

Railfuture proposal: Reopening the railway March –Wisbech, Cambridgeshire.

Wisbech and surrounding area is relatively impoverished. Unemployment is high compared with the south of Cambridgeshire and national rates. Services such as health and education, have below average outcomes. The perception is that the town has visibly stagnated both socially and economically since the railway closed in the 1968.

Railfuture suggests that to improve the economic viability of the town, the 7 miles from Wisbech to March be reopened and an hourly, fast passenger train service be provided to Cambridge (and eventually beyond), calling at March, Manea, Ely, Waterbeach or the new station at Chesterton, connecting into the regular fast train service to London King's Cross.

The rail journey time from Wisbech to Cambridge can be no more than 35 minutes, much quicker than the equivalent road or bus journey, providing a high quality transport link that will connect Wisbech directly into the high value job market of Cambridge.

The rationale of re-opening to Wisbech is no less potent than the regenerative re-openings in South Wales/Cardiff or Nottinghamshire/Nottingham, Alloa/Central Scotland, promoting inward investment and sustainable economic growth, breathing new life into Wisbech (and Fenland to the north and south).

With the possible electrification of the route from Ely to Peterborough currently being discussed by Network Rail, Railfuture would expect the service to be operated as a through service from London King's Cross as an extension of the existing non stop Cambridge service and the return xx.15 non stop from Cambridge. There is currently sufficient electric rolling stock for such an hourly service.

In the short term this service (the xx15 from King's Cross) in any case should be extended from Cambridge to Ely to cope with growth and ease overcrowding between these two stations, giving Ely a half hourly electric train service to London throughout the day. There are aspirations from user groups and some local authorities that this service should go through to King's Lynn, although this would require doubling the existing track and relocation of the overhead masts and wiring at considerable cost.

A direct service extension to Wisbech might in the medium term, be more cost effective as new traffic sources will be tapped and the infrastructure shared with other long distance passenger and freight services between Peterborough and Ely. In the longer term, dividing the train service at Ely to allow direct trains to both destinations as portions working from London/Cambridge to Lynn and Wisbech, might be a possibility.

Background.

The Wisbech to March railway closed to passenger traffic nearly 40 years ago. The freight service continued until about 8 years ago and since then the route has been 'mothballed'. The railway from March Whitemoor Junction to Wisbech is single track, although the line was built as double track. It is about seven miles from Wisbech to March station. The route is a straight line from Whitemoor Junction to Wisbech Goods Junction without any significant gradient. The track, still extant, was kept in good condition owing to the weight of the various freight trains that used it until they were withdrawn. The line crosses public highways at grade. Two highways are protected by automatic half barriers, one by train activated lights and two by full sized gates, latterly crew operated.

The March end of the route is signalled into the Whitemoor Infrastructure yard mainline, controlled by March East Junction 'box as a part of a recent upgrade. Signalled routes available from the Wisbech branch are directly towards Peterborough and directly in to the up platform at March station for direct services to/from Ely and Cambridge. There is a signalled route off the down main from Ely into this platform as well, via a facing crossover at the east end of March station, enabling direct trains to operate from Cambridge to Wisbech.

The Wisbech end of the route runs into the original 1847 terminal, latterly the East Goods Yard. This terminated at Coal Wharf Road, end on to the River Nene 'South Brink', no more than 5 minutes walk from the historic town centre. Most of this area is used as a car park by the adjacent petfood company. The former goods yard is in the ownership of that company. *(The local authority should take steps to safeguard this site from other development.)*

From March the route continues south-eastwards as a double track mainline through Manea and the Fens to Ely, 15miles away and thence to Cambridge, a further 15 miles.

Wisbech and adjoined parishes **have over 31,000 inhabitants** with several thousand more in adjacent areas of Cambridgeshire and Norfolk. The station if reopened would be the nearest to the Lincolnshire 'mini-conurbation' that stretches from **Sutton Bridge to Holbeach/Whaplode, population 33,200**. This **Wisbech sub region has over 70,000 inhabitants**, stretching across the county borders into Norfolk and Lincolnshire and is one the largest and most populated regions in the east without a railway.

March and adjoined **Doddington, Wimblington** have a **population of about 23,000 people**.

Manea is growing with a population of about 2000 people and is the nearest railhead to Chatteris, which is within 10 minutes drive and has a population about 9000. The large villages of Upwell/Outwell, 4500 population, are also less than 10 minutes drive.

Note:

- 1. An initial reopening of the March to Wisbech branch will need the level crossings upgraded, the track re-fettled and land repurchased at Wisbech goods yard but the main junction work at March has recently been completed. As a reopening the initial costs are fairly minimal. However, the social benefits, economic benefits of the inevitable inward investment - the ‘feel good’ factors - are incalculable.**
- 2. Case study:** *The Stirling to Alloa railway re-opened this year. Alloa has a slightly smaller population than Wisbech. The route length is 7 miles and required complete rebuilding, unlike that required to Wisbech. An hourly Stirling to Glasgow semi fast service has been extended back to Alloa. Already demand has outstripped prediction with 20,000 users in the first 2 weeks of operation. The demand is such that 750,000 users are now predicted for 2008/9 rather than the original 155,000.*

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