

English Regional Transport Association (ERTA)

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Report on Brackmills Meeting, Northampton 26-02-2022 by Richard Pill

The Brackmills meeting was intended to discuss matters pertaining to the re-railing of the Northampton Castle Station to Brackmills Industrial Estate as a rail link for better public transport, freight by rail and general accessibility more than the current situation informs. In a background of growing developments of various sorts across the whole Northampton area be it business, warehouses and residential estates, the direct linkage to increased traffic and associated congestion is a major local problem and ever apparent.

Northampton has a reasonable north-south West Coast Main Line (WCML) railway but a lack of east-west radial rails and a lack of a direct rail link with its regional partners in the East Midlands like Leicester, Nottingham and Derby for example, means all north-south movements tend to go by road including the congested M1 and A508 for example. ERTA dearly wants to see the Northampton-Market Harborough rail link put back with deviations where blockages exist and new-build where necessary. The end-to-end linkage and benefits should not be under-estimated. However, the way ahead to get it delivered is equally as challenging and Government seems to be sending mixed messages to say the least on road and rail. Road has a much, much greater budget for expansion than rail and yet, despite COP26 and the concerned about a need for modal shift, cutting emissions and the sheer inefficiencies of congestion, Government panders to the construe of a roads-based society with rail as a nicety, but acting as if expendable commodity and

approaching it as a middle-class play thing, whereas it should be mainstay for most freight and local-regional people movements. It once was, the closures secured the trend towards roads locked-in and only reopening can rebalance our transport infrastructure and inform more modal choices for all.

The meet, the first of its kind, attracted some 12 representatives and was generally a constructive and outward-looking event. It covered yes, the Brackmills Branch Re-Rail Project, but also other rail issues across Northamptonshire specifically but reaching out for partnerships where common support could be found. So, items included taking Brackmills Re-Rail forward and the technicalities involved like Northampton Station layout, capacity, reconnecting the branch to north-south lines and through running into platforms. The road bridge could be reconfigured/replaced, platforms could be reconfigured, and these issues serve a wider purpose than just Brackmills interest, it could create more tracks and capacity for current and future other growths including serving DIRFT and Northampton Freight Depot, trains to Market Harborough and Leicester northwards and Milton Keynes, Oxford, Swindon, Aylesbury and Old Oak Common southwards.

Other highlights were in sum:

- A, Daventry: Harry Burr is pioneering a new station and/or new rail link to the Daventry area
- B. David Ferguson flagged up a new station for Roade to catch growing development and the A508 south of Northampton saving people driving into the town centre if they wish to travel to places like Milton Keynes and London for example or indeed visiting further north beyond Northampton with less drive-time.
- C. Northampton-Market Harborough serves multiple linkages and could enable, with a north-west curve at the Northampton end direct running to DIRFT.
- D. On the Northampton Loop Line, a third track could be looked at for more freight by rail. HS2 is supposed to free up capacity, but more by rail needs more tracks on existing lines and reopenings for greater connectivity as to what rail can provide/tap into new markets.
- E. Stations on the Midland Main Line, now electrification to Corby and Market Harborough has/is happening. Places like Oakley, Sharnbrook, Irchester (serving wider Rushden), Burton Latimer, Desborough and Kibworth should be looked at. The slow lines can provide separate local services to fast-lines which only stop at principal stations. Spacing stations out at 5–10-mile distances enable even distribution of patronage and spreads the load with the gains.
- F. Brackmills needs better public transport for people and goods options. The No. 41 bus service linking Bedford and Northampton has been cut to 1.5 hours interval frequency and takes 1.5 hours journey duration. This is unacceptable for courting regular usage and serving the potential commute, business and visitorship the two towns could be doing with each other if a new faster end-to-end service was fostered. Spiral up or down, it is down currently and for those who want more flexibility, X5 Bedford-MK Central and train to Northampton is the best option it appears, albeit more expensive!

Conclusion: Oh, that all under 65's was given concessionary bus and rail passes if on £20, 000 p.a. or less and Government-backed a drive to greater usage of the public transport system. What will

it take to inform modal shift? A lot more than the spiralling down of public transport and the ability to make public transport much more amenable, affordable and accessible. Currently this is not the case and whatever it takes, should be where Power, Authority and Resource Stewardship should be leading from the front. Meanwhile, incremental line and station reopenings, offer a life-line for optimising the getting more people and goods back on the rails in greater and lesser volumes. We can all do our bit and ERTA will do what it can as well.

Leicester, Capacity and Northampton-Market Harborough Rails

- Leicester is not just a gateway to the East Midlands Region; it is also a gateway from and pivotal part of the East Midlands. That diversity means it is a place people want to get to, through and from for a variety of reasons and purposes and that the mode they choose to use will be centred around norms, costs and access options.
- Northampton is supposed to be part of the East Midlands Regional take, but also comes into the sub-regional sphere of South Midlands, yet Northampton has no direct rail link connection with Leicester/East Midlands and vice versa.
- Reopening Northampton-Market Harborough would provide multiple links and serve numerous markets. There's local, providing a rail choice, currently lacking along the A508 corridor and challenging the M1 which does link Leicester and Northampton of modal choice and market share for people and goods more by rail as part of modal shift and environmentally 'greening' agendas.
- Northampton – Market Harborough Rail Link offers Oxford/Watford-Milton Keynes-Northampton-Leicester and beyond and vice versa. That is new linkages of expanded populations which were not present when the line shut as part of the Serpell Report of the early 1980's. Yes, the passenger service was withdrawn during the 1960's, when Milton Keynes was not built and Northampton half its current size or less, but was used for freight until the end.
- A curve could be provided at the southern end from north-west for direct running from Felixstowe and anywhere else to the inland port of Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal (DIRFT) and vice versa. The line could also serve the new Northampton Rail Freight Depot as well as wider north-south and making use of east-west (Oxford-Bletchley) for rail to grow into a larger inter-regional share of markets.
- Capacity on the Midland Main Line (MML) is constrained apparently. But ERTA's solution is to have a new Bedford-Northampton 'not via Olney' line constructed which would enable some diversionary traffic off MML tracks between Bedford and Market Harborough which in turn would create more paths for MML services (passenger and freight). Looking at electrification north of Market Harborough-Sheffield could coincide with widening the MML and tracks through Leicester to service more rail-based operations. Where can be done, it should and is long overdue for such a consideration.
- The issue of business case, should warrant powers that be taking an interest, studying and making the case to tick boxes of candidacy to court what investment may be available for more and ultimately progressing the delivery of these rail links. The can't, won't and don't mantras of armchair critics, even so-called rail ones, should be challenged with pro-active pursuit of this rail agenda, as those critics are consigned to a roads-only 20th century tunnel vision which does not

see rail as pivotal except big spend footprints like High-Speed solutions. We may need both, but leave it to them and half-baked more of the same is most likely to be the default in short roads, roads and more roads with congestion!

- Widening a green corridor for incorporating twin-track rails, cycleways and footpaths will take some doing, but short-medium-long term, could be plan-directed to adapt terrain to it.

Amphill delusions and exclusions!

The saga for keeping options open remains our quest!

<p>On the 2nd March 2022 we received the notice of deliberations of the Amphill Town Council regarding the station idea for the said town. It had a well-used station until 1959 and was closed due to economy more than usage. Population has doubled since then even locally and 20 years ago, when a study showed it could be done still, the objection was too far from the town centre! Now subsequent development has filled in the gaps so that it is continuous development between Town Centre and A507 former bypass onwards to the industrial estate. The town council's views were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amphill is adequately served by Flitwick Station, • Active travel and public transport links to Flitwick exist, and ATC's priority is to support and work towards improving these, • ATC is concerned about encroachment onto Greenbelt land beyond the mainline, • Current railway development proposals (such as East-West Rail) are towards fewer stations well supported by active travel and public transport links. A proposal for a station at Amphill is contrary to current trends and therefore not a good use of council time or investment. • If you support the railway station lands being protected to keep the option open, the station idea being studied further and pursuit of reopening please write to: 	<p>The ERTA Response:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Amphill and Flitwick are close to each other, but that is not unique on the rail network. Luton and Luton Airport Parkway are just one local example. 2. The railway station at Amphill would provide more capacity for rail usage, parking and riding which Flitwick, due to the fact the lands around it are all built up with non-railway development, cannot expand more. So as growth returns to the network post-pandemic, these issues and that of local aggravations through on-street parking will be exacerbated more. 3. Buses are being cut left, right and centre and are not a fixed asset. Whereas railways, especially a main line are more permanent notwithstanding a complete outburst of Government folly! The railway station, serving all south of Wixams, Marston Vale, Milton Keynes, M1-A507, Centre Parcs to the west and A6/Wrest Park/Silsoe to the east would serve about 15, 000 catchment, leaving Flitwick with an equivalent amount. People tend to drive south in the commute to London, as it saves fuel costs and gives drive-time which many value for time to themselves. 4. Land west of the Midland Main Line to Fordfield Road, was tabled as to be developed by 2030, so ideas of
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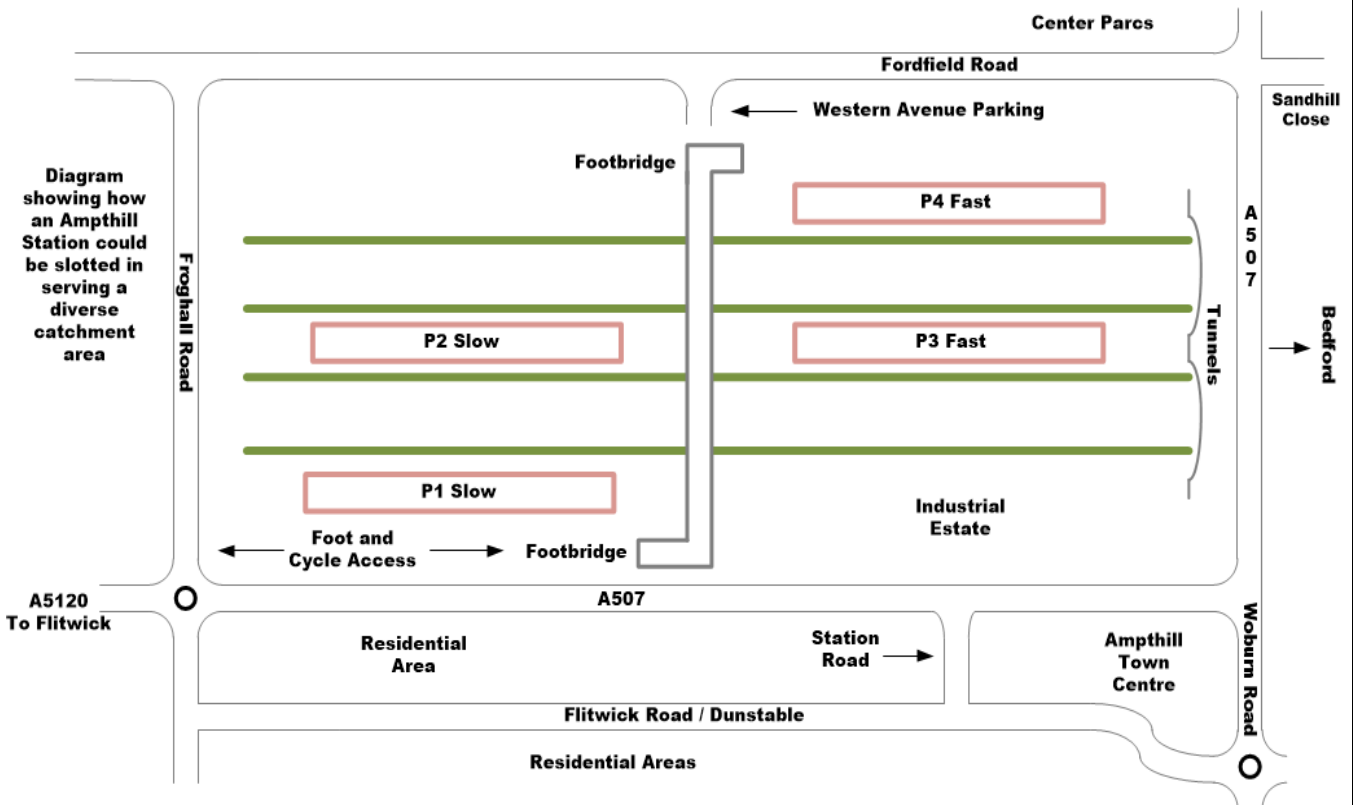
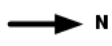
1. Ampt Hill Town Council, Ampt Hill Town Council, Park Lodge, Ampt Hill Great Park, Woburn Street, Ampt Hill, MK45 2HX.
2. Central Beds Council, Priory House, Monks Walk, Chicksands, Shefford, Bedfordshire, SG17 5TQ
3. For emails and elected councillors see websites: <https://www.ampt Hill-tc.gov.uk/> and https://www.centralbedfordshire.gov.uk/directory/14/your_councillors/category/67
4. Local MP covering Ampt Hill-Flitwick (Mid Bedfordshire) is Nadine Dorries via House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA
Phone: 020 7219 5928
Email: nadine.dorries.mp@parliament.uk
Contact giving support for our call for an additional Ampt Hill Station to serve a growing catchment. Congestion is the alternative!

Greenbelt seem at odds with that intention? Relocating the Industrial Estate in part to the west with road access from the west, enables more and a station which could benefit all, not least year-round footfall, spend and visitorship as well as employee access minus land-use parking demands.

5. The comparison with possible proposals to close stations on the Bedford-Bletchley Railway as part of a plan by East-West Rail are hardly comparable with the spread of distance or demand for stations on the Midland Main Line served by Thameslink's on the slow lines which could, at 4-5 each way per hour could be staggered in any case to ensure a good half-hourly or thrice-hourly frequency.

25-Aug-2020

Ampt Hill Station Proposal



Not to scale
© R. PIII/ERTA

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East-West Rail – the doom, gloom and truth!

Things are taking a turn for the worse on East-West Rail even as tracks are progressively being laid in and around the Bletchley flyover and Winslow areas. Divide as ever, there's Oxford/Aylesbury-Milton Keynes Central and Bedford and then the Central Section of Bedford-Cambridge.

Starting Oxford-Milton Keynes, the conundrum of whether HS2 should go over or under the east-west formation remains to be resolved and we get conflicting stories. Someone said "as long as they get built, I don't care". But if the east-west rail is to haul more freight from road to rail, it needs the benefits a straight and flat railway course can provide, not humps. Likewise, Aylesbury-East-West rail has had tracks removed in the Calvert area and the land-take of HS2 means a new alignment east of former formation and a new 'Claydon Junction' east of the old one is required. ERTA has long called for a Claydon Station to serve a growing catchment and relief to Winslow in a context of growth north of the arc. These issues are remaining to be resolved and delay, conundrum and a need for fixing is palpable.

Meanwhile, ERTA calls for the same approach to the former Great Central corridor, for a new junction off the new Claydon Junction going northwards to serve a new course of railway serving east of Brackley 'Brackley Parkway' – the Brackley area being one of the largest towns in England without a local, accessible railway station and HS2, because of its nature will not provide stations between Solihull and Old Oak Common, so plenty of scope for a local, domestic rail line as well.

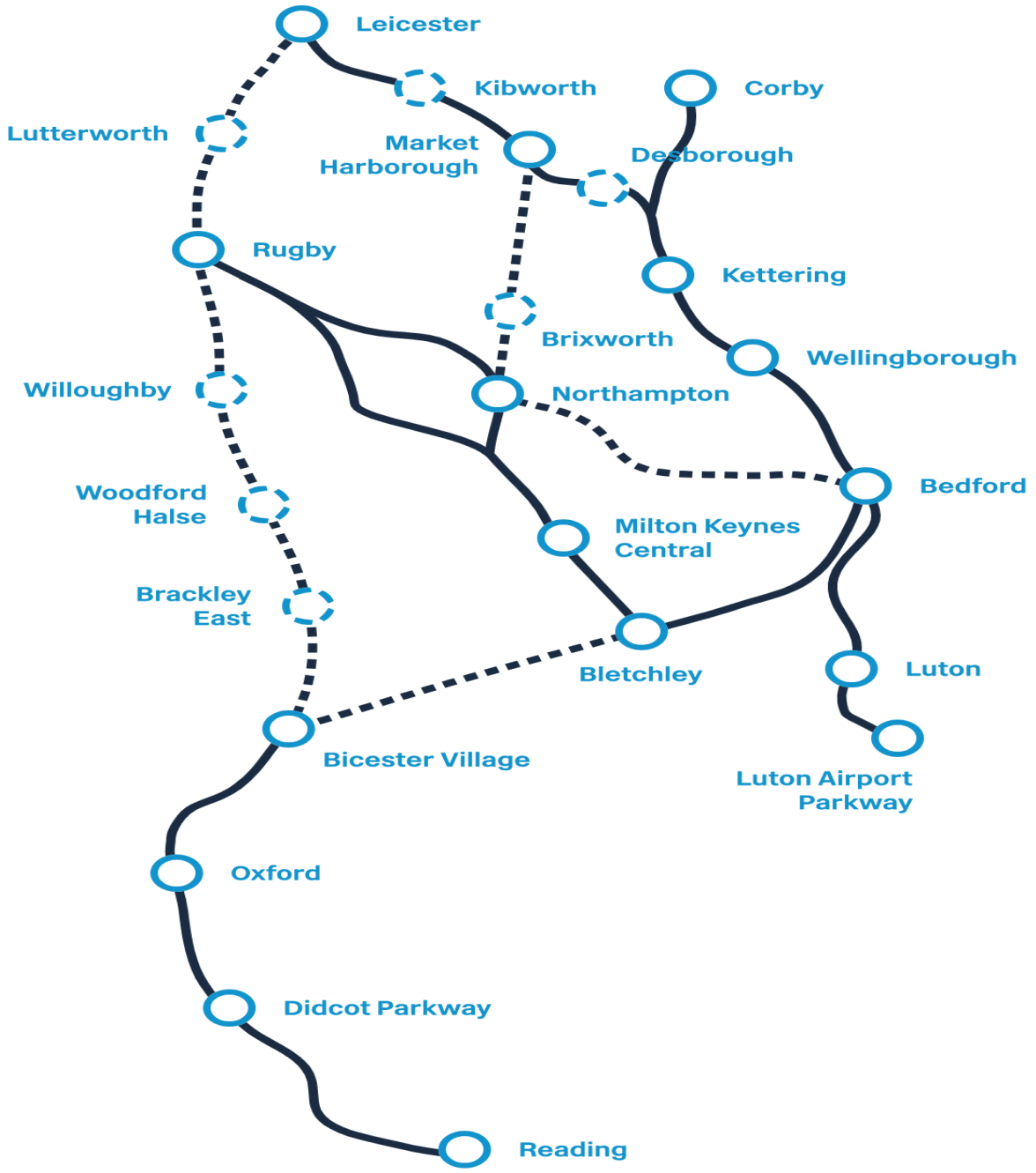
On Bedford-Cambridge – Central Section, we have a vehement lobby against the railway, against the Oxbridge Arc concept and to be fair the bate was given in the perverse 2019 East-West Rail Consultation whereby the original route via St John's Bedford was not included, and either bypass Bedford to the south or go through Bedford Midland and head north-east up a grand hill and yet more hills and scant detail as to how it would negotiate Black Cat Roundabout (A1) being expanded with more road space. Politicians have made the Northern Route 'E' a do or bust in their support for an east-west rail and have also discounted the former old route with counter proposals to block it with infill housing. This is again a wrong approach and lacks both creativity, imagination and realism.

The former Bedford-Cambridge route ERTA has called for as a lone voice in the wilderness, requires:

- No housing in Bedford urban cordon and as yet opponents have failed to identify what housing specifically is at risk.
- The old formation is flat land on embankment, following the Great River Ouse.
- Two level crossings and a raising of the A421 Bypass is required and a realignment around Willington and new alignment north of Blunham to approach the Tempsford plains from the south-westerly direction.
- ERTA has long called for direct east-west and north-south rail links to be physically linked at Tempsford, not segregated as the 2019 Consultation purported.

Although diagram below should have the GC Route Re-alignment proposal going off the east-west rail further east than it displays, none-the-less this 'map of intent' is a fine effort from our friend Mr Harry Burr:

ERTA South Midlands Vision Copyright R. Pill/ERTA 2022
Only principal routes/stations shown



- Existing corridors
- Restored corridors
- Existing principal stations
- New stations

Useful Summary:

Old Route Comparison/ERTA Notes	Objections, fallacy and/or extras
ERTA prefers the old route via old St John's. Whether that means reversing into and out of Bedford Midland and new south-facing bays, should be studied as a part of new station design.	Argument, we must focus all links on Bedford Midland, you can't have two viable stations. Yet, Bicester on east-west rail has two stations with connecting bus links and does adequately well.
If you made the old St John's an 8-coach long station, you would not be able to divert tracks from east to north, it would be a straight east-west and north-south divide. However, if you come from west-north via the Route E option, you discount any east-north direct running anyway as you abandon that route completely!	That may be true, as we state, 2 stations co-existed for best part of 100 years and ability to get a connecting bus link going, maybe part of a new orbital serving new stations, Tavistock Street and the refurbished High Street (footfall and spend) should be looked at. Using the Hitchin arches and a diamond crossing rail, you may still be able to do a direct east-north movement.
It can be argued the old route east of St John's causes no housing to be demolished.	Route E demands housing in Poets and Ravensden to be demolished or tunnelled under.
The old route east of St John's requires 2 controversial level crossings and raising the A421 Bypass.	Route E requires a steep inclined flyover over A428 and A6 trunk road bypasses to ascend the hills and descent via Black Cat Roundabout to a flood plain.
ERTA proposes using the former formation until west of Willington and a deviation around built Willington to head north of built Blunham. We reject the can't, won't and don't brigade psychology as head-in-the-sand. Yes, you can is the answer, it requires studies making the case, it requires lobbying including the Office of Road and Rail (ORR).	You can't get level crossings these days! You can't raise dual carriageway bypasses for a local railway either! You can't slew cycle/footpaths for railways nor a bird sanctuary at Willington. Reality is, had studies been done to address and call-for these instead of getting north of Bedford Midland, we would not be in the pickle and conundrum today. Can we learn lessons? A thousand miles begins with a single step!
ERTA believes, get Bedford-East Coast Main Line (Tempsford) built and then look again at options to Cambridge and Ely respectively for wider East Anglia disseminations to and from.	The northern Route E, fails to deliver, needs huge expense for a design of a switchback! Useless for freight and at huge cost to residential housing and much else. It can be avoided via St John's with or without a second station.
Richard Pill has been associated with calls for East-West Rails East of Bedford since 1987. A basic railway can always be upgraded.	The East-West Consortium was founded from 1994. The old route was removed 1967 and built on from mid-1970's starting with Sandy.
<p>Conclusion: The professional lobby for a full east-west rail link rumbles on, whilst a vehement NIMBY opposition calls for complete derailment of the entire project. Somewhere between the twixt, is the truth of yes, we need a rail link, yes, we need common sense and no we don't need to build every inch of former or new route per se, rather our route which capitalises on best-use. There have been numerous studies and 2019 Consultation was a departure! Protecting old routes is prudent and provident! Our suggestion is flatter, shorter, probably cheaper and avoids clutter at Bedford Midland. What is not to like contrast the Northern Route E option? If only the powers that be would!</p>	