

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Society

Activity Report for 2020

The following report on the activities of The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Society (the Society), for the year ended 31 December 2020, is provided for the information of Members.

CHAIRMAN'S REVIEW David Barrie

2020 was undoubtedly very challenging and this was reflected in the DHRS and our activities. Your Board held a physical meeting shortly before the Covid restrictions, but two other meetings plus the postponed AGM were virtual. This very brief AGM allowed us to conduct the essential business, but we hope that next time we will be back to our usual format with socialising and entertainment.

You will have read in the Darjeeling Mail how we have still been able to make our presence felt in India. When the pandemic struck, your Board gave £1,750 for humanitarian aid to FOSEP, one of our valued Darjeeling partners. The DRCS separately sent £2,000. A Darjeeling Tours party was almost caught by the lockdown in India, but the initiative of Fuzz Jordan got the tour group away in the nick of time. During the year we reported that all was not well with the DHR, simply reporting the facts from those who were there. Fortunately in the Autumn a dynamic new DHR Director was appointed, followed in December by very committed GM NFR. The news rapidly became very positive, and it was good to close the year so well. The other good news from the Darjeeling region was that the incidence of Covid was not as severe as we in the UK have experienced. So much so that on Christmas Day a limited service of Joy Trains resumed. Within the Society all Directors and Officers

continued to fulfil their duties as you will read in their own reports. One major change was that Peter Barnes, our exceptional sales officer for many years, decided to stand down. We appealed in vain for a replacement but most fortunately Fuzz Jordan agreed to undertake the role. He was also largely responsible for the excellent 'Driver's Eye View' DVD, and in the concept and commissioning of the 'Up the Line' book. This is the book that I have always dreamed about. David Charlesworth, whose detailed knowledge of the DHR is unrivalled, has produced a volume that I cannot praise too highly. Elsewhere, the Statfold Barn Railway, an extensive narrow gauge centre near Tamworth, offered us a permanent area for a DHR display which will give us a high profile when the popular attraction reopens.

The Society is blessed with a very dedicated and able Board, supported by its Officers and other DHR enthusiasts here and in India, all caring deeply about the DHR. To you, our members, I thank you for your continued invaluable support. 2021 looks very hopeful for the DHR. Let us also hope that it will be a much better year for all of us.

VICE-CHAIRMAN/PUBLIC RELATIONS Paul Whittle

As is now the norm, and despite the Covid pandemic, much time was spent in maintaining and developing strong relations with our ever-expanding network

of friends and partners in India, including Indian Railways, the Indian Steam Railway Society, the Rail Enthusiasts Society and private individuals.

We continued to support our long-standing partner/ Darjeeling NGO, the Federation of Societies for Environmental Protection (FOSEP). In April, donations from the Society and individual members to FOSEP for Covid relief were much appreciated and helped some of the most vulnerable sections of the local community.

In September Indian Railways announced a consultancy review into the prospects for private investment in India's hill railways. We await developments and have assured

the Chairman Railway Board of our interest in contributing to that debate.

EDUCATION GROUP REPORT Paul Whittle

Despite Covid restrictions and school closures, the annual DHR Schools Awareness Programme went ahead in mid-November, as always with the invaluable help of the ladies of the Inner Wheel Club of Darjeeling. Fifty students from Sardashwari Government Girls High School and Nepali Girls Higher Secondary School completed a DHR-themed essay competition with the prizes being presented at Darjeeling Station. Each participant was presented with a copy of the Society's 'Darjeeling's Wonderful Railway' guide book.

SECRETARY'S REPORT Janine Bird

In 2020 the Board met three times:

In January at The Weighbridge Public House, Alvechurch, B48 7SQ and in June and October via Zoom.

The 2020 AGM, booked for 2nd May at the Kidderminster Railway Museum, had to be cancelled because of the COVID-19 restrictions. On 12th December a virtual 2020 AGM was held via Zoom. 16 members Zoomed in including one from Australia. 43 proxy votes were received.

A provisional booking for a 2021 AGM at the KRM was made for 17th April but this has now been cancelled due to COVID-19 restrictions. Members will be kept informed, through the Darjeeling Mail, about a rescheduled date.

TREASURER Fuzz Jordan

DHRS -Treasurer's Report – year to 31st December 2020

The financial results for the year have been surprisingly good. Subscriptions have fallen by 0.2%, equivalent to 2½ adult subscriptions: with our aging membership, this

is not a bad result. The contribution from sales actually rose during the year, mainly due to two new items, the 'Up the Line' DVD and the 'Up the Line' book. Admin expenses fell, due to our Board meetings being held online rather than physical meetings involving travel. Due to the current uncertainties, we have moved away from providing what we expect to disburse in grants in the following years to a system where they will be approved only when they are required.

For the future, Indian Railways have broadcast their interest in having much more private participation in the operation of their railways. Looking at the DHR as a very small corner of their operation, the opportunity may arise in the near future to adopt for restoration, preservation or even operation of items of rolling stock, maybe even a locomotive, or some form of participation in the line's operation. For anything in this area, it is likely that significant funds would be needed, so it is important to continue the fund-raising aspects of our activities

EDITOR David Charlesworth

The highlight of the year has been the completion and publication of the Up the Line book – it would have been a different story without it both for The Society and me personally.

The other important event was the release of Peter Middleton's Video 125's DVD "Driver's Eye View". It would have been a wonderful package to promote a full trip from the camera with the detailed book but all unfortunately prevented by the COVID crisis like everything else in 2020.

Another opportunity lost was to provide a large and permanent display at Statfold Barn. It was hoped that it would coincide with their expansion and new shop but this was not to be. However, provided Statfold management are still in favour of the display, with completion of the book, revised maps have also been completed so in retrospect it is perhaps just as well because the display can be as accurate as it is possible for us to be.

Contacts

Throughout the year a few friends in India have kept me informed. This is appreciated both personally and in the position as Editor. News is certainly up to date nowadays and so vastly different from when the Society was formed. It was particularly notable when Prabhakar Thapa from Salbari, was able to provide me with live, real-time transmission via WhatsApp to answer a question I had about Salesian Siding! Amazing stuff – even when such Video calls occasionally happen at 5am on Sunday morning.

Talks

Three talks were booked for 2020 but all cancelled or postponed. I have not been asked to provide Zoom or Team presentations as yet so I have not looked into. However, it is looking very likely that 2021 will have this approach or nothing at all.

SALES AND EXHIBITIONS Peter Barnes

Traditionally sales have come from three sources: retail (internet and mail order), show sales and trade sales, each contributing approximately 1/3 of the turnover. 2020 has not followed this pattern. Show sales have fallen to zero, as COVID dictated that all the 2020 shows we planned to attend had to be cancelled, and this looks likely to continue through most, if not all, of 2021. Likewise, most of our trade customers, mainly preserved and tourist railways, have also been unable to trade, and therefore have not placed orders. I hope that this situation will improve in 2021. However, retail sales have increased from £3,300 in 2019 to over £10,000 in 2020, largely due to two new major items. First was the fabulous DVD, giving a drivers' eye view up from Tindharia to Darjeeling, which sold 128 copies last year. The section from NJP to Tindharia will be covered in a second volume, which will be published as soon as Video 125 can get back out there to complete a few shots which they were unable to complete due to COVID last March. The second was David Charlesworth's new book 'Up the Line' which was released in mid-December and had sold just under a hundred copies in the two weeks before the year-end.

We have two new items on the stocks for 2021: the second of the Drivers-eye DVD's and a new book covering all of the subcontinent's Hill Railways which we hope will keep up the sales momentum.

WEBMASTER Michael Melbourne

During this last year I have continued to update the DHRS web site with news and changes on the DHR and also events related to our society.

Due to the Covid19 lockdown limiting the traffic on the line, there is not much news coming directly from the DHR. Most reports are via members visiting the DHR and these are first published in the Darjeeling Mail or from reports in Indian Newspapers.

I also run the DHRS Facebook page, which is followed by over 1000 people in India as well as worldwide. Look for 'Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Society' or click on the Facebook logo at the top right of our website pages.

I am grateful for photographs sent to us, these are all helpful in keeping the website up to date.

Peter Jordan as Sale Officer informs me of changes of items we have for sale on the DHRS shopping web site, new items have been added and some removed as stock is depleted.

This year I continue to update the layout of the sales website with the new format that can be viewed on mobile phones and tablets.

One thing we are tried towards the end of the year was Digital pdf downloads, these have been disappointing with only one sale for the 'DHR Timetable' collection and no requests for pdf copies of back issues of the Darjeeling Mail. Maybe people still prefer a paper copy to a digital one. At the moment when a copy is ordered, the customer gets a link to the download that is only available for 3 days (can be increased), hence the need to use a PC type computer as a tablet/iPad does not have the storage facility to view the issue at their leisure at a later date.

ENGINEERING David Mead

There has been little activity in connection with engineering this year. We are still awaiting the issue of the Maintenance Manuals by UNESCO or any evidence of improved maintenance to track, locos or carriages.

MEMBERSHIP Janine Bird

The membership dropped slightly from 637 in October 2019 to 613 in October 2020.

DTL clients were offered a year of free membership.

EVENTS Janine Bird

Because of COVID-19 restrictions it was not possible to hold any events in 2020.

Any events in 2021 will depend on what COVID-19 restrictions are in place

MODELLING etc. David Churchill

During the year a good number of enquiries have been received, mostly from modellers, on a wide variety of topics. These have included locomotive details and liveries, various coaches, wagons, station buildings and DHR badges. Hopefully, all have been dealt with satisfactorily. Many have raised interesting questions for further research.

Work is continuing toward a book on the DHR coaches and wagons, intended to be similar in size and style to the B Class book. Considerable progress has been made toward finding new material, but much work remains. This has been severely impacted by COVID restrictions preventing access to many libraries and archives since March 2020. Since this seems likely to continue for a considerable time the previous target date for publication by the end of 2021 will no longer be possible.

The Indian press is monitored for items relevant to the DHR and other Indian narrow gauge lines. Material is used for an Indian Narrow Gauge News page in the Mail and will be added to the archive.

Although the Darjeeling Railway Community Support and Darjeeling Tours Ltd. are separate legal entities apart from the Society, reports of their activities are given below as it is considered these are of interest to Members.

DCRS LIAISON REPORT

David Mead, in his capacity as Director responsible for Darjeeling Railway Community Support (DRCS) liaison, reports:

“In 2019 DRCS had an income of £6,524, including £500 from our appeal in the DM, and donations to India of £4,458. “

“The donations this year were for the purchase PPE for health workers of Darjeeling and funds for the maintenance of Rohini School.”

DRCS are grateful for all the support we receive from members of DHRS. This has enabled the Charity to send £70,303 to the Darjeeling District of India since our formation in 2006.

DARJEELING TOURS LTD Fuzz Jordan

Due to COVID, only one tour took place in 2020, and that had to be curtailed when India imposed a ban on international flights. All participants were flown home (just) before the ban came into operation. It is hoped that tours to the subcontinent will resume in November 2021. If this is possible, the first tour is expected to be ‘The Darjeeling Mail’, retracing the 1940’s route of the train to Siliguri from Kolkata.