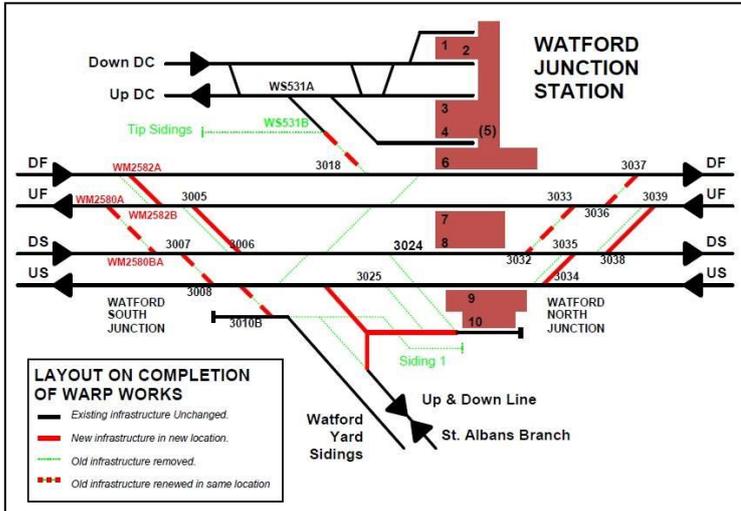




ABFLY newsletter

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Above left: the track layout at Watford Junction 'before and after' December closure

Above right: Graffiti removal taking place on the Abbey Line bridge over the M25 near Bricket Wood, during the December closure.

ABBEY LINE HANDED BACK AFTER 30-DAY CLOSURE

Work to renew track and signals at the junction connecting the Abbey Line and the West Coast Main Line (WCML) have been completed on time. For four weeks, from 29th November to 29th December 2014, engineers worked round the clock to modernise the signalling and trackwork in the area. As part of the Watford Area Renewals Programme, they replaced all the connections from the Up Slow onto platform 10 at Watford, and also on to the branch.

John Nixon, Network Rail's senior programme manager on the project, said: "As well as the connection on to the branch, we've also been removing and upgrading some of the sidings in Watford South Yard. Prior to this work, you had to go through the sidings to get onto the branch. But with the new track and connection it means you can get a connection straight off the branch on to the Up Slow. This will significantly help in terms of future proofing the area."

The fully-mechanised connection is now controlled from Wembley Control Centre, rather than by 'hand-points' as it used to be. During the latest work on the Abbey Line the engineers were taking out the whole of the connection area, which is between Platform 11 and the Up Slow, and installing a new layout. This included new track, ballast and sleepers. Over Christmas they did 150 yards, but in total around half a mile of track was replaced, with everything taken into consideration.

One of the biggest challenges was buried services. As a lot of the track was old, dating back to the 1960s, in some cases even the 1940s, extensive exploration work had to take place to understand what was underneath. Network Rail's contractors found gas mains, water mains and cabling that weren't in any service records.

During the work at Watford Junction, the opportunity was also taken to undertake extensive work on the branch itself – including vegetation clearance, graffiti removal and renewal of overhead line equipment.

Further works on the WCML at Watford were planned for February and Easter, which would have led to additional closures of the Abbey Line. Work still to do includes the complete replacement of Orphanage Road bridge and final commissioning of all the new trackwork. However, due to a landslip on the Chiltern Route at the end of January, which is still under repair today, the February closures had to be postponed. Going ahead with them would have meant the closure of both main trunk routes between London and Birmingham, which was deemed to be unacceptable.

At the time of writing, the Easter closure is still going ahead, with the Abbey Line due to be closed from Friday 3rd to Monday 6th April. Orphanage Road has also been closed to traffic for 12 weeks from Monday 2nd February to Friday 17th April. Replacement of the Orphanage Road bridge will allow trains to travel faster through the area.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Over Christmas we were faced with the challenge of responding, at very short notice, to the government's consultation on the awarding of the West Midlands 'Direct Award' franchise. The background to this was explained in the letter which we hastily sent out to all members, so we won't go over the detail again. As with all government consultations, the number of individual responses received holds a lot of weight, so we put together a template letter outlining our view on the outcomes we wish to see for the Abbey Line over the Direct Award period, and invited as many members and non-members as possible to use this as the basis for their submissions. Our letter included, among several things, a demand for refurbished rolling stock, later opening hours, radical improvement in fare collection, introduction of at least limited peak-hour through services (taking advantage of the new connection – see above), and extension of the Oyster card network up the branch. We are pleased to report that over 140 people responded to the DfT – an incredible achievement. The DfT were known to have been 'bowled over' by this, and promised to take our views very seriously in their negotiations. So thank you to all who took the trouble to respond – and let us watch this space for developments.

NEW WEBSITE ON THE WAY

The national umbrella campaign group 'Railfuture', to which ABFLY is affiliated, recently set out its 'seven steps to a successful rail campaign'. One of these steps was to have a good website.

The ABFLY website www.abfly.org.uk is now over 10 years old, and in this rapidly changing digital age, looks like a Triumph Herald next to a Bugatti Veyron! This is a problem because it is ABFLY's 'shop window'. If people come along looking for information about the group, and all they find is the digital equivalent of an abandoned town, then they are more than likely to lose interest or assume the group is a dead duck.

Unfortunately, despite several appeals, nobody has come forward from the membership to help modernise it, so the committee has taken the decision to bring in the professionals.

A detailed specification for the new website has been prepared with 'best practice' from other rail user groups, campaign groups and rail industry businesses in mind. The company commissioned to do the work, Primary Image, are responsible for some of the most high profile websites in the industry, including those of Christian Wolmar (esteemed Transport Columnist and now candidate for Mayor of London), Young Rail Professionals (YRP) and the Rail Supply Group (RSG).

The work not only includes a new website but a complete revamp of the ABFLY logo plus newly designed posters, membership leaflets and 'pull-up' banners for use at community events etc. Features of the new website will include a news / blog page, live Twitter feed, timetable page, station guide and the facility to join up online. Completion is due for the middle of April.

With ABFLY membership having declined by a staggering 40% since 2008, we see this as a key step in rebuilding our credibility as a campaign group, and ultimately our membership numbers.

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SUBS INCREASE?

As mentioned opposite, ABFLY has suffered a 40% drop in membership since 2008. We can speculate about the reasons for this, but it is clear that with a politically critical couple of years ahead for the line, we must act fast to rebuild our membership numbers and hence our credibility as a campaign group.

One of the unfortunate consequences of the membership drop is the loss of income, and 2014 looks set to have been the first year we ever made a loss.

Like any good business, we must therefore try to reverse this decline by looking at our income and our cost base. Obviously the most important way of increasing income is to get more members, and through the new website (detailed opposite), as well as new membership leaflets and more 'on-train evangelism', our target is to rebuild membership to pre-2008 levels, if not beyond, by the end of 2015.

However, in the short term we must also appeal to remaining members to help us out financially. Our membership subscription has been £3 per annum for as long as anybody can remember, so we are now proposing to increase this to £5 – a big jump in percentage terms, yes, but still a modest amount we hope you will agree! If you have any strong feelings about this, either way, we would appreciate your feedback – either by e-mail to campaigns@abfly.org.uk or via the Chairman, John Webster, on 01727 752613.

Similarly, if anybody feels inclined to make a donation, either as a one-off or by setting up a recurring standing order, please do make yourself known to our Treasurer, Tim Holman, c/o 9d Prospect Road, St Albans, AL1 2AT. E-mail: treasurer@abfly.org.uk. All cheques should be made out to 'Abbey Flyer Users Group'. Thank you.

SAVING COSTS

Finally on the subject of rebuilding the ABFLY 'business', one way in which we can reduce our costs is to use e-mail to distribute this Newsletter. Some years ago an e-mailing list was set up but this has now been taken over by the Community Rail Partnership (CRP) and we cannot use it for ABFLY business. If you are happy to receive your ABFLY newsletter by e-mail in future, please send a short e-mail to campaigns@abfly.org.uk, stating your full name and membership number (if known).