

THAMES VALLEY BRANCH
Newsletter 83 March 2014

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Annual General Meeting at Oxford on Wednesday 7th May 2014

The Branch AGM will be held at the King's Centre, Osney Mead, Oxford, OX2 0ES at 7pm on Wednesday 7th May 2014. After the formal business our guest speaker, Mr Mike Hogg, Projects & Planning Director, First Great Western, will give a talk titled 'Oxford's railway - Getting Ready for its New Role' which will cover the Oxford station masterplan.

Details of the venue and how to get there can be found here:- <http://www.kingscentre.co.uk/content/find-us>

The King's Centre is about a 10 minute walk from the station following the River Thames towpath from Osney. The nearest bus stop is Osney Island on Botley Road. If coming by car please use the Seacourt Park & Ride.

We look forward to seeing many of you there.

Joint meeting at Milton Keynes: Railfuture Thames Valley Branch and Oxon & Bucks Rail Action Committee

18 March 2014 18:30-20:30 at The Quadrant (Network Rail's office - Furzton Room G01), Milton Keynes. This meeting will include an update on EWR and the AGM of OBRAC.

Chairman's Comment.

I have been excited to witness the work starting on the Oxford – Marylebone scheme, with track lifted at Bicester Town, ready for work. The Branch is keen that Network Cards be accepted on this route, and eventually on the East – West rail scheme. It must be remembered the Network Card is not protected under the 1993 Railways Act.

I am also pleased to have been informed, following the attempt to stop the scheme using an expensive Judicial Review (which despite its bizarre grounds, was considered a very good challenge), legislation will be enacted to limit the right of judicial review to those who "have a financial interest in the scheme". This should hopefully prevent a repeat of the delays encountered, as the line heads eastwards if Transport and Works Act powers are needed.

On a separate matter, I have been impressed by the branch's Twitter account which has picked up followers during the floods as we twittered breaking news. I would commend it together with the national Railfuture twitter account. As I write this it has the latest passenger figures for the Branch area's stations on it; all interesting stuff.

On a final note I am conscious that the Branch is split into Thames Valley and the Milton Keynes area and until East West Rail is completed it's hard for us to get together. Please note the Joint meeting on 18th March 2014 at Milton Keynes, when I hope to see you there.

Cotswold Line News.

Worcester Parkway – The County Council had re-iterated its support for this long mooted scheme, and is now pressing for doubling of the Evesham – Norton Junction section. At this stage a station is likely on the Cotswold Line only. The scheme was not developed sufficiently to be considered in the Government's last rail station grant round.

Kingham Car Park – The car park is now overflowing on all days causing much local annoyance and danger to road users; a start date for the Car Park and the disabled access bridge is awaited.

The 15.52 service from Paddington was switched from an HST to a Class 180 last year. This train forms the 16.49 ex Oxford, this coupled with sharply rising traffic has led to issues of exceptional overcrowding. The train was reported leaving Oxford with Handborough passengers being told to disembark prior to departure in late February; it ran direct to Charlbury. First Group hope to resolve the issue in the next timetable change, however it has upset several MPs on the line.

CHILTERN & EWR News

Chiltern are progressing plans for platform extensions, for 9-car trains, at Bicester North, High Wycombe, Princes Risborough and Solihull where at present the maximum permitted length is for seven car trains. Chiltern's experimental Boxing Day train service, a 30 minute service between Marylebone & Bicester North went 'well'; satisfactory loadings were achieved with the majority of passengers heading to London for shopping and sports events. (NB - they confirmed the revenue risk was all Chiltern's with no financial contribution being made from Bicester Village). Chiltern plan to repeat this in 2014 subject to Network Rail not requiring any possession along the route.

More trains for Chiltern

Chiltern are to take on the lease of 9 x 2 car Class 170 units being released by Trans Pennine following the introduction of new electric units on the Manchester – Scotland services.

Banbury East Side Multi-Story Car Park

The strong winds of December 2013 caused work on the 707 space car park superstructure to fall behind schedule. The principal contractor has presented a recovery plan, which sets out the manner in which the 31 March 2014 deadline can be achieved. The plan is credible but remains vulnerable to further adverse weather conditions.

National Stations Improvement Scheme

Work on the upper concourse at Banbury Station began on 8th January. The project will see the existing retail arrangements reconfigured to provide enhanced passenger facilities and an additional seating area. The Information Point is also to be relocated so that it can be accessible from both sides of the new ticket gates. Improvements to the concourse area will also include new ceiling panels, lighting and redecoration to make it more appealing to rail users. Works to install a roof on the footbridge at Bicester North are now substantially complete. The next steps will be the installation of the additional CCTV cameras.

Bicester - Oxford Blockade

The Bicester to Oxford blockade began on 14 February 2014 with Chiltern selecting the Oxford Bus Company as winner of the tender for the rail replacement bus operation. The buses are smartly branded "London Marylebone next stop" and have cycle spaces.

Preliminary works have seen eight new badger sets created away from the line and over 3000 newts relocated with 25km of newt fencing erected. During re-construction, rail access will have to be maintained to the Water Eaton stone terminal and the MoD depot at Bicester. By the time you read this the pointwork that will form the new Bicester South Junction should have been installed on the main line at the south end of the new Gavray chord.

Golden Whistle Awards

On 24th January Chiltern were named as the leading operator in the country for right time arrivals in the Golden Whistles, the industry's annual performance and safety awards. Chiltern were also recognised as the most improved operator for right time punctuality.

East West Rail

In late January Network Rail began clearing the disused overgrown track bed between Steeple Claydon and Bletchley to carry out topographical and ecology surveys in preparation for the line being rebuilt by December 2017.

At the Oxford End the present track layout into Oxford will be kept at first although the up goods loop will be made bi-directional to increase capacity. The track layout into Oxford post EWR is not finalised yet but, with extra capacity required from 2017/18, it may be double track all the way from Oxford Parkway with consideration still being given to reinstating the old LNWR route to give direct access to Chiltern's new bay platforms. Network Rail's final plans for rebuilding Oxford station are awaited.

Watford Junction Opportunity

Network Rail have cancelled their plans for a 17 day block of the West Coast Main Line at Watford Junction during August 2014. It is replaced by a series of weekend blockades during which there will be Virgin Trains Voyagers from running between Rugby and Marylebone via Coventry and Leamington Spa.

WITNEY OXFORD TRANSPORT GROUP (WOT)

This new group has been set up in West Oxfordshire with the aim of overcoming the growing problem of gridlock on the A40 and achieving improved public transport between Carterton, Witney and Oxford. These efforts coincide with the forthcoming opening of the new Chiltern Railways link from Oxford to London Marylebone, East-West Rail to Milton Keynes and Bedford, Oxford Parkway Station at Water Eaton and Oxfordshire's idea of re-opening for passenger services the line to Cowley (currently only used for freight to the Mini factory).

The formal launch of the new WOT group was held at a packed public meeting in Witney on 15th January, attended also by local councillors and transport campaigners. A number of technical and route options were presented alongside population and traffic statistics. The meeting ended with a unanimous call for an updating study of the problems and possible solutions. Among the ideas suggested:

1. A Metro-style commuter train service between Cowley and Witney using existing lines and sections of the disused track, perhaps with Park & Ride sites along the route. 2. A guided busway – a new concrete track and road links exclusively used by buses. Similar systems have recently opened into Cambridge, and between Luton and Dunstable. Recent developments with electric bus technology (e.g. at Milton Keynes) may also be relevant. 3. A "Tram-Train" service where European-style trams operate over existing and formerly abandoned rail lines. Such a system will shortly open between Sheffield and Rotherham, extending the existing Supertram network, and is being planned to the south-east of Greater Manchester.

WOT will be presenting these ideas to local government and partnerships and hopes to be in a position to put in some funding, helped by their supporter organisations. David Mason, Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, has agreed to become one of WOT's Patrons. For more about WOT including the presentation made at the launch meeting and how you can help please see www.witneyoxfordtransport.org.uk

High Wycombe – Bourne End

We welcome the news that the Buckinghamshire LEP are making a submission for £30,000 for a business case study to be made into this reopening which is the first positive step for some time.

Floods

Given the severity of the flooding Network Rail & the operators did well to maintain a basic service through south Hinksey and it is welcome news that Hinksey is included in a list of flood prevention schemes for which the Government are advancing £31 million. The work to raise the track here could, of course, have been done when the bridge was being raised for taller containers and it is a slight worry that the work is likely to be done next year rather than later this year. The flooding west of Maidenhead caused by rising groundwater was potentially far more serious and it is commendable that using innovative solutions Network Rail were able to restore a nearly normal service within just a few days. This and various landslips have certainly shown up where the vulnerable spots are.

Summary: Railfuture Rail User Groups Conference, Oxford Town Hall, 2nd November 2013.

The Lord Mayor of Oxford, Cllr Delia Sinclair, opened the conference. She recognises that Oxford is an important rail hub and it is a challenge to keep road traffic at bay in Oxford and she welcomes the efforts of Railfuture and others in campaigning for improvements. She also spoke of her memories of going by rail on holidays as a child, including on the Severn Valley Railway and in particular remembered a rail journey to Wembley for a football match with a Class 50 engine called Conqueror in 1986.

Chairman – Christian Wolmar

He immediately said he was at the same football match at Wembley as the Lord Mayor and remembers it for different reasons as he is a QPR supporter and Oxford Utd beat them 3 - 0! Referring to the average age of the room he urged us to recruit our grandchildren as Railfuture needs more younger members.

Lord Richard Faulkner of Worcester "Saving Britain's railways"

Referring to his book he said it was a political and social history of Britain's railways in the 2nd half of the C20th. There was no one conspiracy to close but forces combined in the 60s and rail had to cope with decline. He researched the book in several libraries and archives including the Bodleian and found evidence of closures to leave just the main lines. Locally, many stations closed on the Cotswold line and the Fairford branch and to Princes Risborough which was the most direct route between Oxford & London. Other areas fared worse and the Oxford – Bletchley line was not proposed for closure. Future growth had not been anticipated.

Two pro rail ministers in Thatcher's government were Lord Fowler & Willie Whitelaw. He uncovered evidence of collusion of government interference such as the notion to reduce subsidies as only the wealthy travel by rail. In 1979 after a secret plan for more closures was leaked there was a huge row leading to the government announcing no more closures and to keep the network at its 1979 size. The Serpell Report proposed either 100% fare rises, reducing network or reducing safety. It was, of course, shelved.

Now: half population travel by rail annually; other half also benefit from freight on rail. Been a growth industry since July 2001; any attempts to drive away passengers have failed.

He concluded with a quote from Rev. Awdry (Thomas the tank engine author): Three great similarities between the railways and the Church of England: Both had their heyday in the 19th century, both possess lots of gothic architecture, both believe they are the best way of getting to your destination.

In response to questions he said the rise in use of company cars is now over and their use is less due to changes in company car tax; growth can continue provided quality continues to improve and fares don't go up more than inflation; he doesn't feel the abolition of the BRB(Residuary) – ex BR Property Board – is a serious threat to the surviving old track beds.

Stephen Barker – Chiltern Railways “The new rail route from London to Oxford”

He began with an overview of the Chiltern route's progress and current operations before explaining in some detail the new route and the work involved in upgrading and rebuilding it which has proved to be more extensive than at first thought once the track and structures started to be examined in detail. Key points:

Chiltern now has a significant market share on the London – Birmingham route. Top operator for On Time (within 1 minute) arrivals. First step in change for future was the total route modernisation of 1990s. Spent £500 million so far, fleet size doubled.

Chiltern's London – Oxford route will provide relief to overcrowding on the GW route, has a catchment area of all the city of Oxford and more including a swathe of the Cotswolds to the NW. Bicester – Oxford will be rebuilt from 40mph single track to double track 100mph (75mph for freight), involves a complete rebuild and closing of many level crossings, many new bridges and two miles of new road. Wolvercote tunnel which will be deepened and underpinned will be to W12 loading gauge with electrification space. Bicester Town station will be rebuilt as a proper two platform station with new car park and approach road. Islip station will be rebuilt. Much work is needed on two bridges over rivers and floodplain: Mill stream bridge and Cherwell bridge. The new Oxford Parkway station at the Water Eaton Park & Ride will have 100 cycle spaces and be a true multi modal interchange.

When opened there will be a half hourly service of Class 168 trains with journey times to Marylebone of 58 minutes from Oxford Parkway and 66 minutes from Oxford; 38 minutes to High Wycombe.

He closed by posing the question: why are we investing in this? – can be done with a long franchise which had a requirement to invest; expanding the reach of their railway and create new markets such as Oxford – High Wycombe; to make a profit, having invested £100 million they need to make a return.

In response to questions he said the single track reversibly worked final section into Oxford, alongside the GW line may yet be doubled in the future but needn't be at first; they will improve the road junction layout at Water Eaton to improve traffic flows and cycling. Asked about stock for the new Oxford service he said they can make more efficient use of the present fleet but are also looking at options to expand the fleet for London – Birmingham to release more trains for Oxford.

Martin Tugwell, Oxfordshire County Council “The rail revival in Oxfordshire and local best practice”

The County Council recognises the role it has to play in contributing to improved infrastructure and in addition to direct funding one of the ways it does this is to obtain money from developers for transport improvements, for example in Bicester where the population will double with future housing (including on land adjacent to the new Gavray chord), whereas the Didcot Parkway forecourt improvements are CC funded.

Oxford is a “global brand” and they are trying hard to get global top pharmaceutical companies to invest in the county’s economy. The county “spine” is Bicester – Oxford – Didcot. Investment for freight on rail releases capacity on the A34. The local LEP Chairman is Adrian Shooter so has rail experience.

Bicester village with its huge numbers of Chinese visitors is an example of inward investment gaining due to Chiltern’s investment in Evergreen 3. Oxfordshire CC supports EWR and has voted £11 million for it last month. Improved connections to Milton Keynes will be increasingly important as it grows (will be 8th largest place in UK in due course). Oxford airport, for business aviation, are attracted to having Oxford Parkway station as with a quality bus link it puts them only a bit more than an hour from the west end of London. The CC wants also to fund road improvements around Oxford Parkway. For Oxford itself they aspire to a world class station with full multi modal hub. “Investment in public transport supports jobs and the economy.”

Other matters being investigated include: possible use of the Cowley branch presently only used for cars, growth at Culham Science centre, the concept of “Didcot Gateway” with integrated links to the science parks such as Harwell and Milton etc, “Oxford Science Transit – single transaction bus/rail integrated travel, 4 tph Oxford – Didcot (2tph now) and he said that western rail access to Heathrow is essential in the CC’s view.

Finally, on Witney – Oxford he said the CC recognise this is an opportunity to use the old corridor.

Lord Tony Berkeley Rail Freight Group “Rail freight, HS2 and the politics of rail”

Talking about growth and the challenges of accommodating it he started with the projection that intermodal traffic is forecast to treble in 40 years. Other markets are stable though biomass will probably grow as it is 4 times lighter than coal and therefore needs more trains. As in recent years a lot of growth can be by carrying more freight per train. The northern end of the WCML could have 250 freight trains per day in 20 years time. The growth customers, ports, supermarkets, logistics companies all judge rail’s performance against road.

Turning briefly to passengers he said UK growth is more than in France and Germany with satisfaction higher too. Then referring to the Channel Tunnel said freight charges are about 10 times higher than on normal lines which is too large a differential. In the UK freight companies, seven of them, compete openly unlike on the continent. He talked about the difficulties with France “The UK has in common with Spain and Portugal being cut off from the rest of the continent by France.”

What freight needs is more terminals, loops and chords, longer trains, 24/7 operations, electrification and reasonable, simple charges. A target is 10 million lorries off the roads by 2034.

In answer to questions he said:

HS2 should be built for high speed freight from outset; HS1 carries a few freights, about 5-6 per night. He hopes the SW/NE routes get upgraded for gauge enhancement and electrification but this is dependent on Port of Bristol’s plans. Only 10% of NR’s revenue is from freight. To raise slow average speeds trains should be kept moving rather than be looped. Asked which port should be electrified next he said Felixstowe to Nuneaton and the new London Gateway port means there is more capacity in the south east than demand.

Chris Aldridge Network Rail “Looking forward 20 years on the Western Region”

He gave an overview of NR’s plans for the Oxford area which consist of resignalling the corridor, more capacity and full bi-directional working. Headways would be reduced from 4 to 3 minutes between Didcot & Oxford and from 8 to 4 minutes between Wolvercote and Aynho junctions. By December 2017 a new down platform and electrification at Oxford by March 2016. Aim “to provide an exemplary gateway to Oxford” and for growth of 65% in 30 years. The former Oxford North down goods loop will reopen by May 2015 for passenger use.

He briefly talked about the introduction of the new IEP trains. The first four are being built in Japan, the rest in the UK and testing will start on the GWML in the Didcot area from Aug/Sept 2015. First passenger services will be on the Bristol line by May 2017 and on Oxford services from May 2018.

On western access to Heathrow, a route via Langley is preferred with journey times from T5 to Slough of 6 minutes and to Reading of 26 minutes. Due to underground running through Heathrow only electric rather than bi-mode IEPs would be able to operate. A proposed new station at Old Oak Common on the WRML will link to the HS2 station and all GW & Crossrail trains would stop, relieving pressure on Paddington. EWR – Oxford – Heathrow – Old Oak – Paddington potentially a through route. The ex Eurostar depot at North Pole will be an IEP depot.

In response to questions he said that: the Old Oak hub would be more than just a GW/HS2 link and would incorporate local connections too (presumably North London line, Central Line and buses), Reading Council were outstanding

partners for NR with Reading being a good example of working together to improve the railway, if NR have to work on the road bridge at Wantage Road then Oxfordshire CC funded improvements for users can be incorporated in to the works. This latter point was endorsed by Martin Tugwell.

Patrick O’Sullivan East West Rail “Ongoing developments on East West Rail”

He began by saying he is a consultant who was originally seconded to EWR for a few weeks but has been there for 7 years. Earlier he had worked on a new high speed line in Taiwan which was completed from a standing start in 10 years.

The Oxford – Bletchley line was closed in 1967 despite the emergence of the new town of Milton Keynes at that time. The MK Partnership have been influential in promoting EWR and it was included in the 2012 HLOS with NR to build it.

The line was built by Robert Stephenson (1851) and the trackbed is owned by NR so were hoping to do all the work within permitted rights but on examining the original act (shown on a slide) they found that in two places near Claydon the line deviates slightly from the authorised route so they have got to apply for a TWA Order to retrospectively legalise Stephenson’s diversion!

Lots of work was done to get through GRIP 1 -6 and to prove business case. Cost about £500 million including £50 million from the EWR Consortium of local authorities along the route. Chiltern’s Evergreen 3 helped the business case. Suggested initial service: Reading – MK, Oxford – Bedford, MK – Marylebone via Aylesbury & High Wycombe, all one tph.

NR are already looking at increasing line speeds from 100 to 125 mph. Main benefits are: reduced journey times along corridor, better connectivity avoiding London, economic growth, job creation. Value for money is exceptionally high with a ratio of 11:1 which compares with Crossrail at 2.5:1, Borders Railway at 0.8:1 and Airdrie/Bathgate at 1.75:1. Independent firm, Oxford Economics calculate it will bring a boost to GDP of £38 million, extra tax revenues of £17 million and thus pay for itself in 5 years.

Finally, he said this would form part of the “electric spine” and they will commission an analysis of East Anglian economic activity and growth to help decide the best route east of Bedford.

Christian Wolmar’s closing remarks.

He felt the speakers had been excellent and each Railfuture conference he has chaired has been better than the previous one. In thanking the speakers he had presented each with a copy of his new book *To the Edge of the World*.

Railfuture Chairman David Berman closed the conference by saying it was one of the best he has attended and announcing the dates of the next two: AGM Sheffield 10th May and summer conference Cambridge 25th July 2014.

Photos

all by Andrew McCallum unless indicated



Two views of the new junction at the north end of the new Oxford north down loop near Wolvercote which was laid over Christmas, taken from the Godstow Road bridge on 22nd January 2014.



Two views of the work in progress on the new flyover at Reading, at left, showing where the Reading Oxford Road Junction – Reading West Junction line passes under the flyover. Taken on 26th & 19th February respectively.



The new station building at Wokingham on 26th February, a huge improvement on the old one.

Work in progress on the new chord at Gavray, Bicester, from a Banbury – Marylebone train on 23rd Feb.



David King

John Elvin

The scene at Bicester Town – 21st February.

Network Rail vegetation clearance work between Steeple Claydon and Bletchley prior to survey work.

Edited by Andrew McCallum with contributions from Richard Stow, John Elvin & Nigel Rose.