



Celebratory Tea Dance Sat 10 May 2025



SHILDON RAILWAY INSTITUTE

Invoking the Traditions of the Institute for a Special Celebration for Older People

In November of 1833, Timothy Hackworth, Thomas MacNay and several other prominent Stockton & Darlington Railway engineers and locomotive men in Shildon did something that had never been done before. They founded a unique institution for the benefit of railway families.

This new organisation had no premises of its own, and only a handful of books to share. They met in the Wesleyan Schoolroom to borrow and return books. Within nine years the railway company was sufficiently impressed with the society as to offer it a Reading Room at the famous Mason's Arms from where the world's first steam hauled passenger railway journey had set off in 1825. Here rail workers read books magazines and newspapers and held society meetings.

By 1860 the Stockton & Darlington Railway had provided the society with a special dedicated building with a library and hall and a small games room with a chequerboard topped table introducing draughts and chess to the organisation as pastimes.



The 1860 Institute building on Station Street, created by the Stockton & Darlington Railway Company.

The opening of the new Institute Hall enabled a number of new societies to be created in association with the Institute including musical and choral societies, and also provided an excellent space for dancing and celebrations.

From the very first celebratory milestone back in 1850 when the tow marked the first twenty-five years of the railway, tea, coffee and dancing was a very important part of Shildon's way of celebrating key achievements. Those earliest celebrations were held in engine sheds, taken over for the occasion and dressed appropriately by the community. Those would have been draughty evenings, but they were always reportedly well attended.

After the Institute gained its own building, such

occasions became more frequent, and the celebrations were usually attended by some of the leading industrial figures associated with the railway company such as members of the Pease family.



The 1913 Institute building on Redworth Road with its hall for lectures and dancing in the foreground.

Dancing continued to be a popular pastime at the Institute right through to the opening of the newest building in 1913. That building incorporated a long hall that was perfect for lectures and dancing. In later years the original parquet floor was upgraded to a sprung dance floor.

Shildon Railway Institute's Modern Sequence Dance Club was inaugurated on 5 September 1951, at which time members could pay a single shilling to come along and dance to Tommy Smurthwaite and his band. By 2013 when the current building marked 100 years, the club at Shildon was one of very few still running, but we're pleased to say that the tradition continues and its members, most of whom are pensioners continue to meet on Tuesday evenings to this very day. It marked its seventieth anniversary in 2021, which is a remarkable achievement.



Shildon Railway Institute Modern Sequence Dance Club celebrating their 60th anniversary in 2011.

We want to make sure that our older members, dancers and other railway pensioners from across the area have their railway bicentenary celebratory moment this year.

Why have we planned to do this?

The 200th Anniversary of the opening of the Stockton & Darlington Railway should be an occasion for everyone, including our more senior residents. There are many in the town, and further afield, who either spent their lives in the service of British Rail, or whose partners did. We want these people to be at the heart of this celebration.

This tea dance invokes the spirit of Shildon of bygone years, and the tradition of the Institute through the ages. For example we know that as part of the celebrations of 1975 the Institute held not one but four special celebratory dance evenings.

We do not intend to restrict attendance at this event to former railway workers and their partners, but we will specifically target them with our publicity material and where possible will present a direct invitation to them by for example contacting residents of railway housing association properties in the Shildon and Bishop Auckland area.

What are we going to make happen?

Our plan is to work with our Modern Sequence Dance Club who already have a network of contacts across the area.

We have discussed the proposal with them and they helped shape to shape it by advising us on the band to engage and the timing.

We have therefore engaged the Little Big Band from Leeds to provide entertainment, though there will also be dancing, for those that are able, to some recorded music that the dance club use at their Tuesday evening sessions.

Our Institute's team of committee and volunteers will decorate the hall to create a special atmosphere and will bake a selection of traditional favourites such a scones and fancy cakes, and will serve tea and coffee throughout the event.

We will provide a sound system for the recorded music and some tasteful lighting to create a special atmosphere. We'll also seek to engage appropriate speakers including Timothy Hackworth's great-great-granddaughter Jane Hackworth-Young to open the proceedings.

When is this going to happen?

We chose to have this event in the Spring months so that the days are a little longer and outdoor temperatures warmer without being potentially overwhelming. The event will also be during the daytime as we know from speaking to our older members that many no longer enjoy going out on an evening.

The event will take place on **the afternoon of Saturday 10th May 2025** in the Main Hall at the Institute

