

Railway Heritage Designation Advisory Board launch

27 November 2013

Minister, Ladies and Gentlemen, may I first thank all of you for coming this evening. As the invitation says, we are today launching the Railway Heritage Designation Advisory Board, and marking the transfer of the statutory powers of designation from the Railway Heritage Committee to the Science Museum.

I hope you will forgive me if I take you on a brief history lesson.

These powers are those originally enshrined in the 1996 Railway Heritage Act which was passed with all-party support to safeguard and ensure the preservation of artefacts and records that are significant to the nation's railway heritage following privatisation.

Responsibility for the last 17 years lay with the Railway Heritage Committee who during their tenure designated over 1,500 items. Here is a very small sample of them.

The RHC was originally administered by the British Railways Board, and later by the Strategic Rail Authority. Following the SRA's abolition in 2005 the RHC became a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Transport. One of the consequences of that change was that all railways owned by any Secretary of State were in scope, which produced the happy effect that the Army's military railways came on board, and we have already unearthed some important and fascinating artefacts including an extraordinary howitzer gun dating from World War One, and a German rail-wrecker captured in Italy in 1945.

In the autumn of 2010, following the change of government, ministers embarked on what was called a "bonfire of the quangos". One of the early candidates for abolition was the Railway Heritage Committee.

A number of us in Parliament, and the wider railway heritage world didn't think this was a good idea, and were affronted by the then secretary of state's assertion that there was "nothing special" about the nation's railway heritage – I am delighted to see a number of members of the Heritage Railway Association here tonight.

We pointed out that if the powers of designation were abolished, a process of dedesignating over 1,000 artefacts and countless records and drawings would be required, and many would have been lost for ever.

Companies that had cooperated in preserving artefacts could have felt aggrieved that they had not sold them at auction or for scrap. There would be no protection of records as rail companies' records are not covered by the National Archive, leaving a black hole in the history of Britain's railways.

This made no sense at all, and I negotiated at some length with the minister taking the Public Bodies Bill through the Lords, and finally got agreement that whilst the Railway Heritage Committee would be abolished, the statutory powers of designation would be retained and transferred to the Trustees of the Science Museum.

One of the reasons why it proved possible to keep the powers alive was because of the excellent work performed by the RHC, particularly by its chairman, Peter Ovenstone, who succeeded me in that role in 2009, and secretary Neil Butters, who had been with the RHC almost from the beginning. Both of them are here this evening, and I would like to thank them both.

What we are doing today is marking the introduction of the new arrangements. It is the trustees of the Science Museum who now have the authority to agree designations and disposal, and they act on the advice of the Railway Heritage Designation Advisory Board, which is made up of experts from the railway industry, the heritage world, and those who have special skills and experience to offer. Most of them are here tonight.

In addition we have invited everyone who served on the RHC's sub-committees to sign up to a closed user forum, using technology called "Huddle", so that we can view suggestions and opinions on possible designated items and disposals.

Our statutory powers cover the whole of Great Britain – England, Scotland and Wales – and as far as Scotland is concerned, I am pleased that we are continuing to receive skilled and expert advice from an informal group of experts based north of the border.

A crucial ingredient in the way we operate is that we work with the grain of the railway industry, and take great care to create and foster their goodwill. It is a great compliment to the members of the privatised railway that they take their responsibilities seriously and want to work with us.

Items can be proposed for designation by anyone and then assessed against the criteria for suitability. Designation identifies the historic importance of an item whose significance could be lost in a fragmented industry with other priorities, and its effect is simply to ensure that they are looked after and not destroyed. Designated items remain with the owners until such time as they are no longer required and then they may be proposed for disposal.

In the early days of the RHC it was almost automatic that items proposed for disposal would find their way to the National Railway Museum in York. Today though we consider a large number of alternative homes, including other national museums, and accredited museums, heritage railways, and very occasionally private individuals who can promise that artefacts will be looked after safely, and there will be a measure of public access to them.

Although we have significant power and authority given to us by Parliament - we can insist that an item is preserved, and that it can't be got rid of without our approval – we use these powers carefully, and I hope with commonsense.

I have left until last news of an important and welcome development. For the last eight years I have considered that there is one major gap in the railway heritage designation arrangements. Britain possesses the oldest underground railway in the world, now celebrating its 150th anniversary, yet Transport for London is not in scope, although the ex-British Railways London Overground lines are.

I tried to redress this anomaly when the latest legislation was going through Parliament, but was unsuccessful. However during this last summer, Sir Peter Hendy, the Transport Commissioner for London, whose commitment to railway heritage is boundless, agreed to exchange letters with me, which have the effect of voluntarily bringing LUL into scope, so that we can designate a range of important artefacts, including the Metropolitan Line locomotive named *Sarah Siddons*. We shall be considering the list at a meeting of the advisory board tomorrow.

What I hope I have been able to do this evening, ladies and gentlemen, has been to demonstrate that Britain's railway heritage remains in safe, reliable and sensible hands. I always make clear that whilst we have no budget to acquire artefacts or records ourselves, we have something more powerful than that. We have influence, authority, the goodwill of the railway world - and the backing of Parliament.

And speaking of Parliament, this is an appropriate moment for me to introduce the new minister of state at the Department for Transport, Baroness Kramer.