

The future for high speed rail in Britain

By Graham Nalty

graham@grahamnalty.co.uk

The reopening of St Pancras International station and inauguration of the fastest-ever train services from London to Paris and Brussels generated a loud fanfare of positive publicity for railways, for architecture and for high speed rail travel.

I cannot remember any time past when the railways have received so much positive and complimentary publicity.

I warmly congratulate the thousands of people whose time, effort and expertise made such a huge change in the UK rail system into a travelling reality.

And I offer special congratulations to those whose public relations skills made the opening of St Pancras into such a high profile media event.

Now we can enjoy faster train services to Europe. And if we live in the Midlands or the North we can avoid the hassle of a comparatively expensive taxi ride or crowded Underground journey across London.

For many people the journey across London with heavy luggage has been a serious barrier to continental rail travel that has further fuelled the growth of low cost airlines.

It is very interesting to notice how far up the political agenda the cross-London travel for long distance passengers has become now that Eurostar has moved from Waterloo!

So what are the next steps forward?

Railteam

The first step forward has been the creation of the Railteam organisation representing Eurostar and a number of continental railways.

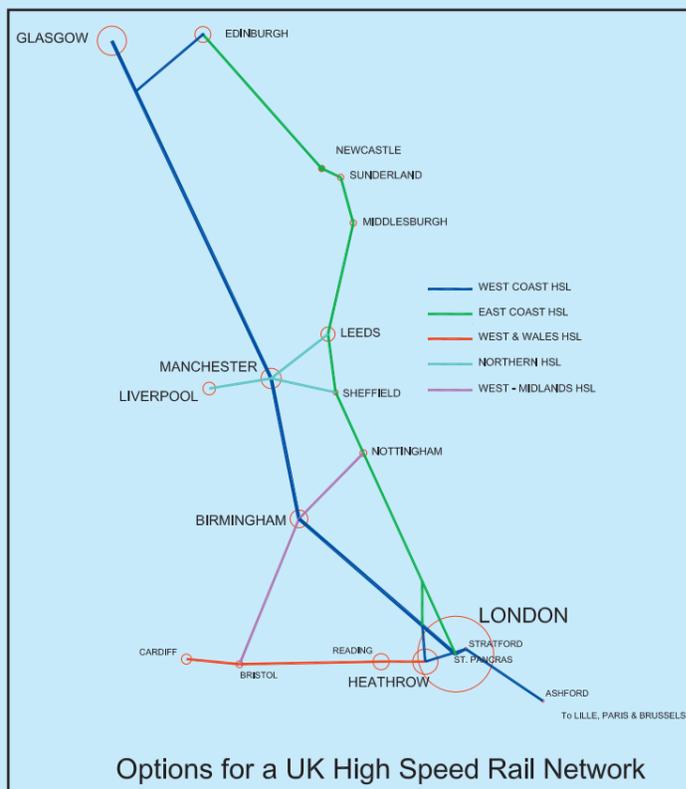
Their purpose is to reduce the barriers to international rail travel through the need to deal with several different rail administrations.

Railteam will offer a special facility for passengers who miss connections to be placed on the next available service.

This is a very valuable marketing initiative that takes the risks of missed connections away from the passenger back to the railway. Can you imagine a budget airline offering this facility?

Another feature of the Railteam plans is the creation of rail hubs at key locations, such as Lille and Brussels, offering easy connections between high-speed services.

They have recognised that the time loss and inconvenience of cross-city journeys between termini in London and Paris, despite the



excellent service frequencies, are a very serious discouragement to rail travel.

Ebbsfleet

Eurostar has received a great deal of criticism, not least from Railfuture members, for the promotion of Ebbsfleet as a terminal for customers arriving at the station by car.

While it is obviously better that Eurostar attracts new passengers who would otherwise have driven to Heathrow or Gatwick to catch their flight to Paris, it is important for the long-term growth of international rail travel that new lines and connections are built to link Ebbsfleet directly by fast rail services with the major population centres in southern England.

Lines in the UK

It would be very reasonable to expect a well-managed developed country to have a high-speed rail development plan that would retain the skills and experience of the people who built High Speed 1 (the line into St Pancras).

But not the UK. Despite the proven benefits of high-speed rail in city regeneration at places such as Lille and Lyon, our Government's Department for Transport seems determined not to develop a high-speed rail strategy.

Sooner or later they will be dragged into doing so because, quite frankly, they have lost the argument. The case for building high speed lines in the UK is too compelling. The

rise in passenger rail travel simply cannot be contained within the present network, and artificial restraints such as the elimination of through trains from Glasgow to Bristol will simply increase congestion on other less sustainable modes of travel.

The glib assumption that we can increase capacity by increasing train lengths, without detailed calculations of the costs of station platform lengthening and associated signalling modifications, is often made by the same people who have previously shirked their responsibility for providing the necessary extra carriages to meet today's overcrowding.

In the absence of a national high-speed rail strategy, Greengauge 21 has been set up by a small group of senior transport and railway professionals as a not-for-profit company to promote a national high speed rail strategy.

So far Greengauge 21 has produced a manifesto showing their vision for high-speed rail, a number of valuable research reports and a costed proposal for a possible extension of High Speed 1 north to Birmingham which they call High Speed 2.

Greengauge 21 are right to look at the North West corridor as being the most urgent choice for High Speed 2 because this serves the highest population and the current routes would become unacceptably overcrowded soonest. Greengauge 21 are right to include Heathrow Airport because the rail passenger

opportunities at Heathrow Airport would be comparable with cities the size of Leeds or Liverpool – at least.

The plan for a station on the high-speed line at Birmingham International is highly imaginative and one that I had not even considered before.

If built, there could be a demand for spurs from the Leamington, Nuneaton and Derby lines to be built into Birmingham International and a proportion of trains from Reading, Oxford, Leicester, Peterborough, Nottingham and Bristol to call there for the connections with the high-speed trains calling at Birmingham International. This could cause increased capacity problems on the already congested track between New Street and International stations.

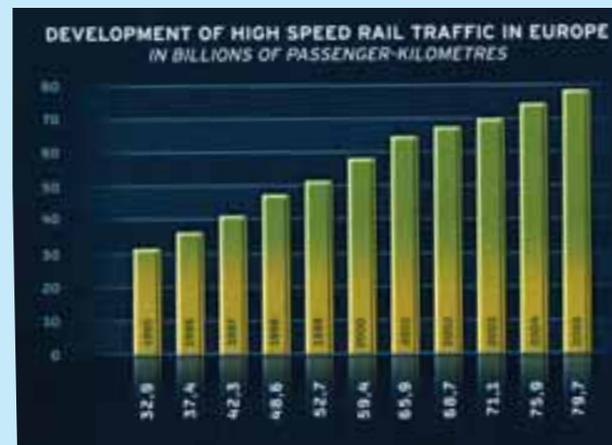
Much of the Greengauge 21 proposal for connecting the line to the West Coast main line and to central Birmingham deserves discussion, but most interesting is the suggestion that building a high-speed line through Birmingham would be too expensive and would require an underground station for high speed services.

Personally I find that idea strange as there is plenty of scope to build a line through the centre of Birmingham with very little tunneling and to permit high speed running through the city for the small proportion of trains that would not need to stop. The Greengauge 21 manifesto states: "An important conclusion from the Strategic Rail Authority studies was that for high-speed rail to be successful, it must serve city centres. Network designs that only reached the periphery (say the M25 in the case of London) would fail to attract sufficient market share to be worthwhile."

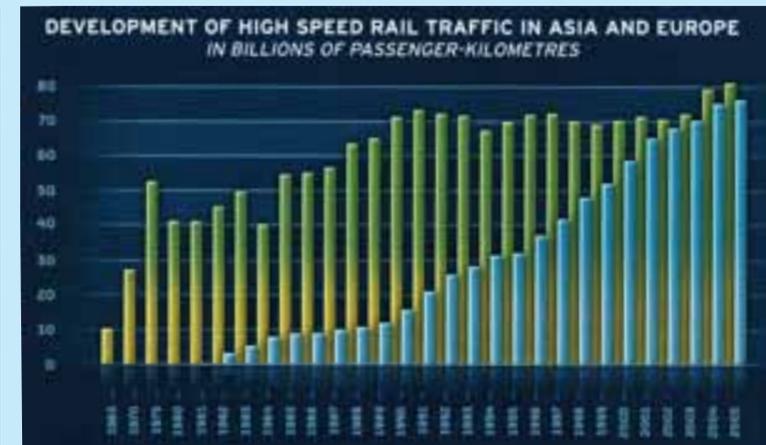
"They would offer little advantage over flying or driving. This is supported by practical experience elsewhere in Europe: considerable importance has been placed on the development of city centre terminals, integrating regional transport interchanges with commercial developments."

Perhaps Greengauge 21 is abandoning its principles to show cost saving credentials with the Treasury here. However, there is political wisdom in doing this as it throws a challenge to the West Midlands business and local government leaders to campaign vociferously for the high-speed line through the city centre, whereas if Greengauge had suggested a city centre station, local authorities might feel that they did not have sufficient decision-making on a matter that affected their economic future.

The provision of a suitable high-speed line station, and congestion-free approaches, for central Bir-



HOW BRITAIN IS FALLING BEHIND: The trend for high-speed rail is up throughout Europe and Asia



Charts: European Railway Industries

tingham is a matter of importance to the railway and to Birmingham far in excess of the number of passengers using New Street because of the critical position of New Street at the centre of so many different rail routes.

Peter Rayner's ideas for Birmingham described in his article in *Railwatch* December 2007 are well worth reading for his understanding of the problems of New Street and his practical imaginative solution for capacity problems at Birmingham.

His solution could fit easily into a proposal for a high-speed line serving Birmingham city centre.

The building of a high-speed line station in central Birmingham would enable Birmingham to be one of the few "hub" stations on the European high-speed network where passengers on, for example, a high-speed train from Liverpool to London could change into a high speed train starting from Manchester going forward to Paris.

While the Department for Transport is talking about a longer term increase in capacity for the Lon-

don-Birmingham-Manchester corridors, Greengauge 21 produced a report in November showing five transport corridors for which high-speed rail might be an ideal solution.

Politically this is a very astute move as this follows on the Government's concern on transport capacity on the London-Birmingham-Manchester corridors and puts on the department's agenda other corridors suitable for high-speed rail.

The other corridors considered are:

London-Stansed-Cambridge-North East

The purpose of this alignment is to serve the eastern side of the country while avoiding the high cost of increasing the number of tracks over Welwyn viaduct and tunnels.

While there is a genuine need for faster and higher quality services from Cambridge to Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle, I am not certain that this new high-speed alignment would relieve as much congestion as an alignment via Leicester, Nottingham, Sheffield and Leeds which are

much larger cities. Greengauge 21 considers this alignment could serve Nottingham and Sheffield from London, but I presume not over the same length of track that would serve Leeds and Newcastle. I suggest, that from Sheffield to Manchester a relief route could run via the Woodhead tunnel.

London-Bristol-Cardiff

Greengauge 21 suggests that upgrading the existing route for higher speeds is part of the way forward together with a link from the High Speed 2 station proposed for Heathrow to the Great Western main line.

Trans Pennine

With the potential of high speed lines on a south-north axis on both sides of the Pennines, a high-speed line across the Pennines, although comparatively expensive to construct, would yield considerable network benefits, linking towns and cities on opposite sides of the Pennines.

I accept that 186 mph between Leeds and Manchester, the two biggest cities, would not offer much saving in journey time, but on a limited stop service from Liv-

erpool to Newcastle, could offer very substantial time savings.

Anglo Scottish

High Speed 2, could reduce journey times from London to Glasgow to about three and a half hours, but for rail to achieve the market share, journey time has to come down to three hours.

Greengauge 21 suggests that this could be achieved by a combination of extending HS2 and speed upgrades of existing lines and some new parallel freight routes.

My own evaluation is that by then there will be much greater political support, particularly from the Scottish side, for high-speed rail to ensure that speeds of 186 mph and higher would be possible all the way from Glasgow and Edinburgh to Manchester, Birmingham and London.

Greengauge 21 have embarked on a slightly risky strategy in defining the five high-speed rail corridors. The risk is very much that these studies could be hijacked by road building interests in the Department for Transport.

The end result could be that unpopular, previously abandoned, road projects could be resurrected while proposals for expanding rail services could be lost in the jungle of bureaucracy as has been the case with the recent multi-modal studies.

Greengauge 21 offers Railfuture a very useful framework in which Railfuture branches in the areas served by these transport corridors can, working with neighbouring branches, develop strategic plans for rail development to complement and benefit from likely high-speed rail alignments.

Greengauge 21 has taken the case for high-speed rail in Britain forward a very long way.

There is still a long way to go. We, in Railfuture should be grateful for their energy and expertise in paving the way.



OUT IN FRONT: A line-up of the various types of high-speed trains in Japan Picture: RdB Wikipedia