



Dear readers,

After 4 years, I have resigned as director of Bideford Railway Heritage Centre and also as the Tarka Rail Association Vice Chair. The reasons I give are all within this article.

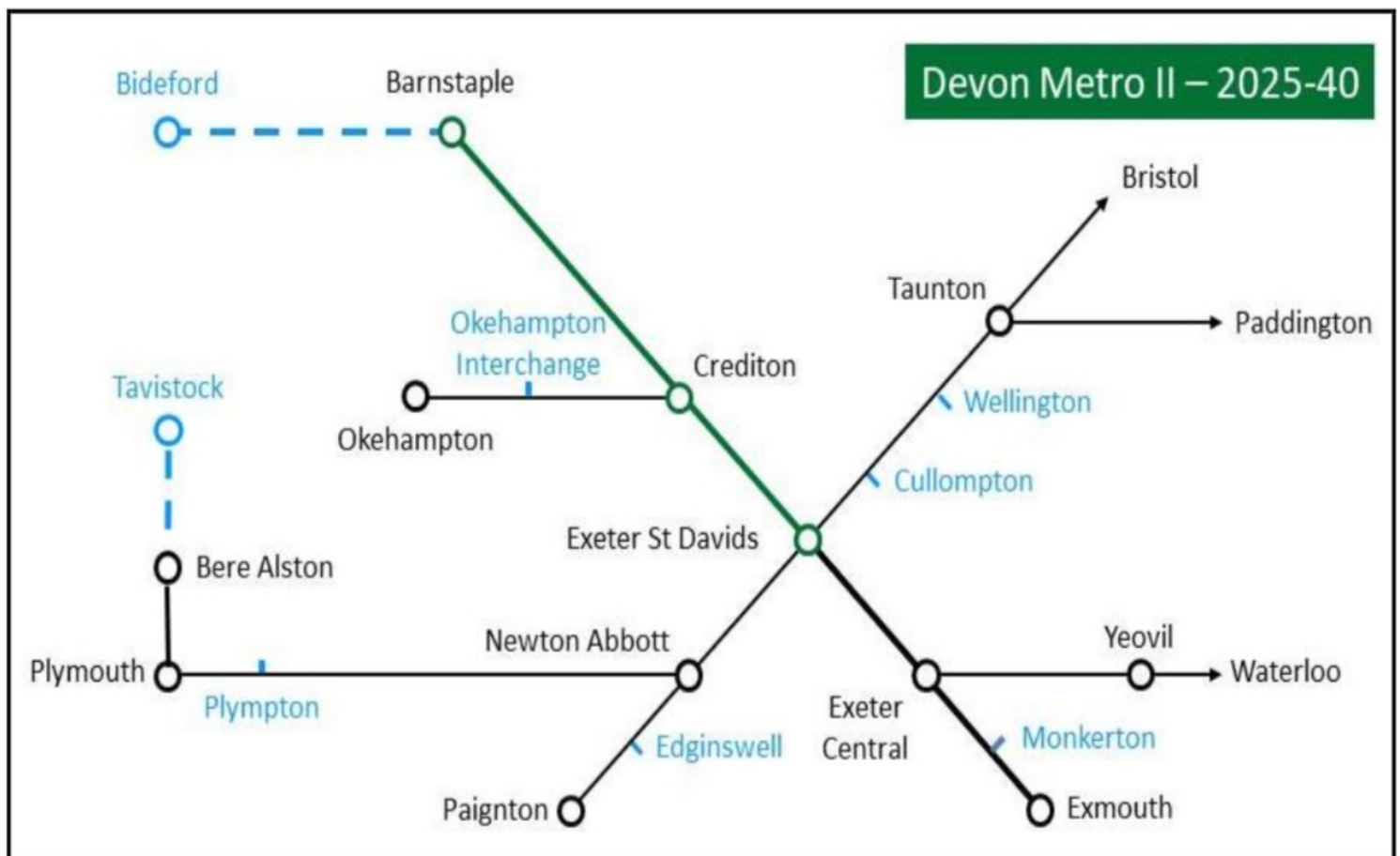
What legacy have I left after being a BRHC director? I managed to get two Bideford Bridge Trust grants to keep the essential funding topped up and I spent a lot of time negotiating a better land and lease deal with Devon County Council which was completed with the aid of our local County Councillor's locality grant. I am still a BRHC member and I thank our directors Andy and Karen for all their help in keeping everything on track.

Firstly, thank you to all the supporting members and all who offered me the chance to deliver Atlantic Coast to Exeter (ACE Rail) presentations. The Bideford rail link work and the associated important work to upgrade the existing North Devon line has now been formally absorbed into the Northern Devon Railway Development Alliance. Great Western Railway placed Bideford as part of their Southwest vision plan and their managing director has publicly stated that he wants the North Devon line upgraded as it would give the operator the greatest return investment. Network Rail has released the 'Connecting Communities' document that places Bideford in its top five Western Route areas to reconnect to the national rail network. By the time this ACE magazine is published, Devon County Council would be processing the submitted responses to the draft Local Transport Plan for 2025-40, (this LTP sets out what transport is required to the whole of Devon and Torbay and it should include a rail link to Bideford).

How did the campaigning start? It all began when Bideford Railway Heritage Centre acquired and returned to town the Bideford locomotive nameplate in early-2021. At the Burton art gallery reception on August 29th 2021 was the mayor councillor David Ratcliff who said *"It is very nice having the nameplate back in Bideford but, what I really want is for the railway to return."*

I was introduced to Cllr Ratcliff and invited to discuss bringing the railway back at Bideford Town Council. After I became a member of Railfuture, I wrote to them and explained that a new campaign had begun to re-join Bideford to the rail network and I even acquired the old feasibility study. It took me some time to realise that the official guidance on studies had changed since the Bideford study was produced in 1999 and that it was no longer relevant information though it demonstrated as guidance to evaluate that a rail link to Barnstaple was indeed feasible. Railfuture is Britain's leading independent organisation campaigning for a bigger better railway and they gave me some starting points on the campaign work as well as publishing my letter in their national magazine Railwatch. After the magazine was published, I received an email from Tarka Rail Association asking that I make contact with them and come to a committee meeting – this offer was taken up and I became a committee member at their AGM. After a motion to support the rail link was passed by Bideford Town Council in January 2022, I began work in finding ways to get more support.

The Tarka Rail Association was originally formed to save the North Devon (Tarka), line from threat of closure however, this is no longer the case: the line is now showing record levels of passenger growth and continues to show the reason why Bideford will one day be reconnected to the rail network. I wish the Tarka Rail Association many more years at representing the users of the North Devon line. One of the aspirations of the TRA was to see Okehampton have a restored passenger service and in 2021 the Dartmoor line was the first ever restored railway service under the last government. This incredible news meant that the ACE Rail campaign became a local interest. Bideford suffers deprivation and is undeniably connected to poor transport which creates a reason why businesses and industries struggle or do not invest in the area. Deprivation is what we call an area that lacks essential infrastructure for a growing community and that produces associated hardship. Infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, GPs and dentists you would think were provided as the community develops however, this is not actually true. Many councils agree the system is very unfair as infrastructure should come first before housing and not be up to campaigners. North Devon Council and Torrridge District Council are the local planning authorities and jointly the district areas are known as 'Northern Devon'. As planning authorities they approve housing but there is a government mandate that housing development must increase: this is why the ACE Rail campaign was taken so seriously. You see, the campaign is not just about restoring Bideford to the rail network; it is about making the Northern Devon area sustainable with proactive steps towards making a carbon zero environment. If we restored that rail link tomorrow, the passenger loadings at Bideford station would cause the North Devon line to overload and it is already struggling with capacity!



When I delivered separate presentations to North Devon Council and Torrridge District Council, ACE Rail received motions of support and added in the rail link as an aspiration to the new joint local plan as well as being placed on other key development plans. TDC's vice chair Cllr Peter Christie was responsible for providing a motion to support the rail link. This local engagement work led to Railfuture inviting me to attend their annual national meeting at Senate house, London and giving me the honorary (joint) gold campaigner of the year award for 2023.



Some comment that the Bideford railway was taken away in 1965 because it was underused, but they are remembering the age of the cheap motorcar and yes, railways did decline with usage nationally however, the public are now making the modal shift back to using the services. In fact, the very last special trip along the line to Bideford was in 1982 and this had 843 passengers! One conspiracy that I have heard is that a line to Bideford would drain the area from the residents and become a satellite ghost town; this is completely false – does Barnstaple filter out its 31K constituents in the morning on the North Devon line services? Maybe this conspiracy is born out of fear that Bideford would lose thousands of skilled workers but train services cannot take that many passengers and in any case all restored railways have delivered incredible social benefits! Another perpetual comment is that the railway will take away the Tarka trail – there is a national government Department for Transport policy that states that one form of sustainable transport cannot take away another. Both, an active travel (Tarka trail), and a rail link are possible, this will all become clear in the completed study work.

Unfortunately, not everyone is here who helped develop the campaign. We have sadly lost Mayor David Ratcliff and Cllr Peter Christie; their help will never be forgotten. We have also lost Crediton Courier reporter Sue Read who was eager to break the story to Mid Devon about Crediton Town Council supporting ACE Rail and the news of the newly formed alliance. We can all discuss how the railway will look, but I will freely admit that all the study work currently taken place is being done by transport professionals who have the skillset to deliver this project to completion and that is beyond the campaign that I started.

This is not goodbye as I have created a properly-constituted Friends Of Barnstaple Railway Station group who I now chair. This coincides with the year's Barnstaple Junction 170th station anniversary. This group will deliver award-winning station environmental enhancements that will keep the other end of the line ready to be reconnected to Bideford. FOBRs has already won 3 top awards this year alone from South West in Bloom and Stations in Bloom and joined the Community Rail Network.

Tim Steer