

Saltford Station, latest campaign news, and future prospects

I did two live interviews on the Steve LeFevre Radio Bristol morning show in quick succession a few years ago. In the first, we talked about the campaign to re-open Saltford Railway Station. Saltford is included in the plans for Metro West following a strong local campaign. A few days later, Steve and I talked about the setting up of the Saltford Business Network (SBN). Steve LeFevre commented **“It’s like Saltford is being re-branded!”**

This made me think that what Saltford needed was not re-branding but simply being better understood. Some people have the perception that Saltford is a place mainly for retired people and the only experience they have of Saltford is being in a queue of traffic on the busy A4 during peak times. Here are some facts about Saltford that may surprise. There are well over 150 businesses either based in Saltford or operating principally in Saltford. The number in employment at Saltford is almost 1000 and those figures relate to firms and businesses that are paying VAT and PAYE. The top three business sectors in Saltford are 1) Wholesale and Retail trade and Repair of Motor vehicles 2) Construction 3) Health and Social work. These figures do not include employment at the Burnett Business Park and the Corston Business Park in the wider Saltford ward area. There is a large working population in Saltford that commutes daily to work in Bath, Bristol and beyond. Census figures show almost 1400 Saltford people travel to work by car.

In a Saltford population of 4,200 there are as many people aged up to 17 years old as aged over 65 years. There are 1000 people living in nearby Corston and Newton St Loe villages. A further 900 students and staff live on site at Newton Park campus of Bath Spa University which is only just over two miles away from where we are now. In fact, during the day on a weekday there are 10,000 people within a 2 mile radius – including almost 5,000 students and staff on site at the Newton Park campus.

There are 27,000 vehicles on average on a weekday passing through Saltford on the A4 which pass the station site.

There is a vibrant community in Saltford. There are many community groups affiliated to the long-standing Saltford Community Association (SCA). The Saltford Environment Group (SEG) is flourishing. Saltford Golf Club has staged the English Ladies Open Tournament. Saltford Sports Club is a focus for sport and recreation in the area with football and cricket teams and Saltford Tennis Club has all-weather courts under floodlights. Saltford Stars JFC, now part of Saltford FC, has won accolades as one of the best run Junior Football Clubs. Scouts and Guides are very popular here.

Saltford is in an area of outstanding natural beauty. Saltford has fabulous open countryside walks and access to activities on the River Avon. There is the historic conservation area which includes Saltford Brass Mill, a gem of industrial heritage,

and the Bristol and Bath cycling and walking path, as well excellent pubs, hotels and restaurants. Saltford is incredibly well connected by road/river/railway/and cycle paths. In the list of amenities in our vibrant, busy, enterprising Saltford, there is one glaring omission – a Saltford railway station.

Saltford is not in need of re-branding but simply to be better known and understood.

It was in the Bird in Hand back in 2011 that Chris Warren talked to me in a conversation with a group of friends about his vision and passion to re-open Saltford railway station on the current site. As Rob Taylor said “*a no-brainer*”.

What you may not know is that a report by consultants Steer-Davies-Gleave had been commissioned by B&NES Council as far back as the year 2000 to look at a Saltford Station. It was a desk-based study which did not have access to the sophisticated computer modelling available to consultants today. This 2000 report made reference to an even earlier study, the Strategic Avon Rail Study (STARS) 1993. That 1993 study contained the recommendation for “low cost heavy-rail service expansion, based upon modest capital investment, station openings and improvements along three rail corridors in Avon.” The station at Saltford was identified in 1993 as the first priority in phase 2 of its proposals. Here are some extracts from the 2000 Steer-Davies-Gleave report. The 2000 report describes the Saltford site as “*flat, easily accessed from the road with an adjacent bus stop*”. *A Saltford Station would provide “good accessibility to major employment, education and leisure activities, whether located in local/regional or sub-regional centres, and, as far as possible, ensure that those who do not have access to a car are not disadvantaged.”* It continues “*The station at Saltford satisfies local inclusion objectives and gives enhanced accessibility from the immediately local area to employment opportunities in Bath & Bristol. The majority of users will access the station on foot and come from the local surrounding area.*” The 2000 report pointed out that a Saltford Station fitted well with wider policy objectives. So what was the problem? In 2000, the timetable had developed in a piecemeal fashion over time and services were often at irregular intervals, with the trains displaying different performance characteristics with varied stopping patterns. There was concern in the 2000 study about line capacity, and platform re-occupation times at Bath Spa. There was concern about revenue collection for short journeys from an un-manned station.

2011 and 2012 were the years of the BIG BANG for the Saltford Station campaign. A lot happened in a short time. I retired from teaching in the Summer of 2011 and that gave me time to research and investigate how one opens a railway station. I never expected that my retirement would involve trying to understand the labyrinthine structure of the railway industry with its multiple centres of decision making all intended to work collaboratively but which often results in inertia and lack of accountability.

Although heavily involved myself, it is impossible to separate out the immense contributions to this enterprise from individuals such as Chris Warren, Phil Harding, Rob Taylor, and others and the efforts of the independent Saltford Station Campaign, Saltford Parish Council, and certain B&NES councillors. It was and remains a collective effort. Chris, Phil and I worked and continue to work as a team. Rob Taylor helped to produce a glossy leaflet to give to opinion formers and key people in the rail industry. We lobbied and campaigned vigorously at that time - attending rail conferences (e.g. Mercure Hotel **4th Nov 2011**), writing to all and sundry - Network Rail, First Great Western, Department for Transport, MPs, MEPs, Prince Charles, and others and obtaining endorsements from such as George Ferguson, then Bristol Mayor. There were TV interviews, the first with Bob Constantine of ITV on the pedestrian bridge over the railway. There have been numerous radio interviews, and of course we mustn't forget the mugs and the brilliant web-site.

The first public meeting was called by the Saltford Environment Group on **20th July 2011** at Saltford Hall. Such was the interest that 120 residents came along at short notice to hear Ben Eve, Chair of SEG, Chris Warren of the Station campaign, Cllr Roger Symonds, B&NES cabinet member for Transport, and myself. The meeting was chaired by Dick Bateman. The Bristol Post reported that a flurry of hands marked the passionate start of a campaign to re-open Saltford railway station. The late Sheila Linfield of Camerton Close, an 81 year old grandmother of four, said she could remember the very sad day the station closed. As members of her family had worked in the rail industry, she owed it to them to be at the meeting.

The first time SALTFFORD RAILWAY STATION was discussed by **Saltford Parish Council** was in **September 2011**. PRESENT: Councillors Reg Williams (Chair), Duncan Hounsell (Vice-Chair), Mathew Blankley, Tina Curtis, Harvey Haeberling, Kim Johnson, Rob King, Neil McKen, Kevin Reeves, Rick Taylor, and Jill Williams

The minutes read:

"Cllr Duncan Hounsell congratulated those campaigning to re-open Saltford railway station and proposed that the Council showed leadership on this issue. He noted that almost half of those responding to the Parish Plan questionnaire had said they would make regular use of a rail service from a re-opened Saltford station."

The Council agreed the following motions (the number of votes are shown in brackets):

1. Saltford Parish Council supports the campaign to re-open Saltford Railway Station whilst mindful of the need to ensure that any concerns of local residents are addressed (9 in favour, none against).
2. The Parish Council wishes B&NES to do all in its power to protect the site from any site development that may adversely affect the possibility of the re-opening of the station (11 in favour, none against).

3. Saltford Parish Council wishes that B&NES considers acting as the "promoter" of the new Saltford Railway Station in negotiations with Network Rail and that B&NES prepares a Project Inception Report for Network Rail at the earliest opportunity (6 in favour, 2 against).

B&NES Council was run by the Liberal Democrats from 2011-2015. Cllr Paul Crossley, leader of the Council, and Cllr Roger Symonds, cabinet member for transport 2011-13, did not hesitate to support the station and were enthusiastic from the first moments they heard the proposal. Working towards the re-opening of Saltford Station became policy. B&NES commissioned a small desk-based study from Halcrow which reported in **March 2012**.

For Saltford station to have any realistic chance of re-opening it had to be as part of the Metro West rail project. There was a crucial morning **February 27th 2012**. I spoke in public time at the scrutiny panel of the West of England Partnership held in Filton and then I drove across to the Guildhall, Bath, to speak at a closed meeting on local railway development chaired by the Lib Dem peer Lord Bradshaw. I knew that if Saltford was not part of the Greater Bristol Rail project (now known as Metro West) the Saltford Station project was dead. At the end of the Bath meeting as everyone left, I had a brief but earnest conversation with Cllr Tim Kent of Bristol Council who was masterminding the Metro West project. At that moment, Saltford was not included and the map and papers for the West of England Transport Board were going to councillors later that day. By 4pm, Saltford was in. That short conversation might turn out to be the most significant in my lifetime second only to the one in which I asked my wife to marry me! Saltford was on the Metro West map and included in what is called "the new stations package".

The independent Station campaign organised a petition of about 2000 residents which was presented to the House of Commons on **19th April 2012** by constituency MP Jacob Rees-Mogg. Chris Warren, Rob Taylor, Richard James, and myself went by train to London to meet Jacob and hand over the petition which he presented at 6:38pm. Hansard records "*Jacob Rees-Mogg - I rise to present this petition from Mr Christopher Warren and Duncan Hounsell, supported by more than 2000 residents who live in and around Saltford in the county of Somerset. It asks for Saltford Station to be re-opened to the great advantage of local people for commuting and for their business life.*"

Saltford Parish Council hosted a public meeting about the proposed re-opening on **October 25th 2012** in the main hall at Saltford Hall. The purpose was to share information with the public and allow residents to ask questions, express any concerns and their aspirations for the station. The meeting, chaired by Nigel Hutchings of the regional CBI, followed a "Question Time" format. The panel consisted of Cllr Roger Symonds, B&NES cabinet member for transport, Chris Warren representing the Station Campaign, Reg Williams as an independent resident.

B&NES was interested to gauge the level of support of Saltford residents and carried out a survey. A village wide postal survey was delivered and a public exhibition event at Saltford Hall was held on **Tuesday 25th February 2014**.

The encouraging Halcrow report referred to earlier report prompted B&NES Council to commission a Higher Level Output Assessment from consultants CH2MHill which was received by B&NES Council in **October 2014**. Saltford Parish Council received a summary from Peter Dawson, B&NES Group manager Transport Policy Officer, on 7th October 2014. That report concluded that, unless there were unforeseen problems, a station at the existing site at Saltford would have a benefit/cost ratio of 2 to 1 and that even before monetised environmental benefits were factored in. A re-opened station at Saltford was projected then to bring in annual net revenue of £770,000 and have car-parking space for up to 144 vehicles. Saltford Station project is now about at stage 2 of Network Rail's 8 stage GRIP (governance for railway investment projects) process for railway development. The first 4 stages are about planning, the final 4 about implementation.

B&NES Council agreed in **December 2014** that "work should continue to develop the business case for a station at Saltford and that this should include the option of opening a station to the west of the village where future development may support the new facility."

"BEST NEW GROUP" National Award - Railfuture annual awards 7th November 2015

Judges' comments: "Campaign shows a sound knowledge of the rail industry and grasp of technical detail, good engagement with stakeholders' buy-in, cross-party support, a strong environmental message, and a good chance of success."

May 2015 saw a new administration at B&NES Council. Saltford Parish Council was elected with all successful candidates expressing support for Saltford Station. Re-opening Saltford Station was listed in a 5-point vision in the first meeting of Saltford Parish Council. After repeated calls, Saltford Parish Council met council leader Cllr Tim Warren and the cabinet member for transport, Cllr Anthony Clarke, in a closed meeting at Saltford Hall on 21st January 2016 to discuss Saltford Station. The purpose was to help B&NES council leaders understand the viewpoint of Saltford Parish Council and to clarify relevant facts. Saltford Parish Council received very little communication from B&NES Council after that meeting. The Parish Council became increasingly frustrated and concerned. Saltford Parish Council in November 2018 wrote an open letter to Cllr Tim Bowles the Metro Mayor and others wishing it to be known that the re-opening of Saltford railway station as part of the Metro West rail project remained a high priority for the Parish Council. It was pointed out that the WECA Joint Spatial Plan had been sent for inspection with a key diagram (Figure 7 appendix A) failing to show a red dot (new station) at Saltford.

Saltford Parish Council was assured by WECA and the then leader of B&NES Council that a Saltford station did remain an objective. Although not told about it, Saltford had been included in the Greater Bristol Area Rail feasibility study (GBARFS) commissioned by the West of England Combined Authority and the

Department for Transport which has just reported its conclusions which I shall refer to later.

In May this year, following local elections, the Liberal Democrats became the majority party on B&NES Council and Saltford Parish Council was elected with all successful candidates expressly supporting the re-opening of the station.

Where is the project now?

Network Rail continues to provide “passive” provision for a new station on the old station site. In other words, Network Rail will not do anything with the infrastructure that would prevent a station being built at some point in the future.

We have strong support from the new B&NES Council. At the B&NES full Council meeting on **10th October 2019**, a motion was carried overwhelmingly with 45 votes for and 7 abstentions expressing the Council’s support for the Saltford Station project. Cllr Neil Butters, cabinet member for Transport, who proposed the motion said that if the Greater Bristol Rail feasibility study confirms Saltford Station as a potentially viable project, then the case for Saltford Station will be taken to the West of England Combined Authority (WECA) for its consideration “*with vigour*”. Importantly, the motion stated that Saltford Parish Council will be kept fully informed of developments.

Bath Spa University has confirmed continuing support for the re-opening of Saltford Station as part of the Metro West Rail project. “Provision of a station so close to the University would contribute to providing another sustainable travel mode for staff, students, and visitors to reach the Newton Park Campus. Such a station would be our local station and could be connected to the campus by bicycle paths and by bus. It would make a positive contribution to our response to the climate emergency and our goal of becoming a carbon neutral university.”

This is the latest position of WECA (West of England Combined Authority) on the re-opening Saltford Railway Station:

“Saltford is included as a potential new station in the West of England’s draft Joint Local Transport Plan 4 (JLTP4) 2019 to 2036 because WECA recognises it has a role to play in tackling existing and future transport challenges particularly around Bath. As with all our new station proposals, they must be feasible, deliverable and demonstrate a good business case with funding identified and secured. The current costs for Charfield station (which is comparable to Saltford with requirements for two platforms, accessible footbridge, shelters and access routes) are put at between £14m and £20m.

*There are major network capacity issues on the railway line between Bath and Bristol and finding the capacity to stop trains at a new station is going to be challenging. The Greater Bristol Area Rail Feasibility Study (GBARFS) commissioned by the Department for Transport and WECA looked at future services and stations and the infrastructure/capacity required to deliver them. **The study found that the new infrastructure required to deliver enhanced MetroWest***

services on the line to Bath Spa could provide the additional capacity required to enable additional stops at Saltford. *It also suggested that it may be possible to introduce a skip-stop pattern (i.e. miss out stops at Keynsham or Oldfield Park) to facilitate a stop at Saltford. This would, however, create an irregular service pattern at each of the stations.*

The findings of GBARFS will now be used to draw up a 10 Year Delivery Plan and 25 Year Strategic Outline Business Case with Network Rail for rail investment in the West of England. Saltford will be part of this work as a possible future station site. In terms of station location previous work has focused on the previous station site. As part of the work on the 10 Year Delivery Plan and 25 Year Strategic Outline Business Case we may need to consider other possible locations for Saltford.”

Next steps?

Here are my suggestions:

- A senior officer at B&NES is identified who will liaise with the Parish Council and act as a point of contact
- B&NES ensures that there is sufficient knowledge and commitment by officers to deliver a rail project
- A B&NES or WECA officer needs to be tasked to examine those estimated costs for a Saltford railway station. The figures for Charfield are more than double what was previously estimated for a Saltford Station. Erroneous ball-park figures might hold Saltford back.
- Cllr Butters and Chris Warren of the Station campaign liaise together to ensure that when the case is taken again to WECA “with vigour” perhaps at a meeting of the Transport Board soon in 2020 that has maximum impact and support.
- The Saltford Station Campaign Group needs to consider refreshing its campaign in 2020.
- WECA is asked to provide funding for Saltford Station to be taken to the next phase of project development i.e GRIP stages 3 and 4. Without that, Saltford Station will always be in a limbo as merely an aspiration. If Saltford Station reaches GRIP stage 3, it can bid for ad hoc capital funding released by the Department of Transport for new stations projects amongst other potential sources of funds. There is a strong case for a Saltford Station to be championed by WECA.

The re-opening of Saltford Station is viable and achievable. To use the phrases of a national politician, “Saltford is an oven-ready station” “No more dither and delay” “Let’s get Saltford Station done”. **Put simply “Saltford Station –bring it back!”**

END