

World-class rail city?

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Lyon Saint Exupery station. The roof was designed to look like the wings of a bird taking off

The French connection

A useful comparison can be made between Birmingham and its twin city of Lyon. Similar in size, Lyon is, like Birmingham, at the centre of the country's second largest conurbation.

It has buses, trolley buses, two surface-running light rail lines and four heavy rail underground metro routes. The two rail-based rapid transit systems serve 70 stations. It has two

major inter-city stations, the second built recently to relieve congestion. Together they offer well over twice the capacity of New Street.

Both the city centres major stations have excellent interchange facilities with underground, tramways, coaches, buses and taxis.

Lyon has a rapidly expanding international airport at Satolas which is shortly to benefit from a third terminal.

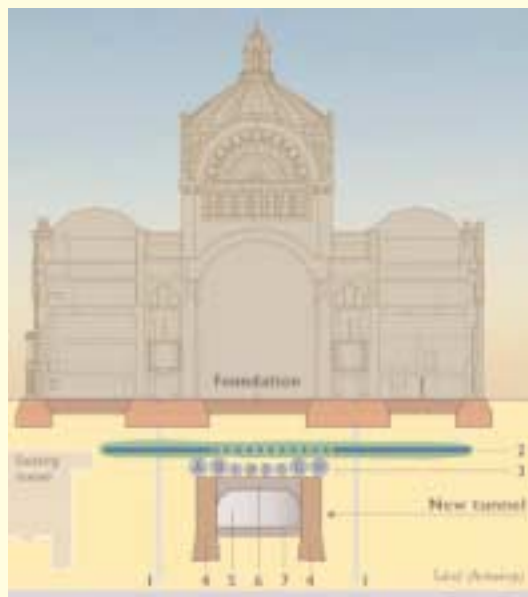
Serving the airport is the newly built Saint Exupery inter-city rail station (above) whose stunningly original design by Santiago Calatrava puts it in a different class from anything to be found in Birmingham.

And Antwerp

Antwerp Central Station is currently being expanded to accommodate a high-speed railway from Paris to Amsterdam beneath it. Built between 1895 and 1905, it is one of the main landmarks in Antwerp.

The platforms are covered by a huge iron and glass vault which also covers many of the small diamond and gold shops, which are part of the diamond district next to the Central Station. The original platforms and tracks themselves are elevated.

Restoration of the Central Station (left) started in 1993. The underground high-speed station is expected to be completed in 2005. Birmingham eat your heart out.



Antwerp station with high-speed line below

By Tony Millinger

For years I have been concerned at the low status and poor quality of the rail network in Birmingham and the West Midlands.

After studying similar areas in Europe I conclude that provision now falls significantly short of normal standards and is compromising the economic regeneration of the region.

Rail services in the West Midlands are also qualitatively and quantitatively inferior to those enjoyed in comparable urban regions in this country.

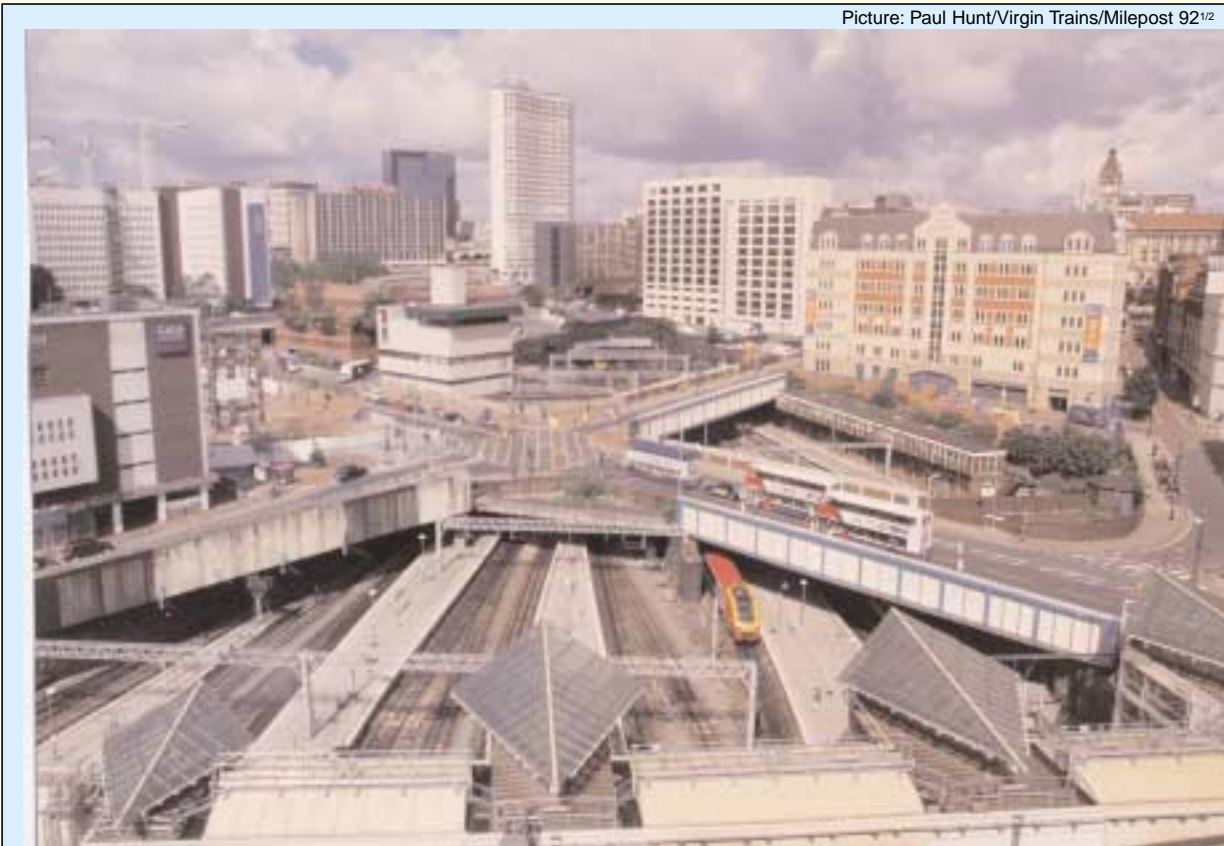
In order to bring them to the standards routinely experienced elsewhere, a number of infrastructure improvements will be both necessary, and in some cases urgent.

The fundamental problem of New Street station in Birmingham must be addressed. A total rebuild, of the sort recently completed at Leeds, will be necessary to achieve network expansion for both local and inter-city services and to provide a suitable gateway for the nation's second city.

Increased terminal capacity in central Birmingham – at Snow Hill and Moor Street as well as at New Street – is a prerequisite for the wider expansion of the network which will be facilitated by four-tracking of the routes from Coventry to Wolverhampton, and from Dorridge to Tyseley.

Running concurrently with this there should be an expansion of the light rail Metro service, at present restricted to a single route through the Black Country from Snow Hill to Wolverhampton. This must be focused on the city centre and should radiate to the many areas of the conurbation which have no access to the heavy rail network.

Where under-utilised, heavy rail routes do exist, improved access to the network must be facilitated by the building of new stations at key points. For example Moseley, Brindleyplace and along the route from New Street to Water Orton, a line which runs through or near a number of new developments, but with at present no station along its entire length. Further improvements to enable growth, enhanced performance, capacity increase and flexibility – aspirations constantly referred to in Strategic Rail Authority documents – will be made by the electrification of



Picture: Paul Hunt/Virgin Trains/Milepost 92^{1/2}

New Street station with the Alpha Tower and other buildings in Birmingham's pedestrian-friendly centre

Birmingham needs care and attention

Birmingham is the only west European city with over a million inhabitants and no underground network. It has no cross-city inter-urban rail-based rapid transit.

The West Midlands has a rail station to population ratio which is less than half the national average.

Dudley is the largest borough – 300,000 people – with no central rail station. Many important suburbs have no access to rail.

Birmingham has the slowest inter-city services of Britain's major centres. Birmingham New Street station is bleak,

unattractive and is Britain's worst rail bottleneck. The rail link to Gatwick airport, which should have been extended to Birmingham, has been abandoned, and Silverlink services to Birmingham are to be axed from 2004.

The region has received significantly less investment than London and other smaller urban areas.

There are no plans for Eurostar services to Europe.

At the current level of funding it will be 100 years before the region has a viable light rail network.

Birmingham hasn't got a public transport system

Ken Livingstone, Mayor of London

The West Midlands road network faces gridlock without massive investment in the region's railways

Centro spokesman

New Street station is currently an embarrassment to the city

Prof Keith Madelin, Birmingham University

Birmingham is the key to the whole network reliability. Government investment is needed if New Street is to cope with future traffic

Chris Green, Virgin Trains

Where do I catch the underground?

German visitor

The city's public transport system has made me scream in frustration

Danish visitor

the foregoing to become reality, the Government and the SRA must understand and reassess the benefit that increased capacity in the West Midlands will bring, not just to the region, but to the nation as a whole.

This must be reflected in a more just and realistic distribution of funding to a region deprived for decades of major investment and must take account of the backlog of major infrastructure projects now needed to bring the quality of provision in the region to that routinely enjoyed elsewhere.

Most of the proposed schemes mentioned in the preceding paragraphs appeared in the West Midlands Capacity Study and were outlined in the SRA's Strategic Agenda of 2001. They were largely conspicuous by their absence from the SRA's Ten Year Plan of January 2002.

As I write, there is much talk of major government investment in light rail schemes for Liverpool and Nottingham and the considerable expansion of Manchester's Metrolink services. Funding on a substantial scale is also earmarked for major station redevelopments at Edinburgh and Nottingham.

While in no way wishing to deny the importance of any of these projects, I am unaware of any investment on a similar scale for the deteriorating services and poor quality infrastructure of the nation's largest conurbation outside London.

If, as seems likely the Government and the SRA are again disinclined to assist with the funding which New Street so obviously needs, they may wish to consider expanding the operational capacity at Snow Hill to the level which existed before its ill-advised closure in the early 1970s.

The construction of additional linking lines in central Birmingham would help this and would in any case create greater operational flexibility in the region for both freight and passenger services. Space exists for such a development on Railtrack-owned land and costs would be significantly less. The SRA provided funding in December for a £1.7million examination of Birmingham New Street station. Architect Will Alsop will examine how the station could be changed to improve passenger flow and how its appearance and facilities could be improved. We will await the outcome with interest.