

Need. Faringdon needs a unique facility to draw people into the area. This facility needs to increase the economic viability of Faringdon, bring employment and improve the quality of life. The recent Healthcheck produced a recommendation for improved rail travel linkage for Faringdon, but recently efforts have failed to revitalise Wantage/Grove or Challow stations.

History. In August 1860 the Faringdon Railway Company Act was passed through Parliament for the construction of a branch line connecting onto the GWR. The Faringdon branch line opened on 1st June 1864, operating in broadgauge (7 feet and a quarter inch rail width). It connected onto the GWR at Uffington, turning east towards Didcot. The line was built by a consortium of local business men who sold the line to GWR in 1886. The line was converted to standard gauge in 1878. The line was closed as uneconomic by British Railways in 1963, followed by Uffington Station closure in 1966. However, the track bed remains intact to Uffington and cross-over points remain on the main line to facilitate branch line reinstatement.

Outline of Proposed Scheme. The branch line would be refurbished as mixed gauge (3 rails) to Uffington over its 3 ½ mile length, with the standard gauge line connecting onto the GWR towards Didcot. Trains departing from here would go direct to Didcot and then return, providing an hourly service. Access to the car parking would be from the A420, with a junction taken directly off the Park Road roundabout. In addition, a foot bridge would provide pedestrian access over the A420.

Beyond Wicklesham Lodge Farm the line at mixed gauge would turn left into Grundon's Pit, with sidings laid out, commuter car parking, freight (ISO container) handling and an engine turntable provided. Passenger and freight platforms would be provided. On this site would be displayed both SSSI rock strata and also broad gauge railway hardware. As a genuine broad gauge railway line (not a replica line) Faringdon would have the only operating broad gauge system in the World. Members of the Broadgauge Society are confident that Faringdon's line would rapidly gain "World Heritage Site" designation. Note that efforts would be made to sound proof the line – an anechoic railway track.

Operationally the standard gauge line would be worked hourly Monday – Friday for commuters. At weekends the line would be used for heritage trains, with standard gauge excursion trains able to join from the GWR. Freight trains could deliver to the Pit subject to "one train in steam on one line" safety rules.

Financial Considerations. Broadgauge advisers have estimated that track and sleepers would cost about £18,000. The connection cost at Uffington would have to be negotiated with Rail Track, but the track bed remains, as do the point power boxes. The points would be controlled from Swindon. Repurchase and refurbishment of the track bed would cost about £300K, but about 80% would be available in grants, the rest from shares. Grant applications could be supported by the Science Museum in particular, as they would benefit greatly from the possibility of displaying their early broad gauge artefacts in a working setting. Significant help in track laying and bed refurbishment could be gained from Broad gauge Society enthusiasts, especially if accommodation coaches could be obtained.

The main income would be from car parking by commuters and their purchases before getting onto trains. Estimates at Didcot are £3.70 per car per day parking and about £1 profit from the shop or canteen per passenger. There would also be a steady Heritage Site income from the Pit display area.

Legal Considerations. Advice from Didcot enthusiasts is to gain planning permission to re-establish the line over 100 metres as a first step and place a simple maintenance cart on it. By law, the line would then be operational. The line would then be extended and safety adjustments made (like putting back the Fernham Road bridge as trains do not fly!), an activity which would not require planning consent or Parliamentary Act.

One small challenge is the extension of a garden onto the line about 100 metres north of the GWR, but this has only happened recently and freehold ownership by the householder is unlikely.

Unlike the Wantage efforts to join into the old GWR line, Faringdon's branch line was always part of the GWR. The Wantage line never, apparently, connected, as it was built at a narrower gauge. There are legal precedents to ensure that reconnection to the main line should be approved, unlike at Wantage.

Political Considerations. The Labour Party produced a DETR document "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" Cm3950 in July 1998. The proposed line reopening would support this document's aspirations, as it would be removing the strain from commuting routes such as the A40 round Oxford, A34 to Didcot, M4 at Swindon, Grove and the expanding boundary of Swindon (East).

Way Ahead. The feasibility of this Vision Statement should be discussed examined by a working party reporting to Planning and Highways.