

The Thinking Woman's Railway
Centre of the Campaign for Real Railways
Home of the Camping Vans, TOAD & TADPOLE

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Exmoor National Park Authority,
Exmoor House,
Dulverton,
Somerset
TA22 9HL

RAILWAY RECONSTRUCTION

Dear Sirs,

**In Support of the Application to Reinstate the Railway Line
between the Temporary Terminus at Killington Lane and Wistlandpound**

Describing the Lynton & Barnstaple as the finest narrow gauge railway in England is not Victorian hyperbole. The standard of its construction, the lavishness of its equipment, the landscape of incomparable beauty through which it passed, the magic of the far terminus above "Little Switzerland;" all of these attributes combined to make it at least the equal of any of the *Lilliputian* railways of the world. Had it been a train set, it would have been the one given to royal children; had it been a contestant, the judges would have awarded the *victor ludorum* without difficulty. This is the railway whose loss all those years ago is still mourned.

Would it have been any different if the line's connection with the national network had been at a Great Western station? Town Station in Barnstaple belonged to the unsentimental Southern company which ran an extensive electrified system, the most modern of the time. Had the terminus been Victoria Road, would the unrivalled publicity machine of the Great Western have ensured the Lynton & Barnstaple's survival? The elder company kept the Vale of Rheidol in Wales going until nationalization, although admittedly it shut the Corris. Had the L. & B. been kept alive through the era of the grouped companies, it too would have become part of British Railways and although it is hard to envisage the line not succumbing to the cuts of the 1960s, it would have remained long enough possibly to have been saved by the preservation movement initiated by Tom Rolt and friends on the Talylllyn over sixty years ago.

B.R. may have continued to operate a seasonal service in the 1950s, when, with nascent prosperity not yet resulting in an explosion of car ownership, rail carryings to the Devon resorts reached their peak. Had the line then been taken over by a light railway company, it would probably have continued to thrive, much as the Ffestiniog has done. It may even have kept Town Station open after closure of the line to Ilfracombe, and Town would have been a more convenient terminus than Junction Station. And if Town Station were open today, it would very much

strengthen the case for reopening to Ilfracombe, a Railway Development Society and Campaign for Better Transport aim.

Decades later, the railway closures still have repercussions, many of which are unseen. Even if the loss of the quaint L. & B. had not decided Barnstaple's station provision, the unrealized potential has accumulated, none of it studied or quantified. The result of that simple, economic dictate from Waterloo in 1935 meant that no one knows how the little line would have continued to change and improve, and even save, lives; the pleasure it would have brought by now to millions of holidaymakers, hikers, cyclists, sightseers and rail enthusiasts from the world over; the usefulness and benefit it would have been to its little realm.

Only 19% of North Devon District's railway stations remain open.

All of the stations in Exmoor National Park are closed.

For this is what has to be considered when looking at disused railways. The remaining half of the rail network is busy, embarrassingly so in places, and the areas blessed with services are often no different in character to those where there are none, such was the arbitrary nature of the closures. Newquay is still served by long distance trains in summer, while Ilfracombe long ago lost its rail connection. Bad press aside, Newquay is a Cornish seaside gem while Ilfracombe continues a decline that no flamboyant artist can arrest.

If, in the mind's eye, the activity of the operational stations is transferred to those closed stations which could well have seen growing custom in recent years, it is not just the moment that must be seen; what should be dwelt upon is all the intervening years when the railway could have helped shape a place, could have contributed to its life and purpose and solved many of the looming environmental and social imperatives.

So, those hasty, irresponsible, politically motivated enactments of the 1950s onwards did untold damage, the effects of which can be felt today and whose blindness and stupidity will increasingly saddle the modern world.

It would be stretching the argument to suggest that a rebuilt Lynton & Barnstaple could revolutionize travel on Exmoor. The sparsity of the population and scale of the infrastructure would not allow the impact of a "big" railway laid in for entirely functional reasons. But the little line would still bring in some measure the qualities of rail transport: its capacity to bind and reinvigorate communities, to create a common purpose and to civilize.

This latter is no small word to use but the process is there. When passengers share space in a railway carriage they leave behind the minuscule, the provision of self-centred transport and concern only for individual journeys, and join the great, national railway network. In contrast to the cockpit of callousness into which the road system often descends, to the thoughtlessness, the chaos and the wasteful, scrambling effort, passengers enter into a sort of pact with a permanent, highly organized and accountable public system, which repays the powers given to it and the impact it causes with a perpetual undertaking to serve the nation.

Passengers at once behave differently. They interact and converse with their fellow travellers. The bold will tell jokes or lead revelry; the serious will point out lineside features and impart historical detail; others more modestly will open doors and give up seats. Public

transport can bring out the best in people and although consideration may be in short supply on a late night rowdy train, and *bonhomie* somewhat lacking when "full-and-standing" in the suburbs, the strength is still there to some degree and, although not always obvious, the duty of care and the culture of safety are the firm foundations of the system.

The Lynton & Barnstaple Railway is intent upon restoring a beautiful thing, one which should never have been lost. It was a man-made work whose perfect geometry ought to have clashed with the randomness of nature, but the railways, canals and other period works show how fine engineering can blend or become one with its landscape. This narrow gauge line, rebuilt as it was before it closed, is the most sensitive and unobtrusive means of bringing rail transport up the valleys of the Yeo and Bratton Stream and onto the edge of Exmoor. Like the adornment worn by a beautiful woman, this railway will flatter its setting. And, as well as being comfortable in their landscape, railways – especially one as exquisite as the L. & B. – being complete entities, win a place in the hearts of men and in the bosoms of communities like no other form of transport.

Of course, there will be disruption and upheaval during the period of reconstruction and perhaps some unease in the planning and consultation stages. But it is hoped that those affected will try to take a lofty view and consider what will be put in place for the benefit of a great many others by landowners suffering some inconvenience or loss of amenity. Being such a long term project, much of the preparatory work will have been completed years before the permanent way gangs pitch camp. Chelfham Viaduct is the supreme example of forward preparation, but other works, including whole sections of almost undisturbed formation, will have been made ready. Linesiders will know what is coming and be waiting for it, and it is hoped in the end that they will be glad to see the whole work taken to its triumphal conclusion.

If it were possible to leap ahead to a time when the railway in its entirety had been operating for ten years or so and had settled into life and landscape just as it had been predicted it would, then today's few detractors could ask themselves how the suggestion to close it down would be received, given the greater number of visitors to the area with less traffic on the roads, the custom the railway had brought to pubs and accommodation providers, the goods and services it had procured each year and the jobs it had created.

Everyone in the area will have lived with and mostly benefited from road motor transport, and although there has been no trunk road building, most routes will have been greatly improved over the last hundred years. Motor roads, especially those which can be sped along, are more intrusive and less safe than they were for pedestrians, riders and cyclists – those with an absolute right to use the highway. Further, most residents in the area will not shrink from using the dual carriageways and motorways which scar the land and cause, it is said, in the case of a motorway, a loss of tranquillity up to ten miles wide. The railway's impact would spread only yards, if indeed the whistling and steam exhaust could be classed as such, for many will come from all over the world to experience the sight and sound of a narrow gauge railway.

For an area so dependent on road transport it would be advantageous to introduce a little diversity. It is perhaps hard to see a steam powered "heritage" railway doing anything to future-proof transport, but supposing a service of nimble railcars were to supplement the timetable,

or become its mainstay in the slack tourist months, and were to offer a one-hour journey. It is too early to promote the idea and the Lynton & Barnstaple company would not lay claim to it at this stage. However, it should not be overlooked by decision makers what potential there is once a highly engineered narrow gauge railway has been built.

To some, the reconstruction of the Lynton & Barnstaple will make no sense. Why would anyone park up a swift, expensive motor car and join a slow and dirty steam train for the final approach to his destination or just for the sake of a ride? The unthinking man who believes that the railway era was merely an intermediate discovery stage leading to the high plateau of human achievement which is mass motor transport, will not begin to understand the reverse revolution which is now underway, with people flocking back to trains everywhere they can. What is the point in rebuilding the ruins of a railway and going to vast expense to overcome all the obstacles that have occurred in the eighty years since closure, merely for the purpose of historical re-enactment? Knowing opponents of rail transport, though, they will more likely find specific reasons for shouting it down, based on a small world outlook.

The answer is that sometimes it should not be necessary to prove that an idea makes sense. Allowing only the rational and the profitable has led to a straitjacketed world full of the mundane, the identical and the conformist; to a world which cries out for things that are gloriously different to nourish the soul. The answer is that motorists leaving their travelling cages to board the train will enter another land. They will see from their carriage windows what they would not have seen from their cars. They will do so in the company of others. They will experience "slow travel" which, like "slow food," should be savoured, not gobbled. "Relaxez-vous," as British Rail cleverly put it in 1989.

It would be a step back in time, a chance for passengers, armed with a scrap of pasteboard, to appreciate the transport of yesteryear, to feel the impetuous tug of a steam locomotive and flexing of a wooden-bodied coach. But it would be real and functional as well, not that far removed from a Swiss railway run on hydro-electricity. Above all it would be fun - good, old-fashioned, memorable fun.

The Lynton & Barnstaple laudably has done exhaustive and costly research and drafting for its second phase push and the detail of what is proposed is now before the authority. It is hoped that the officers and members will be mindful of what a force for good is waiting to be unleashed and what an instrument for change the railway would prove to be, and that the outcome will be a favourable determination of this planning application.

Yours faithfully,

C. Burges

Owner and Operator

Maybe it is the absence of the railway that makes it so loved and it would not be loved as much in the flesh. There is only one way to know and that is to rebuild it.