Our Vision is to recreate the golden age of the Great Western Railway.

Our Mission is:

- To be a nationally accredited independent organisation
- To maintain Didcot Railway Centre as a working museum dedicated to the Great Western Railway
- To provide suitable facilities to demonstrate restoration and maintenance of the Collection
- To be open to the public for the enjoyment, benefit and education of the community.

Our challenge is to become a more commercially orientated organisation in order to achieve the Vision.

Conservation Statement

1) Background

The Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) asks for a conservation statement, or conservation management plan, to support grant applications to conserve a building, landscape, townscape or park[1]. A conservation management plan is a document which explains why a site is significant and how that significance will be retained in any future use, alteration, development or repair. A conservation statement is a shorter and less detailed version of a plan, entertained in cases where a full conservation management plan is unnecessary. Where a full plan is desirable a conservation statement[2] is akin to an initial site assessment representing the early stage of conservation gathering; a full conservation management plan could be part of an HLF project planning grant application.

2) An outline history of Didcot Railway Centre

Didcot Railway Centre was originally a depot, for steam locomotives, built by the Great Western Railway (GWR) at the junction of the GWR London to Bristol mainline and the lines to Oxford and Newbury; the latter was closed in the 1960s. As such, it was an early railway node and today continues to have good rail transport links and is near one of the country's major cross roads. The depot was used to service the steam locomotives used in the area and Didcot's railway importance was originally boosted by the GWR provender store and later by an ordnance depot, although these functions are no longer there.

The Great Western Society (GWS) took up residence at Didcot Railway Centre (DRC) in 1967 when it became obvious that it needed a suitable home to keep the locomotives, carriages and wagons it had already acquired. The Railway Centre is leased from Network Rail. It is based around the original 1932 Engine Shed, Coal Stage and Lifting Shop and surrounding land bounded by main railway lines. Further land to the north west of the Engine Shed was leased in 1975 and the whole area has been gradually developed; the GWS has built a Carriage Shed to house and restore passenger carriages and goods wagons, a Locomotive Works, where locomotive restoration is carried out, a small relics museum building for smaller artefacts and a turntable. Didcot's original GWR Transfer Shed has been re-erected at the north end of the Centre and many smaller original GWR structures from around the country have been rebuilt.

There are three demonstration running lines to give visitors the experience of riding in original GWR coaches behind live steam engines; one line is built to Isambard Kingdom Brunel's broad gauge of 7 ft 0¼ inch and gives visitors an experience of train travel in Victorian days; another is fully signalled and recreates the atmosphere of a 1930s branch line. The Centre also includes a Relics Display Building to house the collection of smaller artefacts, print and publicity, a Science, Learning and Railways facility, to demonstrate the background to railways to younger visitors, and catering and retail outlets.

The GWS leased some additional land in 2000 which had become available between the Centre and Didcot Parkway Station and has progressed a framework[3] for future development of the whole Centre. This will guide the conservation and restoration of the existing buildings and the sensitive development of the new structures that it needs to continue to be in the forefront of the railway heritage movement. These developments will enhance the facilities for restoration, maintenance and the working demonstration of the Collection (all the locomotives, rolling stock, outdoor features, small artefacts and paperwork), will improve the Centre's education and interpretation function and will help to keep the Centre as a working museum dedicated to the GWR. Improved access to the Collection will enable the Centre to expand its role as a place for public enjoyment, benefit and community education and to extend its formal independent museum accreditation from regional to national level. Enhanced facilities will also support the GWS's aim to remain a community based but more commercially orientated organisation to aid long term financial viability.

3) A description of what survives today

Buildings

The existing buildings fall into several categories:

- The original 1932 GWR locomotive buildings, comprising the large Engine Shed and the Coal Stage which is topped by the water storage tank, (both Listed Grade II) that, together with the Lifting Shop, dominate the original London end of the Centre.
- GWR buildings transported from elsewhere and re-erected such as the signal boxes from Radstock and Frome and the Listed Grade II Transfer Shed, which lie to the further north west, in the 1970s extension of the Centre.
- New buildings erected in the 1980s, such as the carriage workshops to the nearer north west and the Locomotive Works, and the shop/ refreshment/ museum complex close to the GWR locomotive buildings. The latter services complex, indispensable to the functioning and operation of the Centre, was not at the time considered necessary to be designed to reflect either the original locomotive buildings to any great extent, other buildings of the steam age period, that would have been found on the GWR, or to provide a complete modern contrast.
- Recent additions and alterations in the form of minor developments close to the locomotive buildings, such as an extension to the GWT Museum & Archive, new information office building, the re-roofing of the 1980s Shop and Museum blocks, with hipped slate roofs to bring them more closely to a GWR style and render them more compatible with original GWR buildings.
- A new Shed for the HLF funded Steam Rail Motor, based on an original building at Southall.

- The Signalling Centre, a new brick building in a GWR style, to display the Swindon Panel and a history of GWR signalling.

Overall the range of buildings varies across the Centre, reflecting the balanced collection and preservation work pursued by the GWS since first coming to Didcot at the end of the steam era on British Railways.

Landscaping

The GWS published its original master plan for the Centre's site development in 1977[4]. This identified areas to be landscaped, mainly those to the rear of the Engine Shed. The front of the engine shed was to retain its industrial character and so provides a scene-setting entry to the world of steam railways as visitors arrive.

The Centre is a true brownfield site on which the natural ground level is about four metres below the current level. In fact when the East Curve of the main railway line - that now forms the boundary between the Centre and the Ladygrove Estate - was built in the 1860s there was a bridge provided under the track to give access to the fields within the triangle of railway lines. Over the years the railway used the site as a convenient landfill for disposal of ash from steam locomotives, until the ground level was raised to the height of the embankments on which the railway lines were laid.

In the 1977 plan, some of the tree planting, for which a grant was awarded, was a planning requirement to screen the newly built Carriage Shed from the town, although the trees now have a more useful function to screen the view out of the Centre of warehouses on the other side of the railway line. The tree planting was planned to provide a series of natural screens that would separate the themed vistas within the Centre, an approach pursued in a second major planting scheme in the mid 1980s.

When the landscaping project began many people were sceptical as to whether trees would grow in the ash but they thrived in the dubious quality soil and, thirty years later, some arboreal management is required on the mature trees to thin out the wooded areas. Regular mowing has encouraged a grass carpet over much of the area not laid with railway tracks. There are also a number of flowerbeds and an allotment area. Allotments were a feature of railway linesides where narrow plots of land could not be used for other development.

The area beside the Main Demonstration Line has been cleared of trees and vegetation to protect the planned electrified lines to Oxford.

The ash that forms the subsoil to the railway centre provides good drainage, so the ground remains relatively free of puddles even in wet weather. This is an advantage for a visitor attraction, which a large number of people walk around. For the most heavily trafficked routes concrete pathways have been provided.

4) A short statement of significance

Didcot Railway Centre has developed from the original Engine Shed, Coal Stage and Lifting Shop complex built by the GWR in 1932. The Engine Shed is an interesting example of industrial pre-fabricated construction and the Coal Stage was built to a standard GWR design for a non-mechanical locomotive coaling facility. Both[5] were built as government funded improvements to the GWR under the Development (Loans, Guarantees and Grants) Act (1929), which was designed to provide employment in the Depression. In the 1970s and 1980s, the

GWS obtained grants to carry out some works using the Manpower Services Commission, which was also designed to provide employment, this time for young people.

The Engine Shed, Coal Stage and Lifting Shop buildings are unique in the UK as being still used for their original purpose of storing and servicing steam engines. The GWS, like the GWR, uses the Engine Shed for storing and servicing its steam locomotives. The Shed lets visitors experience the atmosphere of a GWR steam engine shed. The Coal Stage is still used to load the locomotives with coal and is the only place in the UK where visitors can see coal being loaded in the original way. The Lifting Shop is still used to provide the special crane facilities which are a requirement of some of the heavier jobs to service the steam locomotives to keep them in operation.

The GWS cares for a world-class collection of GWR locomotives, rolling stock and artefacts at the Centre, many stored and used in the complex of original industrial railway buildings. The Centre also provides a location for the display of re-located or authentic reproduction GWR buildings.

In summary, the Centre provides something unique and enduring, demonstrating the development of steam railways over 125 years through the history of one company – the Great Western Railway. Visitors can experience the progress of railways from a recreation of Brunel's broad gauge railway of 1840, through the heyday of the GWR, to the end of steam in the 1960s, with a background of the latest diesel trains running past the Centre on the main lines that surround it. The Centre, like the GWR before it, provides employment for Didcot and the surrounding district. Much of the current Centre is also a green space in what is an increasingly developed urban area.

5) An overview of the main conservation issues on the site

The major conservation issue for the fabric of the Centre is the conservation of the original Listed GWR buildings, these being the Engine Shed, Coal Stage and the Transfer Shed, together with the original Lifting Shop which is not Listed but is within the curtilage of the Listed Engine Shed.

The Engine Shed was renovated in about 1962 by British Railways. Since then only superficial repair or maintenance work has been necessary until recent times. In the early 1980s some works were carried out under the auspices of the Manpower Services Commission but this work was not to a good standard and some of it has interfered with the historic integrity of the building[6]. In general, many of the original features have been removed over time as the building's uses have evolved, for example, the original coal burning stoves were removed from the storerooms during their conversion to necessary offices.

The Centre is currently leased from Network Rail and the GWS has recently negotiated a 50 year lease that will enable access to capital grant funding. This will allow the GWS to start major conservation work on the original locomotive depot buildings, starting with the Coal Stage. In the past, cost pressures, and less acceptance at the time of conservation principles, steered the GWS towards using modern materials and construction methods in maintaining them. Although cumulative alterations have resulted in the loss of some original features, they have also helped the GWS to realise how important it is to take a conservation approach including reinstatement, where appropriate, of as many of the original features as possible. The GWS has carried out major surveys of the Engine Shed and Coal Stage and planning work for their conservation continues.

The GWS has invested in conserving the Transfer Shed with a new roof and guttering. These features have protected the building from the weather and prevented further deterioration.

There is a conflict between the modern use of the Centre as a visitor attraction, where access is key, and the GWS's aims which include maintenance of the atmosphere of a working GWR locomotive depot. For example, concrete paths have been laid around the Centre, a park and picnic area has been developed and museum and retail facilities built; all are key parts of the visitor attraction but would not have been part of the original depot.

Today's regulatory framework is also a challenge. For health and safety reasons, original historical features in some areas cannot be used, for example, electrical supply and lighting systems, although the aim is to use historical style fittings where possible.

6) A short statement of conservation principles

Overall philosophy

The overall philosophy of the GWS for site work is to do what the GWR would have done during its period of existence. This includes the application of high standard specifications for most work required to last. Great importance is attributed to high quality design, within an authentic historic railway perspective, in terms of the layout of new buildings and their individual style and detailing. This approach is complemented by the close attention given to restoration work on the locomotives and rolling stock, a part of the Collection recognised officially as being of international historic value, to the presentation of the existing smaller original buildings, structures and outdoor furniture items and through the GWS special restoration and maintenance programme being developed for the larger historic buildings. Without striving for such quality in all works, the public attraction and educational value of the Centre, and thus its whole purpose, would be compromised.

Key to this is the preference for the use of traditional materials and GWR written guidance. Ongoing maintenance work is carried out according to the provisions of the GWS's Site Maintenance Code and Minor Works Register. A crucial unifying and character making element is the use of the GWR's code for the painting of buildings. The GWS takes painting guidance from the 1933 Great Western Railway Engineering Department Instructions for Inspectors and Storekeepers, which sets out painting directions, and the Historic Model Railway Society's Livery Register[7], which is an authoritative publication that covers the painting of locomotives, carriages, vans, wagons, buildings and signals from 1835 to 1947. The GWS maintains a Schedule of paint manufacturing colour and code numbers for building painting work.

Resolving conflicts

The major conflicts to resolve between historic and modern uses are visitor access and health and safety. Although the original locomotive depot was not a visitor attraction, the GWR existed to transport people and provide them with the supporting services for managing stations and running trains. In accommodating visitors, the GWS's approach is to draw on how the GWR provided for this function, for example to manage visitor flow by the use of GWR pattern signs to reflect original station signage and related railway design signs to direct visitors to the modern facilities.

The GWS scrutinises modern health and safety requirements to distinguish between those where the principles can be interpreted in a sensitive way and where legislation or guidance specifies a

particular solution, e.g. for workshop signage, the latter category still being applied so as to minimise conflict with conservation aims.

New building positions and relationships

The general grain of railway sites is determined by the relationship of buildings to the overall layout and specific geometry of the tracks and to the function that those buildings perform relative to the movement of the trains or the traffic that they convey. Adherence to these concepts needs to be the underlying factor in arranging new buildings at the Centre in order to maximise the maintenance of an authentic railway context both for individual structures and for the developing Centre as a whole.

All railway tracks at the Centre may be used at times when visitors are on site so the need for visitor circulation routes, places to congregate safely and access and interpretation issues must be taken into account without compromising authentic railway arrangements.

Scale and detailed design for new buildings

The scale of railway buildings is determined by the operational needs of a railway undertaking, except in very special circumstances where a structure may be desired by the undertaking for prestige reasons; such exceptions are not envisaged for new buildings at the Centre. Future buildings will include some to serve the needs of the Centre as a public museum, as well as buildings to form part of the Collection as such.

In a railway setting, buildings of different styles, determined by their specific purpose, may quite authentically stand close together or abut. However while functional need will dominate building design at the Centre, a pleasing juxtaposition of design styles is preferred by the GWS to an approach of unnecessary contrast. Brick, timber or painted corrugated iron were generally used in steam era railway works and are expected to be the first choices for new structures, except in the specific case of the carriage storage shed for which, being relatively isolated and screened in the north western half of the Centre, it is expected that some extensions may match the existing portal design.

Planned building developments

The two main areas of the Centre where building developments are envisaged comprise the north western part and the area along the south west side of the eastern half.

In the north western part of the Centre the main building projects anticipated comprise extensions to the carriage storage shed, re-erection of the Cotswold stone station building from Lower Heyford and the recreation of early period Engine and Carriage Houses, for locomotives and rolling stock, that represent the early Brunel broad gauge track era. All these projects were identified in detail some years ago.

For the area along the south west side of the eastern half of the Centre a small range of potential developments is being considered. It will be important to acknowledge the historic value of the 1932 locomotive buildings in the positioning and design of the new buildings that may be proposed. These new buildings will include developments that are needed to support access to and interpretation of the Collection appropriate to the public museum function of the Centre that has evolved. An urban landscape is envisaged for much of this area while incorporating open space adjacent to the approach track embankment of the Coal Stage to maintain its setting.

Designs for this area will be developed using the relationship, scale and design principles above or be re-erections of particular GWR structures.

7) Next steps

This Conservation Statement is a summary of the issues believed by the GWS to relate to the conservation needs and future development of Didcot Railway Centre. The GWS recognises that a full Conservation Plan should also be prepared to specify conservation requirements more closely and also to help with potential grant funding to support conservation and new works. The GWS has prepared a detailed topographical survey of the Centre. Preparation of this Conservation Statement has identified the significant amount of information available on the Centre and its buildings and highlighted the need to collate this into a single record.

Great Western Society Limited
Approved by GWS Board, 27 January 2018

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1 Conservation Management Plans, Helping your application (Heritage Lottery Fund).

2 Conservation Plans in Action: proceedings of the Oxford Conference (edited by Kate Clark and published by English Heritage, 1999).

3 The framework was developed in Far Horizons (GWS, 1999); The Layout of Centre Sidings (GWS, 2001); The Layout of Centre Sidings – Paper II – Proposals (GWS, 2002); The Centre Sidings Framework, (GWS, 2007).

4 Great Western Echo, Summer 1977 (GWS).

5 South Oxfordshire District Council Grade II Listing.

6 Building survey report on the Engine Shed, Didcot Railway Centre, Didcot, Oxfordshire (J.J. Hatfield & Co. Ltd., 2003).

7 Instructions for the Guidance of Inspectors and Storekeepers in the Engineering Department (Great Western Railway, July 1933) and Livery Register No. 2. The Great Western Railway, edited by J N Slinn (Historical Model Railway Society, 1967).