

# **REPORTS OF SOCIETY MEETINGS**

## **A VERY POLITICAL RAILWAY: THE NORTH LONDON LINE 1945 – 2014**

**by Wayne Asher**

**A report of the LURS meeting at All Souls Club House  
on Tuesday 12 August 2014**

Wayne's book on the North London Line [NLL] is due for publication in October 2014. His talk was in three parts: what it was, what it is now, and its future.

In the early 1960s the NLL in essence ran from Richmond to Broad Street via Acton, Willesden, Hampstead, Islington and Dalston, both passenger and freight services. NLL had been electrified and operated on the DC system since about 1916. At the east end of the line, there were extensive freight lines serving Poplar Docks and Stratford – there had previously been passenger services to these destinations, but these services had ceased during the Second World War to free up timetable space for war traffic (especially in preparation for D Day).

In Wayne's opinion, the Beeching Report was basically a manifesto for disinvestment in public infrastructure. Although it did include some sensible recommendations for some lines, most of the data and formulas used in the analysis were incorrect and neglected to consider the effect of more effective management or running of lines.

The NLL was included in the Beeching report as it was claimed to lose £1.6 million in today's money. But BR was soon attracted by the idea of closing Broad Street Station sold for redevelopment at a price of, around, £35M (2014 equivalent value). However, in 1965 BR backed down from closing the NLL due to pressure from a very active and professional Action Group (which was chaired by a senior Civil Servant) who demonstrated how the NLL could improve by better publicity, better service timetable, integration of tickets with LU services, etc, etc.

In 1968 the Labour Government's Transport Act introduced grant aid for socially necessary lines and NLL and its neighbour, Watford – Euston DC line, got two of the initial grants. However, the Conservative Government win at the 1970 saw a threat to these grants and the future of the NLL became doubtful again.

A new North London Line Committee (which included Jonathan Roberts and Stephen Joseph) was formed to campaign against closure and promote that the NLL had a future. They did this by forming good working relationships with BR management and Government officers.

In 1975, BR was planning the full redevelopment of Liverpool Street Station and, in those cash-strapped times, the only sensible resolution was to close Broad Street Station, which was now far too large for the services operating in to it, and sell the site for redevelopment. To maintain the NLL route it was planned to adapt the Hackney Curve so that trains could use it to reach Liverpool Street Station. However, parts of BR management disagreed with this proposal and ordered that the NLL be terminated at one of Dalston or Highbury with passengers having to change to the Great Northern Electrics to reach the City. Senior civil servants told BR that this idea would not be acceptable because of the power of the intelligent and sophisticated campaigning of the North London Line Committee.

In 1994 the NLL started to be operated as a "shadow franchise" under the management of David Watters (a director of NSE) pending its sale to the private-sector. Three years later the NLL was bought by National Express and renamed Silverlink 1997 – 2006. This was somewhat of a low point in the history of the NLL with poor punctuality, poor reliability, old (20+ years 313 stock) and obsolete trains. Investment in the NLL became overshadowed by other priorities and responsibilities of Silverlink such as the AC Milton Keynes, Rugby and Northampton lines; Gospel Oak to Barking services; and DC lines to Watford – Euston. NLL Management found themselves hamstrung as they did not have the funds to invest to improve the poor services. The situation did not improve any in the early 1980s when, unexpectedly London's population began to grow, and people started to move in to the previously unfashionable areas of Camden, Islington and Hackney (which are all served by NLL) and gentrify the cheap properties there.

The 313 stock had only 2 sets of doors per carriage and seats were not longitudinal. As most journeys on the NLL were short (5 miles/2 minutes) people wouldn't move down the cars because they knew they would not be able to get off at their stops. This, therefore, increased overcrowding and made journeys very unpleasant.

By 2014 the NLL has been totally rebuilt, it has brand new stock with longitudinal seating design and plenty of standing room. Service frequency has increased from 3 trains per hour to between 6 and 8 – and this could be more frequent if it were not for the freight traffic which uses the same line. The NLL is fully linked to the East London Line and forms part of the Overground - Broad Street Station closed in 1986 but its viaduct has now been reused as part of the NLL – ELL Overground link. Passenger numbers for 2013 were 135m at 89% satisfaction. These passenger numbers have risen year on year and continue to rise (hence continuing investment in additional coaches).

So why is the NLL so good now? Over £600m has been invested but this turn-around was implemented by the actions of the campaign group who showed how the NLL could be profitable and what a little ambition could do to the line. However, it took a long time for this change to come about because BR did not believe there was any market for parts of the NLL and procrastinated for many years (lacking vision of what could be there; scarred of the effects of “stop-go” funding and concentrating instead upon outer-suburban services). The 2004 Future of Rail whitepaper set out a plan for co-ordinated fares and capital spend across London which was taken forward when the line was taken over by Transport for London in 2007 which set out clear financial settlements and the creation of the London Overground middle circle.

In conclusion, we have seen a serious public transport revolution in North London and now have an outstanding example of what can be done if campaigns make their case for serious investment in a consensus that public transport is the way forward and for the good of London.

The meeting thanked Wayne in the usual manner and then a number of questions were asked.

**Amanda Day**