

RAILWAY
HERITAGE
TRUST

Henley-in-Arden

CASE STUDY

Boarded-up station building to thriving community asset

This case study shows how a community group rescued a boarded-up station building from neglect and turned it into a vibrant hub for the town including a bar and hireable events space. The project faced numerous challenges including difficulties securing a lease, raising sufficient funds, and doing construction work near the operational railway. The group's flexibility, initiative and high energy has overcome these hurdles to create a thriving space that benefits the whole community. Furthermore, as a Community Interest Company (CIC), the Friends of Henley Railway Station (FHRS) invest all profits into the station and surrounding area. Henley-in-Arden therefore shows how railway assets can be used to benefit not only the railway industry but also the wider economy.

ORIGINS OF THE PROJECT

By 2020 the station building at Henley-in-Arden was in a poor state and had become a focus for anti-social behaviour that affected not only railway passengers but the whole community. Angela Okey, a local resident involved in the Shakespeare Line, realised that the building was in need of particular attention on top of what the Friends of the Shakespeare Line were doing with platform adoption. She therefore founded the Friends of Henley Railway Station to spearhead the restoration of the building to community use.

After becoming a CIC, the FHRS led the structural repairs to the station building and its conversion into a community space including a bar and IT facilities that can be hired for small functions. All income and profits from the space are invested back into the building, facilities and station area through grants made by the FHRS. In the first year since opening, these grants have totalled £15,000 to a range of local beneficiaries including the 'Hot Wheels' mobility charity. As the FHRS grow they are expecting to be able to increase the size of their grants over the coming years.

Throughout the work there were several challenges that had to be overcome, from which other projects could take lessons to improve their chances of success.

HISTORY OF THE STATION

Henley-in-Arden railway station was opened in July 1908 by the Great Western Railway as part of its new main line between Birmingham Snow Hill and Cheltenham via Stratford-upon-Avon. After a period of declining usership, and as part of wider cuts to the British railway network, the line was proposed for closure in the mid-1960s. Local opposition coalesced into the North Warwick Line Defence Committee in 1969, who successfully campaigned to keep the line open through a High Court Injunction. The committee has since morphed into the Shakespeare Line Rail User Group. The SLRUG again successfully opposed closure in 1984, but the Booking Office at Henley-in-Arden was finally closed in 1992. The building remained boarded up until 2020, falling into disrepair as the wider station environment also deteriorated. It was at this point that the SLRUG began a campaign to adopt the stations along the line and improve their appearance for passengers.

£15,000 of grants given to local causes in the first year by FHRS

1908

Station opened

1969

Line kept open by High Court Injunction

1984

Line kept open again

1992

Station building closed

2020

Friends of Henley Station formed

2022

Funding achieved for restoration

2024

Grand opening of The Station community hub



‘As well as being a welcoming meeting place for residents, we hope it will attract more footfall to our beautiful town of Henley-in-Arden, which in turn will support our local businesses and traders.’

Angela Okey, Chair of FHRS

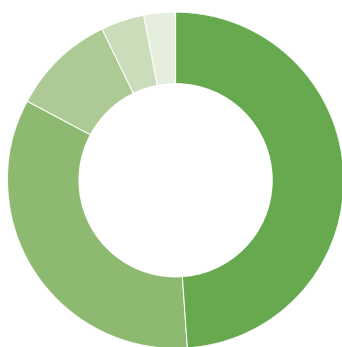


FUNDING

After discussion and engagement with Network Rail and West Midlands Railway began in 2022, the FHRS started looking for sources of funding. It successfully applied for funding from the Customer and Communities Investment Fund (CCIF) operated by West Midlands Railway. This was followed by funding from the Railway Heritage Trust and the FHRS’s Patron, Lord Digby Jones of Birmingham. On top of this, the project received smaller grants from interested individuals and organisations. In all, the cost up to the opening in February 2024 was £400,000.

Costs were saved throughout the process by the generous donation of time from many volunteers who lent their skills to the project. The FHRS is a deliberately small organisation, run by four directors who each bring distinct skills and experience. This structure allowed the FHRS to be flexible and make effective decisions without delaying the project. Not every project will be able to benefit from so many volunteers, but if there is a strong network around the project it can bring many advantages.

FUNDING SOURCES



- Customer and Communities Interest Fund – 49%
- Railway Heritage Trust – 34%
- Network Rail – 10%
- West Midlands Railway – 4%
- Community Rail Partnership – 3%

RAIL INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS

The FHRS were able to build strong relationships with individuals at both Network Rail and West Midlands Railway (WMR). They received particular support from Fay Easton, then Head of Community and Stakeholder at WMR. She helped the FHRS through the early stages, including the securing of CCIF funding that allowed the work to commence. WMR saw the clear security and safety benefits of a station building which was occupied creating an environment where people are coming and going all the time.

Having clear points of contact in the railway industry can make a big difference to getting a project finished on time. It is especially useful when navigating the complex processes for gaining permission to work on railway land and maintaining the momentum necessary to complete a project.

TENANCY AND USE

From the start the FHRS were clear they needed a sustainable use for the building, something which is also a condition of support from the RHT. However, they were not sure what that use would be when they set out. This meant the repurposing had to create a flexible space. This has helped the project even in its first year as it opened with a microbrewery in residence. This has since left the premises but the space can be repurposed so it now functions as an additional bar area that can be hired separately from the rest of the building.

The complexities of tri-partite leasing have affected this project as they do many others. Five years into the process, the FHRS are yet to have signed a lease, instead operating under agreement to lease. This is less secure, but has allowed them to begin bringing benefits to the community without further delay. Nonetheless, this is an important warning to other projects that even an energetic organisation can struggle to expedite the leasing process.

CONSTRUCTION

Proximity to the operational railway is a challenge faced by almost all projects funded by the Railway Heritage Trust. At Henley, they overcame this through careful planning and creativity. The windows were restored from inside the building, meaning that the work site never included the platform. Remaining inside the building even allowed considerable work to be completed to remove chimney stacks and so open up the space without affecting the operational railway. The building is not listed, allowing an ambitious redesign of the internal layout.

Where possible, objects and materials were reused in the new design. An original railing has been restored and now helps to shape the use of the lounge bar. Even the slate from the original gents’ toilets has been reused (after a thorough clean!) – as windowsills and part of the bar itself. Re-using materials rather than throwing them away is a great way to create character in a re-purposed building and it reminds visitors of the past history of the building. Re-use also protects the embedded carbon in construction materials.

The energy and dedication of the team of local suppliers and volunteers allowed the FHRS to complete the build in ten months, ready for a grand opening in February 2024. Not every project will be able to work at this speed, but it shows what is possible with the right team and some creative thinking.



WHERE NEXT?

The Station at Henley-in-Arden is now a thriving community resource with a wide range of regular events such as Eat, Meet and Mingle that bring the community together and bring benefits to the local economy. Increased footfall at the station also now supports a coffee van in The Station's outdoor space, which is also used for open-air pilates and other activities. There are plans to upgrade some of the equipment to further improve the space's potential as a venue for hire.

Commitment to the local area extends to the offering in the bar, which prioritises Midlands ales on its regularly rotated hand pumps. The FHRS have also engaged with local transport heritage organisations such as Vintage Trains and the Transport Museum Wythall to attract more visitors. With bookings for the events space currently running into next year, there is much to look forward to at Henley-in-Arden as this new community space continues to grow and bring benefits to its neighbours. The project therefore provides a leading example for how a railway station's importance to the community can be leveraged to not only increase income for the industry but also to support the local economy and bring wider social benefits such as combatting loneliness and isolation. Similar buildings across the country could bring positives that align with national ambitions for economic growth and a healthier population.

KEY BENEFITS

- Creation of a new hireable events space for the community.
- A new meeting place for the community, facilitated by organised events at The Station bar.
- Revitalising of the wider station environment.
- Coffee van for customers supported by the footfall resulting from the improvements to the station environment.
- Employment and economic opportunities for the local area including support of small businesses through food van evenings at the bar.
- £15,000 of grants to community groups in the first year, including health and mobility charities.
- Increased visitor numbers for West Midlands transport heritage attractions.

KEY CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNT

- It is important to have clear points of contact to work through the long delays that can come during planning and gaining permissions.
- A small, dedicated team can make decisions quickly and provide the focus needed to progress a project.
- It is possible to do a large amount of work from inside a building and so overcome the challenge of working near the operational railway.
- Becoming a Community Interest Company gives legal standing and preferable business rates that can make the new use for a building viable.
- By reinvesting profits through community grants, a CIC can build engagement and goodwill beyond the railway industry and make the enterprise more sustainable.

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