The case for a local rail station

At Great Blakenham, Suffolk.

The London to Norwich (Great Eastern) main rail line passes through Great Blakenham in Suffolk, a village which adjoins Claydon and Barham. Together they have a growing residential population (currently around 8,500) making it the largest free standing lineside community in Suffolk not served by a rail station. There are also several businesses and industrial premises near to the potential station site.

This paper sets out the reasons why a basic rail station served by a local train service should be constructed in Great Blakenham as well as looking at the potential usage, history and some factors which need consideration if the scheme is to be included in the improvement of our regional rail network.

Paper prepared by Barry Moore, a local resident with a background in passenger transport management and rail passenger representation. - January 2015

email; baz@bandm3.plus.com
The case for a local rail station at Great Blakenham, Suffolk.

1. Introduction.
Suffolk is a developing county for a variety of reasons – increased residential population, and industrial/commercial development and tourism. The lower Gipping valley north of Ipswich has a group of adjoining villages all of which have expanded since the 1960’s. Claydon, formerly at the junction of the A45 (now A14) and A140 roads before new trunk road construction in the 1970’s, was the principal settlement. Barham and Great Blakenham have since the 1990’s grown in size to similar populations (approximately 2,500 - 3,000 each), but Claydon is effectively the centre of the ‘cluster’ with shops, primary and secondary schools whilst industry has mainly developed in Great Blakenham.

These three parishes form Suffolk’s largest railway lineside population cluster without a rail station and this paper sets out the reasons why a local station should be provided to serve this area.

2. History and Background.
2.1 Claydon station.
The former rail station, called ‘Claydon’ but actually in Great Blakenham, opened adjacent to the Gipping Road level crossing in 1846 and closed in 1963 along with other minor stations on the main line between Colchester and Norwich, (neighbouring Needham Market station subsequently re-opened in 1971). Claydon station’s platforms and buildings have been totally removed.

2.2 Bus services.
Bus services through the area have been mainly provided since 1920 by the Eastern Counties Road Car Co and its direct successors (currently First Group) based on an interurban service from Ipswich through Claydon and Great Blakenham to Stowmarket (and formerly to Bury St Edmunds). The present service is basically a weekday daytime twice per hour service. There is now no post 19:00 evening service. The Sunday/Bank Holiday service consists of five journeys only. The current bus service pattern does not offer convenient interchange with rail at either Ipswich or Stowmarket.

2.3 Area development.
Although the area was largely agricultural, industry in the form of Mason’s cement works, adjacent to the site of Claydon rail station, dominated the villages from 1913 until closure in 1999. Raw material was mainly sourced locally from quarries to the west of the works.

Since World War II, industrial estates and sites with a wide variety of activities have grown up in Great Blakenham. Current proposals include what is claimed will be Europe’s largest under cover tomato growing complex utilising heat generated by the recently opened incinerator plant. Significant residential expansion took place in Claydon and Barham (the ‘Garden Estate’) in the 1970’s and has continued with a major development of 400 houses in Great Blakenham /2
still being constructed on the site of the cement works, adjacent to the railway. ‘Infill’ housing schemes have taken place principally in Claydon whilst Barham is expanding northward along Norwich Road.

2.4 The ‘Snoasis’ project.
With the closure of the cement works the quarries which supplied much of the raw material for the cement works became available for alternative use. The site was acquired by a consortium, backed by Irish finance, for a major winter sports centre entitled ‘Snoasis’. Although there was some local opposition to the scheme largely from those living close to the site, the project received planning permission in 2005. A public inquiry and environmental work delayed the start of work to beyond 2008 when the global financial crisis engulfed the Irish banks which had supported the project. Although planning permission was extended until 2015 the project now seems moribund.

A condition of the planning permission for the project involved the construction of a rail station at Snoasis’ expense to provide alternative non-car access to the site. This station would have to be open by the time the winter sports centre opened. The design of the station involved a footbridge and lifts with staffed facilities and 10 car main line train length platforms at an estimated cost of £13 million at 2005 prices. Anglia, then the passenger service franchisee, indicated without commitment that they envisaged a service of hourly London – Norwich main line trains calling plus the Peterborough – Ipswich service.

3.1 The planning backstory.
As the planning permission for the station was renewed in December 2010, it is valid until December 2015. However Mid Suffolk District Council Planning advises that although modification of the application for a smaller station is possible, there would have to be negotiations between the residual Snoasis interests and Network Rail. The present Greater Anglia passenger franchisee, Abellio (Netherlands State Railways) took over the franchise from National Express in 2011 but only until 2016 when the DfT are preparing to invite bids for a further 8 or 9 year term.

3.2 Station detail.
The original scheme for a main line scale station obviously cannot be justified without the traffic objective of the Snoasis resort. What is now proposed is a local station with platforms capable of holding 4 car trains. Both platforms would need passenger shelters and cycle parking facilities. If a footbridge is provided ideally it should be located so that it is also available for pedestrians when the level crossing barriers are closed. The car park need not initially be as large as has been provided for (500 spaces). This basic station should be achievable at much reduced cost compared with the original proposal.
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3.3 Passenger service.
It is suggested that a train service similar to that at the other minor stations between Ipswich and Bury St Edmunds be provided, ie hourly on weekdays and 2 hourly on Sundays. This could be provided by either the Ipswich – Cambridge service or the Ipswich – Peterborough service when the latter service becomes hourly. As with the other local stations, passengers would obtain tickets from the train conductor. Based on the current timetable travel times would be approximately to Ipswich 6/7 mins, Stowmarket 12 mins, Bury St Edmunds 32 mins and Cambridge 1hr 15 mins.

3.4 Gipping Road Level Crossing.
Gipping Road through Great Blakenham and leading to Claydon was originally the A45 trunk road until the present dual carriageway road along the Gipping valley was opened in 1974. The current full barrier level crossing replaced the former gates in the 1970’s. It is currently controlled by the Colchester signalling centre using CCTV surveillance.

The land use on both sides of the crossing would make its replacement by an overbridge virtually impossible especially when the needs of HGV’s to access the immediately adjacent Claydon Industrial Estate are considered. For cars and the bus service, Chapel Lane with its overbridge about 500 yards south of the level crossing provides an alternative route.

This proposal for a new station does not require additional trains, but ‘down’ (ie from Ipswich) trains stopping at the station would require the closure of the crossing whilst the train stopped at the platform for an additional 1 to 2 minutes. In the ‘up’ direction (ie towards Ipswich) this would not apply as the train would have cleared the crossing before stopping.

3.5 Staggered platform option.
An option which would reduce level crossing closure time and obviate a need for a footbridge, would be to site the down platform on the north side of the crossing adjacent to Sacker’s metal recycling site. Such a staggered arrangement has been used elsewhere where stations are located close to a busy level crossing. Placing the down platform on the north side of the crossing would require the removal of a rail siding.

4. The railway aspect.
4.1 Passenger train services.
The line through Great Blakenham is the electrified London – Norwich main line (Great Eastern Main Line - GEML). The main line services from London to Norwich (twice hourly, more at peaks) all stop at Ipswich with Stowmarket and Diss being intermediate stops for most trains on the line north of Ipswich. Diesel trains provide services from Ipswich to Cambridge (hourly) and Ipswich to Peterborough (2 hourly but planned to go hourly).
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4.2 Current line parameters.
The current line speed through Great Blakenham is 100 mph and the signalling capable of 3 minute headways. The site for the station is approximately halfway on the eight mile section between Ipswich and Needham Market.

4.3 The Anglia Route Study.
In November 2014 Network Rail published its Anglia Route Study, a consultative document which sets out likely infrastructure requirements for passenger and freight train service operation in 2023 and 2043. Unfortunately in this draft document no new stations are proposed for Norfolk or Suffolk although two are proposed for Cambridgeshire (Cambridge Science Park and Soham).

The impact on the line through Great Blakenham is that the line speed is likely to be raised to 110mph to enable London to Norwich trains to make the total journey with stops in 90 Minutes. Line capacity between Ipswich Europa Junction (where the new direct line from Felixstowe joins GEML) and Haughley Junction (north of Stowmarket) will be required by 2043 for 7 passenger trains per hour (ph) plus a maximum of 5 freight trains ph. Obviously stopping trains at Stowmarket (6ph), Needham Market (1ph) and Great Blakenham (1ph) would use some of this capacity but with electrification (see below) giving trains superior acceleration this impact can be minimised. Also it may assist matters in terms of average train speeds if the Ipswich - Cambridge service which stops at Needham Market did not stop at Great Blakenham which could be served by the Ipswich - Peterborough service.

4.4 Electrification.
Looking to the future it is likely that the Felixstowe - Nuneaton (-Birmingham) route together with the branch to Cambridge will be a candidate for electrification in the post 2020 period. Along with increased line speeds (to 90 or 100 mph) on the line through Bury St Edmunds, this would have the benefit of accelerating local services giving quicker journey times.

5. Passenger usage potential.
5.1 The Local Catchment.
When the former cement works housing scheme ('Blakenham Fields') is complete there will be an estimated population of approximately 4,500 – 5,000 in the parishes of Great Blakenham, Claydon and Barham within a 1 mile/20 minute walking distance of the station site. Adjacent to the level crossing is Claydon Industrial Estate which is a major local employer. There are also several other employment sites within a short distance. The potential catchment area of a station at Great Blakenham is situated on both sides of the railway line unlike that of Needham Market station. The area is relatively flat and it is probable that cycling would be a popular means of access to the station. For travel towards Bury and Cambridge or Peterborough it is likely that the station would be attractive to residents of other nearby villages such as Bramford and Somersham.
5.2 Commuters.
There is a small commuter element in the local population to London which currently accesses the train service by driving to Ipswich station. Additionally there are local people who work in Ipswich who use car or bus where the major office employment zone is conveniently close to Ipswich station. There is also a daily work flow into Great Blakenham particularly from the Ipswich direction. Undoubtedly these factors would grow with the improved accessibility offered by a station at Great Blakenham. With the numbers of people employed within walking distance of the proposed rail station, it is likely that commuting usage of the station would grow. It is worth recording that usage of Needham Market station has expanded to over 77,000 passengers per annum (2012/3 figure) since the hourly service was introduced in 2005 and it could reasonably be expected that Great Blakenham’s usage would exceed this within a short time of opening.

6. Name of station.
Logically the station should be called ‘Great Blakenham’. This name does not appear to clash with any other GB rail station names. However it would be appropriate if the sub-title ‘for Claydon and Barham’ could be added at least to the station signs.

7. Conclusion.
It is accepted that there would have to be negotiation between Network Rail, the Greater Anglia franchisee and the residual Snoasis body over the land ownership as well as modification of the planning permission with Mid Suffolk District Council.

In East Anglia possibly only Soham, Cambridgeshire is in a similar position in being a significant settlement alongside the railway, but a station is proposed for that town. A station at Great Blakenham would not only make a significant addition to the transport facilities of the lower Gipping Valley area, it would generate additional passenger traffic for the railway. Beyond the major housing development at Great Blakenham adjacent to the railway, there are other current housing developments in Claydon and Barham. In summary it is an attractive and expanding area of activity.