

Progress towards Bideford?

This year marks 150 years since the railway first reached Bideford Station, which is now the Bideford Railway Heritage Centre, so what better way to celebrate than to inform you that, 40 years after the very last trains left and part of the track width was converted into a cycling and walking path, a restored railway service to the town is being taken seriously by local authorities!

When the first presentation was made to Bideford town council in January with the prospects of suggesting why Bideford needs to be reconnected, support was received from the full council. This then led to the formation of Bideford town council / ACE Rail group with myself becoming the lead; our meetings in the Bideford mayor's parlour are most informative. When in February we had a big discussion on 'Why Bideford?' A member of the executive from Okehampton's OkeRail team came to help the group, we all took away some very important details from that meeting. OkeRail have been very supportive of ACE Rail and I thank them for the continued support.

Did you know that Torridge district (Bideford) is among the most deprived and poorest areas in Devon and the whole United Kingdom? Little wonder that Torridge would love to see the railway return to boost their economy! Greater Bideford (Bideford town, Northam, Appledore and Westward Ho!) is now recognised as the largest urban population without a railway service. Railfuture who are supporting ACE Rail recently discussed Bideford with Network Rail and GWR senior management, Torridge is known as part of the 'rail desert' in North Devon and Cornwall where there is absolutely no rail service to this coastal area of the country. Bideford (31,000) has always kept up with Barnstaple (33,000) in terms of population.

Bideford deputy mayor McKenzie says *“As an area of deprivation with amongst the lowest wages in the country and some of the highest bills the residents of Bideford would welcome the increased prosperity and opportunities this project would surely bring.”*

Presentations have been given to Tawstock parish council and also to North Devon District Council who have now passed a motion to support ACE Rail and its inclusion in the forthcoming joint Local Plan. There have also been cross-party talks, so the North Devon Green party and the North Devon Liberal Democrats are now supporting the project.

Being all-party is paramount in understanding why restoring Bideford back to the national network matters and that is why Devon County Council’s cabinet lead for Climate, Environment and Transport Andrea Davis, who is also Chair of the sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport, has been included in all reported progress. Andrea you will recognise is our TRA president and recently stood up at our TRA AGM to give the ACE Rail project her full support.

On 20th April 2022 BRHC had a very special day. Andrea Davis arrived to see our station and what restoration work we had already achieved, and she saw how we had a system of active travel Tarka trail cyclists and walkers safely using the trail next to our operational railway line. Andrea remarked how Bideford looks similar to the Avocet line and Exe Trail system. To greet Andrea we had Torridge District Council chair Cllr Bushby, Devon County Councillor for Bideford East Cllr Hellyer, Bideford town mayor Ratcliff, and Railfuture’s director of infrastructure and networks Roger Blake. This show of support was only topped by the fact that it was a sunny day. Andrea Davis was quoted by reporter Lewis Clake saying *“With the summer coming, it's going to show that if you reopen railways, it boosts towns like Bideford and, like Okehampton, which desperately need a bit of economic activity. It*

opens up more pathways for residents to get to the opportunities that are further away. We need to get behind ACE Rail, get behind the Tarka Rail Association and move this forward because this will be transformational for North Devon."

As I am on the TRA committee, I keep the committee informed with my progress and I know I have their support and guidance. If you were to visit a Tarka line railway station any time soon you will find TRA notice boards with their support to ACE Rail. Devon County Council, Network Rail and GWR management have seen the ACE Rail presentations and have offered advice.

Independent organisation Railfuture have been outstanding in offering help and we recognise the left behind community of Greater Bideford as the largest urban population of all towns in Devon without a railway. That is why ACE Rail is now affiliated with Railfuture, they have also now part funded the initial business case.

It brings me to the great honour I have in saying that I have received letters of support from Sir Geoffrey Cox QC MP for Torridge & West Devon, and he wrote (on my behalf) to Secretary of State for Transport, the Rt. Hon. Grant Shapps MP. I have now received further directions from him on how to move this project forward and guidance for funding, so together with Railfuture I can now release this joint statement:

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps has now replied to Torridge MP Sir Geoffrey Cox's request for his advice on how the ACE Rail scheme (Atlantic Coast-Exeter Railway) might be taken forward. The Transport Secretary has confirmed that the Restoring Your Railway Ideas Fund is closed "for the foreseeable future", and recognises the support of Railfuture and local councils.

He then draws attention to the Levelling Up Fund which can be used to upgrade local transport, believes that local authorities and Local Enter-

prise Partnerships are best placed to decide on and take forward transport schemes that will most benefit their local area, and advises us to continue to work with the local councils to take this scheme forward.

The North Devon MP has said that she welcomes the idea and has offered further assistance.

Finally, I wish to give thanks to two fine mayors who have represented both Bideford and Barnstaple. I was delighted to recently invite Bideford town mayor Ratcliff and Barnstaple town mayor Rennles to Barnstaple railway station platform 2. Platform 2 used to be (and will once again) for Bideford bound passengers and also for charter trains.



Cllr Alan Rennles Barnstaple Town Mayor 2019 – 2022
Cllr David Ratcliff Bideford Town Mayor 2007 – 2008 & 2021- 2022

With the Tarka line extended back to Bideford these two great towns can enjoy future economic prosperity with a green sustainable public transport service running parallel to the active travel Tarka Trail. A true carbon neutral vision for this area of Devon could happen if the Tarka line was extended back to Bideford.

Tim Steer