

Putting right Norfolk's £150m rail mistake

Hunstanton's new campaign to rejoin the national network is a 'how to do it' lesson for others, says HOWARD JOHNSTON

If you need any evidence that British Railways deliberately drove many of its secondary routes out of business in the 1960s, you need look no further than King's Lynn-Hunstanton, a once healthy and prosperous line that underpinned the North West Norfolk economy and did its job well.

It is now 49 years since the last trains ran, and locals are asking the same straightforward question: How do we get the 15¼-mile railway back into one of the UK's finest coastal resorts, and how quickly?

A petition that started on the worldwide *change.org* website by Ely-based campaigner Georgina Turner in May 2017 has gained such momentum that the idea of reinstatement is being actively discussed by Norfolk county transport strategists, district planners, and

MPs and local politicians forever looking for oxygen. At the same time, protesters are also mobilising themselves to stop any new railway ploughing through their back gardens.

The clear ambition is to get Norfolk County Council to include it in its definite transport plan. The King's Lynn-Hunstanton Railway Project team will then have done its job, and it can take its foot off the pedal.

We are talking about a line that was once closely associated with the Royal Family (the intermediate station at Wolferton is

on the doorstep to their winter retreat at Sandringham House and has hosted many European heads of state).

Poet Laureate Sir John Betjeman also made a short black-and-white film in 1962, which is readily available on YouTube.

The project group has already been sensibly advised to steer clear of such romantic nostalgia, and study instead the tactics of successful groups such as SELRAP (the Skipton East Lancashire Railway Partnership), which started a campaign that has at long

last persuaded the Government to relay the 12-mile missing link between Skipton and Colne.

A rail revival in Norfolk as soon as practicable will defuse several potential time bombs. First, the number of residents aged over 60 in North West Norfolk is a worrying third above the national average, and they need

better transport to get to the nearest hospital at King's Lynn. Second, there is little skilled work for young people, who tend to leave the area as soon as they leave school.

Day tripper sun and sand seekers are crucial to the local economy, but they regularly turn the main A149 single carriageway road into gridlock for long periods throughout the

summer. This also prevents communities further along the coast being able to get to King's Lynn without long journeys.

A significant potential freight customer would be the exploiter of the vast silica sand deposits that are located near Dersingham, halfway along the old/new railway route. This would successfully address concerns from residents not wanting hundreds of noisy heavy goods vehicles keeping them awake at night.

Use of rail transport could, crucially, finance the reconstruction of much of the railway without having to resort to the taxpayer.

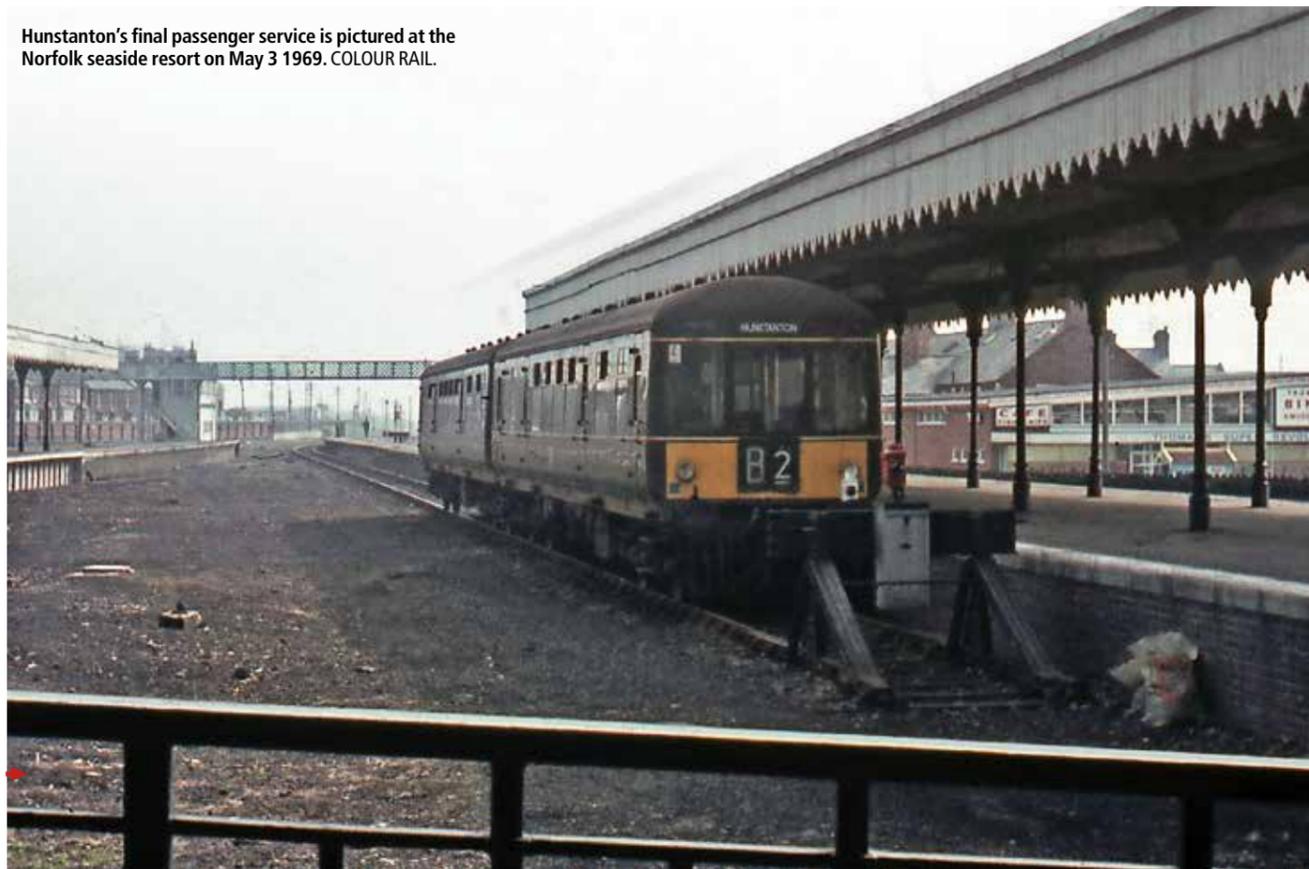
There has been a quantum shift in the →

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Class 31 D5664 (31237) prepares to depart Hunstanton on Friday July 27 1962. The station's decline had begun two years earlier with the loss of direct services to London Liverpool Street.
D OVENDEN/COLOUR RAIL.



Hunstanton's final passenger service is pictured at the Norfolk seaside resort on May 3 1969. COLOUR RAIL.



► attitude of local authorities over the last year. Transport policymaker Norfolk County Council has coincidentally turned pro-rail, and at the end of January announced a £350,000 study to acquire the trackbeds of the Hunstanton and Lynn-Fakenham routes with a view to converting them to cycleways

The revivalists

The King's Lynn Hunstanton Railway Project group has a strong membership that includes senior former railwaymen, engineers, planners, local figures, and consultants.

Latest revival moves go a long way to answering comments by former BR Board member, Strategic Rail Authority executive director, and now Railfuture senior officer Chris Austin in his 2015 book *Disconnected!: Broken Links in Britain's Rail Policy*. He says: "Local support for reopening has been patchy and lacks and drive and focus seen in other parts of the country where lines have been reopened. Hunstanton appears condemned to remain remote from the rail network, forever held back by road congestion and peripherality."

As well as raising public awareness with open days and exhibitions, the group has an online petition, and is a source of advice for MPs, Norfolk County and West Norfolk borough council members and officials. Its next ambition is to commission a professional feasibility study.

and footpaths. Sources close to the author have revealed that this is part of a somewhat greater game plan to get control of disused railways everywhere in the county (even where they have been built over), and identify detours around obstacles. Any new cycleway would have space for co-habiting with trains at some future date.

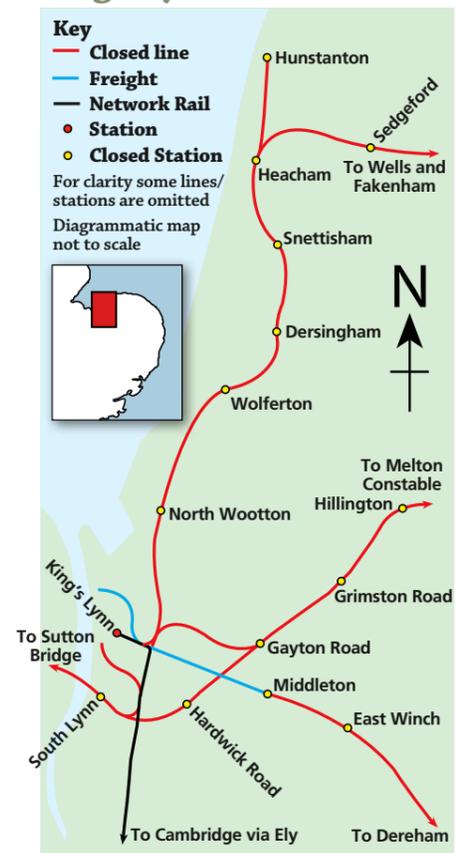
West Norfolk Borough Council, which is responsible for granting planning approval, soundly dismissed any railway revival in its 2008 Hunstanton town development document, describing it twice in a tiny 100-word panel as "unviable". The concept is now being actively discussed in open forum.

The builders of the original King's Lynn-Hunstanton line went to some lengths to avoid heavy engineering. Despite some encroachment by new development since closure in 1969, there is plenty of open space for a new route to be laid out to better serve the large-scale housing over the last 50 years.

Until just a couple of years ago, little or no regard was given to encroachment. The worst travesty is possibly the Lynnsport leisure complex, built across the trackbed just north of Kings Lynn in 1991 when there were clearly other sites available. The intermediate stations survive in relatively good order at North Wootton (private house) Wolferton (private homes and museum), Dersingham (builder's yard), Snettisham (private house), and Heacham (guest house and private museum). None is likely to be reused.

By-passes for the villages thankfully resisted the temptation to adopt the trackbed,

King's Lynn to Hunstanton



A signal and a single bullhead track length displayed on the site of Hunstanton station (now a vast public car park) are a powerful reminder that North West Norfolk needs its trains back. Only the old coal office building survived when the main buildings and platforms were obliterated in the early 1970s. HOWARD JOHNSTON.

although the A149 severs the railway on the western edge of Snettisham and a large housing estate has been built immediately north of Heacham station. Immediately south of Hunstanton, a roadway uses the alignment to serve the Searles leisure and holiday homes complex. Just before the former Hunstanton terminus (now a council-owned car park), planners have quite recently sanctioned a new home on the site of the old level crossing, and a

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pub/restaurant close to it. You can take your pick - it could go either side of the A149 road, and there are still two ‘live’ Network Rail locations on the east and west sides of King's Lynn where junctions could be installed. A western line would use the docks branch, which despite being partly submerged in undergrowth is still officially operational, and follow the Wash coastline a little more

A two-car DMU waits at Hunstanton with a local stopping service to King's Lynn on June 20 1967. Lifting of the double track section between King's Lynn and Wolferton had commenced earlier in the year, turning the route into a 15-mile siding for its final two years of operation. COLOUR RAIL.



➔ closely. This would reach the silica sand deposits quite easily.

An eastern line would make use of the Middleton Towers branch, which the short remaining section of the old King's Lynn-Dereham line used by sand trains. From a new junction, it would run due north past the Queen Elizabeth Hospital (the area's largest employer with 2,400 staff), and new light industrial and housing developments. The line might then straddle the A149 to serve the major villages of Dersingham and Snettisham (one new station for both villages might suffice), avoid a blockage at Heacham, and reach a new terminus about a mile beyond.

At the northern end, the vast area once occupied by Hunstanton station and its sidings is now a vast asphalted car park, which is heavily used in the summer. The solution therefore might be new parkway-style platforms on what is currently a school sports field (relocation would need to be considered), and being next to the A149 would also be

“ The construction cost might be in the region of £100m to £150m - two thirds of the cost of the Cambridge-St Ives guided busway in 2011. ”

convenient for large outlying communities such as Brancaster and Docking.

It can be hoped that service provision can be incorporated into the next Great Northern passenger franchise, with through services from London King's Cross if electrification is possible.

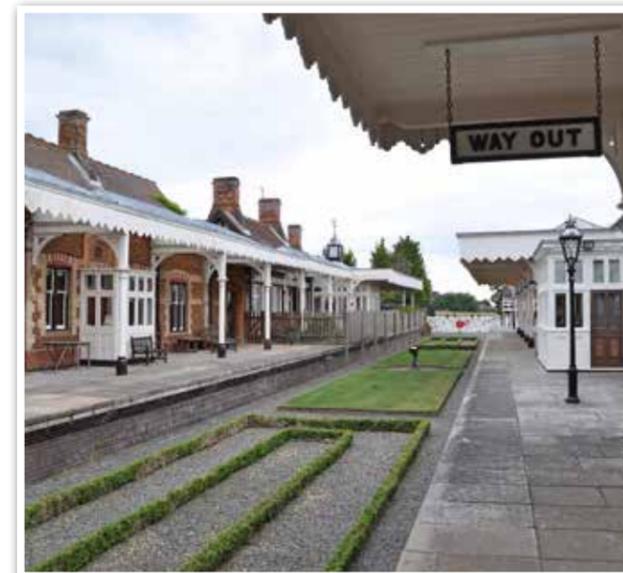
The present Cambridge-King's Lynn main line suffers from the short-sighted singling of the Littleport-Downham Market section in the 1980s. Train crews also blame much of the late running on the congestion caused by Virgin

Trains and local services over the double-track bottleneck Welwyn Viaduct on the East Coast Main Line south of Hitchin.

There is also scope to integrate with the proposed new March-Wisbech service. In the much longer term, if railways really are revived in a big way, the former King's Lynn-Wisbech line could be fairly easy to reinstate over agricultural land from the old main line junction at Watlington (formerly Magdalen Road), although there are problems with new development blocking the Wisbech end.

This service would take some of the pressure off the precarious A47 riverbank road between Wisbech and Guyhirn, and provide through trains again to the East Midlands via Peterborough (unavailable since 1968).

While breached here and there by development, the old 15¼-mile King's Lynn-Hunstanton line benefits from not having any major structures to replace; a new alignment would only require a single rail bridge over the A149 road.



The last Royal Trains ran to Wolferton station in 1966, and when Her Majesty The Queen travels by rail from London to Sandringham House every Christmas, she now goes the last few miles from King's Lynn by car. The ornate station is still maintained in immaculate condition, and the private owner of the eastern platform building welcomes summer visitors. HOWARD JOHNSTON.

Dr Beeching not to blame for closure

For the record, 'Railway Doctor' Richard Beeching was not an enemy of North West Norfolk, as the Hunstanton line was not on his hit list. It features clearly on his 1963 retention map.

The closure decision was taken by Labour Transport Minister Barbara Castle, after severe operating economies and a nosedive reduction in service quality drove passengers away. She refused a Social Railway grant because the annual losses had risen to an unacceptable £40,000 a year by 1968 (almost £500,000 in today's money).

British Railways had actively turned away the holidaymakers that were the lifeblood of the King's Lynn-Hunstanton by cutting out through trains. They also diverted 80% of its revenue overnight by adjusting the accounts, tore up track to prevent excursions running, and allowed all the stations to become vandalised ruins by laying off staff in favour of conductor guards.

Peter Wakefield, vice-chairman of Railfuture East Anglia, has told campaigners: "It's safe to say that in 1969 we threw away an asset that today could be worth £150m."

A cursory glance at the rundown of the route between 1960 and its total closure nine years later reveals a startling list of actions that RAIL readers might well associate with routes elsewhere in the UK that were dealt the same treatment at this time.

Hunstanton, a slightly genteel but high-quality resort on the northwestern tip of Norfolk facing The Wash, is a Victorian version of the New Town. Pre-dating Skelmersdale, Stevenage, Newton Aycliffe, Corby, Basildon, Milton Keynes, Telford, Runcorn and Cumbernauld by many years, it was a table-top creation to stimulate new housing and prosperity.

It began when wealthy local landowner Henry Styleman LeStrange speculatively built the *Golden Lion* hotel (still in business) on windswept land close to the cliffs. He needed business, and building a railway was a quick route to growth. He enlisted partners to promote the Lynn & Hunstanton Railway Company, which incorporated in 1861, a year before his early death at just 47.

The ambition was to link up with the Great Eastern Railway at King's Lynn to provide

fast connections to London and East Anglia. Mapping out the Hunstanton line virtually on the level meant that rapid progress could be made with construction, and it opened on October 3 1862, just ten months after the first sod had been dug, and also within its £80,000 budget. The profusion of new holiday homes made it a success from the outset.

Rail users enjoyed the cheap day return excursions from London and the East Midlands, and evening expresses that allowed for long distance commuting even though it took three hours (ironically about the same as today, including the car/journey to King's Lynn), and many of them included restaurant cars. Pre-war, there were more than a dozen services at weekends, justifying platform extensions, expanded terminus buildings, and extra carriage sidings added.

In the peak summer season in the 1930s, the line (of which only the first six-and-a-half miles north from Lynn to Wolferton were double track), was traversed by a dozen locomotive-hauled excursions in a single day, so many that the operating staff developed a system of sending them all north in the

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morning, parking them up, and returning them south in succession at teatime. Somehow, local stopping services and freight were slotted in between, making full use of the long passing loops.

The decline began with the closure of the Midland & Great Northern cross-country route from Leicester to King's Lynn (and onto Norwich and Great Yarmouth) on February 28 1959, cutting off a host of important connections at a stroke, particularly the East Midlands.

It is wrong to state that the growth of private motor car use, and road coaches, were wholly responsible for the rapid decline in business. The axing of through services from London Liverpool Street from November 1960, officially to use the rolling stock elsewhere, was the turning point, because holidaymakers now had to change at King's Lynn for an inferior all-stations DMU. They might not choose to do that twice.

As noted author and researcher Stanley Jenkins explains, over 210,000 passengers were logged as arriving at Hunstanton station in 1960, and the ticket office also issued 44,000 tickets to local people heading south. But then the rules were changed.

Was BR Eastern Region management deliberately massaging the figures with a sinister motive? New accounting procedures slashed the official annual patronage by over 80% by disallowing arrivals. Why were revenues logged at Liverpool Street, Cambridge or Bedford ignored, when it was clear that they were also generating business for North West Norfolk? Blame certainly does not rest with ER general manager Gerry

Fiennes and Norwich divisional manager Claude Hankin. They oversaw a cost-cutting exercise to keep the line open, including pioneering minimum-cost 'Paytrains' and staff reductions. However, the BR board was having none of it.

Dieselisation of most East Anglian local services had taken place in 1955 with the arrival of two-car Derby 'Lightweight' DMUs, which were declared non-standard in 1968 and withdrawn in favour of equally clapped-out Gloucester RC&W Class 100 units redundant from closures in Scotland. Their internal condition was memorably deplorable; works attention was possibly at a minimum because it was known they would soon also become surplus and making their own one-way journey to the breaker's yard.

The lifting of the double track section between King's Lynn and Wolferton in spring 1967 effectively turned the line into a 15-mile siding, and there was a simultaneous loss of passing loops, signalboxes (left in situ with unsightly broken windows and rusty levers), although a couple of crossings optimistically went over to automatic half barrier operation.

Further signs of dereliction and disinterest were the ripping out of the carriage stabling facilities at Hunstanton, leaving only one track into a central platform. Even the once prestigious *Sandringham Hotel*, just beyond the end of the buffer stops, and bought by the local council after the war, was bulldozed.

Closure day was May 3 1969 - right at the start of the summer season - and in common with other lines across the country, efforts by local groups to run the line could not keep pace with demolition contracts.

Compare this contemporary view of the windswept site of Hunstanton station (now a soulless car park) with those found in books, on websites (and on pages 66-67). On summer weekends in the 1950s, thousands of day trippers - more than the town's entire population - crowded the platforms, and the 20-plus departures included train formations of up to 13 coaches. HOWARD JOHNSTON.



About the author

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Howard's long and varied media career has included spells with national newspapers and as an editor and publisher. A rolling stock owner, he is a renowned transport author, and has written for every issue of RAIL.

