

It has been a privilege to serve as North Devon's MP

MY last few days as your MP in this parliament ended last week and I enjoyed spending some time tidying up a few loose ends!

It was a real pleasure to see the Greenpower races at Chivenor. In the brief period I taught, one of the other maths teachers organised a team and it was lovely to see her there, as well as the West Buckland team and Chivenor Air Squadron Corps in action.

Greenpower have bought their innovative project to Westminster but it was even better to see with cars made by the teenagers there, being kept in one piece and racing around the track.

It was good to speak to parents from West Buckland School about the imminent change in VAT status for private schools if Labour do take office. Suffice to say some are already having to make a change of plans and we have already seen a school elsewhere in the country close their doors as they know they cannot survive the VAT change. Whilst this may not seem important to those not at a private school – stu-

Selaine Saxby

Reflects on her work in the Parliament that is now dissolved



dents moving out of the private sector will move into other schools locally, which are already in many cases full.

I popped to Morteohoe to celebrate their telegraph poles coming down as part of their fantastic initiative to instal gigabit capable broadband with the help of Openreach and then through the AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and National Grid get the poles down so the view is unbroken – other than by the weather!

The first All Party Parliamentary Group I took the chair of was Broadband and Digital Communications, and during the pandemic I was able to work directly with the executive level at Openreach to get broadband into some of our schools, as well as a



Members of The Woodyard project and visitors during a drop-in day at the Castle Centre in Barnstaple earlier this year

national Covid charity. I have continued that work and gigabit capable broadband is now available in 54 per cent of North Devon's homes, compared to just three per cent when I was elected.

I was also able to drop off to Ilfracombe Bowling Club the shirt they gave me but now signed by our Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak!

I am delighted to promote the work of the Woodyard Project, based in Barnstaple, up in Westminster and Ann Cleeves' book, The Long Call which is where the project's name is

originated from. The book is set in North Devon, and the auction will help raise funds for the Woodyard Project in Barnstaple, a fantastic local community led project, a place where everyone can feel at home.

I had the opportunity to ask a business question about the project and support for the auction with the Leader of the House, Penny Mordaunt.

I also met with Charities Minister Lord Parkinson to explore the potential for further funding for initiatives like these, which hold so much

promise for our community.

I was also delighted to hand over copies of The Long Call, already signed by Ann and now also one each signed by the Prime Minister, Leader of the House and Mr Speaker. The final letter I wrote as an MP in this parliament was in support of this great project to expedite one of their applications.

It has been a huge privilege to serve as your MP, and I very much hope I get the opportunity to return in a few weeks' time to continue with the work I have started.

Timely tribute to our wartime railwaymen

THIS year will commemorate the 80th anniversary of D-Day – the largest invasion force that history has ever seen.

What a logistical achievement it was to transport thousands of tonnes of equipment, armour, artillery and the allied forces. How did the Allies move so rapidly to the British coast and without any secrets being uncovered by the German army? The answer was – the railway. This column commemorates all the railwaymen who played a part in the war effort.

Operation 'Pied Piper' was Prime Minister Churchill's heartbreaking and successful evacuation of the children of London and other cities that were sent to more rural areas by railway while the German Luftwaffe continued to bomb the more urban areas.

There is old footage of the children arriving at Crediton, Barnstaple and Bideford to await their carers who looked after them while their parents either remained in cities or were enlisted to the war effort.

I first knew of the local railway's involvement from my Grampy Bill Steer who was leading railwayman in the parcels office at Barnstaple Junction (now Barnstaple station). Bill and all the other railwaymen had such important roles to keep rolling stock moving and had to remain on

Tim Steer

Recognising the essential role of the railways in the 1939-45 conflict



duty as they were vital to the UK's defences and the continued supply for the war effort.

The railway was how troops and military hardware would travel to stations around the Northern Devon coast to train up for the Normandy landings, freight wagons would supply the military and rations for all the nation.

There was a massive artillery gun attached to a railway wagon which would normally be installed to a battleship that went around the coast from Braunton to Bideford to defend Northern Devon from attack.

There was the true story of how Chivenor airfield control tower had talked down a Luftwaffe bomber and Bill Steer and station crew were under orders to get a train to Wrafton to pick up the German bomber crew to be taken to a POW camp.

Some railway services were top secret and to this day, we only know that Sir Winston Churchill would go to Bideford by train: then step from the train and into the grand entrance



Bill Steer's Defence Medal, one of a number that were given to railwaymen who were under government orders to keep the UK moving throughout the Second World War

of the Royal Hotel to speak with commanding generals in preparation to D-Day: yet no local railwayman would speak of this. In the Royal Hotel, there is a plaque and official

letter which is very unique and honours the hotel for keeping war secrets.

Bill Steer never spoke of how vital Barnstaple station was to the war ef-

fort however, United States Naval Photographic Center film number: #1549 uncovered video footage that shows Soviet, US and UK generals, officers and admirals departing at the station to discuss plans before going to Braunton Burrows to inspect the Allies' latest artillery capabilities. Barnstaple station also had three artillery guns emplaced on Sticklepath Hill to protect it from attack.

Great Western Railway ordered strict instructions to their employees; they must not discuss any official government transport movements before D-Day and their general manager made sure a circular was given to every railwayman.

The lead-up to D-Day saw continued movement of trains out of Northern Devon to the coast to supply and arm the invasion to Normandy.

Bill Steer may no longer be with us but, I have been handed down his Defence Medal that was given to all railwaymen who were under government orders to keep the UK moving throughout the Second World War.

This column was written with supportive thanks from Mike Western who runs the North Devon at War Facebook group and anyone who wishes to read more may want to visit the page.