

***Swindon (GWR base), we have a problem! The Tarka line is not fit for purpose as it is, never mind extending it to Bideford.***

You probably did not want to read those words, but it is true.

In December GWR's Managing Director Mark Hopwood CBE gave leading members of the Tarka Rail Association the Christmas present of a visit to Barnstaple, where he performed the first public unveiling of the new ACE Rail campaign banner, bearing the logos of Tarka Rail Association, Railfuture, GWR, and supporting local councils, and all publicised in one of his regular updates on LinkedIn. This was not a visit for pleasure, as Mark had heard direct from TRA's President Andrea Davis, that the Tarka line had speed restrictions in place and was suffering from overcrowding and unreliability. A GWR task force was set up to work on the line's challenges.

In January Tarka Rail Association and Railfuture were asked to assist with a briefing requested by North Devon MP Selaine Saxby ahead of Torbay MP and former Rail Minister Kevin Foster's Westminster Hall debate on "Restoring Your Railway Fund." Her 4:30-minutes speech can be seen on her website 24th-january-2023 and is available in Hansard.

The very next day, at the House of Commons Transport Committee session on Rural Connectivity, GWR's MD Mark Hopwood spoke openly how he had met with local transport groups Tarka Rail Association and Devon County Council transport lead Andrea Davis at Barnstaple to discuss problems in the line's Victorian infrastructure that is causing line and service issues. Mark then came back to Barnstaple to further update the same group this May, and heard how the line is experiencing peak-time capacity issues which has made GWR drivers aware that some services are already overflowing leaving Barnstaple.

Also in January, government's Levelling-Up Fund round 2 support was announced for a successful West Devon Council bid for a post-Dartmoor Line Restoring Your Railway scheme, Okehampton Parkway station: "In Devon, there will be £13.5 million for a new railway station on the eastern edge of Okehampton - the West Devon Transport Hub - complete with high quality cycle facilities and EV charging points on site to better connect communities and promote active travel". This came less than two years after the announcement of funding for restoration of the Dartmoor Line for regular passenger services, and will support Devon County Council's and Railfuture's modal shift objectives by transferring some journeys from the nearby A30. Similar possibilities may exist both for Barnstaple and in time for Bideford.

The independent railway adviser working on the commissioned Initial Business Case for the ACE Rail project is clear that we need to deal with the inadequate Tarka line capacity first as it is leading to suppressed demand. We need this fixed in the coming months and few years, as any extension to Bideford (which will take around 15 years) would otherwise be built on inadequate foundations (can you imagine the Barnstaple and Bideford passengers all trying to board a three car unit?).

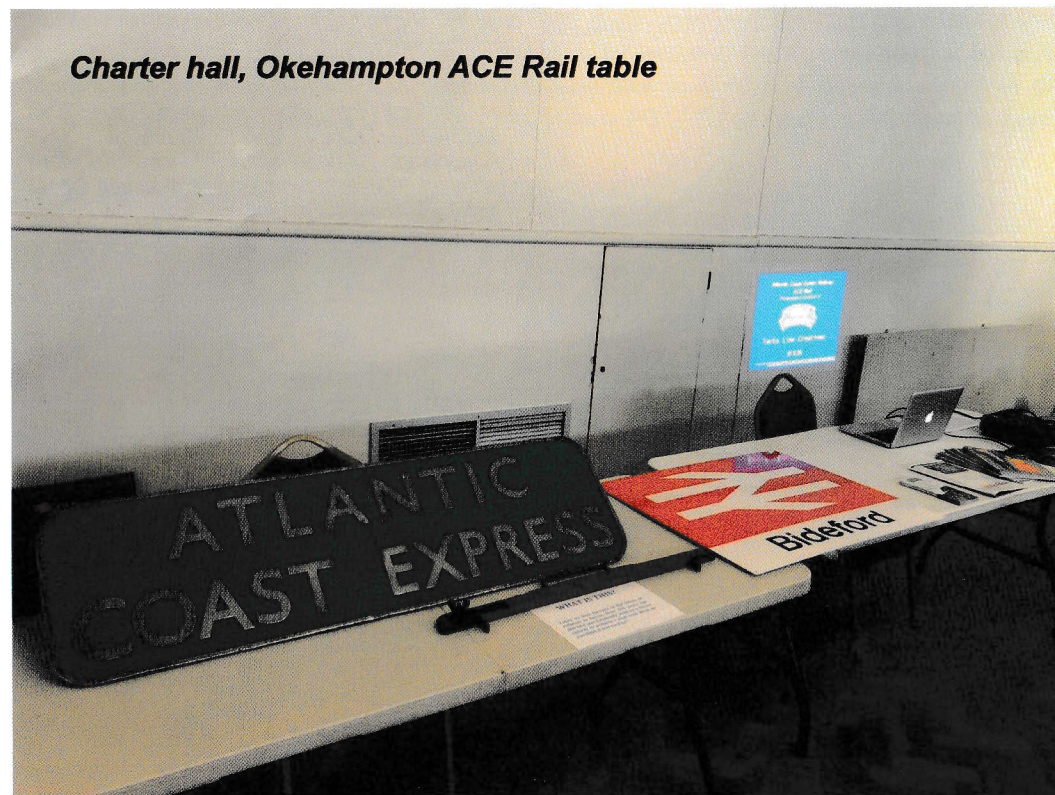
There is also the long-term significance for 'Greater Bideford' of "£15.6 million for the Appledore Clean Maritime Innovation Centre in North Devon which will research green technology and work with local universities and private companies to bring investment and directly create nearly 100 high skilled jobs." That comes after Harland & Wolff's Appledore shipyard was in November included as preferred bidder for a £1.6 billion contract to build three support ships for Royal Fleet Auxiliary, creating 2,000 jobs in Appledore, Belfast and in the UK supply chain, having already won a £55 million minesweeper refit contract last July. If this much can be achieved with only the long-term prospect of a railway to Bideford, imagine the area's long-term economic prospects with a passenger train service actually running again and being only 60 minutes or so from Exeter – the Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail campaign's target!

Two further ACE Rail campaign banners, like the one illustrated and both funded by Railfuture, have been installed at Crediton and Eggesford stations. All 12 stations along the Tarka Line are getting a new "Station News" poster on their dedicated Tarka Rail Association notice-boards which includes mention of last year's Railfuture Rail User Group Awards – a Commendation to the Association in the Paul Abell Best Newsletter category and the Oliver Lovell Gold Award for Best New Group for its ACE Rail campaign.

ACE Rail project lead's 'Tim's talks' have in recent months been at Connect Bude's AGM, in Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership's revived Tarka Line Forum, at the Taw U3A Railway Group, to Barnstaple Christ Church Community Choir, to the official Devon Rail Forum, with North Cornwall MP Scott Mann, and to a joint meeting of parish councils around Eggesford station.

Campaign coverage has been in a media story on Network Rail's website, in the Cornish & Devon Post, Heritage Railway magazine, The Railway magazine, RAIL magazine, in a joint letter with Railfuture in Modern Railways, in the Winter issue of Bideford Railway Heritage Centre's Atlantic Coast Express magazine, the Lynton Lynmouth & Exmoor Advertiser, in the Crediton Courier and in Torridge & West Devon MP Sir Geoffrey Cox's Review of the Year column in the North Devon Journal.

***Charter hall, Okehampton ACE Rail table***







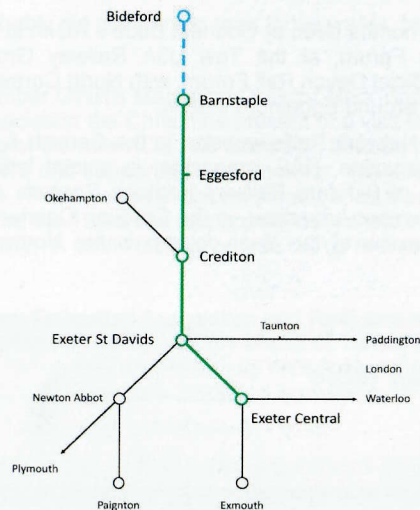
## ACE Rail roll up banner funded by Railfuture

ACE Rail: Reconnecting Bideford to the rail network

Find out more, then register your support:



[www.railfuture.org.uk/Bideford](http://www.railfuture.org.uk/Bideford)



A specially commissioned 2/3 size BR Bideford sign was made by Rydon signs and is all thanks to Colin Burges of the Exeter and Teign Valley Railway who also commissioned signs for Bude, Tavistock and Christow. This sign is incredible and has a reverse side showing a Bernard Mills' photo of Bideford station with the Exmoor Belle.

ACE Rail presentations to Bishop's Tawton and Chittlehampton Parish Councils have each brought on motions of support for ACE Rail. It has been the first-time any transport group has given them information on the growing need for a bigger and better public transport system.

ACE Rail was delighted to be asked to attend a coffee morning on behalf of OkeRail (the group responsible for the campaign to restore the Dartmoor Line to Okehampton) on the second May public holiday Saturday in Okehampton's Charter Hall. This gave a perfect opportunity to unveil the new Railfuture-funded ACE Rail roll-up banner. The other rail groups that attended were Tavy Rail, Connect Bude and Dartmoor Rail Association. Those who attended were amazed to see that an original Atlantic Coast Express headboard had made its way to the ACE Rail table - thanks to BRHC for the loan.

Modernising the Tarka Line - fit for the 21st Century

**railfuture**  
Campaigning for a bigger better railway

Written by **Tim Steer** - ACE Rail lead - Tarka Rail Association  
and **Roger Blake** - director - Railfuture

ACE Rail banner L-R Freelance senior strategic planner - David Northey, Devon County Council transport lead and TRA president - Andrea Davis, Tim Steer - ACE Rail lead officer for TRA, GWR's MD - Mark Hopwood CBE.



Barnstaple railway station L-R front Steven Lawrence GWR Performance manager, Mark Hopwood CBE GWR MD, Andrea Davis - Devon County Council transport lead at TRA president, Tim Steer ACE Rail lead officer for TRA, Mike Day - chairman Tarka Rail Association (TRA). L-R back David Northey - recently retired from NR, freelance senior strategic planner and has joined TRA, Victoria Storey - GWR Chief of Staff, David Whiteway GWR Regional growth manager.

