

A lifeline for East Lancs

The campaign to reopen Skipton-Colne is gathering momentum, with the Department for Transport announcing a full feasibility study and Transport Secretary Chris Grayling paying a personal visit. TOM INGALL reports

“This is not good news. This is fantastic news!” Peter Bryson, chairman of the Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership (SELRAP), is in ebullient mood, quite against the prevailing weather and early hour. A little wet snow falls on the platform at Colne, in Lancashire, as a welcoming committee grows in size - not for the hourly service to Preston, but instead for the arrival of Secretary of State for Transport Chris Grayling.

Since it was established in 2001, campaigning and convincing others to join the cause, this is a special moment for SELRAP. The Government has announced it will fund a full feasibility study into rebuilding the railway across county boundaries, back into Yorkshire to connect just north of Skipton (RAIL 846).

A forlorn set of rusting buffer stops stand at the end of the single-track line through Colne platform. Since February 2 1970, they have fended off potential commuters and passenger flows. Just 12 miles of track bed separates them from the rails in Yorkshire. But today, almost 48 years to the day after closure, there is a feeling of vindication in the air.

Says Bryson: “As of today, we have nearly 500 paid-up members, thousands of other supporters, and about 50 businesses backing us. We are a major campaigning group.

“Very simply, this is about economics, growth and education. Where we are standing in Pendle is one of the most deprived areas in the UK. Yet 30 miles away are two of the

Right: About a mile north of Colne, the formation passes under Red Lane bridge. Besides the obvious clearance work required, new drains will also have to be installed if the Skipton-Colne line is to reopen.

Below: Attached to Red Lane bridge, a modern sign confirms that the trackbed is not a public right of way.



RAIL photography: TOM INGALL

biggest cities - Leeds and Manchester. There are job opportunities there. “People from here should be able to get there by safe, efficient and modern public transport. It’s as simple as that.”

It is, of course, still possible to take a train from Colne to Skipton, but it’s a very long way round and it will take you nearly three hours.

Bryson continues: “We have a regular challenge between the train operator Arriva and one of our old age pensioners, who is a runner. He can run from here to Skipton, quicker than you can get the train. You couldn’t invent it in the 21st century!”

When the railway first arrived in Colne, the buffer stops would have been at the other end of the platform. Opened in 1848, the station

was the terminus of the Midland Railways extension from Skipton. Six months later, the East Lancashire Railway arrived from the other direction and through running across this part of the Pennines became possible.

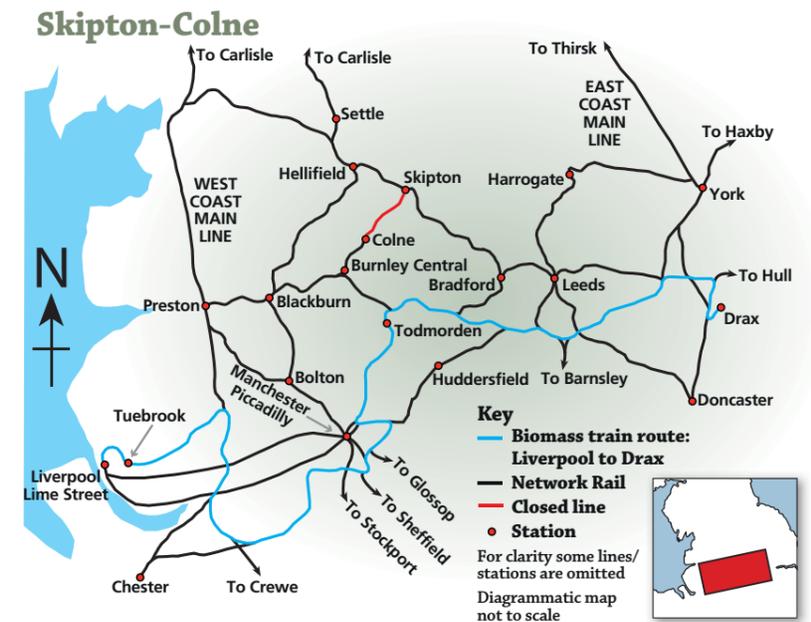
A familiar story of rise and fall followed. Station buildings, engine and carriage shed, freight facilities... all have come and gone. The Beeching report, however, did not recommend the route for closure. And as late as 1967, a Ministry for Transport report identified the line not only for retention, but as the future ONLY route into Skipton!

But a year later, everything changed. Skipton would retain its other lines, and instead the railway to Colne and the remaining intermediate stations would shut.

Following the last through train to Skipton in 1970, Colne was downgraded to an unstaffed halt. Today, it is as basic as the railway gets. A bus shelter, a ticket machine and a couple of name boards serve fewer than 100,000 passengers a year. The short trains arrive, pause for a few minutes, and depart back the way they came. Opposite the entrance ramp, weeds are claiming the paving slabs of the former eastbound platform, which still survives. The whole branch from Burnley was singled in the 1980s.

Contrast this with the potential destination. Skipton railway station is staffed, has witnessed substantial investment following electrification of the Aire Valley lines from Leeds, and welcomed 1.1 million passengers in 2016-17. More than nine million passengers used the Airedale Line in Yorkshire in 2017.

What remains of the line between the two is tantalising. The trackbed is for the large part unobstructed, in part in public ownership, although not without challenges. Very early in its campaigning, SELRAP produced its own report about the work that would be required



for reinstatement. This was followed in 2003 by a Steer Davies Gleave study, commissioned by Lancashire and North Yorkshire County Councils.

Significantly, at the time there were serious proposals for a new road to bypass several villages and to better link the two counties, and which would have been built over the redundant formation. The road cost was given as £37 million, while the basic single-track railway proposal was estimated at £33m.

The two most serious obstacles to reopening are at either end of the line.

Immediately beyond those buffers at Colne is an all-weather sports pitch and then a major road (Vivary Way) bisecting the route. The latter is likely to need to cross the railway using an underpass, a scheme already designed by Lancashire County Council.

Further north there are drainage issues, small level crossings (of the sort which have become a complication for the proposals to reopen the March-Wisbeck line) to reinstate or remove, and at the village of Earby domestic gardens have encroached onto the formation.

Bridges need replacing, a gas main has been laid along a section of the route, and finally, just before the junction at Skipton (about half a mile north of the station), the town bypass has also driven across the trackbed on an embankment. Clearly some sort of substantial new bridge will be required.

SELRAP now believes the cost of reinstatement will likely be around £100m. “There are issues,” acknowledges Bryson. “There are some local residents who will be affected, but all of the issues are far less serious than those which have been overcome”



elsewhere in the UK - for example, on the Borders Railway. That £100m is a realistic figure which has been verified by people in the industry."

Other consultants have followed up the Steer Davies Gleave report. A large part of SELRAP's work has been not only keeping the project in the public eye, but also refreshing and updating the evidence base for it.

The costs will, of course, depend to a great extent on what sort of railway is rebuilt. In its 2003 report, Steer Davies Gleave considered options but noted that local passenger flows alone would barely justify the reopening, and also that the potential for freight operations appeared to be very low. Fifteen years later, and it seems the mood music on the latter point has changed.

Awaiting the Transport Secretary's arrival in Colne are a number of prominent business players, including Andy Koss, the chief executive of Drax Power Station (some 65 miles away near Selby).

"We've been involved in the campaign from an early time," he confirms.

"The railways are a lifeline for our business, much of which comes through Peel Port in Liverpool. It takes up to nine hours to do the 90 miles from Liverpool to Drax by rail. Opening this line would bring that down to three hours. This will give us much more resilience in the supply chain by providing more capacity.

"As a nation, we can benefit from a fast, efficient railway that allows more free movement of goods between manufacturers, their distribution hubs, and their markets across the north of England and beyond."

“ We have a regular challenge between the train operator Arriva and one of our old age pensioners, who is a runner. He can run from here to Skipton, quicker than you can get the train. ”

Peter Bryson,
Chairman, Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership



There were a number of small crossings along the line. At Slipper Hill, about a mile and a half north of Colne station, the crossing gate posts still stand (almost!) waiting for a train.

Time has marched on, and this is now a much bigger proposal than a Borders-style passenger railway. With talk of major new traffic flows, it is clear that the feasibility study will be examining a double-track line. Likewise, beyond the core proposal, Burnley to Colne is expected to be double-tracked. And further afield, some existing structures could require rebuilding as part of a gauge enhancement programme.

Another challenge for the campaign has been the need to reach outside of traditional local and regional government boundaries. This area does not speak with the voice of one authority.

Bryson explains: "The trans-Pennine element of this project isn't where the campaign started, but in the last few years it has become obvious that as well as the regional economy in this area, there is also a demand for better links across the whole of the north from Liverpool to Hull. That's why the businesses support us. They can see the big picture - an alternative to the congested trans-Pennine routes and indeed the M62."

Locally, the Skipton Building Society is a big employer adding its weight to the cause. Chief Executive David Cutter reports that 1,600 people work at the headquarters in the North Yorkshire town, but only a quarter travel



Having arrived two minutes earlier, 'Sprinter' 150228 has another five minutes to stand before forming the 0921 back to Preston on February 3. The journey takes about an hour and a quarter.



Transport Secretary Chris Grayling is escorted around the basic facilities at Colne station on February 3 by Pendle MP Andrew Stephenson.



from Lancashire. "It's vital for the sustainable growth of the business that we can attract talent, and there is a huge pool of talent in East Lancashire and north Manchester."

Back on Colne platform, the great and the good have gathered and are joined by Pendle MP Andrew Stephenson and Transport Secretary Chris Grayling.

Rarely can this station have witnessed so many people, with the throng outnumbering the handful of passengers awaiting the next train. And when it arrives, there is a ripple of amusement - it's a Pacer, held up by many as the nadir of rural branch lines. Should Skipton to Colne ever reopen, it's unlikely that any of this class will ever traverse the line as they are due to go for scrap by 2020.

Elected in 2010, Stephenson had spoken about the reopening campaign in his maiden speech in the Commons.

"I think this rail reopening would have a transformational effect," he tells RAIL. "I'm delighted by the prospect of a full study. We are in Pendle, in Colne, 'at the end of the line'. It's the end of the railway, the end of the motorway.

"To travel to Yorkshire, you have to get through some of the worst congestion in East Lancashire. I would say it's a complete no-brainer to reopen this route to create a new east-west connection across the Pennines. It would transform the lives of young people here to be able to access jobs in Skipton, Bradford and Leeds - opportunities which are currently completely closed off to them."

The feasibility study is a joint commission between the Department for Transport and Transport for the North. There is no word yet as to who will undertake the work, with a tendering process to follow in due course. Funded by the DfT (with a cost somewhere in the 'hundreds of thousands' region), it is

“ It takes up to nine hours to do the 90 miles from Liverpool to Drax by rail. Opening this line would bring that down to three hours. ”

Andy Koss, Chief Executive,
Drax Power Station

expected to be complete before the end of the year.

Stephenson firmly believes it will demonstrate a positive economic case. Sheltering beneath a broly as February tightens its grip, he shepherds Grayling along the platform towards the dim red stop light at the end of the track. Grayling also strikes an upbeat tone: "I think there is a strong case. I wouldn't be here otherwise. Both for passenger services and freight services, this is a link which could make a real difference."

He won't be drawn on what Benefit:Cost Ratio he will need to see before committing to reopening: "I don't have a set number in advance. I just want to be clear the case is there and strong, and that the capacity is there, too.

"If we take more freight trains and passenger trains across this route, we will get them through to Leeds and so forth? So we need to look at things at either end, too.

"This is clearly a transport opportunity, in a part of the world that needs better transport links. We need a whole set of improved connections across the Pennines that can't just be between Manchester and Leeds, we have to do things further north as well."

As to the costs beyond the feasibility study, Grayling adds: "We have a budget for the next

The end of the line. The buffer stops at Colne on February 3 2018. It's hard to believe a double-track railway once continued northwards from here. The all-weather football pitch can be seen, as can the cars on Vivary Way - the first major obstacles to reinstatement. The formation continues to the left of the new houses in the distance.

rail Control Period to be spent on projects which make a difference to freight. We're not doing this on a whim, there is a real prospect for doing this. People expect the case to stack up."

The party retires into the warmth of a small community centre across the road. The Pacer and its passengers rumble away, and quiet returns to this isolated outpost of the national rail network.

It's far too early to confidently announce Colne's new status as an en route calling point, rather than a terminus. However, the announcement of feasibility study funding means that for the first time in decades, revival - rather than just reversal - is seriously in mind. **R**

Further reading

- Filling the missing link - RAIL 585.
- Are we close to filling the missing link? - RAIL 816.

About the author

Tom Ingall, Contributing Writer

Tom Ingall is an award-winning BBC Transport Correspondent and author who lives and works in South Yorkshire. A life-long interest in railways also has him volunteering at the Great Central heritage railway in Leicestershire.

