

Trains, boats, planes... all routes lead to here

ONE of the reasons Milton Keynes was built where it is - midway between London and Birmingham on a north-south axis and between Oxford and Cambridge on an east-west axis, close to both the UK's busiest motorway the M1 and its busiest rail route the West Coast main line - is fairly obvious.

It was planned to have great communication links for goods and people. And thus it is extremely well suited to gain from any uplift in the economy as we crawl from the wreckage of our economic train crash.

Of course, our transport infrastructure is not perfect yet. We are still some way from the reinstatement of the East West Rail link which suffered from Dr Beeching's famous - and widely regarded as short-sighted - cuts in the 1960s.

Indeed, I recall until very recently graffiti on a bridge over the M1 still proclaiming 'Beeching Must Go!'

The revived route, when complete, will reinstate the old Varsity Line between Oxford and Cambridge Universities and link Ipswich, Norwich and Cambridge with Letchworth, Bedford, Milton Keynes, Bicester and Oxford, allowing connections to Swindon, the Thames Valley, South West England and South Wales, with a spur to Aylesbury.

According to a recent economic forecast, the East-West Rail link could generate more than £38 million a year for the UK economy. The western section will require massive upgrading and in some cases dualling of

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existing lines. It will use the existing links to Oxford and the Bicester Town branch line. Beyond Bicester, EWR will use a currently freight-only line to Claydon.

The same line continues to Bletchley but this section has been out of use since the mid-1990s and will need to be rebuilt. At Bletchley, EWR will then follow the existing Marston Vale Line to Bedford. Trains from Bletchley will use the West Coast Main Line, allowing EWR trains to also run to Milton Keynes Central. The new link is expected to seriously revive the fortunes of a currently rather sad and run-down Bletchley.

The western section also includes proposals for trains running from London Marylebone to Milton Keynes via High Wycombe and Aylesbury; giving Euston users a real alternative. This part of the route will use existing Chiltern lines to Aylesbury Vale Parkway, continuing on to the previously mentioned Claydon freight line.

There is a possibility that the high speed rail link HS2, if built, will also come through Milton Keynes and that could halve optimum journey times to around 20 minutes to London or Birmingham. There are, however, many obstacles to this £32 billion project and we are not likely to see it for tens of years.

Ingenious

It is not only rail that is set to be improved, though. There are still realisable plans to create the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway, a proposed new 15-mile waterway linking the Grand Union Canal at Milton Keynes with the Great Ouse at Bedford and on to the waterways of East Anglia.

The Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust was founded in 1995 and completed a feasibility study in 2001. Although the project faces many hurdles - not least funding and an ingenious way to raise and lower boats in order to cross the M1 - it is under way and backed by the Waterways Trust, British Waterways and many other local and national organisations.

What about our air links? The laughably named London Luton Airport as well as Stansted,

Birmingham, East Midlands and Heathrow are all within fairly easy reach but perhaps we should have our own international airport. Cranfield is already home to many corporate, private and charter aircraft and helicopter fleets and with its existing 1,800-metre runway is long enough to accommodate the 215-passenger Boeing 737.

Cranfield Airport's PR team assure me: "Cranfield Airport has no plans to operate as a scheduled passenger airport." Yet rumours continue to circulate that it might. In the meantime it is worth noting that planes must take off into prevailing winds and those are generally from the west in the UK, so noise levels over the heart of Milton Keynes would increase exponentially if Cranfield ever became a busy passenger handler.

We are only a few months away from the London 2012 Olympics, so it might also be worth mentioning the recent experience of a certain local shopping centre manager. Apparently he managed to get from Central Milton Keynes to the new Westfield Stratford City Shopping Centre station in the middle of the Olympic village in under one hour.

Admittedly, all the connections worked each time but that is not bad going and means that Milton Keynes should be a great place to base oneself for London 2012, particularly as new trains on the existing Virgin franchise will be adding two extra standard-class carriages to a nine set train in time for the Olympics.

Happy travelling... Cheerio.



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