

Following the global launch of rail's bicentenary, Alan Hyde from the national Railway 200 team highlights why this year's 200th anniversary of the modern railway is a unique opportunity for shared storytelling and for the railway to remind people of its role and purpose in national life

Railway 200: A once-in-a-generation opportunity for rail

In years to come railway people, customers and communities will, hopefully, look back on this year's 200th anniversary of the modern railway with a greater understanding and appreciation of rail's role in national life: its past, present and future.

By their very nature, historic national milestones don't come around very often - and this is a big one. For some, Railway 200 will be the biggest anniversary of their professional lifetime. It provides a unique opportunity for the industry to come together, to get involved, and tell a big, compelling and coherent story about rail's transformative impact on people's lives and livelihoods and how it's shaping a better, more sustainable future.

A rousing start to the year-long celebrations

The anniversary year got off to a rousing start at noon on New Year's Day with more than 50 railways and 200 locomotives, across five continents, blowing whistles and horns in time-honoured fashion to signal the start of a global celebration of a British invention. The Heritage Railway Association claims that the Railway 200 Whistle-Up was the biggest railway heritage mass participation event ever. Mainline operators, train modellers Hornby and even Thomas the Tank Engine also greeted the anniversary year in style. The event attracted widespread media coverage, including BBC Breakfast and The Times, and social media was buzzing with contributed clips from across Britain and beyond.

The next day The Royal Mint launched its commemorative coin set for 2025, featuring a £2 coin that celebrates the opening of the Stockton and Darlington Railway (S&DR) on 27 September 1825, a journey that changed the world forever. The rail coin will be available individually later in the year.

And, thanks to industry partnership, there was the launch earlier this month of the 200th anniversary rail sale, with 50 per cent off more than two million advance purchase tickets, offering great days out across Britain up to the end of March.

A unique charity partnership has also been launched, bringing together Alzheimer's Research



The commemorative Railway 200 coin. Image: Royal Mint

UK with the Railway Children, Transport Benevolent Fund, Railway Mission and Railway Benefit Fund. The partnership aims to raise £200,000 this year and help to protect rail memories for the future.

Coming down the track

With the support of partners, the anniversary activities and events will gather momentum and profile, with peak interest expected in September, the 200th anniversary month. More than 120 events,

mainly from community and heritage railways, are already listed on a searchable interactive map on the Railway 200 website, which is being regularly updated - www.railway200.co.uk/search-for-activities-and-events

In a partner-led campaign like Railway 200, all involvement - big or small - is welcome. It's hoped that the anniversary celebrations will touch the lives of people in communities across the UK and abroad, in a variety of meaningful ways, and encourage »

» more people from all backgrounds to consider a career in the railway, given the current skills gap which is predicted to widen as experienced rail staff retire.

The celebrations are not dependent on one single activation, which could prove costly, potentially disruptive to the network and not engage with as many people as a broader-based programme of activity over 12 months.

Some of the 'big ticket' highlights lined up include:

- An amazing nine-month international festival – www.sdr200.co.uk - at world-class venues in Durham and Tees Valley, from March to November, inspired by the opening of the S&DR.
- An eye-catching touring exhibition train, called 'Inspiration', that will criss-cross Britain from this summer for 12 months, creating a buzz at main line stations, heritage railways and rail freight depots. Developed in partnership with the National Railway Museum (NRM), part of the Science Museum Group (SMG), the train aims to celebrate railway innovation and inspire schoolchildren and others to consider a career in rail.
- The NRM's 50th birthday celebrations, including the summer re-opening of its refurbished and refreshed Station Hall, housing the Royal carriages.
- The Greatest Gathering, a fun-filled family event from 1 to 3 August at Alstom's historic Litchfield Lane site in Derby, the new home of the railway. It will showcase the largest temporary collection of trains and rail exhibits for a generation.

Also, look out for the imminent launch of the Railway 200 merchandise range, to be retailed by SMG.

Shared storytelling

Activities and events can help to tell a story. But other ways can be explored too, such as talks and presentations, blogs, letters to the local newspaper, news stories, or sharing positive experiences of rail on social media.

Planned campaigns or investment stories can be easily overlaid with Railway 200 messaging to convey a continuation of rail's pioneering pedigree and tradition of innovation, under the banner of the 200th anniversary.

Potentially, if the industry gets it right, this year's anniversary and what it means for the nation could be the biggest UK rail story ever told and the biggest partnership-based UK rail campaign ever. That's the ambition.

As we know, a positive profile is hard won. But this year's celebration provides a big opportunity to reset the railway's relationship with the public, to encourage more people to travel by train, to appreciate the role of rail freight more and to attract the next generation of pioneering talent.

Railway 200 can also help to create a bridging narrative for the industry as much of it transitions to a simpler, better railway under Great British Railways.

To tell rail's past, present and future story, four main themes will be explored:



The Railway 200 Whistle-Up at the North Yorks Moors Railway

- Education and Skills
- Innovation, Technology and Environment
- Heritage, Culture and Tourism
- Celebrating Railway People

How to get involved in Railway 200

As a start-up anniversary campaign with modest marketing spend, Railway 200 is reliant on industry partners to amplify and customise messages, and contribute to the storytelling, to reach and engage with as wide an audience as possible. Indeed, if the major industry players, through their social media channels, were simply to share a Railway 200 post it could reach at least 16 million followers, at the click of a button and at no cost.

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Last year was, in large part, about preparation and intra-industry engagement - to turn awareness of rail's anniversary opportunity into ownership, not just involvement. This year is about delivery.

There are myriad ways to own the opportunity. The size and nature of the opportunity is what our individual and collective imagination allows it to be. It's not too late to contribute.

In presentations and meetings throughout last year, the small, national Railway 200 team, led by programme manager Emma Roberts, offered suggestions on how to get involved. If in doubt, please don't hesitate to email railway200@gbrrt.co.uk

But, don't delay. The clock is ticking on this once-in-a-generation opportunity.

- Follow Railway 200 on social media (X, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn), share posts and post your own, using #Railway200.
- Organise events and activities; get them registered and publicised on an interactive map on the Railway 200 website.
- Download a partner toolkit, full of handy materials and messages.
- Apply the Railway 200 logo across your communications channels and content.
- Share your rail stories so they can feature in a Great Rail Tales podcast and other media.
- Sign up for a monthly newsletter.
- Send in your content (photos, films, animations)
- Advocate anew for the railway, explaining its purpose and value to UK plc.
- Get railway people excited and involved in what 2025 has to offer.

In 2026, let's make sure we don't look back with regret – no wistful thoughts of 'if only we'd have done this or that' during our milestone year. Now is the time to contribute to the next chapter in rail's revolutionary story. **»**

www.railway200.co.uk