

LEADER

Community-Led Local Development



National Rural Network

LEADER 2014-2020 (EXTENDED TO 2022) NRN CASE STUDY

Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Restoration of Drumboe Steam Engine and Upgrading Works to Railway Museum

Summary

The Donegal Railway Heritage Centre (Donegal RHC), located in Donegal Town, commemorates the operations of the various railways across County Donegal from 1863 - 1959. Housed in one of the few surviving railway stations in the county, the Donegal RHC is committed to saving, restoring, celebrating and developing a first-class visitor attraction. In 2017, LEADER supported the centre to professionally design and print three publications celebrating and showcasing the history of Donegal railway. More recently, the Donegal RHC benefitted from LEADER funding towards the restoration of the Drumboe steam engine, the last train to operate in the county, back in 1959. This generated huge local interest in Co. Donegal and extensive media coverage further afield.

Context

Founded in 1995, the Donegal Railway Heritage Centre (Donegal RHC) is comprised of a recently refurbished museum and information centre, as well as a retail element and coffee shop. Among the items on display at the centre are original railway carriages and wagons, unique historical artefacts, working railway

Project name: Restoration of Drumboe Steam Engine and Upgrading Works to Railway Museum

Date: 2019-2021

Local Action Group: Donegal LCDC

Implementing Partner: Donegal Local Development CLG

Type of Beneficiary: Heritage Centre

Priority & Focus Area: Theme 1: Economic Development, Enterprise Development & Job Creation / Sub-theme: Rural Tourism

Project Beneficiary Name/Organisation: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Address: The Old Station House, Tyrconnell St, Co. Donegal

Further information:

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)



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models and various audio-visual presentations on the history of the railways.

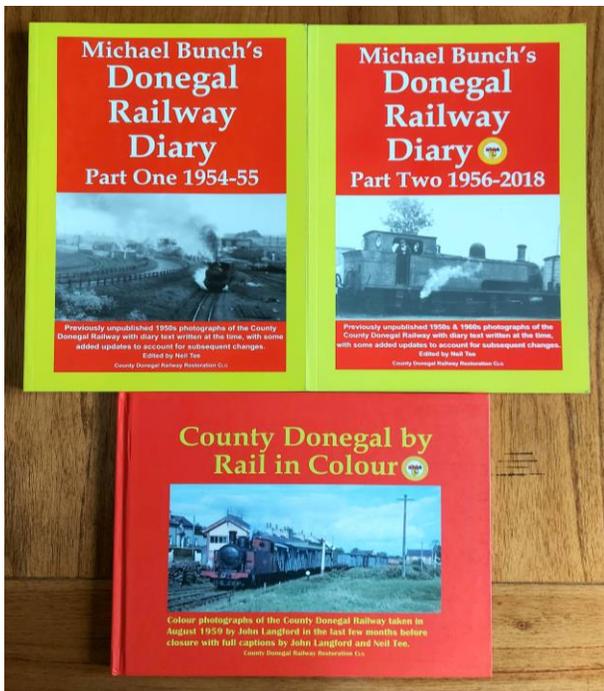
When Niall McCaughan, Manager of Donegal RHC, took up the role in 2018, he felt that despite all the centre had to offer, the visitor attraction was lacking something to capture the imagination of locals and tourists alike.

“We were missing a real ‘wow factor’, something that would set us apart. We knew that a steam engine would not only become the centrepiece for the museum, but a must-see for anyone interested in Donegal’s heritage.” Niall McCaughan, Manager, Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Having previously been successful in obtaining funding through the LEADER Programme to support the publication of three books focusing on Donegal’s Heritage Railways back in 2017, the Donegal RHC were motivated to approach LEADER once again.

On that occasion, the focus of the LEADER supported project was very much on how the sale of these publications could help to sustain the centre financially, and make it more historically important, while also benefitting the local area. Together with local authors, the centre set about researching and compiling a wealth of historical material and photographs. On completion, the books were professionally produced locally, and were made available in the centre, in local book shops and through the Donegal RHC website, generating great excitement.

To build on the success and momentum of this series of publications, Donegal RHC set out in 2019 with the aim of applying for LEADER support to help with the restoration of Drumboe, the last passenger train to operate in the county in 1959. There were two main phases to this project: (i) the restoration of the steam engine itself, and (ii) the building of a new presentation platform and canopy at the museum.



The LEADER supported publications - Source: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre



BEFORE: Drumboe had fallen into a state of disrepair - Source: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre





Objectives

- To deliver on the transformational potential of the Drumboe steam engine to the Donegal Railway Heritage Centre as a sustainable tourist attraction, and also to the wider local economy.

Activities

Initially, Niall McCaughan, Manager of Donegal RHC, contacted Donegal Local Development CLG to enquire about gaining access to a road train, the kind of train you would expect to see on wheels, as a tourist attraction, in a European City. The focus soon changed though to Drumboe, when it became clear that restoring the steam engine, which had been lying in a restoration yard in Whitehead, Co. Antrim, might be a realistic possibility with LEADER support.

The Donegal RHC were proactive in setting up a committee to work through the LEADER application process which consisted of a core of 3-4 employees and board members who met regularly. Fundamental to the success of this committee was the diverse expertise and experience brought by each member across the areas of community projects, finance, marketing and project management.

In addition to applying for LEADER support, obtaining match funding was a crucial aspect of this project.

“We relied heavily on crowd-funding and direct donations. We placed a strong focus on building and maintaining support and awareness around the project. We held a number of talks with local community and heritage groups, hosted county-wide

and cross-border events, and presented to Donegal County Council and other organisations across the county.” *Niall McCaughan, Manager, Donegal Railway Heritage Centre*

The Donegal RHC benefitted greatly from donations from across the island of Ireland and further afield, including from the centre’s members, a one-off large donation from Henry Forbes’ grandson, who was the General Manager of County Donegal Railways (CDR) and played a pivotal role in transforming the Donegal Railway during his tenure from 1910 to 1943, as well as donations from the North West of Ireland Railway Society and many others.



AFTER: Drumboe in 2021, restored to its former glory - Source: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Results

History was made on the 9th of October 2021, when the first original Donegal steam engine returned to the county in decades. After extensive restoration works in Co. Antrim, Drumboe was taken on a low-loader through Derry, Strabane, Stranorlar and into Donegal Town Centre. The steam engine has successfully come





full circle as it was the last engine to operate a passenger service in the county on the 31st of December 1959, leaving Donegal Town Station for Strabane.



Drumboe being carefully lifted into place - Source: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Separately, the museum itself received an upgrade in preparation for Drumboe's return. A new presentation platform was completed, and after Drumboe had carefully been lifted into place, a new canopy was installed above the engine, railway carriages and wagons. Additional landscaping was carried out, LED feature lighting was installed, and a small track for a children's ride-on railway has been built. The museum is now publically recognised by many as an example of best practice in transformation and public engagement, establishing it as a must-see tourist/heritage destination in Donegal Town.

The restoration of Drumboe and its subsequent 'homecoming' to Donegal Town generated huge interest in the county and extensive print, radio and television media coverage both locally and nationally. There is greater awareness now around the services that the Donegal RHC has to offer. In addition, the timing of 'The Homecoming' in early October 2021 had a positive impact on visitor numbers. This extended the tourism season for the Donegal RHC in the period leading up to Christmas, normally a quieter time of the year.



The hard-working team at the Donegal RHC standing alongside Drumboe on its historic return to Donegal Town - Source: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

"The restoration of Drumboe and upgrading works to the railway heritage centre project provides an exciting new heritage tourism offering. The LEADER team in DLDC is proud to have played a role in this project. The return of Drumboe to the Donegal Railway Heritage Centre will provide a link to Donegal's railway heritage and further enhance Donegal Town's offering as an all-year-round destination on the 'Wild Atlantic Way'. I would like to commend Niall McCaughan and the team at Donegal





Railway Heritage Centre for all their hard work getting this project off the ground through the pandemic and what proved to be a challenging two years. We now look forward to welcoming visitors to this truly unique tourist attraction. On behalf of DLDC, I would also like to thank all the LEADER project partners and funders including the LCDC for their effort and support in assisting the delivery of this project.” *Nick Maskery, LEADER Manager, DLDC*

McCaughan, Manager, Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Support of Donegal Local Development CLG

Throughout the LEADER application process, the Donegal RHC liaised closely with Donegal Local Development CLG, who provided excellent assistance with bringing the application together.

“It is really important to understand what the funder is looking for. Donegal Local Development helped us to do that and were patient with any delays associated with the Covid-19 pandemic. They shared substantial knowledge with us with regard to what could be included in the application and what could not.” *Niall McCaughan, Manager, Donegal Railway Heritage Centre*



Drumboe is now the centrepiece of the museum and was launched officially in August 2022 - Source: Donegal Railway Heritage Centre

Funding

Total project budget (i)+(ii)+(iii) =	€86,666.00
+ (i) Rural Development Programme support (a)+(b)	€64,999.50
+ (a) EAFRD (EU) contribution	€40,819.69
+ (b) National / Regional contribution	€24,179.81
+ (ii) Private / Own funds	€21,666.50
+ (iii) Other funding sources	-

Lessons

Match Funding

It was challenging for the Donegal RHC to generate the match funding they needed to support the LEADER application. To attract this funding, a real emphasis was placed on the significance of the project for Donegal Town and for the wider county.

“It was more about the wider story of Donegal, rather than just about the Donegal Railway Heritage Centre. There was a real opportunity here to save something unique to Donegal and to restore it.” *Niall*

Contact details

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