Plaque will recognise significance of Alloa's Waggonway route

By Rajmund Bakonyi @thecosmicraj Trainee Reporter

DEBATE: The tunnels for the old Alloa Waggonway may have been a world first - Image courtesy of the National Transport Trust

A PLAQUE, set to commemorate Alloa's famous Waggonway, has ignited a debate on whether the world's first railway tunnel was built in the Wee County.

The National Transport Trust, which has been working with partners in Clackmannanshire, is to unveil one of its Red Wheel plaques on Mar Street, pandemic permitting.

The plaque will recognise the historic Alloa Waggonway, which used to span some two and a half miles and connected the coal pits at Sauchie and Fishcross to the harbour.
Initially on wooden tracks and later upgraded to iron, the waggons were drawn by horses when John, the 7th Earl of Mar, opened the line in or around 1768. The route, one of the earliest in Scotland – believed to be second only to that in Cockenzie in East Lothian – passed under two tunnel-like bridges which are still in place today.

Speaking to the Advertiser, National Transport Trust spokesman John Yellowlees said: "They could be one of the very first railway tunnels in the world, but it all depends on who you ask. "As you can imagine, in the 18th century local newspapers and others weren't sitting around saying: 'wow, it's a first'. "If you look up which was the first in the world you'll read it was in Derbyshire in 1793 [the Fritchley Tunnel] but the one in Alloa – the line was opened in 1768. "So, were these – the two tunnels – were they added later or were they always there? "And that's where it's not quite clear."

Indeed, plans for the "coal road" – as named at the time – were first drawn up for the 6th Earl of Mar around 1710.
According to information from Clacks historian Susan Mills, whom the National Transport Trust worked with, the Waggonway skirted the western edge of the town unlike the old road, Coalgate, which ran through Alloa.
However, she made clear she does not think the two tunnels were a world first. Susan Mills, director of Clackmannanshire Heritage Trust, said: "It's pretty clear that it isn't the oldest because actually, the Waggonway was created in 1766-67 before Drysdale Street and Bedford Place had extended far enough to need to be carried over the top of [the railway].

"The tunnels that were built to, in effect, take the two roads over the top of the Waggonway weren't needed until the 19th century when those streets began to expand westwards. "They must have created a level area [before then], so there was a certain degree of digging down to create a suitably level route but the tunnels didn't exist from the beginning, they were only added when the town was extending westwards.

"I don't think they can really be the oldest."