

THAMES VALLEY BRANCH Newsletter 95 February 2019

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Branch Annual General Meeting 2019

We are currently working on our plans for this which we intend to hold in Oxford in the second half of April, probably on a weekday evening (Tuesday 23rd April likely); you will be notified formally in due course.

Visit to Chiltern Railway's Aylesbury Depot on 13th September

A small group of members were treated to a fascinating visit to Chiltern's busy train maintenance depot at Aylesbury on 13th September 2018. We were welcomed by Production Manager Marc Everist who introduced us to the operations of the depot and gave us a full and thorough tour of the site. Marc was clearly passionate about their achievements and his enthusiasm (and sense of humour) shone through and he deftly answered numerous questions. As he said, Aylesbury is not the most convenient location for Chiltern and the site is quite constrained; there is little spare capacity, the fleet is achieving higher than planned mileages and there is very little slack should units fail in service. On limited resources they are managing to keep an ageing fleet operational. As Marc pointed out, it is obvious that a new full maintenance facility, rather than just fuelling, cleaning and stabling, at their Banbury site, where the space for it is ready, would result in improved availability and more efficient engineering operations. An increase in fleet size would also allow for better margins and provide more passenger capacity thus allowing for future growth. It was noted that in coming months several Class 170s, which are compatible with the existing fleet, will be coming off lease from other operators who have large new fleets on order.

Andrew McCallum

Witney Oxford Transport

Witney Oxford Transport Group has launched, with substantial help from Railfuture, a YouTube video: "Dare to Imagine", to great acclaim. It can be seen on YouTube and is recommended; it sets out a compelling case for a rail link to Witney. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rm5fESvsSI8>

New Civil Engineer have also written a rather good piece, on Witney to Cowley, setting out in great detail the aims and objectives of WOT and Railfuture; it is very gratifying to see what is a distant project being taken seriously, at last.

Cotswold Line

The platform extensions are all finished but are not in use as the software on the IETs has not been updated yet. Railfuture notes the platforms were all done in 8 weeks, a bit of a record for the UK, and a credit to those doing the work. When finished 10 car trains will be used at peak times.

At Hanborough the land to the west of the station is being developed and the car parking is to be left, offering parking as the station grows. As some members will be aware the plan was to re-use Abbey Wood Station Buildings but these were damaged due to the need to get them demolished in a possession. As such, there are to be new buildings for the new staffed station.

Oxford Evening Out

Britain's cheapest ticket has been withdrawn from 4th January 2019. It offered a rover after 18:30, Kingham - Didcot - Banbury for £4.00. It is fair to say it was not widely advertised and not heavily used.

Chairman Comment

I am delighted with the WOT video, setting out the case for Transport Investment in West Oxfordshire (see above) and suggest all members have a look at it. It does seem to me that this is the way forward in getting our message across, as it is now apparent that anyone under 40 is far more receptive to a short video than leaflets. I would like to follow this success with one for the Cowley Branch and Bourne End - High Wycombe. Railfuture has good, well thought out plans and this may be a low cost way of getting the news out to far more people.

Richard Stow

WANTED – Media help!

We are campaigning for more and better train services across the Thames Valley area but need to raise our media profile to get our messages across more effectively. Can you help?

We are looking for someone who can assist with any or all of the following, depending on your own wishes, skills and experience:-

- Develop and maintain contacts in key local media across the region
- Write eye catching press releases
- Be our Social Media presence
- Be our first contact point for media enquiries and be willing to give interviews

Knowledge of and interest in transport and related issues in the region would be very helpful but full support can be given.

We are all volunteers; how much time you give is up to you.

This would suit someone who has worked in PR/journalism/marketing etc who is about to or has recently retired.

It could also suit a student or recent graduate in a relevant discipline who is looking to gain experience in a voluntary campaigning group.

For more about Railfuture see: www.railfuture.org.uk

Interested? To find out more contact: Chairman, Richard Stow richard.stow@railfuture.org.uk or Secretary Andrew McCallum andrew.mccallum@railfuture.org.uk

Railfuture Conference - Reading, 10th November 2018 Summaries of talks.

The conference was opened by the Mayor of Reading, Cllr Debs Edwards, who in welcoming us, said that Reading station “sets the stage” for Investments and the railway in Reading is wonderful, we can get everywhere around the country by rail.

Cllr Tony Page, Reading Borough Council.

Cllr Page started by saying that Reading & Nottingham are regarded as two of the best UK municipal bus companies and in Reading there is growth, especially into the centre and the Green park area with more people travelling in and out but we should make better use of rail, light rail, active transport & buses.

The Council started lobbying for the station upgrade 20 years ago. The station is Crossrail-proof and ready for WRATH too. Crossrail meets Cross Country at Reading.

Reading shows the role of the local authority is important in new investments and being a unitary authority helps, giving a “unified perspective”. Green Park station is now secured, committed and funded with an enhanced design, more fit for purpose for passengers.

The old Royal Mail site just north of the station is now vacated by NR and planned for mixed use development. At Tilehurst station investment is proposed for accessibility improvements. At Reading West station, presently very basic with poor access, the council is looking with NR/GWR to enhance it with lifts to platforms and a ticket office/coffee shop under the bridge. It is a difficult site but the council are committed.

Turning to buses, he said they are looking at the idea of a congestion charge, pollution levy or a workplace car parking levy. The only such levy so far in the UK is in Nottingham which took 6 years and its £450 p.a. per space (small employers are exempt). Trams are unlikely in Reading. Scope for improvements in public transport is there but just needs the funding. Improving P&R sites is important and they work well with other Berkshire councils though Oxfordshire & South Oxfordshire seem less keen on public transport. There is much new housing in Wokingham DC area and Reading has to plan public transport accordingly.

As an example of cross-council planning, Cllr Page concluded by pointing out that at Reading Green Park station the east side platform is in Reading DC and the west side platform is in West Berkshire DC!

Howard Smith, Operations Director, Crossrail

Stations west of Paddington are now operated by MTR. Oyster now works at Heathrow where gates have been installed. LHR had been resistant to gates but did a study that found passengers welcome them as it reassures them that they have the correct ticket. The depot at Old oak Common is the “perfect site” and can accommodate 33 trains; they have their training simulators there too. 150 drivers and 100 technical staff will be based there. They are currently running one train in the tunnels at up to 60mph for testing and will soon have two trains. Opening Autumn 2019 (as at the time of the conference. Since then the opening has been further postponed).

Ian Walters, Managing Director, SLC Rail

SLC Rail emerged from Chiltern when they were owned by John Laing to deliver stations with third parties, not NR, some examples being Kenilworth, Kidderminster, Bromsgrove & Worcestershire Parkway. His colleague Ian Baxter does lots of work on the North Cotswold line. Developing a business case requires vision and passion. There are three requirements to have on board: a senior politician, a senior officer in the local authority and someone like SLC Rail.

Worcestershire Parkway: Worcester faces slower journey times than other similar cities. It will unlock IEP capacity, will have 500 car parking spaces and a staffed ticket office. Cost of £30 million includes flood alleviation. The Council are delivering, there is passive provision for another platform on the Cotswold Line and there is an extra bridge for a public right of way just beside the station bridge.

Bromsgrove: the concept for the new station arose from the old station being inadequate especially for travel towards Birmingham with short platforms and infrequent services and the car park was too small thus constraining its use. Electrification to Bromsgrove allows the Cross City Line to serve it with more frequent trains. It has a new much bigger car park, bigger station buildings, more facilities and allows for more capacity also west/southwards. Bigger benefits are gained by doing the new relocated station plus electrification together.

NUCKLE: 1st stage was new stations between Coventry and Nuneaton (Coventry Arena, Bermuda Park & platform extensions at Bedworth) with 2tph next year; 2nd stage was Kenilworth station opening. Midlands Connect are taking on the concept of extending Coventry – Nuneaton trains to Leicester with a dive under at Nuneaton; they are keen on this.

He concluded by remarking that just as with the “Metroland” housing growth funding the Metropolitan Line, that will be the future with EWR an example.

In answer to questions he replied:-

New stations on main lines won't happen where capacity won't allow it.

The North Cotswold Line Taskforce is taking forward re-doubling.

Tony Page added that the local authority is key but don't hesitate to involve MPs. Regarding Thames Valley Park (between Reading & Twyford) he said a station here has been assessed many times but capacity is an issue. Asked about how to leverage housing development money into railways Ian said that SLC have "ways to do this." Asked about Oxford station redevelopment, he said he has spoken to Ian Hudspeth (Oxfordshire County Council leader) and to him it is "blooming obvious". Finally, asked whether they are involved in any branch line projects he said SLC Rail are involved in the Ashington line in Northumberland.

Anna Holbrook, Senior Sponsor, Western Rail Link to Heathrow, Network Rail

Some Heathrow facts: it is Europe's busiest airport, 70 million passengers p.a. of whom one third business and two thirds leisure, 76,000 people work there (compared to 36,000 for NR who are spread out nationally rather than all on one site.)

The remit is to provide access from Reading, needs 4tph minimum to generate enough users. It is not dependent on Heathrow expansion. Stub tunnels were built when T5 was built (also for southern access) so the terminal is ready. The Strategic Outline Business case has been done; there's no business case for serving T5 only, trains need to run through to the central terminal area. They are using a Development Consent Order for which the consultation has to be done in advance.

Reading will become the link to Heathrow from all over the south-west, west, Wales and south Midlands with a 23 minute journey time (6 minutes from Slough).

Tunnelling will take a year and a bit but building the junction off the main line, just east of Langley station, will be the tricky bit. Heathrow will be a funder and the line will be 3rd runway compliant but not dependent.

Benefits include £800 million growth to the UK economy and places such as Oxford and Newbury will be within the "golden one hour" of Heathrow.

Regarding wildlife mitigation Anna said this has project has them all: bats, newts, the lot! Answering a question about the main line junction and the grade separation (the main line is on an embankment so it'll pass under) she prefaced her answer: "If you're an engineer this project has everything" before going on to explain that it will lead off the relief lines only with the up relief on a new alignment to the north with the new line descending, then passing into a tunnel once south of the main line. Some clearances with motorway structures and water mains will be very tight.

Jill Poyton, Senior Sponsor, Great Western Electrification, Network Rail

Jill opened by asking for a show of hands for how many had been on a Class 800; lots of hands went up. Then she asked how many had been on a Class 800 while it was changing modes; several hands went up. Then she asked how many had noticed when the Class 800 had changed mode; only a few hands went up.

She said rail must keep up with greening its power sources compared to road which is getting greener.

At Bristol, four tracking up Filton Bank will result in a faster journey time to Paddington via Parkway than via Bath. One of the learning lessons was to think about wider issues around bridge re-building; track lowering is not always an option. Raising bridges involves extending the approach ramp which can mean dealing with four landowners, one for each corner of the bridge. Bridges too close to level crossings can mean the wires are at too steep an angle for the pantograph to cope. Through Box Tunnel the track was lowered before that section of electrification was cancelled; they had to cope with 8 types of bat, some very rare. Delays can put up the cost of vegetation clearance as it needs to be revisited. Clearances can result in farmers not realising that fences had become inadequate.

Electrification has now reached Swindon, to Newbury has just been energised with services due to start in January and Bristol Parkway is next. Finally she said the reasons they are doing all this is to increase capacity with cleaner, greener, quicker trains, NOT because the DfT said so.

Graham Cross, Chief Executive, Heathrow Southern Railway Ltd

HSRL was founded to develop southern rail access to Heathrow. The M25 is the busiest motorway in Europe, the proposed route is 8 miles of new railway, privately financed and it avoids the level crossings at Egham. HSRL would own the track. From T5 it would be in tunnel beside the M25 to Staines, then continue to Chertsey or Virginia Water.

The purpose is to connect to Heathrow from Basingstoke, Guildford, Woking and from Waterloo via Staines. Guildford services would be dependent on the proposed Woking flyover. Trains could run on into Paddington from Woking etc so it could be a through route to HS2 via Old Oak Common thus opening up multiple new journey opportunities. Journey times to T5 would be 40 minutes from Basingstoke, 6 minutes from Staines and 26 minutes each from Richmond and Guildford.

The M25 can't expand any more; even Highways England, in a study, concluded that the only option is public transport. Heathrow has worse NO₂ concentrations than EU limits caused both by planes and road traffic.

It could open in 2025/2027 and is not dependent on the third runway. Financing and funding would be private with access charges paid to HSRL and it does not depend on premium fares. It has cross-party support, The Secretary of State, Grayling, wants private finance; an announcement from the DfT is expected then it would be built with a Transport & Works Act Order rather than a Development Consent Order.

Andrew McCallum

East-West Rail Public Inquiry

The Inquiry into the Transport & Works Act Order started on 6th February and will last upwards of 12 weeks. It is planned that Nigel Rose will give evidence on behalf of Railfuture, fully supporting the proposal but with some caveats relating to the lack of future proofing and active provision in certain aspects:

- Platform lengths
- Through freight services and diversionary routes
- Double tracks between Claydon Junction and Aylesbury

The majority of the objections to the TWAO relate to level crossings on the still open section between Bletchley and Bedford. Many of the others relate to compulsory purchase of land necessary for construction work to make Victorian embankments fit for a 21st century railway and concerns expressed by local authorities about haul routes for HGVs carrying spoil, etc.

Oxfordshire Plan 2050

The Oxfordshire City and District Councils are putting together a statutory spatial plan to take the County forward for the next 30 years, deciding generally where employment and residential development should be located. It will be vital for these to be placed adjacent to public transport infrastructure and differently to recent experience where houses seem to be plonked down randomly with the transport following when congestion has become blindingly obvious. The branch committee will be commenting on the consultative document with the hope that the Plan will include all our aspirations for the local rail network like the Cowley branch, the North Cotswold line, Wantage/Grove Parkway, access to Witney and services on and off East-West Rail along with integrated bus and cycleway connections to stations. More information about the Plan can be found at <https://oxfordshireplan.org/> .

East Chipping Norton Strategic Development Plan

Of course we do not have any aspirations to re-open the railway to Chipping Norton! However, it is worrying how often local planners are ignorant of public transport networks. A development of 1200 houses plus 5 hectares of employment space is planned for Chipping Norton. In the consultation document it is claimed that there is a bus link to "nearby" Kingham station. Not only was the bus withdrawn in 2017 but the station is over 5 miles away! There have been other similar examples in recent times. We have to remain very vigilant!

Nigel Rose

Bits and pieces

The five East West Rail central section route options were announced on 28th January. Railfuture's East Anglia Branch will lead on our response. See: <https://eastwestrail.co.uk/haveyoursay>

The Williams Rail Review, announced by the government following last year's timetable problems is open for consultation until 31st May. Railfuture's input is being handled nationally but you may wish to make a personal response. See: <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/s/williamsrailreview/>

The branch will have a stand at an event to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the opening of the Didcot to Oxford railway on Saturday 15th June at Grandpont, south Oxford, close to the site of the original station. See: www.didcotoxfordgwr175.org

From the new year electric trains have started to operate most of the Reading – Newbury local services (but not yet the Paddington – Bedwyn semi-fasts as the Class 800s are not yet cleared to call at these stations). See photos below. Platforms have been lengthened at intermediate stations as necessary for four cars except at Newbury Racecourse where they are already long enough although here doors only open in the front three cars! On the subject of platform lengthening, those at the western end of the Cotswold line were completed in a couple of months last autumn albeit with a one week blockade. In contrast, platform lengthenings at the intermediate stations between Reading and Oxford (except Appleford & Culham) are still not operational after more than a year!

Photos:



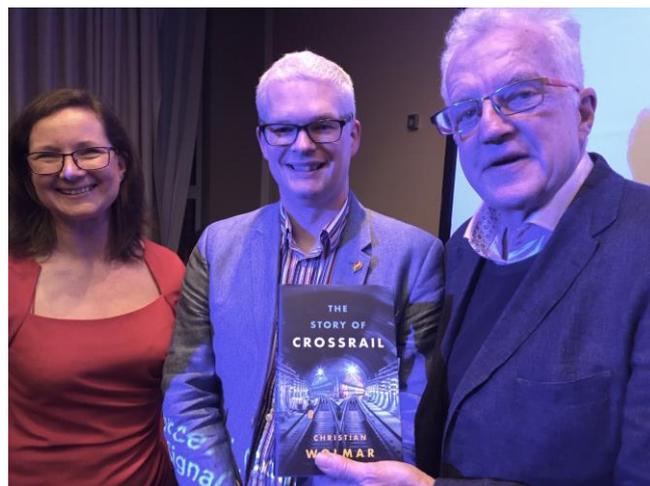
Branch members visit Chiltern Railway's Aylesbury Depot, 13th September 2018. *John Elvin*



Work starts on EWR Stage 2 at Launton Crossing, east of Bicester, on 19th October 2018. *John Elvin*



The Goring Gap on a sunny evening seen from a GWR Class 800, 6th November 2018. *Richard Stow*



Reading Conference speakers Jill Poyton and Graham Cross receive their books from Railfuture President Christian Wolmar, 10th November 2018. *Peter Travis*



Crossrail train on test at Reading station in early January. *James Hutton*

Railfuture's Martin Smith & Richard Stow on our stand at Oxford Green Fair, Oxford Town Hall. *John Elvin*



The large new multi storey car park at Didcot Parkway has opened. The upper decks, despite the metal fins, offer new views over the station, yard, museum and countryside beyond, as seen, left, looking towards the station.



A GWR Class 387 on a Reading - Newbury service calls at Newbury Racecourse. The doors in the 4th car (nearest) do not open despite the platform being long enough.

A Class 387 Reading service in the bay platform at Newbury. An HST calls on the 12.33 Paddington to Taunton. *All: Andrew McCallum on 10th January 2019.*