

Analysis

Getting to the heart of the matter

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Rail reopenings: where is the money coming from?

WISBECH lies at the end of a closed eight-mile branch line from March. Its station closed in 1968, although the line lasted longer, carrying pet food until 2000.

The line's track is heavily overgrown in places, with some level crossings now hidden under tarmac. Nothing remains of the town's three stations, with one subsumed by the pet food factory and the others by housing.

Despite this industry and the surrounding fields of crops, Wisbech is reckoned to be economically poor in terms of skills and access to jobs by public transport, as well as having above-average youth unemployment. Local business talks of skills shortages.

A new report from the Campaign for Better Transport (CBT) suggests that reopening this and other towns' rail links could help. Its introduction says: "Reopening railways has the potential to

A Campaign for Better Transport report has identified routes that could benefit from restoration of passenger services, but funding remains a problem to be solved. PHILIP HAIGH examines the problems

transform communities. For both passengers and freight, rail is a high-quality national transport network that can give people access to a wealth of social and economic opportunities. It can support local economies; expanding labour markets and encouraging new investment and development. It can help tackle regional inequalities, making economically disadvantaged parts of the country more attractive for investment."

Wisbech lies 38 miles by rail from Cambridge and 23 miles from Peterborough, both of them centres of major activity and employment. A rail link could help bring people

to those jobs, just as the Borders line in Scotland helps feed (and was justified on) Edinburgh's need for workers. But that risks taking the life from towns such as Wisbech, rather than injecting new spirit.

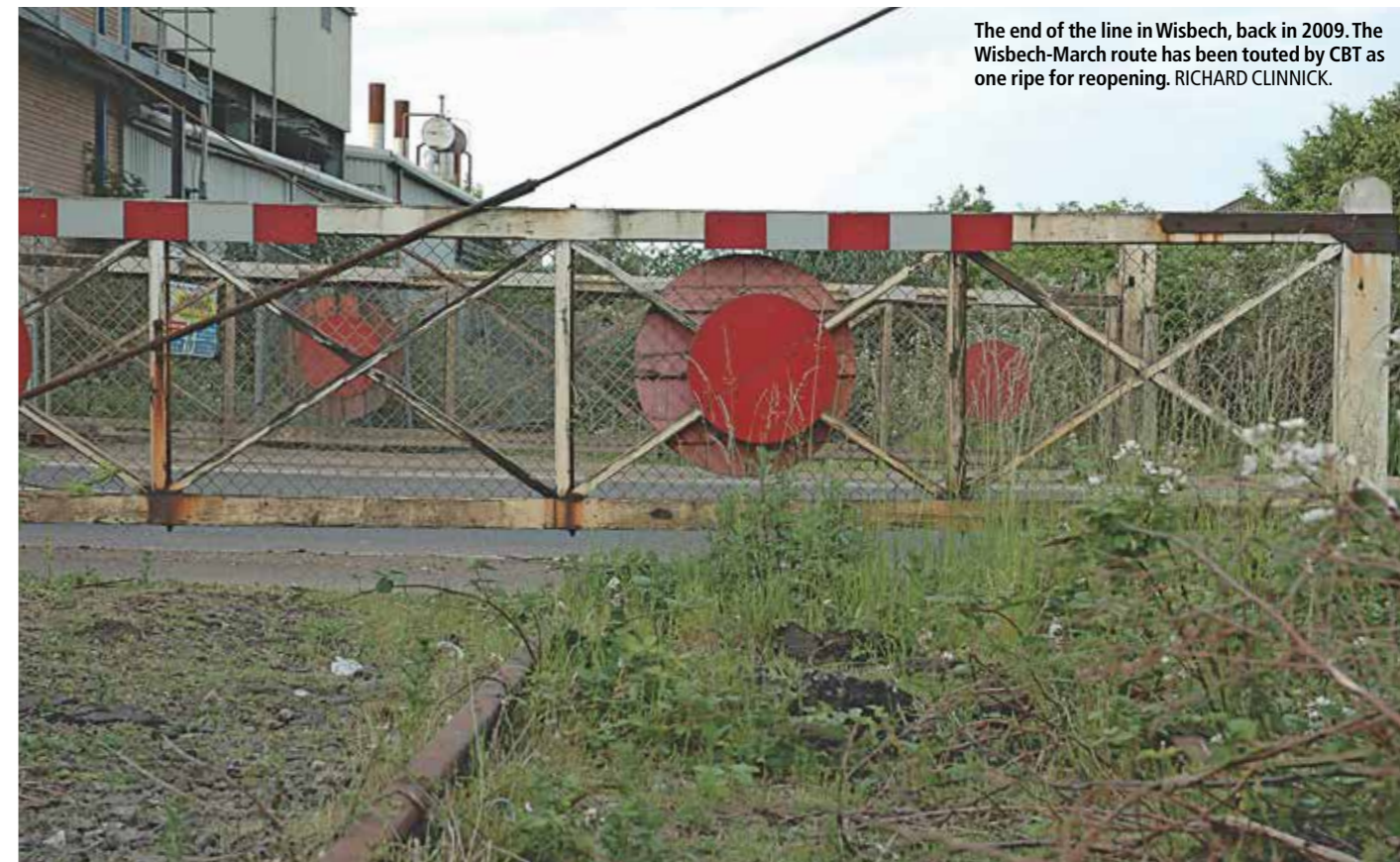
Talk of reopening rail lines captures headlines from time to time, but there's very little progress in returning passenger trains to disused rail corridors, or even to lines that already exist but only carry freight. Scotland has enjoyed some success, but that's beginning to be history with neither Transport Scotland nor the country's current government having ever authorised a line's reopening.

In London, trains have returned to the Dalston route that British Rail closed in 1986. But that reopening dates back to 2010.

The Department for Transport is now backing East West Rail to return trains to the missing and closed parts of the Oxford-Cambridge route. It has a hefty £1.1 billion price tag for its Bicester-Bedford section (RAIL 859), which is a mix of mothballed and open tracks. Nevertheless, it's making progress with a public inquiry opening in February.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, work to make the case for returning trains to the mothballed tracks to Levenmouth (RAIL 843) grinds forward with another round of reports being compiled.

The area is deprived and would doubtless benefit from its residents being able to reach jobs further afield, perhaps in Edinburgh. But the latest report suggests there's no evidence of rail freight demand for



The end of the line in Wisbech, back in 2009. The Wisbech-March route has been touted by CBT as one ripe for reopening. RICHARD CLINNICK.

CBT's reopenings

Oxford-Cowley: Upgrade four miles of freight line, open stations at Science Park and Cowley and consider reopening subsequent 16 miles to Princes Risborough.

Totton-Hythe-Fawley: Upgrade ten miles of freight line, open stations at Marchwood, Hythe and Fawley.

Southall-Brentford: Upgrade four miles of freight line, open station at Brentford.

Henbury loop, Bristol: Upgrade six miles of freight line, open stations at Henbury, North Filton and Ashley Down.

Okehampton-Tavistock-Bere Alston: Reopen 25 miles, open Tavistock station.

Portishead-Bristol: Upgrade four miles of freight line and reopen another three miles, open stations at Pill and Portishead.

Stratford-Long Marston-Honeybourne: Upgrade three miles of freight line and reopen a further six miles.

March-Wisbech: Reopen mothballed eight miles, open station at Wisbech.

Bedford-Sandy-Cambridge: Reopen 27 miles, open station at Cambourne.

Cambridge-Haverhill: Reopen 17 miles and consider further nine miles to Sudbury, open stations at Granta Park, Linton and Haverhill.

Leicester-Burton-on-Trent: Upgrade 31 miles of freight line, open stations at Swadlincote, Ashby, Coalville and Leicester East.

Pelaw-Ferryhill: Reopen 18 miles of the mothballed/dismantled Leamside Line, open stations at Washington North, Washington South, Penshaw, Fencehouses and Durham Belmont.

Liverpool-Skelmersdale: Reopen three miles and open Skelmersdale.

Poulton-le-Fylde-Fleetwood: Reopen six miles and open Thornton and Fleetwood stations.

Skipton-Colne: Reopen 12 miles and stations at Earby and West Craven Parkway.

Hirwaun-Aberdare: Reopen four mothballed miles and station at Hirwaun.

Aberbeeg-Abertillery: Extend Ebbw Vale line by two miles.

Caernarfon-Bangor: Reopen seven miles and station at Caernarfon.

Beddau-Pontyclun: Reopen three mothballed line and stations at Talbot Green/Llanstrisant and Beddau.

Dunfermline-Alloa: Upgrade 14 miles of freight line and open stations at Kincardine, Valleyfield and Cairneyhill.

Leuchars-St Andrews: Reopen five miles and open station at St Andrews.

Thornton-Leven: Reopen five mothballed miles and open station at Leven.

Shirebrook-Ollerton: Upgrade six miles of freight line, open stations at Ollerton, Edwinstow and Warsop.

Matlock-Buxton: Reopen 12 miles and open station at Bakewell.

Walsall-Water Orton: Upgrade 15 miles of freight line, open stations at Sutton Park, Sutton Coldfield Town, Streetly and Aldridge.

Birmingham Camp Hill: Upgrade six miles of freight line and open stations at Moseley, Kings Heath, Balsall Heath and Hazelwell.

Walsall-Birmingham: Upgrade seven miles of freight line, open stations at James Bridge and Willenhall.

Stoke-Leek: Reopen mothballed 12 miles, open stations at Endon, Stockton Brook and Leek.

Low Moor-Thornhill (West Yorkshire): Reopen seven miles, open stations at Oakenshaw, Cleckheaton and Heckmondwike.

Harrogate-Ripon-Northallerton: Reopen 18 miles, open Ripon station.

Blyth and Tyne: Upgrade 16 miles of freight line, open stations at Ashington, Northumberland Park, Seaton Delaval, Newsham for Blyth, Bebside, Bedlington and Woodhorn Museum.

Stockton-Ferryhill: Upgrade 13 miles of line used by freight and diverted passenger trains, open Stillington station.

Source: Campaign for Better Transport.

the branch, which weakens the case for reopening. There is also a hint that ScotRail's timetables may leave no space to serve the branch as they concentrate on existing stations.

Across Britain, CBT suggests there's potential to add 343 miles to the passenger rail network (166 miles of reopened route and 177 miles of freight lines upgraded to passenger status), and open 72 stations to bring 500,000 more people within walking distance of a train.

It says: "If rail's potential is to be realised, then a new approach to reopenings is needed. This should take as its starting point that there is a case for enlarging the rail network. It requires a new methodology to identify and prioritise those projects which bring the biggest benefits to the country. Crucially, it should be able to draw on new investment to deliver an expansion programme."

CBT's research found 224 projects worthy of further consideration. It then filtered these for broad viability before subjecting those that passed to further tests, based on social, economic and environmental factors that examined their potential to support new housing, tackle regional disparity, decrease

social exclusion, create skilled jobs, invest in local economies, create integrated transport networks, create healthier towns and cities, bolster rail freight, and reduce environmental impact.

This cut the 224 down to 13 for which there was a clear case and 20 that needed further development or a change in circumstance (such as new housing proposals) to strengthen their case.

CBT suggests the first group could be delivered in 2020-25 for £1.2bn-£1.8bn, and the second group in 2025-35 for £3.5bn-£4.6bn. It uses a mix of early project estimates and final costs from projects such as Stirling-Alloa and Oxford-Bicester to arrive at its costs of £9 million to £16m per mile.

However, the £1.1bn for East West Rail covers reopening 12 miles of mothballed railway and upgrading a further 35 miles of

open tracks, and equates to £23m per mile.

Which makes it more likely that any expansion plan needs a large pot of money rather than a new methodology to prioritise which lines to reopen. And that's money not only to reopen them, but to cope with any ongoing subsidy if operating costs outstrip fare revenue.

On the basis of the gross value added (GVA) benefit of rail of £10bn (a 2015 figure), CBT has estimated that expanding the rail network could add between £155m and £245m GVA. Up to 1,600 railway jobs could result from the expansion.

Prominent in CBT's list are lines that today carry freight trains or only have passenger trains during diversions. They should be among the easiest to add to the passenger network, and should relatively easily bring more trains to more

passengers.

Yet years of campaigning in south east Northumberland has brought regular passenger services to Ashington no closer. Amid general agreement on the benefits of rail services to the area, no one appears willing to commit money. Department for Transport could find it, but prefers that it comes from local sources that have none.

And that's a problem for which CBT's report provides no answer. Spending on rail reopenings is entirely discretionary and depends on DfT's largesse. There's no sense that DfT would be worse off for not spending, and therefore little incentive to put money towards rail. Air pollution might, for example, load heavier costs on health authorities, but proving a link between higher DfT spending to encourage a switch from cars to trains and lower health spending remains difficult.

Then there's the rail industry's reputation for overspending and its inability to deliver major projects without major disruption. It doesn't make rail a safe place to spend scarce resources.

Fix this and there'll be more chance of a welcome reception for the lines in CBT's latest report. **✉**

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Campaign for Better Transport