

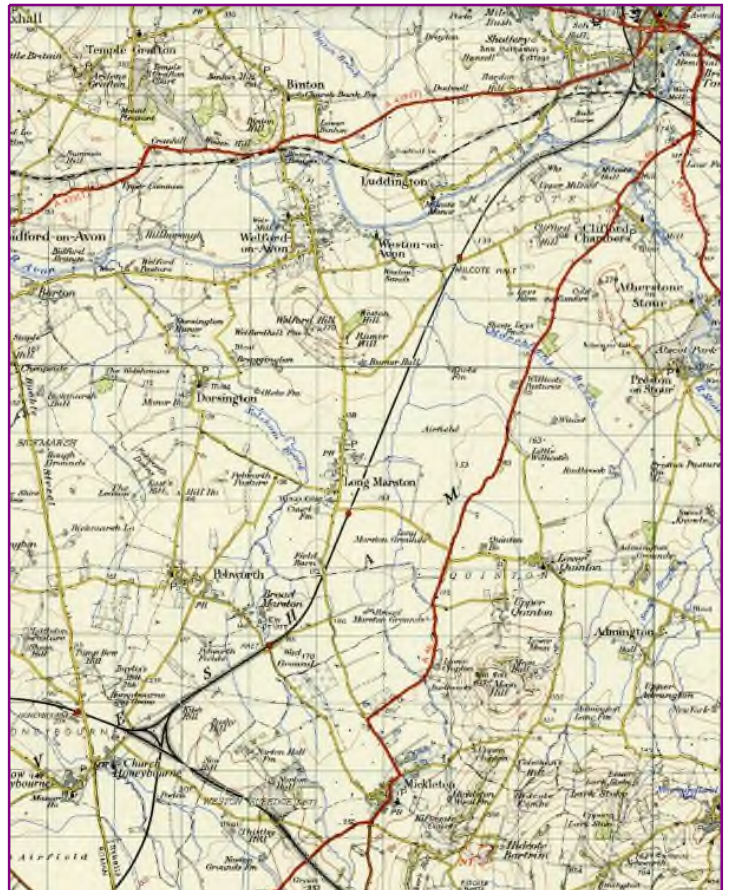
## RESTORING THE STRATFORD TO HONEYBOURNE LINK

by John Morgan

To wide acclaim from the rail industry and media, the last Government launched a long awaited, "*Restoring Your Railway*", Beeching Reversal, fund in January 2020, with a £500m budget. The Department for Transport (DfT) invited MPs, local councils and community groups across England and Wales to propose how they could use this fund to reinstate axed local services and restore closed stations. The fund was split into three categories, to ensure DfT could support different projects at different phases. Reopening the Stratford to Honeybourne line was promoted in the Ideas Fund.

Through the Ideas Fund, the DfT sought proposals for projects to restore lost rail connections to communities, restoring track and services to an old alignment. The DfT would fund 75% of costs, up to £50,000, of successful proposals to help fund transport and economic studies and create a business case. Future funding to develop projects would be subject to approval of this business case.

Applications for the Ideas Fund had to be sponsored by one or more Members of Parliament whose constituencies would benefit from the scheme. The group promoting the scheme could include local government, community groups, local enterprise partnerships or other interested parties. In our case Nigel Huddleston, Mid-Worcestershire, agreed to be the Sponsoring M.P and our bid was endorsed by ten other M.Ps and eighteen other organisations including the local authorities along the route.



Any bid for funding had to focus on making the strategic and economic case for the scheme as well as setting out any recognised challenges. These should include socio-economic benefits, the services proposed and the infrastructure and operating costs.

The main purpose of this study would be to commission a Strategic Outline Business Case (SOBC) for the restoration of passenger rail services between Stratford-upon-Avon and both Worcester and Oxford, via Honeybourne Junction, on the Worcester-Oxford (North Cotswold) line. The study would also look at the broader regional impact of the reopening proposal on both the area served between Stratford and Honeybourne, including the proposed new housing developments at Long Marston Airfield Garden Village and also across the wider region. Overall, it should consider the wider economic benefits of any such reopening proposal, including tourism, employment and education.

Following discussions between the four local rail promotion groups, our bid was duly submitted to the DfT by Nigel Huddleston, as the Sponsoring M.P., on 19 June 2020.

On 25 November 2020, the DfT announced that our Bid had been successful. One of fifteen successful bids out of 50 submitted and included in the National Infrastructure Strategy. The consultants Stantec were appointed to carry out the study in February 2021.



A GWR Castle on the northbound *Cornishman* approaches Stratford-upon-Avon in August 1963

(John Jennings)

As a community group, we asked Wychavon District Council to act on our behalf for the procurement of the study and tendering. The support for this scheme from the Council's Leader and Officers has been particularly noteworthy, for which we are very grateful. Thanks should also go Nigel Huddleston and his staff, the other 10 M.P.s and eighteen supporting organisations.

The real challenge is to capture the latent demand for rail travel from Stratford and South Warwickshire that will never be realised as long as it remains at the truncated, stub end of a branch line with slow and infrequent services.

A letter from an American tourist to the Stratford press summed it up quite neatly:

*"As a visitor to your beautiful town, who would choose not to be categorized as an ugly American, it seems the network of railways in England somehow omitted Stratford from its planning and, although my stay in your historic town was a dream come true, further trips to England would either convince me to rent a car or to stay somewhere more agreeable to the rail network."*

A previous Stratford Rail Study by Arup in 2012 had revealed that Stratford only attracts 6% of tourist trips by rail compared to 13% for equivalent centres. Stratford-upon-Avon has 3.5m visitors to the Town, 6.0m pa to the District, and lies on a major international tourist route.

GWR Grange Class 6851 *Hurst Grange* heads south through Milcote with a train to Cheltenham Racecourse



(John Dagley-Morris)

This is the very rail corridor that exists now - apart from the six mile missing link between Stratford and Long Marston. The Chiltern route to London Marylebone does not serve this market and can take 2hr 30m.

As a tourist destination, Stratford is home to the Shakespeare heritage sites, including his birthplace, which attract spending at £300m per annum and support 7,000 jobs.

The demand is not just from tourists. Stratford-upon-Avon has a committed population growth of 36,195 (3,500 homes) by 2031. Six miles south, the Long Marston hinterland has a committed population of 24,176 (6,087 homes), including the Long Marston Airfield Garden Village with 8,000 people (3,500 homes). Under the current, South Warwickshire Local Plan consultation [January 2025], the Long Marston Garden Village may be expanded for 25,000 additional people (10,000 extra homes).

Stratford Town and the rapidly expanding Long Marston area, already suffer from ever worsening traffic congestion, in which all traffic from the south has to use two bridges to cross the River Avon, one of which is a narrow medieval structure. Rat running through adjacent villages to the A46, A435 and M40 Junction 15 is commonplace. This is an affluent area with high levels of car commuting.



A new station site at Long Marston Airfield Garden Village is protected in the Stratford Core Strategy. A journey time of just 50 minutes from Stratford to Birmingham could be provided, with Evesham to Birmingham taking just 65 minutes.

The Stratford Core Strategy Inspector's Report, 2016, considered that the southbound rail link would *"provide a long-term solution to the town's traffic congestion."* and *"There can be no question that the service would provide a sustainable alternative to the use of the private car for many residents and Visitors."*

Regrettably, in June 2022, the DfT announced that the SOBC had not been selected to progress to the next stage. They confirmed that their decision was in reality a combination of issues: the RYR fund being oversubscribed, budget cuts and the perceived strength of our Business Case.

In the Minister's decision letter, the promoting groups were invited to meet DfT officials in London to discuss the decision in more detail, the next steps, and to move forward in a positive light. To this end, meetings were held in London in 2023 and we were advised to consider a refresh of the SOBC study.

Support to commission a refresh of the SOBC, including funding, was given by various Local Authorities and interest groups. This was commissioned in early 2024, led by Stratford-on-Avon District Council, and a Final Report was due to be published in Spring 2025. Unfortunately, the new Government made the decision to end the *"Restoring Your Railway"* initiative in August 2024 - which raises a question mark on the future of further railway reopenings.