

Prologue



Kira, interviewing a new B4RN customer in Knight Stainforth, 2019.

I'm an academic researcher who studies the digital divide. Specifically, I study how people come up with innovative solutions to overcome the digital divide on their own terms with interventions that work best for them and their communities. I think community-owned internet networks are among the most exciting and innovative examples of people tackling digital exclusion, and that's what brought me to B4RN. I first visited B4RN-land in 2019, and over the past five years, I've done countless interviews, and I've gotten to know the network and the people who have built it. The story of B4RN is a human story of frustration, resilience,

grit, creativity, and collaboration. It's a powerful reminder that digital connectivity is rooted in human connectivity... and sometimes you need to JFDI!

This book has been written by B4RN community members. It's a compilation of written stories, oral histories, photographs, and links. It's a non-linear, branching tale of key people, places, milestones, and memories, intertwining and intersecting like the roots of a tree. I hope you enjoy this book – it's your book. These are your stories, and they belong to you.

Kira Allmann, Ph.D. Co-editor.

B4RN demonstrated what can be done for a fraction of the money that HM Government eventually spent to bribe BT to do what it had postponed after being nearly bankrupted by local loop unbundling.

The other achievement of B4RN, possibly its most politically relevant, is to demonstrate that community self-help can deliver more appropriate solutions more reliably and consistently than central government, of whatever hue.

Philp Virgo



Beyond the book
[The book weblink](#)

The story of B4RN isn't simply about the many people who have joined our ranks over the years - from our first shareholder, Walter Willcox, onwards. It isn't about geography, geology, rural and remote - all of which our incredible team has overcome. It isn't about technology - fibre optics are well understood and proven. It includes politics. And some phenomenal connections amongst people world-wide trying to achieve one thing - connectivity and ubiquitous comms.

I do so hope that others will read this book and understand just what a phenomenon B4RN is, the history of how it came to be, and the potential for similar projects, not just in broadband, but across all aspects of community infrastructure. People Power is the most extraordinary thing to behold and B4RN illustrates just how amazing that force can be.

Lindsey Annison, founder member of B4RN.

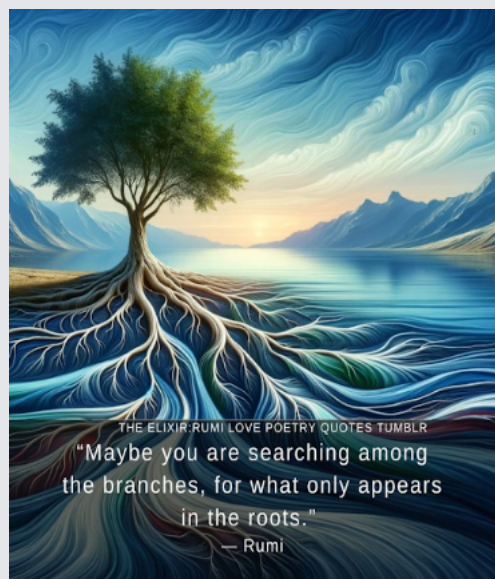


B4RN, or to give it its full name, Broadband for the Rural North, did not spring fully-formed into life in 2011. Events 30 years previously ensured that the farmers and housewives of Cumbria could end their isolation from the digital world and relieve their frustration by JFDI (Just F***** Doing It) themselves.

Ian Grant, co-editor.

Some 15 years ago in the late 90s, farming communities across the UK were paralysed by a government decision to go digital for all documentation. Unfortunately, the farming communities were isolated with very poor, or non-existent, broadband. None of the established service providers would address this problem as it was not an economic opportunity!

During my life I have come to respect many groups of people including farmers because they don't take, and will not be discouraged, by BS. Today B4RN serves communities from Northumberland to Norfolk and Surrey and brings world class broadband to thousands of customers that no other supplier will consider viable.



Only 15 years ago the industry scoffed at the B4RN vision, and no one foresaw the outcome. And it all started with the frustration of just one area of Lancashire and the people of grit. As a friend, colleague and admirer of all that B4RN has done and achieved, I can salute you as champions of broadband, workers of miracles, and a changer of lives! So impressive and so very well done to you all.

Professor Peter Cochrane, OBE DSc



Some 13 years later, that same AltNet sector, is responsible for over £20 billion pounds worth of investment, which is greater than the combined value of any subsidy and private investment from BT.

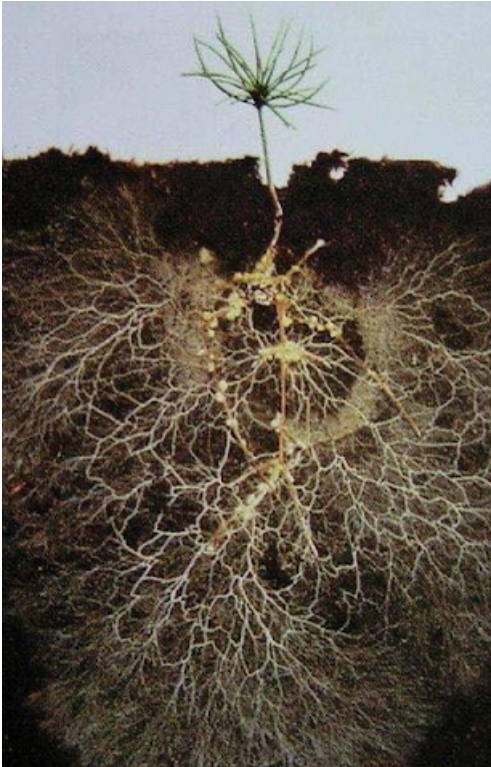
B4RN played a significant part in the birth of the AltNet sector, and the sizeable investment in the UK it would later bring.

Lloyd Felton

More from these contributors later in the book.

Introduction

Roots, Routes, Nodes, and Branches



To embark on a book of this kind is a big undertaking. It is a compilation of the many stories from the people who actually built the network. We lived through it. These are our stories. This book belongs to all of us, in all ways.

Broadband for the Rural North started as the seed of an idea, fertilised by frustration—twenty years of struggle had already gone into deciding to grow our own internet network. Indefatigable gardeners, campaigners and advocates like Lindsey Annison, Aidan Paul, Peter Cochrane, Adrian Wooster, Lloyd Felton (and actually the list is endless) have fought for years for the right to internet access for all. They often feel like they have toiled in unforgiving ground in vain, but without them B4RN would not be standing today. By sharing their knowledge they ended up designing and building their own networks too, or helping others to build them. This knowledge was shared, and nourished the roots of B4RN.

There is so much that came before the full-fibre network we call B4RN now, and some of that history is in this book, too.

We decided to become self-sufficient when it became clear no company or government was going to get us connected. The digital revolution was happening around us, and if we wanted to be part of it, we had to do something about it ourselves.

The roots of B4RN run deep. We had spent years cultivating the seed, before a tiny shoot finally emerged and became the mighty, sprawling B4RN family tree. That moment came on August 3rd, 2011, when B4RN was officially registered with the FCA (Financial Conduct Authority) as a community benefit society.

The roots are almost as extensive as the branches. There are literal roots of the network, underground: the ducts, fibre, and bullets. You can not see them, yet they are essential for the network to work. The other roots are the people who helped on the way. That is also partly why we wanted to write a book, so that we remember the roots are there, because our impressive tree would not be here without them. The network is amazing, both from a technical viewpoint as well as from the perspective of social impact.

We have faced many obstacles, as the stories here will explain, but the challenges—from the weather, to the landscape, to the bureaucracy we have gone up against—have made our tree stronger.


This is the story of B4RN. It is the story of how each community, fed from the roots, grew its own branch and flourished into a live network of people and machines. The B4RN network is built underground; you cannot see it, but you can see the impact on people and communities.


This book has been written by the community. The photos have come from the community. Like the network, this written record is by and for the community.


Chris, collector of stories.

To be completed by three founder members and secretary (who may also be a founder member)

We apply for registration of
Broadband for the Rural North Limited

Name	Barry Forde	Signature:	
Address	Brow Top Barn, Rakehouse Brow, Quernmore, Lancaster, Lancashire, LA2 0QW	Date:	3/8/2011

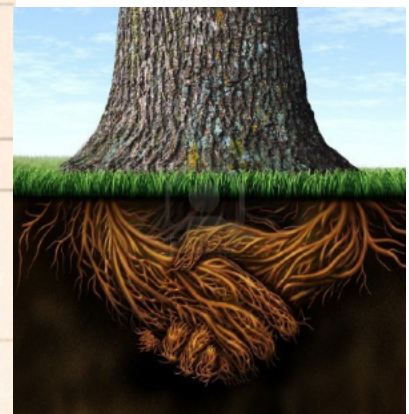
Name	Christine Conder	Signature:	
Address	Broadwood Farm Wray, Lancaster, Lancashire, LA2 8QT	Date:	3/8/2011

Name	Lindsey Annison	Signature:	
Address	Croft House, Brookside, Warcop, Cumbria CA16 6PF	Date:	3/8/2011

for Broadband for the Rural North Limited (applying for registration under the Industrial and Provident Societies Act 1965)			
Name	Barry Forde	Date:	3/8/2011
		Secretary	

B4RN Limited Aug 2011 27 © 2010 Wessex Community Assets Limited

B4RN is officially registered
as a Community Benefit
Society



Like branches on a
tree, we may grow in
different directions,
but our roots remain
as one.



Chris Conder, 2019.
Photo by Kira Allmann.