

Historic Environment Report. Stockton & Darlington Railway Walk June 2025

It was felt fitting as we approached the 200th anniversary of the SDR on 27th September that we should walk a key section of the line, and 18 of us met next to the newly restored Gaunless bridge at Locomotion museum in Shildon to walk the route to the original site of the bridge at West Auckland.



We set out to follow the original 1825 S&DR trackbed from the point where it left the diversionary route built in 1858 to bypass the Brusselton incline. In one sense it was good to see a lot of work going on around the former Masons Arms inn in preparation for the bicentenary, but it did mean that access to the original trackbed was restricted while a new footpath is being constructed. We were however able to pause outside the inn (now a restaurant rejoicing in the name 'Cape to Cairo') to view what was perhaps the oldest railway station in the world where on 27th August 1825 George Stevenson's 'Locomotion No 1' with its carriage 'Experiment' and 21 wagons (with seats for passengers) was attached to 12 further coal wagons from Witton Park colliery which had been lowered down Brusselton Incline for the first time. The Locomotion with the great man on the footplate then set off with the first publicly-advertised steam-hauled goods and passenger train on its journey to Darlington, then on to Stockton.

We followed this initial run in reverse, climbing the Brusselton incline on the old track bed, passing the original locomotive and carriage works (which gave employment to nearly 3,000 workers until it closed in 1984 and is now given over to a range of smaller local industries) before passing under the Shildon bypass and reaching the summit of the incline where the original winding-house survives in private ownership. Here the

party paused to inspect the original 1825 sleepers still in situ as the track begins the descent of the incline to West Auckland.



Some 800 yards further on, the line disappears for half a mile or so and a diversion becomes necessary. The rather ordinary looking path followed here was in fact Dere Street, the original Roman main road leading to Hadrian's Wall and beyond. By now the weather was getting rather hot and, shortly after rejoining the track bed some half a mile short of our destination, we stopped for a much-needed drink at the only café on our route (just where the old line is bisected by the West Auckland bypass). On again after a rather hair-raising crossing of the bypass, we soon arrived in West Auckland at the bridge abutment where the Gaunless Bridge (our walk's starting point) had originally stood. At this point the diversionary line from Shildon rejoined us and our journey was done. Hopefully despite the rural solitude of the original route nowadays, the group was able to sense in some small way the noise and excitement of that great day 200 years ago.