170th birthday celebration of town's historic rail connection

TONY GUSSIN
tony.gussin@cleanskypublishing.co.uk

THE five-day free Railfest to mark the 170th birthday of the Barnstaple to Exeter line kicked off at the town station on Thursday, August 1, with a re-enactment of the official opening of the railway all those years ago.

A tongue-twisting Victorian speech by Lionel Thomas Benecraft, town clerk from 1843 to 1883, from the original opening ceremony, was read out by town clerk Rob Ward, joined by today's mayor of Barnstaple, councillor Janet Coates, and Barnstaple's vicar, the Reverend Canon Dr Benjamin Williams.

The recreation of that milestone in history in 1854 was the signal for Railfest to get underway, organised by Barnstaple Town Council and celebrating the railway heritage of Barnstaple, the anniversary of the line and the wider rail history of North Devon.

There was plenty going on up until Monday at town centre locations including the Guildhall, Pannier Market, library and the Quay, with a Rail Trail for walkers of all ages offering stamps at each location and the opportunity to find out more about the town's heritage.

Speaking on Friday, the mayor Cllr Coates said: "I was delighted to be invited to open Barnstaple Town Council Railfest earlier today.

"This town-wide celebration of the 170th anniversary of the Barnstaple to Exeter line, gives us all a valuable opportunity to learn about and celebrate Barnstaple's historical link with the railway.

"I hope everyone will take the chance to see all that is on offer at various venues around the town, over the next few days."

At the Mayor's Parlour in the Guildhall there was an exhibition looking at the history of local railways in a little more depth.

The main exhibition upstairs in the Guildhall saw the Dartmoor 0o9 group's active model railway display of Barnstaple Town Station, plus models of Pilton Yard, Parracombe Halt and Lynton Station, as well as plenty of historical information and railway relics.

North Devon's new MP, Ian Roome, dropped in to the Guildhall to see the exhibition and wish everyone a good Railfest in the coming days.

He said: "It's great to see the railway heritage of Barnstaple and North Devon celebrated and well done to the town council for organising such an engaging and comprehensive look at this important part of our history.

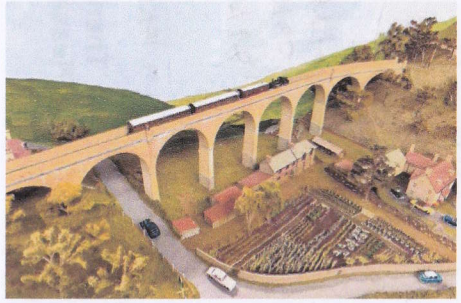
"But the railway is just as vital to us in Barnstaple and North Devon today, with what we now call the Tarka Line still going after these 170 and still hugely popular with local people and visitors alike.

"It is still a much-needed transport link and in due course it would be wonderful to see heritage lines such as the Lynton to Barnstaple Railway return to full service too."

In the Pannier Market, visitors could find out more about the Lynton to Barnstaple Railway, now partially open as a heritage line at Woody Bay Station and work continues to reopen more of this iconic railway.

Alongside Railfest, the Pannier Market hosted a Victorian Fair on Sunday and Monday which proved popular with visitors.

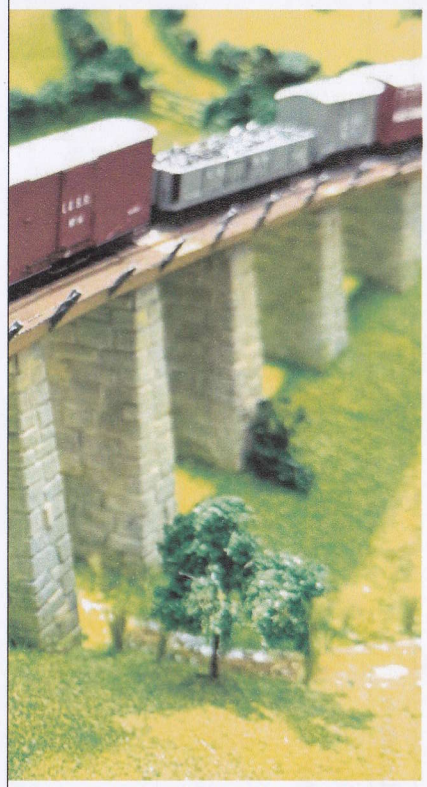
A model of the Lynton to Barnstaple Railway on display at Barnstaple Pannier Market



Barnstaple Guildhall is home to model railways depicting the rail heritage of the town and North Devon

The original speech that saw the opening of the Barnstaple to Exeter line in 1854 is read out at Barnstaple station by town clerk Rob Ward, alongside the mayor of Barnstaple Cllr Janet Coates and the Reverend Benjamin Williams

Barnstaple



Mayor Janet Coates and North Devon MP Ian Roome at the Railfest exhibition in the Guildhall

Council endorses new rail link move

TORRIDGE District Council has officially aligned itself with the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, a significant step forward in the campaign to enhance rail infrastructure in North Devon, *writes Ella Sampson.*

The council's community and resources committee recently endorsed the alliance's efforts to establish a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple and to bolster improvements and services on the Barnstaple to Exeter line.

The council has agreed to explore a joint feasibility study for the new rail link, setting aside £10,000 for this purpose as part of its new strategic plan. Notably, there is no additional cost for TDC to join the alliance, as the group's goals align with the council's own objectives.

This decision marks a proactive step for Torridge, which is currently the only district in Devon without a rail connection. The region has been grappling with increasing traffic congestion, exacerbated by a 25 per cent rise in passengers on the Barnstaple to Exeter line since the Covid-19 pandemic.

The success of the recently restored Okehampton to Exeter line, which has reportedly stimulated the local economy in Dartmoor, further underscores the potential benefits of enhanced rail connectivity.

Cllr Chris Leather (Ind, Northam) expressed support for the council's involvement but emphasised that securing the Exeter line from Barnstaple should remain a top priority.

He expressed scepticism about the feasibility of reviving the Bideford to Barnstaple line, suggesting alternative modes of transport such as tramways or monorails might be more realistic.

Conversely, Cllr Teresa Tinsley (Lib Dem, Bideford North) voiced concern over the Bideford to Barnstaple line, questioning its potential benefits and the impact on Bideford. She advocated a thorough feasibility study that considers all aspects before committing further resources.

There are also concerns regarding the potential impact on the Tarka Trail, a popular tourist destination that traverses former railway lines.

Great Western Railway previously contributed £6,500 in 2022 to investigate the business case for reinstating the Bideford to Barnstaple rail line.

Rail shake-up could benefit local growth

ELLA SAMPSON
ella.sampson@cleanskypublishing.co.uk

A MAJOR shift in the way the railways are run in the UK could have a significant impact in North Devon, it has been suggested.

The shake-up comes in the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Bill, which was introduced to Parliament on July 18.

This bill, unveiled in the King's Speech, marks a significant overhaul of the rail sector, putting the focus on public ownership and aiming to improve train services across the country.

The new legislation seeks to address years of poor rail performance by making public sector operation the default option for rail services, rather than a last resort.

The move is part of a broader initiative by the Government to put transport at the heart of its mission, ensuring that passenger services are run with a focus on efficiency, quality and reliability.

For North Devon, this change could have wide-ranging implications.

Tim Steer, vice-chair of the Tarka Rail Association, highlighted the importance of supporting infrastructure in conjunction with housing development.

He noted that while additional rolling stock for North Devon and Dartmoor lines would be beneficial, the effectiveness of government ownership will depend on the implementation and management of the services.

Mr Steer told the *Gazette*: "It is vital that existing and future housing has the relevant supporting infrastructure; the planning reform needs to reflect this balanced narrative.

"District planners have challenged large scale housing developments to the point that (when fully/over developed), many areas are now unsustainable in terms of supporting infrastructure.

"Though any additional rolling stock to service the North Devon and Dartmoor lines would be welcomed, we must understand that government ownership of a rail company does not necessarily mean that it will operate immediately better.

"Great Western Railway (the service operator), has shared our Tarka Rail Association's vision of two services per hour with higher capacity units and they even helped part-fund the recent initial studies for the North Devon line extension to Bideford.

"I hope the English Devolution Bill set out in the King's Speech can give our statutory transport combined authority Devon County Council more abilities to improve Devon's sustainable transport. With DCC charged in drawing up a new Local Transport Plan and including an updated Devon Metro, the future looks transformational."

The Department for Transport has criticised the current privatisation model for failing passengers, describing it as wasteful and fragmented.

The shift to public ownership is intended to remedy these issues, delivering a more reliable and passenger-focused service.

With five bills addressing various aspects of transport, the Government's legislative agenda promises the most extensive overhaul of the sector in a generation.

These changes are expected to drive economic growth, unlock opportunities, and contribute to the Prime Minister's goals of achieving net zero emissions.

Transport Secretary Louise Haig, said of the new bill last month: "This is a clear signal of intent. Rail reform is at the heart of this King's Speech.

"As Passenger-in-Chief, I said we'd move fast and fix things and that's exactly what we're doing with this weighty, radical legislative agenda.

"Our transport system is broken, but this bill will pave the way for better trains that work for everyone, no matter where you live.

"After years of inefficiency, we're two weeks in and the first steps towards rail reform are being taken today. Change starts now."

The government said: "Our railways are essential in ensuring connectivity for all kinds of people across the country and unlocking their full potential is essential to growing the economy and lowering emissions from transport.

"The privatisation model is failing passengers day in, day out. Publicly-owned passenger rail will put an end to years of waste and fragmentation on our railways and establish a more efficient, higher quality and reliable service.

"The new laws will ensure rail services are run with the passengers put first."

A rail shake-up is on the cards, with potential benefits for North Devon
Picture: Derek Harper/Geograph