



Autumn 2013 Conference in Oxford

Saturday 2nd November 2013

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Oxford 2013 Conference – The Day's Proceedings

Introduction

The 2013 Autumn Conference, organised by the *Railfuture* Thames Valley Branch, was held on 2nd November in the magnificent surroundings of The Assembly Room of the historic Oxford Town Hall.

A record number of one hundred and forty delegates attended the conference making it the most successful, in terms of numbers, so far. Delegates met from 10.00 onwards for refreshments and as well as a chance to look at various sales and information stands, to "network" with other delegates and speakers and partake of coffee and biscuits.

The conference also provided various authors with the chance to market their books, to the extent that one of the speakers felt the need to apologise at the start of his presentation for not having a book to plug!

One ongoing theme throughout the conference was the appreciation of the various organisations for the work done by *Railfuture*, both now and in its previous incarnations, in helping them with their aspirations.

Welcome to Oxford

Councillor Delia Sinclair was the first speaker and welcomed everybody to the City of Oxford. She said that Oxford is an important rail hub as it is a challenge to keep road traffic at bay in Oxford. She was full of praise for the efforts of *Railfuture* for campaigning for significant improvements in public transport to improve the quality of life in Oxford.

Councillor Sinclair concluded with her memories of rail travel in the past when she had many rail based holidays including one on the Severn Valley Railway. She had particularly fond memories of a special train hauled by a Class 50 called Conqueror to Wembley to watch Oxford play in a Cup Final, which they won.

Welcome to the Autumn Conference

A very sad looking **Christian Wolmar** then took to the podium and recalled that he was at the same Cup Final as Councillor Sinclair and as an avid Queens Park Rangers supporter he did not share her pleasure as Oxford United had won 3 – 0.

He recovered very quickly however as after welcoming everyone to the conference, he was still able to point delegates in the direction of a stand at the back of the room, where delegates could relieve themselves of the money weighing down their pockets by buying books written by both himself and Lord Faulkner.

While being pleased to see so many delegates he did urge *Railfuture* members to try and recruit younger new members as most of those facing him were not in the first flush of youth. He concluded by reminding us of the renaissance of rail in London, such as London Overground and Gospel Oak to Barking electrification and the part that *Railfuture* had played in this.

Saving Britain's Railways

Lord Faulkner thanked the Lord Mayor for her warm welcome and then informed the delegates that by some strange coincidence the title of his presentation was also the title of his latest book!

The presentation was essentially a summary of the decline and rebirth of the railways in the second half of the 20th Century. Inevitably the "B" word was mentioned but although Dr. Beeching was cast as the villain all he was doing was to carry out the task set by the government of the day and in particular the Minister of Transport Ernest Marples who, purely coincidentally, just happened to own the largest motorway construction firm in the United Kingdom.

Some of the closures proposed to achieve the task of making the railways profitable were not always logical but a lot would have closed anyway and in fact some closed that he did not propose such as Oxford to Bletchley. The party in opposition at the time of Beeching was elected in the next election on a promise to reverse the closure programme but in fact the new Minister Barbara Castle closed more railways than her predecessor.

One suggestion for which routes should close was that all routes without continuous welded rail should be closed which perhaps sums up some of the thinking at the time.

Lord Faulkner then quoted two statements from the economist J K Galbraith.

1. Economic forecasting makes astrology respectable.
2. Economics is useful as a form of employment for economists.

No one had anticipated the future growth in demand for rail travel.

Public opinion began to change in the 1970's but was still hampered by both governmental civil servant antagonism towards the railways. Richard Marsh, B.R. Chairman, wondered if something unpleasant must have happened to many civil servants mothers on steam trains to have made them so anti rail. At the time The Department for Transport had 1700 staff looking after roads and 70 looking after railways and public transport. The unions did not help and the Transport and General Workers Union was responsible for closing Didcot freight depot.

A proposal to close the route into London Marylebone and convert it into what would now be called a Bus-way was taken seriously. The Institute of Economic Affairs was and still is funded by the road industry and is even now opposing rail projects.

Fortunately when the Thatcher government came to power there were in 1979 two pro-rail ministers Lord Fowler and William Whitelaw who uncovered plots to close the majority of the rail system. This somehow found its way into the press and caused such an uproar that the Government promised to keep the Network at its 1979 size.

In the 1980's the infamous Serpell report was published which came up with proposals to reduce the rail deficit by 100% fare rises, slashing the Network and reducing safety. This was fortunately fairly rapidly "kicked into touch"

By now over half of the population travel by rail at some time and the rest benefit from freight carried by rail. Since 2001 rail has been a growth industry and all past attempts to drive passengers away from rail have failed. The use of company cars is reducing and growth should continue but that old track beds that have not yet been sold off should be safe in the future.

With regard to re-opening the line from Honeywell to Stratford upon Avon Lord Faulkner stated that it was possible but that the last stretch into Stratford would be a challenge so

campaigners should put pressure on local politicians. He also said that in the context of opening new lines there was no clear process to follow and that perhaps he should write a book about it!

He concluded with a quote from the Reverend William Audrey about the similarities between the Church of England and the railways. "Both had their heyday in the 19th Century, both possess lots of Gothic architecture and both believe they offer the best way of getting you to your destination!"

The New Rail Route from London to Oxford

Stephen Barker from Chiltern Railways opened his presentation with the inevitable commercial for them, pointing out that their success had been built on the back of the "Total Route Modernisation" in the 1990's and that the extension of their London services to Oxford via Bicester was possible because of the long franchise held by Chiltern.

The new route to London will relieve overcrowding on the Great Western route as well as opening up new journey opportunities from intermediate stations to both Oxford and London. The line is currently a 40mph single track line but will be transformed into a 100mph double track line built to W12 loading gauge with level crossings replaced by bridges or diverted roads, Wolvercote Tunnel given more clearance and a new connection at Bicester for direct running to London Marylebone.

An ecological assessment has resulted in 3000 Great Crested Newts, 25 miles of newt fencing and innovative bat protection measures in Wolvercote Tunnel where lights installed in the tunnel will come on prior to a train entering the tunnel and go off again when it leaves. This means that before a train enters the tunnel the bats will return to their roosts until the train has passed.

Work had already started on vegetation clearance and the new chord at Bicester was already under construction. Bicester Town and Islip Stations will be rebuilt and a new Oxford Parkway station built at the Water Eaton Park and Ride site with 100 cycle spaces and as many bus services call in there it will become a true intermodal interchange. Initially the route from there to Oxford is planned to be single track but that may yet change and in answer to a question he said that Chiltern would be paying for road junction improvements in the Water Eaton area to improve access to the Park and Ride site.

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

For rolling stock he thought that with more efficient use of the stock that Chiltern Railways already leases they could provide the service using Class 168 units but did not rule out the possibility of acquiring extra stock for the Marylebone to Birmingham services to release units to Oxford to London.

Any further expansion would be a matter for the next franchise holder as Chiltern's franchise will be ending when the current expansion is finished.

The Rail Revival in Oxfordshire and Local Best Practice

Martin Tugwell of Oxfordshire County Council said that the Council recognised its duty to provide improved infrastructure to support the development of the County. Some of this was in the form of direct financial contributions but also money from developers to improve transport improvements. As examples, in Bicester where the population will double with future house building, including land next to the new chord being put in by Chiltern railways

the developers were having to fund improvements whereas at Didcot, where work is ongoing to improve the public transport interchange, the work is being funded directly by Oxfordshire County Council.

Mr. Tugwell stated that Oxford is a "Global Brand" and that the County Council is trying hard to attract top global hi tech companies, with a great deal of success so far in the pharmaceutical industry, into the County. The county spine is from Bicester via Oxford to Didcot and Oxfordshire hope that investment in rail for both freight and passenger services will ease congestion on the A34. The chairman of the Local Enterprise Partnership is Adrian Shooter so the LEP has plenty of rail experience to call on.

Bicester Village, which has large numbers of Chinese visitors, is an example of inward investment that has resulted from Chiltern Railways investment in Evergreen 3. Oxfordshire supports the East – West Rail Corridor Project and only last month voted £11 million pounds to support the project as improved connections to Milton Keynes, which is planned to become the eighth largest conurbation in the UK, will become increasingly important. In addition Oxford Airport is developing into an important business airport and the new Oxford Parkway station on the rebuilt line to London Marylebone will put it within an hour of the centre of London.

For the City of Oxford itself the County Council aspires to make it into a world class transport hub and stated that "investment in public transport supports jobs and the economy. Oxfordshire is also investigating the possible use of the Cowley branch for passengers; growth at Culham Science Centre; the concept of Didcot Gateway with integrated links to the science parks such as Harwell and Milton; Oxford Science Transit – single transaction bus/rail integrated transport; four trains per hour from Didcot to Oxford and a western rail connection to Heathrow Airport.

He concluded by saying that Oxfordshire C.C. recognised that there were opportunities in the future to use the old rail corridor from Witney to Oxford.

Rail Freight, HS2 and the Politics of Rail

Lord Berkeley stated that the main theme of his presentation was that intermodal traffic was expected to grow by 300% over the next forty years and the possible ways that the rail industry could cope with this growth.

One estimate is that the Northern part of the West Coast Main Line could have to accommodate 250 freight trains a day in twenty years' time. The rest of the freight traffic on rail would remain fairly stable but that there would be some redistribution of the commodities carried.

The salient parts of the ways in which the industry is coping with this growth and is planning to cope with this growth in the future are detailed below.

One simple method of carrying more freight is to simply increase the length of trains as many are not running to the capacity of the locomotives hauling them. This may require longer loops, upgrades to lines such as the work going on at present to upgrade to Joint Line from Peterborough to Doncaster via Spalding and Lincoln to a 75mph freight spine which because of the low number of passenger trains on it should provide a faster end to end journey than using the east Coast Main Line.

HS2 could take 500,000 lorries a day of the roads even if built only as a passenger route but if long term thinking were to be employed it should be constructed to be able to accommodate fast freight trains overnight. He said in this respect that HS1 was used by fast freight services overnight but not as much as it could be due in no small part to the

ridiculously high charges levied by Eurotunnel for through freight trains from the rest of Europe.

The new chord at Ipswich to take freight direct from Felixstowe to Ely and Peterborough without the need for reversal should be followed as soon as possible by doubling and electrifying the Felixstowe branch and the rest of the route through to Peterborough then onward to Nuneaton and to Doncaster via Lincoln.

The more electrified freight lines terminals that there were then the better it would be for rail born freight as modern electric locomotives could haul bigger loads than diesels as shown by the Stobart Rail container train on the West Coast route where one class 92 electric locomotive had replaced two class 66 diesels hauling the longest freight train on the network. A short term solution to this problem, which could also open up new traffic flow possibilities in the future is the new generation of electric locomotives equipped for "last mile operation" with a diesel powered alternator for access to non electrified terminals.

Going slightly off subject he did also point out that the latest figures from the EU show that UK passenger growth is by far the highest in Europe and that we also top the rail safety league and have higher passenger satisfaction levels than France and Germany and that the best way to keep us at the top is to increase capacity on the UK rail network.

Looking Forward Twenty Years on the Western Region

Chris Aldridge from Network Rail began by saying that the activities of rail user groups and *Railfuture* are very helpful to Network Rail.

He outlined Network Rail's plans for the next five years for the Oxford area which would consist of re-signalling the area to create more capacity and full bi-directional working. Headways would be reduced from four to three minutes between Didcot and Oxford and from eight to four minutes between Wolvercote and Aynho junctions. These actions together with the new down platform at Oxford, the electrification from Paddington to Oxford by March 2016 and the availability of the former down goods loop at Oxford for passenger train use will provide an exemplary "Gateway to Oxford" and will allow for a 65% growth in traffic in the future.

Chris then turned his attention to the new IEP trains on order for the Western Region. The first four were being built in Japan and the rest would be built in the UK and testing will start on the GWML in August or September 2015 in the Didcot area with services to Bristol starting in May 2017 and to Oxford by May 2018. The trains will be a mixture of electric and bi-mode trains although even the electric trains will have "get you home diesel engines" under two of the coaches. A new IEP depot will be built on the site of the old Eurostar depot at North Pole. A direct line from the West to Heathrow Airport was under serious consideration with the preferred route being one via Langley giving times from Terminal five to Slough of six minutes and twenty six minutes to Reading. As the only place for stations at Heathrow will be underground this would preclude the use of IEP trains, even when running in electric mode, because of the fuel tanks on the "Get you home" diesel cars so as things stand Heathrow could not be served by Inter City trains.

In the longer term the proposed new station at Old Oak Common would provide a major West London interchange with the HS2 station and all GWML and Crossrail trains would stop there and in conjunction with the East-West rail proposals (see next speaker) there is the potential for a through Milton Keynes, Bicester, Oxford, Reading, Heathrow, Old Oak Common to Paddington service. In addition Old Oak Common would also provide local transport connections using the London Overground, Central Line Tube and local buses.

Chris also stated that Network Rail works closely with Local Government and cited Reading as a good example of working together with the rebuild of the station.

If bridges had to be rebuilt for electrification where for example major work was needed on the Wantage Road over-bridge then they would work with the authorities to improve the safety of the road as well, a point endorsed by Martin Tugwell from Oxfordshire County Council.

In closing Chris Aldridge said that CP6 planning is already underway with a series of market and route studies.

Ongoing Developments on East-West Rail

Patrick O'Sullivan began by saying that he is a consultant who was originally seconded to EWR for a few weeks but has now been working on the project for seven years. Earlier he had worked on a new high speed rail route in Taiwan which was completed from start to finish in ten years!

The Oxford to Bletchley route was closed in 1967, despite not being recommended for closure by the "Good Doctor", and the growth of Milton Keynes as a "New Town". The Milton Keynes Partnership had been influential in promoting EWR to the extent that it was included in the 2012 High Level Output Specification with Network rail to build it.

The original line was built by Robert Stephenson in 1851 and the track bed is owned by Network Rail so EWR was expecting a trouble free build within "permitted rights". When they examined the original act however they found that in two places near Claydon Stephenson had deviated from the authorised route so to reopen the line which has been in existence for one hundred and sixty two years, EWR has to apply for a Transport and Works Order just as if it was a new line to make Stephenson's diversions legal.

Patrick said that a lot of work had been done through GRIP 1-6 and to prove the business case for the project. He did at this stage advise the conference that to provide new services and route re-openings a good business case was essential rather than nostalgia for the past. The total cost of the project was likely to be £500,000,000 which includes a £50,000,000 from the EWR Consortium of Local Authorities along the route. Chiltern's Evergreen 3 project had been a massive help to the business case for EWR.

The proposed initial service would be one train per hour from Reading to Milton Keynes; Oxford to Bedford and Milton Keynes to Marylebone via Aylesbury and High Wycombe. EWR would bring better connectivity and shorter journey times, job creation and economic growth.

The route has a benefit-to-cost ratio of 11:1 which is exceptionally high and independent firm Oxford Economics calculate that it will bring a boost to GDP of £38,000,000, generate extra tax revenues of £17,000,000 and pay for itself in five years.

The final part of the route from Bedford to Cambridge was far more problematical as much of the original route has been lost forever and when the "Electric Spine" is completed to Bedford an analysis of East Anglian economic activity and growth would be commissioned to see what the best route would be.

Closing Remarks

Christian Wolmar said that he felt that the speakers today had been excellent and that each *Railfuture* conference that he has chaired has been better than previous one. In thanking the speakers he presented each one of them with a copy of his new book, *To the Edge of the World*, on behalf of *Railfuture*.

Closure of Conference

Railfuture Chairman David Berman closed the conference by saying that it was one of the best he had attended which produced support from the delegates. He then reminded everyone that the *Railfuture* AGM would be in Sheffield on Saturday 19th May 2014 and gave the dates and venues for the Summer Conference (Cambridge on Saturday 25th July 2014) and Autumn Conference (London on Saturday 1st November 2014) before wishing everyone a safe journey home.

RAILWATCH ARTICLE ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

The following appeared in the December 2013 edition of Railwatch magazine.

The railway must help Oxford retain its position as a global gateway, *Railfuture's* November conference in the city was told.

Welcoming *Railfuture*, **Lord Mayor Delia Sinclair** said it was vital trains work well, because roads are so heavily congested. Other world destinations in the area include Harwell, which the European Space Agency moved to in January, Bicester Village, the second most popular visitor attraction in England, and Culham Science Centre, which is involved in researching future methods of nuclear power generation.

One of the key aims for the railway must be to develop a direct service to Heathrow Airport, via a western access route, so international travellers can get to Oxford more easily. A whole raft of rail improvements is being planned for the Oxford area, but the link into Heathrow airport is still to be decided, said Network Rail strategic planner **Chris Aldridge**.

The enhancements would have been unthinkable five or ten years ago and he said *Railfuture's* campaigning support was very important. He said: "Keep up the good work."

Already approved is the new Evergreen 3 link from Bicester so trains can operate from London Marylebone to Oxford, which was described by **Stephen Barker** of Chiltern Railways.

After five years of planning how to deal with newts, bats, badgers, and the remains of a Roman town, work is under way but only after a long process of coping with objectors to the scheme.

After Evergreen 3, the East West Rail link will provide services from Oxford to Milton Keynes and Bedford, and eventually to East Anglia, said project director **Patrick O'Sullivan**. EWR has succeeded in winning approval against all the odds, even though nearly everyone agreed years ago it was a good idea which "would probably never happen".

The key to convincing the Government was to show that EWR joined up six of the fastest growing population centres in Britain, and it is now recognised as having an exceptional benefit-cost ratio. Other projects planned for the area include electrification, re-signalling and line capacity enhancements which would allow longer freight trains to pass through from Southampton to the Midlands. Possibilities for the future include using the freight-only Cowley branch for passengers and creating a light rail route to Witney.

About 140 people attended the conference, which was judged one of the most successful ever run by *Railfuture*.

Railfuture president **Christian Wolmar** said the conference hall was full, just like the railways, which were undergoing a fantastic renaissance which could be seen in both London and Oxford. He told the largely mature audience that *Railfuture* needed more young people, women and ethnic minorities to get involved.

He said: "You need to recruit your sons and daughters to *Railfuture*. Perhaps give them one of my books for Christmas!"

The first speaker was **Lord Richard Faulkner** of Worcester who co-authored with Chris Austin Holding the Line - How Britain's Railways were Saved. He said he had "unbounded admiration" for *Railfuture* and its predecessors who kept the flame alive when the lights were going out for railways elsewhere.

He then told the sorry tale of how politicians, civil servants and trade unionists connived in repeated attempts to destroy the railways by starving them of finance and with a large programme of line closures.

He traced the war on the railways back to a secret 1960 government committee whose aim was to close as many railways as possible, aided by politicians such as Ernest Marples.

He paid tribute to a series of rail campaigners and whistle-blowers who exposed some of the plots against the railways. Tory politician Norman Fowler became an unlikely hero for the railways. Soon after he became transport minister in 1979, he ignored the brief from civil servants and said he would not sanction further rail closures.

Lord Berkeley of the Rail Freight Group said he was pleased that many new intermodal freight terminals are rail linked but said new ways of delivering freight into city centres were being tried out, with freight being delivered into Euston overnight and a new rail-based parcels service on the Midland main line. But he said the Channel Tunnel was a dismal failure and a wasted asset for rail freight, handling only five to six trains a day

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