

The High Speed Rail Link

Although drive-across bridges and drive-through tunnels have been proposed at various times, the most favoured solution to the possible Fixed Cross-Channel Link since the middle of the 19th century has been twin rail tunnels and this is the solution now being constructed. Sir Edward Watkin, Chairman of the South Eastern Railway in 1873, envisaged through express services from Manchester to Paris and the concept of linking the British and European mainland railway systems for both passengers and freight is the goal of current activity. The concept is simple and obvious enough but it involves massive problems.

As those of us who live in Dover have irritating reason to know, the existing rail network is less than perfect and although British Rail doubtless does its best, time-keeping is haphazard especially during weekend repairs, cleanliness sporadic, refreshment only occasionally available and trains either crawlers or bone-shakers. The network is overcrowded with the competing demands of commuters and other passengers, and barely adequate for the very restricted amount of intercontinental freight traffic which heavy goods road vehicles have not grabbed.

When the scheme of the 1970s was under construction, British Rail, conscious of the incompatibility of current and future traffic needs, demanded a dedicated separate High Speed Link but there was such an outcry from the stockbroker commuting belt and other guardians of both urban and rural environments against the desecration of Kent that the project was abandoned in advance of the cancellation of the whole scheme in 1975. When British Rail revived the fixed link proposal in 1979 with the so-called "mousehole" concept of a single tunnel with separate flights of trains in both directions, it was claimed that the existing network would suffice and this was again contended when the current Eurotunnel scheme won the competition with Eurobridge, Euroroute and the other contestants. It was for this reason that Waterloo was designated as the Channel Tunnel rail terminus.

It may have been that British Rail, deprived of its own scheme in the 1970s, was lukewarm to the status of being a mere customer for Eurotunnel's rail loop under the Channel which would also carry cars, coaches and lorries on rail wagons. Certainly BR's estimate of the likely amounts of both passenger and freight traffic were markedly lower than those of Eurotunnel which responded by threatening to fund and build a private alternative high speed link. Eurotunnel contends that a new dedicated link is needed in 1993 whereas British Rail's estimate is that 2000 will be soon enough.

The decision to construct a link was made by the government, of course, but it is subject to the major constraint that, as in the case of the Channel Tunnel itself, public finance is not, unlike everywhere else in Europe, to be available and BR has been compelled to propose and survey possible alternative routes across Kent between London and Cheriton with strict requirements against the costs of environmental safeguards and protection and with strict demands for adequate (7%) financial returns on the operation.

In consequence the various county-wide defenders of the environment, notably the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies to which the Dover Society is affiliated, the Kent Branch of the Council for the Protection of Rural England and the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation, which collaborated in the Kent

Action Group for protection against the damage which the Channel Tunnel would inflict on the county, have again combined. Kent County Council, impressed by the quality of the Kent Action Group's petitions to the parliamentary Select Committees which considered the hybrid Channel Tunnel bill, generously contributed to its funds and this time round took the initiative in founding and funding the Kent Rail Action Group which purports to represent all objectors to the scheme.

Kent County Council employed environmental consultants who recommended rejection of all four routes proposed by British Rail which was consequently commanded to think again and has now come up with a route from King's Cross and Waterloo by tunnel to Swanley and under the North Downs, but elsewhere on the surface to Ashford and Cheriton. This is an improvement but it still threatens a great deal of beautiful Kent with disfigurement and noise and makes only an indirect contribution to getting traffic off the roads and back on to rail which is the best justification for its creation: it is for passengers only although there will (it is claimed) be more room for freight on existing lines. It may also improve commuter services and relieve air transport and congestion, not to mention attracting industrial and/or warehousing development.

An independent group has suggested an alternative which would save all Kentish towns and villages except Ashford from noise and disfigurement. From Ashford the line would tunnel under the North Downs to a point west of Sittingbourne and then proceed along the coastal marshes (cherished by some for plants and birds) to cross the Medway and the Thames into coastal and industrial Essex to a London terminus at Stratford.

There is also controversy about the parliamentary procedures to be employed. Railways are normally created by a private bill and there are those who say that this nevertheless affords proper opportunities for objectors via Select Committees. Others argue that a non-statutory public inquiry followed by Development Orders offers greater opportunity for protest and desirable amendment. It will be interesting to see how the various controversies are resolved. Unlike the caucus race in Alice's Wonderland, not everyone can win!

Jack Woolford Chairman of Kent Federation of Amenity Societies
& of The Dover Society.

PLANNING COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES

The Planning Sub-committee is kept up-to-date on current planning applications by Dover District Council with which we have a good working relationship.

Specific areas that have concerned us recently have been the Dover Engineering Works site developments and the St Margaret's (Granville Hotel and Claringbould) schemes.

We have been in contact with the developers and agents of the various DEW schemes, in particular concerning the lack of provision for a Riverside Walk and over the size and layout of the car parks. Some concessions have been made with regard to screening and provision of footpaths but the Walk still eludes us.

We are being kept in touch with developments in St Margaret's by local residents and will be adding our weight to those seeking an amicable solution.

We should be pleased to receive any views members may have on local planning issues though we must point out that our aim is not to oppose *per se* but to try to obtain the best possible solution for all concerned.

Ken Wraight