

English Regional Transport Association (ERTA)

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ERTA Bedford-Sandy Rail Link Pamphlet	Issued 2022	£1.00 where sold

Bedford-Sandy Rail Link; can we learn lessons for elsewhere?

In 1987 I called a meeting at The Bell Pub in Sandy, opposite the railway station and out of it came an association to advocate reinstating a rail link between Bedford and the East Coast Main Line at Sandy. Since the line originally closed in 1967 and during the 1970's, development had encroached the old trackbed, first a school and then a few houses including at Blunham from 1985.

Apart from this, the reopening was suggested to go to the south of the Blunham houses and swing to a new link to the north of built Sandy; to have a new link with the north-south main line, north of Sandy. This was understood, but mocked and ridiculed by some who you would have thought would be more charitable, but of the rail fraternity itself, who were the leaders in generating clouds of cynical opposition, masking their jealousy that they lacked the courage to step out and think the much talked about, but not made public thought that closure was a mistake and reopening the only answer and justice to that mistake. Questions of interim damage to bridges and old trackbed, were found to be over-come-able and these rudimentary apprehensions were picked up by the later East-West Consortium who took these very ideas and found a systematic professional evaluation in the 1997 Steer Davis Gleave Report.



A point of lessons transferable is as follows maybe:

1. Just because a closure has happened, it does not necessarily follow that it cannot be reversed.
2. You can't turn the clock back; you start where you are at and work out solutions to challenges and problems.
3. There was a time when land abounded and deviations/realignments were plausible and became by-words to leverage support for the belief in the do-ability of a conceptual process.
4. Now we have a largely built environment, routes have not been protected much in many cases if at all and so now the question is more-like a. do we want the railway back? b. what audit of obstacles and possible solutions and costs accrue? c. is it expedient to consider new route options alongside a traditional core route and d. if a new Network Rail styled daily use railway, it would be a railway of 21st century construe, not a Victorian rail interpretation with

the baggage of semaphore signalling, gated crossings and lots of paid manual labour!



Speed is not so much the issue. Yes, there's a view if you have speed, you can put more trains down a line and carry more. But then you get into 3-mile braking distances, limited station stops/areas served and delineation of passenger and freight, whereas the sort of railway I believe in is one which caters for all using the same tracks. By all means have fast and slow lines, but all means ensure all large communities and distances between areas get their fair share of station access. Please bear in mind freight and passenger line growth plans can nurture business as once the line is reinstated, new built or mix and match of the two usage grows through sheer choice. Keeping people moving is what matters, serving communities too, not just end-to-end considerations.

Some say you can't rebuild for example a terminal branch alongside the A16 between a new triangle junction at Firsby in Lincolnshire and Louth for example and the usage case would be negligible to warrant the £billions outlay. Not only has Greengauge produced a report saying what a worthwhile thing it would be to do precisely this, (<http://www.greengauge21.net/wp-content/uploads/Connecting-East-Lincolnshire-Greengauge-21-FINAL.pdf>) but there is a campaign for this 'reopening/new build' with some council interest. It failed to court Government funding for continued study, but for an area where poverty is significant, a rail desert thanks to the closures abounds and the promise of all-year-round footfall and spend to regenerate local incomes seems a win, win. Yet, still some deny all this and ridicule those who raise it. Supporters like me point out that the Borders Line between Edinburgh and Tweedbank has carried over 4 million people in its first few years and has been a success promising more like the through benefits of linking with Carlisle could offer; but opponents in East Lincs say "the model is not transferable" – on what grounds they do not seem clear, but these head-in-sands swathes of viewpoint, do nothing for the environmental benefits of re-railing, of social inclusion and integration and the

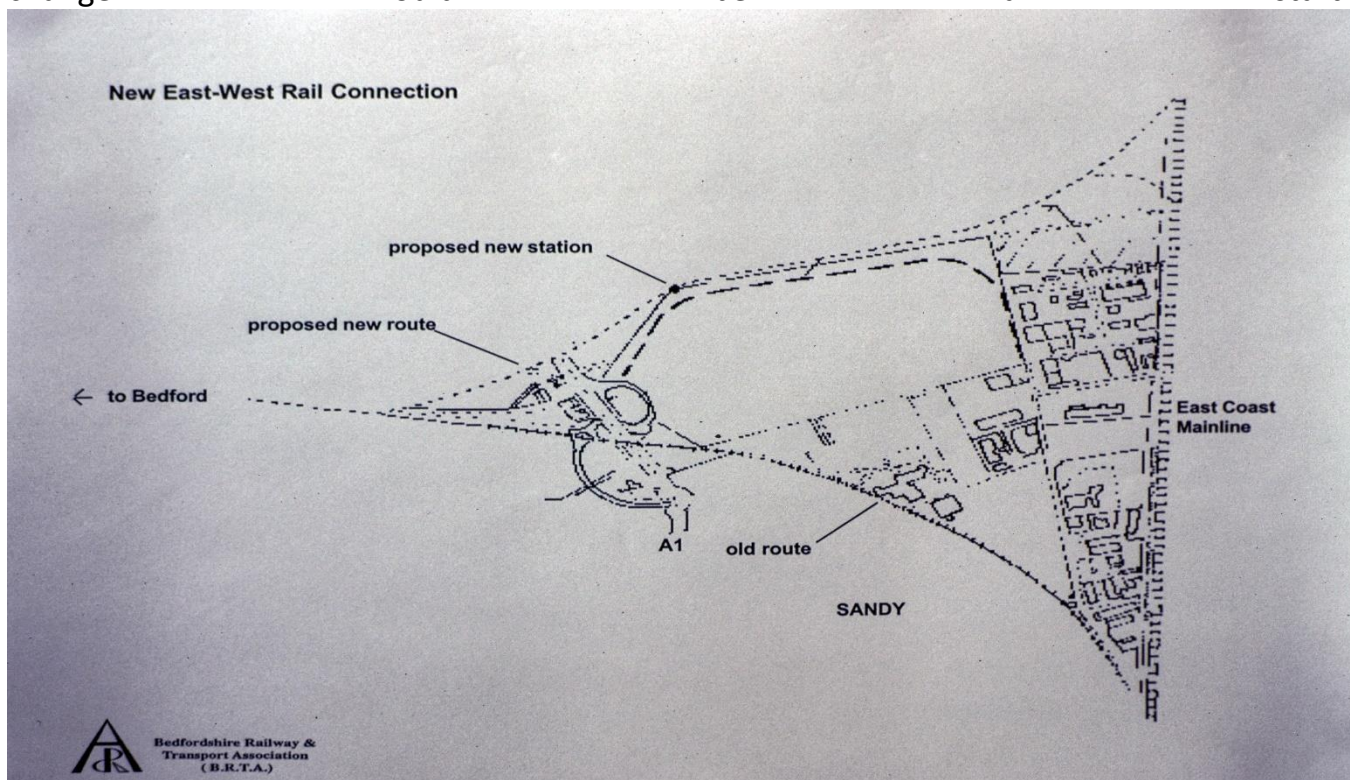
benefits of rail connectivity.



On Bedford-Sandy, the debate has moved on to other routes than the original. Even our own ERTA takes the view as do I, that the old route between Bedford St John's and east of Willington could be recovered (everything comes at a cost!) and thence via a new route on embankment north of Blunham/south of the River Great Ouse, across the River Ivel and A1 respectively to approach and link to the north-south main line north or south of Station Road Tempsford on what we call the 'Tempsford Plains'. If we wait 10 years this option will be lost. Mid Beds (now Central Beds) seems to have had a covert policy of destroying former railway trackbeds and scuppering hopes of recovery, ditto South Cambridgeshire! It is worth remembering cycle and footway courses on old trackbeds can be slewed/re-directed easily enough. Likewise, canals (Guildford-Horsham) and as for tunnels (Woodhead) a new bore could do the job and gain from modernised design methods. Now the politics are cowardice from facing up to what needs to be done and a third party to hide behind which bridges or tunnels to avoid levels crossings and has as a third party with anonymity built-in and thus unlike politicians unelected, but has avariced powers and legal construes which give license to in not so many words say to barriers "here's the cheque, move please!" You may agree or disagree, NIMBYISM has legitimate voice on the one hand but can be head-in-sand as well. Discernment, differential impartiality and declaration of interests all helps pin-point where things are at and more scrutinising journalism could be useful/academic researchers who publish widely likewise. If we wish to reduce road-based traffic and foster choice and modal shift, re-railing the nation is essential. We must have a pro-active plan now and onwards for fostering more passenger and freight movements by rail and ensure the net-work is robust and comprehensive enough to cater for it. Reading is a pinch point for Southampton-West Midlands and how ridiculous for deep sea landings at Southampton to be heading north of West Midlands, but taking road and rail capacity all those miles to and from, when Hull/Liverpool and a new Woodhead could be just the ticket for cutting transport miles, time and cost? Yet this, by some rail media journalists is denied with an overplay on cost, case and

the past glories of a different age. They fall short of making the leap to what was called for in the run up to closure of Woodhead 40+ years ago, that it should be integrated with the rest of the network (25KV rather than DC electrification) and enable diverse operations and capacity, not just coal. Now a combination of passenger aspirations, containers and other extra capacity utilisation of diverse trains could really benefit from Woodhead rebuilt as well as declutter the A628 which with other trans-Pennine roads are being called for progressive upgrading based on a false premise, that the rail alternative was crushed and 40 years of deficit been allowed to build up to a congested problem in the heart of a National Park! The report conclusion is 'can do better'. Inland Roll-on, Roll-off, should be created and laid out from Channel Tunnel-Orbitals of London and Edinburgh/Glasgow and Cardiff and Exeter for example. Yet there is no plan as I am aware of such. Crossrail saved money on conventional tunnels rather than Continental Loading Gauges, which could have allowed Channel Tunnel/Europe – Birmingham through services. Tinkering plans for redesign to enable North London Line-HS1 and HS2 access arcingly for a joined-up-railway all well and good if can be done, but misses out Heathrow with a need to change trains at the emergent Old Oak Common (OOC) interchange station. As one former manager said in the rail industry "we don't do joined up in this country". That sadly does not have to be the case, but seems to be. Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but given the closures of local railways are systemically a root problem historically underscoring so much of todays transport, environmental and logistical issues, rectification as much as possible or even a year-on-year start using indirect taxes of nudge psychology a bit like taxes on sugar and plastic for example, to encourage behaviour change

would be a start.



What we end up with (cynically) is tax for Chancellor's empty bucket and less-than a trickle of select reopenings, rather than a full-blown 'Reverse Beeching' agenda Rt. Hon. Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Transport promised early after his appointment. The public give and get fudge, but government finds £billions for new roads, but not the same for local-

regional rail reopenings either direct or in grant funding or specifically let other councils/agencies 'get on with it'. We need a speedy delivery, a concise transport focused policy in rail's favour and built in to it a design and accessibility which covers all pockets and addresses hard-pressed families and matters around transport and affordability. Bedford-Bletchley if reliability issues and bustitutions could be resolved once and for all in rail-based operations favour, is relatively cheap cost-wise. How the local shuttle service will sit with the East-West Rail without selling out of total reformation remains to be seen. But the principle of local railways for local people and places in connectivity terms remains a principle to be cherished. One church tried to sit on a ring road but the larger numbers did not materialise. It relocated to a community hall next to an estate and it worked, with people identifying it as 'their' church.



On Bedford-Sandy rail link, we started off wanting more-or-less an extension of Bletchley-Bedford running on to Sandy as a minimum with connections to the north-south main line as an interchange. Cambridge as a nodal place of magnetic proportions loomed always in the background with past and future aspirations always 'there'. Means-ways were mooted, found but came to nothing. A vision for 10 miles of partly reinstated and new railway, were blown out of all proportions to astronomicalism, and now at £4.5 billion budget and many professionals engaged as in a rugby scrum half, the fight is 'on', but Northern Route E creates as many problems as it purports to solve and at the Cambridge end, South Cambs District Council objects all the way having done nothing to protect the old route or realignment space alongside it. There are no panaceas. The old route at Cambridge is severely blocked with M11 looming large and the list after that is monumental by our standards. More is the pity, but

again, can lessons be learnt elsewhere to make recovering a railway easier?



We face an existential crisis. Time and resources are finite. Religion can be a tremendous source of hope and faith leads to vision and aspiration for a bit of heaven here on earth. Entrenched polemics can lead to introversion and the worst of humanity, when we actually need some coming together, agreement that we do need a railway and a recognition that some sacrifices, compensation and relocation in some cases serves the greater good, but that speed and stealth is not the answer either, as alienate enough people and you get more upgraded roads and congestion/parking problems and all the associated dysfunctions with that default agenda of pollution, land which cannot be used for things we cherish like farming, conservation, recreation, housing and places of employment appropriately balanced to the round of the quality of life and proportionate to need and demand, not just market whim or vested interests.

Richard Pill
03-04-2022

Captions Above:

1. 1988 Class 317 heads towards Sandy on the slow line of the East Coast Main Line.
2. 1989 Looking east and north-east from Girtford Bridge, now 33 years later all built up!
3. ECML looking northwards with old Fallowfield's link inserted during the war visible.
4. Diagram of our predecessor organisation, shows how we once thought the rail link could go. Now all built over.
5. 1988: Fallowfield's just north of now Sunderland Road, Sandy, all built over now.
6. 1988: Shows houses being built as 'Station Court' at Blunham. Now all compromised, no deviation spaces available. Hence our call for a new alignment north of Blunham.



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