



An exhibition of art and photography will be staged at St Mary's Church in High Bickington on Saturday and Sunday, July 4 and 5, running from 10am to 4pm both days, with refreshments served throughout. Entry is free but donations are welcome, to be divided between the church and Devon Air Ambulance. Parking is available on the main road and throughout village. A first art and photography exhibition held in the summer of 2024 was such a success that organisers have decided to do it all again this year.



Jack: story behind top accolade

FORMER Kingsley School pupil Jack Roberts has spoken about overcoming years of ill health, isolation and PTSD after being crowned an Autism Hero at an international awards ceremony in London, writes Alex Haynes.

The 21-year-old, who is originally from the Barnstaple area and now lives in Cardiff, won the Personal Achievement Award at the 2026 Autism Hero Awards on May 9, organised by the charity Anna Kennedy Online.

Jack, who is autistic, has ADHD and Classical-Like Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, was recognised for his charity work, advocacy and determination to return to education after spending years housebound due to his health.

Speaking to the *Gazette*, Jack said: "To me, all of the last few years have been about surviving, growing, and trying to help others where I can along the way.

"I was certain that there was no way I would win the award, but I did. Honestly, I'm still shocked, and extremely grateful."

Jack attended Kingsley School in Bideford for his GCSEs and



Jack Roberts is an Autism Hero

Route ahead is unclear: next stop is GWR nationalisation

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GREAT Western Railway and Network Rail are working together on plans for further improvements to the Tarka Line, the *Gazette* can reveal, but with no confirmed timeline, no funding secured and the operator due to be nationalised in December, the path ahead remains uncertain.

The confirmation comes as rail campaign group Railfuture pointed to the launch of improved timetables on Cornwall's Newquay line as a model North Devon should follow.

From Sunday, May 17, services on the Atlantic Coast Line between Newquay and Par doubled to hourly as part of the Mid-Cornwall Metro project.

Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall chair Tim Steer said the project should inspire action closer to home, arguing that "route modernisation to enable faster and more fre-

quent services would most probably have a similarly transformational effect for rail travellers, and the economic fortunes of the local communities served".

It is a view echoed by councillor Andrea Davis, a Devon County Council member and president of the North Devon Line Rail Group, who says they are the only rail user group on the line.

"With increasing movements from North Devon for education and healthcare, we know that improvements aren't desirable, they are essential," she told the *Gazette*.

Councillor Davis said the line was "a vital link for residents and businesses in North Devon but also well used by people visiting our area", adding that the group fully supported improvement in "resilience and capacity" on the route.

GWR told the *Gazette* it was working "closely together" with Network Rail on the project, with "shared ambitions for further improvements to the line."



Councillor Andrea Davis and Tim Steer

Following the publication of Network Rail's feasibility work earlier this year, the operator said it had "moved into the next phase, refining timetable options to better understand the infrastructure required."

But it was candid about what still needs to happen. "No timeline has been confirmed at this stage, and securing funding will be essential to delivering the improvements we all want to see," a spokesperson said.

The response made no reference to GWR's impending change in ownership.

Secretary of State for Transport

Heidi Alexander has confirmed that GWR's contract with the Department for Transport will end on December 13, when the operator moves into public ownership. What that means for ongoing projects such as the Tarka Line upgrade remains unclear.

Railfuture also argued that station improvements, pay-as-you-go ticketing and newer trains being introduced in Cornwall "should also be seen as motivational for routes elsewhere, in particular the Exeter to Barnstaple line in neighbouring Devon", and separately noted the North Devon Line by name as a route that should be inspired by what is happening further west.

Councillor Davis and members of the North Devon Line Rail Group will be at Barnstaple station next Thursday, May 21, to promote the group and its work.

The group has members of all ages and from all along the line, described by councillor Davis as "a diverse group of local committed people".

said it was there that he first began to better understand and accept his neurodiversity.

However, after leaving school and starting college, he experienced a major health event which forced him out of education for several years.

During that period, he turned to volunteering and charity work to rebuild his confidence and reconnect with society. He became an ambassador for the Holocaust Educational Trust, speaking about the importance of learning from genocides, while also working with LGBTQ+ charity Just Like Us and mental health organisations The Mix and Shout.

Jack said much of his advocacy was driven by his own experiences growing up in Devon.

"Living in Devon as a disabled, transgender and autistic teenager was honestly quite scary," he said. "People didn't understand me, and people often don't like what they don't understand. I can certainly say I didn't like or understand myself."

Jack is now studying musical theatre at Cardiff and Vale College and is preparing to appear as Nicely-Nicely Johnson in a production of *Guys And Dolls*.

Last year, he also travelled to New York to take part in a Model United Nations conference after applying "on a whim".

Hospital denied funding it needs

HAVING read the article in the May 6 edition of the *North Devon Gazette* by North Devon MP Ian Roome I cannot agree more with his comments.

The North Devon District Hospital is the poor relation that does not get the funding it needs. While the hospital needs updating in certain areas how on earth can it cope with an ever increasing population?

Of course there are patients kept in A&E for long periods. Beds cannot have a fairy wave a magic wand and hey presto, there are more beds.

This and previous governments have failed to plan for the ever increasing population — build houses are all we hear but where are the new schools, health centres, dentists and a new hospital to support this increase? If things continue as they are at present we will not be seeing an end to long waits and corridor care!

Here is an idea to make money more available for the above: stop paying money to France for stopping the illegal immigrants. It is failing miserably.

Shirley Bere
Torrington

Years fly by

I ENCLOSE an attachment of a report I made 40 years ago, the week before I left school, when I was 16.

I was a member of Torridge Fly Fishing club, based at Gammaton Reservoirs in Bideford, for three years between 1986 and 1988. I rejoined the club in 2018 and became secretary in 2023. We held our annual club competition on Sunday, May 3, the details of which are set out below:

Eleven members contested the club's annual competition which took place at the top lake today.

Forty five fish were caught, of which there were seven, five fish bags. Andrew Dimbleby is the new club champion with a five fish bag weighing 12lb 13oz. He was awarded the shield by last years winner Maurice Jones.

Alan Masters came second with a five fish bag of 11lb 10oz and third place went to new member Jeff God-sall with a five fish bag of 11lb 8oz.

The Tom Bellew Cup for the heaviest fish went to Alan Masters with a fish of 3lb 2oz.

Fish were caught regularly throughout the day although John Hutchins had his five fish in under an hour and a half this morning.

My late father Peter worked at the *Gazette* from January 1984. He was recruited from a local Greater London paper to assist with making the *Gazette* into the free paper it still is today.

When the paper moved from its original Grenville Street premises to Allhalland Street, I was asked if I would decorate the offices over the Easter holidays, (1986). I must have done well as the then editor, Dave Tanner, asked if would do some dec-

Plough on



A bucolic scene, captured brilliantly by Graham Hobbs from the Tarka Trail at Bideford earlier this month

orating at his home. During this time Dave asked what I was intending on doing when leaving school. One of

my interests at the time was journalism. Dave asked if I would do a match report of the TFFC competition that

was upcoming and the attachment was the result. I didn't get the required five O-levels needed to get in-

to journalism, mainly because I had moved schools four months into the O-level studies and there was no such thing as a national curriculum then, so all the work done at the previous school was no good when I arrived at Bideford in January 1985.

Dad started at the paper in 1984 and we didn't sell our house in London until December 1984.

Our club, which has been active since 1959, has a capacity of 45 members. We currently have 27 and are looking for members to join. Our current subscriptions are £190 for the season. Members may take up to 40 rainbow trout per season for this.

Alternatively, day tickets are available for £28 for three fish. Tickets may be obtained from Tarka Outdoor pursuits in Torrington, Barnstaple Bait & Tackle or online via Ticketsource.

All these details and how to join etc, are available on our Facebook page, Torridge Fly Fishing.

Andrew Dunn
Secretary
Torridge Fly Fishing Club

Case for rail

UTILITY network repairs and improvements are perpetual along the B3233, which unfortunately has the pipes and cables buried under the surface of the road.

This means that during the upcoming works residents will be severely challenged to know what journey times will be best for their commuting. During the utility company's community drop-in, I personally heard from Wales and West Utility that they know this work will create chaos by rerouting all traffic and buses along the A39.

This only builds on the case for a Bideford rail link. Bideford continues to receive a bus service that can no longer go by a timetable or rough journey time and Barnstaple continues to suffer from bad road congestion.

Tim Steer
Railfuture Devon and Cornwall regional branch chair

Opposition ignored

WHY is it that the great majority of the media fail to highlight the tens of thousands of Jews and Israelis who are appalled by the nationalistic aggression of the Netanyahu government towards the Lebanese and the Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank?

In the 1960s, like many others, I was privileged to spend some months in the newly emergent state of Israel working on various kibbutzim. There I met and worked with many Jewish families and individuals, some of whom had survived the Holocaust.

I would like to think that their practical idealism, witness and humanity was not in vain.

Jeremy Bell
Appledore



How will GWR nationalisation affect rail users in our region?

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GREAT Western Railway is to be brought back under public ownership on December 13, 2026, the government has confirmed.

But for North Devon passengers, the question is a more local one: what does it actually mean for the Tarka Line?

GWR, based in Swindon, runs services connecting London with the South West of England and South Wales, including the Barnstaple to Exeter route.

The move is part of the government's wider plan to create Great British Railways (GBR), a single body intended to bring train operators and infrastructure under one roof.

The Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership (DCRP), a non-profit body funded by local authorities, train operators and the University of Ply-

mouth that promotes branch lines and works to deliver rail improvements across the two counties, welcomed the change.

Its manager, Richard Burningham, said uniting the railway under single leadership could only help deliver improvements on lines like the Tarka.

"GWR moving into public ownership is a key step on the way to creating Great British Railways which reunites the two halves of the railway," he said.

"Both GWR and Network Rail have been hugely supportive of rural and community rail services in Devon and Cornwall for very many years. I am very confident that uniting the railway will further enhance this."

He added: "Railway managers from both GWR and Network Rail are and have long been fully engaged with campaigners for the ambitious improvements now sought and, without any disrespect to anyone, I think it can only help that the next



GWR is heading into public ownership at the end of the year

steps will be taken forward by a united railway under one leadership."

But Tim Steer, chair of Railfuture's Devon and Cornwall regional branch and a Tarka Line campaigner, urged readers not to expect immediate change.

"The operator may be brought back into public ownership but sadly, this does not improve or change any circumstances with the North Devon line," he said.

Mr Steer pointed to the scale of what is needed, a new battery fleet to replace diesel trains ahead of the government's 2040 phase-out target, funded business case studies and formal Transport Appraisal Guidance from the Department for Transport, before any enhancements to frequency, resilience or journey times could even be considered by officials and politicians at the Treasury.

"Basically, there will be no celebrations until the users of the North Devon line can see tangible enhance-

ments to improve the service," he said.

Those enhancements are precisely what a local campaign, founded by North Devon MP Ian Roome, has been calling for. The campaign highlights persistent overcrowding, the need for more carriages, bridge closures caused by flooding, and the structural constraints of a single-track line with no passing places, all of which limit what any operator, public or private, can currently deliver. FirstGroup, which has run GWR since 1995, said it would work to ensure a smooth handover.

"We are proud to have operated services across the Great Western region for the past 30 years," a spokesperson said, "and we remain committed to serving the people of the West and South West of England and South Wales."

The transition takes effect on December 13. For Tarka Line passengers, whether it marks the beginning of real change remains to be seen.

Chance to recognise innovators

COMPANIES championing technology and innovation across the South West of England are being put on alert as the Tech South West Awards 2026 officially open for entries.

From trailblazing startups and gamechanging scaleups to inspiring leaders and teams driving global change, the awards shine a spotlight on those redefining what's possible, tackling realworld challenges and putting the South West firmly on the innovation map.

Following a standout event at Sandy Park, in Exeter last year, with more than 300 attendees and a packed room of innovators, this year's awards will feature 21 categories showcasing the full spectrum of the region's thriving tech sector. And this year, the ceremony returns to Ashton Gate Stadium, Bristol, on Thursday, November 26.

Dan Pritchard, co-founder of Tech South West, said: "The South Wests innovation story keeps getting stronger and the Tech South West Awards are back to help tell it. We're returning to Ashton Gate in Bristol for this year's ceremony, and we're already excited about what this region has to show. Every year the Awards remind me just how much is happening across cleantech, defence tech, quantum, health and so much more. The first step is nominations, so if you're part of a team doing outstanding work, or know exactly who should be nominated, now's the time to step forward."

Now in its eighth year, the Tech South West Awards continue to celebrate the region's fastest growing sector, recognising innovation and impact from every corner of the South West. Covering the whole region, from Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly through Devon, Somerset and Dorset to Bristol, Bath, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, the awards showcase the breadth and strength of the South West's thriving tech ecosystem.

The awards are once again proudly supported by headline sponsor Bishop Fleming, who have backed the event since its inception.

Dan White, partner at Bishop Fleming, said: "We're proud to help celebrate the businesses and individuals shaping the future of the industry."

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