



Creating Connected Tourism Hubs: North Coast 500 and Northumberland 250

 Northern Scotland & North East England

The North Coast 500 and Northumberland 250 are two key initiatives in the UK which have accelerated rural tourism by advertising destinations to local, national and global audiences. They have been powerful tools in unlocking the potential of rural locations by providing clear routes for accessing them which has enabled a large impact upon local businesses and communities.

The North Highland Initiative: North Coast 500

The NHI use tourism as a vehicle for creating sustainable communities. This has resulted in the creation of The North Coast 500, a 516-mile route that has attracted an audience of 3.3 billion people around the globe in 2018 and created an additional 200 jobs in its first year of operation.

Following the creation and development of North Coast 500 Ltd, it has received

private investment, however NHI remains a significant investor.

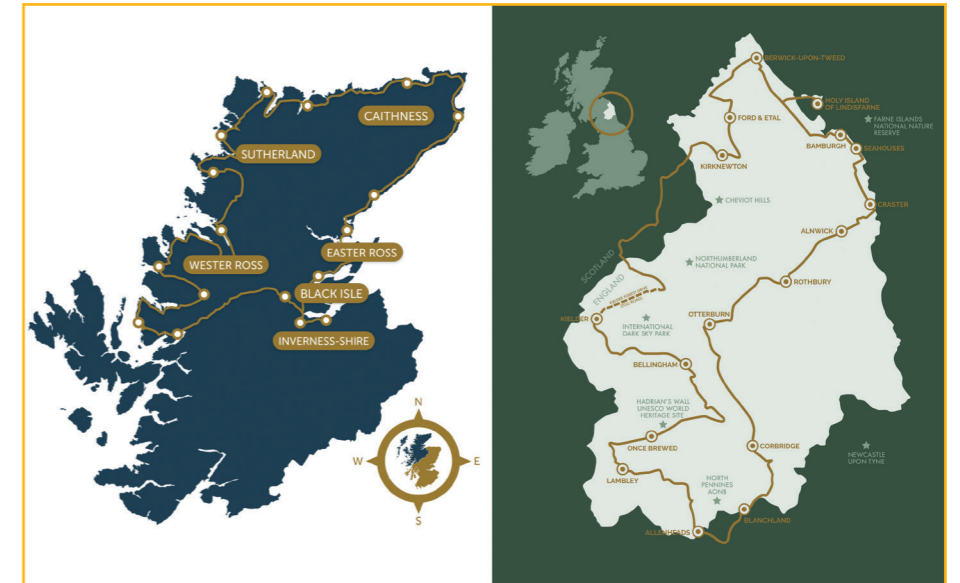
Subsequently, NHI has assisted communities with fundraising and the development of projects. The success of the NC500 has prompted the NHI work with communities to create projects with community and wider regional benefits.

Northumberland 250

Northumberland 250 is a small private business and primarily an online platform promoting the diverse attractions of Northumberland along a 250-mile

route. The business also provides the opportunity to hire a Land Rover to enjoy the landscape of Northumberland.

The founders of the business travelled the whole of Northumberland to identify a logical route to travel Northumberland. The concept and wider project originated on Instagram and has been a powerful tool for developing relationships with North East businesses and to generate marketing collaborations.



Relevant links:

The North Highland Initiative: North Coast 500

Website: <http://www.northhighlandinitiative.co.uk/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/NorthHighlandsScotland/>

Twitter: https://twitter.com/north_highlands

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/northcoast500/>

Northumberland 250

Website: <https://northumberland250.com/>

Press Release: <https://northern-insight.co.uk/media/bringing-northumberlands-adventure-to-life/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Northumberland-250-102766235237010>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/nland250/>



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Funded through the Just Transition Fund and the Carbon Tax Fund



Interview Questions and Responses

The North Highland Initiative: North Coast 500

What are the origins of the project?

In 2015, the North Coast 500 was launched by the North Highland Initiative (NHI) to strengthen the tourism sector. The route now brings in more than £20 million in tourism spend per annum and brings benefits to over 500 miles of scenery, beginning and ending in Inverness.

The North Coast 500 concept and brand was created by NHI and is now owned, managed and developed by North Coast 500 Ltd, a privately funded company. North Coast 500 Ltd was established in 2017 to create a self-sustaining commercial entity which could promote the North Coast 500 brand. NHI held a majority stake in the organisation until 2019 when Wildland Ventures Ltd took the majority stake.

How did they secure funding?

A range of corporate, business and public sector partners support the North Coast 500. The North Coast 500 brand is now monetised through license agreements. As a result, they have established Business Club, Business Partner and Corporate Partners memberships which enjoy the use of the brand as part of the membership. Business memberships start from £110 per annum, price depending on the size of the business. This means that businesses can use the 'North Coast 500' and 'NC500' brand, are listed on the website and receive social media promotions and monthly newsletters.

Additional actors have applied for external funding to maintain the infrastructure of the NC500. For example, Highland Council has bid for £44 million from UK Government's Levelling Up Fund to fund road improvements along the west of the NC500 route.

How is the project managed or governed?

The project was originally managed and governed by the North Highland Initiative, and influenced by the Highland Council and Scottish Government. The project is directly managed and governed by North Coast 500 Ltd, a registered limited company in Scotland. The company has key corporate partners including The Singleton Distillery, Johnny Walker Clynelish Distillery, the Caledonian Sleeper, Dunnet Bay Distillers, Arnold Clark and Highland Titles.

What are the impacts of the project to date?

The route has been the most successful route development in Scotland and has project economic benefits to the North Highlands. The Moffat Centre for Tourism at Glasgow Caledonian University found that the route generated over £22.89 million in GVA in 2018 and supports sales for accommodation, retail and attractions near the route.

Northumberland 250

What are the origins of the project?

David Cook founded Northumberland 250 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and developed the start-up alongside his job in the sports travel sector¹. David was passionate about travel and wanted to enable people to explore Northumberland. He then created a route to travel Northumberland, which marked the birth of the Northumberland 250 concept. He took inspiration from projects such as the NC500 and the Cabot Trail in Canada.

How is funding secured?

The business grew after spreading organically on Instagram and the business sells a wide range of products on its website to generate revenue. However the business also makes charitable donations. For example, the official map for the Northumberland 250 costs £6.00 and every 25p from the purchase of these maps is donated to the Kielderhead Wildwood Project.

How is the project managed or governed?

The project is directly managed and governed by its co-founders David Cook and Ella Mckendrick as a registered limited micro business.

What are the impacts of the project to date?

Customer feedback has been overwhelmingly positive, and the route has encouraged people to visit Northumberland. The company also advocates its 'leave no trace principles', which encourage tourists to be responsible and minimise the impacts of their journey on the landscape.

In addition, the Northumberland 250 has collaborated with local businesses and the wider creative sector in the North East, generating new collaborative projects with organisations such as BOX Pizza, Hesleyside Huts and Defender Camping. The business has also collaborated with North East based artists and social media professionally to develop exposure for local talent.

¹ BRINGING NORTHUMBERLAND'S ADVENTURE TO LIFE – Northern Insight Magazine (northern-insight.co.uk)



Lough Ree Distillery (Phase 2 – Visitor Centre and Facility Expansion)

 Ballinasloe, County Galway

The development of the micro-distillery began in August 2018, named Phase 1 by the Lough Ree Distillery (LRD). The project has currently moved into Phase 2, which involves the construction of a full-scale commercial whiskey distillery and visitor experience on the main site in Lanesborough. The aim is to increase production of LRD whiskey, gin and vodka after seeing initial success since 2018 launch in Phase 1. With sales and exports growing, a new site is required to enable greater production. The new site will also offer visitor experiences and bespoke services.

The construction of a production unit and related infrastructure, along with a visitor centre will be complete by the end of 2023, with an additional “Ambassador Suite” planned for 2025.



The project is aiming to create 20 jobs during construction, and 25 jobs within 5 years of operating. The LRD secured €1,000,000 from the Just Transition Fund to support Phase 2.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you as a business agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

The Lough Ree Distillery, as a private business, established a business plan and set a level of product as a key objective they wanted the Lough Ree Distillery to deliver.

How did you decide upon a single project idea that could deliver against those objectives?

By setting out a business plan, the Lough Ree Distillery then planned an initial micro distillery to establish initial operations in Lanesborough and to meet an amount of product to cover initial capital costs. The development of the larger distillery and visitor centre, named “Phase 2” and funded by the Just Transition Fund was part of their original ambitious long-term plan, and the JTF appeared at an opportune time for the Lough Ree Distillery.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects. Has that consensus held or does it remain challenged by some in the business? If so, how are you dealing with that?

The Lough Ree Distillery was formed by members of the same family with the initial ambition of establishing a gin distillery in Lanesborough, before diversifying into vodka and whiskey. The consensus for establishing a global brand but with local roots in Lanesborough has not changed.

How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

Planning and managing the initial distillery launch and the subsequent Phase 2 of the project using just transition funding involved the management team of three senior individuals in the same family specialising in particular areas and hiring individuals when appropriate, with the current LRD having a team of 7 individuals. The key areas are:

- Branding and brand development
- Finance and funding
- Supply chain development



Funded through the Just Transition Fund and the Carbon Tax Fund



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How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans. How have you managed that process?

When applying for the JTF to support the LRD Phase 2 developments, the team experienced obstacles in understanding State Aid and match funding. The team worked closely with the LEOs and with the centralised JTF team to fully understand the complexities and arrangements of the funding for Phase 2.

How did you identify a funding need?

The LRD identified a need for funding by obtaining costs through creating an initial business plan and therefore clearly understood the capital costs required for the visitor centre and expanded facilities in Phase 2.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

The LRD managed the process for bidding for funding internally. However, this was only possible as the three core members of the business had the knowledge and experience to do so, as engineers and an accountant with industry experience in the sector.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The LRD required specialised expertise for developing a brand and approached Bord Bia (the Irish Food Board) for support the establishment of a strong brand. This has supported the initial growth of the business and provides a strong foundation for Phase 2.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

The hardest difficulties were centred upon applying and securing for the JTF and obtaining a clear understanding of State Aid and match funding using money from the EU. This required working closely with local public agency partners, such as the LEO. Tight timescales were placed upon the LRD through the State Aid verification process and the LRD managed to overcome this difficulty by having experienced individuals in the business and working in collaboration with relevant public agencies, such as the LEO.

Has the business managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

The LRD has managed to stay true to the original project vision of establishing a visitor centre and expanded distillery. The LRD is about to commence construction and will begin to draw down funding in the coming months.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

The key learnings from the LRD include:

- Understanding the Just Transition Fund application process.
- State Aid categories and what they mean for you as an organisation.
- What match funding means for you as an organisation and how to access it.
- Project selection criteria before undertaking a largescale funding application, ensuring the project is properly planned through a strong business plan.
- Long-term sustainability of the project, wherein generating revenue is key and ensuring sound commercial viability is key. The LRD noted that projects which are entirely grant funded project may be constrained long term.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

The LRD stated that setting up the micro distillery was key for providing a basis for applying for funding for Phase 2 and enabling project delivery. The LRD needed to do that to start a presence and to establish itself as an active distillery.

The initial micro distillery was funded by EIS (Enterprise Investment Scheme) in 2017 to build the distilling facility, purchase stock and equipment. This has allowed the LRD to establish its distinctive brand and the LRD management team learned a lot from starting from a small scale.

Another key decision, as a business, was diversifying into whiskey and blended whiskey to capture a global market.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your business as you moved through the different phases of the project?

The LRD registered as members of Drinks Ireland and the Irish Whiskey Association who were important for supporting the LRD in the initial phase of establishing the micro distillery and launching initial operations. The LRD also sought external support from Bord Bia, which was critical for establishing the micro distillery and creating a strong brand. The LEO has also supported the LRD by opening networks and relationships in the region.

Key contact

Peter Clancy, Lough Ree Distillery
peter.clancy@lrd.ie

Links

Website: <https://www.lrd.ie/>

Irish Whiskey Magazine (September 2022 Article): <https://www.irishwhiskeymagazine.com/news/latest-news/lough-ree-distillery-commences-distillation/>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/LoughReeDistill>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/LoughReeDistillery>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/loughreedistill/>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3G3vHgl-obLF-KYVxp3bQQ>



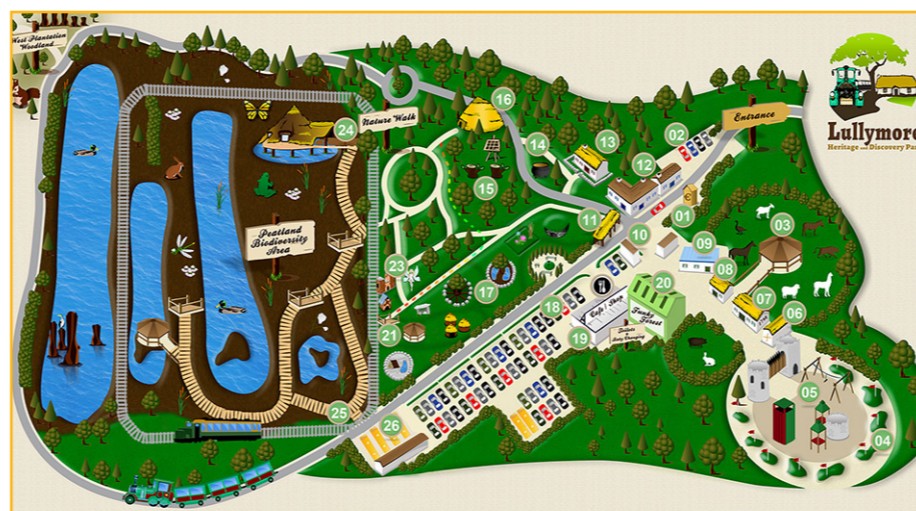
Extension to Peatland Biodiversity Boardwalk – Final Phase of Lullymore Heritage & Discovery Park

Lullymore, County Kildare

This project will enhance the existing Lullymore Heritage Park through a 300-metre extension to the biodiversity boardwalk. This will enable access to the West Plantation Woodland.

Information signage will educate visitors on the Bog of Allen and its capacity to store carbon. The park is a day visitor attraction and a key resource within the region, attracting over 50,000 visitors each year.

The €83,200 grant, secured from the Just Transition Fund, will enable the park to increase its offering, which will contribute towards the continued increase in visitor numbers by 10% every year, which will support additional seasonal and full-time employment. This will support surrounding communities, who can capitalise on the benefits of tourism growth and the rewilding of the bogs.



The extension of the boardwalk is planned to open to visitors in April 2023.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you as a community agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

The Lullymore Heritage and Discovery Park Board formed in 1990s and are using the same mission statement which is to create a viable tourist attraction and to enable the community to become more socially and financially sustainable.

The extension of the boardwalk aligns directly to this mission statement and the board collectively agree on which projects to invest in.

How did you decide upon a single project idea that could deliver against those objectives?

The extension directly aligns with the organisation’s principles as it educates people by getting local residents and tourists out into the peatlands. The long-term goal was extending the boardwalk and using a sustainable material.

This idea was developed by the board and shared in close collaboration with the community in public meetings.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects. Has that consensus held or does it remain challenged by some in the community? If so, how are you dealing with that?

The board members are all committed, understand the organisation’s ethos and are there to support the paid members of staff delivering projects. The board have been key in deciding how to communicate appropriately with the community.

Some members of the community have felt threatened about rewilding and the opening of the boardwalks to increase tourism. Therefore communication has been key and the use of language. The park shared the message of having industrialised peatlands which should be rewilded and organised public meetings with the community and the local Tidy Towns group to share this message.



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How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

The park has hired experienced paid employees to develop projects, using funding generated by tourism revenues. There is a core team of three members of staff with strong project management skills who deeply understand surveying, construction and managing finances.

The first extension required external advice and expertise. However the project management team at the park has developed capacity and ability to manage the extensions internally.

How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans. How have you managed that process?

The approach to constructing and extending the boardwalk is now established and the park has built relationships with key construction contractors since 2012. This relationship is primarily with Ecoplastic, a firm specialising in manufacturing sustainable material for constructing the boardwalk.

When the design of the boardwalk has to change, the park has worked in collaboration with industry experts such as Ecoplastic to plan redesigns.

How did you identify a funding need?

The park are closely linked to contacts managing LEADER funding, the local Public Participation Network and Kildare County Council. The notification of accessing Just Transition Funding for the final extension came through these key organisations.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

The project management team at the park managed the application to the Just Transition Fund and other funding sources over time for the previous extensions, such as LEADER.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

For the first extension the park procured experts and built a strong link to suppliers. This was procured through e-tenders using LEADER funding.

The park also directly procured a firm to install signage for the boardwalk and worked with research experts at Maynooth University to understand heights of the bogs and timings.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

The hardest difficulties were due to COVID-19 and Brexit which increased prices and slowed deliveries of materials. Therefore the park cut the cost of signage to increase spending on the boardwalk materials.

The park worked closely with suppliers and had to complete a change of notice form for the Just Transition Fund as it required a budget movement. This process was undertaken by the core project management team at the park.

Has the community managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

The park is still designing projects to meet its historical and original vision, and the extension has remained true to its original vision.

The community is on board as the park has continually updated them via public meetings, sharing the key message of protecting and educating people on peatlands and increasing visitors to improve the local community.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

A strong amount of trust and belief in a cause is critical for developing projects, alongside having strong leadership through a board. All members of the board have common guiding principles and a clear vision for the project.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

The extension began in 2012 with a united board with an overarching aim and ambition to eventually achieve a full extension. The decision to pursue the final extension was key and it involved waiting for the correct funding opportunity and the Just Transition Fund provided this opportunity.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your community as you moved through the different phases of the project?

The final extension boardwalk project was largely managed by internal expertise with the support of experts on the board.

Key contact

Ray Stapleton, Manager, Lullymore Heritage & Discovery Park
raylullymore@gmail.com

Links

Website for Original Peatland Biodiversity Boardwalk:
<https://www.lullymoreheritagepark.com/peatlands/peatland-biodiversity-trail/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/lullymore/>



The Cavan & Leitrim Railway

 Dromod, County Leitrim

Dromod is a unique family attraction, which allows visitors to ride on heritage locomotives and view their collection of aircraft, buses and steam/diesel locomotives.

The project began in 1992, when a group of enthusiasts visited the site of the original Cavan and Leitrim railway building and track bed. They then purchased the station site and track bed. The group then brought their collection of artefacts, re-laid the railway and constructed a new workshop and carriage shed. In 1995, the first public services operated, enabling visitors to ride the diesel “Dinmore” or steam service “Dromod”. Since then, more acquisitions have arrived at the site, which offers a museum of artefacts and railway rides.



Interview Questions and Responses

How did you decide upon a single project idea?

The project was developed in the 1990s by a group of enthusiasts to demonstrate a piece of Irish heritage to the local community, due to an interest in social history. The group is diverse but all have an interest in the project. The project started out as an interest in heritage and has since developed into a community project.

How did your group agree the key objectives that you wanted your project to deliver?

From the beginning, the objective of the project was to provide an experience to the public which could educate people on what it was like to travel. While the primary aim related to the education of the public, there was also an element of tourism from the beginning.

To do so, the group set up the site from scratch. Everything that is currently on the site has been bought or donated, then assembled or made by volunteers on the site.

Describe the process by which you achieved consensus around objectives and projects?

Initially, an unofficial committee of members was established. This was made of people who shared the same goals and had the drive and motivation to set up the railway. Whilst members of the group have departed, there is still a core committee group which operates the project on a day-to-day basis.

How did you approach planning and project management around your selected idea?

Project management is addressed by the core committee group. Each person within the committee has a different area of expertise, including administrative knowledge, mechanical engineering, admin, railway management, engineering and restoration, and track work.



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How has that stood the test of time through the project? Have you had to revise your plans? How have you managed that process?

There is not a written plan for the project overall, but plans are developed for specific projects. For example, they have developed a conservation management plan. This plan is used to gain agreement on which funding methods might be a good fit and which organisations can be approached for advice. Plans are developed using best practice and the sharing of ideas with other groups.

How did you identify a funding need?

The museum at the Cavan & Leitrim Railway site has a donation fare which raises enough to cover basic expenses for the site such as electricity and water. There is also an open fund for the project, whereby people can donate as much, or as little, as they'd like. Beyond that, specific projects, such as the restoration of a specific artefact, require outside funding.

How have you managed the process of bidding for funding?

The project received EU funding in the 1990s and the project has also received funding from the Heritage Council, Failte Ireland and Leitrim County Council. The funding from Leitrim County Council comes in the form of small community grants (of less than €1000) and is given for specific projects. The bidding process is managed internally on a voluntary basis.

Did you have a need for specialist expertise for your project? If so how did you handle that and approach experts?

The project has never paid for external specialist expertise but has received advice from other groups delivering similar projects to gain direction. There is a degree of goodwill whereby they would help the other groups when needed.

Within the core committee group, each member has a specific area of expertise based on their previous experience gained from setting up other railways. Their knowledge of experiences and challenges in other locations helped them to overcome the challenges in Leitrim.

The public safety element of their project is regulated and requires personnel with specific expertise. While the safety element was obvious, other areas of expertise such as the administration side, social media and event planning have developed over time and grown naturally as more of the public have come through the doors.

What have been the hardest difficulties to overcome and how did you overcome them?

Initially, there was some pessimism from the local community, as community members thought it would be difficult to set up a railway from scratch. This challenge was overcome early on through public engagement.

Operating the railway alongside a full-time job can be difficult. Balancing full-time employment with a voluntary role was important, as there are certain responsibilities to keep in mind to keep the project running such as project sustainability, ensuring expenditure is paid, securing the appropriate insurance and having a duty to the volunteers.

Has the project team managed to stay true to the original project vision? If not, why not? If it has, how has this been achieved?

The project aligns with the initial vision. There was nothing there when the initial group of enthusiasts started in the 1990s. A range of bi-annual projects have resulted in the growth of the project, as it has gained additional artefacts.

This was achieved through the group's own ambitions. Other members have come on board with the project and understand the meaning within the region, meaning they support the project financially or through volunteering.

What have been the biggest learnings from the delivery of your project?

If a community has vision for a particular project, they should expand a project and bring people on board to understand if it is realistic. Community groups should get in touch with other groups if they're in need of direction.

What decisions, or elements of organisation have been the most important in the delivery of your project?

The people involved within the project have become close to each other because they are all dedicated to the objectives of the project. Having a closely bound team driving the projects is key for the success of the railway.

What were the most important sources of advice and guidance for your group as you moved through the different phases of the project?

Community groups have reached out to gain advice or guidance from the project manager of the Dromod and Leitrim Railway and have provided support. This is critical for developing projects and understanding the work of other communities. Therefore, undertaking research into what other similar communities are doing across Ireland and reaching out to them is critical.

Key contact

Darragh Connolly, The Cavan & Leitrim Railway
dingletrain53@gmail.com

Links

Website: <https://www.cavanandleitrimrailway.com/>

YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/user/TheCLR2011>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/cavanandleitrimrailway>