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<p>East-West Rail Turbulence</p>	<p>August 2022</p>	<p>Price: £1.50</p>

East-West Rail Turbulence: ERTA points the way for rail and save some money!

For reflections on the past, please refer to reference (1) below and scroll down and click! But the announcement that Grants Shapps may cancel East-West Rail (2), surely does not mean Oxford-Bedford which is a rebuild job, but the new construction 'gaps' between Bedford and East Anglia. On the one hand the problems were inherent with the whole project from the start. Disunity amongst the rail fraternity and on the other a post-rail culture developing where roads are the way for freedom. Carefully ignoring congestion blight, but seeing more roads as the answer to congestion, not rebuilding rail links.



Caption Left: Bedford-Sandy trackbed at Goldington looking west 1985. Why build brand new with up-hill/down-hill, when this flat land commends itself and you can always slew a cycle/footpath alongside in such an open-land context surely?

In 1985 that was very much the emergent case and in 1987 when the first organised effort to formally suggest the rail link east of Bedford should be supported, met with incredulity.

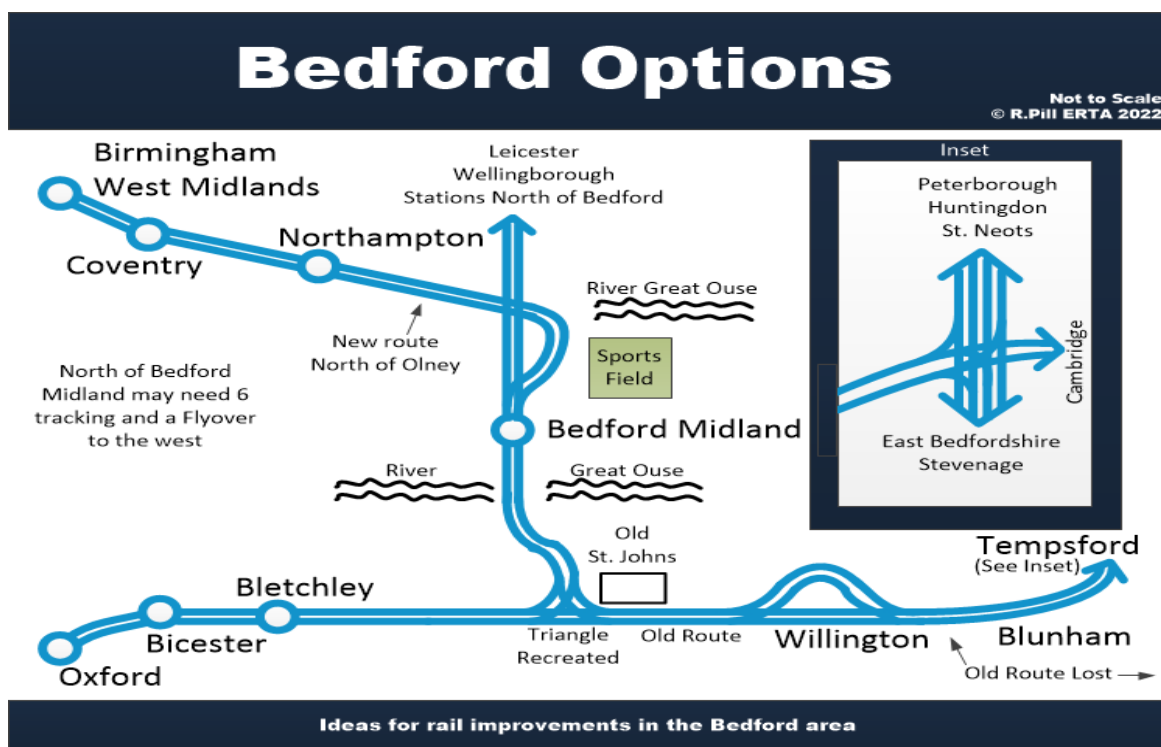
Interim, bypass building has been done and the volume of traffic has grown to fill the new vacuum of capacity created. Despite the views expounded and reified by media that bypasses offer relief from congestion, in fact, Bedford is very much congested today despite those bypasses. With the growth of development, that congestion will grow and be exacerbated and with roads everywhere, there will come a day when nowhere else to go transport-wise. In short, a rail link east of Bedford is essential to counter-balance the growth of traffic and bring some choice to the market of business on offer. ERTA has long argued that whilst we need them, buses are no good at luggage conveyance, bikes or freight. Only the rail alternative can cater for this, to reduce the juggernaut volumes and give car owners a decent alternative to make them think public transport as a realistic and viable option.

Where things went wrong, apart from disunity at the start and counter-objections to a bridging of the former Bedford-Sandy trackbed east of Bedford with the A421 in 1993, the 1997 Steer Davis Gleave Consultants report made the case for a Bedford-Cambridge Railway, but Bedford Councils could not make up their minds! Some touted an inner route serving Bedford and faithful to the old route, others wanted a new-build outer railway avoiding Bedford. They wanted cake and eat it, the darn cheek being they had spent a decade saying things like “there’s no case or demand for a railway” and “blockages prohibit rebuilding” I paraphrase from letters I used to receive from them. They knew we lacked the resources to challenge their bigoted views. Then, here, 1997, the report of consultants, trained and experienced in such matter are saying “it can be done” and “benefits if done to...Bedford!” – again I paraphrase. All we had been saying was shown as ‘do-able’ being getting east of Bedford via the old route, realignment south of Blunham and a new route north (then) of Sandy with connectivity to the main north-south main line and new links to Cambridge via the Ickleford Curve. Alas it floundered, alas the disunity meant government following a post-Iraq financial deficit, took its money elsewhere and just turned the question back to focusing on the then ‘western section’ Oxford/Aylesbury-Milton Keynes/Bedford. East was abandoned, Central Beds Council as it became developed over the north of Sandy lands blocking off access for a new railway.

So, we come to the 2019 consultation whereby it comes up out-of-the-blue, with a new route east of Bedford. Our lay assessments showed that it was engineeringly challenging to put it mildly and ill-judged. On engineering, environment impact (knocking down houses) and fit for purpose criterion, it was dismissed by us in utter disbelief and disappointment and we counter suggested a new-build using the old route instead with realignments at Willington and instead of south of Blunham, to go north of Blunham. Their meeting point was ‘south of St Neots and north of Sandy’, which by my map means the Tempsford area, north or south of Station Road. But despite our efforts to warn the EWRCO

that their new route north of Bedford would court a lot of opposition, they ploughed on and now it hits the buffers. That means we get the Oxford-Bedford link, but no rail link to East Anglia.

If we wait 10 years, rate of development means all options will be lost. A421 is growing like M1 with about 50% juggernaut lorries, so any new railway must cater for freight from day one, ideally in roll-on, roll-off/Piggyback terms, we must have vision for this and build accordingly. But the proposed new route had steep gradients, was circuitous and lacked connectivity with the East Coast Main Line (ECML) in the Tempsford area (Peterborough, East Beds and Stevenage for example in scope) and as for the new route to Cambridge,



because and weaving between development, avoiding compulsory purchase and re-build, it weaves to join the Royston-Hitchin line from Cambourne on new trajectory and against the grain of the landscape meaning new embankments of some size. It is a circuitous route, a controversial route and costly.

Our route to ECML from Bedford uses the old route to just west of Willington. A realignment is possible, but speed need not be the main consideration. Our route then goes north of Blunham to approach the Tempsford plains from the south-westerly direction with physical connectivity with the north-south main line for optimum passenger and freight reaches to the Bedford-Oxford corridor and vice versa. Our route is shorter and probably cheaper than Northern Route E and despite some councillors claiming to the contrary have yet to specify exactly what houses would need demolishing if any, whereas 40+ in the Poets area of Bedford would be required for the Northern Route E, which our route would be hard pressed to equal! Yet for all that, the Mayor, for all his attributes, has failed to grasp these merits and lead from the front in asking our

route to be assessed with a view to overcoming challenges, not building new housing on the old St John's Station site which would scupper any rail link east of Bedford forever.

Caption below: Simon Barber captured the old St John's 'green site' in urban Bedford circa 2019. Why block an amenity for housing, when a railway + a green corridor could really add something in the urban context, including traffic reduction?

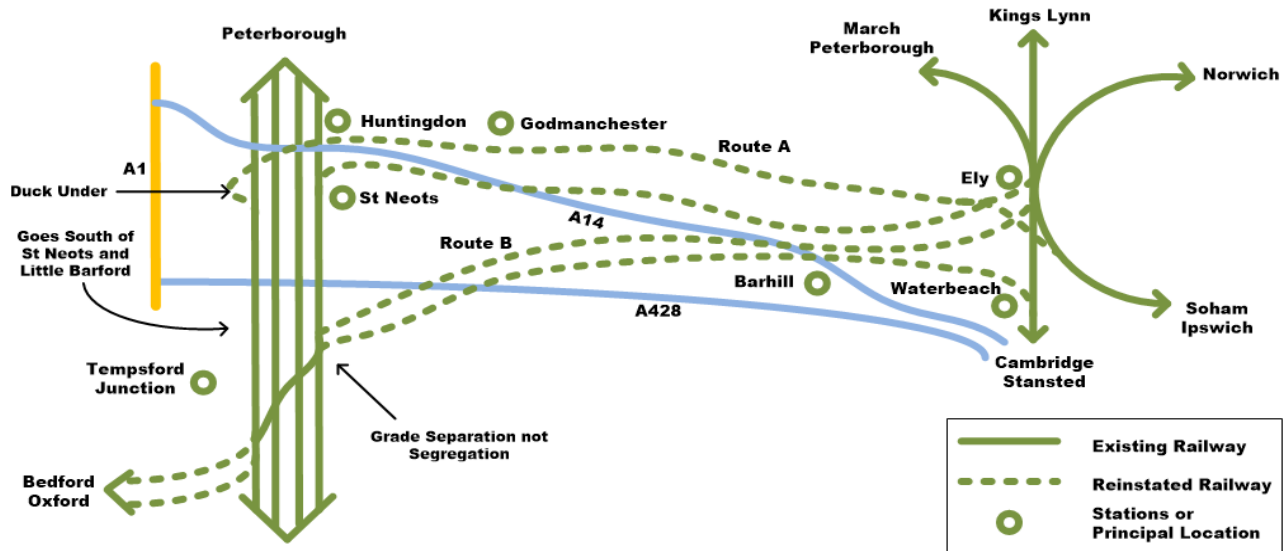


On east of Tempsford, we believe there is merit in connectivity to Cambridge principally for passenger requirements. However, if the link to the Royston-Cambridge line proves too much, we believe a new look at a new rail rebuild to link with Norwich, Ipswich/Felixstowe and Cambridge/Stansted lines from a new multiple linkage at the Ely area from the west. If we act now, lands can be acquired and the new link pushed through. A key objection from Cambridge is that loads of freight through the urban centre would be counter-intuitive and given the capacity constraints both there and Newmarket Tunnel, I can see their point. If all goes via a new link across to Ely and the Ely bypass being mooted but stalled by... government, whose Secretary of State for Transport as at 23-08-22 is still Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP despite Government agreement we are in a Climate Emergency, is pursuing roads and counter-intuitive policies to any environmental/land-use stewardship cares. It presides over ever-more uncertainty and seems to be wobbling like a jelly, rather than a bull-by-the-horns and leadership, direction and cascading money from road to rail and an investment for a better future and lowering our emissions footprint at one and the same time. When win, win stares you in the face and you ignore it, begs the question as to whether it has an objective and honest evaluation of the needs and situations this country faces. Suffice to say Government finds money for roads more easily than rail projects of an exact similar nature. If our route suggestion is less than Northern Route E, why not evaluate,

compare and contrast and go for it to give hope of some traffic reduction relief to urban areas and land savings for rural ones? The £950 million Black Cat Roundabout (3) remodelling and dualling to Cambridge will, like A421 M1-A1 only full with more traffic which then backs up at junctions and once capacity filled to gridlock, has no Plan B. Urban areas cannot accommodate it and so, unless we make the rail link a priority, we are in a dire situation of false premises. The railway is the right way to go, our route, not Northern Route E, which even lay people with some local knowledge could work out was not going to succeed except as some kind of vanity project which does not serve rail well. We welcome all parties to round-table with us and crack on with a rail link east of Bedford.

24-Jul-2021

East Midlands and Anglian Freight and Regional Passenger



Not to scale
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