

North Devon 'needs back its lost rail links'

ACE Rail is hoping to restore the lost railway connection from Bideford to Barnstaple and is progressing well with its campaign

By Lewis Clarke, Devon Live - 13:00, 26 March 2023



"Barnstaple is that way!"

R>L: Tim Steer, Michael Ireland and David Northey at Bideford Railway Station (Credit : Simon Ellery)

Campaigners hoping to link Bideford's former rail network with Barnstaple have spoken of its vital need ahead of the anniversary of The Beeching Axe. ACE Rail is hoping to restore the lost railway connection from Bideford to Barnstaple and is progressing well with its campaign.

The Bideford Extension Railway from Barnstaple opened in 1855 and then was extended in 1972 to Torrington. Economic stagnation in North Devon in the twentieth century meant that the train service failed to develop, and the North Devon lines remained single track. Regular passenger trains from Barnstaple were withdrawn on October 2, 1965, and special trains occasionally used the line until it was closed in 1982.

The Beeching Report, called The Reshaping of British Railways, saw the light of day on 27 March 1963. The first report identified 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles (8,000 km) of railway line for closure, amounting to 55 per cent of stations, 30 per cent of route miles, and 67,700 British Rail positions.

Tim Steer, the Tarka Rail Association's ACE Rail lead officer, explained why a Greater Bideford rail link is now needed more than ever. Tim said: "The volume of traffic now coming towards Barnstaple on the A and B roads is causing peak-time gridlock and this is only going to get worse with more large scale housing developments around Greater Bideford, Fremington and Barnstaple.

"Torrige has absolutely no rail link meaning it is cut-off, the residents are reliant on a bus service or to drive to Barnstaple to catch the Tarka line or drive to the newly restored Dartmoor service at Okehampton."

"Torrige is now widely known for having some of the UK's worst weekly wages and one of the most deprived districts – meaning the Greater Bideford residents are using their private vehicles to leave the area to find work. Some residents work in the Barnstaple area however, many are having to drive through the congestion to get to a further location or to join the rail network in a different district. A restored Greater Bideford rail link would help alleviate the traffic that bottlenecks around Barnstaple and bring economic prosperity to both towns.

"Tarka Rail Association realises that the existing (Barnstaple to Exeter) Tarka line is already nearly full leaving Barnstaple at peak times, extending the line to Bideford would only overload the service and give the passengers at further stations along the line no capacity for seating or standing. We would need to see the investment in the existing line for capacity (more carriages) and frequency (two services per hour) before we can ever extend the line on a new alignment."

"We (Tarka Rail Association) have been successful in securing funding from Railfuture and Great Western Railway (the Barnstaple to Exeter railway operator). The funding has now gone to commissioning an independent railway consultant who will look at the existing rail line and what can be done to improve the existing line as well as options to extend the service to Greater Bideford."



L>R: Tim Steer, Michael Ireland and David Northey at Bideford Railway Station (Credit : Simon Ellery)

David Northey, Tarka Rail Association and also freelance senior strategic railway planner added: "I've been involved in the Restoring Your Railway campaign and a number of schemes, and I'm very interested in how we can reconnect communities that have been disconnected by the cuts that Beeching took in the 1960s and some that ended up through to the 1970s. There were many communities across the country that have been isolated and lost their rail system so it was really interesting that I come along today to give some support.

"When you look at the whole of North Devon and Torrige, it's an isolated part of Devon. You've got one major road network and one railway into Barnstaple, so if any of those are affected by disruption, it really affects the whole growth and business moving around the whole of North Devon and Torrige.

“Having additional access to sustainable transport is really important, not only for the longer distance getting out of Torrridge through to Exeter where there might be education and access to work, but the whole movement internally within Torrridge and North Devon, especially into Barnstaple.

“I travelled this morning by car and it was very interesting to see the traffic on the A361 and the money that had been invested in the Link Road and you think that actually small investment in our rail systems, bus networks, could connect a lot of people together.”

Mr. Northey praised the OkeRail scheme and the return of the regular Okehampton to Exeter service which in its first year had more than 250,000 passengers using it. That line is set to get busier in the near future as funding towards the new Okehampton East Parkway station has been given.

The previously-mothballed rail line, which runs between Okehampton and Exeter, was restored in just nine months and was delivered £10 million under budget, becoming the first former line to reopen under the Government’s £500 million Restoring Your Railway programme.

Mr. Northey said: “The reopening of the railway to Okehampton was not just for the benefit of people of that town, but it was for the benefit of people that lived in Bude, Holsworthy, Launceston and Tavistock. We know that people are traveling up on the A30 to get to Okehampton to get the train to avoid congestion in Exeter and further afield.

“An opening of a railway or an accessibility to railways whether it be heavy rail, light rail, whether it's improved bus links, is so vital if we are to connect communities together and enable them to grow and be sustainable.”

Dr. Michael Ireland, chair of OkeRail said: “It’s really important for OkeRail to support other railway reopening groups, and I think ACE Rail is at the pinnacle of reopening a very important line.

“The Okehampton line wasn't supposed to be closed under the Beeching axe. It was closed by the Labour government in 1972 but fortunately it remained open for freight traffic from the Meldon Quarry which made our reopening a little easier.”

Speaking about the effect the railway re-opening has had on Okehampton, Dr. Ireland said: “I think it's a lesson that we can probably bring to places like Bideford. It's certainly revitalized the small business community in the town. As chair of OkeRail I go and I talk to people and the small business community, it's certainly benefited from this and so as they, the park and leisure facilities. It's brought people into the town and people going out. There was a worry once that if we have the railway back it'll be haemorrhaging people from the town out, but it's brought people in and that's the key thing.”