

Railfuture makes the case for the East-West Rail Link between Oxford, Bedford and Cambridge

Oxford and Cambridge are world famous for their universities and high-tech industries.

In the 70 miles between them there are fast growing towns and cities, such as Milton Keynes, and growing industries such as the motor sport companies based around Oxford and Bicester. In fact, the phrase 'Oxford to Cambridge arc' is commonly used to refer to the new business and education initiatives across the area. Demand for travel along the arc has increased enormously in recent times, but public transport is very poor, the railway linking Oxford to Cambridge having closed 42 years ago. There is a bus service, but it is very slow. Because of this most journeys through the arc are made by road, several hundred million pounds having been invested in the roads since the railway closed, yet congestion remains a major issue.

Quite a lot of the old Oxford to Cambridge railway still exists, with track in place from Oxford through Bicester to Bletchley and onto Bedford. However, passenger services run only between Oxford and Bicester, and between Bletchley and Bedford, and these are slow, all-stations services. Freight destinations include the extensive military depot near Bicester, London's waste disposal site near Calvert, and Network Rail's depot near Bletchley for West Coast work. East of Bedford, the track has been taken up and key stretches of the original route have been built over, including a guided bus track near Trumpington. Fortunately, alternative routes exist.

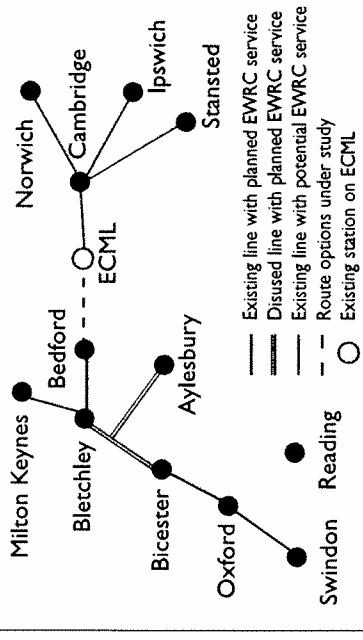
One can see that there is huge potential for re-linking these sections, and indeed Oxford to Bedford is under design, and Milton Keynes station has recently been rebuilt

to support a modest level of service. The aspiration remains to develop the railway so that the towns and cities along the whole arc can be linked by trains - a fast and environmentally friendly solution. A renewed Oxford to Cambridge railway levers an even greater benefit, as by using the existing tracks to the east of Cambridge and to the west of Oxford, an inter-regional East-West Railway Link (EWRL) can be created. This project links East Anglia to the Chilterns and the Thames Valley using the reopened Oxford to Cambridge section as its centrepiece. But the EWRL would do far more because it is a radial route around London, and it would have interchanges with 10 radial routes from London, creating many other journey opportunities. The project is the equivalent to the M25 - but safer and with far less environmental impact.

There are many players involved in rebuilding the Oxford to Cambridge line. A consortium of local authorities, the East West Rail Consortium, promotes the overall EWRL project. Railfuture set this up in 1995 as a result of a campaign. It has 34 members, which gives it a strong democratic mandate, as they represent the population of seven counties and about half the members form a Steering Group - altogether quite an unusual set-up for this country. An officer of Buckinghamshire County Council chairs the Steering Group.

In 2009, plans for the Oxford to Bedford section completed the GRIP 3 stage in the Network Rail planning process, and GRIP 4 is currently in progress. There was also a big step forward when Chiltern Railways became involved, and proposed an 'Evergreen 3' project to link London Marylebone with Oxford, via High Wycombe and Bicester. Under 'Evergreen 3', the Oxford - Bicester route will be

Oxford to Cambridge showing possible services



rebuilt, providing both a new route to London and a key part of the Oxford-Cambridge project. 'Evergreen 3' is due to open in 2013, after which the remainder of the western section in between Oxford and Cambridge, that is Bicester-Milton Keynes-Bedford, should open during 2014 - 2019.

Meanwhile, the routing of the central section of the project, between Bedford and Cambridge will need to be resolved. A link across the gap between Bedford and the East Coast Main Line will need to be built, and from there Cambridge can be reached on existing tracks. The gap is only eight-miles wide at its narrowest, but finding a way through is not easy. The EWRC has studied several route options, and short-listed two: one via Luton and Stevenage, the other via Hitchin and Royston. Bedford Renaissance and others are also interested in a route adjacent to the trunk roads between Bedford and Cambridge in the same way that the Channel Tunnel line runs next to the M20. All these options require significant funding for stretches of new track, but are far cheaper per mile than the equivalent road.

2010 will be a crunch year for Oxford-Cambridge link. Local authorities will be finalising their Local Transport Plans for 2011-2026, which may or may not protect the route from development. The Regional Assemblies will be producing plans for housing and transport for the next 20 years, and Chiltern will be seeking parliamentary approval for 'Evergreen 3' and Network Rail will be planning for 2014-2019.

On top of that, there is a new Infrastructure Planning Commission with powers over major road and rail projects, and of course, a new parliament if not government as well. It promises to be a lively year between the light and dark blues.

◀ Swanbourne, the first station heading west from Bletchley, is pictured in 2005 on the 'mothballed' section from Claydon Junction. Although the station building is boarded up, the old Station Masters house is now a private residence. The occupiers keep the redundant trackbed clear of all weeds. Ken Brunt

