

Railwatch

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High-speed hidden asset

Our cover picture shows an aerial view of the new Stratford station on the Channel Tunnel rail link which was taken for a 12-page special report for *The Guardian* on 27 May 2005.

It is the one place between Dagenham and St Pancras where Eurostar trains will come to the surface. The rest is in tunnel, hidden away from both passers-by and future passengers.

Stratford station is built in a one-kilometre long concrete-lined trench and, at the top of the picture, is near the River Lea and water-bearing alluvium layers.

Not far down is an aquifer in which the water is rising by about one metre a year.

The project incorporates many methods to keep water out of the station but rising water levels could wreck the structure.

So to maintain the lower aquifer water level 10 metres below the base slab, a permanent "de-watering" system has been installed using submersible pumps in 22 boreholes drilled into the chalk.

It is just one of the many innovative aspects of this enormous engineering project.

Architect Mark Fisher has designed the station building which is described as "a big, generous light-filled bridge of steel and glass crossing the tracks and spanning the box".

Guardian writer Jonathan Glancey described the Channel Tunnel rail link as a "real wonder" most of which will never be seen by future travellers on Eurostar.

Eurostar is now confident it can double the number of passengers over the next seven years – to 14 million each year.

Director of communications Paul Charles said Eurostar is still looking at plans to run direct services to Amsterdam and Cologne "although not before 2008".

Passenger numbers increased sharply after the opening of the first stage of the CTRL in 2003 which cut journey times by 20 minutes.

When stage two opens in two years, a further 20 minutes will be cut from the overall journey time.

The European Passengers Federation, of which Railfuture is a member, maintains contact with Eurostar via a small group of British, French and Belgian colleagues.

EPF have welcomed the introduction of £69 return fares from London to the German cities of Aachen and Cologne, an offer which includes Eurostar travel to Brussels and high-speed Thalys or ICE trains onwards into Germany.

EPF chairman Trevor Garrod and Ray King had a useful meeting



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with officials of the Association of Train Operating Companies to discuss international ticketing and how this might be made more accessible through stations, travel agents and call-centres as well as via the internet.

At the end of April, EPF representatives also met with officials of BEUC (The Europe-wide federation of consumers' associations) to discuss possible co-operation. In particular, it is hoped to work together on an EU-funded network for the promotion of energy and transport-users' rights.

The new high-speed line will not just have international trains running on it. High-speed domestic services from Kent are also scheduled to start.

Japan's Hitachi company has broken into the British market by clinching a £250million deal to supply 28 140mph trains.

The order for six-car trains with seating for 350 in each has been placed by the Strategic Rail Authority through leasing company HSBC Rail.

As Brian Cooke, chairman of the London Transport Users Committee pointed out: "The CTRL is important because it frees up capacity on other lines, by diverting some Kent commuters away from the busy lines into Cannon Street, London Bridge and Victoria, thereby improving the Metro services south of London."

Already four rail companies, including Danish state railways, are gearing up to submit their bids for the "Integrated Kent" franchise in August. DSB has recently recruited Roger McDonald, a former managing director of Thames Trains, to spearhead their bids for the high-speed line and also for Thameslink.

The CTRL connection with Thameslink is still however in doubt. The Government insists it is committed to seeing the new Thameslink station "box" put into service but

seem to be happy to wait for the outcome of the Thameslink 2000 public inquiry which reopens in September.

The Strategic Rail Authority has also blocked plans by Midland Mainline to introduce a new St Pancras-Leeds via Sheffield service.

MML had bought seven nine-coach Meridian trains – worth £100million – which would have cleared the way for a half-hourly MML service at Bedford (currently hourly).

The SRA appears to have backed the plan in 2002 but subsequently changed its mind.

Bedford Commuters Association say Bedford passengers have lost out three times over, with no interchange at St Pancras, no new frequent MML service and a "cheap" refurbishment of Thameslink's 319 trains which are not up to modern standards.

They also had to put up with Thameslink's route through London being blocked for 35 weeks because of the CTRL works. This also broke the rail connection between Luton and Gatwick airports.

Railfuture London chairman Keith Dyal is asking members and rail user groups in the South East to lobby their MPs, the Department for Transport and Network Rail to fit out the Thameslink station.

The existing King's Cross Thameslink station in Pentonville Road is not only badly placed for serving both St Pancras and King's Cross but the station does not meet modern standards.

Its platforms are very narrow and cannot be widened and it has to be closed from time to time because of overcrowding.

With the opening of St Pancras for CTRL and the integrated Kent franchise traffic, the additional numbers of passengers will overwhelm the station and the frequency of closure due to overcrowding will increase to an unacceptable level.

We all hope the Department for Transport's new rail director general can now sort out the mess. He may also be crucial in catching up with our international competitors and delivering high-speed rail to Britain.

So far the only reality in Britain is the CTRL and an Atkins report on the possibilities for other lines. Can we expect much progress from the Department for Transport?

More rail planning functions, however, are being hived off to Network Rail which in future will be responsible for industry performance and planning as well as the route utilisation strategies.

Hopefully, this will not provide too many opportunities for buck passing between the DfT and NR.