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From Blyth to Bideford?

PAGE ONE PICTURE

Our page 1 picture by Trevor Watson shows an ordinary train making its way through the rosebay willowherb growing beside the track.

An ordinary scene? Not quite. Soon there will be a regular passenger service on the 18-mile Ashington, Blyth and Tyne system, now renamed the Northumberland line. It is one of the first results of the government's Restoring Your Railway policy.

The class 158 train is shown approaching Morpeth on the line from Bedlington in August last year with a contingent of socially distanced dignitaries.

The train left the East Coast main line at Benton Junction and entered the southbound platform at Morpeth, where it reversed and returned to Newcastle via Bedlington.

Another major step forward came in January, when a planning enquiry completed its collection of the necessary evidence relating to reopening the Ashington-Newcastle line for passenger trains. Government inspector Richard Clegg is required to assess the pros and cons of issuing a Transport and Works Act Order to authorise the scheme. Six new stations – at Ashington, Bedlington, Blyth, Bebside, Newsham and Seaton Delaval – are



Picture: SENRUG

2008: Dennis Fancett, left, and the then Wansbeck MP Denis Murphy joined train crew for a photograph in the South East Northumberland Rail User Group's reopening campaign. Their achievement has inspired others all over Britain

- Tarka team target Bideford: Page 5
- The clamour for rail: Page 12-13

planned, along with infrastructure changes. Consent has been granted for all the stations except Newsham. Meanwhile, Network Rail is carrying out enabling work on the line, which is expected to open in 2024. While the overall Northumberland line project, which will get passengers from Ashington to Newcastle in 36 minutes, has been largely supported, it has faced criticism. County councillor Caroline Ball said proposed station designs lack "wow factor". Liberal Democrat councillor and former leader of the county

council, Jeff Reid, has questioned whether the project is a good use of public money. Although diesel trains will probably operate on the line, the area is expected to be a centre of electrification – of the road network!

Construction work has begun on a Britishvolt car battery factory on the site of the former coal yard at Cambois, near Blyth, for a lithium-ion factory to produce electric vehicle batteries.

The government has agreed to invest £100 million into the Britishvolt factory via its automotive transformation fund.

Britishvolt is one of two major UK battery factory projects that have secured funding, as well as expansion of an existing factory at Sunderland owned by China's Envision that supplies the Nissan car factory.

Tarka team on target for Bideford



Picture: ACE Rail

RESTORE OUR RAILWAY: (left to right) OkeRail's Kevin Ball, Bideford Railway Heritage Centre director Tim Steer, Railfuture's Roger Blake, Bideford Mayor David Ratcliff, Mayoress Philippa Ratcliff, BRHC volunteers Steve Trowbridge, Karen Harley and Spencer Taylor, and Andrew Toon with Torridge District councillor Peter Christie of the Green Party

By Roger Blake

MP Chris Heaton-Harris was rail minister until December and is now Conservative chief whip.

In October he had this message for unsuccessful Restoring Your Railway bidders:

"This is currently the last round of the ideas fund for the foreseeable future."

His "foreseeable future" comment suggests that a number of unsuccessful schemes have real benefits and are good cases for development.

He also said that "rail network enhancements pipeline" funding is fully committed, but he asked his team to keep the Restoring Your Railway scheme under review. I take that as a source of encouragement to rail reopening

Bideford to Barnstaple Railway

campaigners. Over the next two years, campaigners should be preparing their cases to bid for funds in Control Period 7 (2024-29) because there could well be an ideas fund Round 4.

One campaign is already gearing up, following advice and guidance from Railfuture.

ACE Rail, led by Councillor Tim Steer, wants to extend the Exeter-Barnstaple Tarka line service to Bideford, although the trackbed to Bideford has been taken over by the popular Tarka Trail for cyclists and walkers.

Tim Steer said: "I named our railway line the Atlantic Coast Express railway or simply

ACE Rail. We cannot be sure yet where the consultants will suggest the best line will be. We want active travel and sustainable public transport to work in harmony."

Kevin Ball explained how OkeRail's 14-year campaign culminated in the successful return of a seven-days-a-week passenger service between Okehampton and Exeter.

The population of Greater Bideford, which includes Northam, Appledore and Westward Ho! is now over 30,000. That is almost the same as Barnstaple, which kept its rail link when Bideford lost its final passenger service in 1965.

Freight continued to Bideford until 1982, when the last special rail tour ran.

The South West has done well in winning over a quarter of the successful bids to the Restoring Your Railway ideas fund.

Reopening to Tavistock from Bere Alston is also expected in the next 10 years.

Greater Bideford now stands out as the largest population in Devon suffering the injustice of having no rail services.

More information about the campaign can be found on the Railfuture website on the branch page for Devon and Cornwall. Search for Railway reopenings.

■ Roger Blake is head of Railfuture's infrastructure & networks group



Picture: LEWIS CLARKE

TEAM ON TRACK: Front row: Heritage volunteer Karen Harely, Devon councillor Linda Hellyer, Bideford mayor David Ratcliff, Devon County Council transport lead Andrea Davis, Torrington councillor Doug Busby. Back row from left: Steven Trowbridge, Clive Fairchild, Railfuture's Roger Blake, Tim Steer and John Skidmore

What a difference a year makes!

By Tim Steer

When I contacted Railfuture in 2021, I was concerned about our ever-expanding local population. Greater Bideford is 31,000, Barnstaple 33,000 while Fremington parish (between the two towns) has over 13,000 parishioners.

The Beeching era faster bus service is stuck in daily traffic congestion. A 30-minute journey can last three hours.

"One person one car" has produced this problem, but the railway does not get stuck in traffic.

Bideford now suffers extreme transport injustice, with the town's economy at risk, while our neighbour Barnstaple still has its Tarka line passenger service to Exeter.

Our campaign to restore the railway to Bideford involved bringing Bideford town councillors into contact with Okehampton which is celebrating the return of a regular passenger service to Okehampton.

We agreed we needed some levelling-up help because Bideford (part of Torrington District) has among the lowest GDP per capita in the UK.

After several Restoring Your Railway presentations to councillors, our ACE Rail project (Atlantic Coast to Exeter Railway) is being supported by several local authorities – North Devon District Council, Bideford Town Council, Tawstock parish council with more to follow.

Tarka Rail Association also supports us. It sees extending

the Tarka line to Bideford as a fantastic proposal. What about the former track bed, the active travel Tarka trail? No one wants to take this away, if anything, we are researching how we can follow the same example as the Exmouth-Exeter Avocet line and the Exe trail. With a raised-profile new trackbed, we may even be able to save the Tarka trail from coastal erosion.

I invited Railfuture director Roger Blake to join VIPs, including Bideford town mayor, the chair of Torrington District Council and the local county councillor in our historic meeting at Bideford Railway Heritage Centre station with Andrea Davis, the Devon County Council cabinet lead for climate, environment and transport. She is also chair of the sub-national transport body Peninsula Transport.

Later the mayors of Bideford and Barnstaple made a symbolic joint inspection of the renovated Bideford-bound platform at Barnstaple station.

Sir Geoffrey Cox, MP for Torrington, has been in contact to pass on advice he received from the Transport Secretary Grant Shapps. North Devon MP Selaine Saxby is also welcoming the proposal.

ACE Rail is now affiliated to Railfuture. Keep up to date with developments on the Devon and Cornwall reopenings page or on the ACE Rail Facebook page.

■ **Tim Steer is director and station manager for Bideford Railway Heritage Centre**

♦♦♦♦ Hourly trains started running in May on the Exeter-Okehampton "Dartmoor" line following the reopening of the line in November – the first line to reopen under the government's Restoring Your Railway programme. Since 1997, the Dartmoor line had been open only on some summer Sundays after BR's official closure in 1972.

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



Pictures: RAILWATCH

CLOUDY PAST: Abbey Wood station on day one of its brighter future with the Elizabeth line

Fast forward for Crossrail

By Roger Blake

London Mayor Sadiq Khan said opening the central section of London's east-west Elizabeth line was a "roaring success". The million people who travelled on it in the first five days would probably agree. The line, which began

life as Crossrail, now connects Abbey Wood (south-east London) with Paddington. Come the autumn, there will be through running from Reading (in the west) and Heathrow airport via Paddington and Liverpool Street to Abbey Wood and Shenfield, on the eastern edge of London. It is London's first fast

Metro line and provides an interchange at Farringdon with the north-south Thameslink network, including Bedford and Brighton. Its opening may have been delayed for four years but London is at last catching up with the RER lines which Paris has enjoyed for years. It required sustained perseverance and patience by Railfuture and many other campaigners since the idea was first proposed by railwayman George Dow in *The Star* newspaper in 1941.

BR's 1980 *A Cross-London Rail Link* was followed by the government's 1989 *Central London Rail Study*, with the 1991 Crossrail Bill being rejected by a 1994 parliamentary committee. The 2008 Crossrail Act led to construction starting the next year, with tunnelling beginning in 2012. At last, it is time to celebrate.

Restoring Your Railway

There have been 38 winners in the first three rounds of the government's Restoring Your Railway contest.

Some communities isolated by rail closures can look forward to a brighter future, and gain from the socio-economic benefits of rail connectivity. Others are still waiting for the magic of line or station reopenings.

Railfuture, as a respected independent organisation

which operates nationally, regionally through our branches, and locally through affiliated and other rail user groups and campaigns, is well placed to develop practical examples to expand the market for rail travel.

New homes and the need for rail transport

Horden station, 15 miles south of Sunderland, reopened in 2020. The original station closed in 1964, 16 years after the government designated nearby Peterlee as a new town which was going to expand with thousands of new homes to be built. The population in 2020 was estimated at 26,000.

Bideford station closed to regular passenger services in 1965, although there were occasional specials until 1982. At the time, Bideford's population, now over 31,000, was larger than Barnstaple, which kept its 40-mile rail link to Exeter. Now the Railfuture-affiliated ACE Rail campaign is on the case.

What a difference a year makes: Page 4

The Railfuture-affiliated Witney Oxford Transport Group's campaign for a new Windrush Line is gaining momentum, with financial support from the county council and public support voiced at the May Day Fair in Carterton by RAF Brize Norton.

The Oxford-Eynsham-Witney line closed to regular passenger services in 1962 and closed completely in 1970. Over a half-century later the A40 is a legend in its own time for slow and unreliable journeys and a poor safety record, and the area has an existing population of over 50,000. That is expected to grow by another 8,000 with Salt Cross garden village and other developments near Eynsham.

Railfuture is hoping that Washington station (closed in 1963) can be reopened to serve Washington New Town, eight miles west of Sunderland and designated a new town in 1964. It now has a population of around 67,000.

Railfuture is also hoping for rail reopening progress at Skelmersdale (nine miles from Wigan) where the station closed to passengers in 1965, only to be followed five years later by Skelmersdale becoming a new town. Its population is now around 35,000. The Skelmersdale-Rainford line closed in 1961 while Skelmersdale-Ormskirk closed in 1963.

■ **Roger Blake is head of Railfuture's infrastructure & networks group**

Stay in touch with Railfuture's national Infrastructure & Networks and Freight Groups via the Railfuture website

ving power: Recruit a new member

railwatch July 2022 7

Think small

Railwatch 171 mentioned reopening the railway to Bideford, but what about the cycle path? The Transport and Health Science Group advocates rail/greenways – high speed miniature railways parallel to cycle paths. Running a 15 inch gauge train at 40-50mph is feasible and no more problematical than 160-200 mph at standard gauge.

Railfuture groups should consider opportunities for this, but a potential scheme serving Bideford is Taunton to Padstow via Norton Fitzwarren, Barnstaple, Bideford, Great Torrington, Halwill Junction, Launceston and Wadebridge, with branches to Bude, Westward Ho, and Bodmin, and branches or links to Okehampton and Tavistock.

Stephen J Watkins, co-chair, Transport and Health Science Group

London loves its new east west railway

By Roger Blake

London's equivalent of East West Rail is proving popular with rail travellers in south-east England.

Twenty years after tunnelling started on Crossrail – now known as the Elizabeth line – trains are running but with the promise of much better things to come.

Central London's much-delayed Bond Street station opens this month, and in November trains from Abbey Wood (in the east) will start running beyond Paddington to Heathrow airport and Reading (in the west).

Trains from Paddington will also start running to Shenfield, just beyond the eastern boundary of the London travelcard zone.

Frequencies between Paddington and Liverpool Street will rise to 22 trains per hour in the weekday peaks. It will be 24 by next May, with through running from Shenfield extended beyond Paddington to Heathrow and Reading.

Railfuture has learnt many lessons from its long campaign for Crossrail – a name which emerged in the 1974 London Rail Study report. That's nearly 50 years ago!

Railfuture's current struggle is to ensure that East West Rail is built in its entirety from Oxford to

Cambridge and beyond. (See separate article on back page). Crossrail took years to create a new railway and the government's *Restoring Your Railway* scheme is also an exceptionally slow process.

An update on the programme was issued in June. Nine of the original 38 "ideas fund" winners were awarded a further £15 million for scheme development.

The update identified 23 "ideas fund" winners of Department for Transport funding which allows them to produce their strategic outline business cases.

A further 13 schemes that already have business cases are receiving further support.

Following the Dartmoor line, the Northumberland line will be the next well-publicised scheme in England, being chased hard in Scotland by Levenmouth. There are six schemes "in delivery", dependent on the new stations



Elizabeth line Liverpool Street station

fund. On the negative side, eight "ideas fund" winners that produced their business cases have been terminated short of their intended destination. Eight advanced proposals were considered for funding but did

not qualify. Undaunted, rail campaigners will press on to achieve their ambitions. Both the Windrush line in Oxfordshire and a new Welborne station in Hampshire are on the verge of commissioning business cases.

A group in Oxfordshire has renewed the campaign for a station at Grove/Wantage Road, and the Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail campaign in northern Devon strides ever forward.

Railfuture has learnt more lessons from the RYR process.

While the here-and-now railway scene is undoubtedly extremely challenging, the seasoned and successful gold award-winning campaigners who spoke after the national Railfuture AGM in Bristol have a clear message.

Expanding the market for travel by rail by extending the network of lines and stations is unavoidably a long game in which clarity of vision and collaboration are absolute essentials.

Stay in touch with Railfuture's national infrastructure and networks and freight groups on the Railfuture website. Search for campaigns or Restoring+Your+Railway

■ Roger Blake is head of Railfuture's infrastructure & networks group

Rail User Group award winners deserve star slot at Railfuture AGM

Railfuture's Eighth Awards for Rail User Groups rewarded 17 of the 36 nominations with awards, and a further 10 with commendations.

The new format, introduced since the seventh awards during the 2018 conference in Reading, saw the presentations given more time after the national AGM in July, which this year was held in Bristol.

In the Covid-enforced absence of Railfuture president Christian Wolmar, who nevertheless was to join remotely, the presentations were made by vice-president Stewart Palmer. The Judges' Special and Gold Award

winners who attended the AGM each made short presentations about the activities behind their awards.

The judging panel of seven vice-presidents gave OkeRail and the Dartmoor Line the Judges' Special Award, accepted by chairman Michael Ireland.

The Gold Award winners were:

Best Newsletter – the Paul Abell Award – South East Northumberland Rail User Group and Fen Line Users Association

Best Website – Friends of the West Highland Lines

Best New Group – the Oliver

Lovell Award – Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail campaign

Best Campaign – Cooksbridge Station Partnership

Best Campaigner – the Clara Zilahi Award – Nick Farthing, of Three Rivers Rail Partnership.

The RUG Awards were organised by Roger Blake with help from the judges co-ordinator Stewart Palmer.

Full details of all the awards and commendations are on the Railfuture website under *What's on* and in the August issue of *Rail Action*.

Sussex success: Page 21



OkeRail and the Dartmoor Line won the Judges' Special Award. Chairman Michael Ireland, left, with Stewart Palmer, centre, and OkeRail executive member Cllr Kevin Ball

Graham Ellis

Devon and Cornwall

gerard.duddridge@railfuture.org.uk

UGC

■ ■ Marsh Barton's new station

Exeter's new Marsh Barton station, planned to open next year, is under construction.

The two new platforms will accommodate up to six-car length trains, which will be hourly Paignton to Exeter and Exmouth services, plus additional peak hour trains.

There will be no normal car parking and this may well exclude older and less able passengers.

The original plan included a station footbridge with steps down to the platforms, but now passengers will face a walk of almost a quarter of a mile to reach the southbound platform.



Devon County Council

■ ■ Bideford wins backing

Under the auspices of the Tarka Rail Association, Railfuture-affiliated ACE Rail's Tim Steer, who is campaigning for Bideford-Barnstaple reopening, took a presentation to Crediton Town Council which was very warmly received and attracted enthusiastic support.

Broadcaster Jeremy Vine, who is patron of the Appledore Book Festival, has taken a positive interest in the scheme. Sir Geoffrey Cox, MP for Torridge and West Devon, has been supportive, and North Devon MP Selaine Saxby has been given a detailed briefing.

Next step in the ACE Rail campaign will be production of an initial business case for the Torridge and North Devon Connectivity Programme.

At the Railfuture AGM in Bristol, Rail User Group Awards were presented to ACE Rail, which won gold for best New Group, and to the Tarka Rail Association which received a commendation in the Best Newsletter category.

Star prize, the Judges' Special Award, was presented to Michael Ireland as chairman of OkeRail, with his executive member Kevin Ball in attendance, for their exemplary campaign to secure the rebirth of regular passenger services for Okehampton.

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall contacts:

gerard.duddridge@railfuture.org.uk
philip.shelton@railfuture.org.uk

Payback time after years of campaigning

By Roger Blake

It took 81 years of campaigning to get London's Crossrail (the Elizabeth line) completed, and Railfuture can claim at least some of the credit.

In October 2022, Bond Street station opened, although the original idea by railman George Dow was suggested in 1941, during the Second World War.

In November, Abbey Wood to Heathrow and Reading, together with Shenfield to Paddington, were scheduled to start.

We have to wait until May 2023 year (82 years) for Shenfield to Heathrow and Reading to be running.

Another long-term Railfuture campaign, East West Rail, continues to make progress, with work continuing on the Bicester-Bletchley section.

Oxford-Bletchley services are expected to start in December

Maggie King



2024, but when trains will start running into Milton Keynes Central is uncertain.

The upgrade of the Bletchley-Bedford section (the Marston Vale line) is currently under a Cabinet Office cloud, while the Bedford-Cambridge section is in the early planning stages.

Railfuture will carry on campaigning to get East West Rail and many other reopening projects on track.

Fife's Levenmouth link and the Northumberland line to Ashington are on target and are awaiting firm dates for services to begin. Several new stations are expected soon: Thanet Parkway, Brent Cross West, Marsh Barton, Edginswell, Winslow, Reading Green Park, Cardiff Parkway, St Clears, Portway Parkway, Inverness Airport, and East Linton.

Railfuture is keen to see the government's Restoring Your Railway initiative give the post-pandemic railway a boost and shift people from air and road to environment-friendly rail.

Railfuture is backing the strategic outline business cases for a new station to serve Welborne garden village, Hampshire, and for a new Windrush line to connect Salt Cross garden village, Witney and Carterton with Oxford.

In Devon an initial business case is in preparation, thanks to support from Great Western Railway's community fund, Railfuture's fighting fund and the Tarka Rail Association. The aim is to upgrade the Tarka line as the basis for extending rail services from Barnstaple to Bideford.

Railfuture is also involved in stakeholder engagement in Hampshire's Waterside line and the Bluebell Railway's extension to Ardingly. You can see the Railfuture submissions on the website. Check out on the campaigns and what's on tabs.

Stay in touch with Railfuture's national infrastructure and networks and freight groups on the Railfuture website. Search for campaigns or Restoring+Your+Railway @RailfutureNetws and @RailfutureFret

■ Roger Blake, right, is head of Railfuture's infrastructure & networks group



Paul Hopper (Hoppers)

Laura James, of The Voice local radio station for North Devon, with Tim Steer of ACE Rail Campaign after an interview dealing with plans to reinstate rail services from Barnstaple to Bideford.

Laura is holding Railfuture's gold Oliver Lovell RUG award for best new group, which was awarded to the Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail campaign. Tim is a committee member of the Tarka Rail Association.

Tim is showing off the "Outstanding" certificate from the Royal Horticultural Society's South West in Bloom competition that was awarded to Barnstaple railway station for the joint work by Barnstaple in Bloom and Tarka Rail Association.

Keith York



Mayor of Barnstaple, Louisa York, pictured with Tim Steer of ACE Rail Campaign, right, and Andy Hedges of Tarka Rail Association, holding Railfuture's gold rail user group award

Slow progress

Thank you for an interesting, as usual, issue of Railwatch 173.1 was pleased to see that a new station is

to open at Marsh Barton, near Exeter where I was born. It is a pity a new station was not provided there around 1950 when the industrial estate was first built. I reckon that is a good example of how not to get things done.

Just over two miles south of Marsh Barton, Exminster station should also be reopened.

North of Exeter, Tiverton should be reconnected to the rail network by reopening the Exe Valley line.

Already on the existing rail network but lacking stations are Stoke Canon, Hele & Bradninch, Cullompton and Wellington. Why they do not have reopened stations is a mystery to me.

In North Devon, best wishes to campaigners wanting to reopen Bideford. It was an extremely short-sighted decision to close it in the first place. It is sad to see that the

long-established rail connections from Wales to Ireland are not very efficient or well-organised these days. It is also sad that it takes so long to achieve such obviously needed improvements to the rail network.

J Evered, Goylands Close, Llandrindod Wells LD1 5RB

Devon and Cornwall

tim.steer@railfuture.org.uk

Railfuture newsletter

Since the previous branch report in *Railwatch* 173 a new 16-page branch newsletter has been published, available to view or download on the branch's page of the national website.

Tarka Rail Association's Railfuture-affiliated ACE Rail campaign lead Tim Steer gave a presentation to Barnstaple Town Council in October, and received unanimous support. There he made the first public announcement that Great Western Railway had confirmed financial support from its community fund towards the cost of an initial business case for an extended and upgraded Bideford-Barnstaple-Exeter railway service, reporting next March. GWR had issued their own press release only hours before, and Railfuture nationally issued one too. GWR's financial commitment completed the funding package, which was already supported by Railfuture's Fighting Fund and the Tarka Rail Association.

Dartmoor allies

The Dartmoor Line continues to go from strength to strength, in October winning the National Rail Awards for Outstanding Teamwork and for Outstanding Contribution to Society. The new Dartmoor National Park information centre and the all-week Bulleid Buffet at Okehampton station reopened at the end of September. The Dartmoor Railway Association and OkeRail continue to be very good friends to Railfuture in Devon, as their websites demonstrate.

Blooming success

Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership's Tarka Rail Association and Barnstaple Town Council have had their joint efforts over many months to smarten up Barnstaple station's disused island platform recognised by the Royal Horticultural Society. They have been recognised as "Outstanding" in the RHS South West in Bloom *It's Your Neighbourhood* category.

Tavistock priority

The strategic outline business case for restoring services to Tavistock is being submitted by Devon County Council to the Department



OkeRail Chairman Michael Ireland and Executive member Cllr Kevin Ball on their return to Okehampton from Railfuture's RUG Awards in Bristol, bearing the Judges' Special Award which they suggested would be put on display in the station!

for Transport, following the successful bid for up to £50,000 in round 3 of the Restoring Your Railway ideas fund. Railfuture notes with approval that, along with Bideford, Tavistock is said to be one of GWR's top three priorities in the South West. Meanwhile the Mid-Cornwall Metro – connecting Newquay, Truro and Falmouth – is another Restoring Your Railway ideas fund winner in the South West, given additional project development funding earlier this year. Rail minister (at the time) Kevin Foster, the MP for Torbay, was expected to take a close interest!

Branch AGM

Although a date and venue have to yet to be arranged, there should be a branch AGM next year – for the first time since 2019. Branch Secretary Philip Shelton has given advance notice that he will not be standing for re-election.

Railfuture Devon and Cornwall contacts:

gerard.duddridge@railfuture.org.uk
philip.shelton@railfuture.org.uk

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

OkeRail



By RUG awards judges coordinator Stewart Palmer and awards organiser Roger Blake

Railfuture's ninth awards for rail user groups (and similar organisations such as local campaigns, station adopters and rail partnerships) will be presented after the 2023 national annual general meeting, to be held on Saturday 15 July 2023.

Nominations for the six categories of best new group, newsletter, website, social media, campaign and campaigner must be submitted by Easter Saturday, 8 April 2023.

Please note that the award for

Railfuture Campaigner of the Year is a separate award for Railfuture members only, and with a later closing date to be announced in due course.

In *Railwatch* 173 we incorrectly used a picture for the Judges' Special Award of Tim Steer, Stewart Palmer and Andy Hedges. The online version was corrected.

Full details of all the 2022 awards and commendations and previous years are on the Railfuture website. Click on What's on and then RUG Awards.



Graham Ellis

The picture that should have appeared in *Railwatch* 173: OkeRail chairman Michael Ireland, left, Stewart Palmer and OkeRail executive member Councillor Kevin Ball, displaying the Judges' Special Award