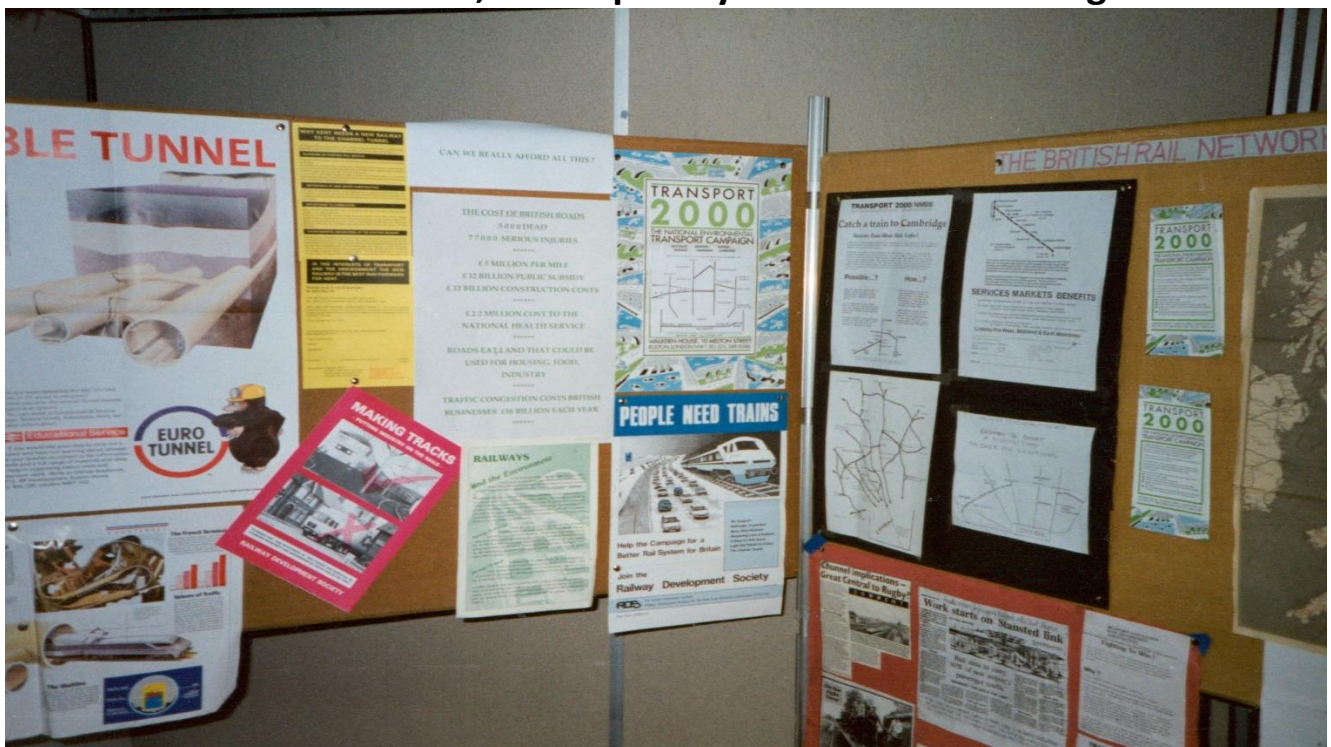


English Regional Transport Association (ERTA)

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https://ertarail.co.uk/	www.linkedin.com/in/richard-pill-erta	https://ertarailvolunteer.blogspot.com
East-West Rail Special Article November 2021		Price: £1.00 where sold

East-West Rail Matters past and present reflections by Richard Pill. Not the last word, but hopefully some food for thought?



Caption Above: Part of a display I was able to do at Westminster College Library Oxford in 1991 to generate awareness of rail development and references to the Oxford-Cambridge aspiration. It turned a few heads!

Introduction: The east-west rail Bedford-Cambridge saga rumbles on whilst Bicester/Aylesbury-Milton Keynes and Bedford takes forever to deliver. Richard gives a personal reflection.

1. Oxford-Bedford-Sandy-Cambridge Closed 1967, leaving the remnant Bedford-Bletchley.
2. 1973 we joined the EEC and shipping went from west to east in landing terms and with no east-west rail between the North London Line and the Peterborough-Leicester-Nuneaton line, majority went east-west by road locked-in. With population growth as well, fuelled demand for new roads but the lack of a rail choice was keenly felt but not pro-actively addressed much by structural authorities, powers and enablers.
3. Mid 1970's Sandy expanded with London overspill and the new upper school assumed land which contained the old trackbed (the land on which the railway once went) and further development continued to this day.
4. 1985 permission given for the development on the old trackbed at Blunham called 'Station Court' and elsewhere bet Potton, Gamlingay, entrance to Cambridge alias Trumpington and Trumpington Meadows, M11 and much more. This also included the earlier Cambridge University Radio Telescopes all meant a new railways was and is needed, bet alongside where the old went with deviations and stretches of new-build or elsewhere and with patterns abounding of development without regards to a rail link, a theatre of diminishing opportunities.
5. 1987, at cost to myself, tabled a public meeting at Sandy and a handful formed the Bedford and Sandy Rail Reopening Association (BASRRA) (1987-1990) which led to Transport 2000 Bedfordshire Branch (1990-1994).
6. Circa 1995, the East-West Consortium was formed. I was having a game of pool in Dunstable (another campaign then) when it came over on the local radio of the Consortium being formed. I knew my days in Dunstable were numbered and would soon head back to Bedford precluding the formation of the Bedfordshire Railway and Transport Association (BRTA) in 1997. It was one of several events whereby the campaign became 'professionalised' progressively and yes, they had resources to do more and well, contrast we voluntary amateurs, but equally then, the 2019 consultation abandoning any use of the old Bedford-Cambridge rail route, was another wresting from us any input as the basis of the consultations were 'all but what we wished for'! That does not mean that any east-west rail choice is not worth supporting, but the means-ways and route now, raises questions, but negligence in failing to protect old formations translates to plough through or avoid as much as possible. A key variable is RPSB could court 1 million objections, contrast some other routes/places say max of 40, 000. All has to be taken into account and costs will vary as to outcomes. But we cannot have Network Rail reports purporting joined-up rail connectivity between East-West Rail and East Coast Main Line (ECML) at Tempsford area, whilst consultations support a segregated railway with merely an interchange station. Rather have joined-up lines and let people access the railway for direct transit from where they live, bet south of Peterborough or north of Stevenage and East Bedfordshire to Bedford County Town.



Caption Above: One of the founders of campaigns for an Oxbridge East-West Rail Link, Mr Chris Wright in 1986 visited Claydon Station, which subsequently ERTA has called to be included on the Oxford/Aylesbury-Milton Keynes/Bedford part of East-West Rail. It is a growing development area within a 10-mile catchment and without it and Calvert, will only flood Winslow and Aylesbury respectively or continue congesting the wider road network.

7. 1997 Steer Davis Gleave produce a report which argues a Bedford-Sandy rail link can be do-able with deviations especially on land north of development creep Sandy.

8. 1997 the Bedfordshire Railway & Transport Association (BRTA) was formed and tabled both East-West Rail support reiteration and calls for studying and making a case for a Bedford-Northampton rail link as well. At this time, from Swindon-Ipswich as agreed Bedford-East Coast Main Line (ECML) was a missing link and once solved whether via a new Cambridge-Huntingdon corridor (coming into Cambridge from the North) or an Ickleford curve onto the Hitchin-Royston-Cambridge line (coming in from the south).

9. 2010-2018 Railfuture and others lauded and followed the East-West Rail Consortium and agreed this strategy. Old Cambridge-Huntingdon Rail corridor lost to Guided Busway and development near Ickleford blocked the southern option. Sandy continued to grow curtaining off the north of Sandy route option from a south of Blunham route. Meanwhile in Bedford...



Caption Above: 1987, Richard Pill hands a copy of the Rail Development Society (RDS) Fighting for Rail booklet to the then Parish Council Representative of Willington, Bedford introducing people to the world of railway development aspirations!

10. 1988-1989 we have a sponsored report (Colquhoun) by Bedford Borough Council recommending the Bedford-Sandy rail option as a congestion solution, but was ignored. Indeed 1993 Side Roads Order 199 about a bridging of the old railway formation or not, both the Borough (planning) and the County Council (strategic and transport) both opposed the A421 Bypass bridging the old railway trackbed despite a number of local authorities writing to beg it be supported in the wider strategic interest. Alas the road was built blocking the railway corridor. Likewise (2015-2018) level crossings have received a bad press with fatalities and policy reaction was to say 'no' to level crossings. One would be needed at Priory Marina access and possibly across the now dual carriageway A603 Cardington Road. That meant a new looking for a new rail route. The old one ruled out on these grounds and the RSPB at Sandy, despite a wind turbine close to its site, objecting a railway would be harmful to the birds, despite it was an operational railway for 105 years. But RSPB has 1 million plus members, imagine all those objectors to a railway? Moreover, there was in the 1960's a recognition that the Oxford-Bedford-Cambridge Railway would do more trade if it connected with the Bedford Midland Railway Station for connectivity. The idea was trains would reverse at Bedford Midland Station Bay platforms and out again. Sadly, closure denied this principle, but in 1984 the closure of the old St John's Station meant a new halt under Ampthill Road Bridge, Bedford and extension of Bletchley-Bedford shuttle trains to link with Bedford Midland. Presumably, they were not so concerned with 'speed' as loadings and connectivity improving receipts over expenditure costs of the railway over all? Semi fast trains were always a possibility with 2 stations.

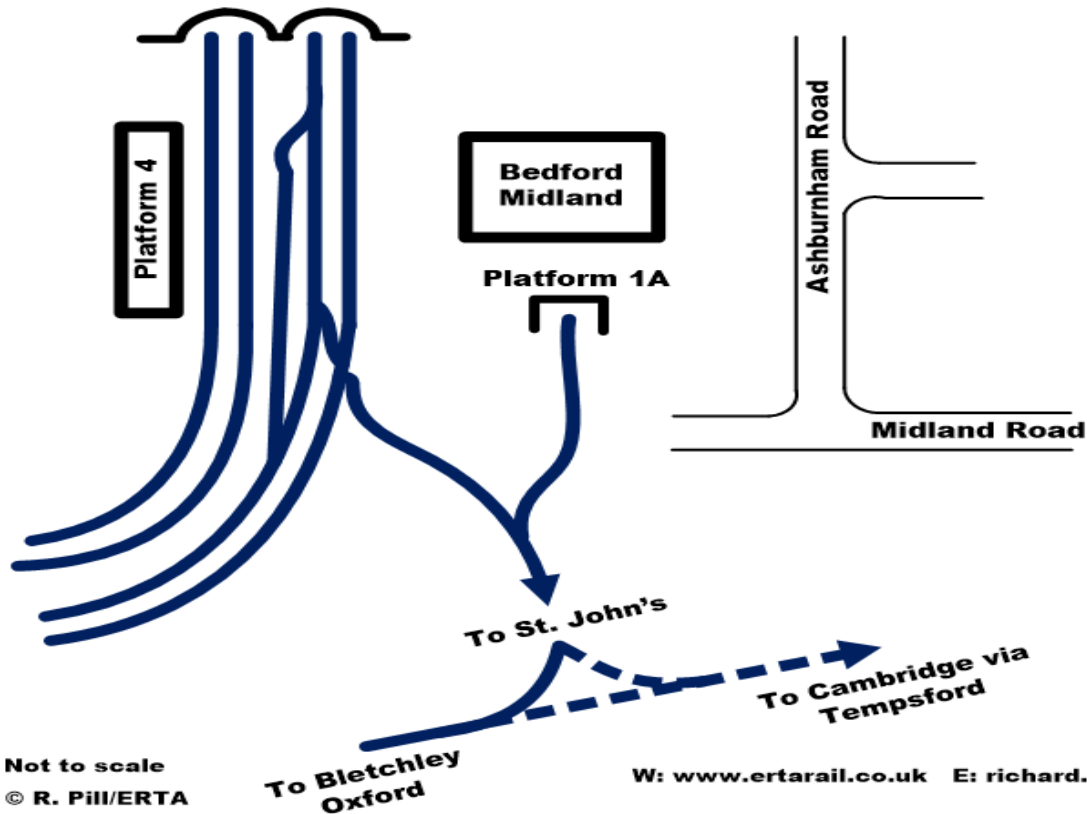
11. Jan 2019 consultation ruled out the original route as an option for the public to decide. It gave 5 options and suggested that Route E, i.e., north of Bedford via Ravensden to Tempsford would be optimal. Beyond the main line at Tempsford, Cambourne would have a station before going south to join the Royston-Cambridge rail link west of Shepreth Junction. This was a brand-new-build of a railway and approximately £4.5 billion is the sort of sums we are talking about. Politicians say linking with Bedford Midland is crucial and yes to that. But to then head north and east raises questions on cost, practicality, durability and includes knocking down houses potentially, blight and much more intrusion than the other option ERTA has mooted during these 3 years.

12. ERTA believes that a new triangle at St Johns would enable Felixstowe (and all in between) – West Country (say Bristol/Southampton/Cardiff arc) to go direct along an east-west rail link without any need to trundle through Bedford Midland passenger station. Meanwhile... the Route E Northern Route, does not include an east-north or across access for running onto either Northampton (part of the logistics main centres/alias 'Golden Triangle'); nor to the north via Leicester South Curve for onwards to Nuneaton for West Coast Main Line and West Midlands hubs. Contrast from where the East-West proposed rail route comes to the ECML at Tempsford for physical linkage for optimum operations/market potential reach and range (passenger and freight) and enable links to the east from south of Peterborough e. g. St Neots – Addenbrookes via Cambridge South Station without any need for change as is proposed if the 2 lines are segregated with some interchange station and yes, a load of houses in the middle of virtually nowhere, just infill development on currently green fields. Coming west from Tempsford to go north of Blunham and assume or bypass the old route at Willington and raise the A421 with that designed bridge facility, implement 'special dispensation' the 2 level crossings and reinstate the St John's triangle. Half a trackbed, some 4 miles is still there. Cycleways and footpaths can be slewed alongside with a fence and suitable footbridges with disabled/cycle ramps built in at various places. Most of Willington is extended back gardens and a bird sanctuary, could relocation be easier and cheaper than knocking down houses in Bedford and/or elsewhere in North Bedfordshire and less intrusive on wildlife pro rata?

13. In any case, if a study were done looking into these things positively and comparison with Route E made, we believe our suggestion is not so daft. Moreover, any freight trains for going beyond Bedford Midland northwards and vice versa, would be facing north off of St Johns, whereas they cannot off Route E and Route E means all new freights as well as passenger workings must go through passenger platforms at Bedford Midland. Long container trains, will mean passenger services must wait elsewhere while they get through by whatever frequency they occur. Don't get us wrong, we want more people and goods by rail, the Climate Emergency and dire need to reduce vehicle exhaust, demands it surely, so a railway is very much needed and indeed other east-west rails also across the regions south of Leicester to north of London.

Rail Layout at Bedford Midland “Box”

Approximation



Caption Above: Bedford Midland Station as is today with our suggestion of ‘via St John’s Reinstated Triangle’ to reduce the number of east-west freight trains that would have to pass through the main station. This is rejected but another 2-track extra solution is in the wings and hard to see how putting all extra passenger and freight trains through the station ‘box’ will be sustainable without such extra tracks, as it is often the case now, trains await access from the south for platform interface capacity access. More services good, but will need more platform capacity and freights will want more track capacity. Moreover, facing north to go from East onwards to Northampton or Leicester/Nuneaton, means via St John’s makes operational sense.

14. Reversing passenger services to new bays at the south end of Bedford Midland with a new passenger access looking down Midland Road towards Bedford Town Centre is seen as second rate and lacking connectivity for Bedford by some politicians. But they also spend money they say for other calls they lack, on whether using existing 4 tracks north of Bedford on the Midland Main Line can cater for more north-south passenger and freight plus east-west rail passenger and freight and modal shift. ERTA believes that were politicians and indeed the East-West Consortium and East-West Rail Company and Government to study our suggested route and its handiness for east-west freight and passenger operations, they would save money, enable more and ease the burden of respective upheaval. An upgrade from St John’s to Bedford Midland, remodelling of Bedford Midland would enable more anyway. Our suggestion probably would enable the existing tracks to cope, contrast a

Northern Route E, which would demand 2 extra tracks with demolition of houses as a tip of iceberg upheaval. Suffice to say, some support a railway full stop without care or concern. Others oppose for whatever and all reasons including statements like “everyone goes by car these days!” Our route is more direct and once beyond the A421, it is free until A1 and River Ivel, contrast Route E which after housing upheavals faces Black Cat Roundabout and Rivers Ivel and Great Ouse to name but a few hazardous, costly issues to resolve. It can be avoided, and ERTA makes these principled points in the interests of a local railway, for local people, in local areas and providing on the back nationwide logistics and wider travel. A steady speed of 25 mph can beat congested roads, cost-time finding parking and park-and-ride buses themselves get caught in congestion. A train can keep going all weathers and the mere 30 miles between Bedford and Cambridge even at 25 mph steady speed, renders you ahead of the game, how much more 45 mph, 75 mph but who needs 100 mph or more for such relatively short distances? So again, some realism can also bring costs down. Campaigners need to reckon what lessons can be learnt and apply them elsewhere. Reverse Beeching is different in this respect, Beeching had a plan, like it or not, contrast this current Government, talks Reverse Beeching, but we see no nationwide all-encompassing plan, but trickles, dribs and drabs randomly making a token gesture, but failing to deliver comprehensively the length and breadth of the country. No money we are told, but the Government finds it for £27 billion new roads, £100 billion HS2 and £200 million a new yacht and many other capital expenditures. Maybe top-slicing some of that for what is really needed, could enable what they purport. What role for levelling up, if people are disenfranchised socially, economically or environmentally or all three-on-one?



Caption Left: Class 104 DMU Unit 1985 at Bletchley Platform 6. Cold winter’s day, blue sky and snow on the rails. Lovely wooden panelled cosy interior with heating kept people warm and trains ran even when roads proved dysfunctional. We desperately need that Churchillian Wartime determination and grit to make our railways once again indispensable!

15. ERTA has not just blindfoldedly ‘gone with the crowd’ whereby ‘any railway is good per se’, but we consider what may be more operationally expedient, what fits and consider things like cost stewardship and that a straight, flat railway is good for heavy freight, not a camels proverbial switchback design! This courts support and opposition from opponents of railway and supporters in equal measure. But we have people like me living in Bedford who has to live with consequences and outcomes. We need an east-west rail link and would argue the 25, 75 as well as 50 miles from London spread and intervals, yet on these other two – Essex-Hertfordshire-Buckinghamshire and A14 parallel, we have hardly begun. I say ‘we’ but really it should be Government, Leaders and Professionals, alas often commuted and abandoned to campaigners and enthusiasts to pioneer and like East-West Rail Oxbridge, a

wing and a prayer randomly gets picked up and worked with and found 'good idea' and then things start sooner or later to translate to the system created to ultimately move towards delivery. What a system it is! It costs avarice, takes oodles of time, engages many agencies and labyrinth of people, publishing reports and pass the parcel games of procedures, rigmarole, double checking and too long a wait for delivery. Only a trickle can endure such a system, whereas the contrast on the grassroots ground is 'Climate Emergency' and that in a proverbial 'fire' every second counts and delay or toying can cost life or limb. Personally, I reflect my 30+ years' experience that it is not High Speed this country needs, but fast tracking of right rail application schemes – local, domestic, mixed use 'all in one' and joined-up-ness, which has and is lacking system-wise. What will it take to inform change, reform and will it be too little, too late even as passing generations have 'warned' and 'told you so' amidst competing voices, clamours and the buzz of status quo laudations? Changes must happen to rebalance and indeed, put funding in favour of rail reopenings, rebuilds and select new-builds/corrections on former end-to-end connectives lost to mass development.

16. Olney, Sandy, Ampthill, Kempston Retail Park and Shefford are local examples and I am sure many can know local examples of where they live of lost rail routes or a lack of a station and where new-build interpretations are needed. Of course, the unfairness is that schemes like HS2 can just plough through, whilst schemes like recovering a Great Central corridor are dismissed by rail journalists as 'too much upheaval'. Personally, I'd rather of had a modern passenger and freight electrified Great Central and Woodhead link with a new Birmingham arm, cruising at a max of 90 mph. Alas we are where we are and what a costly exercise and if the P.R. proves misguided, the damages, losses and longevity of delivery takes a toll? Some say "we need it for up-and-coming generations" but as one generation passes and another one kicks in; it is like giving a 1980's single or album to a 'now teen' who is into completely different music and means-ways of accessing it (digitally/electronically). There's nostalgia, retro aplenty, and blue sky purporting of 'new' which tends to have common traits like nose-coned frontages, high speed and niche audiences, with in all probability two or triple tier levels of affordability and disenfranchisement. In short, what is left of the 'creaking Victorian Railway' will be for the masses and 'new' will be for those who can buy in or out times whatever life throws at us as a human race. I hope to be proved wrong. As far as East-West Rail is concerned, the jury is out, even as announcements will continue to be made.

Conclusion: We are told from the 2021 consultation, the results will be done, route confirmation and a possible inquiry? Let's hope it is not more of the same, but the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help us all!

Notes for further reading:

1. <https://eastwestrail.co.uk/> Website of the East-West Rail Company

2. Information on the 'Golden Triangle' logistics centre:

<https://www.bis-hendersonspace.com/is-the-golden-triangle-still-the-centre-of-uk-logistics/>

To join ERTA and help make a difference, please go to:

<https://ertarail.co.uk/become-a-member/> or email richard.erta@gmail.com