

Eastern Daily Press

SERVING THE COMMUNITY
SINCE 1870

We need to know the cause of this latest rail accident

The precise cause of yesterday's train crash remains the subject of rigorous investigation.

But there is already a wearying familiarity about what has happened. Our region has seen a worrying number of crashes at level crossings, many at relatively isolated spots, used primarily by farm traffic.

The countryside of East Anglia is dotted with these crossings and they remain an important link for many businesses, as well as residents.

Rail travel in this country remains, of course, a remarkably safe method of transport. Yet these incidents still occur. It is not for us to prejudge the cause of this particular accident, yet we hope the investigation is as swift, as thorough and as open as it can be.

We need to know how this happened, and what can be done to ensure it never happens again.

In the immediate aftermath, of course, our thoughts are with the tractor driver, who suffered the most serious injuries. For those on board the train, particularly the driver, this must have been a deeply shocking, stressful incident. One passenger said that at one point, they did not know if they were going to live or die. We wish them all well.

The rapid response of our emergency services – the British Transport Police, Norfolk police, the air ambulance, fire and ambulance services – combined with the speedy reaction of the train driver and conductor, seem to have ensured that the situation was brought under control as quickly as possible.

Now, though, is where the real work begins – tell us what went wrong.

Giving democracy a voice

This row over a proposal to merge the role of town criers between Sheringham and Cromer is a rum affair. Of course, there is nothing surprising about the controversy and depth of feeling that the suggestion has provoked.

We can quite understand why a proposal to share this important civic role has proved contentious, especially between two proud, fine neighbours with such a fierce – if friendly – rivalry.

No, what seems most peculiar about this business is that when it came up at a Sheringham town council meeting, it was considered an unsuitable subject for the ears' of the town's citizens. Instead, the public and press were removed and discussions continued in private. The council say this was for "data protection" purposes and for fear of "identifying individuals".

We will have to take their word for that. Of course, there will be more momentous issues than that of town criers on which to fight battles for open democracy.

But whenever our democratically-elected politicians – at whatever level – take steps to exclude the public and operate behind closed doors, it is worth making a fuss.

Like all good town criers, we like our civic matters voiced loudly, not whispered in secret.

What's in a name?

So familiar are they, that we sometimes fail to grasp the poetry and beauty of our region's place names. Cockley Cley, Clippesby, Corpusty, Costessey, Cobholm, Clenchwarton – to pick just some of those starting with 'c'. All readers will surely have their own favourites and we wonder how you will have fared with our quiz on the origins of some of those names.

We suspect the answers may provoke debate. The origins of these names are so far back in the mists of time that rival theories can exist.

After all, in some of these villages, residents cannot even agree on the correct pronunciation.

READER'S PICTURE OF THE DAY

iwitness24



■ This atmospheric image of the cliffs at Hunstanton was taken by Peter Jarvis, using long exposure. If you would like to submit a picture for possible publication in the EDP, visit www.iwitness24.co.uk

Here's the reason why it's better to say best

Peter
Trudgill



email: newsdesk@archant.co.uk

Everybody who speaks English as their native language knows exactly what the word "best" means.

If you're best at something, then there's nobody who's better than you. You are the top, the leader, the superior one.

So this must mean that if you can run 100 metres in 12 seconds, and your friend can only do it in 13 seconds, then you're the best.

Well, there are some people who say that's not right – that if there are only two of you, then you are not the "best" but the "better", and that best should be reserved for referring to one of three or more people.

Why on earth would they think that? Well, it's because they've learnt one of those artificial rules about English grammar which were invented by people with nothing better to do – people who argued that it's "correct" to say the best, nicest, fastest if you are comparing three or more entities, but "wrong" if there are only two, in which case it "should" be better, nicer, faster...

This argument is completely without foundation.

There's absolutely no reason why we shouldn't say that something or someone



■ Usain Bolt, the fastest runner in the world over 100 metres, and therefore the best. Picture: PA

is the best or fastest of two. If you're the top, the leader, the superior one, then you are the best, regardless of how many are being evaluated. Adjectives like better and faster are comparatives, while best and fastest are superlatives.

If you compare yourself as a runner with everyone in your family, you might be able to say that you are faster and better than all the others – and that you're therefore the fastest and best.

Similarly, if you compare yourself just with your friend, then you are still the fastest and best – superlative – even if there are only two of you being compared.

Some readers might now be saying "but we were always taught..." Yes, exactly. We were taught this rule because there is no such rule.

The real rules of English grammar don't have to be taught to native speakers – by the time we are three and four years old, we know them already.

We all know it's normal to say things like "if you have to choose between the red one and the blue one, then the blue one would be the best choice".

If you were to say "the better choice", that would sound clumsy and artificial and pedantic – because it is.