steam-raisers, who are up at the crack of dawn to bring our engines to life. Your early starts and tireless commitment do not go unnoticed and we are deeply grateful for everything you do to help create the magic our visitors enjoy.

Thank you all,

*Rachele*  
General Manager

***Diesel Day:*** On Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> January at Whitehead there will be train rides and exclusive footplate trips behind GM diesel B142.

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## WHITEHEAD SITE

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***Signals:*** The long-disused home signal arm at the bridge end of the platform at Whitehead has been reinstated thanks to several weeks of brainstorming and problem solving by the site squad.

The old signal arm, which was installed in 2018, and had never been operational as it had seized up, was removed and replaced by a similar CIÉ signal arm which itself was refurbished. The lamp was also refurbished and returned to its position.

The signal wires were tensioned and connected up to a lever in the signal box. This means that three signal levers are now operational and available to visitors who always enjoy pulling them and seeing the signal arm fall.

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## WHITEHEAD RAILWAY MUSEUM

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***Congratulations:*** Well done to our Museum team who worked so hard in recent months towards re-accreditation of our museum status.

***Grant:*** We are also pleased to have been

awarded a museum capital grants from Communities NI to further enhance the Museum's standards of collection storage and provide inclusive access to the site and collection.

**Praise For Café:** The café at Whitehead Railway Museum has come in for some unsolicited praise from influencer Sam Knox who runs the "What's On In Carrickfergus" blog. Café manager Keeley Brown says they had no idea that Sam was going to pen some feedback but is delighted that he did.

*Went out for a spot of lunch today and wanted to try somewhere new. As chance would have it, we found a secret little gem, tucked away and hidden away in a spot where you wouldn't expect to find anything. Let me introduce you to Whitehead's best kept secret - Cups & Carriages.*

*It's part of Whitehead Railway Museum and it's like walking into bygone vintage age with just enough of a modern twist to make it comfortable and relevant without spoiling the vibe.*

*We went for the Fireman's Fry, and oh my goodness it was delicious. Enough to feed and fill even my hungry belly, tasted delicious, and everything was freshly cooked and piping hot. Most importantly, they don't make the mistake that every other cafe seems to make these days by toasting the soda and tatie farls - they fry them, just like my old mum used to do.*

*And finally, as you're leaving, you can buy an old fashioned quarter of sweets, weighed out from a big glass jar and delivered to you in a white paper bag, just like when we were kids.*

**Throwing Open The Gates:** The Museum played host on Friday 17<sup>th</sup> October to a group of more than 30 Level Crossing engineers from across Europe who were in Northern Ireland for a conference as guests of Translink.

Delegates represented a range of countries including Britain, Croatia, Denmark, Ireland, Netherlands, Portugal and many more.

The delegates welcomed in the Stables where refreshments were served by café

staff.

After a brief history of the RPSI and Whitehead Excursion Station, the first port of call was the Signal Box where the engineers took a keen interest in the display and workings of the box.

The tour proceeded to the Locomotive Gallery and Dunleath Works, then to the Carriage Gallery where they first inspected steam locomotives Nos. 3 and 461, followed by Diner 88, the Directors' Saloon and the Irish Presidential coach. The visitors expressed themselves well impressed by the museum and by the level of engineering work being carried out by both full time and voluntary personnel.

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## WINTER MEETINGS

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**New Season:** The programme has kicked off with four successful meetings so far:

8<sup>th</sup> October: Castlederg & Victoria Bridge Tramway by Charles Friel.

12<sup>th</sup> November: Translink NI Railways - Better Connected Today and Tomorrow by Ian Campbell (NIR)

10<sup>th</sup> December: More Travels With Mac by Michael McMahon

14<sup>th</sup> January: Greenore by John Martin

**Next:** The next meeting will be:

11<sup>th</sup> February: Belfast Great Victoria Street Remembered by Robert White.

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## GENERAL

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**Omagh Commemoration:** The RPSI has been presented with a Civic Recognition certificate in respect of the Society's contribution to the Omagh Heritage Railway Memorial Project marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a tragic railway accident in which five railway workers lost their lives.

The presentation took place on 24<sup>th</sup> November prior to a ceremony at the memorial in Omagh which honours the memory of the five victims of the accident. The RPSI built a six metre panel of Great

Northern Railway (Ireland) track which is the centrepiece to the display. The certificate, issued in the name of Fermanagh & Omagh District Council, was presented to RPSI President Dr Joan Smyth by Councillor Barry McElduff, the council chairman.

Mr McElduff paid tribute to the RPSI and expressed gratitude on behalf of the council to the Society and the role it had played in marking the tragic anniversary of the accident, in which a Derry to Belfast train hit a gang of permanent way workers at Omagh station in dense fog.

Dr Smyth said it had been an honour for the Society to be involved in the creation of the display. She said the RPSI was keen to preserve and pass on to a new generation skills such as tracklaying and locomotive engineering.

Dermot Mackie the RPSI site officer, said he was proud of the way his team had delivered the project, which involved assembling and laying chaired wooden sleepers and rail on a bed of ballast at the memorial site. He stressed that all the track materials were genuine GNR(I) items from Whitehead and said the rails had originally been recovered from the Derry Road line which served Omagh and closed in February 1965.

Descendants of the railway workers who perished that day were then called forward one by one to lay single white roses on a memorial plaque which had been installed 25 years ago to mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Mr McElduff said the five who lost their lives - John Cassidy, John Cleary, John McClory, Dan McCrory and Charles Flanagan - were all local men who did not see or hear the incoming train. He said the memory of that day had never faded for their families or the local community. He said the ceremony provided a chance to pause and reflect on the lasting impact that the loss of the five lives and said it was important that this significant anniversary was being marked.

Music was provided by St Eugene's Brass and Reed Band, which had played at the funeral services for the deceased back in 1950. Among the present day members of the band

is Tony McGartland, author of the book "Omagh Railway Station - A Journey Through Time".

More than 200 people, including specially invited members of the RPSI site squad, attended the ceremony, and the event was covered by UTV and BBC Northern Ireland along with the local papers.

The memorial is at James Street, on the site of the original stationmaster's house and in the shadow of the bypass road which now runs along the route of the Derry Road through Omagh.

Also present were council officials and the two main organisers of the event, Mark McGrath and Paddy Hunter from the town's heritage group.

**Sales News:** New books have been added to our Shop:

- "Irish Railway Rover Part 3", Michael McMahon, hardback, 19 x 25 cm, 90 colour photos, 80 pages, £17.50/€21.
- "Irish Railway Rover Part 4" by Michael McMahon, hardback, 25 x 18 cm, 95 colour photos, 80 pages, £17.50/€21.
- "Irish Railways Line By Line, Volume 4, Northern Ireland Railways, 1968 to 2011", by Jim Edgar, softback, 25 x 18 cm, 133 colour photos, 22 b&w photos, 3 diagrams, 64 pages. £14.50 / €17.

**Annual General Meeting:** The AGM took place in Dublin on Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> October.

There were no new faces elected to the Board, although we did say goodbye to Jonathan Clinton - many thanks for his service.

Also, our appreciation to the IRRS for the use of their fascinating Library room.

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