

Devon and Cornwall

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Around the regional branch area

Cornwall has the final (or first) 81 miles of the Great Western main line between Plymouth and Penzance, and half of the Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership's nine community rail branch lines (the Tamar Valley Line is in both counties). However, there is no escaping the reality of Cornwall's lower level of rail development activity and associated campaigning. There are just two known campaign groups in Cornwall: Connect Bude which is affiliated to Railfuture and a new one led by Launceston Town Council, both towns being recently connected to the rail network at Okehampton by diverting existing bus services to the station. However, bus frequency is disappointingly lower than the hourly rail service to Exeter. That difference between the counties continues to be reflected in regional branch and affiliated group activities. Almost all of the rail user groups in the regional branch area which are affiliated to Railfuture are in Devon.

Across both counties, and including Somerset too, the sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport is getting into its stride with publication in November of its Rail Strategy – which “outlines how rail underpins the region's future economic growth while helping to meet climate goals”. It was followed by a consultation from December to February on its draft *Peninsula Transport Strategy – Strategic Priorities to 2050*. After three webinars by the organisation in January, Railfuture Devon and Cornwall led our response jointly with Severnside branch, highlighting the central role of rail in accelerating all-important modal shift.

Devon and Torbay already have a joint local transport plan (2011-26) and, while new Department for Transport guidance is still awaited for a successor LTP to be developed, 2024 brings the prospect of a new combined county authority for the two councils, which will include Devon's eight districts. A new devolution deal with central government should bring fresh opportunities for Railfuture to exert its influence on official decisions relating to transport as part of a package of newly-devolved powers and funding.

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall welcomes Cornwall Council cabinet's agreement in December to a levelling-up fund package for the Mid-Cornwall Metro project. We note with appreciation the approval by Torbay Council's planning committee in November of Network Rail's planning



BARNSTAPLE: Great Western managing director Mark Hopwood, centre, visited Barnstaple station in October for the third time in 12 months. On the left is Marcus Jones, Network Rail western route director and on the right is Tim Steer, Tarka Rail Association's co-vice-chair who is also responsible for liaison with the Barnstaple in Bloom team of volunteers
Picture: Mike Day



Neil Bromley, left, and Michael Cooke of Heathfield Rail Link Association at Newton Abbot railway show in December
Picture: HRLA Facebook

application for the new station at Edginswell (also known as Torquay Gateway) on the Riviera line between Newton Abbot and Torre. There remains, however, the vexed question of bridging a significant funding gap identified last summer.

In December, the Heathfield Rail Link Association, advocating restoration of services over the mothballed freight-only line from Newton Abbot to Heathfield and Bovey Tracey, was among a number of groups at the annual Railway Studies and Modellers Show in Newton Abbot.

Devon developments

Elsewhere in the regional branch's area, the rail development campaigning news from Railfuture comes from north Devon. Three particular spheres of influence can be highlighted.

The first has been from some individual members in their personal responses to a planning application considered to adversely affect the last remaining station building at the former Bideford station, now the home of the Bideford Railway Heritage Centre. As a result, a total of 65 objections were submitted from members of the public, along with those from

the conservation officer, as the building is locally listed and in a designated conservation area. There were just eight responses in support. Almost all of the 73 responses made some reference to the possibility, and for many the desirability, of passenger rail services returning to Bideford. Whether or not the proposed development would have any relation to that prospect came second to the awareness-raising value of the proposal.

The second opportunity was a joint lobby from Railfuture and the Tarka Rail Association in response to the public consultation by Torridge District Council on its draft strategic plan for 2023-28. This made no specific reference to a restored rail link with Barnstaple, despite the council previously committing to its inclusion in the forthcoming new joint local plan with North Devon District Council. Although public engagement in such matters is often very low, the publicity generated by Railfuture and the TRA resulted not only in a one-third higher level of public response than for previous similar exercises but even more helpfully, references to that omission of a rail link topped the poll, pushing the need for affordable social housing into second place, and accounted for 25% of all respondents. The amended strategic plan adopted in December now includes the following in the local economy theme: “Investigate with the relevant partner organisations (North Devon Council, Devon CC, ACE Rail and Network Rail) the appetite to jointly commission and fund a study to evaluate the economic and environmental benefits and impacts of re-establishing the rail link.”

Seemingly without waiting for relevant partner organisations, the district council in January then committed some revenue funding in 2024/25 from the government's shared prosperity fund towards a

feasibility study: “Bideford railway study (to work alongside other key stakeholders)”. This is an admittedly unexpectedly early campaign success.

Whether you call them “relevant partner organisations” or “other key stakeholders”, the third sphere of influence is in the creation of the new Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance. A new stakeholder organisation alliance modelled on other successful lobby groups up and down the country was initiated by Bideford Town Council in December, inspiring the hashtag #Reconnection2040.

Railfuture, the Tarka Rail Association and most recently Barnstaple Town Council have signed up. The alliance's opening declaration of intent is: “To secure a new rail link between Bideford and Barnstaple and upgrade of the North Devon (Tarka) Line between Exeter and Barnstaple, championing their transformational benefits for communities and businesses and advocating to decision makers the economic, social and environmental case for developing and investing in the project”.

An inaugural event in Bideford was scheduled for March.

Finally, in a surprise follow-on from the report in the previous issue (*Railwatch* 178), the Tarka Rail Association with Barnstaple in Bloom was announced in mid-December as shortlisted in the national Community Rail Awards for “It's Your Station” – with the awards ceremony in Swansea on 18 March.

Tavistock rail link promised

The government has promised funds to work with Devon County Council to reopen a station at Culmpton as part of the Devon Metro plan. The government and the council will also join forces to reconnect Tavistock to the network by rebuilding five miles of track to Bere Alston. It would give Tavistock a rail service to Plymouth.

Mid Cornwall Metro planned

The government has published its £58 million plans for a Mid Cornwall Metro, which involves upgrading lines to provide an hourly Newquay-Par-St Austell-Truro-Penryn-Falmouth service. The plan includes a reinstated platform at Newquay and a loop at Tregoss Moor to clear the way for doubling the frequency of some services. Funding is £49 million from levelling-up, £6 million match funding, £1.5 million Restoring Your Railway and £1 million active travel. £500,000 could be provided for digitalisation of ticketing.

Public consultation started in February at Newquay.

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Railwatch is for Railfuture members, the rail industry and anyone interested in railways

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Railfuture member of the year

By Wendy Thorne

Do you know someone who in 2023-24 has contributed to the success of Railfuture or raised our profile, by for example campaigning successfully for an improved or new rail service?

Perhaps they work behind the scenes, helping their local branch or engaging stakeholders.

If you think they deserve recognition then we want to hear about them – by Monday 1 July.

Nominations may be made by any member of Railfuture, and but only Railfuture members are eligible to be nominated.

To submit a nomination, send a written statement of not more than 500 words identifying how the nominee has contributed to Railfuture's mission to be the number one advocate for rail users and the rail industry, and how they have enhanced Railfuture's campaigning for a bigger better railway. Send to Wendy Thorne no later than Monday 1 July at:

wendy.thorne@railfuture.org.uk

The 2023 Award (renamed from Railfuture Campaigner of the Year) is due to be presented in Edinburgh on Saturday 13 July 2024, immediately following formal business of Railfuture's national AGM.



By Roger Blake

The final call for nominations for Railfuture's tenth Awards for Rail User Groups (which includes similar organisations such as local campaigns, station adopters and rail partnerships) closed on Easter Saturday.

This year there are just seven nominations across four of the six award categories from four of Railfuture's 14 branches – North East, North West, Scotland and West Midlands.

The awards and commendations will be announced after this year's national AGM in Edinburgh on Saturday 13 July.

Full and illustrated details of all the RUG Awards and Commendations from 2023, and previous years since their inauguration in 2012 and Campaigner of the Year in 2019, are in Railfuture's national website, under What's on.



Two of last year's winners are pictured left

They took home four of Devon's five Awards

Councillor Andrea Davis, Cabinet Member for Climate Change, Environment and Transport, won last year's Judges' Special Award for Devon County Council

The Tarka Rail Association's Tim Steer won Gold Awards for Best Campaigner (joint) and also Best Social Media plus a Bronze Award for Best Campaign

Will election give the railways a clear road?

Words and pictures by Ian Brown

We all know that government leadership of Britain's railways is in the remedial category, as evidenced by the progressive destruction of HS2 as a viable project for Britain, thus wasting billions of pounds of public money. It is as if the government's aim was "maximum spend, minimum benefits".

Railfuture members had mixed views about High Speed Two, with a fair proportion claiming that the project addressed the wrong priorities.

Railfuture recognised this from the start and campaigned for HS2 to be integrated into the rail network, serving whole regions and adding capacity to core routes such as the West Coast main line.

We could have claimed some success if it were not for the prime minister cancelling HS2 north of Birmingham at the Tory Party conference in the former Manchester Central station. It suddenly seemed that "swelling up the north" would be about filling potholes, caused by increasingly large and overweight cars.

Was political leadership always so poor?

I think the answer is probably "Yes". There was one big difference when we had a national railway, British Railways. BR had good management, particularly at the time when it was abolished to make way for privatisation.

BR's enlightened management did not stop Beeching-style dosages of course, because BR was usually kept short of money by the government. However, because BR



BACK TO THE FUTURE: Devon County Council is probably the leading shire council sponsoring rail development. This picture looks like a heritage railway on a gala day, but it is Okehampton on a summer weekday. Regular, daily passenger trains from Exeter to Okehampton were retained in 2021 after 50 years, following a joint project by Great Western Railway, Network Rail and Devon County Council. A visit to Crediton, Barnstaple and Okehampton illustrates what can be achieved by the county council and its partners

had a relatively strong leadership team, it did enter into a meaningful dialogue, sometimes an intensive dialogue, with government on behalf of the railway industry.

BR was able to reduce the social and financial impact of some government interventions. At the end of the day, BR always held a losing hand, because the Treasury determined held on to the national purse strings.

BR therefore became resigned to managing a progressively obsolete set of kit with ever greater skill in sweating its limited assets.

British Rail then was on a hiding to nothing.

Since 1993 and even now, the Treasury maintains its grip on the flow of investment cash.

Partly as a result, privatisation became largely a money-go-round system moving financial resources between players that sometimes looked like some form of computer game. A lot of taxpayers' money did go into financing the railway "game". The aim seemed to be that the private sector companies "playing the railway game" continued to make money.

At the same time, the railway continued to need investment at a key time when its importance was increasingly being recognised, with growing acceptance of the dangers of climate change and pollution.

The privatised system did, after its infamous 1,000 days start, result in investment in new trains. However, it is probably fair to say

that if all the profits created by individual private companies had been invested in rail infrastructure, we would have a much better railway today.

The train operators and Network Rail are actually quite well managed now. Management is not really the issue. In the case of the train operators, management has a contract and manages its affairs to deliver the contract while ensuring that they play the money-go-round game and squeeze some profit out of it.

The train operators have generally managed this process reasonably well, although the Covid outbreak put paid to the ticket revenue

income stream which was an essential component of the money-go-round. Passengers have seemed to be of secondary consideration from a government policy perspective.

The GBR transition team is still beavering away but there has been a lack of top-level leadership in driving the initiative forward. Getting parliamentary powers will not now happen until well after the general election.

The danger is that if there is no one driving the process forward, the trade unions will fill the vacuum. If they play havoc with the system it could threaten the credibility of rail as the transport system for the future.

Plus ça change?

The Labour Party has realised that transport is an issue but, beyond the simplistic slogan of nationalisation, it still needs a well-thought-out policy that might actually work.

Great British Railways sitting on the shelves was a marvellous opportunity for the Labour party. The idea behind GBR had been well and truly shelved out over a lengthy period by civil servants working for the incumbent government.

You could say that by adding an ombudsman or two and changing the stupid name, you have a workable system of running our railways brought to you by the Conservative government – waiting to be implemented by an incoming government of any colour.

With the general election now agreed for American Independence Day on 4 July, both parties have essentially the same plan for the railways!

So let's get on with it. The government can set the strategic objectives, and Great British Railways must then be allowed to run the industry focussed on passengers and freight customers. GBR must be allowed to make investment decisions and to maintain an investment pipeline with delivery partners.

This will require increasing the productivity of, especially, electrification and control system (signalling) upgrades.

Modal shift to rail is essential for environmental road and rail



NEXT PLEASE: Tim Steer of the Tarka Rail Association has made a good case for bringing regular train services back to Bideford

must have the capacity to accommodate transfers of passengers and freight from road efficiently.

Roads go to your front door while railways do not. Planning transportation in an intermodal integrated way is essential and it will of course mean investment.

Putting some effort into devolution

The politics of Scotland may look problematic compared to the rest of the UK, but the Scottish government has established itself as an effective client for Scotland's railways.

Wales could be the same, although its railway client credentials are only now just starting to show, as major investment in electrification in the South Wales valleys is getting into gear.

Trying to commission five new, or substantially modified, rolling stock fleets simultaneously was a serious strategic error which inflicted serious hardship on passengers in Wales and also those using cross-border rail services.

Hopefully much of the pain is over and passengers will start to see the benefits of investment in new rolling stock.

However, the train operator which tackled rolling stock best was not

devolved authority but Greater Anglia, which completely replaced its whole fleet with three new types which, all capable of running on the electrified network using electric traction. No more old-fashioned diesel multiple units!

Devolution to cities

If Britain is really serious about providing effective transport systems in our cities and large towns, rail must be part of a properly planned transport solution. All modes of transport, including rail and light rail, must be glued together by an easy-to-use ticketing system and integrated system maps.

This worked in London with the London Overground and Crossrail projects.

The inspiration for London came from Paris, which established RER (Réseau Express Régional or

Regional Express Network). The RER routes across the centre complemented the Paris Metro. Trams and light rail, like a doughnut all round the city's circumference, completed the rail magic.

I was involved with creating Crossrail, Thameslink and the Overground projects in London. We did not, however, finish the job with light rail on the scale of Paris. It is unlikely that any of this progress would have been achieved at this scale in either city without devolved transport authorities.

For Paris, it was Régie autonome des transports parisiens (Parisian Autonomous Transport Administration).

For London, it was Transport for London.

Britain's GBR plan involves limited devolution in two conurbations, Greater Manchester and the West Midlands, both areas where rail, complementing and integrated with light rail, can play a far greater role in providing a cost-effective transport solution.

This can be driven effectively only from city government which has the need and the means to plan proper transport networks.

This model already applies in most European cities where the national rail system can be a cost-effective partner conveying high volumes of passengers. Other cities should follow.

Railfuture's role

Railfuture understands enough about railway economics to be able to focus on viable proposals for expanded rail service and responsiveness. Indeed there is now some momentum behind responding proposals, as evidenced in Scotland with new stations on the East Coast main line, light rail to Newhaven and now the Liverpool and Mersey Link.

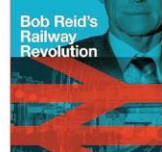
Campaigners, managers, officials, planners and politicians have put in some admirable hard work to make these projects happen.

It seems pretty clear that forward-looking projects are more likely to succeed where effective rail governance, including devolved political governance, is in place. Benefits need to be real and relevant but they also need to be made visible to the promoters – and the public.

The post-election changes to our railways, if implemented with some real drive, will give a much better prospect for Railfuture's campaigning. But it will remain difficult to produce a convincing business case.

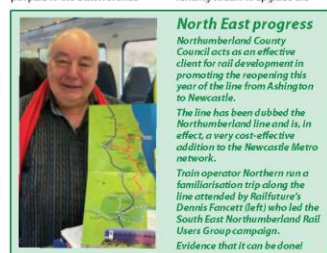
Plenty to go for.

■ Ian Brown CBE FCI is Railfuture's policy director



Bob Reid's Railway Revolution

Sir Robert Reid turned British Rail into one of the best railways in Europe when he was BR chief executive in 1980-90. InterCity became profitable, Network SouthEast was created and, for the first time in 30 years, passenger numbers and freight grew.



North East progress

Northumberland County Council acts as an effective client for rail development in promoting the reopening this year of the line from Ashington to Newcastle.

The line has been dubbed the Dennis Fancett line and is, in effect, a very cost-effective addition to the Newcastle Metro network.

Train operator Northern run a familiarisation trip along the line attended by Railfuture's Dennis Fancett (left) who led the South East Northumberland Rail Users Group campaign.

Evidence that it can be done!

Rail strategy lost in a sea mist

By David Henshaw

With an election fast approaching, now might be the time to begin campaigning in a high-profile way for the "lost" sections (often quite short sections) of railway trunk lines.

I will not list them all, but in the West Country, Okehampton to Bere Alston surely tops the list.

A great deal of money has been spent on making the sea defences just a little more resilient at Dawlish, and Network Rail and its contractors have done a great job of defending the station, but the billions thrown at the project did nothing to improve defences on the equally exposed railway north and south of the town.

Reopening Okehampton-Tavistock-Bere Alston is a relatively easy win, and once done it is permanent, unlike sea defences.

Yes, money will have to be thrown at Dawlish for the foreseeable future, but the engineers will never win against the might of a steadily rising ocean... apparently rising at a faster rate than the scientists expected.

Dusting off the files, my Dawlish photo was taken on a relatively calm day in October 2023, when the gentle wind worked with the tide and swell to overwhelm the sea wall with some ease, and spray reached the station through the completed works too.

The train emerging is a Hitachi bimode incidentally! There were few cancellations that day, but a very large number in the days that followed, and this was not an east wind or a named storm.

I produced the map below in 2015 to demonstrate that a west-north chord was a relatively straightforward option near Cowley Bridge Junction just north of Exeter. This, of course, is another place where flooding is frequently an issue on the main line, caused



Picture: David Henshaw

WAVE GOODBYE TO BILLIONS OF POUNDS: The sea shows the railway who is master at Dawlish, Devon

again by climate instability, in this case heavy and prolonged downpours affecting the River Exe.

A low viaduct across the valley would avoid the whole Cowley flooding issue, and allow trains to take a direct link to the more resilient Tavistock route to Plymouth and beyond.

There are always sceptics: Meldon viaduct would cost hundreds of millions to restore. Tavistock is impassable. The whole line would be slower. It will bring about closure of the coastal route.

There were plenty of sceptics about forging a route through Galashiels too when Scotland planned to reopen the now highly successful Borders Railway. And do not forget how British Rail told us Ribbleshead Viaduct was collapsing when it wanted to close the Settle-Carlisle line. Once the political will is



Picture: David Henshaw

OKEHAMPTON: Busy after resumption of regular services in 2021

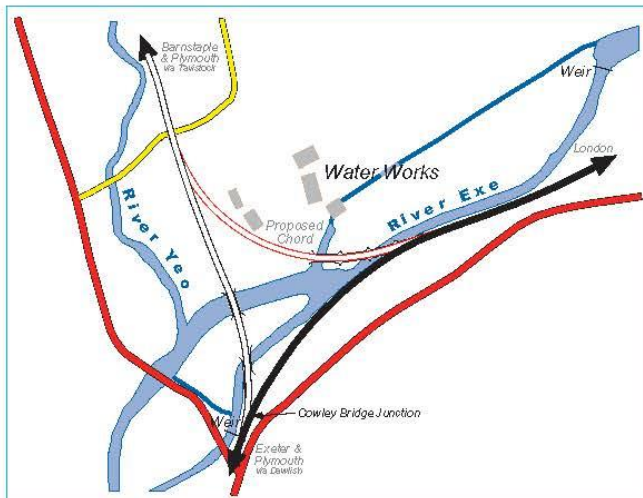
sorted, these impossible engineering issues mysteriously vaporise.

The time has come to put prospective politicians on the spot. The Tories could have promised to fund these major trunk-line projects when they shamefully cut HS2 back to a laughable rump, but they promised much of the money to road projects.

Without wanting to appear partisan (I have voted left, centre,

right and green over the years), the time has come to back those who share the same transport vision.

■ David Henshaw lives in Dorchester and is editor of **AtoB Magazine**. He is a former national executive member of the **Railway Development Society** (Railfuture's forerunner). He is the author of **The Great Railway Conspiracy** and **Brompton Bicycle**.



Map: David Henshaw

FREQUENTLY FLOODED: Cowley Bridge Junction, near Exeter

"Flying taxis... should be a reality by 2028," said Department for Transport in March



Picture: Roger Cornfoot

MELDON VIADUCT: A potential alternative rail way to Plymouth

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A new Alliance is born

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance was inaugurated at an informal event, organised by Railfuture, in Bideford's historic Royal Hotel on Friday 1 March. Representatives from 13 stakeholder organisations gathered to share perspectives on the value of returning rail services to Bideford, and upgrading the capacity and performance of the existing services on the North Devon (Tarka) line between Barnstaple and Exeter.

The new alliance is modelled on other successful partnerships, from the Cotswold Line Promotion Group to the East London Line Group, and the Thameslink Consortium to the East West Rail Consortium. The gathering included representatives from local councils, train operating company Great Western Railway, and Network Rail, with supporting statements from two MPs.

Railfuture's press release generated social media coverage and was followed up by the *Crediton Courier*, *Chime Whistle Publishing*, *Rail Advent*, *North Devon Gazette*, *Devon Live*, *RAIL* magazine, and the *North Devon Journal*. Roger Blake was interviewed on BBC Radio Devon. *Voice FM* hosted the Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail project campaigner and Railfuture RUG Awards-winner Tim Steer. Related press and social media coverage has continued unabated. Torridge District Council voted to join the new alliance soon after the inaugural event.

Consultation responses

Railfuture has responded to Peninsula Transport's consultation on its draft strategy to 2050. Railfuture also provided input to the proposed Devon & Torbay devolution deal, which could create a new combined authority.

Appeal for funds

Railfuture Ltd acted on behalf of the new Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance to submit an application to Great Western Railway's customer and community improvement fund. The financial support would enable the alliance to commission a study which would lead to a strategic outline business case. Torridge District Council has committed some match-funding from its shared prosperity fund and in April a specialist consultancy had been selected.

Railfuture research

In April Railfuture Devon & Cornwall published two pieces of significant research based on official data sources. The first was on passengers' top destinations from the four main North Devon (Tarka) line stations in 2022/23, which showed Exeter's three main



ALLIES: Mayor of Barnstaple Louisa York (left), ACE Rail campaign lead Tim Steer and Mayor of Bideford Jamie McKenzie (right) including, in the background, Railfuture directors Roger Blake and Ian Brown CBE, Doug Bushby of Torridge District Council, Tom Hart of Harland & Wolff's Appledore shipyard, Marcus Jones and Victoria Storey of Network Rail, Matt Barnes of GWR and Jamie Hulland of Devon County Council



My carriage awaits: Tarka Rail Association vice-president elect Peter West OBE, on his way home from the alliance event, is reunited with the class 150 named after him

stations together as the top destination grouping for between 59% and 65% of all passengers from Barnstaple, Umberleigh, Eggesford and Crediton. More surprisingly, Barnstaple emerged as second only to Exmouth as the top destination from Exeter Central. 2023/24 was another record-breaking year, with an all-time high of 785,000 journeys, representing an 11% annual increase.

Connect Bude

Railfuture affiliate Connect Bude was awarded funds from Railfuture's Fighting Fund, with

local match funding, to develop the case for improving rail connectivity in that part of North Cornwall. Following the restoration of regular passenger rail services between Exeter and Okehampton, connecting bus services between Okehampton and Bude were introduced in 2022. More passenger growth is expected after the opening in 2026 of Okehampton Interchange – the West Devon transport hub.

Heathfield test bed

Railfuture member Michael Cooke, chair of Heathfield Rail Link

Association, reports interest by rolling stock company Eversholt in using the "temporarily out of use" branch line from Newton Abbot to Heathfield as a test-bed for its Revolution VLR vehicle.

Combe Rail

Railfuture affiliate Combe Rail is preparing to mark the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the railway with an exhibition in Ilfracombe Landmark Pavilion on Saturday 20 July. The group made an unsuccessful bid to the *Restoring Your Railway* ideas fund for TawLink, a light railway between Barnstaple and Braunton.

Mid Cornwall Metro

Transport Secretary Mark Harper visited Cornwall in March to check on progress with the Mid Cornwall Metro, to be delivered in two stages in 2025.

Next May should see an increased service frequency on the Newquay branch, followed in December by direct services via Par, St Austell and Truro through to Falmouth. The following day he visited Barnstaple and received a comprehensive briefing about the capacity requirements of the North Devon line from Mike Day, the outgoing chair of the Railfuture-affiliated Tarka Rail Association, Devon County Council's Andrea Davis and North Devon MP Selaine Saxby.

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Northern Devon hive of activity

Rail campaigner Tim Steer was invited to be a columnist for the *North Devon Gazette* in April. In his first article *From railway legacy to community advocacy*, he introduced himself as the latest in his family's long line of historical association with the local railways, leading into the ACE Rail campaign and its subsequent affiliation with Railfuture. Tim is also one of three directors of the Bideford Railway Heritage Centre based at the former Bideford station and also cares for the listed Instow signal box. He has contributed ten fortnightly articles in his first five months, with one title being *Social media an unsatisfactory platform to achieve change*. There has been a steady flow of other media coverage of rail campaigning in northern Devon associated with Railfuture in various other outlets such as *Devon Live* and the *North Devon Journal*.

Rail-Mindedness Index

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall published research, using the Office of Rail and Road station usage estimates to generate a *Rail-Mindedness Index* for Devon. The index still showed the North Devon (Tarka) line with relatively low station usage per capita of catchment area population, despite record-breaking journey volumes. There is likely to be substantial suppressed demand.

Rail campaigners on TV

BBC South West TV's *Spotlight* programme featured Railfuture-initiated Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance with interviews at the former Bideford station, at Barnstaple station with Tarka Rail Association vice-chair David Northey and ACE Rail campaign founder Tim Steer, and at Exeter St David's station. You can view the TV segments via *Railfuture in the news* on the Railfuture website.

Stakeholder conferences

Railfuture members from around the Great Western Railway network participated in the operator's community rail and stakeholder conference, held at STEAM in Swindon. Campaigners were delighted to see a map of the GWR network with a dotted line from Barnstaple to Bideford and another from Bere Alston to Tavistock (proposed line reinstatements).

Railfuture workshop

The Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance held a Railfuture-sponsored workshop in Bideford in July for nine stakeholder organisations, seeking ways to modernise and extend services between Exeter and northern Devon. The workshop included regional body Peninsula Transport and discussed how its strategic investment plan can incorporate



ACE Rail Campaign's Tim Steer with newly elected MP for North Devon Ian Roome who was able to inspect Railfuture's new publicity material at the five-day Barnstaple RailFest in August, held to mark the 170th anniversary of its first railway station, Barnstaple Junction

elements of the Torridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme.

Railwatch at anniversary

Copies of the latest *Railwatch* were taken to an exhibition in Ilfracombe as the town marked the 150th anniversary of the railway.

Backing for railway alliance

A unanimous committee vote backed Torridge District Council's earlier decision to join the Railfuture-initiated Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance.

Railfuture provides support

Railfuture's directors ratified earlier decisions that the Railfuture Fighting Fund should provide support for an initial land value capture study, an NDRDA convention next year and making progress towards compiling a strategic outline business case on reinstating rail services to Bideford.

Back to business

Work on reinstating rail services to Bideford should continue unaffected by the new government's cancellation of the *Restoring Your Railways* scheme. BBC South West were told that progress was being made on developing a business case.

Guest speaker Christian Wolmar

Railfuture president and *Railwatch* correspondent Christian Wolmar visited Appledore Book Festival in September in his capacity as a railway historian, author and journalist.



Climate focus for Connect Bude

Railfuture-affiliated Connect Bude has a much-improved website, which highlights the Bude Climate Festival and the Bude-Stratton Heritage Festival. The website also gives welcome prominence to Railfuture's Fighting Fund support for its survey to support the case for improvements to the very infrequent bus links with the hourly train services at Okehampton. It also includes a video of a journey from Okehampton to Bude – by drone!

Bideford rail champions

Railfuture Devon & Cornwall is saddened by the passing of two stalwart champions of bringing rail services back to their community, former Bideford town mayors Peter Christie and David Ratcliff.

New task for rail winner Andrea

Railfuture RUG Award-winning

Devon County Council elected Andrea Davis as new deputy leader in May. She retains her cabinet portfolio for climate change, environment and transport. She has also become chair of the Peninsula Rail Task Force and will play a key role in establishing the new county combined authority of Devon with Torbay. The new Authority will produce a new local transport plan, which is likely to include an updated version of Devon Metro framework and, Railfuture hopes, an aspiration for Bideford to rejoin the rail network.

Metro service boost in May

At least two rail development projects should not be impacted by the government's axing of the *Restoring Your Railways* scheme – the new Okehampton Interchange station and Mid-Cornwall Metro. Work on both has started. The first phase of the Mid-Cornwall Metro, a doubling to hourly of Par-Newquay services, will start in May.

Three rail projects at risk

Three rail development projects are at risk: reinstated Tavistock-Bere Alston-Plymouth services, a re-opened Cullompton station (between Exeter St David's and Tiverton Parkway), and a new Edginswell station (Torbay Gateway) on the Riviera line between Newton Abbot and Torre.

VLN hope for Heathfield

Heathfield Rail Link Association's chair – and Railfuture member – Michael Cooke took a stall to the town's annual summer fayre in July, where he was visited by former and current town mayors. He is also receiving support from Newton Abbot Town Council, and Stover Canal Trust, which is adjacent to the rail line.

The association wants the four-mile line from Newton Abbot to Heathfield, last used by freight seven years ago, to be reopened for passengers.

It is concentrating on retaining platform 9 at Newton Abbot in use. It also wants Network Rail to issue a licence for HRLA members to work on the platform at the former Teigngrace Halt.

A survey has been carried out to examine whether the line could be used for testing the very light rail vehicle being developed in association with Eversholt Rail. The Heathfield branch is one of 200 potential routes which the battery-powered very light rail vehicle could be used on.

25% growth on Tarka line

Railfuture published research in July showing that the first six months of 2024 had an astonishing 25% more journeys on the North Devon (Tarka) line than in the previous best-ever comparable period, which was pre-pandemic (2018). The research is based on GWR data.

www.railfuture.org.uk/Devon-and-Cornwall+Branch

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My rural ride around Britain's flawed rail network

PRESIDENT'S COLUMN

By Christian Wolmar

In the past few weeks, my speaking engagements have taken me to various interesting rail-connected places, mostly for the first time. It has been a fascinating experience, highlighting the good, the bad and the possible.

Let us start with the good. I was invited, thanks to Railfuture director Roger Blake, to speak at the Appledore Book Festival in September. I confess I had to look up Appledore, as I thought it was up north (that was in fact Appleby) and discovered that it was some 10 miles from Barnstaple in north Devon. I was told that it could be reached by a lovely cycle path along an old railway track from Barnstaple and consequently squeezed my fortunately quite light road bike into one of the horrendous compartments which are provided on Great Western's new Hitachi trains.

As an aside, only a country as dismissive of cycling as the UK could possibly have allowed the purchase of trains that require cyclists to hang up the front wheel of a bike on a hook some six feet high in order to carry them on the journey. Very few people, especially those with heavy bikes, can possibly fulfil this task, and yet it now seems we are stuck with this insane idea until the second half of the century, given rolling stock's life expectancy. I digress. The bike

ride was indeed fab, but the key point was that the Barnstaple branch line from Exeter is heavily used and clearly a key part of the local infrastructure.

On my return journey at 10.00 in the morning, there were about 70 people waiting for the hourly train. While GWR and the local Devon council are both very supportive of the service and would like to provide a half hourly service, this would be possible only after considerable infrastructure investment. But it would be a great boon. I am afraid that my attempts to get a train to another remote station, Barton-on-Humber, were rather less successful. On the journey to Barton, there was chaos because of an incident on a train, a broken down service and a track circuit failure, which meant I had to phone the host of my meeting to meet me at Scunthorpe, as otherwise I would have been late. For the return on the following day, a Saturday, all services had been cancelled from Barton because the train was needed elsewhere by operator East Midlands Trains and I had to resort to the bus replacement service, which was actually very efficient. It was just as

well I did not have my bike with me.

Barton is one of the few places on the rail network that require three trains to reach from London, run by three different operators which have made little effort to create efficient connections. This historic anomaly is the result of the fact that the station can be reached only from the east, as a connection to Scunthorpe proposed in the 19th century was never built. A two-hourly service which is frequently cancelled serves little purpose for the 11,000 residents of the town. They can access better

connected parts of the network, either by hopping across the Humber bridge to Hesse or Hull, or by taking a bus or driving to Barnetby, nine miles south. As currently set up, only the hardest train enthusiast is likely to use the rail service and even I failed.

Then there is the possible. I was invited to speak at the Campaign for Borders Rail AGM, which also featured David Shirres, the editor of *Rail Engineer*, the new Carlisle MP Julie Minns and long-time railwayman Steve Bradley, who is campaigning for reopening lines in

the west of Ireland on both sides of the border. The Scottish campaign is, of course, seeking to continue the success of the 2015 reopening of the Borders railway to Tweedbank by completing the line through to Carlisle, an ambitious but feasible task given the need for regeneration.

The key point is that the circumstances on every part of the railway network are different. That applies to campaigning too. What works and is appropriate in one place may not be in another. Flexibility and, at times, compromise are key, especially given the difficult situation of this new government. Our first task, perhaps, is persuading ministers that what may seem like a lost cause or a waste of money may be a very worthwhile project. That, as I have argued in *RAIL* magazine, requires a completely new way of assessing transport schemes, moving away from the discredited business cases dependent on spurious benefit-cost ratio assessments.

■ **Railwatch readers can buy a signed copy of my latest book *The Liberation Line* (featured in *Railwatch* 181) for a special price of £20 post free. Email christian.wolmar@gmail.com and put *Railwatch* offer in the header**

■ **Christian's *Calling All Stations* is available on all main podcast platforms**



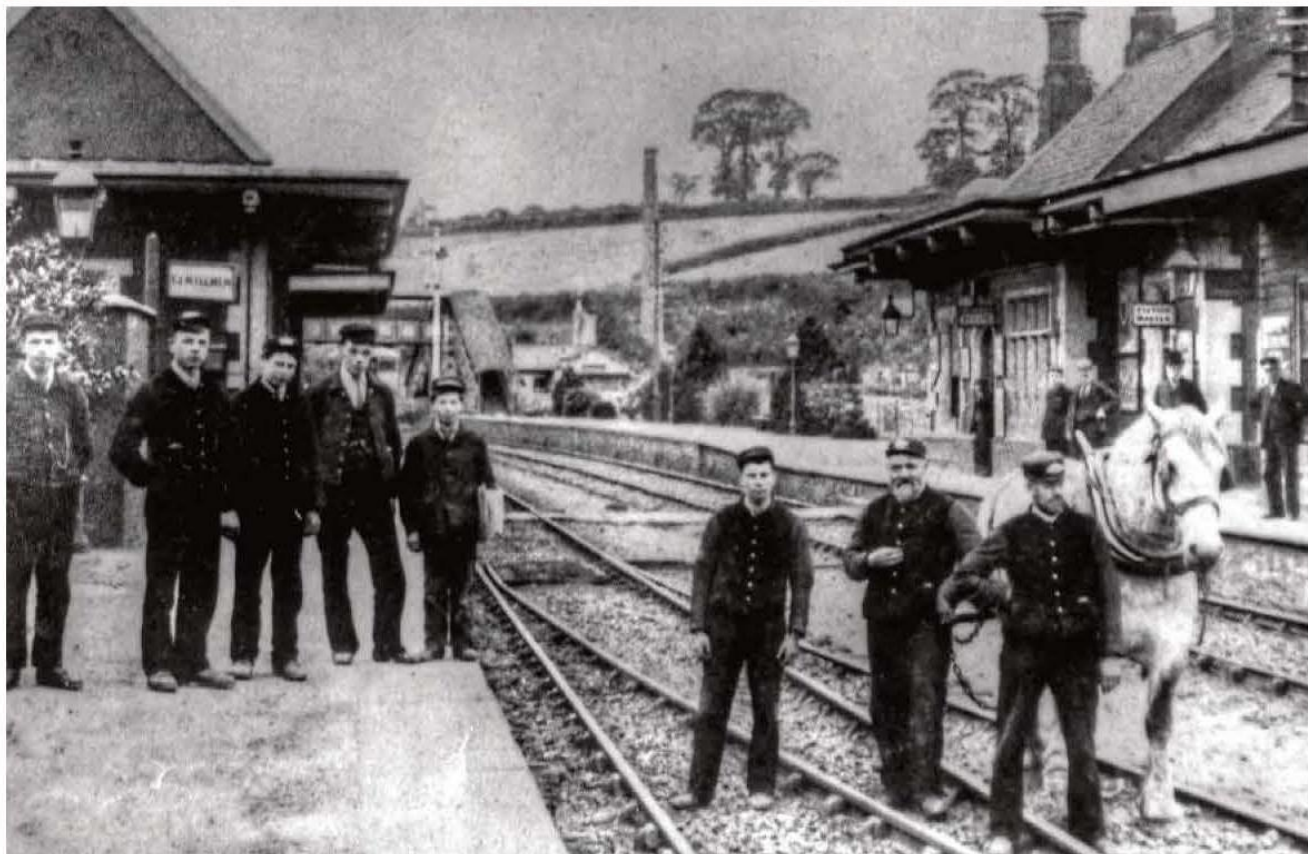
Christian Wolmar

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X @railfuture

Join Railfuture at www.railfuture.org.uk/join/

Station team and shunting horse ready for action 132 years ago



Picture: The Folklore Library and Archive

CREDITON: Rail staff at the Devon station in 1892, along with their shunting horse

I am the project manager for a new heritage archive focusing on Devon's branch lines. The project is being funded by a GWR grant, and is an initiative from The Folklore Library & Archive, whose work you can see at www.folklorelibrary.com

Our aim is to save "hidden" heritage in all its various forms surrounding Devon's branch lines, including oral histories. We are trying to connect with as many people as possible, who are prepared to sit down with us for an hour or so and share their rail-related memories, which will be recorded to form part of this unique archive.

One of the project's main goals is to collect oral history – sitting down and chatting to people about their memories of Devon's railways, and capturing those memories before they are lost forever. We are also able to accept donations of artefacts, and can assist with digitising personal archives of photos, video, slides and cine film.

The archive has already received some intriguing and unique items from contributors including personal archives, a school project and a number of fascinating personal interviews, in which many wonderful anecdotes have been shared.

Everyone's interactions with the railway are unique. A train driver will see it very differently from a passenger, campaigner or volunteer. Gathering people's stories from a wide variety of viewpoints will help us to create as full a picture as possible of Devon's branch lines, and we are very grateful to GWR for helping us preserve these vital and fascinating links to our past.

The Railway Heritage Project is funded by GWR until February 2025, after which the resulting archive will be made available to researchers, historians and rail enthusiasts.

If you can contribute to the archive with your own memories of Devon's railways, please contact me at folklorelibrary@gmail.com

One of the archive submissions we have received shows rail staff at Crediton station in 1892, along with their shunting horse.

Tracey Norman,
Project Manager – Devon Railway Heritage Project,
On behalf of The Folklore Library and Archive
Registered Charity Number 1203418

Rail transport for new homes

Property development can unlock funds for new rail projects, as Railfuture members at the AGM in Edinburgh heard from E-Rail's Dr George Hazel and his colleague Tony Cahill, at Railfuture's branches and groups awayday in Tamworth. See also page 6.

Both presentations can be found in the library of our website, and support Railfuture's focus on our three campaigning priorities for bringing rail closer to growing communities.

Connecting communities

The government appears to have shifted its priorities to using rail to drive economic growth rather than connecting isolated communities, although Railfuture knows that giving communities a rail service boosts their economic performance.

Network Rail has identified 29 of the largest population clusters on its western route which are more than three miles from an existing rail station in a Connecting Communities document.

Progress has been made on the following five which have been through Network Rail's advanced business case analysis.

- Portishead line, Bristol
- Cullompton station, Devon
- Tavistock station, Devon
- Wellington station, Somerset
- Cowley branch line, Oxfordshire

Doubt has, however, been cast on some in DfT missives.

Devizes station, Wiltshire, has also been subjected to a detailed business case study, and case studies have been carried out for possible reopening of Bideford and Plympton in Devon, Corsham and Royal Wootton Bassett in Wiltshire and a station south of Gloucester.

■ *Roger Blake is Railfuture's director for infrastructure and networks*

Stay in touch with Railfuture's national infrastructure and networks and freight and logistics groups via our dedicated campaign web pages:

www.railfuture.org.uk/A-bigger-railway

www.railfuture.org.uk/Freight

Also on X (formerly Twitter):

[@RailfutureNetws](https://twitter.com/RailfutureNetws)

[@RailfutureFret](https://twitter.com/RailfutureFret)

tim.steer@railfuture.org.uk
alan.clark@railfuture.org.uk

Buses connect with GWR trains

Devon County Council, which won a Railfuture award last year for its proactive support for rail, has also won praise for promoting bus links to connect with rail services. It has supported five such routes at Okehampton and Barnstaple stations.

Services 309/310 are timed to connect with train services at Barnstaple, and also pass the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway's station at Woody Bay.

Stagecoach announced that the arrival of these new buses comes ahead of a broader electric vehicle roll-out in 2025, which will include 20 new electric buses for the North Devon bus network. This includes routes between Barnstaple and Appledore / Westward Ho! via Bideford, and Ilfracombe via Braunton, all running via Barnstaple rail station.

Railfuture members had previously contributed to the county council's consultation on bus-rail integration at Barnstaple rail station.

By contrast, Bude and Padstow in north Cornwall have less fortunate tales to tell. Railfuture affiliate Connect Bude is worried about the frequency and reliability of buses to Okehampton rail station.

<https://connectbude.co.uk/>

Connect Bude is awaiting the results of its Railfuture Fighting Fund-supported survey of the potential use of increased services. Meanwhile Padstow is in the thick of a row over the town council's recent withdrawal of permission for operators to use the bus stop on its land at the foot of a hill by Padstow Museum, which was the rail station building until line closure in 1967. A public meeting was being held in October.

Campaign targets at risk

A dark cloud has hung over three rail development projects in the Devon Metro area since the new government cancelled the Restoring Your Railway scheme. Even before the July cancellation, the planned new station at Edginswell in Torbay, sometimes referred to as Torquay Gateway, had



Stagecoach Buses unveiled its new 12-strong fleet in October to provide upgraded services to connect with GWR train services at Barnstaple station. Andrea Davis, who received a Railfuture award on behalf of the county council, is in the red jacket, third from right, with Railfuture and ACE Rail's Tim Steer, second left. Andrea is Devon's deputy leader and the cabinet member for climate change, environment and transport



Volunteers at Barnstaple station with Barnstaple Town Council's deputy mayor Joanna Orange (fourth from left). The trophy is held by Tim Steer (fourth from right)
Photo: GWR Barnstaple station staff

funding difficulties because of rising costs. Restoring passenger services to Cullompton, on the Exeter-Taunton line, had by contrast received project development funds. Funding for an outline business case to restore passenger services to Tavistock from Plymouth via Bere Alston had been promised by the previous government's rail minister.

If these projects fall victim to project reviews, campaigners will have to appeal to the new County Combined Authority for Devon and Torbay, which will have devolved funding for transport.

Two other projects supported by Railfuture are safe. Works for the Mid-Cornwall Metro have begun at Newquay station. In west Devon, track will be slewed in March in preparation for the new

Okehampton Interchange station, which is expected to open in 2026.

First class station volunteer team

Barnstaple station volunteers were praised for taking on a "Herculean task", by Britain in Bloom judge Derek Beer. The team excelled in their innovative use of recycled materials, transforming the redundant platform to create sustainable planters and rockeries.

Railfuture member and local project lead for the ACE Rail campaign Tim Steer has set up the Friends of Barnstaple Railway Station as a formal adoption group to make an inclusive environment for all ages and abilities.

There will be sustainable and seasonal planting within permitted planting areas including the former island platform. The establishment

of the Friends coincided with Barnstaple station being awarded the Gold Award at a regional Stations in Bloom competition.

The October awards ceremony was held in the Castle Gardens, Sherborne, Dorset. Volunteers Tim Steer and Graham Hayward accepted the accolades on behalf of Barnstaple station.

Train travel is now more popular

The national headlines continue to lament the general struggle to recover passenger use of the rail network to pre-pandemic levels, but recovery plus growth is under way in the South West and on North Devon's Tarka line in particular.

Railfuture's analysis of official data shows growth in Devon and Cornwall.

North Devon's Tarka line to Barnstaple outstripped the other six lines with a post-pandemic 36.5% increase in station footfall. Since such records began in 1997-98, passenger numbers on the line have almost trebled, while passenger numbers since 2009-10 have doubled. All this growth has been achieved with little more than patch and mend expenditure on infrastructure maintenance.

Influencing and convincing

The Railfuture-initiated Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance, which has absorbed the ACE Rail campaign, has focused its work on submissions to the sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport for its strategic implementation plan.

A local transport plan is also being prepared for the new Devon and Torbay combined county authority.

Railfuture is calling for new rail services to reach Bideford. Network Rail has assisted Railfuture's cause with the recent publication of *Connecting Communities – framework assessment of new station opportunities on Western Route*. It included Bideford as one of the five case studies which were selected for detailed assessment from the 23 potential new or reopened stations shortlisted.

www.railfuture.org.uk/

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Farewell to Gerard, the Open University geologist who campaigned with Railfuture for 30 years

The funeral of Railfuture stalwart Gerard Duddridge took place on 30 October at the Church of St Cyr and St Julitta in Newton St Cyres, Devon.

Gerard, pictured right, a long-standing chair of Railfuture Devon and Cornwall, died in the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital. Gerard's widow Lynette and his brother John welcomed Railfuture members to the funeral. A geologist and geographer



for the Open University, Gerard was committed to rail campaigning but was also an expert on bus services. He carried out research for the Open University on earthquakes, soil gas and flooding.

He was influential in the campaign for the Devon Metro and Okehampton station reopening and he was also working to reopen the line to Bere Alston. For many years, virtually single-handed, Gerard maintained Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall branch which covers an area 120 miles long from Land's End to the Somerset border. He was the branch correspondent for *Railwatch* for 30 years,

providing articles and maps to professional standard. Former Railfuture board member Philip Shelton said: "I came to appreciate what an enormous amount he contributed to Railfuture in general and the Railfuture branch in particular. His output was prodigious.

"He compiled an analysis of every rail line in the two counties which had been closed in the past, together with details of what was needed to reopen it, the feasibility of doing so, the economics of reopening and a score on a scale of 1 to 5 of whether campaigning to reopen it would be worthwhile."

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