



So another year is over and what have we done? Answer: LOTS!

Firstly, I must congratulate the newly restored Dartmoor line to Okehampton on their 2nd anniversary, the line has had over 550,000 passengers in that time! That is an enormous number and it shows what a well thought out restored railway to a town can do. What is even better news is the existing North Devon (Tarka) line is actually breaking all passenger records and about to go over **700,000 USERS IN ONE CALENDAR YEAR!** It appears that the line is one of the best post-pandemic recoveries in the South West. But, this now brings new challenges such as how do we get more people on a service that can only handle 3 carriages?

As in previous issues of ACE, I remind readers that we cannot simply extend the existing North Devon line to Bideford otherwise it will overload. Teams in Network Rail and Great Western Railway are now studying how to bring a better capacity train onto the North Devon line and then increase the infrastructure so that we can see two services per hour coming to Barnstaple. Recently, social media was full of posts and comments that told us of instances where the North Devon line could not fit any more passengers on board in the week and the weekend, photos, videos and also a press release from the Tarka Rail Association proved what was happening.

What an honour it was to be asked to go to the University of London, Senate House to attend the Railfuture national awards on Saturday 15th July and receive the joint Campaigner of the Year award for all the work on ACE Rail, the Bronze award for best campaign (ACE Rail), also Gold for best social media on Tarka Rail Association and the ACE Rail Facebook groups. At the awards too was Dartmoor Rail Association who won a Gold for best website, and Devon County Council's Climate Change, Environment and Transport lead Cllr Andrea Davis who received the Judges' Special Award for all the County's transport work to develop the rail network.



This year, I was also honoured to be made joint vice chair of the Tarka Rail Association and around the same time, I was also asked by the Barnstaple Town mayor Cllr York to attend the Fair Proclamation Ceremony on 13th September where I responded to the toast to the Prosperity of Barnstaple by North Devon Council's Head of Place, Property and Regeneration.

The response to the Prosperity of Barnstaple:

"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.

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 Torridge, North Devon, Mid Devon and Exeter.

There was a time, in the past, when the Tarka line to Barnstaple had only 7 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 each way. 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.



There was a time, in the past, when the Tarka line to Barnstaple had only 7 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 each way. 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 to see rail excursions such as steam engines to the town as well as early morning trains out to London. Our greatest aim is to reopen the Bideford to Barnstaple rail link that again will provide both towns with a prosperous future.

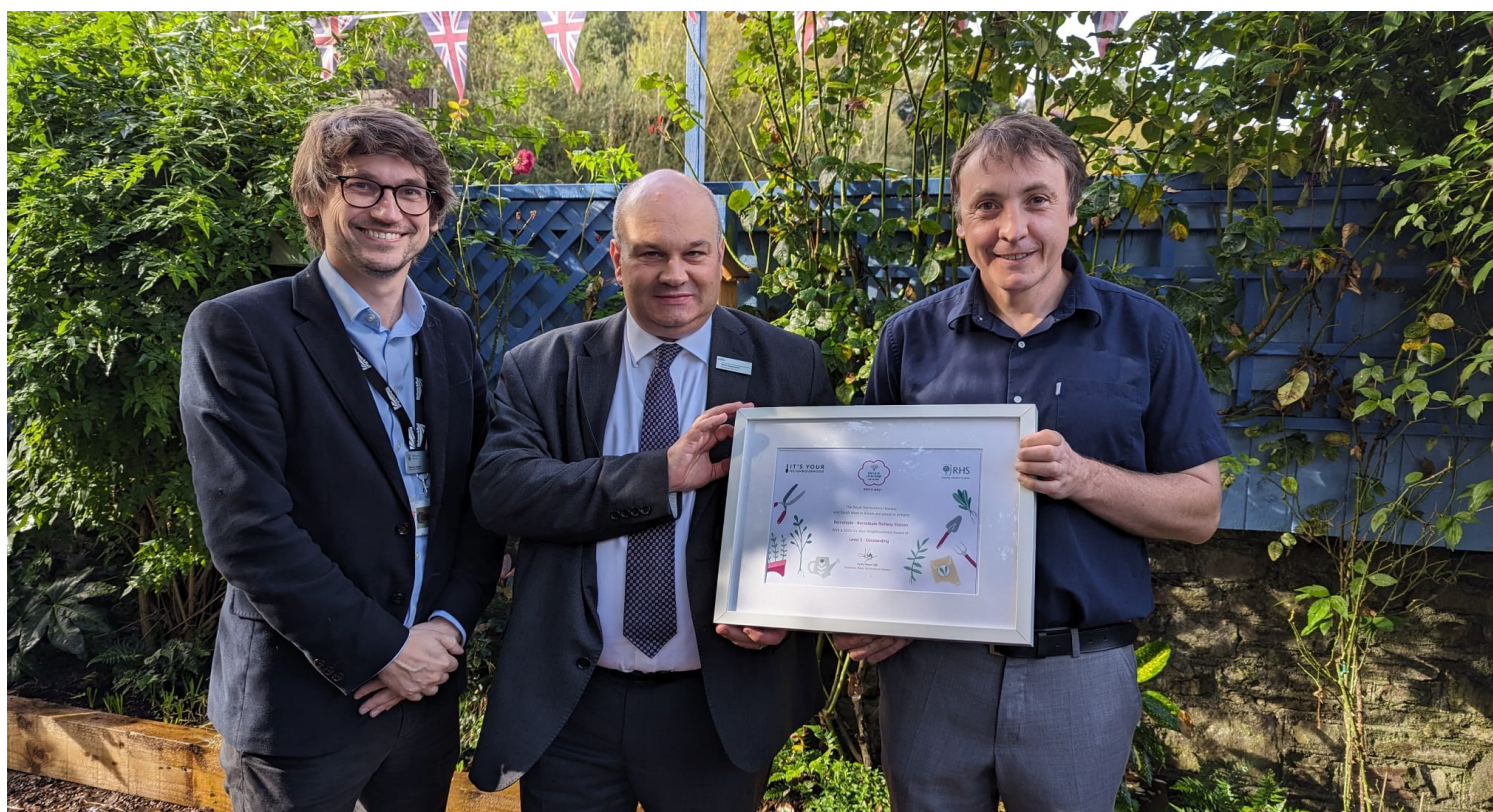
Bideford and Ilfracombe lost their rail links and is it any wonder why these towns are now known for suffering from social and economic deprivation? Barnstaple is a beacon of hope for these Northern Devon towns and is the major hub connecting the area.

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 by responding to the prosperity of Barnstaple."



Barnstaple railway station (once Barnstaple Junction) was delighted to receive a South West in Bloom – Outstanding 'In your neighbourhood' award for the railway station and a gold award for the Stationmasters cafe in the business category. Barnstaple in Bloom and Tarka Rail Association continues to meet weekly to keep the station in its award-winning state, can we see further investment coming in from GWR and Network Rail? Time will tell. The old Bideford bound platform at Barnstaple continues to wow over visitors and is included in many of their photos, imagine what it would look like the day the line is once again restored to Bideford?



The Tarka Rail Association Press Statement, late-November.

“North Devon Trains at bursting point!

The North Devon line that goes from Exeter to Barnstaple is known as the ‘Tarka line’, the line is operated by Great Western Railway while the rail’s infrastructure is maintained by Network Rail, a committee of various backgrounds is looking after the rail users while skilled industry presidents are there for all community and transport representation.

The Tarka Rail Association is one of the oldest rail user groups in the UK. Originally formed by a group of volunteers who wished to save the line from being another victim of railway closures – that is no more - the line is now faced with new challenges namely how to get more passengers on board. Our railway is reaching capacity on key college and leisure services. The last official figures on the North Devon line 8th January – 11 November shows 632,714 journeys were made (Figures supplied by Wessex Trains/Great Western Railway and compiled by Devon and Cornwall Rail Partnership). The line is now about to break all passenger records by going above 700,000 journeys in a year! You might be reading this thinking ‘so who is using the line?’ The answer is quite vast; students wishing to go to Exeter to study, commuters who work in Exeter, Crediton and Barnstaple, tourists who are making Devon a destination for a holiday, shoppers who are ready to spend a day out in Exeter or Barnstaple or indeed using other lines to reach different towns and cities. This list is not complete and we respect those who wish to make the modal change from private vehicle to sustainable public transport.

A Barnstaple to Exeter Central rail ticket is currently £13.30 return and those who have purchased a £12 Devon and Cornwall Rail Card get a third off for a year meaning the same return journey is less than a tenner. Can you consider the price difference when using a car? Fuel, MOT, car wash, insurance, road tax, fair wear and tear (tyres) and of course parking charges. Is it any wonder why we are seeing a growing society that is using the railway if provided with the correct infrastructure?

The Dartmoor line to Okehampton has recently celebrated their 2nd anniversary. Being the first ever restored railway in the UK, the Dartmoor line have a lot to celebrate, over 550,000 journeys were made using the service that stops at Okehampton, Crediton and Exeter and that has been a huge benefit to the communities. Crediton station is now a very well used station as both the Dartmoor and North Devon lines stop here meaning the town has a service every half an hour to Exeter.

Thanks to the brilliant work by Great Western Railway and Devon County Council, we now have connecting buses that arrive in time for your North Devon line service and remain at Barnstaple railway station to pick up passengers to Lynton, Combe Martin, North Devon District hospital and Ilfracombe.

The Tarka Rail Association is fully aware that the hourly service is now reaching passenger capacity leaving Barnstaple during the week and weekend. At peak time, we are seeing three carriage GWR units leaving Barnstaple full and standing and this is making challenges to the other stations along the line namely that we are seeing suppressed demand (communities along the line are finding there is no capacity for them to get on board). The TRA has seen many comments on social media about the capacity issues that has resulted in logged complaints to GWR (please continue to report to GWR complaints) and health issues augmented by being packed into a carriage, we are taking these comments very seriously and that is why DCC, GWR and Network Rail is supporting our aim to provide a service that meets the needs to the customers. We will keep moving with giving the passengers additional capacity and also move the North Devon mainline to Exeter into a modern line that has a more frequent (two trains per hour) and faster service. We have not forgotten our ACE Rail campaign to extend the line to Bideford - now officially the largest conurbation in the South West not in any way connected to the rail network and in the only Devon district without a railway station yet, we must focus on the existing line infrastructure being modernised to meet the needs for today first otherwise Bideford would have the same issues and there would be no room to get on board.

Please use the GWR complaints page to report in any journeys that you had to stand all the way from Barnstaple to Exeter, had no capacity and other concerns to

www.gwr.com/help-and-support/making-a-complaint

Please can we ask users of the North Devon Barnstaple to Exeter line aka Tarka line to engage with your area’s MP to make sure they are aware that housing growth has far exceeded the current railway’s hourly service capacity and that we need higher capacity trains and additional trains per hour to serve our communities.”

Press statement jointly written by Tarka Rail Association Chair Mike Day, joint vice chairs Tim Steer and David Northey and president Andrea Davis.