

REPORTS OF SOCIETY MEETINGS

THE CROXLEY RAIL LINK

by David Leboff of London Underground

A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House on Tuesday 8 May 2012

The presentation started with an explanation that the current Watford station on the Metropolitan Line was remote from the town centre and main shopping areas. When the line was constructed there was the intention to extend to the High Street but this was never constructed, in part due to local opposition. For many years there has been an aspiration¹ to link the Metropolitan Line to an adjacent disused national rail branch line, which ran passenger and freight services from Watford Junction to Croxley Green. Services stopped on this branch line in 1996, which was formally closed in 2002, as it was uneconomical to continue to run, mainly due to a lack of direct services to London combined with an economic downturn that severely affected jobs and industry in the West Watford area during the mid-1980s and 1990s.

The disused branch line comes very close to the Metropolitan Line just south of Watford and it has been suggested many times that there should be a short link between them to create a through route from the Metropolitan Line to Watford Junction station. This scheme is now a serious proposal and is being promoted by Hertfordshire County Council in partnership with London Underground and Network Rail. The proposals are currently in the design phase and are being developed with the aim of having trains running along the new track by 2015/2016. As part of the scheme it is proposed that Watford (Metropolitan) station be closed for passenger services, although the track infrastructure would remain in place to facilitate the continuing stabling of trains.

The original stations on the national rail branch line were Croxley Green (not to be confused with the Croxley Green station opened on the Metropolitan Line in 1925 and later renamed to Croxley in 1949), Watford West, Watford Stadium², Watford High Street and Watford Junction.

A number of historical photographs were shown including the station building of Croxley Green Station in the 1920s and the single platform – although the branch line was single track it was constructed to accommodate twin tracks. After road layout changes in the 1960s the station was relocated and a photograph showed the new covered staircase entrance up to the platform, with British Rail Croxley Green written on the canopy. Photographs of Watford West station on Tolpits Lane showed the station building, which is contemporaneous of Hounslow Central station and of similar size and scale, and the platform, including the standard canopy of single car length. The station building survived until recently, but has now been demolished.

Recent photographs showed the totems still remaining outside Croxley Green station, in network South East livery, and the remains of the platform, showing that the track is still present and visible through the vegetation overgrowth. At the location of Watford West station, the recent photos showed there was still a totem and signage present (at least before the station building was demolished) and the platforms were again heavily overgrown, demonstrating how quickly vegetation can take over if it is not managed.

The platforms at the Watford Stadium halt station were shown, but this time the vegetation had been cut back. The station served Vicarage Road stadium, home of Watford Football Club, and was open only on match days. Although the route is closed, the infrastructure, including the lattice bridge over the Grand Union Canal, is still owned by Network Rail who are responsible for managing it in a safe condition.

It was explained that the objectives of the current project are to enhance transport links between residents and employment, business, education, health and leisure opportunities within Watford and across Hertfordshire as well as to London and the national rail network. In addition to promote economic growth and housing development by improving public transport linkages and to provide a credible alternative to car travel.

¹ It was an aspiration from many decades before the Croxley Green branch was finally closed.

² This wasn't on the original line, only opening in 1982.

Scheme plans show how the link is proposed from the Metropolitan Line north of Croxley station, via a new viaduct (the existing lattice bridge is not in a suitable condition to be reused), to the branch line. As part of this Watford (Metropolitan) station and the train service from Croxley would be closed. The proposed route will link business parks, Watford Hospital and Watford Football club, the town centre and Watford Junction Station. Croxley Green and Watford West stations would not be re-instated, but new stations provided at Ascot Road and Watford Hospital, before the junction with the London Overground DC lines to Watford High Street and Watford Junction stations. There are proposed redevelopment areas around Watford Junction and Charter Place, in the main shopping area, and a major redevelopment area around the Hospital and Bushey station on the main line and it is hoped that the proposed new link would help in the regeneration of these areas.

Key elements of the scope of the project are the new viaduct and embankment linking the Metropolitan Line to the Croxley Green branch, reinstatement of double track along the disused alignment, a new junction with the London Overground DC lines, works to bring the bridges, cuttings and embankments up to the required standard, new stations at Ascot Road and Watford Hospital, closure of Watford (Metropolitan) station and minor works at Watford High Street and Watford Junction stations. The value of the project is some £116.8m, split between the DfT (£76.2m), Local Authorities (£33.7m) and third parties (£6.9m).

A fascinating computer generated flythrough along the proposed route from just before Croxley Station to Watford Junction was shown, along with the proposed new Ascot Road and Watford Hospital stations. The stations are designed to operate with minimum staffing levels, with ticket machines only and no staffed ticket offices. The existing Watford Junction and Watford High Street stations will remain with their existing operators, London Midland and LOROL respectively. The proposed train service is 6 tph at peak and 4 tph off peak, but the infrastructure will be designed for a capability of 10 tph. London Overground currently run 3 tph over their DC section, which has been safeguarded for 4 tph, so in theory the shared section of line could support 14 tph.

The powers to construct, operate and maintain the railway are granted through the Transport and Works Act (TWA). The public consultation process was completed in summer 2011 and the TWA Order application was made at the start of this year, following announcement of confirmation of funding from the DfT. A public enquiry will be held, expected in autumn³ 2012, and if the application is successful powers should be granted by summer 2013. It is anticipated that that work on site will commence in summer 2014 and that the scheme will take approximately two years to become operational from the start of construction, including testing and commissioning.

Some 55 objections were received following the extensive public consultation. Whilst the scheme was generally positively received, most objections were due to the closure of Watford (Metropolitan) station. The primary concerns related to people having a greater distance to their nearest station, the effects of the scheme on road traffic and parking and the impact on access to the local Grammar School.

A number of suggestions for alternative schemes were made during the consultation exercise including keeping Watford (Metropolitan) station open and providing a peak time service only, providing a Watford – Croxley shuttle service or forming another branch from the Metropolitan Line north of Moor Park and connecting into a more southerly route along the former Watford – Rickmansworth alignment to link Watford Junction and Watford High Street stations to the Metropolitan Line. However the DfT have already instructed London Underground to commence the application for powers to close Watford (Metropolitan) station and passenger service from Croxley. If the closure of the station is not granted then the cost/benefit ratio of the overall scheme would be less advantageous, the business case will have to be re-evaluated and it was speculated that the DfT may withdraw their funding.

It was highlighted that there is still a lot of process and design work to complete before works can commence, as well as a number of technical integration matters to work out. Some of these include how to extend the proposed new London Underground ATC signalling system over the link, resolving interoperability issues on the existing London Overground DC lines, obtaining additional LUL S8 rolling stock without adversely affecting other delivery programmes, finalising the arrangements for stabling of the trains (the scheme assumes these remain at Watford station sidings) and increasing

³ Now confirmed to be October 2012.

the scope of the current London Underground Power, Prestige (Ticketing) and Connect (Communication) PFI contracts to cover the link.

The next major stages of the project are to prepare for the TWA public inquiry and the Watford (Metropolitan) station closure hearing. If all is successful then the scheme will deliver benefits for Watford through improved transport links to town centre and regeneration sites. After the fascinating presentation an interesting Q&A session took place with the presenter being thanked afterwards in the usual manner.

Further information can be seen on the official project website at <http://www.croxleyraillink.com/>

Tim Lewis