

Heritage centre railway coaches ready to welcome visitors

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The railway coaches, which have been painted in Border Counties Railway colours, are now ready to welcome their first passengers.

The project, which began a year ago, has been funded by a grant of £173,600 from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) and Northumberland Uplands Local Action Group (NULAG) -Leader Programme. The project meant the Heritage Centre's exhibition space was vastly extended, creating a better learning space for visiting schools and special interest groups. A new tearoom will provide sustainable business opportunities for the centre as well as helping to boost local employment. The result is a first-class visitor attraction for people from both Newcastle and Gateshead and further afield. Visitors will now be able to enjoy the excellent facilities that Bellingham has to offer, learn about the area's rich local heritage and explore the beautiful North Tyne Valley.

Ivor Crowther, Head of HLF North East, said: "It is fantastic to see that these important train carriages have been restored and are now open for everyone. These exciting new exhibitions and learning spaces give visitors the opportunity to enjoy and learn about the North East's vast railway and transport heritage. We at the Heritage Lottery Fund are delighted to have supported this project that will bring Bellingham's history alive for young and old alike."

NULAG Chair, Michael Nixon said: "We are thrilled to support this exciting project and hope that it will really benefit the community of Bellingham and those who visit us."

There are two coaches now on display. The first will house a new, extended exhibition space with permanent exhibitions exploring the Wannie Line from Redesmouth to Morpeth and the branch line to Rothbury - as well as telling the story of the Brown Rigg School.

Brown Rigg was a Boarding School in Bellingham that opened in 1938; it housed Newcastle Church High School girls during the war and then reverted to the original purpose of a 'Camp School' until its closure in 1984. A number of former students or 'Brown Riggers' have worked with the centre and helped to create the new exhibition.

New classroom facilities will be used by visiting schools and special interest groups and the space will include an exhibition by the Northumberland National Park encouraging visitors to explore the surrounding area.

The second coach has been converted into a tearoom appropriately named the 'Carriages Tearoom'. The tearoom will provide good quality home baking and light lunches. The Heritage Centre itself has also undergone important restoration work as part of the project, including a new lighting system which combines greatly improved energy efficiency with far better illumination of artefacts.

This is an exciting year for the centre and Bellingham and will provide something of interest for everyone, from exploring their local railway heritage to wandering around the exhibitions and having a relaxing break in the tea room.

Notes to editors

The temporary exhibition area in the centre is hosting an exhibition of pastel drawings by local Elsdon artist Geoff Heslop entitled Local Working People. This will run from 17 March until Wednesday 9 May.

The next major event will be the Vintage Vehicle Rally on Sunday 15 April, but the Tearoom will be putting on something special for Mothers Day the 18 March. The Heritage Centre and Carriages Tearoom will be open every day from the 17 March.

Northumberland Uplands Local Action Group is hosted by Northumberland National Park and uses the Leader approach to make funding decisions. The funding is being made available through the Rural Development Programme for England, which is jointly funded by Defra and the European Union.

Further information

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