

SELRAP's five-year reopening dream

After 17 years of tireless campaigning, the Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership (SELRAP) is on the verge of an incredible success.

Since SELRAP's first meeting on April 10 2001, it has often been a case of one step forward, two steps back, one step forward. But then a key change in the group's fortunes came in 2015, with the formation firstly of Rail North, and then Transport for the North.

The mood now is definitely upbeat, as witnessed when *RAIL* met with present chairman Peter Bryson and long-serving colleagues David Penney and Andy Shackleton. Secretary of State for Transport Chris Grayling's announcement that a major feasibility study is to be carried out (*RAIL* 846, 848) has brought revived optimism.

The publication in March 2017 of the *Central Trans-Pennine Corridor, East-West Connectivity, An Economic Study* changed the landscape considerably. Commissioned by the Lancashire Enterprise Partnership, together with the West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) and the York, North Yorkshire and East Riding LEP, the document explored "the potential economic benefits that might arise across the north of England from enhanced connectivity between Lancashire and north and west Yorkshire".

The study's purpose was to "develop a strategic economic narrative to support the case for potential investment and intervention in road/rail-based connectivity across functional and connected economies comprising the Central Trans-Pennine Corridor".

While it was not intended that the study should suggest any particular solution, Bryson notes its conclusion that reopening Skipton to Colne "would have a massive impact on the economy and a transformational effect. This kicked things off, for in May 2017 we set up the Project Development Team."

With meetings every two months chaired by SELRAP, this PDT includes Transport for the North, Arriva Rail North, Network Rail, Arup,

Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership Chairman PETER BRYSON talks to founding chairman STEVE BROADBENT about the exciting future for the long-anticipated project to reopen the Skipton-Colne link

Skipton Building Society, Drax Group and Peel Ports, along with GB Railfreight, the Rail Freight Group and a Private Finance Company. "Very quickly, the PDT established a very simple pattern of proposed services along the reopened line," says Bryson.

This would entail the half-hourly Leeds-Skipton trains being extended via Colne and all stations to Rose Grove, just to the west of Burnley. The line from Skipton through to Gannow Junction would be double-track, since just having single track would not offer adequate capacity.

There will probably be one station on the reinstated line - a park-and-ride facility serving Earby, Barnoldswick (where there is a large Rolls-Royce aero engines factory) and the West Craven business park. While Skipton to Rose Grove could be electrified as a natural extension of the Aire Valley Line, it may be more pragmatic for bi-mode trains to operate the route, with passive provision for electrification being made in the design.

"The rationale for this service pattern is very simple," says Bryson. "Burnley and Pendle have a combined population of 200,000 which would be within one hour's travelling time of Leeds and Bradford. That's more than Oxford or Cambridge, and only slightly less than Milton Keynes, which are having so much investment in the shape of the East West Rail project.

"Leeds to Rose Grove is roughly the same distance as from London to Milton Keynes, and all the intermediate stations - Colne, Nelson, Brierfield, Burnley Central, Rose Grove - are right in the heart of densely populated urban areas and very close to their respective town centres."

The principle has been established that the Rose Grove to Leeds service will be a modern, fast, reliable and sustainable passenger service.

Bryson adds: "Electrification is an option, but SELRAP has also established a principle that Skipton-Colne will form a strategic rail link across the North, dubbed the 'Northern Link'.

"Like all railway projects, it will take some time for the traffic to build up. But with so many people living close to the railway, with the employment opportunities that already exist along the corridor, and with the vital need for regeneration, there is no doubt that passenger numbers will grow steadily."

The key argument remains exactly what it was in 2001, although the need is now that much more urgent. These towns need

regeneration and a much higher level of economic activity, a crucial issue which the railway is singularly best placed to help solve.

Pendle and Hyndburn residents need access to well-paid jobs, while the area (one of the most deprived in the UK) also needs to attract inbound commuters and visitors. With a high dependency on road travel in the area, the Burnley-Colne conurbation has high levels of pollution, congestion and accidents which the railway would help relieve.

Rose Grove, close to the M65 motorway, would become a transport hub with connections into the Blackburn-Todmorden-Manchester Victoria service. Further connectivity would be provided if the York-

Leeds-Preston-Blackpool North service called there.

Bryson explains that a key advantage of this simple plan is that it is totally self-contained. The construction would not affect any existing services, save for the rebuilding between Colne and Gannow, and two weekends necessary to link in the new line at Gannow and Skipton West Junctions.

The contrast is often made between the smart, four-platform station at Skipton and the nearly invisible, semi-derelict, single platform

at Colne. An indication of the kind of economic regeneration and environmental benefits the railway would bring to Colne and its Pendle neighbours is that Skipton (population around 15,000) has 1.1 million station users each year. Colne (population close to 20,000) has less than one-tenth the number of rail passengers.

"All the studies show there is a huge level of suppressed demand for rail travel from the Pendle and Burnley areas," says Bryson.

"And Leeds, with its many connections to rest of the country, is the prime destination.

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

Bradford is now also supporting the proposal, because it sees it has a serious traffic congestion problem."

The Bradford metropolitan area includes Shipley, Bingley and Keighley, which would be served by trains to/from Rose Grove.

The route's freight potential has also emerged. From the SELRAP campaign's inception, the fact that Skipton-Colne is the lowest rail crossing of the Pennines, without steep gradients or tunnels, has been seen as a key positive.

The route is less susceptible to severe weather than those that reach higher altitudes, with characteristics that make it highly suitable for freight traffic. This would take pressure off the Standedge and Calder Valley trans-Pennine routes, freeing capacity for

A Northern Rail Class 142 departs Colne on May 2 2009. The buffer stops are just out of shot and around the curve, but a major feasibility study will now be carried out to restore the 11½ miles of missing railway to Skipton that was closed in 1970. PAUL BIGLAND.

Skipton-Colne: the major engineering schemes

Locations along the 11½-mile route where significant civil engineering work will be needed:

- To the west of Skipton station where the line crosses underneath the Skipton bypass, and then over the river Aire.
- At Earby, where a level crossing needs eliminating.
- At Foulridge, where the bridge over the Leeds and Liverpool Canal has been removed.
- The crossing of Vivary Way, immediately beyond the buffer stops at Colne station.



SELRAP Chairman Peter Bryson hosts a meeting at Portcullis House in Westminster on November 1 2017, with MPs and representatives from a range of organisations including Network Rail, Transport for the North and local authorities. SELRAP.



➔ passenger trains.

Drax Power Station, located near Selby (north Yorkshire), supplies around 7% of the country's electricity needs. Three of its six 645MW power generation units now use sustainable biomass, in the form of compressed wood pellets, and a fourth unit will be converted this year.

Drax has a long-term agreement with the Government to produce power in this way, but the biomass trains can take as long as nine hours to reach Drax from the port at Liverpool.

Peel Ports has invested heavily in new dock facilities at Liverpool, but it is unable to gain the access it needs to the national rail network for the incoming cargo. Put simply, efficient rail transport is vital for both businesses, a problem so far unaddressed.

With Drax and Peel Ports both members of the PDT, the vision for the Skipton-Colne corridor has developed to include provision for a W12 gauge freight route between Liverpool and Hull and Immingham docks on the East coast - allowing freight containers with goods for the north of England to be unloaded at these ports and carried by rail, rather than using southern ports. Carrying biomass by rail to Drax is a more efficient and reliable way of delivery, with each train taking a significant number of lorries off the roads.

This whole route was examined last summer in an Assessment of East-West Strategic Railfreight Routes. And Bryson says that with the exception of the newly built or rebuilt track between Burnley and Skipton, only a limited amount of gauge clearance and junction work needs to be done to make this concept workable.

Between Skipton and Leeds, paths formerly used by trains carrying imported coal could be made available for new freight flows. Having crossed the Leeds station western throat, the route eastwards to/from Drax and the North Sea ports is very freight friendly and (it is understood) would need only minimal work.

Maggie Simpson, Executive Director of the Rail Freight Group, tells RAIL: "We are

glad to see work now under way to assess the feasibility of reopening this route, including consideration of its use for freight. The study remit must be broad enough to consider freight journeys from origin to destination, and also its potential use as a diversionary route, alongside a fully upgraded and freight-capable North TransPennine route."

With the vision of both the passenger and freight services having been developed and agreed by the PDT, reinstating the Skipton-Colne line now creates a 'Northern link' at a fraction of the cost of any other solution, with a wide range of significant benefits and being "increasingly seen as a viable and credible proposal, and that has driven the Department for Transport to become involved", according to Bryson.

As for the passenger market, the serious

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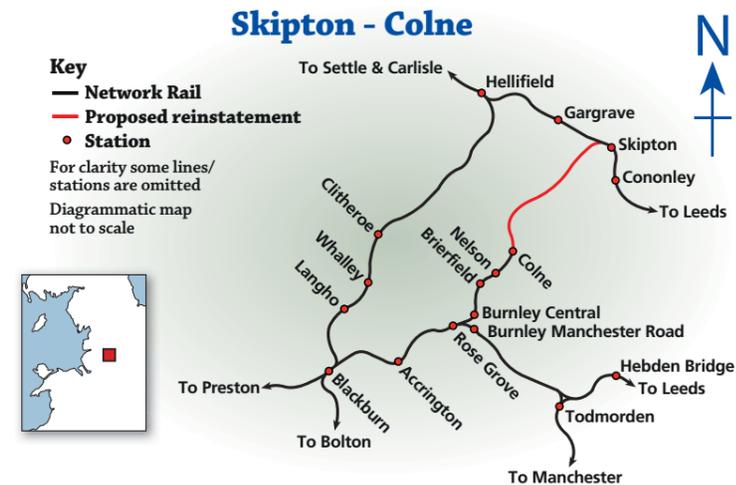
Peter Bryson, Chairman, Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership

economic deprivation of the Pendle and Burnley areas has long been a concern. The lack of a direct train service to Manchester is hindrance enough to accessing jobs and education, but having no rail link into Yorkshire is a barrier indeed.

For example, the Skipton Building Society, headquartered in that town, finds it difficult to recruit and retain staff given the competition from financial sector employers in Leeds. A rail connection with Lancashire would give the company a much greater pool of potential talented staff.

That is just one example of the kind of flows likely to develop when Pendle and Burnley residents can travel eastwards by train, whether for well-paid jobs, higher education or other needs. But Bryson adds: "Our proposals are also attracting attention from those wishing to travel in the opposite direction - for example, from Shipley, Bingley and Keighley to Burnley, the centre of the UK's only designated high-technology aerospace manufacturing area."

Young people need both good public transport and affordable housing to start climbing the respective educational, employment and housing ladders. A fundamental cornerstone of the Skipton-Colne project is that while younger people today want to travel more, car ownership is often unaffordable, leading to migration from



the smaller towns and subsequent economic and social disbenefits. House prices in Pendle are much less than in Skipton - in Pendle, two-bedroom terrace houses sell for under £60,000.

Meanwhile, the work of the Central Trans-Pennine Corridor study is being taken forward by Transport for North. Studies of eight corridors are under way, with the Skipton-Colne corridor believed to be one of the most important. TfN's report is due out this summer.

From the very start, SELRAP has been a team effort involving a number of dedicated and industrious (and increasingly knowledgeable and influential) individuals. A major step forward (or perhaps more of a natural progression) took place on November 1 2017, when Bryson, aided by long-serving colleagues Andy Shackleton and David Mawdsley, chaired a meeting in Portcullis House (a part of the Parliamentary estate in Westminster).

It was hosted by two 'local to SELRAP' MPs, and attended by three additional MPs, plus representatives from Lancashire and North Yorkshire County Councils, West Yorkshire Combined Authority, Transport for the North, Network Rail, Arriva Rail North, Drax Power, Peel Ports, Skipton Building Society and Arup. That SELRAP was asked to chair this seminal meeting is a mark of the status the group has achieved.

This meeting made the MPs - particularly joint hosts John Grogan (Labour, Keighley) and Andrew Stephenson (Conservative, Pendle) - realise that the issue is not only one of transport, but also of economic growth and regeneration, and the key to unlocking this potential in their constituencies.

Bryson reflects that support from the two county councils has always varied "and is still only lukewarm". Nevertheless, they and WYCA have endorsed the Central Pennines study. Network Rail has come on board

relatively recently thanks to efforts by Drax, and there is "now serious engagements with Network Rail, who are looking at wider network issues".

The appearance of Transport for the North has brought about a "sea change with regard to attitude". Bryson suggests that while county councils and other local authorities may not fully understand rail projects, TfN certainly does.

"We are talking the right language. Transport for the North recognises that rail is the right way to bring the transport improvements to city centres and major urban areas. But while TfN currently focuses on the major cities, East Lancashire - with a population of 200,000 - is large for somewhere that is not a city."

With Arriva Rail North having a "transformational agenda" for the present franchise, Bryson acknowledges that the company is giving "a lot of support behind the scenes, and it is quite clear that our scheme fits fully into the agenda for a developing Northern franchise".

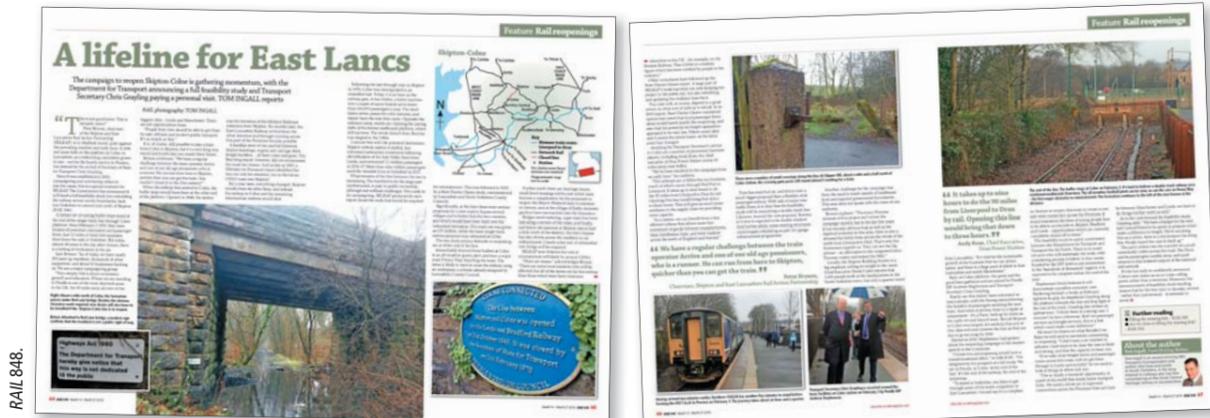
Then came a complete surprise to SELRAP... Transport Secretary Chris Grayling's visit to Colne on February 3 (RAIL 846). His reason for the visit was the announcement of the feasibility study.

The timing was right. As Bryson acknowledges, the SELRAP volunteers had taken the campaign just about as far as they could, the scheme now needed professionals to take it forward.

"We were very pleased with this announcement," he says. "We could not have asked for more."

And with the intention for the study to be ➔

With significant economic disparity between the neighbouring districts of Pendle (Lancashire) and Craven (North Yorkshire), Transport for the North will release a report this summer on its plans for the Colne-Skipton corridor. SELRAP.



RAIL 848.



Railway reopening projects

| Comparison of populations served, route lengths and construction costs | | |
|--|------------------|----------------------------|
| Borders Railway | Oxford-Bletchley | Skipton to Colne |
| Population of the city | | |
| Edinburgh 490,000 | Oxford 160,000 | Leeds & Bradford 1,750,000 |
| Population of the two largest towns | | |
| Galashiels 15,000 | Bletchley 37,000 | Pendle 75,000 |
| Tweedbank 2,000 | Bicester 33,000 | Burnley 85,000 |
| Rail route length | | |
| 35 miles | 40 miles | 12 miles |
| Construction cost | | |
| £350m | £730m | £100m |

As can be seen in this simple comparison, Skipton to Colne is the smallest and lowest-risk project. The reopening of Skipton to Colne - to form a new route from Leeds to Burnley - will serve a total population of approximately two million who live and work in Lancashire and Yorkshire. (Source: SELRAP)



RAIL 816.



completed by the end of this year, there is clearly urgency in Grayling's thinking. Would the Transport Secretary have travelled all the way to Colne on a cold Saturday morning in midwinter, and committed a sizeable chunk of money to this feasibility study, if he was not expecting a positive outcome?

There will certainly be a natural tendency to lobby for expansion of the project. Why stop at Rose Grove? Why not continue the service through to Blackburn and Preston, or forge a new link between Skipton, Pendle and Manchester Airport? These are among the more obvious suggestions likely to be made by rail enthusiasts, MPs and local councils alike.

But Bryson is adamant: "We are focusing on our project. What we do not want is for this scheme to expand to encompass more of northern England - there is not the traffic case for this. Eventually, perhaps, but not for some time. One step at a time, let's get the basics done properly."

The feasibility study being commissioned by the DfT and TfN follows on from SELRAP's work over 17 years, and is expected to include a full engineering study - an important element as some major structures need constructing or rebuilding. Solutions to these challenges, and mitigating the effect of the line on nearby properties, will be identified - appeasing doubters who believe there are insuperable obstacles to progress. There is only one building on the protected trackbed, while some 30 houses will be seriously affected by these proposals.

The other key element of the feasibility study will be 'optioneering', although there are very few options to be considered. Bryson anticipates the study being completed by autumn 2018, with a government decision to proceed following around the turn of the year.

Bryson believes that the right thing to do is to build Skipton-Colne quickly. And by 'quickly', SELRAP is thinking in terms of around five years from now to opening. This is very fast by current rail industry standards,

Peel Port's new £100 million biomass facility handles up to three million tonnes of pellets a year, imported from North America and bound for Drax power station in Yorkshire. Both Peel Ports and Drax sit on SELRAP's Project Development Team, which meets every two months with other stakeholders. PEEL PORTS.

with the process generally delayed by the complex planning process or by lack of funds.

Grayling's invitation on March 20 for proposals for private investment into railway infrastructure improvements more generally (the 'rail network enhancements pipeline') will certainly help SELRAP's ambitions, especially given that a Private Finance Company is a member of the Skipton-Colne Project Development Team. But the potential and need

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

for this line in terms of economic regeneration is significant, and the ambition has not been forged in isolation from advice from the rail industry.

The planning process may need to be streamlined (an advance that would certainly benefit other reopening projects), but Skipton-Colne is indeed a 'quick win' now that it has gained critical momentum.

After reviewing the issues concerning the other three trans-Pennine rail routes, Bryson concludes: "The advantage of building the scheme early is that while it is never going to be the main trans-Pennine route, in building a diversionary route first, Skipton-Colne becomes the enabler for the much-needed enhancements on the other routes."

From his long engineering career, Bryson has experience of how rail developments can be the catalyst for major regeneration. In this regard, he sees the wider Skipton-Colne scheme as being "the Docklands Light Railway for the North, the beginning of something

transformational".

David Penney says two aspects convince him that the line will indeed be built speedily: "Firstly, the DfT and TfN have accepted that this is much more than just a little local railway project. They also realise they're going to need a diversionary route, given the emerging strategic plans for the other trans-Pennine lines."

While the challenge of dealing with people and bodies either side of the Pennines was always foreseen, Bryson notes that the formation of TfN "has brought about a sea change. TfN fully understands the issues involved and the potential for this reopening, and that rail is the right way to bring transport improvements to cities. And East Lancashire, with a population of 200,000, is the biggest 'non-city' in northern England."

So, what next for SELRAP? Having changed significantly from being considered (as Bryson says) a "little community group with no specific expertise" to one capable of

convening and chairing the Portcullis House meeting, SELRAP is fast approaching another crossroads.

The Government's devolution agenda has helped several of the 'cross-boundary' challenges to fade away, with Bryson acknowledging: "We wouldn't be where we are today without TfN. Without them we would still be talking to a fragmented audience. We are now operating in a much more favourable environment than we were five years ago."

SELRAP has laid the foundations, built up all the necessary building blocks, made contacts, and brought experts and organisations together (not forgetting its 500 members and a positive army of supporters), such that the project will now be taken forward by the DfT and TfN.

The handover began in March 2018. SELRAP was instrumental in defining the scope of the feasibility study, and will continue to be a source of knowledge for that study,

Peter Bryson

After having been the senior project manager on the early stages of the King's Cross station's western concourse development in 2014, Peter Bryson bought a copy of RAIL to read an article on that project.

That issue included a small item about SELRAP, mentioning the involvement of civil engineering contractor Arup... and fired an interest which has proved to be so important to the campaign.

keeping a very close eye on the process to ensure all key issues are properly (and positively) examined.

"But we are determined to ensure that the project does not become a great big, wishy-washy, catch-all project spreading right across the North," says Bryson. "We are going to keep up the pressure for the early reinstatement of the Skipton to Colne railway."

SELRAP will therefore take on a watching brief as the project moves forward, becoming more of a monitoring and pressure group. Confidence is high that a positive decision will rapidly emerge, and as this government is expressing an interest in the development of railway infrastructure, it may well be that SELRAP has created the template for others to follow. **R**

Further reading

- Are we close to finding the missing link? RAIL 816
- A lifeline for East Lancs, RAIL 848

About the author

Steve Broadbent, Contributing Writer

Steve is a highly experienced transport writer with long roots in both railways and aviation. He founded SELRAP to campaign for the re-opening of the Skipton-Colne Line. He joined RAIL in early 2008, and is a regular news and features contributor.

