



Barnstaple Fair Proclamation

My thanks first and foremost must go to Madam Mayor for inviting me here on this historic occasion. Ladies and gentlemen, this tradition goes back thousands of years and I feel so privileged to respond to the toast.

Introduction

The Tarka Rail Association is one of the oldest rail user groups in the United Kingdom, a part of the Devon & Cornwall Rail Partnership which was the first ever rail partnership in the country. Our rail user group represents the passengers of the Barnstaple to Exeter railway branch line known formally as the Tarka line. This branch line has 12 station stops which supports communities in the districts of Torrridge, North Devon, Mid Devon, and Exeter.

There was a time, in the past, when the Tarka line to Barnstaple had only seven trains a day and was at risk of closure. However, today, we have a train every hour and every day of the week: that makes it 17 services per day. The Tarka line and its railhead of Barnstaple is now the only rail link to the national rail network in the whole of Northern Devon. There was a time where all the neighbouring towns had their rail link to this very town which meant they were connected to the rail network.

Prosperity

Better connected places tend to be more prosperous: the passenger recovery since the pandemic is so strong for the line to North Devon, we are exceeding all pre-pandemic records. In the last financial year we had over 700,000 passenger journeys. The railway is key in our community's prospects.

Tarka Rail Association is currently talking to the train operator Great Western Railway in improving the Tarka line for a faster, higher frequency and increased capacity service to make trips to Barnstaple more attractive. We are also working on a strategy with authorities to reopen Barnstaple's platform 2; this will enable us to see rail excursions such as steam engines to the town, as well as early morning trains out that gives the public more connectivity to reach far-off destinations. Our greatest aim is to reopen the Bideford to Barnstaple rail link that again will provide both towns with a prosperous future.

Bideford and Ilfracombe lost their rail links and is it any wonder why these towns are now known for suffering from social and economic deprivation? Barnstaple is a beacon of hope for these Northern Devon towns and is the major hub connecting the area.

In the past, neighbouring towns and parishes would come to see Barnstaple's Fair and arrive at one of the three railway stations that served the town. Now, we have one station that remains well used and with dedicated bus links to Barnstaple, the Fair will once again bring in friends, families and loved ones.

Ladies and gentlemen, the Fair is once again here in town so, I want to raise a glass and respond to your toast... **To the prosperity of Barnstaple.**