

WINDSOR LINK GAINS MOMENTUM

Editor **JAMES ABBOTT** joins Windsor Link promoter **GEORGE BATHURST** for a walk round the royal borough

Joining Windsor & Eton Central to Windsor & Eton Riverside station with a cross-town tunnel and a new sub-surface station? The Windsor Link Railway (WLR) sounded like a completely bonkers idea when I first heard of it a couple of years back. Why would you want to spend millions linking two lines of marginal importance? Completely batty.

Although, when you look a little closer, not so much. You get the real estate gains from freeing up the existing stations, yes, that's a no-brainer. But the new line under Windsor would also give a potential western approach to Heathrow Airport – that excites curiosity. And you'd be joining lots of places in the Thames Valley regional powerhouse that are poorly-connected by public transport at present and where road congestion is appalling. Even more interesting – and before you know it, this at-first-sight ridiculous idea is starting to stack up.

It's all the brainchild of former Windsor councillor and submarine scientist George Bathurst, who is now devoting himself full-time to realising his dream of creating a new regional rail network in the Thames Valley, with a minimum of new build. And he is starting to convince some big name

backers of the sense of this project. Meridiam SAS, one of the largest infrastructure funds in Europe, has recently come out in favour of it, while construction firm Skanska has come on board too.

The partners are responding to Secretary of State Chris Grayling's request for market-led proposals for rail, alongside Network Rail's Hansford Review of private sector funding. As Mr Grayling put it, 'The public sector does not have a monopoly on good ideas. We want to provide a sustainable future for the rail sector and open up the development and delivery of rail infrastructure to take full advantage of new and innovative solutions and relieve the burden on taxpayers and farepayers.'

Parallel government initiatives are seeking to secure a Public Private Partnership to help deliver a western access route into Heathrow that is being promoted by Network Rail (p90, August issue), while market-led proposals have been requested for construction of a southern link to Heathrow. Windsor Link has relevance to both of these.

So just what is this project that is now starting to make some very serious people sit up and think?

CROSS-WINDSOR TUNNEL

WLR Phase 1 comprises a new rail tunnel in Windsor to deliver a through-running railway connecting the South Western with the Great Western lines. The tunnel would be about 300 metres long, with a sub-surface station replacing both the current stations. Mr Bathurst is in favour of a single-track tunnel, with cut-and-cover construction, to minimise cost – he says you could get 12 trains an hour through such a tunnel. He puts a price tag of £100 million on this tunnel under Thames Avenue (Datchet Road) in Windsor – about half what a bored tunnel would cost, albeit with the problem of dealing with the utilities under the road surface.

The trainshed at Windsor & Eton Central was converted to retail use some time ago and it is now a mall with a platform attached, so there is not much real estate gain here. But Windsor & Eton Riverside is a different kettle of fish. As Gordon Biddle relates in *Britain's Historic Railway Buildings*, 'From the outset, the London & South Western Railway wanted a special station, and they employed a noted architect, Sir William Tite, to design it... the result outclassed Brunel's wooden shed (at Windsor & Eton Central) in every possible way. This magnificent building would be freed up by the WLR plans, with Mr Bathurst

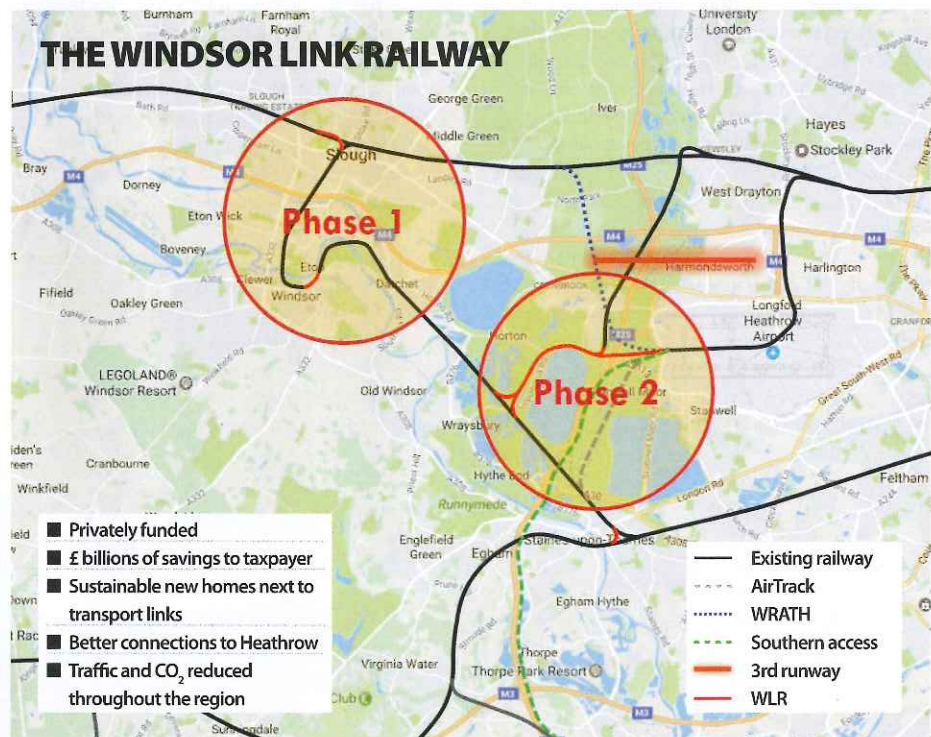
Site of the new sub-surface station: the WLR proposal would put the new station on the left hand side of this picture. At right is Central station, with the area occupied by this end of the GW branch freed up for other uses. Philip Sherratt





Windsor & Eton Central: unit No 165121 on arrival with a service from Slough on 2 August 2018. Philip Sherratt

gesting redevelopment as a boutique hotel –
ini St Pancras Chambers by the Thames.
s for work on the existing railway, the viaduct
ging in the line from the Great Western main
at Slough was built for double track and
er the WLR proposals a long passing loop
ld be installed on the viaduct. This line was
duled for 25kV electrification under the
nal Great Western modernisation proposals
could be overhead electrified to link up with
hird-rail electrified line south of Riverside,
dual-voltage units plying the route.



The Royal Curve at Slough, so-called because royal trains were the main users of this chord to Windsor from the west, would be restored under the WLR plans; the line was closed in 1964 and is now a car park.

The surface works needed to complement the new tunnel would take the cost of WLR Phase 1 up to £370 million. Mr Bathurst envisages financing this at no cost to the taxpayer. His idea would be to take over the entire route between the junctions from Slough and Staines for a peppercorn, as he would be relieving Network Rail of substantial expense in maintaining the structures.

He doesn't envisage running the trains, which would be operated by franchisees. WLR Phase 1 envisages a 4tph Slough-Staines-Waterloo shuttle. This is not that radical: it's a step up from the current two trains per hour (2tph) frequency

at Riverside, but South Western Railway was already planning a doubling of services to Riverside station for the December 2018 timetable, making four an hour, before that was quashed by the timetable change partial moratorium. The Great Western 20-minute service (some with poor connections) would also increase in frequency under the WLR plans.

This would make rail a more attractive option for visiting Windsor from the capital. At present, the town is in danger of being strangled by the traffic problems presented by the seven million visitors that come each year to see the castle and other attractions. Tourist coaches, in particular, are a nuisance: they line up in serried ranks in a coach park alongside the Great Western viaduct. On my visit, on one of the hottest days of the year, air quality and noise were appalling, as most of the drivers left their



Future hotel public space? The trainshed of the Tite station built for the South Western, with a Class 458 on a Waterloo service. Philip Sherratt

engines running to keep the air conditioning on while their charges were off visiting the castle.

It is at this point on my tour of the town that my guide, George Bathurst, gets really fired up. As a lifelong Windsor resident, he is passionate about what the Link could do for civic space in the town. First, many of the coaches would be eliminated as rail travel from central London would be so much better and this would tempt international travellers to the castle to use electric trains rather than coach tours, which would enhance air quality. A spending boost could be expected: tourists on day excursions by train that they organise by themselves would be likely to splash out more cash in the town than do coach tourists on two-hour 'tick off the sights' stops.

Thus there would be a much-reduced requirement for coach parking under the WLR plans. Remaining parking would be put underground, beneath the local park (Alexandra

Gardens) – freeing up existing surface car parks for redevelopment. Meanwhile, to the east, putting the South Western line in tunnel on the approach to Windsor would open up Home Park to the river, with a big amenity gain.

The southernmost end of the Great Western viaduct would be demolished where the new line went into tunnel. This area and a nearby industrial estate would be zoned for residential under Mr Bathurst's plan, helping to take pressure off the Thames Valley's overheated housing market.

Altogether, the urban reshaping he proposes would free up some 21 acres for residential use – generating between £500 million and £1 billion, more than sufficient to finance the railway scheme. On top of that, central Windsor would become a much more attractive place to live and visit, with the oppressive coach park removed and riverside vistas opened up.

In transport terms, Phase 1 would join the economically important M3 and M4 corridors, creating new rail journey opportunities for millions of people in these economically vital areas of the UK. A park and ride station is planned on the route just north of the M4 at the current tip site at Chalvey.

SERVING HEATHROW

While the Slough – Waterloo service has merit in regional transport terms, a real bonus would come if WLR were to serve Heathrow. Mr Bathurst argues that, with a link off the South Western line near Datchet to Terminal 5, the WLR could play the role of both the proposed western and southern links to Heathrow.

To capture the western traffic via Windsor, he proposes a new station on the main line west of Slough at Slough trading estate, plus north – south platforms on the Windsor line adjacent to Slough station. He would also have a flyover at Slough to allow access to the Windsor / Heathrow line from both the Great Western main and the relief lines (by comparison, the current proposals for a western rail link from Langley to Heathrow, outlined on p91 of the August issue, only have connections off the reliefs).

From the south, services could come in on the WLR's new branch to Heathrow from Woking and other places on the South Western. The WLR connection could also be used (with dual-voltage stock) for extending the Elizabeth Line westwards, to Ascot for example.

As with other proposals for new links to Heathrow, WLR would serve new platforms at T5 built in space safeguarded when the current T5 station was constructed. But in addition Mr Bathurst would make his link suitable for freight, by connecting it into the Colnbrook freight branch (current proposals for a third runway at Heathrow show the freight branch being shortened and terminated north of the new runway, so the WLR freight proposal would



need the freight branch to be protected and placed in tunnel under the new runway).

George Bathurst maintains that his proposals to reach Heathrow would cost about a third of the £3 billion-odd required for separate western and southern access routes. Furthermore, he adds there would be no need for taxpayer subsidy for the WLR construction.

There is a respectable history of railway projects, from Chiltern's Evergreen upgrades to the Docklands Light Railway initial system, of starting small and affordable and building from there; all-singing all-dancing schemes often fail to make it off the drawing board. WLR would seem to fit in the former category. However, if western access to Heathrow really were to be routed via Windsor, it would probably be wise to make at least passive provision for double track on the cross-Windsor link – single track here would represent a potential bottleneck.

PHASE 3

The final phase of WLR would see the new line through Windsor becoming the keystone of a regional network, with Mr Bathurst envisaging services over it to the M3 corridor and Gatwick. The university cities of Oxford and (via East West Rail) Cambridge are also in his sights.

High Wycombe and the Chiltern route northwards are also possible targets. This would be reached via the Bourne End branch and by rebuilding the closed route north of there. This has been proposed by others but is problematic as parts of the old trackbed have been turned into a nature trail and other parts built over or destroyed. However, the old Wycombe Railway route followed a meandering alignment along the Wye valley and a new-build alignment might have the advantage of being more direct.

All this, though, is some way in the future and the first job for George Bathurst is to convince the Department for Transport of the advantages of his core proposition,

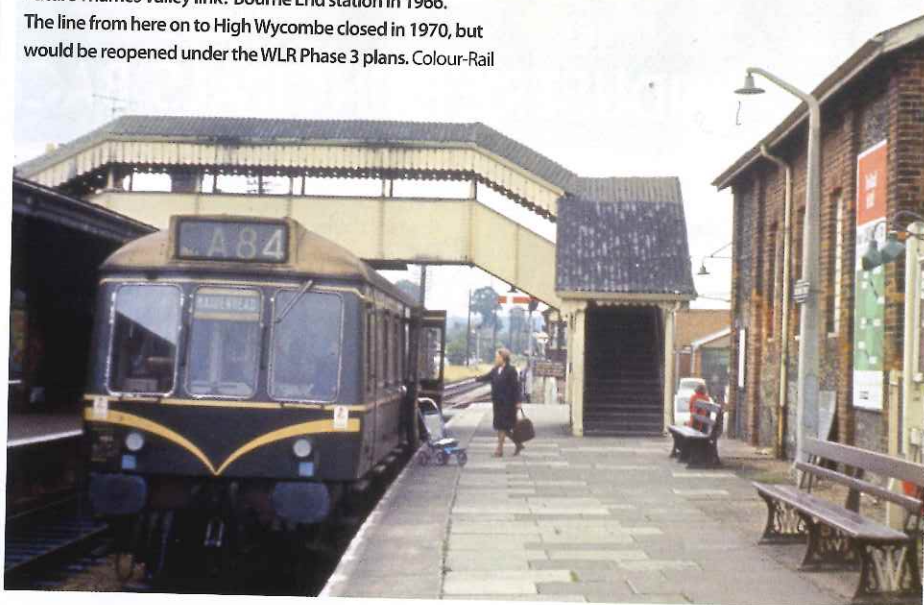
The Brunel viaduct: the area of car parking shown here would be sited under a nearby park in the WLR plan. Philip Sherratt



Tranquil canal side walk: this area would become part of a large public space with Home Park if the intervening Riverside railway line were to be put underground. Philip Sherratt

Future Thames Valley link? Bourne End station in 1966.


The line from here on to High Wycombe closed in 1970, but would be reopened under the WLR Phase 3 plans. Colour-Rail



linking the two Windsor stations with an underground link, as the key to all the benefits outlined in this article. It's a grand vision, providing many transport benefits as well as a radically greener and better-functioning town centre for Windsor.

George Bathurst brings to mind that great Victorian railway entrepreneur, Sir Edward Watkin. With his interlinking directorships of the Great Central, Metropolitan, South Eastern

and Chemin de Fer du Nord, Watkin's vision was of direct trains from Manchester to Paris via his companies and a Channel Tunnel, which he also championed. The vision was just about realised over a century after his death: with a short walk down the Euston Road from Euston to St Pancras International, you can now travel almost direct by rail from Manchester to Paris.

Let's hope it doesn't take that long to realise the vision of the Windsor Link Railway. 

HEATHROW SOUTHERN BIDS

It is understood that, in addition to the Windsor Link Railway, there have been four other responses to the DfT's request for market-led proposals for southern rail access to Heathrow:

- Heathrow Southern Railway – a link to T5 from Chertsey on the Addlestone loop described in a feature in the December 2016 issue (p70). Widely believed to be the frontrunner.
- MTR is understood to have put forward a proposal; the company did not respond to a request for comment. One source described the proposal as being close to 'Airtrack Lite', Wandsworth Council's 2011 idea for using existing Feltham services on a new branch to the airport from Staines.
- A light rail line from Heathrow to Staines backed by Spelthorne Borough Council. This could be the first stage of the London Air Rail Rapid Transit System (LARTS), a circular light rail line running parallel to the M25, proposed by Interlinking Transport Solutions.
- Uncertainty surrounds the fifth proposal, which is thought to be either a second light rail proposal or a maglev proposal.

