

railfuture

Sevenside Branch Newsletter No. 32 New Year 2017

Contributions to the Newsletter are welcome and should be sent to the Branch Secretary, Nigel Bray. Email: nigel.bray@railfuture.org.uk

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More information about campaigns is available on the Railfuture national website.

Railfuture Sevenside Branch Meeting in Swindon, 25 February 2017

The next meeting will be at S. Aldhelm's Centre, Edgeware Road, Swindon at 2 pm on Saturday 25 February 2017. The venue is about 5-10 minutes' walk from Swindon station. Tea and coffee will be available. Our guest speaker is Paul Jenkins, Managing Director of Thamesdown Transport, the Swindon based bus operator, on the subject of bus / rail integration.

If coming by train, leave the station by the main exit and walk over the pedestrian crossing, first passing the Queen's Tap on your right and then over another crossing to pass through the large pedestrianized area surrounded by white Zurich office buildings with tinted windows. Keeping the Octagon restaurant on your left, walk through the underpass marked Parade. Then walk alongside Debenhams on your left and go through a short walkway with Tesco Metro on your left. A large red brick building (formerly Sanford Street school) is immediately ahead. Turn left and then immediately right into Sanford Street, so that the former school is on your right. Walk to the end of the street, passing Learn Direct on your left. At the T-junction the S. Aldhelm's Centre is immediately ahead, almost opposite a pay and display car park.

Future Railfuture Sevenside Branch Meetings

Branch AGM on 8 April 2017 at GL1 Leisure Centre, Gloucester at 2 pm.

It is hoped to have a July meeting in Bridgwater or Taunton with a speaker who worked on the upgrade of the Felixstowe line in East Anglia.

Branch Treasurer receives award

A presentation was made at our recent meeting in Bath to Branch Treasurer, Tony Lloyd, who is also Treasurer of Friends of Suburban Bristol Railways (FOSBR). Tony has been Treasurer of Railfuture's Sevenside Branch for nearly 10 years and was nominated for special recognition by Christina Biggs, Secretary of FOSBR.

Report of talk given to Railway Correspondence & Travel Society Cheltenham branch on Great Western Electrification Project, 17 January 2017

At least five Railfuture members attended an illuminating talk given to the RCTS Cheltenham branch by Jill Poyton, Senior Sponsor for the GW Electrification Project (GWEP). She is an engineer with Network Rail (NR) who has worked in the railway industry for 16 years and has special responsibility for the routes between Swindon, Bristol and the Severn tunnel. As this includes the sections affected by the recent deferral of electrification to Bristol, it was instructive to learn not only the reasons behind that decision but also the factors contributing to the inflated costs of the scheme.

In contrast to some recent articles in the railway press talking down the prospect of further electrification, Jill Poyton has great faith in the benefits of electric traction including lower track maintenance costs and its contribution to a cleaner environment. She explained that GWEP involves higher technical standards than on the East Coast Main Line electrification, which was completed in 1991 and has suffered frequent dewirements. The Overhead Line Equipment (OLE) being installed for the GW lines has been designed to cope with much higher tensions than was the case with ECML.

She pointed out that all holes for the OLE masts in the GWEP have had to be hand dug down to the first metre to detect the presence of buried cables which were a legacy of a BR decision to dispense with troughing by the lineside. OLE designs have had to take account of the cables discovered during digging, including some belonging to third parties. The estimates for operating the High Output Plant System (HOPS) train, designed to install OLE while trains were still running on adjacent tracks, had proved too low. It was a completely new design, she said, “but doesn’t operate like a production line and some parts of it work faster than others.”

Another reason for the cost escalation was that the true cost of rebuilding road bridges crossing the line had not been factored in. Work is required not only on the bridges but on their road approaches in order to comply with highway regulations concerning visibility and gradients. 108 overbridges between Maidenhead and Cardiff were involved. The most challenging of these is Steventon High Street bridge, a Listed structure with a low arch, three miles west of Didcot. Lowering the track at this point would not by itself resolve the problem because the village is in a flood zone and also requires higher OLE over two level crossings. 20 possible options were being considered for Steventon.

Additionally 107 sets of pylon cables crossing the railway needed to be raised. Three power supply points to feed the OLE had been built at Foxhall Junction (Didcot); Thingley Junction, west of Chippenham; and in the Cardiff area. A fourth at Kensal Green would feed Paddington-Maidenhead as part of the Crossrail scheme and a fifth might be built at Reading to add resilience to the supply and allow for future extension of the wires to Basingstoke. A 6km trench was built to connect the Thingley Junction power supply with the existing power station at

Beanacre, near Melksham. The supply point at Cardiff would be adequate for eventual electrification to Swansea.

NR had taken the precaution of asking English Heritage whether it wished to List any bridges on the route. This was to enable track lowering to be planned in advance. In some cases as much as 1km of track required to be lowered to avoid undesirable gradients. Lowering might also require alterations to the drainage of a site. At some locations such as Sodbury tunnel, track lowering was ruled out because of the flood risk.

During work to lower the track in Box tunnel, divers were needed to examine the adjacent Corsham tunnels, which were found to contain running water. A subway infill was required before the track could be lowered. Work sites at Box tunnel were having to be cleared out daily to enable bats to fly in and out. As with the Severn tunnel, overhead conductor bars will be fitted in Box and Sodbury tunnels.

Bath Spa station has also presented major challenges because it is a listed building and the city is a World Heritage Site. To avoid truncating the platform canopies, a T-shaped catenary will be built between the present tracks, which will be slewed and the platforms widened to meet them. The platforms will also be lengthened, as will those at Chippenham, to accommodate 10-car IEPs, which are longer than HSTs.

So why has electrification to Bristol been deferred?

Jill Poyton explained that several interconnected infrastructure projects in the Bristol area needed to be completed before electric train services could start. Bristol Area Signalling Renewal (BASRE) would be essential because the existing electronic signals, dating from the early 1970s, were not immunised against induced currents from electric trains. Bristol signal box would be closed and its work transferred to the Thames Valley Signalling Centre at Didcot. The first phase of this work would involve re-signalling Bristol Parkway to Wootton Bassett Junction in February 2017. She added that the full IEP timetable could not work without four tracking of Filton Bank, due for completion in December 2018. “Electrification (to Bath and Bristol Temple Meads) has been deferred to release resources for BASRE, Filton Bank and Bristol East Junction remodelling,” she said.

Another factor in the deferral was that NR was now effectively a public-sector body subject to Government spending limits and could not just raise extra private capital as it wished. Its spending plans were allocated to five-year Control Periods but the routes affected by the deferral would, she said, be electrified by March 2024 (the end of CP6).

Asked whether electrification from Swindon to Gloucester and Cheltenham was likely, she said she was not aware of any plans to do so, nor was Gloucester re-signalling an early priority. “The next signalling project being worked up (on NR’s Western Route) is for Cornwall.” She also

suggested the next major route in the West to be electrified after GWEP was completed would be Bristol Parkway- Birmingham.

Other questions put to Jill Poyton after the meeting concerned electrification to Oxford and Newbury. It transpired that wiring from Didcot to Oxford was being deferred so that remodelling of Oxford station layout and Oxford North Junction could be completed first. December 2017 was still the expected date for electric trains from Paddington to reach Didcot, where an EMU depot would be built. Electrification from Reading to Newbury was going ahead (with completion due in December 2018) because bi-modal trains between London and the far South West have finite fuel capacity and need to run partly on electric power.

Quick Win Rail Schemes – proposals from Severnside Branch

Railfuture's national Chairman, Chris Page recently invited suggestions for Quick Win rail schemes, costing under £2m and able to be delivered relatively quickly. This followed a request from Rail Minister Paul Maynard when he met Railfuture's representatives (Chris Page, Chris Austin, Head of Railfuture Networks Group, and Allison Cosgrove, Head of Railfuture Passenger Group, also national vice Chair) at Westminster in December 2016. All Railfuture branches have contributed to a list, which will be consolidated, prioritised and sent to the minister. Severnside branch has produced the following suggested Station Improvements - thanks are due to Glen Burrows, Michael Hodge, Horace Prickett, Peter Rawll, John Stretton, David Wood and Rob Niblett, Gloucestershire County Council rail officer, for their advice.

Ashchurch for Tewkesbury

Ashchurch, Tewkesbury & District Rail Promotion Group (ATDRPG) would like to see a card only ticket machine, preferably able to dispense tickets ordered online and CCTV on the station platforms. Bench seating on both platforms has been promised by GWR for 2017 and may happen anyway; otherwise, funding to provide it would be most welcome. These improvements are supported by Gloucestershire County Council and Laurence Robertson MP.

ATDRPG advises that GWR, Cross Country Trains and Network Rail support its proposal to change the station name to Tewkesbury Parkway in principle, although a cost of £ 50,000 has been quoted, presumably because railway information systems would have to be amended. Renaming would attract more passengers because the town is well known throughout Britain but few outside Gloucestershire have heard of Ashchurch.

Bridgwater

This station needs an updated Onward Travel poster, showing the location and destinations of the nearest bus stops, plus a map of local bus routes similar to the one at the bus station. Both these displays need to be on the outside wall of the main entrance because the booking hall is closed after ticket office hours. Signage towards the town centre and bus station are also required.

The proprietor of the station café, which is currently located in a portakabin on the station forecourt, has prepared plans to move it into a vacant room in the main building. A suitable room has been partly converted already but would presumably need fittings and utility connections to complete the move.

Bridgwater is the second busiest station in Somerset with 312,000 journeys recorded in 2015/16. Although money to improve it has been promised from EDF in connection with the new Hinkley Point power station, it is unclear what this would be spent on and when.

Harrington humps could be provided on the down platform, which is uncomfortably low in relation to much of the rolling stock which calls there.

Friends of Bridgwater Station (FOBS) has put these ideas to the Local Transport Forum, run by Bridgwater Town Council, which supports them. Sedgemoor District Council is planning to improve the “Celebration Mile” between the station and town centre which would include better signage. FOBS is seeking the support of the Celebration Mile project manager for the station improvements.

Filton Abbey Wood

This is one of the busiest stations (1m recorded journeys in 2015/16) in the Bristol area but has no direct interchange with bus services. Local buses serve Filton Avenue and the A4174, about ¼ mile and ½ mile on foot respectively. A bus map showing local bus routes is needed alongside the Onward Travel poster. Signage to the station is also needed from Filton Avenue. The case for bus services to call at the station was also made by Martin Garrett at the FOSBR AGM on 20 January 2017.

The existing ticket office is small and needs a more substantial building including a waiting room. More cycle racks are needed because the existing ones cause congestion on Platform 1. All these suggestions were raised at the Station Travel Plan meeting commissioned by GWR and hosted by Atkins Rail on 1 December 2016.

Melksham

Wiltshire Council plans to convert a redundant building into a waiting room and café. It already owns the land and is also planning a land swap to relocate a tyre company which currently uses a disused portion of the platform. Network Rail plans to lengthen the platform to accommodate three-car trains but the Council wants it extended to accommodate five-car trains. This is because usage of the Swindon- Westbury service has grown from 18,000 journeys in 2012/13 to 235,000 in 2015/16.

TransWilts Community Interest Company has estimated that the improved station facilities, including additional parking, would cost £ 1.25m.

Parson Street

This Bristol suburban station has seen a dramatic increase in usage (from under 2,000 journeys in 1997/98 to 127,000 in 2015/16) but its passenger facilities are still very spartan. Larger and more robust shelters (e.g. of brick) would provide better weather protection for more people.

The wooden steps from the road overbridge provide the only access to the station but many are in poor condition. GWR has promised to replace any rotten steps and examine the underlying structure for signs of rust and corrosion. It has also said it will paint yellow lines along the platform because many fast trains pass through it. Tactile slabs along the length of the platforms for the benefit of blind and disabled passengers have been requested by the recently formed Friends of Parson Street station. GWR has said it will include these in its plan of improvements for the station, which are supported by Karin Smyth, MP for Bristol South. FOSBR supports better facilities and additional stops at Parson Street.

Bristol City Council has said it would support expansion of CCTV at the station if necessary and improvements to passenger information and facilities, should funding become available.

Pewsey

This station is a railhead for a large area of mid Wiltshire with 233,000 journeys recorded in 2015/16 but the station approach road is hazardous for pedestrians because it lacks a pavement and has very poor visibility where it joins the main road. Wiltshire Council is proposing to designate a safe walking route to / from the town centre via Wilton Road. This would require signage and the opening of a gate currently locked by Network Rail.

Stonehouse

This station had 149,000 recorded journeys in 2015/16 and is expected to have an hourly service of IEPs between Cheltenham, Gloucester and Paddington from December 2017. A temporary ticket office was provided in the station forecourt in 2014 after the previous (1976) building subsided. A new permanent ticket office would be desirable, as would a larger waiting shelter on the up platform.

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