

# Lines could have been saved... and it's not too late

Relishing Eurostar's high-speed service to the continent, I've always been more 'for' than 'against' the building of HS2 across our crowded, precious landscape.

But a visit to North Devon has made me think that the billions spent on HS2 may have been put to better use by opening old lines closed since Beeching.

Staying near Bideford, I travelled daily by bus into Barnstaple. The buses use the main road that runs above the old railway line, now the Tarka Trail. It's a frequent, direct service, but nevertheless an ordeal.

Because it is busy, the bus is always stopping to pick up and set down passengers - making for a slow and tedious journey, currently aggravated by several sets of roadworks. And although modern, the bus is uncomfortable, with jolts from potholed roads.

After three days of making the return journey from Bideford, I

was exhausted. I pity the people who have to do this every day. Buses are no substitute for trains. No wonder so many prefer their cars.

Yet, below this bus route to Barnstaple is the old rail alignment that seems capable of being relaid.

Perhaps it would be more complicated than at first glance, but surely just a handful of HS2's

billions would have done it. Then the thousands of people living in and around Bideford, and all the businesses and holidaymakers, could have reached Barnstaple in minutes and be as fresh as a daisy.

Across Britain, using just small change from HS2's budget, so many long-closed routes (often just a few miles) could have been reopened to serve and connect

places where (since the 1960s) the population has greatly increased in number and mobility.

Thousands of people would then have had their daily lives made easier, and many more perhaps persuaded not to drive.

Of course, it's too late now to abandon HS2. And nor should we. We must build for the future, and in 50 years' time the ever-increasing metropolitan populations suffering even busier roads will be grateful we did.

So, let's hope HS2 is properly completed, no matter what the financial pain.

But people living in the ever-growing regional and rural communities are justified in feeling resentful because their railway line - bought and paid for - was closed 50 years ago without thinking of a future that is now the present.

Will a politician arise to speak for them and to campaign for more reopenings?

*Alan Gwyer, Basingstoke*

**The Instow signal box and level crossing in Bideford is still in situ, despite trains not having run for many years. The old rail alignment is now the Tarka Trail, but Alan Gwyer believes routes such as this could still be reinstated. ALAMY.**

