

# Choices for Crossrail

London Crossrail first appeared in a post-war plan in the late 1940s. It reappeared in the Barran plan in the 1970s – as a two-line scheme, and again in the Central London Rail Study in the 1980s, but famously fell victim to a procedural fiasco in Parliament.

It topped a cost-benefit analysis of various London schemes in the 1990s, despite the high cost. The Jubilee extension came out bottom of that exercise, so which was built? – the Jubilee line!

Now Crossrail is back on the agenda, subject to more studies, more consultations, more variations, and of course someone offering to pay! Meantime many other proposals from the earliest plans have been built – the Victoria line, the Jubilee line, and Thameslink. Crossrail must rank as the oldest unfulfilled promise in London.

Throughout all this, the core of the scheme remained a tunnel connection in Central London between Paddington and Liverpool Street. The exact route has changed slightly, from one via Covent Garden to one shadowing the Central line.

Occasionally a third alternative, following the Circle line via Kings Cross, has been put forward, but advocates of this ignore the fact that the main purpose of the scheme (as well as providing a cross city route) is to take passengers closer to their main destinations in the City and West End, rather than to other mainline termini.

The Circle line already serves that purpose. So the route of the core tunnel was settled on the “Central” corridor, which continues to be protected. More recently the route immediately east of Liverpool Street has been modified sensibly to provide for an interchange with the East London line at Whitechapel. So far so good.

No such clarity or certainty has governed the outer parts of the scheme. Until recently there were a few fixed points: Shenfield in the east, Slough and usually Reading in the west. Once Heathrow was added to the rail network it rightly also became a part of Crossrail plans.

It also involved electrification of about a third of the route to Reading. One might have thought this would have improved the case for Crossrail running to Reading, or at least Slough. Apparently not, in view of recent developments.

Incredibly this route has now been dropped (except for Heathrow) in favour of a previously unheard-of proposal to run to Richmond and Kingston. This involves major disruption both to SWT services on the Kingston loop and to the District and North London lines – Richmond would lose its link to one or other of these.

Has anyone considered the implications of half the Crossrail service negotiating flat junctions at Richmond (is anything else possible here?) the bottleneck bridge over the Thames and the junctions on the Kingston line, not to mention the level crossing at Acton Central! A branch on the Hounslow loop would have made slightly more sense.

One does not exactly detect a groundswell of support for the proposal from SW commuters, most of whom will presumably prefer established services to Waterloo to a long detour via Acton and Paddington. Better still, they would probably prefer to see a second Crossrail line to serve their existing routes via Waterloo or Victoria. This is already in the minds of planners as a SW to NE route through London.

Something similar had already happened in the east some time earlier. The choice of a second eastern branch was always less clear. At one time the main focus was on LTS (now a.k.a. C2C) lines to Tilbury, etc.

With the advent of Heathrow the eminently sensible idea of running to Stansted, airport-to-airport (via Stratford) came into the frame. But now the emphasis is on Docklands. Okay, Docklands is a growth area, but does that mean they have to get every new rail link? They have already got the Jubilee line ahead of its rightful priority (thanks to the promoters of the Canary Wharf and the Millennium Dome). They also have the DLR, at least some of which should have been built as a real railway. Now they want half of Crossrail too!

Just as the problem (if there is one) of the District line

**Railfuture policy officer Mike Crowhurst asks: Where on earth is Crossrail going?**

Richmond branch could be solved by developing either a new branch of the Central Line (as per Central London Rail Study) or extending the Hammersmith Met to Richmond (or indeed the North London line to Kingston), so the needs of Docklands can be adequately served by building the second branch of the Jubilee line for which provision was made at North Greenwich during construction of the present line.

This could serve the Royal Docks area and on to Woolwich/Plumstead or Thamesmead (possibly beyond) just as well and far more economically than Crossrail. Together with DLR extensions already planned, this would give the Dockland area all the links it needs, leaving Crossrail for the serious business further out.

As for Ebbsfleet – the suggested terminus for part of Crossrail – this could be reached far more simply from Forest Gate via Barking, and the Channel Tunnel rail link at Ripple Lane. This would offer LTS/C2C passengers a Crossrail connection (which the planned route does not have) at Barking, and also probably be a more attractive option to North Kent passengers than the proposed CTRL service to St Pancras. Granted the constraints of the CTRL and the junction at Forest Gate mean that only a limited number of Crossrail trains could use this route, but there are plenty of other places they could go – Stansted, Chelmsford, Southend Victoria for instance, or indeed the LTS lines themselves, all already electrified at 25kV.

What is more, given that one gathers it is the intention (for obvious reasons) that Crossrail be as self-contained as possible, it makes little sense to propose branches into either North Kent or the Kingston lines where they will be anything but self-contained, capacity is already fully stretched, existing services (and travel patterns) would be heavily affected, possible “stub-ends” created, and DC traction will be required in addition to AC.

By contrast the routes to Shenfield, Southend (either way) and Reading/Slough offer far fewer conflicts and would be far more self-contained. Furthermore, even on the proposed lines, there is a curious choice of stations. Are Greenhithe and Stone really more important than Maryland and St Margarets? And why no call at Limehouse (for LTS), City Airport, or even Woolwich or Plumstead? Serve the real passengers, not the property speculators!

Back in the west, even more confusion has reigned regarding secondary branches. At first the emphasis was on the Chiltern route to Aylesbury. The original proposal for a branch of the central tunnel to Marylebone was in due course replaced by either a tunnel or surface route to Neasden.

This had the advantage of being self-contained and would no doubt suit Chiltern Trains’ strategy of concentrating on their long distance services to the Midlands, but had the disadvantage of lacking an interchange with the remainder of the Chiltern route at Neasden, not to mention more tunnelling.

The more obvious option of the direct route to High Wycombe surfaced only briefly before vanishing again, despite most of the infrastructure already being there. Meantime other options involving the Silverlink services either to Watford (DC) or beyond (AC) came into the frame by way of a link to Willesden Junction.

These latter are not entirely illogical but nor are they as self-contained as they at first seem. Including both Watford and Amersham lines would make least sense, as they serve many of the same suburbs. High Wycombe still seems the easiest and most logical option after the Great Western main line. Loops off the main Crossrail route could provide improved interchange at North Acton with the Central line (taking over the Ealing branch) and at Willesden Junction with Silverlink and the North London line.

The impetus for some of these changes in the east is not far to seek. The powerful Docklands-Thames Gateway development lobby is clearly being listened to, unlike the less influential ordinary rail users of East London and Essex. In the west the picture is more complex. It seems the SRA has con-

vinced itself that merging franchises is the panacea that will magically create extra capacity on the GW mainline. It sees Crossrail as an unwelcome complication which threatens to undo this done deal. It cannot appreciate that capacity is independent of labels like TOC names or Crossrail that attach to various trains. In contrast, diverting suburban services into Crossrail does free up more capacity in the Paddington terminus. Add to this a reluctance to extend electrification if it can possibly be helped. That requires too many bits of the industry to cooperate! In short, the tail seems to be wagging the dog.

Then we have the Mayor of London, now in overall charge of Transport for London, who clearly wants to keep the scheme within the boundary of Greater London. In this he will no doubt have the sympathy of those who believe schemes like Crossrail merely encourage people to commute further, and of those who fear it would lead to “overheating” in the Reading corridor.

This is a recipe for never building anything to tackle existing problems or improve conditions for existing passengers, for fear of attracting some new ones. In the opposite camp are the advocates of the “commercial” approach including the Treasury, who favour the long distance options because these attract higher fares. Come on everybody, let’s have a reasonable balance of long and short distance services in this and other cross-London lines. Something for everyone!

Then there are those who feel the money should be spent in the regions, not London. Of course lines need investment throughout the country. Rural services need subsidy, disused routes need reopening and hopefully some new lines might get built one day.

But in London, cross-town lines not only cater for London commuters, they also help passengers trying to travel between different regions across the city, cutting out the ordeal of the overloaded Underground for the cross-town sector. It is crazy that the mainline network has this huge gap at the heart of the capital just where many inter-regional journeys meet and the Underground is least able to cope with the extra load. And if we forget about tunnels right out to Gunnersbury, Neasden or Woolwich, there might just be some money left for the rest of the country! Crossrail is just one line, but it is a start. If we built two Crossrail lines, we would still only have three such lines in London. In Paris (a smaller city) they are already on their fifth! And we seriously expect London to get the 2012 Olympics?

I am told some in the Thames Valley have their doubts about Crossrail because they fear that the pattern of services would need to be adjusted, or that unsuitable inner suburban stock would be used for outer suburban services. Of course these points must be addressed, but we are in danger of losing the whole scheme while we argue about these details. They come later. Similarly, whilst a western link to Heathrow would complement Crossrail well, it is not essential to it, and is really a separate issue.

Meantime the basic concept is going seriously off the rails. Instead of a compact, passably self-contained network, we are now facing a complex scheme extending into several operating areas instead of the original two, including the intensive Southern DC system on both sides of the city. Not only that but major extra tunnelling in the suburbs – previously to Neasden, now in Docklands – keeps getting added



*This beautiful picture of Kyle of Lochalsh station is on the back cover of a new rail guide book, entitled Iron Roads to the Far North and Kyle. Unfortunately it is no longer possible to catch a ferry to the Isle of Skye from Kyle but the journey is still worth taking for its own sake. The book is the fourth of an excellent series published by Waygoose with financial support from several companies and public bodies, as well as two private individuals, Geoffrey Evison and John Yellowless. Costing £4.99, it is obtainable from Waygoose, Park View, Tatenhall Common, Staffordshire DE13 9RS Tel: 01283 821472 email: karen@waygoose.org.uk*