

A special event took place at RPSI Whitehead on Saturday April 2 when the President of the Heritage Railway Association, Lord Faulkner of Worcester, unveiled a plaque which had been awarded to the Society in the broadcast material section of the annual HRA Awards.

The award was in recognition of Mike Beckett's RPSI 50 DVD which was produced in 2014 to mark the Society's Golden Jubilee. The award was announced in September 2015 and now the plaque has been unveiled at Whitehead Excursion Station.

It was a day of celebration for the RPSI and around 80 volunteers and special guests took up the invitation to attend the ceremony. Don Wildy and John Stewart looked after the meeting and greeting at the registration desk.

Light refreshments were provided by the RPSI Catering Team under the leadership of Eileen Armstrong. Meanwhile, Team Friel had been busy setting up the lectern and PA system in the station building.

On the screen behind the lectern, the award-winning RPSI 50 DVD was already playing. The film was shot, edited and produced by member Mike Beckett and has been much acclaimed by all who have seen it. The film features footage of the Society's early days, views behind the scenes, and interviews with several of the Society's leading lights.

Site officer Dermot Mackie had earlier taken the VIP party on a tour of the newly developed locomotive and carriage sheds, pausing en route to point out the rapid progress being made on the turntable pit. The party included Lord Faulkner, RPSI President Lord O'Neill and East Antrim MP Sammy Wilson.

A later group included Alister Bell from the Gobbins Cliff Path, Carole Long from Mid & East Antrim, David Robinson from Whitehead Community Association and Graham Walton from Carrickfergus Tourist Information Centre, who is closely involved with the proposal to open Black Head Light House to visitors in July.

Lord O'Neill acted as MC and welcomed everyone to the ceremony, noting that this was another Golden Jubilee year for the RPSI, in that it was in 1966 that the Society had set up shop at Whitehead Excursion Station.

Lord Faulkner said it was a huge pleasure and privilege for him to represent HRA at such a special occasion in Whitehead. He said the aim of HRA was to give support to its members, to encourage best practice and to reward it – which was what the event was all about.

Describing RPSI 50 as "brilliant" he congratulated Mike Beckett on the film. Lord Faulkner also noted that this was not the only HRA award that the RPSI had won recently – recalling that in February the RPSI received a commendation in the prestigious John Coiley Award for the restoration and return to traffic of No. 131.

He said: "There will be much more to celebrate in the future, when you complete the £3.1m Whitehead Railway Centre project.

"These are great times for the cause of railway preservation and heritage here in Northern Ireland and I congratulate everyone involved – volunteers, paid staff and benefactors alike."

Lord Faulkner said the soon-to-be-published HRA Report for 2014 would reveal a 6% rise in total turnover for the organisation's members, an 8% increase in passenger numbers, with total visitor numbers up 8% to 11.7 million. The movement had earned £112m, carrying 8.4 million passengers over 568 miles of track from 451 stations.

Lord Faulkner then invited Lord O'Neill to accompany him and the two peers jointly unveiled the plaque to a sustained burst of applause from all present.

Next up was Mike Beckett who told guests that the RPSI 50 film had been an important and timely project, reflecting the RPSI's endeavours and telling its story. He said it had been a real team effort, and referred in particular participants who had passed away since the making of the film.

He mentioned Sullivan Boomer, whose voiceover he said had brought the film to life, and Francis Richards, the carriage officer, who had been a great interviewee.

Archive material had come from many sources, including the late Norman Johnston of Colourpoint Books, who had been a tremendous source of assistance.

Lord O'Neill then invited Sammy Wilson, the MP for East Antrim, to speak. The RPSI President said Mr Wilson had been instrumental in helping the Society secure the grant aid necessary to turn the Whitehead Railway Centre project into reality.

Mr Wilson praised the RPSI team involved in pursuing the funding and said they had been "tenacious". He said the Society should be proud of them all, and said it was notable that the RPSI had always wanted to "do things right" as it sought funding.

The MP said that when he had first visited RPSI Whitehead he had been impressed by the potential the centre had both for tourism and for retaining core engineering skills and passing them on to the next generation.

Mr Wilson said the new centre would play a key role in developing the tourist potential of the East Antrim area and said he was pleased that Mid & East Antrim had placed the promotion of tourism as the top of its list of economic priorities.

He said he thought the idea of a "living museum" at RPSI Whitehead was "a great idea" and said he hoped it would generate enthusiasm and excitement, and produce the success that would reward all the hard work to date.

Mr Wilson concluded by wishing the RPSI every success as it brought its plans for the museum to fruition and said he looked forward to seeing Whitehead Railway Centre open to the public.

Denis Grimshaw, the RPSI chairman, thanked Mr Wilson for his supportive remarks and said the present plan was for a "soft opening" for the centre towards the end of 2016, followed by an official opening in Spring 2017.

Mr Grimshaw thanked Lord Faulkner for coming to Whitehead to unveil the plaque, and thanked HRA for giving the RPSI this recognition. He said that over the years, HRA had benefited the RPSI in many ways.

Mr Grimshaw then presented Lord Faulkner with a copy of the late Norman Johnston's final book, *Parting Shot*, as a token of the RPSI's appreciation to HRA.

Lord O'Neill then invited all present to proceed to the platform where a sparkling No. 85 Merlin was waiting to operate a short trip along the RPSI's siding. Crewing the engine were James Friel, Matthew Crockett and Ryan Downey.

Thanks are expressed on behalf of the RPSI Events Committee to all who contributed in so many ways to making this event such a success.