

APPENDIX 4

TREES IN THE STOCKTON AND DARLINGTON RAILWAY CORRIDOR

Trees are of paramount importance to the setting of the S&DR and the walking and cycling route that follows it. Trees are located both within and alongside the enclosed boundary of the active and abandoned sections of the line, thus creating a corridor within the borough from Whiley Hill in the north, through the urban area, to Goosepool in the east. Many trees are in the Council's control; a substantial number are on Network Rail and other private land. The Durham Wildlife Trust and the Forestry Commission also have responsibilities along the corridor.

The nature of the S&DR trees is such that it does not fall easily into any of the categories defined in Darlington Council's draft Tree and Woodland Strategy. Instead, the S&DR corridor is one of a number of green corridors following railway routes (active and abandoned) and watercourses which combine to form a network, readily visible from the satellite view of Google Maps. Trees and other vegetation in these corridors require protection and management in order to provide improved and effective habitats for wildlife.

The heritage and ecological importance of the S&DR corridor is recognised in the Darlington Green Infrastructure Strategy, the emerging Darlington Local Plan and in the Project Programme of the S&DR Heritage Action Zone. The 200th anniversary celebrations for the S&DR in 2025 will generate thousands of visitors to the town from throughout the UK and overseas. They will expect the S&DR corridor to look its best.

Existing Trees

No trees were likely to have been planted when the S&DR was built in 1825 but in the Darlington section the track was contained within thorn hedges to prevent animals and people from straying on to the line. Over time, and since the closure of the Fighting Cocks Branch, some of the hedges have been left to grow and develop into trees and tall bushes. Addition trees have self-sown in undisturbed areas.

Roughly half of the 15k of the S&DR corridor is within the built-up area of the town. All but 6k from the East Coast Main Line and Oak Tree remains an active railway. Many trees line the route along the abandoned section in Council ownership east of the A66 Bypass. There is also a significantly important tree presence along the active line in both the urban and rural sections and this has not been unduly affected by Network Rail's right to remove growth for operational safety reasons.

The trees currently within the Northgate Conservation Area are protected by the planning system. However, consideration is being given to designating a conservation area covering the abandoned section of trackbed and adjoining land between the A66 Bypass and Oak Tree as a pilot to designating the whole 26 miles of the S&DR main line.

The Council-owned trackbed has, since the closure of the Fighting Cocks Branch in the 1970s, become a popular walking and cycling route, recently resurfaced as part of the HAZ programme to create a continuous 26 mile route from Witton Park to Stockton Riverside. A management strategy and specification is required for the trees and other vegetation, which has two aspects;

1 To ensure that the green corridor is maintained with the best interests of it being a suitable habitat and corridor for wildlife, and

2 To maintain an attractive setting of the S&DR for users of the Walking and Cycling Route Heritage Trail by;

- Keeping the path clear of fallen branches and trees,
- Avoiding root damage to features of heritage significance,
- Keeping drainage clear to prevent flooding,
- Removing leaf fall build-up on the path,
- Avoiding obstructing important views.

New tree planting

There are three distinct opportunities for additional tree planting along the S&D corridor in Darlington;

1 Tornado way

The original proposals for Tornado Way, formerly termed the Eastern Transport Corridor, included extensive tree planting on either side of the road, together with the retention of the S&DR trackbed and its enhancement as a landscaped footpath and cycle route (see below). Unfortunately almost all traces of the historic railway trackbed were destroyed when the road was eventually built and the landscape concept was abandoned in favour of open plan wildflower meadow mix areas of grassland. This has not been successful and the result is a fairly bleak unkempt and noisy highway dominated corridor of motor traffic, street lighting columns, highway signs, traffic lights and views of industrial development and areas of car storage. It presents an unattractive experience for those following the footpath and cycle route alongside the road.

Conclusion

It is important that the Council's Tree and Woodland Strategy encompasses trees in the S&DR corridor, whether they be in Council or private ownership, within or outside the boundary of the line, or whether the line is active or abandoned. Existing and new trees deserve protection and proper care and attention if they are to thrive and contribute to the value of the corridor to wildlife and to the setting of the S&DR and its walking and cycling route.

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