

Rail Britannia media release

Dronfield Musical Theatre Group, which this year celebrates its 50th anniversary, has come up with something very special to entertain its audiences – a film.

In May 2020 the group was unable to perform its planned show because of the pandemic. But not to be put off they decided to make it into a film instead.

Two years on, the film, Rail Britannia, is set to have its premier at Dronfield Civic Hall and tells an amazing story from Dronfield's Victorian past.

Shot entirely on location in and around Dronfield the film, which has traditional and original music, tells the story of what happened when a steel rail works opened in Dronfield in 1883 bringing hundreds of workers from all over Britain to work there. Dronfield became a boom town. But exactly ten years later, the works shut down and was moved to Workington, where raw materials were cheaper. As a result, Dronfield became what the Derbyshire Times described as “a ruined town... a town full of ghosts.”

The film tells the story the trials and tribulations of workers and their families as they struggled to survive and overcome all the hardships that beset them. It is also the story of the indomitable spirit of the workforce who produced huge quantities of steel rail which was exported across the globe.

DMTG chair Alan Powell describes how it all began. “Not being able to perform live came as a great shock to us but we were determined to keep the spirit of the Group alive. We had already started rehearsals, so we carried on using Zoom and recorded much of the music from home. As we gradually came out of lockdown we started to film, meeting in small groups at first, and then expanding as the lockdown tiers receded.

“It has been a great way to keep the group engaged and we have enjoyed the new challenges of filming a story (in monochrome) rather than putting it on stage. Group member Gavin Ward, who usually plays the dame in our pantomimes, taught himself the art if cinematography and editing and colleague Tommy Jones (often a panto villain) wrote and recorded original music for the score.

Alan added: “As well as the cast, other members contributed to the technical and location process and many Dronfield people were curious when they saw

us all dressed in Victorian costumes filming on location on early Sunday mornings.

“We have also had superb co-operation from many people who have helped us by providing locations, not least William Lee on Callywhite Lane who allowed us to film inside the works.

“The Rail Britannia story is a truly remarkable one which forms part of Dronfield’s rich industrial history and needs to be remembered.”

A public showing of the film, which is part of the Group’s 50th anniversary celebrations, is at Dronfield Civic Hall on Saturday May 21 at 2.15. Tickets (all £6) from dmtgboxoffice@gmail.com or call 0751 985 2244.