

Morpeth will be proud of new look station... Steven Hughes

“Brilliant!” That was the reaction of The National Lottery Heritage Fund’s Senior Investment Manager Steven Hughes when he recently toured Morpeth Railway Station to see for himself the work being done to give the town’s Victorian station a new lease of life at the start of the second decade of the 21st Century writes **Ian Leech**.

Accompanied by Doug Phillips (Chairman) and David Lodge (Chief Executive Officer) of Greater Morpeth Development Trust (GMDT) which is leading the partnership to repair, restore, conserve and preserve the original characteristics of the historic railway station, Mr Hughes visited Morpeth as work is nearing completion on the transformational project.

After his tour he was confident to be able to tell me: “Morpeth is definitely going to be proud of what is being achieved at the town’s station.”

The Heritage Fund, using money raised by National Lottery players, is the biggest single funder of the station revamp that is costing £2.2 million, giving a development grant and then a full award of £790,000. Other significant supporters of the station include the Railway Heritage Trust, Northumberland County Council, North East Rural Growth Network, train and track operators Northern and Network Rail.

However, the lottery investment proved to be the catalyst for drawing in the other funders who each had their own reasons for investing in the station’s preservation and conservation whilst all buying into the Trust’s vision of developing a transport hub that is fit-for-purpose for modern rail travellers as well as being a gateway to the town that Morpeth can be proud of.

The station is a Grade II Listed Building that was designed by the renowned architect Benjamin Green for the Newcastle & Berwick Railway Company with the first trains calling there from 1846.

The partnership has been at pains to ensure as much of the old building as possible, has been faithfully restored to its original Green design including re-instating the 15 tall chimneys which externally gave the station its distinctive appearance, as well as re-opening its grand portico entrance.

Internally travellers will find a café



Lottery Heritage Fund Senior Investment Manager Steven Hughes giving his back to the work now nearing completion at Morpeth Railway Station



Original fireplaces from when the station opened in 1846 have been retained

waiting to serve them for the first time; new toilets including one for disabled users; and a dedicated ticket office while un-used rooms have been transformed into much-needed office space for up to seven small businesses. A caboose-style building in the station forecourt will also be occupied as a taxi office.

Work at the station is expected to be

completed in just a few weeks time followed by the confirmation of tenants to occupy the offices and an operator to run the station café.

Mr Hughes who has been the Heritage Fund’s case officer at the station throughout the project, told me he initially visited Morpeth when the idea of refurbishing its main building, was

first being mooted. “Railway projects, such as Morpeth station, are relatively rare and other than heritage railways very few have been supported with funding,” he said.

“They can be problematic which is a nice way to put it, because they not easy projects to work on.”

Morpeth could perhaps have been a case which fell into that category because it is a busy East Coast Main Line northern halt between London and Edinburgh which meant, for instance, that scaffolding had to be put up and dismantled during the night over three weekends when the power was cut off to the track.

Space was also tight for construction crews to work in, and at the same time safety-wise they had to be very aware of the numbers of travellers boarding and alighting trains at Morpeth.

As Mr Hughes said, however, what swung the decision to grant lottery funding Morpeth’s way was that – in his words – the project ‘simply stacked up!’

“The impact a project like this can make on a building that has been left more or less empty and neglected for a long time, can be amazing when its full potential is taken into consideration,” he said.

“A lot of the time with buildings such as Morpeth Railway Station you have to look beyond what is there to see what the potential is and what investing in it could bring by way of economic advantages to an area as well as the benefits for visitors and the local community.

“That is where our funding can make such a difference to a lot of projects like this because without it they would simply not stack up. It costs more money to bring them back into use than they will be worth but at the end of the day they are important historic buildings and that is why we introduced the heritage enterprise programme.

“A building such as Morpeth Railway Station is not only a vital facility for local people to use but is a gateway into the town for visitors and the first impression they will now get when they arrive here is of a beautifully restored, marvellously historic old building. Even looking out of a carriage window as a train passes through, the visual impression passengers will see is of an impressive entrance to the town.

“Often a station is the first thing people see when they arrive somewhere and if it looks a bit run-down and neglected it can immediately put into your mind is the rest of the town like that as well! With

projects such as this we have to look at how they fit in with what else might be going on in an area and consider whether they are a strategic fit; who else is signed up to what is happening plus whether the local community is also behind what is being proposed.”

Mr Hughes admitted there were times when doubt was cast over whether the project would ever get off the ground but he added: “We never wanted to take a step back and withdraw potential funding and the fact that we all pressed on shows the value we attached to the project because we could see the importance of it to Morpeth.

“Ultimately, we wanted to see the station project happen and support the vision and determination of the Trust to make it happen, and now it is nearing completion it looks amazing.”

“This is the first time I have walked around the station for a little while and the changes are just brilliant and what has been done has totally transformed what was here before. A lot of the time when you return to projects such as this it is hard to picture what was here before and that is the case here. Now the station looks so different and so vastly improved from when I first saw it. It is just terrific!”

New extended hours for the station ticket office

Among the prime beneficiaries of the work nearing completion to modernise Morpeth’s railway station as well as preserving its Victorian charm and character, will, of course, be the travelling public using trains to get to and from the town.

Because among the improved facilities for passengers will be a new ticket office that will be open extended hours, modern toilets and a café.

Currently the ticket office is open from early morning until lunchtime, but once the station work is completed passengers will be able to buy a ticket over the counter from 6.30am until 5.30pm. There will also be two ticket machines inside the reception area of the new-look station,

as well as one on the platform that passengers will still be able to use any time of the day or night.

Two new Arriva Rail North members of staff who will be running the ticket office as Station Supervisors are Wendy Howie and Michael Herring.

There will be new toilets – including one for disabled

users – inside what will be a station reception area and waiting room in the improved main building, and, of course, for the first time a café selling hot drinks and snacks once an operator has been secured.

Outside in the forecourt of the station which will be a private car park for the office tenants, and a dedicated taxi office is also being built in the unusual style of an American caboose

guards van.

Kerry Peters, Northern Head of Trains & Stations, says she believes the new facilities will be welcomed by travellers when the new-look station is open.

“Together, they will make travelling through Morpeth Railway Station, a much better experience for passengers,” she said.



Morpeth Station manager Sarah Kennedy is pictured with new Station Supervisor Wendy Howie and Betty Greener, who has just retired after working in the ticket office for many years. Michael Herring was unavailable for the photograph.