

Great Central Considerations – Why ERTA believes it should be supported.

Background: The Great Central Railway (1) was a casualty of its time. 2 World Wars, depleted populations, Government switch of spend from rails to roads and the Beeching agenda culling duplicate lines and seeing the problem as a 'nail' (too many railways) and solution 'hammer' (closures) all conspired to render the railways out of date, seemingly inefficient and the wrong side of trend and popularity. The hastening extension of the M1 north of the Watford Gap to Leicester, Nottingham, Sheffield and ultimately Leeds, the decision to retain the Midland Main Line and the fact that development along the corridor of the Great Central was less-than that of its other radial London north-south rail counterparts meant it was seen as the most expendable railway to go. 1966, closure in part as a through main line (essentially south of Rugby to Aylesbury) but was retained until 1969 when the last regular passenger operation between Nottingham Victoria and Rugby Central was culled finally. Other bits went to go on to be developed – Nottingham a shopping centre, Sheffield-Leicester generally compromised and deconstructed over decades since except for the Leicester North-Ruddington stretch which is part of the Great Central Steam Railway Operation, but apart from a chord at Loughborough off the Midland Main Line towards East Leake, is isolated from the wider national rail network. They failed to retain access to Leicester Central, even though the station stands, it is surrounded by non-rail development.

The situation now: However, south of Narborough, whilst in ruins, a corridor can be detected and an amalgam of the former Midland Rugby-Leicester and Great Central Rugby-Leicester could be sewn together to inform a new railway incorporating expanding populations (now), capture new markets like Magna Business Park, serve Daventry International Rail Freight Terminal (DIRFT) and to challenge and win over modal shift from various principal roads to rail once more (passenger and freight). A curve at Narborough onto existing Nuneaton-Leicester lines in both directions enables West Coast Main Line duplicate looping and towards Leicester for utilisation of capacity via Knighton-Burton-Derby and Leicester for gatewaying East Midlands and beyond and also the link across to Peterborough, East Anglia and the principal deep-sea port of Felixstowe. Add to this that existing north-south main lines are at capacity now, add to this that the M1 is reaching gridlock (now) with not much to make for miles long queues either way at any time, causing delays, compounding emissions and basically a victim of both its own success but also the dangers of throwing all transport solution 'eggs' into one basket!

Enter ERTA: As ever, anyone who wants to do something, offer a solution or see more than repeating past follies of too much credence to one-big solution solves all claims, finds many arm chair critics and competing claims and solutions where there need not be. For example, we have HS2, which has divided ERTA as per other groups and organisations, indeed the country as a whole from tree huggers to hard-nosed

journalists, from politicians of all colours divided across spectrums and yet the thing is being built at cost. It is claimed it will create capacity on existing London north-south radial lines and that in turn will facilitate enablement for conveying more passenger and freight trains on those older tracks. Fair enough, but will it declutter the M1? Will it serve Leicester? Will it enable Southampton/Bristol-East Midlands and beyond without taking paths into Birmingham/West Midlands and/or London? Will it address new flows zig-zagging the trajectory of HS2? In short, advocates dismiss these sorts of questions as nonsensical and brush aside. We believe they are pertinent questions, not to dismiss HS2 per se, although could be done, albeit too late the proverbial horse has bolted! But, from a viewpoint of scoping, this is where ERTA believes we need the Great Central Corridor re-railed/rebuilt/new built and in some places reinterpreted. We are not advocating all but between Grendon-Calvert-Woodford Halse-Rugby-Lutterworth to a bi-directional rail junctioning in the Narborough area.

What could this enable?

1. Providing rail services (passenger and freight) to a corridor currently not served by rail, but growing in developmental terms. Take Calvert and a 5-mile radius, new town potential being toyed with. Development is going in, so land claims for enabling a new route north to Brackley is required as HS2 assumes the old Great Central trajectory.
2. Calvert (2) - Grendon enables domestic services to bay and go on (via a new tunnel) to directly link with Crossrail (alias The Elizabethan Line), Heathrow, Guildford and if we have our way, Guildford-Horsham-Gatwick/Shoreham (port/resort) and Brighton as well as via Guildford, Portsmouth and Southampton at a push.
3. Brackley (3) – a growing town (13, 018 at 2011 census) is another growing area. It has the busy dualled A43 and is to get HS2 but no station. Our domestic line claim would enable a new station to the East of the town and with a linking bus with Silverstone could bring a larger population to gravitate to better rail access than driving to existing stations 10 miles away in any direction.
4. Woodford Halse: There is a view a new Banbury-Daventry-Northampton rail link should be constructed to enable better east-west connectivity rail choices, the east-west rail Oxford-Bedford corridor not being adequate alone and it is becoming more widely recognised we need more east-west rail links north of London/south of Midlands arcs anyway. That east-west rail and our north-south capacitor rail link could link physically and serve each other.
5. Willoughby: Here is where it gets more complicated. On the one hand a new build domestic rail link with new stations south of Willoughby and at Barby crossing over the WCML north of Kilsby to link with the Northampton Loop or where it and the WCML Main Line converge out of Rugby going south. Can it be done? A study is needed.

6. Rugby: Once into Rugby WCML Station with associated links, going onwards via former Midland Link to Leicester loops round to intercept the former Great Central corridor at right angles. Solutions are needed, but the gains and wins are manifold and should not be underestimated. Working back, route protection, study and basic interest by all tiers of governance are needed to grasp potential and make good the fostering and nurturing of such outcomes pro-affirma to rail to be done.

7. GC Rugby: Reinstating a new viaduct over WCML Rugby could be pushed through – HS2 would after all – so why not for more domestic rail capacity if the market is robust enough to warrant that route and capacity? It is not an either or, we need both and again, many towns and cities have more than one rail station. While it is good to link-up, segregated access merely means a diversity of footfall and spend and more capacity/choice and besides the railways serve different locations and markets, so again, worth looking into.

8. See Newsletter Number 38 for an article on Rugby-Narborough (4)

9. Passenger and freight, the need for this corridor to be protected, studied further and supported exists and would benefit all radial existing lines out of London and enable south-west to north-east, without recourse to London or Birmingham, freeing their tracks for their centric traffic.

Conclusion: ERTA continues to table meetings and forums on and off line. We welcome people to join and add to our numbers as well as we welcome reliable volunteers of all ages to help nurture support at all levels. It needs leadership and direction as well as advocacy and case making. Segments or one big scheme, we don't mind. It really is time to bring back our trains and tracks!

R.B. Pill
ERTA Campaigns Coordinator
Richard.erta@gmail.com
T. 01234 330090
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Refs:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Central_Main_Line
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calvert,_Buckinghamshire
3. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brackley>
4. <https://ertarail.co.uk/newsletter-archive/>

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Joined Up Vision For Increase Rail Capacity

