THE HIGH WYCOMBE SOCIETY

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AFTER BEECHING

SUSTAINABILITY CARS LIGHT RAIL

1. Some of the changes since Beeching (mid 1960s)

A faster growing world population and new economic activities threaten to exhaust some vital resources and accelerate climate change, prompting the quest for sustainability (Earth Summit, Rio 1992). This faces many challenges, including the millions of car journeys which take precious land for big roads and parking everywhere, and consume limited oil reserves to produce tons of carbon dioxide, increasing global warming and acidifying the seas. Compared with cars, light rail aids sustainability, by making more efficient use of energy and land, and being good at getting motorists to switch from their cars. Light rail could also be a good way to reopen some of the rail lines closed by Beeching 40 years ago, when many things were very different.

2. Sustainability, rail travel, and 'Beeching' closures.

Sustainability and other concerns have led to the expansion of rail travel, heavy and light. Steel wheels on steel rails use energy more efficiently than tyres on tarmac, and the guiding rails minimise the land take. Further, steel is hard wearing and can be recycled relatively easily. All this suggests that reopening some strategic 'Beeching closures' (as below) might now be investigated, and reinstatement with light rail considered. The smaller land requirement could make it more easily accommodated, where building developments since the closure now present some problems. These may be problems of engineering diversions or of compulsory purchase, which are more complex than those normally encountered by local authority staff and their councillors. Central Government might therefore consider how it could best intervene to assist reinstatements that could benefit both the environment and the economy, by improving public transport sustainability and accessibility - locally, nationally and internationally, because all three levels are likely to be a key consideration in securing inward investment.

3. Brunel's branch line Maidenhead to High Wycombe, opened 1854 (See attached map).

One such strategic Beeching closure is the 5 miles that linked High Wycombe (HW) and Bourne End. This is ***half*** the rail link from Brunel's Great Western Main Line at Maidenhead to the town of High Wycombe, 10 miles to the north. High Wycombe has an industrial history of more than eight centuries, originally based on many water mills powered by the small River Wye. It is set deep in the Chiltern Hills, so to avoid tunnelling, Brunel chose the route along the Wye Valley to Bourne End, where the Wye joins the Thames, and then bridged the Thames for the further 5 miles south to Maidenhead.

4. 1905

Another railway opened coming through HW to London, taking a more direct route via Beaconsfield and a tunnel, and running into Marylebone. Thus Brunel's branch line lost most of the HW/London traffic, but became a valuable link between two railways, and maintained the long established connection between High Wycombe and the Thames Valley.

5. 1970

Nevertheless this link fell victim to the Beeching axe and HW/Bourne End was closed in 1970. Strong local campaigning has so far kept the Marlow/Maidenhead service via Bourne End open. As things turned out, the closure coincided with the emergence of the Thames Valley as one of the nation's key wealth creating areas, which also stimulated activity in HW, and the requirement for connections between them. The M40 opened in 1965 and Heathrow had become a major airport by the 1960s… but the vital north/south rail link remained closed.

6. After 1970

The Thames Valley-High Wycombe area developed considerably. The population has grown significantly, and thousands of new homes built. The 1905 railway has become today's Chiltern Railways, with excellent services to London and Birmingham plus a less frequent service to Aylesbury. The timetable shows 183 trains a day at HW. Next year there will also be a frequent service between London and Oxford via HW, but still no new infrastructure south to the Thames Valley is on the agenda. The 2001 Census revealed the car commuter mileage between HW and the three Thames Valley towns of Slough, Maidenhead and Reading was **278,000 miles every day**. Bus services are unsuitable for commuting on such congested roads , and would attract little or no modal shift - but the vital rail link remains closed.

7. 1994 - 2008

A visionary civil engineer, Christopher Wallis, surveyed the disused track of the HW to Bourne End rail link (HBL) in 1994, and called for its reinstatement, soon supported by a consultant railway signals engineer, Colin Harrison. The then District council put the protection of the track and land for diversions into the local plan. Some 65% is still completely clear. Elsewhere simple diversions are possible, apart from 80m which may require demolition of one or two properties. Three major bridges are required, two replacing demolished bridges and one new, to replace a now unsuitable level crossing location. Two further feasibility studies by professional consultants (one a preliminary exercise, the other more detailed) were commissioned by a Maidenhead businessman in 2008. Both confirmed the feasibility of reinstatement with light rail and the latter one estimated the cost to be £42m. Following these studies, Bucks County Council made a study which produced a figure of £100m. In response to questions it was stated that this larger figure included the 60% surcharge required by Government. This suggested a basic figure of £62m to be compared with the £42m. In response to further questions, we learned that the £62m contained a sum of £8m to compensate for the demolition of a row of industrial buildings, but none of other five engineers had considered this demolition to be necessary.

8. Light rail seems to be the transport mode of choice

Its efficient use of energy, coupled to its well known popularity with users, including motorists, strongly suggests that the light rail reinstatement could significantly reduce the transport carbon emissions between High Wycombe and the Thames Valley (para.6 above). Also, light rail's minimal land requirement would assist the desired unobtrusive character. The restored link could join the present rails at Bourne End, thereby supporting the continuation of the Marlow/Maidenhead service as well as allowing the through light rail service between Maidenhead and HW rail stations, to make the valuable strategic connection between two busy national railway networks, as shown on the sketch map. It would also facilitate international links via public transport access to Crossrail for Heathrow, while the housing and businesses in the HW/Thames Valley area require public transport that is frequent, energy efficient, unobtrusive and accessible, losing little time or energy when stopping for passengers, suggesting a Parry type hybrid vehicle might be appropriate. The reopening of this Beeching closure has received the unanimous support (September 2009) of the Council of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. The disused rail track offers an off street route with no problems of the costly moving of under track services, e.g. electricity. A tunnel under the M40 is still extant, and the existing line from Bourne End to Maidenhead still has an operational bridge over the Thames**. These are assets of immense value**.

High Wycombe is Chiltern Railways second busiest station after its London terminus of Marylebone, and since more people commute between HW and the Thames Valley than to London, it seems reasonable to expect a reopened link to be well patronised. The local Council would no doubt appreciate some encouragement from the Government to embody full route protection into the local planning framework. Perhaps a relatively minor scheme such as this, but with major sustainability and economic gains, would appeal to the Treasury who may have to postpone major schemes such as HS2.

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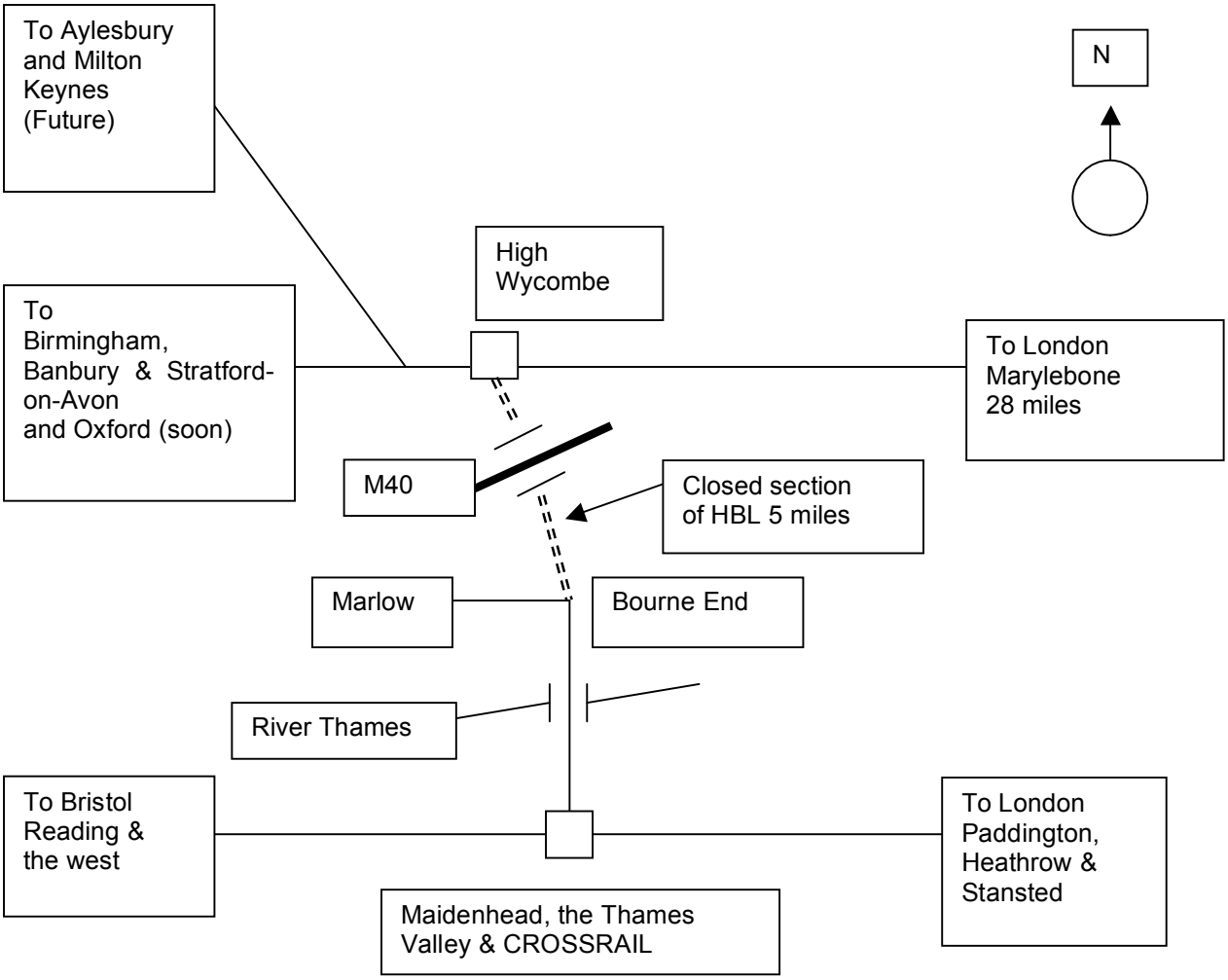

High Wycombe Station is Chiltern Railway's second busiest after Marylebone, with 185 trains a day, of which 58 run between Wycombe and London only. The other 127 run between London and points west and north of Wycombe, but not south.

Maidenhead Station serves the busy town with many valuable connections (including easy access to long distance services at Reading), which would be much enhanced by a frequent, eco friendly light rail link to High Wycombe. This will be paramount with the arrival of CROSSRAIL.

The formation has two key assets:
An operational bridge over the Thames
A disused tunnel under the M40