

Tim Steer: From railway legacy to community advocacy

Columnist, Tim Steer, Vice Chair of the Tarka Rail Association, shares his latest thoughts

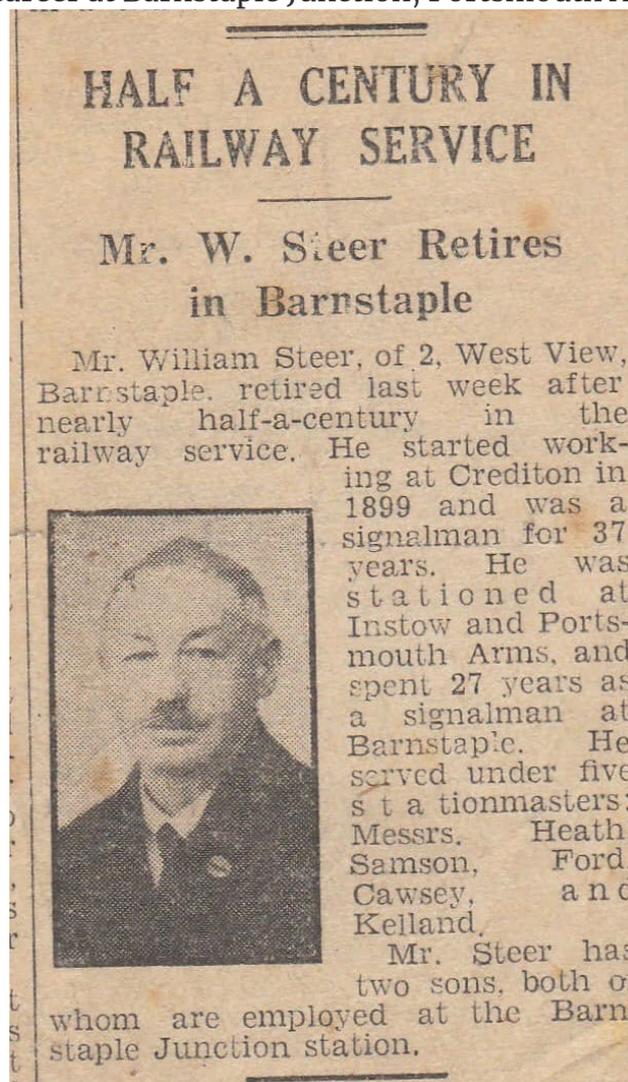


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Firstly, I would like to introduce myself with a bit of my local family history. Great-grandfather William Steer was a signaller in Crediton before relocating to Barnstaple and continuing the same career at Barnstaple Junction, Portsmouth Arms and Instow.



ABOVE: William Steer

He retired after completing half-a-century in the railway industry.

His son (my Grampy), Bill Steer was the leading railman in the parcels office at Barnstaple Junction: he retired from the railway after 41 years of service.

Railman retires

Mr. Bill Steer, of 20, Linden Close, Barnstaple, has retired after 41 years with the railway service. He joined at Barnstaple, where he has remained ever since. He was leading railman



Mr. BILL STEER

in the parcels office. He has been presented with a gold watch by the management and cigars and an electric cigarette lighter by his colleagues.

ABOVE: Bill Steer featured in a newspaper cutting

Finally, my late father Brian Steer was a fireman on the footplate at Barnstaple Junction but sadly his career was halted in the 1960's because Dr Richard Beeching had sent a 'Reshaping British Railways' report to the Central government.

That report (known by many as the Beeching axe), took away many towns and communities from the rail network and offered a token bus service in its place.

In North Devon and Torridge, the axe of the rail network meant my late-father had to find a new career as did hundreds of local railwaymen.

However, my father did not stop a life of dedication to the railway and in his later years, he became an engine driver for Bideford Railway Heritage Centre.

The damage the Beeching axe dealt in towns such as Bideford and Ilfracombe meant after the lines no longer served their towns; they rapidly fell into hardship or what we currently call deprivation.

Luckily, we have had many who have campaigned to keep the Barnstaple to Exeter line from receiving the rail network axe; mainly thanks to the decades of dedication from Tarka Rail Association's committee.

The Tarka Rail Association (TRA) has successfully campaigned to also increase the frequency of Barnstaple to Exeter services from every 2 hours to every hour: a service that is now showing record breaking passenger growth.

The TRA continues to campaign and work with Great Western Railway (the service operator), and Network Rail (the line's infrastructure management team), to see that the services are increased for additional capacity and frequency.

Three years ago, the TRA had also elected me as an officer to their committee to take on the ACE Rail (Atlantic Coast – Exeter Railway), campaign to reconnect Bideford to the rail network and together, we have had huge formal support from the parish and town councils; district authorities, MPs, and the County transport lead.

The ACE Rail campaign successfully received funding from Great Western Railway, Railfuture and from the TRA for an Initial Business Case called the North Devon and Torridge Connectivity Programme; in its conclusive summary the consultant stated Bideford warrants a better public transport service and further investigation into extending the line. One of the highlights of the Initial Business Case was to learn that the public needs a better capacity service on the existing Barnstaple to Exeter line as the consultant confirmed the line is experiencing 'suppressed demand'.

This basically means the services are becoming full and standing leaving Exeter and Barnstaple with no room to get on board.

The ACE Rail campaign has now been absorbed within the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance and will now take the campaign on as a project and is already working with local partnerships in producing the next body of work a Strategic Outline Business Case.

Sustainable public transport that connects with other services is the future for our communities because that will provide affordable mass transport to various destinations around the nation.

Private vehicles such as cars, vans and lorries are causing daily congestion as anyone who lives around Barnstaple will know; the road network around the town is not able to sustain the levels of use and we must look at alternative transport.