PUBLIC TRANSPORT BETWEEN CARTERTON, WITNEY AND OXFORD

A new group has been set up in West Oxfordshire whose objective is to overcome the growing problem of gridlock on the A40 and achieving improved public transport between Carterton, Witney and Oxford. Its formal launch was held at a packed public meeting in Witney on 15th January 2014, attended by local councillors and transport campaigners, and ended with a unanimous call for an updating study of the problems and possible solutions.

1. Background

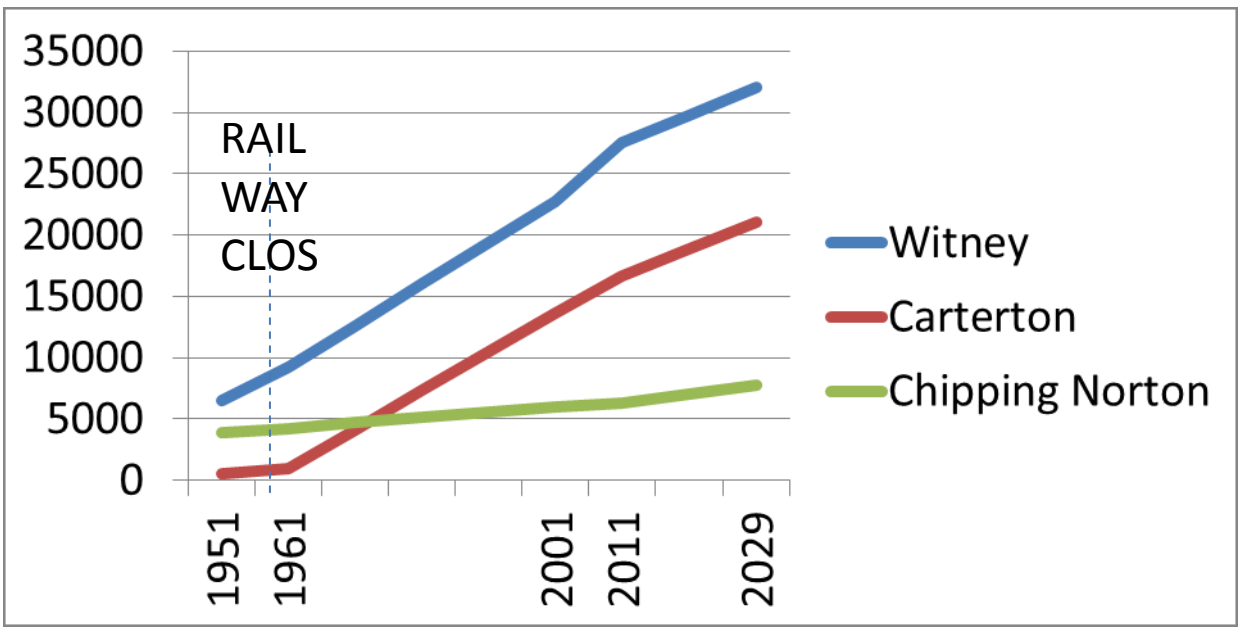
The branch railway succumbed to the Beeching axe and closed to passengers in 1962, but since then there has been enormous population growth and the RAF has moved all its air transport operations to Brize Norton. Many local industries have closed. Employment growth has been elsewhere, in Oxford city and southern Oxfordshire, particularly in research and services. As a result, the A40 is badly congested and the bus services cannot keep to time. The operators want to see better infrastructure – a duplicate "track" would free up road space and reduce the sensitivity of the single route to disturbances, accidents and flooding.

2. Population Growth

Census Year	Witney	Carterton	Chipping Norton*
1951	6554	575	3878
1961 – railway closed in 1962	9219	984	4245
2001 – Oxfordshire CC report	22765	13598	5972
2011 – ATOC report in 2009	27522	16707	6337
2029 – projections in WODC Plan #	32025	21092	7759

likely to be higher following latest review of housing demand now in hand

* Figures for Chipping Norton give indication of pressure on rest of network



3. Journey times

Witney is ~ 13 miles from Oxford. "Bing" maps suggest a journey time of 31 minutes but peak time experience is 55 minutes and 2½ hours is not uncommon. The S1 bus timetable is 50 minutes off-peak and 68 minutes peak, but again these times can be significantly exceeded. It is frustrating for the operator that, despite investing in high quality vehicles at a high service frequency, they cannot provide the reliability they want to and are having to make further investment in effectively dead mileage to try and overcome some of the problems. Based on systems elsewhere, it is estimated that a separate guided bus or tram-train could take around 20 minutes and be consistent. There is similar experience to and from Carterton.

Uncertain journey times lead to missed hospital appointments (a cost to NHS and taxpayer), missed job interviews and potential for dismissal if employee's timekeeping is poor. Bus services to local towns and villages (e.g. Burford) are infrequent and users are reliant on connections in Witney with the S1/S2. If the connection is missed, passengers have long waits and will more than likely revert to the car for the whole journey, adding to congestion on the A40. Similarly, passengers need reliable connections with long distance coach and train services in Oxford. In the current situation, people cannot plan for appointments and connections.

4. Previous Reports

In 2001, OCC commissioned Mott Macdonald to produce a report, at a time when other schemes in Oxford were planned (e.g. express bus) but since abandoned. Their traffic projections pre-dated the recent and planned population growth and the RAF re-locations. MM examined options for heavy and light rail and looked at how much of the old trackbed had not been built over.

In 2009, the Association of Train Operating Companies (ATOC) studied towns across the UK which had lost their train services under Beeching. They concluded that re-opening to Witney could be justified; a capital cost of £95 million was estimated with an operating Benefit to Cost Ratio of 1.8. Re-openings elsewhere have created passenger loadings well in excess of expectations e.g. Ebbw Vale line in south Wales and Airdrie-Bathgate in Scotland.

5. Options

These include widening or dualling the A40, a guided bus system, re-opening the heavy rail branch or a light rail/tram-train system. There are advantages and disadvantages to each and they need detailed technical assessment before a final conclusion is reached. Our initial assessment can be summarised as follows:

5.1 Widening/dualling the A40:

This could be environmentally damaging and will simply move the inevitable queue nearer to Oxford. Such schemes in the past have just led to generation of traffic, building up congestion again. It would not give an additional route so the risks from perturbations remain.

5.2 Guided Busway:

Buses currently would be (hybrid) diesel powered but developments in electric traction and charging systems (e.g. as being trialled in Milton Keynes) could deliver a carbon footprint similar to light rail. Once off the "track" there is flexibility of routing through urban streets but finding a dedicated route into the centre of Oxford would remain problematic. Cambridge and Luton-Dunstable have systems and Greater Manchester is planning one to the west.

5.3 Heavy Rail:

It would be easy to integrate with existing Network Rail lines via Yarnton Junction and could be linked with the County Council's aspirations of using the Cowley branch for passengers alongside freight to the Mini factory. However, the old line ran to the "wrong side" of Brize Norton airfield. It would be necessary to provide parkway/P&R style stations to the south of Witney and Carterton, and perhaps at Eynsham.

5.4 Tram-trains:

This technology has been used on the Continent for many years, enabling modern tramcars to share heavy rail tracks as well as street running. The first system in the UK is currently being built between Sheffield and Rotherham, extending the existing Sheffield Supertram network. The infrastructure is cheaper than for heavy rail as it need not be designed for freight, and can have steeper gradients and tighter curves; powered by electricity and therefore less sensitive to oil costs. Surveys indicate a "sparks effect" making them more attractive to passengers than buses. Greater Manchester are planning a network of tram-trains starting with the use of the line from Marple in the south-east, sharing with Sheffield-Manchester trains and linking into the Metrolink across the city centre. A Witney system could be routed across to the new Oxford Parkway/P&R station and thence into Oxford station and on to the planned Cowley branch, thereby overcoming some of the access problems within Oxford itself. Street running could be possible within Witney and Carterton, running into some of the housing areas and the airfield. Other possible extensions could be from Oxford Parkway to the hospitals.

5.5 Doing nothing is not an option in view of the planned housing growth and the location of employment growth some distance away.

6. <u>Old trackbed</u>

The Mott Macdonald report stated that around ⅔ of the old trackbed had not been built over. It could therefore be used for much of the route from Yarnton Junction to Witney for either tram trains or a guided bus system. It could also provide part of a route across to Oxford Parkway station, creating a link with the new East-West Railway to Milton Keynes and Bedford and Chiltern Railways to London Marylebone.

However, the old trackbed is of no use west of Witney as the Fairford branch ran to the south of Brize Norton airfield. A new route would have to be found to serve Carterton and the RAF.

7. Short term developments

The authors recognise that creating a new or re-opened dedicated "track" between Witney and Oxford will be a long-term project, although we hope it will not take as long as the 20 years needed to gain approval for East-West Rail.

There is therefore a need to consider some short term improvements to public transport along the corridor to reduce car demand on the A40 and the carbon footprint. Better use could be made of the existing railway between Hanborough and Oxford, by improving the bus service from Witney to the station. Consideration could also be given to linking Hanborough with the proposed Cowley service. There will also be inevitable changes to transport in north Oxford when Oxford Parkway station opens in 2015. Bus services could be re-configured to connect this new station and P&R to towns and villages to the west along the A40 and A44 corridors. The possibility of bus lanes along or alongside the A40 should also be reviewed.

8. Where next?

The Mott Macdonald report did much of the technical work related to possible routes and the use of the old trackbed. However, as outlined above, traffic figures need to be updated in view of the population increases and re-location of employment (the last blanket mill was even still operating in Witney in 2001), and taking account of changes in transport technology.

There are also significant changes to the local rail network under way which are and will have an impact on the available options. These include electrification, re-signalling, East-West Rail to Milton Keynes and Bedford (and perhaps on to Cambridge), Chiltern Railways Bicester curve link to London Marylebone, the "electric spine" for rail freight services utilising the East-West Rail to the West Coast Mainline, completion of re-doubling of Cotswold Line between Charlbury and Wolvercote Junction, and redevelopment of Oxford Station and creation of adjacent public transport interchange.

Two consultancy firms have already expressed an interest in updating the 2001 report. Although Witney Oxford Transport Group will be able to provide some funding towards such a study, we will need financial support from others. Because of the major budget cuts, the immediate local authorities are unable to help at this time. Over time we hope this situation will change, particularly once we have the initial updated study findings, but in the meantime we will have to rely on charitable and other non-governmental help.

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