



## JUSTIFICATION FOR TWBC RETAINING TRANSPORT POLICY & PLANNING PROTECTION FOR THE RAILWAY FROM TUNBRIDGE WELLS TO ERIDGE.

### **Historic Background.**

1. Ever since the railway was closed in 1986, TWBC has given this planning protection - "Policy TP14 - The Local Planning Authority will safeguard the Tunbridge Wells to Eridge railway line by refusing proposals that would compromise the re-opening of the railway line."

This protection was crucial when Sainsburys built their superstore on the West Station site in 1989. An agreed corridor was left so a line could run straight through the site alongside Linden Pk Rd and on in front of the station itself. The later Homebase building similarly left a corridor, presently used for garden products, through which the line could continue straight on to the intact railtrack through to Groombridge, and thence to Eridge on the railbed duly protected by Wealden District Council, under Planning Policy WDC TR8.

Both these planning protections are fully backed by local district councils transport strategies and the transport policies of both KCC & ESCC.

2. However, an understandable common perception is that a through railway would be blocked by a toilet block built subsequently on to the Sainsbury's superstore in 1994-5. This has arisen because the existence of the protected railbed was not taken into account when the planning grant was given, and then Sainsburys commenced building a further 2m out, blocking a straight run through for the railtrack. But "compromise" was interpreted as "prevent" rather than "harm or hinder" and Sainsburys were granted retrospective planning permission when they provided technical evidence, though questionable, that a railtrack could still be laid curving round the protruding toilet block.

This most unsatisfactory situation led to Lord Mayhew (then our MP) securing a written undertaking by Lord Sainsbury (which became a formal agreement with TWBC) to demolish the toilet block if this became necessary for the railway to be built.

### **The Tunbridge Wells to Eridge Line.**

3. The principal reason for closing the line in 1985 was not "poor patronage", although this was being discouraged by lack of timetable co-ordination, but as part of a financial package to secure funding for the £24M electrification of the Hastings Line. The large railway area at TW West Station was sold off for £4M to Sainsburys.

Similarly, the Uckfield to Lewes section was closed in 1969, not because of inadequate use, but by a series of official decisions (and in-decisions) triggered off by a local road scheme which was soon abandoned.

All this was when road transport was supreme and being encouraged to increase indefinitely.

4. But today, if the Lewes to TW rail connection were still intact, it would be regarded as a valuable contributor to our transport needs. Tunbridge Wells has a railway running right through the centre of its built-up area. So in 1996, David Campbell Bannerman, a former TWBC Committee Chairman, conceived a brilliant Park & Rail scheme which had halts in TW at TW West, TW Central, RVP (old Goods Station), High Brooms, & Industrial Estate.

5. Crowborough & Uckfield are fast-growing and the area is nearly 40,000 strong; they come to Tunbridge Wells & Tonbridge for employment, shopping, education & entertainment.

Altogether, a rail connection to Crowborough & Uckfield would be more important for Tunbridge Wells than the connection to more distant Hastings in a different south coast orbit.

In the words of the tireless Wealden Line Campaign, the re-opening of the TW to Lewes rail route would be the most beneficial transport improvement for TW in more than half a century, bringing economic, social & environmental benefits to the Royal Spa Town.

6. The TW Transport Strategy does recognise the potential of a re-opened railway for Park & Rail using the succession of stations at Groombridge, Eridge, Crowborough, Buxted & Uckfield. The station car parks would need further enlargement and the active Uckfield Railway Line Parishes Committee is duly concerned about this, as it is for the re-opening of the through railways. Eridge in particular has obvious potential for a large Park & Rail facility in the blighted area between the old and new roads.

7. Such is the realism and drive in Sussex to get Lewes and Tunbridge Wells re-connected through the Uckfield Line, that no fewer than four feasibility and business case studies have been completed over the years, financed by the local Sussex councils, sometimes with TWBC assistance. A privately financed Wealden Way Study is leading to a full feasibility study for £150,000, thanks to the enthusiasm of numerous councils at all levels in Sussex.

The general conclusion of all these studies has been that the railbed and important bridges are virtually all intact with no significant outlay needed to put them back into service.

On present costs, the 8 miles Lewes – Uckfield connection should be made for around £50M, and the 5 miles Eridge – TW for much less, with no environmental cost as with road schemes.

However, the great resurgence in rail travel and the saturation of the Brighton Line, now justifies a greater expenditure for complete electrification and adequate double-tracking.

8. The reconnection at Lewes would not be by the old route, but by the older short Hamsey Loop to join the line from Haywards Heath and enter Lewes so trains would be able to go straight on through to both Eastbourne and Seaford & Newhaven. Although a train change would be needed for Brighton, there would be an overall advantage for the railway system.

The main Brighton to London Line is notoriously overcrowded, but no more trains (certainly not both fast & slow) can be fitted in because there are only two lines south of Three Bridges.

But re-connecting Lewes to Uckfield would enable many of the London trains from both Eastbourne and Newhaven, which now join the Brighton Line at Haywards Heath, to run up instead to East Croydon & London Bridge using the Uckfield Line, crucially enabling more trains to run from Brighton to London, and an alternative route when the main line is closed.

9. From the viewpoint of Tunbridge Wells and Kent, the re-connection of TW & Lewes would increase the usefulness of the cross-Kent Medway Valley line connecting the Medway Towns through Maidstone & Tonbridge/TW to Lewes & Brighton, completing a strategic route avoiding the need to travel into, within, and out of London.

10. Furthermore, the north-going loop at Birchen Jtn, Groombridge is still available (though the dismantled bridge over Cousley Rd would have to be re-constructed), to restore the former useful alternative route to London from Tunbridge Wells. This route is not longer than the line to Charing Cross, and journey times to Croydon, Victoria and further west in London could be if anything shorter, esp. if the rural stations at Cowden & Hever were closed.

11. The re-opening of all these closed railways could be the greatest possible improvement to the transport situation in and around Tunbridge Wells, benefiting Southborough, Tonbridge, and the whole region and contributing to our role as a regional Transport Hub.

Tunbridge Wells should play its important part in the drive to achieve re-opening.

JOHN V GOODFELLOW

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