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**STRATFORD TO NORTH WOOLWICH
ABANDONMENT
SOME FURTHER THOUGHTS**

by G.D. Towner

In *Underground News* No.545, John Gillham highlighted the inconvenience caused by the closure of the Stratford to North Woolwich Silverlink Metro services, and its replacement by the Docklands Light Railway. It seems to me to be a backward move to convert an operating heavy rail service into a light railway.

Light railways can take various forms, but common to all is the user of short, light, vehicles that can negotiate sharp curves, climb steep slopes and accelerate rapidly. The use of light vehicles means that viaducts, bridges and flyovers can be constructed quite cheaply, and hopefully pleasing to the eye.

Such technology was clearly appropriate in the redevelopment of the London Docklands. It was fully exploited in the construction of THE INITIAL RAILWAY, as witnessed today by the sharp curves and steeply graded flyovers. Geometric constraints and limited funding made an alternative heavy rail solution impossible. The large scale development now apparent was not envisaged originally so that the low capacity vehicles were adequate.

In contrast, the North London (NL) branch to North Woolwich already existed as a heavy rail line, which had been electrified and generally upgraded during the 1980s. In 1993 the LONDON DOCKLANDS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION (LDDC) had proposed a rail link between Silvertown and Woolwich Arsenal, via a tunnel under the Thames – THE WOOLWICH METRO. Subsequently, a subway/travolator between Silvertown and the Airport was also proposed. In their closing report (1998) the LDDC included a recommendation that the “Government for London” should consider their plans for The Woolwich Metro. There was no mention of a DLR extension! But, earlier in 1996, the LONDON REGIONAL PASSENGER COMMITTEE had supported an extension of the DLR to the Airport – and the rest is history.

But why was it necessary for the DLR Airport Extension to make the Stratford – North Woolwich section of the NL redundant as a heavy rail link? The DLR extension under construction to Woolwich Arsenal has clearly killed off the Woolwich Metro project – and the part between the Airport and King George V stations duplicates more or less the Silvertown – North Woolwich section of the NL. However, Custom House serves the ExCeL Exhibition Centre for which the DLR trains are frankly inadequate for the mass movement of crowds. Indeed, the last time I got caught up in such a seething mass on the DLR platform, I, slightly infirm, moved down to the NL platform and enjoyed a comfortable seated journey to Custom House!

It would therefore have seemed more logical to have retained the Silverlink Metro services between Stratford and Custom House where there are two platforms with double tracks between the stations, thus enabling the doubling up of services at

times of major public exhibitions. Little additional funding would have been required. The take-over by the DLR requires a new flyover.

As a general principle, it is surely a waste of resources to run light rail vehicles of limited passenger capacity over an existing system engineered for heavy rail trains capable of moving masses of people? Even short-sighted? The DLR started 20 years ago with single units, then double units requiring platforms to be lengthened and viaducts strengthened, and now three-car units are needed. As the Docklands developed, it became clear that heavier rail was required, so the Jubilee Line Extension was opened in 1999.

Perhaps if the LDDC had remained in office for a few more years, we would now be able to travel from, say, Richmond into Kent, without needing change trains several times!