

English Regional Transport Association (ERTA)

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Sustainability from notions to grassroots applications – still a way to go!

In 1992 there was a United Nations (UN) Conference on the Environment in Rio-de-Janeiro, South America hence the name 'Rio 92'. (1) I was sent by the then Railway Development Society (RDS) to the British UN follow up in Manchester to capture what may be in it for rail. 1992 is all a very long time ago and sadly, much of my archive has had to be recycled due to downsizing over the years. However, what I do recollect is someone from Seattle in America leading a seminar saying how this word 'Sustainability' is about holding the social, economic and environmental in balance and equally being squared to inform a 'sustainable' anything. If we build without regards to the environment, collectively the environment comes back in various forms which ultimately presents a global threat. If we only do 'social' and neglect 'environmental' or 'economic' aspects, then again, the environment suffers and feeds back to affect people and communities. Everything has to be paid for and yet money as an end in itself is nothing if we neglect the social and environmental considerations.

I recall, even in Bedford where I come from, there was much talk, committees formed in Rio 92's name and the buzz word 'sustainable' and 'sustainability' was banded about. But Bedford, like many other places was a congested place. It was geographically central between London and Birmingham (north-south) and East Anglia and the West Country (east-west).

Before the 1960's and after over many years, we British, having led the world in giving railways as a global transport system of doing things with many dependent industries; post war for whatever reason, we progressively dismantled our integrated public transport and rail based majoritively freight systems to a road only agenda.

Closing trams and rail links, locked-in the the-road reliance pattern and in 1969 for example, the railways lost their Common Carrier Status (2); they just could not reach and range as once was. The instigated policy and spend direction were no longer rail and shipping but roads and aviation. That platform was predicated on fossil fuel, namely oil.

Great ideas for sustainability but a locked-in unsustainable transport system and way of doing things which was now lifestyle reliant, systemic and increasingly universal.

Of course, then and now not everyone had cars for a variety of reasons.

Since the early 1990's more use of what railways remain is more than ever; but car, van, lorry, road, oil is still the norm. Roads and Rails are congested, informing the question what can give, what can take and how do we move to a more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable transport system for people and goods?

Since 1987 I had led a campaign for route protection of part of the Bedford-Cambridge railway (Bedford-Sandy section mainly) and advocating reopening. It was the minimum piece of rail infrastructure for restoring an Oxford-Cambridge railway. Upon reaching the East Coast Main Line (ECML) it was envisaged trains would run through to Cambridge either via a new build Huntingdon-St Ives-Cambridge railway or via a new curve at Ickleford north of Hitchin onto the Letchworth-Royston-Cambridge line or both. The counter to our efforts, small as they were, was the going rate at tiers of Government levels, society as a whole and cheap petrol/convenience was to build more houses, find other uses, fallow, defer, reject and well, the sums and all considered was against! Maybe a good idea environmentally, some social benefits but economically, who was going to pay? Then in 1994 the Standing Conference of East Anglia Local Authorities (SCEALA) formed the East-West Rail Consortium (EWRC) (3) based out of Ipswich and that got Bedford Borough, Mid Beds District and Bedfordshire County Councils to join and support the aspiration for an east-west rail link.

From there on, whilst as campaigners we interjected ideas, suggestions and directed to a purer form of basic, local railway upwards movement, they took the principle to Government and informed pots of expenditure on numerous studies we laity could but dream of.

In 1997/1998 2 things of significance happened. First, Labour got elected and got their White Paper on Sustainable Transport (4) under way which signalled a shift to more things like walking, cycling, buses and rail doing more 'modal shift'. Sadly, after 2003 9/11 and the costs of wars overseas were eclipsed by u-turning on delivery and follow through. The 2003 London South Midlands Multi Modal Study (LSMMMS) was a last gasp advocating Bedford-Cambridge and Bedford-Northampton. However, in 2004, the then Department for Transport/Secretary of State for Transport the Rt Hon. Alistair Darling MP demanded further research for Oxford-Cambridge and directed focus on the Western Section (Oxford-Bedford) first. The focus of the East-West Consortium moved from Ipswich to Aylesbury. In 1997 the Steer Davis Gleave Report vindicated what us campaigners had said that realignments at Blunham and Sandy were possible and should be done. Oxford-Bedford had much support. However, during the Labour tenure of office until 2010 delivery was not done and Bedford-Northampton was long grassed, literally!

In the current 'Climate Emergency' the saga continues. Bedford-Sandy has been lost as has Cambridge-St Ives-Huntingdon. We are to get Oxford-Bedford by 2025-ish. It is making some progress, but given the 35-year history of effort, it should be made an equivalent of a Government backed Nightingale Project and speeded up! Then, the social, environmental and economic benefits can be enjoyed by the places it would serve with sustainable footfall and spend minus the congestion and pollution in a context of growth and global diminutives we are all awaking to afresh.

We have to see real evidence of Boris Johnson and his Government are listening. Jury is out currently. If he was saying “no” to a £27 billion new roads programme and “yes” to an increase of the Rail Reopenings Fund (5) (currently a mere £500 million); a rebalance or indeed move towards rail expansion for local, conventional rail rebuild and slicker time and cost delivery that would be something. Likewise, some ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ measures to interim incentivise rail route protection. But whether power, politics or other lobbying interests (oil, gas and a locked in lifestyle and design layout adapted to roads majoritively), rebalancing is remiss. If the analogy of the Titanic and the Iceberg holds up, the collective ‘we’ are aware of it, know we need to change course, but are still moving towards collision at some speed.

Government is elected and charged to give Leadership and Direction.

To inform the path, shape and adjustment patterns successive generations will aspire to build their lives around. People will use what is available, cheap and convenient. If done sustainably fine, if not, we must face the consequences. Start redressing and re-railing and gradually the rebalancing at least can have a chance to happen. If we keep putting it off, we are 'playing with fire'. You can only speak truth to power, if you know who and what and where the power is and it realises it is in its interest to act.

Richard Pill

Vice-Chairman of the English Regional Transport Association (ERTA).

A voluntary, membership-based association open to all.

W. <https://ertarail.co.uk/>

B. <https://ertarailvolunteer.blogspot.com/>

Notes Further Reading:

1. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/milestones/unced>
2. <http://archive.commercialmotor.com/article/14th-july-1967/33/are-the-railways-common-carriers>
3. <https://www.eastwestrail.org.uk/>
4. <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/lords/1998/jul/20/the-new-deal-for-transport>
5. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/re-opening-beeching-era-lines-and-stations>

Below: Richard Pill mans the ERTA Stall on the left. In normal times, daily congestion in Bedford on the right. Solutions are in short supply.



From the Vice Chair: The Art of Route Protection.

The Bedford-Sandy rail link campaign, beside advocating the reconstruction of a former railway in modern form, was essentially a fire-fighting exercise to stop the rot of ruination. Since the line closed in 1967, ten years later we saw housing and a new school constructed assuming the old route annexing it into compounds. This development of more housing continued in Sandy up until the present day, with a population largely outstripping available facilities. Likewise, in 1984 the proposed routes of the Bedford Bypass, one of them at least assumed the route of the Bedford-Willington trackbed and one even wanted to take and close the remnant Bedford-Bletchley railway. That triggered my sense of alarm and a sense of how expedient the railway was to trash and supersede with



'now' transport alternatives, namely roads. Don't get me wrong, these trends were played out during the 20th Century and even today disparity amidst much talk and expensive conferences around themes of the environment but Government puts £27 billion into new roads and Rail Reopenings Fund only gets £500 million. Then in 1985 Mid Beds District Council gave the go ahead to housing called Station Court, Blunham which assumed the old trackbed and blocked the course of old railway. Then in 1990 there was a push for the A421 Bedford Bypass not to bridge the course of old railway and landed on it without any overbridge designed-in and so another blockage. During the 1980's the A603 Cardington Road in an urban area was dualled, which the line crossed. Then in the 2000's a rowing lake between Bedford and Willington threatened the old trackbed. What became clear was big interests can sway opinion where it counts, they have the resources small campaign groups like us do not. The closure was generations behind us, the world had moved on, majority have cars and so demand for roads was up and the environment, like icing on a cake, was nice but expedient in all but name despite the onslaught of UN Rio 92 and Sustainable Development discussions. Then in 2019 we are told that the East-West Rail will not use the old route even with realignments where blockages exist as the Steer Davis Gleave Report of 1997 alluded, why? Partly because the Sandy extent of development screened off any reasonable access from south of Blunham Station Court to the East Coast Main Line (ECML). Now we have a proposed Northern Route which is a debateable option but has a statement and command of the Secretary of State, the wish for the new railway to serve Bedford Midland Station at all costs and once heading north, anathema to provide 8 coach bay platforms and reverse trains, rather head north and engage however hard and costly the terrain. Now, we learn that the new railway will intercept the ECML at Tempsford put as 'north of Sandy, south of St Neots'. Again, we wish for physical tracks linking the outer slows of the ECML to enable trains using same tracks from Peterborough and Stevenage/East Bedfordshire to access Bedford and the wider Oxford corridor, rather than get on a train and wait a connection, pay more probably also. ERTA is the 4th organisation I have led since 1987. The first was the Bedford and Sandy Rail Reopening Association (BASRRA) 1987-1990, then Transport 2000 Bedfordshire Branch (1990-1994), Bedfordshire Railway and Transport Association (BRTA) 1997-2008, resuscitated 2013, which morphed into the ERTA in 2015. Protecting rail routes is a Cinderella aspect of rail campaigning and media coverage, yet foundational! **Picture above of Blunham circa 1990, shows new housing being built and realignment space all gone now.**