

KING'S LYNN TO HUNSTANTON REOPENING CAMPAIGN

BY RICK MORRISH

The King's Lynn – Hunstanton Railway Campaign (KLHRC) is seeking to bring back the railway that for more than a century provided a well-liked and well-used connection to the North Norfolk seaside. The railway was closed in 1969 – not as a result of the Beeching Report, but mainly because of a litany of British Rail cutbacks that took no account of the social needs of isolated coastal resorts.



The railway was first opened in 1862 – almost entirely due to the efforts of one man – Henry Le Strange. Le Strange was responsible for planning and promoting Hunstanton as a seaside resort and he was sure he needed a railway connection to make it work. Even though the town only had a population of 500 at the time, the railway was soon a success. It gained additional kudos when the Royal Family purchased nearby Sandringham. A smart new station was constructed at Wolferton to service the royal visits. There were also stations at North Wootton, Dersingham, Snettisham and Heacham.

In the early 20th century seaside excursions became popular and, by 1937, Hunstanton station had four platforms that were all lengthened to assist passenger handling. In the years after the Second World War, peak holiday periods required the operation of a one-way system on the line – with incoming trains generally in the morning and outgoing trains in the afternoon and evenings. Heacham also grew as a holiday destination. However, when direct trains from London were stopped in 1959, 80% of revenue was immediately lost. Further cost savings with Paytrains saw the service reduced to unsustainable levels, running only for a further ten years – and 3 May 2019 marked the 50th anniversary of the last train (see photo of it at the top of the next page). A sizeable percentage of townspeople turned out for it, and most of those still alive would love to see the railway reinstated.

In recent decades a number of people have tried to gain support for reopening the line. But the new campaign group feels real momentum is now building to bring

back the trains. An online petition now has well over 4,000 signatures and the local MP, Henry Bellingham, is being supportive. The group is lobbying the Borough and County Councils to write the reopening into their Transport Strategy.



The last train at Hunstanton's extensively rationalised station

Campaign spokesperson Howard Johnston says "Linking North Norfolk with fast, reliable access to Cambridge and the south is essential. At the moment we are losing our young people to other areas and the average age here is well over 50. Many services have recruitment problems. A railway would also have access benefits to education, hospitals, services and entertainment.

"There is a lot of work to be done to convince short-sighted local politicians of every persuasion to get their backs into supporting a campaign to ease the acute congestion on the A149. In May 2019's elections, it was disappointing to see better transport so low in their priorities when they know we all talk about little else. Norfolk County Council, the main policymaker, seems to have little interest in anything much beyond Norwich. We are over 50 miles away from there, so we need to shout much louder to be heard."

North Norfolk continues to be a very important holiday destination – but with few transport alternatives, road congestion and traffic accidents have been increasing. "That will only get worse" says campaign chairman, Andrew Murray. "Major growth is proposed at Wisbech, Ely and several settlements around north Cambridge. Even in West Norfolk the Borough council is currently delivering 16,000 new homes. When the sun shines the nearest beaches for all those people are in North Norfolk."

Much of the track bed still exists from King's Lynn to Hunstanton, but the broadly flat landscape does not prevent the alignment being moved slightly so as to reach important locations such as the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, one of the area's largest employers. Connections to the national network are feasible in two locations.

The line from Cambridge to King's Lynn is awaiting investment – with junction improvements at Ely proposed that will allow two trains an hour from London, it is not outlandish to envisage Hunstanton being accessible from London in a little over two hours.



Other plans are afoot. RAIL EAST readers will know that James Palmer, elected mayor for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, is pushing ahead with plans to re-open the March to Wisbech railway. He sees the opportunity to connect Peterborough to King's Lynn (map, left, modified from Railfuture original) and has written it into his vision for the area.

"There is a real opportunity here to create a transport network that is low carbon, low energy and sustainable for the 21st century and beyond" says Andrew Murray. "And when much of our local landscape is at or below sea level these issues are important!"

To read more about the campaign or support the reopening of the Hunstanton line by signing the online petition, search <http://www.hunstantonrail.org.uk>

Rick Morrish is secretary of the KLHRC (email contact hunstantonrail@outlook.com)
 All photos in this article provided by him.