



# ABFLY newsletter

[www.abfly.org.uk](http://www.abfly.org.uk)

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## PLAYING THE LONG GAME

### *A High Speed future?*

On 11<sup>th</sup> March the government announced its intention to build a second UK high-speed line. The new line, labelled 'High Speed 2' (HS2) will link a greatly-expanded London Euston with a new station in Birmingham, cutting journey times to 49 mins on average (current best is 1h 22 min) and releasing much needed extra capacity on the existing West Coast Mainline. Beyond Birmingham, high speed trains will run on 'classic' lines to serve Manchester and Scotland, at least initially, but the government's ultimate intention is to create further high speed lines in a 'Y' formation to serve the East Midlands, Sheffield, Manchester, Leeds and maybe even Scotland. The estimated cost of all this: £15.8 to £17.4 billion, infrastructure costs alone, with a completion date of 'late 2026'.

The scale of the project is almost unimaginable. Consider the completion date alone; your newsletter editor will be 43. That's scary. The Pendolinos on the WCML will be approaching the end of their 30-year design life. Jordan will be on her fifth or sixth marriage. And the UK will still be paying off its debt. Given the likely political and public-finance upheaval ahead, you might as well dust off your crystal ball to predict whether or not this project will ever see the light of day. But anyway, full details can be found on the Department for Transport's website <http://www.dft.gov.uk/pgpr/rail/pi/highspeedrail/>.

The advertised speed of the new service (up to 225mph) is matched only by the government's rapid change in policy. In 2006, former British Airways' chief executive Sir Rod Eddington produced 'The Eddington Transport Study', reporting on future transport strategy. His report gave only lukewarm support for high-speed rail, and support in Westminster waned. However, fast-forward to March 2010 and we now have a fully costed, fully surveyed route for 'HS2' between London and Birmingham plus a clear idea of future extensions, cross-party support (just!) and a favourable media. And there is pretty much one person to thank for all this: the erstwhile Lord Andrew Adonis.

At this point you may be forgiven for being a little confused. Haven't we had proposals for a high-speed rail network before? Well yes, in fact, just about everybody has had an opinion or published a proposal in the last decade. I won't go into the details but here are some of the players who have offered their tuppenneth to the debate: 'Greengauge 21', 'UK Ultraspeed' (promoters of Maglev technology), the Institution of Civil Engineers, Engineering companies Arup, Atkins and Steer Davies Gleave, the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, even Virgin Trains put forward a proposal to build a high speed line as part of their bid to run the East Coast Mainline franchise in 2001. Perhaps most surprisingly of all was Network Rail's proposal, put forward in August 2009, for a 'route and branch' approach linking London with Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Why was this surprising? Well, because it came less than four months before the government-sponsored 'HS2' company was due to deliver the findings on its own year-long study to the Secretary of State. Many in the rail industry were wondering why Network Rail choose to press ahead with its own conclusions, given its status as the government-funded 'not-for-profit' guardian of the nation's rail infrastructure. A case of the left hand doing one thing and the right hand.....who can say?

Anyway, what has any of this got to do with the Abbey Line, I hear you saying? Well, for two reasons. Firstly, it illustrates the point that a year is a very, very long time in transport planning, especially where the whirlwind that is Lord Adonis is concerned. And secondly, it highlights the debate over whether or not the proposed tram scheme is the best thing for the Abbey Line in the long term.

### *Trams*

To recap; on 4th January 2010 the Department for Transport (DfT), in partnership with Hertfordshire County Council (HCC), published a consultation document entitled 'The Future of the Abbey Line'. The document sets out plans to convert the line to light rail operation. There are two main pillars of the proposal; firstly, to provide a more frequent service of at least half an hour, because the necessary passing loop can be built for a fraction of the cost of its heavy rail counterpart (so we are told – details in terms of £££s, as ever, have not been forthcoming). Secondly, responsibility for the line will transfer to HCC, making it a 'local transport facility'. Fundamentally, says Lord Adonis in his foreword to the consultation document (see [www.dft.gov.uk/abbeyline](http://www.dft.gov.uk/abbeyline)), the improved service can be provided for roughly the same budget as currently expended to maintain the less regular heavy rail service. Reading between the lines, this effectively means the branch becomes greater 'value for money' thus securing its long-term viability. A good thing, right?

ABFLY spent three months formulating a response to the DfT / HCC consultation document, taking expert advice. This was delivered to the DfT on 16<sup>th</sup> March. The full response is now available through our website [www.abfly.org.uk](http://www.abfly.org.uk) (printed copies are available on request – please write to or e-mail the chairman, details overleaf). Here are the highlights.

In many ways the plans are very positive. We all want a higher frequency service. 30mins is good but if there's potential to reach 20mins (as the consultation document suggests), well, even better. The benefits of a higher frequency service are obvious. Imagine the 'best case' scenario – a tram every 20mins. Mini-timetables would be a thing of the past. You could simply roll up at St Albans Abbey station any time of the day and expect to be in Watford within 35mins (assuming the 'worst case', i.e. you just missed the previous tram by seconds, and assuming current journey times are maintained or improved). There would be no worries about having to wait an additional 45mins in the shelter at St Albans Abbey, thus making your journey of little over 6.5miles into an hour-long, tedious waste of time. But it's not just about the added convenience of a 'turn up and go' service. Think about connections, both with trains and buses at either end of the line. With a tram delivering you every 20mins into Watford Junction, the number of 'useful connections' increases, both north, south and ultimately east and west (Croxley Rail Link?). So not only have you improved public transport provision between St Albans and Watford, but you have also opened up a whole host of what they call in the biz 'journey opportunities'.

Another 'positive' for the scheme is the potential for future expansion. One of the things we call for in our consultation response is for the option of additional stations to be 'tested' in the tender – i.e. to ask bidders to at least cost for them as an 'option' which HCC can buy if they want, or save for another day. Specifically, we call for the bidders to look into new stations at Asda / Sainsburys (between Watford North and Garston), the Building Research Establishment (between Garston and Bricket Wood) and at Sopwell (between Park Street and St Albans Abbey). And in the much longer term, will we be looking at 'on-street' extensions into Watford and St Albans, or maybe the re-use of the old railway between St Albans and Hatfield? It's not part of the current scheme but who knows, with light rail technology the idea undoubtedly takes one step up the probability ladder. And late night trams – again, these were mentioned in the DfT's document as 'subject to affordability' but ABFLY are calling for these to be part of the specification. At least they should try to get a price for it (remember if you want to change something or buy extra once you have signed a contract you are on the 'back foot', negotiation-wise).

Another 'pro' for the scheme is that, potentially, and if managed correctly, this could very much place the line on a more sound financial footing thus securing its status for the foreseeable future. If more can be delivered for less, surely this is a no-brainer? But this is where the doubts start to creep in. Herts County Council don't exactly have a glowing reputation for delivering rail-based projects, with the relatively minor (by comparison to HS2!) Croxley Rail Link being in its umpteenth year of development. The timescales for conversion of the line into tramway operation are devilishly tight, the end of 2011 being talked about for the start of the new operation, less than 18 months from now. A number of people that we have talked to in the rail industry see this as highly optimistic. Some say it is downright impossible. Nonetheless, this is what the Good Lord Adonis has decreed, so good luck to them.

Another nagging doubt is how the business case stacks up. Ok, so second-hand (mid-life) trams are apparently available from the continent at reasonable prices today, but what happens when they become life-expired? What will replace them - brand new trams? Will that be affordable? And what about spares? Do you buy a large fleet with plenty of standby units (6+ trams) or a smaller, leaner, harder working fleet? What about maintenance costs? Is a brand-new, dedicated maintenance depot (probably on railway land at Watford Junction or, perhaps less likely, at St Albans Abbey), really cost-effective for the sake of a few trams on a single route?

Perhaps the biggest single concern is what will happen should the project fail, e.g. if there are insufficient bidders or the bids are too costly, or at the later stages, e.g. due to technical problems or contractual disputes. Should the project collapse after normal heavy rail closure procedures have been 'dis-applied', what is the back up plan? Will the line revert to heavy rail operation (and legal status), and if so, who is the 'operator of last resort' and who will pay for 're-conversion'? Since HCC will take a much greater role in the operation of the line, there is a significant risk that the line will become a 'political football', with budgets under pressure from councillors outside of Watford and St Albans who may or may not be supportive of the operation. Short-term uncertainty could be very damaging for the commercial viability of the service, investment plans and motivation of the operator. Who will arbitrate in the event of a dispute between HCC and the operator, once the contract has been signed, and will their decision be legally binding? And what exactly is the 'alternative closure regime' proposed by the DfT?

Finally, what of the longer term? With the case for longer rail franchises now being investigated by the Department for Transport, is the business case for a conventional passing loop with conventional heavy rail vehicles really as 'dead' as we are led to believe (again – precious few facts have been forthcoming, citing 'commercial confidentiality', despite numerous requests)? And looking even further into the future, if HS2 sees the light of day, this will release an awful lot of capacity on the West Coast Mainline. With Watford due to be re-signalled in the not too distant future, all of a sudden those through trains from St Albans Abbey may not be as impossible as conventional wisdom would lead us to believe. Of course, the ambition for through trains to London will be permanently killed off by the self-contained nature of the tram scheme, but this is balanced by a higher frequency service opening up many more 'journey opportunities', not just for London but to many destinations, as explained above.

### *A choice*

As should now be evident, ABFLY is at something of a crossroads. We are faced with a potential 'silver bullet' in terms of the service but with serious reservations about a) its deliverability and business case, b) what happens if it all goes wrong and c) is this the right thing to do in the (very) long term. Of course, politicians cannot be blamed for taking decisions in the here and now, for they don't have a crystal ball either. And from that point of view, perhaps only a 'knave or a fool' would oppose this scheme (to quote from a recent letter in the Watford Observer). However, as a user group we have to tread the fine line between supportiveness and scepticism. We hope that our consultation response achieves this balance. Have a read, and see what you think. The consultation is open until 31<sup>st</sup> March.

## REVENUE COLLECTION

One thing that has consistently 'bugged' us in recent years has been an increasingly patchy revenue protection regime on the Abbey Line. The line has a reputation in the community for being a 'free ride', especially if you are travelling between intermediate stations. The issue of lost revenue came to a head on Saturday 7th November 2009 when there was a fireworks display in St Albans. According to an ABFLY member the trains were 'packed to the hilt' between 6pm and 10pm. There was nobody to collect fares. A quick 'fag packet' calculation reveals that London Midland could have lost up to £4600 on this occasion. And it wasn't the first time.

ABFLY is concerned about the lack of revenue collection on the Abbey Line because it demonstrates a certain lack of commitment to the line and its long-term viability. Not only that, but it frequently causes inconvenience to honest passengers who are forced to queue at Watford Junction's tiny excess fare window in order to buy a ticket for onward travel. It is not uncommon for people to miss their connection. We wrote to LM about this. In response, we are pleased to hear that LM will be installing a Ticket Vending Machine (TVM) at Watford North, the second busiest station on the route after St Albans Abbey (which already has one). This will go in within the next few months. Remarkably, they are also considering one for Garston. This one would be card-only, however, as LM have suffered a spate of TVM vandalism recently. Card-only machines do not seem to suffer as much, for obvious reasons. Additionally, Senior Conductors and Revenue Protection teams are being issued with upgraded mobile ticket issuing machines (Avantix II) which are designed to speed up the issuing of tickets. So, all credit to London Midland. Things may be looking up.

## ABFLY MEMBERS' MEETING

Lest we forget our *raison d'être*, London Midland will still be running the service for at least another 18 months and there are plenty of things for us the User Group to challenge them about! Therefore why not come along to our forthcoming Members' Meeting on

**Monday 26<sup>th</sup> April**

*1900 for 1930 start*

*The Parish Centre, Bricket Wood*

Representatives from London Midland will be in attendance. Possible guest speaker TBC. The meeting will be followed by a brief AGM.

New members are welcome to join at the door upon payment of a minimum £3 subscription fee per household per year. For agenda items please write to: The Chairman, ABFLY, Mr John Webster, 17 Faircross Way, St Albans, Herts, AL1 4RT E-mail: [chairman@abfly.org.uk](mailto:chairman@abfly.org.uk).

## NEW VOLUNTEERS

We are delighted to welcome to the service of ABFLY, not one, not two but THREE new volunteers in recent months.

**Rosalind Devlin** takes on the role of 'Operations Monitor'. Her duty is to monitor day-to-day operation on the line, noting down incidents of delay, cancellations, missed connections, poor customer service etc. These incidents will be fed back to London Midland at ABFLY's quarterly liaison meetings. E-mail [feedback@abfly.org.uk](mailto:feedback@abfly.org.uk).

**Paul Ebbens** takes over the role of Membership Secretary from David Horton, who continues to edit the newsletter and maintain the website. E-mail [membership@abfly.org.uk](mailto:membership@abfly.org.uk).

**Charles King** takes on the role of publicity officer, a post which has been unfilled for a number of years. He is also an 'expert witness' when it comes to transport planning, and trams in particular, having previously worked for Faber Maunsell (now AECOM).

We thank all of our new volunteers for stepping in to help the cause!