

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

Telephone:-
Christow (01647) 253108

Internet:-
www.TEIGNRAIL.Com.

Your reference:-

Please quote this reference:- 3182
21st November, 2014

Dartmoor National Park Authority,
Parke,
Bovey Tracey,
Newton Abbot
TQ13 9JQ

RAILWAY RECONSTRUCTION

For the attention of Dan Janota, Head of Forward Planning

Dear Mr. Janota,

Ashburton Station **Railway Reconstruction**

Were it not for one glaring fundamental failing, it would have to be said that the National Park Authority has acted with the best of intentions and, in association with the retained architectural practice, gone about the challenging task of producing a masterplan for a complex and confined site in a highly professional manner.

The masterplan would have to be applauded for its vision and the way in which the different elements have been considered and the problems overcome, not least of which would be the likely prolonged fruition. It would be an exemplar of town planning and a credit to those involved in its conception.

This would surely be the case but for the unwillingness to see the significance of the central feature of the site. Just like, in 2001, Moretonhampstead Station was referred to as "Thompson's haulage yard," Ashburton Station has become "Chuley Road," as if to block proper recognition.

To some extent this is understandable. When the National Park was founded, there were 31 stations in or immediately around Dartmoor. Twenty years later there were none, and today there is only the new Ivybridge on the national network. Older planning officers may remember the relentless decline of the railways; younger ones will have been brought up without knowing how extensive the railway system once was and how comprehensive were its services. Few planners have any idea of the forces which shaped today's establishment; fewer still can see how railways have the strength to future-proof the nation's transport. It is no wonder that a failure to take railways seriously is common among planners at every level.

Dubbing the area "Chuley Road" may have led to the authority being remiss in not consulting rail interests. Perhaps it is stretching the point to have expected the National Park to consult Network Rail, although Teignbridge District Council, if only as a formality, sought a response from the track authority in 2012 in the case of a bridge demolition on the dismantled Teign Valley Branch (*TEIGNRAIL.Com/Campaigning/Greenwall Lane*).

However, it is well known that in 1997 the South Devon Railway commissioned a full engineering survey of a new line from Buckfastleigh to Ashburton. The S.D.R. has a Transport and Works Act Order and thus is a statutory body. Its present terminus at Buckfastleigh is only 2½ miles from Ashburton. It is a major tourist draw and contributes greatly to the local economy.

Now, it would seem impossible that if there had been any desire to reinstate the line by the private rail authority or, unofficially, by a group of members and supporters, such desire would have been made known three years ago, or not much less than this; certainly it would not have been communicated only in the last few weeks.

But there are factors which go some way towards explaining the lack of action until almost the eleventh hour:-

- ⌚ The uneasy graduation of the S.D.R. from the clutches of the Dart Valley Railway and the "catching up" with what were seen as more pressing concerns;
- ⌚ The "Curse of Ashburton," stemming from 1972, when, for the sake of £600,000, the line was lost under some of that era's rampant road building;
- ⌚ The belief by one group, in a large or disparate organization, that another is doing something;
- ⌚ The possibility that no one spotted "Chuley Road" was actually Ashburton Station; and
- ⌚ An "old guard" that is perhaps somewhat lethargic and unambitious.

Whatever the reasons for the railway's inaction, it is felt that, as a matter of course, the National Park Authority should have consulted with the S.D.R., even if only to establish from the outset that the railway really did have no interest in reinstating the line.

Additionally, Ashburton Station is mentioned in the Railway Development Society's (now *Railfuture*) *South West Rail Strategy* (pp. 100/101), a copy of which was sent to former National Park Officer, Dr. Atkinson, in April, 2004, and which should be deposited in the reference library at Parke. *Railfuture* is a national pressure group which informs and tries to guide government and local authorities.

That the authority did not consult rail interests is a serious omission. Though it is not the sort of technicality that can

scupper the whole process, it does surely give grounds for a considerable extension of the consultation period to allow the railway campaigners to work up their case.

Many of the difficulties arising at the station would be dealt with at once by the site reverting to its original purpose and becoming again very much a whole.

- 👉 Flooding would not be such an issue on the site if the waters were unobstructed by buildings through the centre. Defences and alleviation would become a railway responsibility.
- 👉 Three important station buildings would be reused in the best possible way and safeguarded.
- 👉 Other appropriate development, both commercial and residential would be confined to peripheral, disjointed sites, making it less important that they form part of a masterplan.
- 👉 Railway reconstruction would change the bulk of the station area at one time and quite quickly, in the event.

By far the most important aspect is function. The National Park Authority has a duty to encourage public transport use and to attempt to break the dependence on private road transport. Talk of the proposed plans being "trip generation neutral" is really just wishful thinking.

Few heritage railways provide genuine public transport. Services cannot be provided all year round, lines have severe speed restrictions and the cost of steam traction is too high to allow competitive fares. But there is a crossover occurring: increasingly, the railways are putting themselves forward to operate "social" services with the intention of reducing congestion, improving the environment and making roads safer.

In North Devon, Exmoor National Park is working with the Lynton & Barnstaple Railway on long term plans to relieve traffic pressure on Lynton and Lynmouth by building a "park and ride" station at Blackmoor Gate. Local authorities across the country are similarly engaging with private railways on public transport initiatives.

It is unlikely that railway reinstatement at Ashburton would bring pure public transport to the town straight away; a 20-minute diesel train journey to Totnes, perhaps to make a main line connection, would not be possible without a change in the overall structure of transport. But there can be no doubt that rail tourists would soon descend on Ashburton, having in most cases left their cars elsewhere. So the town would benefit from visitor footfall without the place becoming cluttered with cars, both moving and parked. Ashburton could become one of a series of revived Dartmoor "Gateway" stations.

In the longer term, there must be a return to the public

systems of transport. But it is no use asking people to queue for a train service that is not there; the infrastructure must always be in place and working. Reinstating the railway would allow further development of services as time goes on.

Knowing all this, it would now be a tragedy if anything were to obstruct the return of the railway to Ashburton Station. Now that the railway interests have woken up, it is time to put the "Chuley Road" ideas to one side, no matter all the work that has been done, so that the good people of Ashburton can be consulted on a new plan; one which aims to put the town back on the railway map and make the best use of the station site.

A new generation of railway people is emerging - thoughtful, eager, entrepreneurial - typified by popular campaign leader, Alasdair Page. Steeped in tradition, but wide awake in the modern world, he and his followers are not content any longer to wait around for their elders to take the lead. They have been gathering confidence for some years and the sudden realization of the threat to Ashburton Station has set them on the march.

At this stage, the best the campaigners can do is commence fund raising to buy the necessary land at the station, paying the owners that wish to relocate sums which reflect the uplift in value the sites would have gained if allowed to be developed conventionally. Beyond this, the National Park Authority would obviously need to be convinced that railway reinstatement could be achieved within a reasonable time, bearing in mind all the many obstacles that would need to be surmounted - the deadweight of administration being one of the greatest.

It will be impossible for the "Friends of Ashburton Station" to make a detailed submission before the end of the public consultation period on 12th December. They need more time; they need the support and encouragement that other local authorities have given to railway projects.

The authority that was responsible for the demolition of Princetown Station could redeem itself here.

Yours sincerely,

Colin Burges

Owner and Operator

Encl.

The buildings found on the site are not part of some obsolete manufacturing process, or the remains of an exhausted mine, or the relics of a religious order that has disbanded; indeed, they are not redundant at all - just waiting to reprise their role.

When a short distance away the same type of buildings are still used for their original purpose, or a variation of it; when the railway concerned was cruelly robbed of its proper terminus and the plans exist which would put right that injustice, it shouts that the masterplan for Ashburton Station should revolve around **railway reconstruction.**