

# **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**



## **The Role of Railways in Herefordshire's Future**

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## **The Background**

Herefordshire suffered greatly in the great railways cull of the 1950s and 1960s, commonly known as the 'Beeching axe'. Rural branch lines were decimated with the loss of lines to Kington, Bromyard, Hay-on-Wye and Gloucester. At one point it looked as if Herefordshire was set to lose all its railways. However some sense, with some political pressure prevailed and Herefordshire was left with the Marches Line between Newport and Shrewsbury and the line to Worcester. Services however were drastically reduced, all through expresses being diverted away from the Marches line leaving it with just a slow infrequent local service between Cardiff and Crewe.

During the 1950/60s the number of stations fell from fifty four to four. The four stations that remain open today being Hereford, Leominster, Ledbury and Colwall. The train service has experienced a number of fundamental changes which have taken them from the days of British Rail, through the era of British Rail Sector management to the privatised rail companies of today. The course has not been easy, services suffering loss of cohesion under the franchising arrangements with different private train operating companies (TOCs). There are three TOCs operating in Herefordshire. On the infrastructure side there was the privatisation of track and signalling under Railtrack which ended in disaster, the loss of life and eventual re-nationalisation under a government run body, Network Rail.

The whole messy business of track and trains being separated has yet to run its course.

## **The Picture Today**

Herefordshire railways today are vested in four organisations. Track and signalling are under the control of Network Rail. Train operations are under the control of three TOCs.

The Marches Line service is provided by Transport for Wales (TfW) the brand name under which trains are operated by Keolis-Amey (TfW Rail Wales). As the Marches Line is mostly in England, TfW operate the Marches Line under an agency agreement with the Department for Transport.

The London via Cotswold Line service is managed by Great Western Railway (GWR), a subsidiary of First Group whilst the Hereford- Birmingham services is operated by West Midlands Railway (WMR), an arm of West Midlands Trains Ltd which itself is a part of Abellio (Dutch Rail).

Over these years of change there have been improvements. The Marches Line has a frequent long distance service connecting South Wales with Manchester and North Wales. The Birmingham service is hourly whilst Hereford continues to have a limited number of through services to London. However, where both TfW and WMR fail is in respect of the quality of the rolling stock, lack of adequate capacity and poor reliability. That improvements are due to both services with the arrival of new rolling stock over the next few years is an immense encouragement to the future of railways in Herefordshire.

## **Into the Future**

In the foreword to a consultation document 'De-Carbonising Transport', the government is making some bold statements:

*'People in the UK need to shift from cars to public transport to address the challenge of climate change.'* Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said: *'Public transport and active travel will be the natural first choice for our daily activities. We will use our cars less and be able to rely on a*

*convenient, cost-effective and coherent public transport network.'*

If such is to be the case then railways have an important part to play in the future and this applies as much to rural counties such as Herefordshire as to the metropolitan conurbations. If Herefordshire is to seriously improve its connectivity with both the West Midlands economic region on the one side and the Welsh economic region on the other, then improvements to rail services in the light of climate change becomes a priority.

Investment in the railways of the Welsh Marches has sorely lagged behind the rest of the country. In March 2014 the Marches Local Enterprise Partnership commissioned a Marches Rail Study. The report identified a number of key issues and recommended potential solutions. In respect of Herefordshire two key issues were:

- ◆ The requirement for additional future passenger capacity on the Hereford-Birmingham route.
- ◆ The requirement for additional future passenger capacity into both Hereford and Shrewsbury on the Marches Line.

The potential solutions were identified as:

- ◆ Install double track sections of the route between Shelwick Junction (Hereford) and Great Malvern to enable the operation of three trains per hour per direction.
- ◆ Explore the opportunity provided by the re-signalling of the Marches route for re-timetabling existing services and potentially accommodating new services. Consideration should be given to the potential for operating an additional local service over the Marches Line.

These key issues were given emphasis in a second LEP Report in May 2016 titled 'Investing in Strategic Transport Corridors in the Marches'. Both the Marches Line and the Hereford-Worcester line upgrades were given category 1 status as shown in the Appendix to this report. Clearly, rail is set to play an increasingly important role in strengthening and coping with future connectivity between Herefordshire and the West Midlands and between Herefordshire, South Wales and the Northern Powerhouse.

However, despite the growing urgency in the need to update Herefordshire and the Marches railways, the improvements identified by the Marches LEP have fallen significantly down the list in Network Rail's investment programmes. Marches Line re-signalling to increase capacity is now in the long term strategy to 2043 for Network Rail Wales. Equally, looking into the West Midlands Rail Executive Investment Strategy Report we find that the doubling of the line in sections between Hereford and Great Malvern has fallen into the long term post-2034 period.

This is bad news for Herefordshire and the Borders at a time when the government is extolling people to shift from cars to public transport in the moves to de-carbonise transport. Network Rail itself is also forecasting significant increases in demand for rail travel over the next three decades (see Appendix at end of report).

## **Restoring Your Railway Fund**

In February 2020 the Department for Transport issued an updated guidance report on 'Restoring Your Railway'. In it, the Department invites MPs, local councils and community groups across England and Wales to propose how they could use funding to reinstate axed local services and restore closed stations.

There is always a keen interest in reopening closed railway lines but before getting too excited the report specifies that *'it is for you to make a compelling strategic case for funds to help develop your vision further to our panel chaired by the Rail minister Chris Heaton-Harris.'*

Over the years there have been murmurings about reopening the Hereford-Ross-on-Wye-Gloucester line as well as the Hereford-Brecon line. There are other pet schemes but the list of requirements for making a bid is formidable. The report states:

*'The bid for funding should focus on making the strategic and economic case for the scheme, as well as setting out any recognised challenges. We would expect this to include: socio-economic benefits; services proposed; infrastructure and operating costs'.*

This should not deter applicants, however there should be a cold realisation that reopening of rural lines when the existing Marches and Worcester lines are still in need of considerable investment to serve Herefordshire in the future may well prove how fallacious the idea is.

The most promising possibilities within Herefordshire may prove to be the reopening of closed stations on existing lines. Pontrilas is a case in question where the group of local parishes have included the scheme in their neighbourhood plan and have received the express support of both the Member of Parliament and the Local Authority. A second case in point is the closed station at Withington on the Worcester line where there could well prove to be a genuine case given the considerable expansion of housing in the dormitory villages of Bartestree, Lugwardine and Withington/Whitestone and the proximity of Whitestone Trading Estate.

The reopening of a freight link to the Rotherwas Enterprise Zone may well emerge in the not to distant future in connection with the governments plans for de-carbonising transport. Consequently, restructuring of the freight and food supply chain with the establishment of distribution depots served by inter modal container trains may become a possibility. Such a scheme, in conjunction with the use of smaller electric commercial vehicles for local distribution could fall in line with the call for banning heavy commercial vehicles from inner urban areas and small market towns. See the next section on Freight Transport.

### **Freight By Rail**

There was a time when firms such as Bulmers, Painter Bros, Pontrilas Sawmills made us of rail transit. However, as the structure of British industry changed from heavy to light manufacture, so transport economics favoured road haulage for the smaller units. Most heavy goods vehicles on Britain's roads are involved in distribution of goods. The railways sensibly concentrated on that sector of the market where they could economically perform well—the bulk load of up to and over 1,000 tons in one go. Contraction in steel and coal production together with the closure of coal fired power stations has further eroded the percentage of freight moved by rail. Today the only freight movement by rail out of Herefordshire is that of stone and aggregate from the railhead at Moreton-on-Lugg mostly to the South East to fuel the building industry. Otherwise through freight on the Marches line has dropped significantly although the line still figures in Network Rail's freight strategy for the future.

However, throughout Britain there has been a shift to rail in the intermodal market. This relies on the use of containers to transport individual loads delivered to distribution railheads for onward transit by road. That this sector can be built upon when there is a need to reduce road haulage and effect modal transfer of individual loads to rail is very much in the hands of government. Such a move would clearly rely on a restructuring of the supply chain, the establishment of rail heads and the onward transit by smaller road vehicles, thus taking most heavy goods vehicles out of towns and cities. This is very much in line with the de-carbonising

transport statements made by government. Whether the government can or even has the willpower to put this into action remains to be seen.

For Herefordshire, the reinstatement of a rail link into Rotherwas Enterprise Zone and the establishment of a distribution centre may yet prove to be a sensible way forward. Rotherwas could serve most of Herefordshire using small electric road vehicles on short journeys.

The fact that a study 'The Marches & Mid Wales Freight Strategy' was commissioned by the Marches LEP, the Growing Mid Wales Partnership and the Welsh Government, shows there is a keen interest in the future pattern of freight movement. However, the report did not hold out much hope of a significant shift to rail and concluded that rail freight may be able to provide an opportunity to transfer some freight movements to rail but freight by road is likely to remain the dominant mode. This does not mean that rail has to be dismissed entirely but at present the structure of the manufacturing and food supply chains prohibits its use widely across the country and especially in the Marches.

## References

W.S Atkins: Marches Rail Study for Marches LEP: March 2014

Marches LEP: Investing in strategic Transport Corridors in the Marches: May 2016

Marches LEP & Growing Mid Wales: The Marches & Mid Wales Freight Strategy

Department for Transport: Restoring your Railway Fund ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk)>Transport>Rail>Community Rail)

## Sustainable Transport Herefordshire Who Are We?

We are a small group of professionals who embrace transport and land use planning, economics, the environment and who see into the future and learn from the past.

The realisation that future transport has to change led to the formation of the **Herefordshire Sustainable Transport Group** in 2017 (HSTG).

We publish under the title of **Sustainable Transport Herefordshire**.

Our principal aim is to examine and study innovative, environmental and economic changes in transport that can be applied to Herefordshire's current transport problems. We seek to work with the local transport authority, local MPs, the Department for Transport, transport operators and community groups in planning the future.

HSTG is an Independent Group allied to Rail & Bus for Herefordshire and the Herefordshire Transport Alliance.

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## Appendix: Extracts from the Marches LEP Report

Project	Summary Details
<p>Category 1: Newport to Shrewsbury Re-signalling</p>	<p><b>Rationale:</b> Re-signalling, track layout works will allow 100mph line speed running by reducing the headway between services at key locations on the route such as Shrewsbury and Hereford.</p> <p><b>Transport connectivity benefits:</b></p> <p>(1) Enhances rail freight capacity and provides an alternative to road, by enabling additional paths to be timetabled around passenger services.</p> <p>(2) Enables enhanced service frequencies – for example hourly services from Cardiff to Manchester and North Wales – which could be delivered through a future project.</p> <p>(3) Enhances links by reducing journey times between The Marches, Wales and North West England.</p> <p><b>Wider economic benefits:</b></p> <p>(1) Promotes higher capacity and more cost effective freight services for transport of goods.</p> <p>(2) Widens labour markets by reducing commuting journey times between the key towns.</p> <p>(3) Promotes higher volumes of inbound tourism to destinations along the line.</p> <p><b>Estimated timescale:</b> Programmed for delivery in 2017.</p> <p><b>Current cost estimate:</b> To be confirmed.</p>

Project	Summary Details
<p>Category 1: Shelwick Junction to Great Malvern Re-doubling</p>	<p><b>Rationale and Key Outcomes:</b> Re-doubling of the line between Shelwick Junction and Malvern Wells, providing a continuous two track route to / from Hereford.</p> <p><b>Transport connectivity benefits:</b></p> <p>(1) Removes a significant constraint on the future development of train services west of Worcester – and in particular gives the ability to increase service frequency to Herefordshire stations.</p> <p>(2) Provides the option for a greater number of direct services from Herefordshire stations to London and the South East via Worcester.</p> <p><b>Wider economic benefits:</b></p> <p>(1) Widens labour markets through provision of better access to job opportunities in close proximity to stations (for example in Hereford, Worcester and Birmingham).</p> <p>(2) Provides a great number of service options for single-day business travel between Hereford, the West Midlands and (in particular) London and the South East.</p> <p><b>Estimated timescale:</b> To be confirmed.</p> <p><b>Current cost estimate:</b> To be confirmed.</p> <p><b>Next steps:</b> A detailed feasibility study and Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) should be undertaken to understand required infrastructure and economic benefits of higher frequency services.</p>