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# Okehampton to Exeter rail line - public demand transparency

EXCLUSIVE - ERIC PARTRIDGE - PUBLISHER

It's been over two years since the former Secretary of State for Transport, Chris Grayling declared in a letter to 'colleagues' that the government had commissioned rail operator Great Western Railway (GWR) to investigate the reinstatement of a passenger service between Exeter and Okehampton.

The definitive, albeit penultimate paragraph, in the three page correspondence dated 30th January, 2018 (pictured on page 10) - which also covers a number of other rail-related issues concerning the South West - reads: 'In addition, we have instructed GWR to prepare plans to introduce regular train services to Okehampton, with the objective of securing a credible and costed plan for delivering an all-week, all-year train service between Exeter and Okehampton as soon as is reasonably practicable.'

The final paragraph also states: 'I will continue to update you on the progress as we continue to invest in this vital part of our rail infrastructure.'

Up until now this publicly-stated commitment and encouraging rhetoric had been largely met with a wall of silence from both the Department for Transport (DfT) and GWR and has led to various action groups, concerned members of the general public - who have been closely monitoring events - and *The Moorlander*, demanding answers from the key agencies and stakeholders involved.

As reported here last month, the news that Dartmoor Railway and associated infrastructure was for sale and that miscellaneous leases had been allowed to lapse set alarm bells ringing as to the future of the promised reintroduction of a regular daily service between Exeter and Okehampton.

Continued on page 10

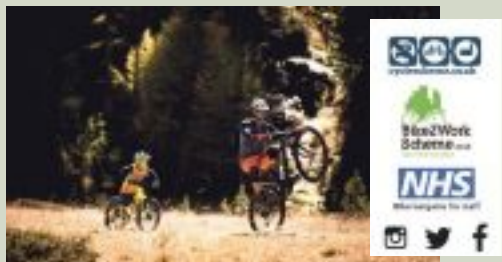


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# Government announce £500m Beeching

ERIC PARTRIDGE - PUBLISHER

Readers of a certain vintage will remember the 'Beeching Report', an eponymous analysis originally published in 1963 by Dr Richard Beeching, then Chairman of British Rail.

It effectively reshaped the railway network throughout the UK and resulted in the closure of 2,363 stations and 5,000 miles of railway line being declared redundant - totalling 55% of stations and 30% of route miles across the country.

Dozens of branch lines that linked villages with towns were rated egregious loss-makers and were culled, along with great chunks of mainline. Devon was one of the worst counties affected, resulting in the isolation of many a rural community. The report became known as the 'Beeching Axe'.

Although the Okehampton branch line was not originally included in those cuts, the philosophy of the government of the day was to build roads, roads as car ownership became more affordable and widespread.

Last month, the Government stood by its election manifesto promise to mount a 'Transport Revolution' announcing plans to reverse some of those devastating cuts with access to a £500million 'Beeching Reversal' fund. The fund is aimed at bringing back the rail connections needed to level up access to opportunity across the country and to help subsidise feasibility studies of routes that could be restored - but without any commitment to any further funds. At the launch of the Beeching Reversal Fund in Fleetwood, Lancashire



BOB RUSH AND CHRIS BLIGH HAVE BEEN CAMPAIGNING FOR THE REOPENING OF THE OKEHAMPTON-EXETER LINE FOR YEARS

last month, Transport Secretary Grant Shapps invited MPs, local authorities and community groups across England to come forward with proposals on how they could use these funds to reinstate axed local services. £300,000 has already been committed to an 'Ideas Fund' to kick-start the process and encourage innovative ideas that will then be considered for further funding in the future.

Before the Beeching cuts, Dartmoor and Devon were fairly well served with local rail links.

The 'alternative' Exeter to Plymouth line, under the London and South Western Railway (LSWR) banner, followed the northern and western margins of Dartmoor passing through the towns of Crediton, Okehampton, and Tavistock rather than hug the coastline as the Great Western Railway route did, and still does. The route that connected the two cities was completed by 1891, but the 'Beeching Axe' saw the line closed in the mid-1960s and just the local service remained at either end.

Trains between Exeter and Plymouth via

Okehampton were withdrawn from 6th May, 1968, when the 20-mile section between Meldon Quarry and Bere Alston was lifted, while between Meldon and Okehampton the line was only retained for freight trains ferrying the stone from the quarry.

Okehampton to Exeter passenger services were withdrawn on 5th June, 1972.

Although activity at the quarry itself ceased in 2011, the line from Okehampton to Exeter has been used for a limited number of excursions during the summer since 1997 and 'The Polar Express' train which was run by Dartmoor Railway in the build-up to Christmas.

The Okehampton to Bude line included the 10 mile stretch between Holsworthy and Bude. The line branched from the main line at Meldon Junction to the west of Okehampton opening in 1879 and to Holsworthy and Bude nine years later.

However the area served by the line was sparsely populated with records showing that in the mid-1930s fewer than seven tickets a day were sold at Ashbury (near Okehampton and Northlew) with passenger numbers declining steadily, particularly when private car ownership became commonplace even before the Beeching cuts were introduced.

The Tamar Valley Line remains open, but was in fact listed for closure as part of the Beeching Axe.

However, it escaped, all except for the section between Gunnislake and Callington, because the

## Okehampton to Exeter rail line

continued from front page

Only last week the *i* newspaper, reporting on the failure of the Northern Rail franchise, headlined that 'Other troubled rail operators could be under threat' and then poured fuel on the fire by claiming that: 'The South Western franchise is also under the spotlight while the South Eastern and Great Western franchises are due to end on 1 April.'

GWR's lease actually expires on 31st March, but it is widely accepted that the license to operate for another two years - with a further two year option - will be granted without let or hindrance and that the whole process is a mere formality.

Expressing the mounting local frustration following the lack of any salient information or transparency since, *The Moorlander* contacted GWR for clarification regarding the future of the line and the current progress of the plan as commissioned by the then Secretary of State in January 2018.

GWR have, this week, issued the following statement: "We can confirm that following a request by the DfT, GWR provided a response on the potential to provide regular services between Exeter and Okehampton, and how some of the challenges to such a project could be overcome, for their consideration last summer.

'While our response is confidential we recognise the present feeling and local aspirations around the future of regular weekday rail services to Okehampton, which was the most sought after additional route in the most recent GW franchise consultation.

'The DfT's February 2019 "Investing in the South West" report recognised this and we are continuing to work with stakeholders to explore future opportunities for the route.'



MEL STRIDE - CONSERVATIVE MP FOR CENTRAL DEVON

This is extremely encouraging news not only for the future of the Exeter to Okehampton line but for the regeneration of the Bere Alston to Tavistock link too. It would, however, be too much to expect that the remaining gap, which would complete the 'Dawlish-avoiding or northern route' between Okehampton and Bere Alston via Meldon, will be re-established any time soon.

'Or for the rural connection from Okehampton to Bude via Halwill Junction and Holsworthy, which closed in 1966 as a result of 'The Beeching Axe', to be reintroduced either. That is not to say that reopening these lines, which would be of immense benefit to their respective communities and businesses, will never happen at all.

Mel Stride, MP for Central Devon, whose constituency embraces the Exeter to Okehampton

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# Reversal Fund

roads in the area were so poor. The line remains open today from Plymouth to Gunnislake, and includes a stop at Bere Alston, where it is hoped that the line to Tavistock can be reopened.

The North Devon and Cornwall Junction Light Railway was built to serve numerous ball clay pits that lay in the space between the London and South Western Railway's Torrington branch, an extension of the North Devon Railway group, and Halwill Junction.

The line continued to take passengers until March 1965, and the northern part from Meeth and Marland continued to carry ball clay, but not passengers, until August 1982.

So just how can the Beeching Reversal Fund help local communities here in Devon?

Devon County Council (DCC) has already declared it will be nominating the Bere Alston to Tavistock line for funding. Councillor Andrea Davis, Devon County Council Cabinet Member for Infrastructure, Development and Waste, told *The Moorlander* exclusively: "With the huge amount of time and effort and cost that has already gone into the reinstatement of the Okehampton to Exeter line, - which I am 100% certain will happen once the rail regulators are satisfied - then we will turn our attention to the reintroduction of the Bere Alston to Tavistock line. The council already own the track bed, there are no issues there so it is right that we apply to the fund which will advance the proposals and help with the extra money needed to get it open and rebuilt.



BERE ALSTON STATION 1964 AS VIEWED EASTWARDS TOWARDS OKEHAMPTON AND EXETER.

"In time we would hope to complete the entire Exeter to Plymouth northern line but it has to be done incrementally. It will not happen overnight but there is a commitment - we all want to see it happen and our aim along with our various partners is to reduce the journey time from Plymouth to Paddington to under three hours."

Richard Burningham, manager at Devon and Cornwall Rail partnership said, "The reversal fund is very positive news and I am particularly pleased to see the fund is to develop proposals rather than commit £500m for the reopening of rail lines, as £500m won't go that far and you won't get much railway for it. This should go a long way to come up and work up some strong proposals.

"It is encouraging to see the investment in the rail-

way and it follows the growth of usage of Devon and Cornwall's branch lines."

Mr Burningham added that while he doesn't see the full line reopening immediately, he is hopeful for the future. "If Tavistock and Okehampton reopen and are a success, then there is just a 15 mile gap in the track, and reopening could be an option."

There are a few problems to overcome first though as Chris Bligh, a railway expert who has an exhaustive knowledge of this particular line having worked in the rail industry for over 20 years points out. "There is a potential problem with reopening the line all the way from Exeter to Plymouth via the 'northern route' currently, as it would require reversals of the train at both Exeter St David's

and Plymouth which would add a potential 15 minutes to through journeys. There are also parts of the route which are currently single track which would need upgrading to a double track as capacity would not be enough for any diversions or for rerouting freight this way to free up capacity on the main line via Dawlish."

Chris, along with fellow professionals Bob Rush - who works in construction project management, and Richard Proctor, former station manager at Okehampton itself were all heavily involved in an advisory capacity with Destination Okehampton and action group OkeRail until June last year. The group have submitted their own comprehensive and independent proposals to the various agencies and stakeholders for the reintroduction of the Okehampton to Exeter line.

They have also prepared an exhaustive study for a 'northern route', including a proposed new timetable, which could be seamlessly incorporated into the existing schedule together with detailed plans of a new 'park and ride' station known as Okehampton Parkway at Okehampton Business Park on the east side of the town.

"A new study needs to be done into a Holistic view of the Northern Route and the current branch lines to Barnstaple and Gunnislake," added Chris.

Whether the group's efforts are recognised by the strategic partners involved in the local regeneration remains to be seen, but the announcement of the Beeching Reversal Fund can only be good news towards restoring the region's rail network.

## - public demand transparency

rail link, has been stoic in his support for the reintroduction of the new service for many years.

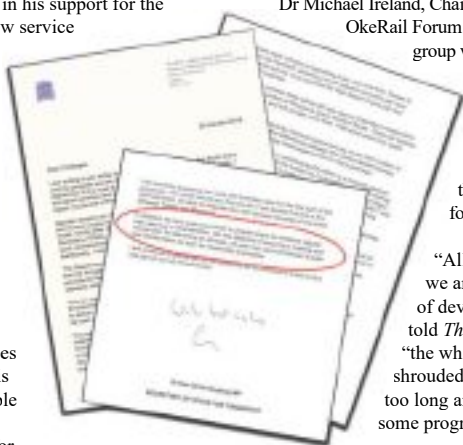
"I have campaigned for over a decade to bring a regular rail service back between Okehampton and Exeter via Crediton.

"I have held dozens of meetings with local campaigners, Government ministers and the different agencies involved to progress this huge project, for example playing a key role in securing the go ahead for the route's government backed feasibility study, which is now nearing completion. I remain confident that we are close to achieving what we have long set out to do and that within the next two years this valuable service should be up and running."

Dr Michael Ireland, Chairman of the OkeRail Forum - the local action group who has been campaigning for the reintroduction of the defunct line for over ten years - appealed to the key stakeholders for transparency.

"All we ask is that we are kept informed of developments," he told *The Moorlander*, "the whole affair has been shrouded in secrecy for far too long and it's about time some progress was made."

Now that GWR have publicly admitted that they did indeed deliver the commissioned report to the DfT some six months ago we trust that Dr Ireland's message will not go unheeded and that the public are kept better informed in the future.



OKEHAMPTON TRAIN STATION



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