

Bovey Tracey Town Council

11th November, 2017

For the attention of Councillor Tony Allen

Dear Mr. Allen,

The Newton Abbot to Heathfield Railway Revival Group's *Facebook* campaign has been remarkably successful in drawing attention to the remnant of the Moretonhampstead Branch, which has lain dormant since 2014, when timber loading ceased.

Two similar attempts to stimulate a revival of the line were abandoned, the most recent being put off by Network Rail's warning of how vast a sum of money would be needed to upgrade the line for passenger trains.

As I say in one of my pieces, a layman may all too easily imagine that what happens on a special occasion is only a small step from becoming a regular operation.

The only railway reopening planned in Devon is the six-mile section of the former main line between Bere Alston and Tavistock. The county sponsored scheme has been talked about since 1991 and nothing other than a few token minor works has been done.

Even when there is the most proven need for railway reconstruction, schemes suffer repeated setbacks. The most advanced case in the West Country is the line between Bristol and Portishead, driven by a council that is desperate to relieve chronic road congestion.

The population of Portishead has reached 25,000 and is on course to grow much more. The passenger service ceased in 1964 but the line did not close until 1981. It was never lifted and although the rails were severed by a new road, they remain today. Most of the line is still used by heavy freight trains from Royal Portbury Dock. Yet Network Rail has just massively inflated the costs of raising it to passenger standards and of reinstating the derelict two miles to the terminus.



Portbury Junction: The new line serving the docks diverges left while at right the rails leading towards Portishead continue to rust. A great number of commuters from the growing dormitory town face a daily grind to get into the city and cry out for an alternative, but all Network Rail does is dither.

Realistically, given that the Tavistock and Portishead schemes are stalled, campaigners should ask themselves whether Heathfield is likely to succeed.

My promotion of the Teign Valley and Moretonhampstead branches has been consistent over many years. In 2014, after the Dawlish Debacle, with the old bypass route momentarily being flashed on TV screens worldwide, I made sure that everyone from the Rail Minister to parish councillors knew where the line was and what it could do.

But I have come to believe that campaigners should look beyond their individual causes and press for a relaxation of the great obstacles confronting rail expansion, a burden which the massive road building and environmental despoliation of the 1960s onwards never had to carry.

It is encouraging that so many communities are waking up and asking for their stations or lines to be reopened, without perhaps even knowing for certain the extent of the benefits this would bring. Writing such aspirations into local plans is the best that can be done because, as things stand, I am afraid it would be just wishful thinking.

In the case of the Moreton Branch, the pressing need is to safeguard the line as it is now and the route as far as Pottery Road.

Transport provision can be swung by the stroke of a pen, as it was in the 1960s when it was decided to let the public systems go into decline. A shockwave from a world event may suddenly bring home to the masses convinced that road transport is everlasting how very vulnerable it really is and trigger another revolution.

Communities that have planned ahead will then be best placed.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Burges

Last year I put this to Dave Black, Devon's transport supremo:

"Such is the belief that railways cannot be rebuilt once they have been ruined, at least in this part of the country, campaigners are more likely to press for reopenings of lines that are merely disused. Thus the rump of the Moretonhampstead Branch from Newton Abbot to Heathfield is frequently brought up locally and nationally, it being the only network line in Devon devoid of any service. The latest suggestion is a Stourbridge-type operation using a lightweight Parry unit.

"But, as with the county plan, local authority aspiration has weakened. From Heathfield Station being mooted for possible future use as an interchange in the mid '90s, it has only the vaguest mention in the latest local plan. And this at a time when you are preparing to spend £23-million on the corresponding A382."

Att. 10 links and an *East Dartmoor* rail map.