

BRAVE NEW UNDERWORLD

by Julian Glover – of the Evening Standard

A few years ago, Prince Philip visited workers digging tunnels at one of the deep Crossrail stations. He spurned the safety gear officials tried to get him to wear and marched down the steep stairs unassisted – telling his hosts bluntly that he didn't expect to live long enough to travel on the first train. But afterwards, impressed with what he'd seen, he added that he just might be.

When will that train run? Right now, builders are racing 24 hours a day to hammer the last parts into place. Crossrail – soon to start running as the Elizabeth Line – is set to change London forever, sending new air-conditioned trains racing under the city through beautiful stations of a kind that will astonish passengers used to the cramped Underground.

It's a dream of a project for any world city and it's nearly there, with the first passenger trains long planned to run through the main section from Abbey Wood to Paddington in December. The exact date has not been confirmed officially but it was expected until recently to be 9 December.

It has cost £15B and will increase London's rail capacity by 10%, with platforms twice the length of an Underground train, dozens of new escalators, specially commissioned art installations (of variable quality, I'd say). When it's in place you'll be able to get from Whitechapel to Bond Street in ten minutes and from Farringdon to Paddington in just eight minutes. Taking pressure off existing routes, it should even make travel on the parallel summer steam oven which call itself the Central Line something like a civilised experience.

I've been following the project from the start. I've crawled into a cab of a vast tunnel boring machine at Abbey Wood, in the east, as it inched towards the Thames in 2012. I've watched chunks of clay fall from the walls at Whitechapel as two new sections joined up a few years later. I've dressed in hi-vis orange safety gear and met the enthusiastic apprentices who helped get it built and who have forged careers of their own as tunnelling experts.

This year I walked along the platforms at Farringdon station as the first purple platform signs went up, soon to be a familiar sight to millions of travellers.

While other countries have seen big new infrastructure projects delayed – Berlin's new airport is almost seven years late and may never be finished – Britain has got on and built Crossrail in less than a decade. That's not to say everything is perfect in London's new underground world. The official line remains that the central section will be up and running "on schedule" as planned before the end of the year. And 94% of the work is done. What's left is the tricky bit of turning huge empty stations and tunnels into the living, working transport machine – training platform staff, testing escalators and ticket barriers, making sure passengers don't get lost. Is there time to get that finished, too? After all, it was a lack of testing which turned the opening of Heathrow's Terminal 5 into a PR disaster, and which caused chaos in Thameslink trains this summer.

Deep under London, in the cool and away from the sun, people are "beavering away", says TfL, to get the line open before Christmas. But you don't have to go far in the rail industry to find senior figures – including at the top of the project – who fear that deadline will be missed. That would be embarrassing for a project which has been rightly seen as an example of British engineering success – and which until now has been on time and within its funding limit.

It's not on budget anymore, though – last month the Government had to hand over an extra £600M to the two organisations building the project, Crossrail and Network Rail – and got cash-strapped TfL to include £150M of its own. That cash will go towards finishing systems in the central tunnels and getting the signals to connect properly with the trains.

The British-built carriages use the latest technology but getting it to run reliably is hard – which is why, for the moment, they are not being used to serve Heathrow as a trial before the full opening of the line as planned. That may be a sign of more trouble to come.

The public document submitted to TfL's board on 25 July admits that "a significant cost and schedule pressures remain across the project". It adds, "a significant amount of testing remains to be done." Maybe that's why the route still isn't marked on Tube Maps as being "under construction", as happened when the Jubilee Line was built. TfL wants to manage expectations (its excuse is that summer tourists would be confused).

The document confirms that the route was meant to be running in December – but then it points to a second conditional briefing, to be discussed later in a session not open to the public, offering “further details” of the challenges still ahead.

Do such last-minute wobbles matter? After all, a few months’ delay may not count for much, given that the line has been decades in the planning. The scheme was first authorised when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister (I was once told by a witness that she picked it over the route of what is now planned as Crossrail 2, from Hackney to Chelsea because, in her words no one she knew wanted to go from Chelsea to Hackney “so we’d better have the other one”). After several false starts building finally got underway in 2009, with full funding put in place a year later.

So perhaps it is unfair to focus on a potential short hold-up when the bigger picture is the near completion of a much longed-for project. And watchers say TfL is so determined to get the line open in some form this year that it will hitch up dray horses to pull the first train through if it has to.

This summer the power has been switched on throughout the line (after a dramatic first attempt to power up a section, when a wrongly wired transformer blew up). On 11 June the first of the new trains ran from Pudding Mill Lane in the east to Westbourne Park in the west. That was at slow speeds but soon TfL will begin a more normal test service, without passengers.

And at least some stations are nearly complete. Tottenham Court Road is a showpiece. So is Canary Wharf. Important interchanges at Whitechapel and Bond Street are among those said to be less advanced. It’s possible that the line will have to miss out some of those stops in the early days, or close at weekends to allow further work to complete things. Annoying, then. But at least it will be open.

And to be fair, planners have always promised to run things in stages. The first trains in the tunnels won’t go further west than Paddington. In March 2019 the branch east from Liverpool Street to Shenfield is due to be added. In December 2019 the full service out to Heathrow and Reading in the west, is meant to be running.

For a capital which needs to impress the world with confidence in its future, Crossrail is vital. There are two big deadlines ahead for London in the next year. One is the opening of the Elizabeth Line. The other is Brexit. You don’t need to be a Londoner to know which one businesses and residents would rather see run late.