

MISSING LINK

The Newsletter of the Wealden Line Campaign

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INVESTORS PREPARE TO FUND BML2

ONE of the biggest decisions affecting rail travel across the London and the South East region is scheduled to be made within the next couple of months when the long-awaited London & South Coast Study will finally be made public.

Serious interest in the Brighton Main Line 2 Project has been forthcoming throughout the year, although we are not yet in a position to reveal the full extent. This will, however, take place in due course. Nevertheless, we can outline some of the developments which have been taking place this year.

Some months ago we were approached by professional financial advisers who clearly recognised the potential value of the project to Greater London and the capital's commercial heartland in east London and Canary Wharf. These are the people who generate income and create wealth for the capital and are unencumbered by having to support more politically-motivated projects, as is so often the case with our elected representatives. Neither are they bound by dubious projections of a project's value or worth by civil servants, who in some cases cannot see the wood for the trees. Instead, these are the companies and the private sector investors who have to commit hard-won earnings, as well as the interest of their shareholders, rather than dip ever further into the public purse as costs escalate.

Keen to confirm BML2 as a serious economic proposition, a meeting took place in early Spring with the BML2 project team at the headquarters of a leading firm of London lawyers. This was to establish a way forward for the project to be properly handled and managed. This was felt to be particularly important should it be pursued further and put before major investors who have bases both in London and around the whole world.

Prior to this meeting, a serious Letter of Intent was received, which provided an initial and substantial financial commitment to the BML2 project – and progress to its scope in full. Understandably, the investors were keen to know more about the project and discuss the challenges and opportunities which might lie ahead and to see whether the scheme should be taken up and financed.

A few weeks later there followed a very warm and cordial 'meet and greet' gathering at their Mayfair headquarters where questions could be fired from both sides so that mutual understanding could be achieved. The BML2 team was keen to provide as many satisfactory answers as possible, despite the fact that some elements (chiefly in the London area) require further study. This is because, as steady progress has been made, new opportunities along the way have come forth, whereby the whole project has markedly benefited and been greatly strengthened.

Clearly, the scale of the project is such that it was only possible at this meeting, which took place in April, to outline the key benefits. Even so, from the investors' point of view, there was satisfaction in the value of BML2 to the capital as well as the wider region. To aid the launch of BML2 as a serious investment proposition, a specially-produced, full-colour promotional brochure entitled *BML2 – a Capital Project* was designed and distributed at this gathering.



A BML2 Project Group meeting held at Canary Wharf during May

RECOGNITION

With the help of professionals from the financial and commercial spheres, BML2 has steadily been transformed into a leading transport project for the UK. Recognition that the scheme's scope extends far and wide – and well beyond its original Sussex genesis – has been a most welcome step forward. Understandably, this has been especially gratifying to those whose belief and faith in the project as a fundamental 'game-changer' has been ratified by those prepared to invest their capital in worthwhile infrastructure schemes.

Broadening-out the previous and somewhat parochial rail regeneration scheme so that it could solve massive congestion problems in London was certainly the right move back in 2010 at BML2's launch. Despite a few fringe political critics, who were once so vociferous but now are no longer relevant, BML2's ability to create vast new opportunities for travel across the capital has been widely recognized.

Central to BML2's London Phase is the Lewisham – Canary Wharf – Stratford section under the River Thames which would involve approximately five miles of tunnelling. New crossings under the eastern Thames are constantly being touted and said to be desperately required. However, so far none of these has involved a major rail link and certainly not on this scale.

The BML2 Project is already well-known to the strategic advisers and planners at Canary Wharf who acknowledged its value and ability to ensure the complex was situated on the most important and significant nucleus of London commerce. Indeed, Lord Adonis, now Chairman of the Government's National Infrastructure Commission, was left in no doubt of its importance to the Wharf during a meeting at the House of Lords organized by Lord Bassam of Brighton early last year.

In order to provide a confidential briefing of the increasing serious interest from investors, a meeting was held at Canary Wharf in May where discussions took place regarding the Wharf's own aspirations for transport improvements and BML2. It was established that a north-south axis, which included fast connections to both Gatwick and Stansted would be very advantageous. Copies of the new brochure were also made available, which not only outline the scheme, but demonstrate the cross-party political support it has gained.

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Right across the South, demand is far outstripping capacity

BREXIT

The BML2 Project owes a great debt to former Chancellor George Osborne. Whereas political analysts variously heap praise or pour scorn upon the man, we will always remain grateful to him for showing genuine concern over the plight of Sussex during his visit to the county and seeing for himself the difficulties its economy and its people face. The railway in the South plays an enormous role in the economic health and well-being of the region, as acknowledged by George Osborne.

Needless to say, and whatever our individual personal views on the EU Referendum outcome might be, the result in June was an upheaval, especially as the consensus of informed opinion was that the UK would continue to remain within the European Union. With the political aftershock, the resignation of David Cameron as Prime Minister, the vitriolic election for his successor, a whole new cabinet team and so on, it wasn't perhaps surprising that the anticipated plan of action for progress on BML2 became somewhat delayed.

Prior to the vote, there had of course been some discussion on whether the future looked rosier for the scheme, be it in or out on Friday 24th June. Fortunately, we had already been reassured that the investors were not particularly concerned which way the result went. Certainly the subsequent good news is that from the investors' point of view Brexit makes no difference to their enthusiastic support for this major project.

FAST PACE

Apart from the upset of the political appletart in June, the dust has settled remarkably quickly and everything is now back on track. Not only this though, because in the past couple of months the pace of interest has quickened, whilst further enhancements to the primary project have been favourably received. On the political side, whereas the delay has been frustrating from our perspective, there does appear to be a fresh appetite by the new Government to "get on with things" so we look forward to seeing what emerges in the coming weeks.

PHASES

One matter which has cropped up many times and understandably so, is the investors' commitment to the whole of the original BML2 project. This embraces all the Sussex Phase and includes reopening to Lewes and the new South Downs Ashcombe tunnel to Brighton; the Kent Phase, which includes re-establishing the Ashurst/Eridge-Tunbridge Wells links; and of course the very expensive but hugely profitable London Phase. Fears that the project could be cherry-picked with only the latter phase occurring have been quashed as shown in the original Letter of Intent. Although a legal undertaking could be inserted into the contract, this is deemed hardly necessary because, what has transpired during discussions with engineering consultants and investors, is that all three phases are necessary for the project to be fully effective.

For instance, proper and sustainable relief of the Brighton Line is necessary. A primary purpose and requirement of the Sussex Phase is to draw away overbearing railheading by commuters who currently swamp the route. Only by providing a second main line, which itself operates manifold, fast and convenient services, can this be achieved. Another purpose is to provide a badly-needed alternative route whenever the BML is down, be this in emergencies or when engineering work, rebuilding or whatever is required. Only BML2 can satisfactorily meet this need. The other key purpose is the opening-up of new routes and destinations which are crucial to the economic growth and well being of the Sussex Coast and its expanding towns.

We must also repeat (as if we haven't made it plain countless times before!) that BML2 emphatically does not 'bypass Lewes' just because it has a spur beneath the South Downs running directly into Brighton. Benefiting just as much will be Eastbourne, Polegate, Seaford, Newhaven and Lewes with an important second main line to London, along with all the additional destinations which will be made available.

BRIGHTON MPs CONDEMN DELAY

Rarely a day, let alone a week, goes by without an incident, occurring along the Brighton Line. This is why consultants were instructed to come up with solutions and a report – which itself has ironically been 'delayed' for whatever reasons.

Frustrations over poor performance and a lack of urgency in publishing the London & South Coast Study caused Brighton & Hove MPs Peter Kyle and Caroline Lucas to question the Rail Minister. Caroline Lucas asked Paul Maynard: – "*whether he plans to fund proposals for a Brighton Mainline 2 in order to remedy the significant capacity and performance constraints identified.*" A curt response that Government would release the report "*in due course*" was described as "*rubbish*" by Caroline Lucas, who has consistently supported the BML2 Project.

Peter Kyle vented his wrath in the press: "*We've had a new Chancellor, new Rail Minister and new Government since they first promised this report and still passengers suffer every day. As well as doing everything I can to get the current mess sorted out, I am pressing the Government to deal with the long-term capacity time bomb that will explode on to the next generation of passengers if we don't get this right. I'm calling for this report to be released before Christmas at the very latest.*"

CLOSURES RARE?

It's worth a reminder that in 2008 Network Rail dismissed a second main line to Brighton – as their report declared:

'Reopening of the route would enable the diversion of passengers for the south coast east of Brighton on to Uckfield Line services in the event of an emergency total closure of the Brighton line between Croydon and Wivelsfield. Such closures are thankfully rare, and Network Rail is working to further improve performance in order for such closures to be eliminated as far as is practicable.'

'At present when the Brighton Main Line is closed for engineering works anywhere between East Croydon and the coast trains have to be diverted away from their usual route. Such closures occur on up to 8 occasions per year, usually on winter Sundays when demand is lowest. Due to the nature of the track layout between Three Bridges and East Croydon, complete closures are required only rarely and generally are programmed for the Christmas holiday period.'

Alas, the reality of the situation proves otherwise

SUPPORT FOR BML2 MAIN LINE TO TUNBRIDGE WELLS



Cramped and difficult to operate, Tunbridge Wells station struggles on a daily basis to meet demand.

The Royal Borough of Tunbridge Wells remains a popular place to live, work and visit, but it is severely clogged with traffic and hampered by insufficient transport infrastructure. Whereas improvements to the A21 London–Hastings trunk road continue to happen, the situation on the western flank remains dire, as anyone who drives along the A26 from Crowborough to Tonbridge will know.

Just as bad, the Borough is also held back by the limitations imposed on its train services, caused by constraints on its rail infrastructure. Today, its central station is cramped and over-stretched and is really inadequate for the pressures placed upon it by the thousands who commute every day. Frustration at the delays, cancellations and unreliable services provoked a popular petition this year, amounting to around 17,000 signatures, calling for GoAhead's Southeastern franchise to be revoked. Whatever the faults of the operator, the underlying problem rests elsewhere because there has been a political resistance to invest in expanding the South East's railway.

We have never asked Government to commit billions of pounds into a brand new high-speed network, but revive useful and strategic sections of railway which should never have been closed in the first place.

For more than thirty years now the Wealden Line Campaign and other venerable individuals have attempted to stop any development occurring which could jeopardise reopening. Now that the South East's railways are bursting at the seams, and cannot cope with ever-rising demand, these routes are needed more than ever. The loss of Tunbridge Wells' other main line to London in the 1960s was a tragic political error, leaving only a local link to the Uckfield line at Eridge, which closed in 1985.

Now, in respect of the Tunbridge Wells to Eridge line, Tunbridge Wells Borough Council says in a new document:

'Although since the line's closure no commitment has been made to reopen it as a railway, it remains an aspiration of the Council to see it reinstated. In recent months the Council has been encouraged by the comments made by Central Government in this regard; the 2015 Summer Budget confirming that: *"The government will extend the scope of the Lewes–Uckfield study to look at improving rail links between London and the south coast, including upgrades to existing routes, consideration of the Brighton Main Line corridor, and re-examination of the DfT's feasibility study on BML2"*



Queueing to board crowded trains is a daily experience where standing all the way on journeys is now commonplace.

TWBC subsequently wrote to the Department for Transport – *'... requesting that the study is broadened to also consider the potential to reopen the previously closed section of the line from Tunbridge to Eridge. It is considered that such a study could provide further evidence and a business case for reopening the line.'*

TWBC believes this could provide additional support for safeguarding the route. The Council went on to state *'the reopening of the route to Eridge, combined with the Uckfield to Lewes link, could provide significant sub-regional connectivity to Sussex towns, including Crowborough, Brighton and Eastbourne as well as to East Croydon.'*

The council also noted the written commitments provided by Sainsbury's to remove structures blocking the route, as well as the safeguarding of the route connecting the former West and Central stations owned by a subsidiary of the DfT.

Consequently, we were told: *"The inspector's report into the TWBC Site Allocations plan accepted the case for retaining the alignment all the way from Grove Junction to Eridge"*.

We also heard that Tunbridge Wells West is likely to be a new 'Area of Change' under the new Local Plan. More specifically, the view is taken that it would be *"important to secure the rail investment as an integral part of this, or the site could merely be built on again in a denser way."*

Mention was also made of the importance of safeguarding the former double-track main line link between Groombridge and Ashurst which for well over a century provided fast direct services between the Borough and Victoria/London Bridge via Croydon. This derelict section falls within the boundary of Wealden District Council and is not currently under threat.

It is a tragedy that this route (South Croydon–Oxted–Groombridge–Tunbridge Wells West) was scheduled for early electrification (in 1963) along with the line down to Uckfield and Lewes. Ruefully, all was lost with the construction of Stage One of the Lewes Inner Relief Road which severed this main artery, leaving British Rail to subsequently propose closure of all railways between Tunbridge Wells West–Hurst Green Junction (Oxted) and Lewes.

RENEWED MAIN LINE

Comparable main line services between Tunbridge Wells and the capital via Croydon/Oxted is a key element of BML2 and has aroused significant interest among Borough leaders who say they'll jump at the chance of a renewed main line rail link to London. In an identical predicament to the Brighton Line, this is the only way to relieve the already over-stretched Tonbridge main line via Sevenoaks.

After decades of fighting for this great project, it seems we are finally on the cusp of making serious headway.

THERESA MAY'S NEW TRANSPORT SECRETARY IS 'BML2 AWARE'

On 21 July 2006 Chris Grayling, now Theresa May's Transport Secretary of State, wrote to the Wealden Line Campaign saying: *"I can understand your interest in the scheme and appreciate the potential benefits of opening up the line to the South Coast through Uckfield."*

He went on to publish a document, arguing that the Conservatives had a grip on the problem – *"There are towns and cities up and down the country where transport systems are bursting at the seams and it makes sense to protect old transport corridors from development. Too many developments are being planned without adequate provision for local infrastructure. In many cases, disused railway lines provide corridors into city and town centres. We want to make sure that there is adequate protection for potential public transport routes to help ensure that out towns and cities grow in sustainable ways."*

RELIEF LINE

Chris Grayling declared the Uckfield line: *"– could act as a valuable relief line for the [Brighton] main line to the south coast from London."*

It is also worthy of note that Ministers in Mrs May's Government and David Cameron's such as Justine Greening and Teresa Villiers have both confirmed the Sussex project as *"a viable proposition"* as well as *"an issue of high importance"*.

However, one of the most significant appointments to Government is Brighton Kemptown MP Simon Kirby, who received a call from Prime Minister Theresa May, offering him a Ministerial position as Economic Secretary to the Treasury in her new administration.

Simon has been a stalwart supporter of BML2 and in 2012 said: *"I was pleased to meet with representatives from the Brighton Main Line 2 campaign recently. As they know I am a supporter of their cause, and I was grateful to them for meeting with me to discuss this issue."* Simon has spoken publicly on many occasions to the media about introducing a second main line directly into Brighton as part of BML2.

CRYING OUT

City leaders have also spoken out over the summer as the capacity crisis and reliability issues affecting Southern has become ever more apparent. Speaking up for everyone in Brighton and Hove, Conservative Group Leader Cllr Geoffrey Theobald told the media: *"As the city grows in importance and population, the current rail service cannot cope, even if the trains are running perfectly, let alone for the future. To me these are some of the many reasons why we are crying out for an additional Brighton to London mainline – BML2."*

With admirable perception of the problem he added:

"Fundamentally it's about providing far more capacity into the network so that more trains can operate and hardworking people can rely on getting to work on time, comfortably and without delays. They may even get a seat!"

GLOBAL INTEREST IN BML2

During the summer we were also encouraged to hear from other key figures in the private sector. Recently we were contacted by Australia's largest end-to-end rail transport solutions provider – one of the world's largest engineering construction companies. They told us: *"The BML2 project has been identified by our international business team as one of interest and we would like to understand more about the status and key drivers for its development."*

RIGHT PROJECT

Back in the UK, the Government has been keen to shore up the case for its multi-billion High Speed 2 project which will require huge amounts of taxpayers' money.

Whatever the merits of HS2 – and we do not want to be embroiled in any argument over its value, or otherwise – we can't help but notice that it appears to be falling out of favour. Certainly among business commentators and serious investors it is remarkable that the private sector seems unconvinced by its case. Only recently Nigel Wilson, chief executive of Legal & General, one of Britain's largest insurance companies which is very eager to fund major infrastructure projects, urged Theresa May to walk away from HS2. He told the press: *"You can have big projects, but they have got to be the right big projects."*

It's becoming increasingly evident to more and more people that BML2 can solve a host of problems, whilst boost London's economy at the same time. As Brighton MP Caroline Lucas once tweeted – *"Bring it on!"*

DISMAY OVER NEW TRAINS



"The new train feels quite odd because it's one long tube-type carriage," one commuter told *The Guardian* newspaper recently. *"If I do get a seat, the lack of tables makes trying to get any work done on your laptop really awkward and difficult. And if I don't get a seat and I'm forced to stand, it's not any more comfortable than standing on the old train – you're still left jiggling around the doorway for an hour and 20 minutes."*

Unfortunately this is the DfT's solution for the Brighton Line which is perhaps acceptable for around inner London, but not good when you're faced with a long commute every day.

As transport commentator Simon Smiler told the reporter, Govia's brand new Thameslink metro-style trains *"– aren't really suitable for long journeys. People still like a seat and somewhere to put their coffee. So you can understand the frustration if people are forced onto a mobile sardine tin for over an hour to get to work on time."*

Woefully, 'fewer seats but more standing space and wider aisles' is now the DfT's way forward, rather than building new links or reopening closed lines in order to run more trains. In some places where routes have been irrevocably lost that might be the unfortunate case – but not in this region!

A daily Brighton to London commuter told the paper he would settle for standing for 30 minutes. *"Half an hour seems like it would be okay. But on a bad day, with delays, I can be standing for more than 90 minutes. You can joke about it being a first world problem, but it does become quite punishing."*

WEALDEN LINE CAMPAIGN ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

FINAL NOTICE - the 2016 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING will be held this year on **SATURDAY 19th NOVEMBER** Commences at 2pm (doors open 1.30pm) at Uckfield Civic Centre (main Weald Hall). We look forward to seeing you all.

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