



► Barry Clasper's donations to RNLI stations



Bridge.

"An awful lot of mileage, paint and canvas but hopefully to help raise awareness of the work carried out by all of the volunteers," said Barry.

He said the response so far has been "all good".

"As the paintings were for the crew, the best buzz I get is hearing their response," he revealed. "Abstract art is to conjure thought and emotion.

"I hope this body of work highlights their bravery and that the public recognise that the existing images in the RNLI shops don't portray the reality of the life-threatening dangers of the sea."

Barry said he has painted and sketched from childhood, but became obsessed by it all about 20 years ago.

"I started with landscapes and watercolours but create mainly in acrylic and multi media. I have exhibited around our North East galleries, but nowadays use my

webpage.

"A Barnard Castle gallery got in touch asking me to exhibit my latest body of work in 2012. This resulted in me compiling an explanation to my art in my book 'Real Men Don't Cry'."

“

I hope this body of work highlights their bravery and that the public recognise the images in the RNLI shops don't portray the reality of the dangers in the sea

Barry Clasper

He said he hoped his project would lead to increased recognition of the volunteers of the RNLI, and the St Abbs crew.

"The RNLI have had a lot of bad press over the last few years," he said. "The PC Brigade and sending donations abroad have made tabloid headlines, but politics have to be ignored as the crew still risks their lives daily. The attention should be on their bravery. Donate direct to the station in your area and make the crew realise their worth to the local community."

As for his very personal donation to the RNLI, Barry's project has come at considerable cost to himself.

"In monetary value I am sure you can imagine that it has cost me an awful lot to provide canvas and paint to complete such a task," he said. "The time and money spent on this project is of no concern to me, as I am driven to carry out this venture."

■ Visit: www.clasperart.com

We must cross the bridges and invest in public transport

Paul Benneworth



LIVING in Norway is an incredible experience. Bergen is Europe's rainiest city, the prices are astronomic and the day length is disorienting, but they're not the hardest things to come to terms with.

Norway is stunningly beautiful, and is a land of high mountains, sheer cliffs, glaciers and deep fjords. But that make it a very difficult country to get around.

The big cities may be just a hundred miles apart as the crow flies. But this geography makes every journey an epic adventure.

Norway uses air and ferry travel to bind the country together. But there's a realisation that these sectors' reliance on dirty fuel oil means a greater need for electrified car and rail transport.

The snow-capped mountains may be beautiful, but it's impossible to build roads over them. The fjords break every coastal inter-city trip, making a network of car ferries vital to bridge the gaps.

Tax breaks and road toll exemptions have driven the highest rate of electrical car sales in Europe. But the Norwegian government realised shifting to clean energy means findings more efficient ways through the fjords and mountains.

They've recently invested tens of billions of pounds in a high-technology infrastructure linking the country together. The flagship is the Rogfast tunnel, going 16 miles underneath the Bokne Fjord reaching a depth of 390m below sea-level.

Building the tunnel involves excavating more than 8.5m cubic metres of rock - disposing of that rock is a huge engineering challenge. Ground was broken in 2018, and the tunnel will open to the public in 2026.

But what most surprised me was its moderate price tag. The total cost is roughly £1.5bn, which sounds a lot at first, but not when you compare it to British infrastructure projects, particularly the ill-starred High Speed 2 rail project.

When I worked at Newcastle, we had a small project to calculate the potential benefits of high-speed rail linking London to the North and Scotland. We

had assumed that it would cost - like Rogfast - a few billions to build an entirely new set of rail lines linking London, Glasgow and Newcastle.

I was shocked to read that the latest estimates now see it costing upwards of £100bn for completion, and stopping at Manchester and Leeds.

What didn't shock me were recent calls to save money by cutting planned connections to Leeds and hence Newcastle.

There's serial underinvestment in transport north of Manchester, and whenever savings are necessary then it's our region that feels the pinch.

We are invisible to London-based transport planners, and as soon as their plans hit the buffers, we are first to be jettisoned to try to balance their books.

That invisibility explains why the long hoped-for metro link to Bedlington and Ashington never materialised. The tracks already exist, there would be massive social and economic benefits for North East Northumberland.

For 20 years we've never got further than being an transport aspiration. The Shadow Chancellor is apparently a strong fan of metro expansion, but doesn't seem in a position to influence this.

In Bergen, they are building a new metro line that runs underneath a hillside hospital and through a mountain to better connect a nearby town.

The council has financial revenue and borrowing powers necessary to make long-term commitments to improve people's quality of life.

Our various local authorities don't have those powers. But the real difference in Norway is the vision to not let mountains and fjords be a barrier to giving people the transport they need.

Light rail is the future for sustainable transport in the North East. We need our leaders to see bridges over the problems lying in our way and develop the future transport system we so desperately deserve.

■ Paul Benneworth is a Professor in Western Norway University of Applied Science and lives occasionally in Whitley Bay