



THAMES VALLEY

campaigning by
The Railway Development Society Limited

THAMES VALLEY BRANCH Newsletter 89 February 2016

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Annual General Meeting at Oxford on Saturday 16th April 2016

The Branch AGM will be held at the West Oxford Community Centre, Botley Road, Oxford, OX2 0BT at 10.30am on Saturday 16th April 2016.

Our guest speaker will be Chris Austin, OBE, FCILT, Head of Railfuture's Infrastructure & Networks Group, co-author of *Holding the line, how Britain's railways were saved*. His talk will be titled: "*Disconnected! Broken Links in Britain's Rail Policy*" This will look at the social and political history of lines that closed and reopened, together with some ideas on lines needing reopening for the future.

Details of the venue and how to get there can be found here:- <http://www.woca.org.uk/>

The Centre is just a few minutes walk from the station on the north side of the Botley Road opposite St Frideswide Church.

We look forward to seeing many of you there.

Summary of Branch Meeting in Reading on 22nd November

The guest speaker at our members' meeting on 18th November 2015 in Reading was Tom Pierpoint, Regional Development Manager, Great Western Railway. Here is a summary of his presentation on the new GWR franchise.

It should be noted that this talk took place before the results of the Hendy Review of Network Rail were announced; also that all the dates Tom quoted are those as agreed with the DfT in GWR's franchise agreement.

The Western region is the largest non-electrified network serving London but the capacity is not fully utilised due to short trains. GWR were awarded a 3½ year franchise until 1st April 2019 at least.

Three service level commitments Tom quoted are: electric trains to Hayes from Spring 2016; two trains per hour between Reading & Gatwick (20 more trains per day in total); from December 2018, new additional off peak services to Bristol via Bristol Parkway and time savings of 15 minutes to Bristol, Cardiff & Cheltenham. They have also ordered a fleet of AT300 trains (similar to the IEPs) for the West of England routes.

From May 2018 the Heathrow Connect services and the Hayes shuttles (see above) become part of the Crossrail service, initially using Paddington mainline platforms but from December 2019 using the new low level platforms as the full Crossrail route is open.

GWR will still run local Paddington services calling at Ealing, Slough, Maidenhead, Twyford and Reading. The Class 165/166 units will be replaced by Class 387s with 110mph capability and Class 365s. The Henley branch will be electrified (Dec 2017) but with no through services to/from London, Marlow will not be electrified and also have no through London trains. Reading – Basingstoke electrification will be transferred from being part of the "electric spine" to the Western scheme (due Dec 2018) with a new station at Reading Green Park and possibly another at Chineham.

Reading – Newbury electrification (Dec 2018) will see an increase in trains on this route from 40 to 52 per day. GWR are keen to promote electrification from Newbury to Bedwyn and on to Westbury but possibly use the battery powered electric units meanwhile.

At Paddington GWR are currently building the new ticket office with “no glass screens”. Station car park improvements will be delivered at Slough and Goring while Didcot station car park will be multi-storied. Stations that transfer to Crossrail will do so in December 2017.

Tom stressed the challenges of maintaining services during the electrification works.

During the questions and discussion afterwards the following matters arose:

Marlow branch – costs of Bourne End changes would include resignalling and migration to TVSC Didcot. They are looking at plot of non NR owned land by Marlow station for a car park.

Wantage/Grove station - is not a priority for GWR though Oxfordshire County Council are keen.

North Downs line – the idea of running some trains to west of Reading was raised but the dive under being single and the question of western access to Heathrow are constraints.

Cycle spaces – members present considered that space is likely to be insufficient on IEPs and potentially on 387/365s. Kingham station new car park was 70% full after 6 weeks. For Hanborough coping with growth will require more car park space, the question being how to provide more services by extending Oxford trains.

Honeybourne – Stratford reopening was raised but Tom said getting a better service on the Cotswold main line comes first for GWR.

GWR are unable to subsidise bus services, not even the X8 if OCC subsidy cuts result in its ending. The Witney-Woodstock via Hanborough bus has scope to grow with new timetable/hourly trains.

Re-doubling from Wolvercote to Hanborough and Wyre Piddle to just west of Pershore would allow 2tph Worcester – Paddington.

Appleford – Tom has met the local parish council who raised recent deterioration in their service; likewise the issue of improvements for Culham & Radley was raised.

Through ticketing (eg bus Wantage to anywhere via Didcot) – there is scope for more initiatives such as this.

Twyford car parking – GWR are looking at increasing capacity which is much needed here.

Banbury - Oxford local service – two units will be dedicated to this with a 90 min standard frequency and some working through to/from Didcot; this would be a welcome improvement.

Appleford Rail Group

The Appleford Rail Group (appleford.rail.group@gmail.com) held a public meeting on 16th October, attended by local councillors, Ed Vaizey MP, and Robert Smith and Tom Pierpoint from Great Western Railway. The Group was formed in response to cuts in the number of trains calling at Appleford since 17 May 2015 which have resulted in an unbalanced service. In the up direction there are gaps of three and a half and four hours off-peak. In the down direction there are two gaps of four hours, followed by two trains 30 minutes apart, then a gap of two hours and 40 minutes in the evening peak. The 17.24 from Paddington, 18.26 from Reading, no longer stops at Appleford. Robert Smith, General Manager East GWR, argued that it was necessary to save two minutes to avoid delaying other trains on a congested stretch of line. He said that GWR's service commitment is for five trains a day in each direction Mondays-Fridays, but ten up trains and nine down trains call at Appleford. According to official counts Appleford has an average of 35 passengers a day, but unofficial counts by local people have recorded at least 80 passengers a day.

The Group's first aim is the restoration of the Appleford stop on the 17.24 from Paddington, but they also want a two-hourly off-peak service Mondays-Fridays, the same as on Saturdays, and the restoration of a Sunday service. The Group wants to establish regular consultations with GWR to obtain improved facilities such as bicycle racks and a carpark. GWR has a Customer and Communities Fund of £750,000 annually for small improvements, but will expect matching funding. There are concerns about safety on the bridge, as passengers coming up the steps from the platforms step straight into the roadway. The County Council should be pressed to install a pavement and traffic lights for one-way working over the bridge.

Martin Smith

GWR/West Oxfordshire District Council event

Railfuture were invited to be represented at a conference on 12th February for businesses, organised by GWR and hosted by West Oxfordshire, to present the vision for the future of the North Cotswolds Line.

The conference chairman was Lord Richard Faulkner, who opened by referencing suppressed demand, access to Heathrow, the need for easier access to employment and the importance of business support. Presentations were given by Mark Hopwood, MD of GWR and leading councillors from Oxfordshire and Worcestershire. The importance of rail developments was stressed if we are to achieve economic growth but avoid our beautiful countryside being covered in tarmac. Comment was made that it was not only access to London which was important but also to Oxford and Worcester, which have two of the most rapidly growing economies outside London. A winding up address was given by David Cameron, expressing his full support for the vision and urging all parties to work together to develop the financial case.

Figures were presented showing the growth in passenger numbers all along the route and reference was again made to suppressed demand, demonstrated by the way car parks filled as soon as they were opened or extended.

With the help of the Local Enterprise Partnerships, pragmatic proposals have been put together as to the methods of achieving the overall aims of reduced journey times and increased frequencies. It has been concluded that re-doubling the full remainder of the route would not be value for money in view of the technical issues involved and the objectives can be achieved by re-doubling at the western end between Evesham and Pershore and at the eastern end between Wolvercote Junction and Hanborough. The latter station would be used as a “turn-back” for fast London-Oxford trains, enabling 3 trains per hour into Oxford. Reference was also made to the re-opening of the Cowley branch (and a cross-city link) and Stratford-Honeybourne.

The timing for delivery of these infrastructure improvements would be in Control Period 6 (2019-2024) at a cost of £275M.

Other developments already under way along the line include Worcester Parkway station and car park extensions.

Businesses were asked for their help and support in delivering the vision and judging by the round-table discussions this seemed to be unanimous. However, during the Q/A sessions, concern was expressed about the lack of joined up thinking when Oxfordshire was cutting bus links to stations. As part of the general discussion, Mark Hopwood again stressed the importance of car parks but said that they were expensive and in certain locations it might be better to invest in connecting buses.

Overall this was positive news although of course it would be better if delivery could be quicker. We have to remember that East-West Rail took 20 years of work, so we should not be surprised. If there is success, most of the current Oxfordshire objectives for the Branch would be underway – increased frequencies, Hanborough turn-back, Cowley branch, Stratford-Honeybourne. (Wantage/Grove Parkway and Culham are also on the LEP’s list). However, we will need to keep an eye out for any negative impacts on the small stations and halts.

Witney-Oxford (WOT)

The conclusions from the OCC consultation about long-term solutions for the A40 are still awaited. The short term scheme for a bus lane along the A40 coupled with a P&R at Eynsham has been “future-proofed” against the various long term options and work is now progressing. However, a final choice has to be made for the location of the P&R car park, depending somewhat on other developments in the local area.

WODC councillors have stressed a preference for linking with the Cotswold Line rather than a new direct fixed connection. In the short term, an improvement to the road between the A40 and Hanborough station, capable of taking express buses from Witney, would be appropriate. However, with the experience of Borders Railway releasing suppressed demand (and increasing house prices!), the case needs to continue to be made for reusing the old railway. The GWR vision for re-doubling between Wolvercote Junction and Hanborough could actually make it easier and cheaper to make a connection at Yarnton, perhaps with a new station on the branch. WOT will continue to argue strongly for this approach, citing Borders Railway and comparing its actual costs against the seemingly inflated ones presented by OCC for the line to Witney.

Nigel Rose

Chiltern News

Oxford Parkway

Opened on 26th October, the new Oxford Parkway station is outperforming its initial commercial targets with a well used car park in addition to large numbers of passengers arriving by bike and bus. Construction work continues to the west of Oxford Parkway where the line is being rebuilt into Oxford with much engineering work being undertaken

in Wolvercote tunnel where the track bed has been lowered to accommodate two running lines and to future-proof the route for eventual electrification.

Opening through to Oxford

The first official passenger train is expected to depart from Oxford station on Monday 12th December 2016 although trains will be running on Sunday 11th as part of a test running day primarily for staff familiarisation purposes. It had initially been planned to open the new line earlier, however the extended timescale required for the discharge of planning consents, construction, testing of the infrastructure and training of drivers has led to a December launch. Oxford City Council finally approved certain noise and vibration planning issues in December but reports now suggest the City Council has revised their original consent and have now imposed a maximum limit on the number of trains allowed to use the line of eight trains each hour and night time restrictions on freight of 2 tph.

Banbury Upgrade and Route Closure

There will be a nine day closure on all lines through Banbury from Saturday 30th July until Sunday 7th August inclusive. During this period, bus replacement services will operate between Leamington Spa, Bicester, Banbury and Oxford. As part of its railway upgrade plan, Network Rail is investing £76 million on the rail infrastructure in and around Banbury. Both Banbury north and south signal boxes date back to the early 1900s and the mixture of semaphore and colour light signals will be replaced with modern LED signals controlled from the West Midlands Signalling Centre in Birmingham. In addition, a revised, more reliable track layout will be brought into use through Banbury station together with a connection to the new train maintenance depot currently being constructed south of the station on the site of the former steam depot (closed in 1966). Certain parts of the depot are expected to open later this year and will provide additional stabling sidings to replace those being lost once the new track layout is in use. The depot will cover 2,783 sq metres and be capable of accommodating 58 rail vehicles, plus track maintenance vehicles.

John Elvin

Cotswold Line News (see also the report on the GWR/WODC conference, above)

The new 100 space car park at Kingham is now opened and has boosted traffic immediately. It is now 70% full and it will be interesting to identify where the new passengers come from but initial work suggests to the west of station with many from the Cheltenham area. The footbridge should be finished imminently.

Coombe /Finstock

These 2 halts are handling 30 trips per day based on passenger counts, suggesting suppressed demand; no doubt the Wolvercote roundabout work has boosted use.

Hanborough

The planning application offering land for 400 car park spaces has been deferred. The Branch now sees this private / public sector deal as key to unlocking investment and will certainly attend the appeal if it is rejected by councillors.

There is now a late night service back from Paddington at 23.18 on Fridays along the Cotswold Line for which publicity seems a little lacking.

HS2

The petitioning of the Bill finished on 4th February; Royal Assent is expected later in the year, with a 6 month delay till work starts. The Steeple Claydon station plan is NOT in the Bill. Any further plans will be via Transport & Works Order procedure.

OBAG

At the AGM on 17 January 2016, Ian East stepped down as Chairman and is replaced temporarily by Henrietta Leyser. The Branch expresses its thanks to Ian for his dogged campaigning style.

Wantage /Grove

Wantage/Grove station, despite opposition from some, remains a core priority and was mentioned at the 12th February Conference.

Bucks LTP4

The branch has submitted a response to Buckinghamshire County Council's Local Transport Plan 4 which focused on the importance of reopening the High Wycombe – Bourne End line not only for local connectivity but also as part of a through north-south connection all the way from Milton Keynes to Maidenhead for Heathrow. Branch committee members have a forthcoming meeting planned with Bucks CC councillors & officers as indeed they have with Oxfordshire too.

Chairman's Comment

I am looking forward to Chris Austin's visit in April to our AGM. His new jointly authored book, "Disconnected", following "Holding the Line", gives a good critique of the utter death wish of some senior BR managers who saw closing even viable lines as their role in life. We have two in this Branch; Oxford - Cambridge and the Witney - Oxford section of the Fairford branch, neither of which had issues with lack of traffic.

It's good to see the former being restored after 30 years campaigning and having now read the feedback from the North Cotswold Line Meeting on 12th Feb, it seems our affiliate Witney Oxford Transport is spot on with its demand for a high quality sustainable transport link to West Oxfordshire.

Don't forget the National Railfuture AGM in Milton Keynes on 21st May 2016 which the Branch is hosting, I trust there will be news there of "Next Stop Cambridge". I look forward to seeing you there.

Richard Stow

Oxford station/Hinksey works

Work has now started on the disused bay platforms at Oxford station in readiness for use by Chiltern. Some track has been lifted, including truncating platform 3 to about a three car length and the short stay car park has moved to Becket Street.

Network Rail have announced a fortnight blockade from 30th July between Oxford & Didcot (coinciding with the Banbury blockade mentioned above) for the flood alleviation works at Hinksey which involve raising the track in the vicinity of Redbridge, enlarging the culvert to the south and building a new culvert to the north of the bridge. With no trains between Didcot & Leamington Spa for much of this time no doubt a comprehensive road replacement service will be provided. It will be interesting to see how Oxford Parkway manages as Oxford's only railhead during this time.

PHOTOS:



Both: Andrew McCallum

Our stand at the Oxford Green Fair, Oxford Town Hall, 5th December, 2015.

The new footbridge at Whitehouse Lane, Hinksey, south Oxford, from the old one, 17th February 2016, showing clearly the extra height needed for electrification.



Both: James Hutton

Wolvercote tunnel works looking north from First Turn (left) and the new First Turn bridge (right), 18th February 2016.



Andrew McCallum

John Elvin

Looking north from above the northern portal of Wolvercote tunnel, 17th February 2016.

The dedicated Bicester Village building at Bicester Village station, containing a very smart waiting room, 12th Feb 2016.



Both: John Elvin

Shoppers boarding a London bound train at Bicester Village (left) and alighting from one (right), 12th February 2016.

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