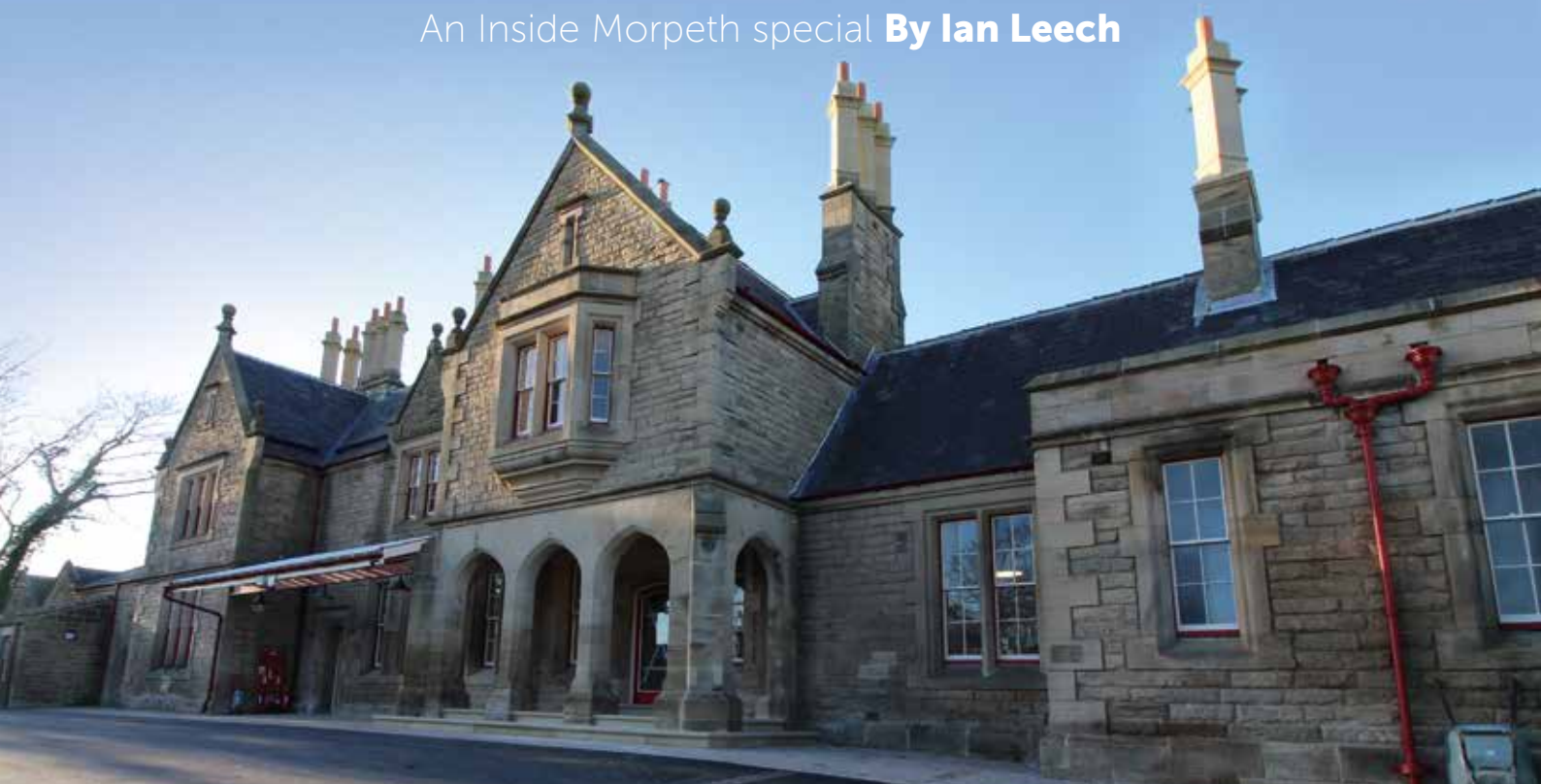


MORPETH RAILWAY STATION

NEW LEASE OF LIFE FOR A PIECE OF RAILWAY HISTORY

An Inside Morpeth special **By Ian Leech**



**Greater Morpeth
Development Trust**
Regeneration of town & countryside
www.gmtdt.net

Working in partnership to deliver quality projects in Morpeth

Northumberland
Northumberland County Council



**NORTHERN
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northern
by ariva

Alderson Law



MAIN SOUTH STATION ENTRANCE TOWARDS COOPIES LANE

EAST ELEVATION

MAIN NORTH PLATFORM ELEVATION TO RAILWAY TRACKS

SIGNALLING START OF A NEW ERA AT MORPETH STATION

Tuesday September 8th 2020 marks another momentous day in the long history of one of the stand-out railway buildings along the whole length of the main East Coast line between London's King's Cross and Waverley Stations in Edinburgh.



Generations of passengers have travelled through Morpeth Station

The day when the elegant Grade II Listed Morpeth Station which welcomed its first passengers as railway travel was being pioneered across Britain during the reign of Queen Victoria, was given a new lease of life as a modern transport hub at the same time as providing much-needed new workspace for budding local businesses.

For the past 18 months work has been underway to restore and conserve the grand old station built in 1846 for the Newcastle & Berwick Railway Company, by retaining so many of its original features designed by the renowned architect Benjamin Green, at the same time as providing 21st Century rail travel facilities and that functional office space for small firms.

The result is testament to the team efforts of a partnership brought together over the past seven years by Greater Morpeth Development Trust to raise the £2.3 million needed to carry out the work. The Trust is a community-based organisation which has done so much valued and varied work around Morpeth over the past decade ranging from staging popular entertainment events, starting a community cinema in the town, improving access and signage to riverside and woodland walks and publishing the work of local historian authors.

Prior to the station's restoration GMDT's most spectacular achievement was to project manage the restoration and conservation of the 300-year-old Morpeth Town Hall, designed by Sir John Vanburgh of Blenheim Palace

and Castle Howard fame, whilst safeguarding its future as a modern civic building in keeping with its historic past.

When the station restoration and redevelopment was first mooted, the initial hurdle GMDT had to overcome was to convince potential partners that as a small organisation with only one full time and two part-time members of staff plus a board of volunteer directors, it could plan, raise funding for and deliver such an ambitious project.

A number of small grants at the feasibility and development stages of the project from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Northumberland County Council, the Homes & Communities Association, CORE and the Architectural Heritage Fund, helped shape the final delivery plan.

Pointing to its successful delivery of the Town Hall restoration, however, the Trust won the backing of the Railway Heritage Trust which supports the preservation, upkeep and future sustainability of buildings and structures which form part of Britain's historic rail network.

At the same time GMDT was able to secure a development grant then a full award of £790,000 from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, to set the project in motion before the two initial funders were joined in the station partnership by Northumberland County Council, the North East Rural Growth Network, and track and train operators Network Rail and Arriva North.

With the funds in place contractors STP Construction were able to move on site in the early months of 2019 to begin what the company's site manager Carl



Re-instating the tall chimneys has restored the station's characterful appearance

Neasham-Gilbert likened to being a job midway between a rock and a hard place. What he meant by that was that his team would be working trackside of the busy main line between London and Edinburgh with high-speed trains thundering through Morpeth station at very regular intervals during the working day, while on the other side of the building work space was severely constrained by a heavily trafficked road leading into the busy Coopies Lane Industrial Estate.

Added to that, the construction crew had to consider as paramount, the safety of passengers walking around the station platforms quite literally under their feet!

All this had to be done without disrupting rail traffic with the only exception being when scaffolding had to be erected and dismantled – jobs which had to be undertaken during the dead of night over a couple of weekends when the power to the lines could be safely isolated. To get the work done a team of 30 scaffolders, eight glaziers, 12 joiners and labourers had to work through two Saturday and Sunday nights in time to finish by 4am on the Monday morning. On the first occasion the last labourer finished sweeping the platform at 4.01am, so tight was the scheduling!

During the work programme the overriding aim of GMDT and its partners was to preserve the integrity of the station building as it was specified by Benjamin Green who with his father John was also responsible for the design of iconic North East structures such as the Theatre Royal and the landmark Grey's Monument in Newcastle.



“ The changes that have been made are brilliant and have totally transformed the station... ”

**Steven Hughes
Senior Regional Investment
Manager, The National Lottery
Heritage Fund**



Original fireplaces have been retained in some of the office

However, years of leaking roofs, generations of pigeons gaining access through holes in the roof, water damp and rot had taken a severe toll on both the external and internal fabric of the station building. All this damage had to be carefully removed, replaced or repaired wherever possible, to maintain the style and manner of Green's original design. For example, as many as possible of the original timber window frames have been repaired or refurbished by hand, a time-consuming task but one considered to be eminently worthwhile. An elegant Victorian portico at the front of the building has also been opened up again, to re-instate a classically stylish entrance to the building.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of the determination of the partners to restore the building to Green's specifications, however, has been the reinstatement of the 15 very tall chimneys which gave the station its distinctive and characterful appearance. For safety reasons they had been considerably reduced in height a number of years ago.

Specialists stone masons Classic Masonry from North Shields undertook the work using 'Blaxter' sandstone specified by the station project conservation architect John Curtis from Napper Architects.. A total of 81 stones some weighing nearly half a tonne, were quarried from near Otterburn, and dressed ready to be hauled some 50 feet into the air using the block-and-tackle lifting method.

Now the work is done and the newly refurbished Morpeth Railway Station can start welcoming passengers to its new facilities. A café had been created



The Flying Scotsman arriving at Morpeth Station

“What has been done at Morpeth Station is transformational - an almost derelict building has been brought back to life...”

**Andy Savage,
Executive Director
Railway Heritage Trust**

inside the main building along with a modern ticket office, new toilet facilities and a caboose guard's van-style taxi office has been built in the corner of the station forecourt.

Internally, seven offices have been created for use by small businesses in what was previously unused work space inside the station building. Already six of those offices are in the process of being let to local businesses while tenants have also been identified to run the café and the taxi office.

Today, Greater Morpeth Development Trust and its partners are proud to welcome to Morpeth, Sir Peter Hendy, Chairman of Network Rail, to officially open the new look station and to see for himself the work that has been done to transform it into a modern transport hub at the same time as preserving the style and character of one of Benjamin Green's most elegant Victorian railway stations.

Green was also responsible for the design of a number of smaller stations along the East Coast line through Northumberland, some of which are still standing, but Morpeth is the only one remaining in use to passengers.

“What we see today is the successful outcome of a huge amount of work over the past seven years by our Trust and its partners,” said GMDT Chief Executive Officer David Lodge,

“It has been a long – and at times difficult road – to get to where we are today but we have persevered in our determination to not only preserve what is a wonderful example of Victorian railway architecture, but to give travellers to and from Morpeth the very best facilities we could provide for them.

“At the same time, we have been enterprising in using empty office space as much-needed accommodation for small businesses in what surely must be a unique location right next to the main East Coast line.

“The work carried out at Morpeth is amazing...”

**Kerry Peters
Head of Northern
Trains & Stations North East**

“Morpeth Railway Station has been such an important juncture on the line for nigh on 175 years as a gateway not just into the town but to the wider Northumberland. How it is used today

“The development of an enterprise hub and a cafe will, in time, directly create a further 18 rural jobs...”

**Colin Bell
Business Growth Director
at the North East LEP**

is a far cry from those days long ago when some of the very first passenger trains were pulling into the station. But restored to its original Victorian elegance, the station continues to make a decisive statement about how important an amenity it is in Morpeth as well as being a living reminder of a very different era of rail travel.

“Greater Morpeth Development Trust has been at the forefront of giving two such historic buildings in the town a viable and sustainable future and that has been a major achievement for us. However, as a Trust we are not just about safeguarding the town's heritage because we do so much more as a community organisation to help make Morpeth a better place to live and work.

“The station has been at the heart of life in Morpeth since the middle of the 19th Century and will remain so for many, many years to come. We believe the people of Morpeth will be rightly proud of what we have achieved at Morpeth Railway Station as a partnership team.”