

Uckfield - Lewes 2022 is reopening target

Roger Blake and Chris Page review where the reopening case now stands

February 2019 will mark the 50th anniversary of the most recent passenger trains to run between Uckfield and Lewes. It will also be the time when Network Rail's Delivery Plan for Control Period 6, 2019-24, will be published.

That date is Railfuture's target for the investment commitment required to establish the foundations for the resurrection of East Sussex's missing main line between its coastal communities, their inland siblings and London. Such a commitment would make a restoration of services feasible in December 2022.

For that bold ambition to be fulfilled the task for the intervening years, already well under way, is for that target to become jointly owned and driven by the broadest possible spread of stakeholders across agencies, sectors – and political parties.

The past five years have witnessed two local trends of particular relevance. One has been an all-too widespread and debilitating disbelief that it will ever be done, in the wake of the 2008 Network Rail reinstatement report. Because the scope of that study was too narrow it found no economic case for the scheme – which has had a dis-empowering effect, numbing the long-held

and widely-shared aspiration for the link to be reinstated.

In contrast, the other local trend, all the more energising for happening in the face of the dramatic economic downturn which was kicking-in around the time of that report, has been the nationally strong and sustained growth in the use of the county's railways in general and of the Wealden line in particular.

Over the past decade, which includes the replacement of the 'Thumpers' by modern Turbostars in late 2004, Wealden line patronage has multiplied 3.5 times, far out-stripping growth rates on other East Sussex lines. In an age of austerity, the attraction of cheaper season tickets and other fares may well have out-weighed the longer journey times bought. Little wonder that Network Rail is charged with delivering infrastructure in the forthcoming Control Period 5 to support a 25% morning peak capacity increase on key trains into London Bridge.

One of the challenges facing campaigning group Railfuture is how best to address those two and other trends, in the county-wide context of a hunger for infrastructure investment to drive economic

growth by improving communications, and in a rail industry context with new 'rules of engagement' embodied in the Long-Term Planning Process (LTPP) and reflected in the draft Passenger Market Study for London and the South East.

Inner relief road

The little acorn which marked the beginnings of Railfuture's current engagement with local and other stakeholders was the County Council's spring 2012 proposals for Uckfield town centre traffic improvements, one option being to sever the trackbed again, this time for an inner relief road. As a result of consultation feedback, a year later that option had been replaced – with the inner relief road deferred until a bridge carrying it over the railway becomes possible.

Meanwhile another element of the town centre package is moving ahead, with the transfer of ownership of the old station site from the now-defunct BRB Residuary Ltd to Network Rail for that company to construct on it, beside and protecting the rail route, a sorely-needed 130-plus spaces commuter car park by next spring. Railfuture has been at the table as a partner in the process helping

Wealden scene: the 15.05 London Bridge –
Uckfield service passes Forge Farm, north of
Eridge on 23 April 2011. David Staines





Future main line? Unit No 171804 departs Ashurst station for Uckfield on 2 February 2008. David Staines



Extract from OPC's Rail Atlas - Great Britain & Ireland, showing the missing link between Uckfield and Lewes.



High Rocks: the Spa Valley Railway's No 1317 forms the 17.50 service from Tunbridge Wells West to Eridge on 6 July 2013. David Staines

drive forward the delivery of that particular local aspiration, which consolidates the concept that rail-heading is a legitimate contributor to mode-shift. It also gives access to the rail network across stations' wider catchment areas as well as within their own local communities.

JRC study

Another acorn was planted when in March 2013 Railfuture put its members' money where its mouth is and following competitive tender engaged independent adviser Jonathan Roberts Consulting (JRC) to establish an evidence-based context of economic and transport needs across East Sussex as a whole.

Mr Roberts' report 'Access and Connections: East Sussex - Opportunities to align railway investment to the economic growth requirements of East Sussex' (see www.railfuture.org.uk/uckfield+lewes) shows that the county and its neighbours' economic growth can be promoted by providing new journey opportunities between the Weald, the Sussex Coast and Brighton, by increasing capacity between the Sussex Coast and London, and by reducing travel times between towns along the coastal corridor between Brighton and Ashford.

Taking a more strategic view than Network Rail's 2008 study, Railfuture's approach combines the benefits for county and regional economic growth with increased network capacity and better journey times. Railfuture considers that a positive business case can now be created for an affordable initial Wealden line scheme which aligns with Network Rail's objectives, plans and time lines. Crucially, it can also energise the support of a broad alliance of stakeholders, and so can be opened in a realistically foreseeable and credibly achievable timescale.

These results were shared with East Sussex County Council's new Lead Member for Economy and his officers in July. Just before the May elections, it had been understood that the most likely

incoming administration would be looking for a county rail strategy and action plan to prioritise and promote the county's rail development ambitions, and align them with the county's growth needs.

Barely a week after those May elections Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin visited Lewes with local MP Norman Baker and set Network Rail the exam question: 'Can reopening Uckfield - Lewes add network capacity to meet the demand for the future growth in rail travel?' and in so doing, as Network Rail's director of network strategy and planning Richard Eccles echoed, 'ensure that the rail network can continue to support and drive economic growth in the region'

Framed by the strategic and 30-year context of the final Passenger Market Study for London and the South East, Network Rail's exam response is expected to sit alongside options for the Brighton main line in the imminent Sussex Route Study, the next step in the new LTPP, as the essential first building-block towards CP6 from 2019. It has therefore been timely that the new County Hall administration has briskly set about developing its rail strategy as a basis for influencing Network Rail and other rail industry partners, and for engaging a breadth of stakeholders to develop consensus about common economic and spatial objectives for rail improvements to support.

The East Sussex rail strategy 'Shaping rail in East Sussex' has been through public consultation and a stakeholder symposium and was expected to be formally adopted in mid-November, in time for the draft Sussex Route Study. As with other counties which have secured rail developments on the back of a credible rail strategy, this renewed commitment signals a gear-change from supporter to potential active promoter.

There are some reasons for optimism:

- We have a government whose departments demonstrate recognition of the umbilical link between capital investment in infrastructure and

improving economic performance; note that East Sussex's Gross Value Added is barely above two-thirds of the UK average.

- We have a Network Rail LTPP which through its Passenger Market Study for the region prioritises investment to secure wider economic and environmental as well as more conventional transport objectives.

- We have a new County Hall administration with three top priorities - jobs, jobs and more jobs.

- Now we have the Invitation to Tender for the new expanded Thameslink franchise which speaks of 'Vision and Opportunity' thus: 'As a key commuter network, it will play a key role in connecting people with jobs across south-east England.'

Better connectivity will mean individuals can access a wider range of employment opportunities, while employers can tap into a wider pool of labour which will, along with the major investment in Crossrail, support the growing London and wider south-east economy'

With that strategic policy context firmly in place, and the evidence-based analysis offered in the JRC report, Railfuture has set out a clear programme to see Wealden line services extended via Lewes to the Sussex coast, including Brighton as second-only to Milton Keynes as an employment centre in the wider South East outside Greater London. It is worth noting that the JRC study's primary focus was on the



Brighton: traffic objective from the Weald. The new-look Brighton station concourse after its improvements and official reopening on 11 October 2013, showing a Class 377/3 in Platform 4, Class 319/4s 319440 and 319427 in Platforms 5 and 6 and Class 171/2 No 171727 in Platform 7, heading respectively services to London Victoria, Bedford, Bedford and Ashford. Brian Morrison

Bridge to a brighter future? Old structure over the river Uck between Isfield and Uckfield, looking north, 7 July 2012. David Staines



Route blocked: but for how much longer? The former station at Barcombe Mills, between Uckfield and Lewes, looking south from the trackbed on 4 July 2008. David Staines



At the northern end of the Lavender Line a new platform was opened named Worth Halt after the adjacent long distance footpath on 7 July 2012. The first public service to use the platform departs, formed of the Lavender Line's hybrid '2H' with the motor coach of unit No 1133 leading. David Staines

medium-term needs of East Sussex and the Weald, with the question over whether the Wealden line could serve as a relief to the Brighton main line as a secondary issue.

The 10-year programme hoists the flag up the mast to provide the necessary focus around which to inspire, energise and mobilise a multi-agency, cross-sector, and all-party alliance of stakeholders great and small who share the vision and can unite around a consensus for its justification.

2022 target

Accepting as a starting point the timeline mapped in the 2008 report from Network Rail, Railfuture believes that progress through the GRIP investment programme stages can result in an opening with the December 2022 timetable change. Surrounding dependencies include implanting an initial scheme in the forthcoming Sussex Route Study, and seeing that reflected in the Initial Industry Plan for CP6 expected in autumn 2016, the Office for Rail Regulation having started its Periodic Review '18 that spring. The next vital step will be securing a place in the DfT's summer 2017 High Level Output Specification, followed by Network Rail's early-2018 Strategic Business Plan for 2019-24 and then early-2019 CP6 Delivery Plan.

Throughout those processes of project development there will be the political processes of stakeholder engagement with decision-makers. Outside the likes of King's Place and Kemble Street there are plentiful opportunities for influence, ignored at their peril by professionals, harnessed to the vision by those who own it. The JRC strap-line 'the politics of projects' comes into play, recognising the role of judicious timing of interventions around district, county and general elections, party conferences, and central government budget announcements, autumn statements and comprehensive spending reviews.

2019 is not only the first year of CP6. It is also the year when the imminent expanded Thameslink management contract comes round for review with renewal in, or up to two-year extension from, 2021 in prospect. That is yet another opportunity to align established rail industry processes with the related prospect of additional capacity through an additional coast-capital connection.

Route options

Route and service propositions are included in the JRC report's evidence-based assessment of the economic and transport needs to be met by an extended Wealden line.

Previous studies have presumed that the former railway trackbed from Uckfield to Lewes is largely intact and available for re-occupation. Railfuture and JRC believe that this remains the case.

It is recognised that the 1969-closure alignment is *not* available on the local approaches to Lewes station, where there has been extensive property development and road construction. However the original railway alignment via Hamsey is still available, or a new alignment close to that, which would join the Haywards Heath - Lewes line just north of a large bend in the river Ouse.

Options for the best mix of coastal destinations, which include significant higher/further education centres as well as employment markets, point to a route from Uckfield gaining the Haywards Heath - Lewes line south of Cooksbridge via the Hamsey area with a junction facing Newhaven and Eastbourne.

In 2008, Network Rail took the view that a proportion of bridges on the disused route would require replacement, but that otherwise the track bed appeared to be in good condition. Uckfield to Lewes could be covered in about 10 minutes. Inclusion of any local stations at Barcombe Mills and/or Isfield would add about two minutes per stop.

Brighton might best be reached with a new Lewes loop, leaving the county town eastwards in the Newhaven direction but soon turning south through a semi-circle into the corridor of 'the Cockshut' watercourse and A27 bypass to face west for Falmer and Brighton. South Downs National Park Authority officers have been introduced to this concept.

As well as those coastal connections, analysis also highlights Tunbridge Wells as a significant and worthwhile inland destination. Ah, but what of the incumbent Spa Valley Railway, and not overlooking either the Isfield-based Lavender Line south of Uckfield? Innovative models of mutually-supportive co-existence between classic and preserved railways are already developing elsewhere across the country and over the coming decade discussions which have already begun in broad outline have time to develop and mature.

As for the former route between Tunbridge Wells West and Tunbridge Wells Central, which has been partially built over, the JRC study envisages services from Brighton and Lewes terminating at Tunbridge



Old meets new on a summer's evening at Eridge. Unit No 1317 will work the Spa Valley Railway's 20.20 to Tunbridge Wells West, whilst at right Southern's No 171801 forms the 19.33 Uckfield - London Bridge service on 6 July 2012. David Staines

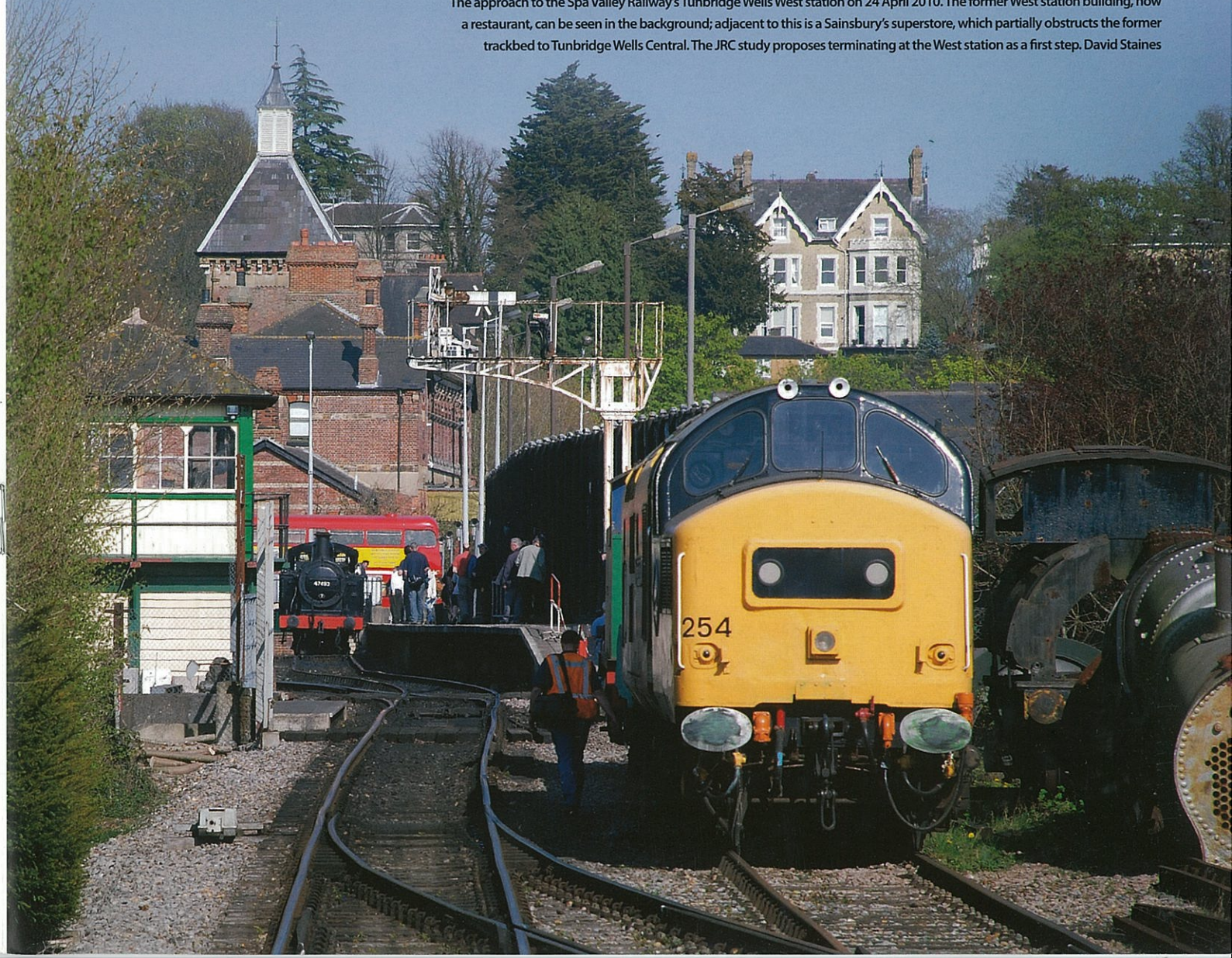
Wells West - with extension to Tunbridge Wells Central and Tonbridge something for consideration in the longer term.

Croydon

At the other, London, end there is the East Croydon question. Network Rail is increasingly

likely to include developments in CP6 to resolve the capacity constraints at East Croydon (Windmill Bridge Junction), and elsewhere on the Brighton main line such as at Keymer Junction south of Haywards Heath. With those delivered in the same time-frame as Uckfield - Lewes reinstatement, selectively re-doubling the Wealden line will then

The approach to the Spa Valley Railway's Tunbridge Wells West station on 24 April 2010. The former West station building, now a restaurant, can be seen in the background; adjacent to this is a Sainsbury's superstore, which partially obstructs the former trackbed to Tunbridge Wells Central. The JRC study proposes terminating at the West station as a first step. David Staines



become feasible and justified in order to provide more services, not just towards East Croydon but potentially Tunbridge Wells too.

Imminent improvements

For the imminent CP5, as noted earlier Network Rail has to increase Wealden line peak capacity into London Bridge. The plan at the moment is that longer trains will be accommodated by Network Rail lengthening Wealden line platforms. Rumours abound as to where the additional diesel trains required might be found.

Railfuture took note of the Chancellor's June Comprehensive Spending Review announcement of infill electrification of the Gospel Oak-Barking line, expected by 2017, and of the Transport Secretary's August press release pointing to electrification of the Windermere branch by 2016.

The campaign's response to the ORR's consultation on its Draft Determination for CP5 included the proposition that the alternative and higher-value infrastructure investment to deliver the same output would be electrification of Hurst Green-Uckfield. Electrification would allow the acceleration of Uckfield line services, which in the future would enable timings between Eastbourne or Seaford and London via a reopened Uckfield-Lewes line to match those via Haywards Heath.

Hard-pressed East Coastway/Marshlink services could benefit from an interim DMU cascade, pending Ashford-Ore electrification and the opportunity for a fast Javelin service to London from Hastings via HS1 in 75 minutes.

The case for Wealden line electrification was supported by a broad alliance of ten stakeholder organisations - all three county councils, two

district councils, district and regional partnerships, Sussex Community Rail Partnership, Passenger Focus, and the local parishes committee - plus the MPs for Wealden and Bexhill & Battle.

All five short-listed bidders for the next franchise have been lobbied. Whether or not the argument is won, and there is no doubting East Sussex County Council's resolute determination that it should be, Railfuture has shown its ability to assemble an alliance around a consensus, as it seeks to consolidate its position as an independent source of expert advice and as trusted broker between different viewpoints and audiences.

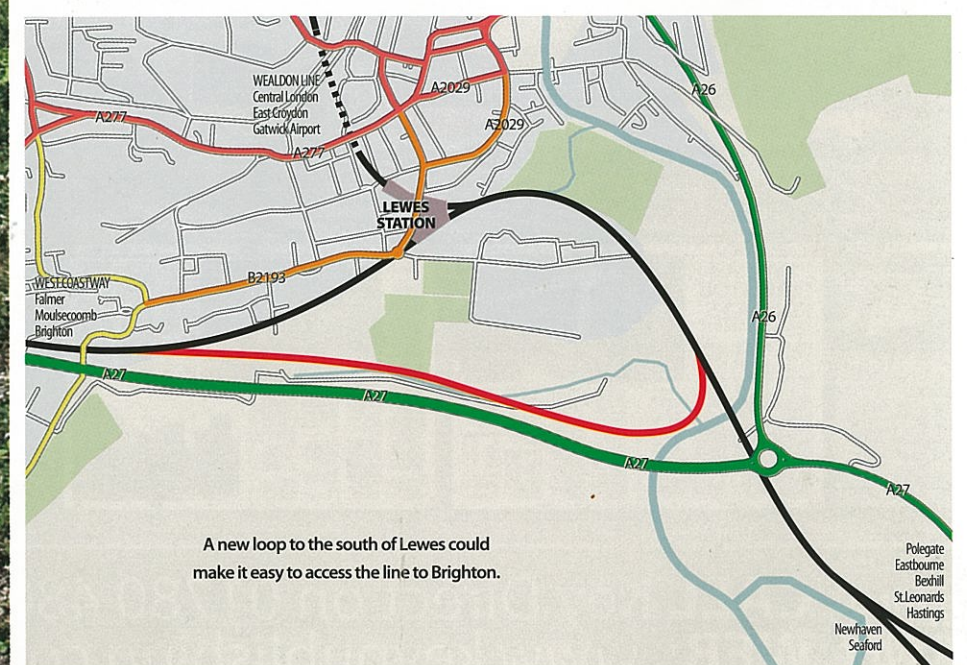
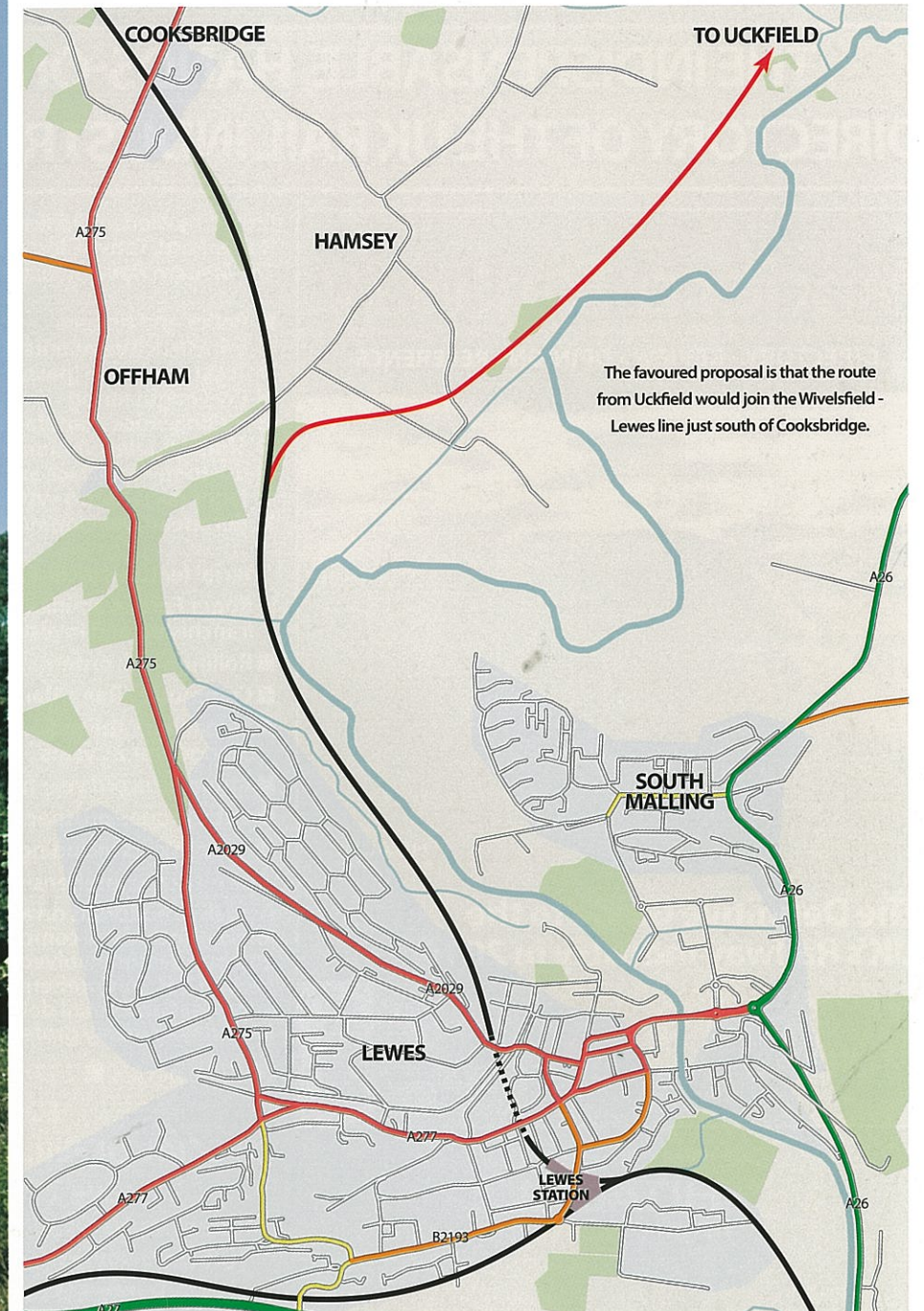
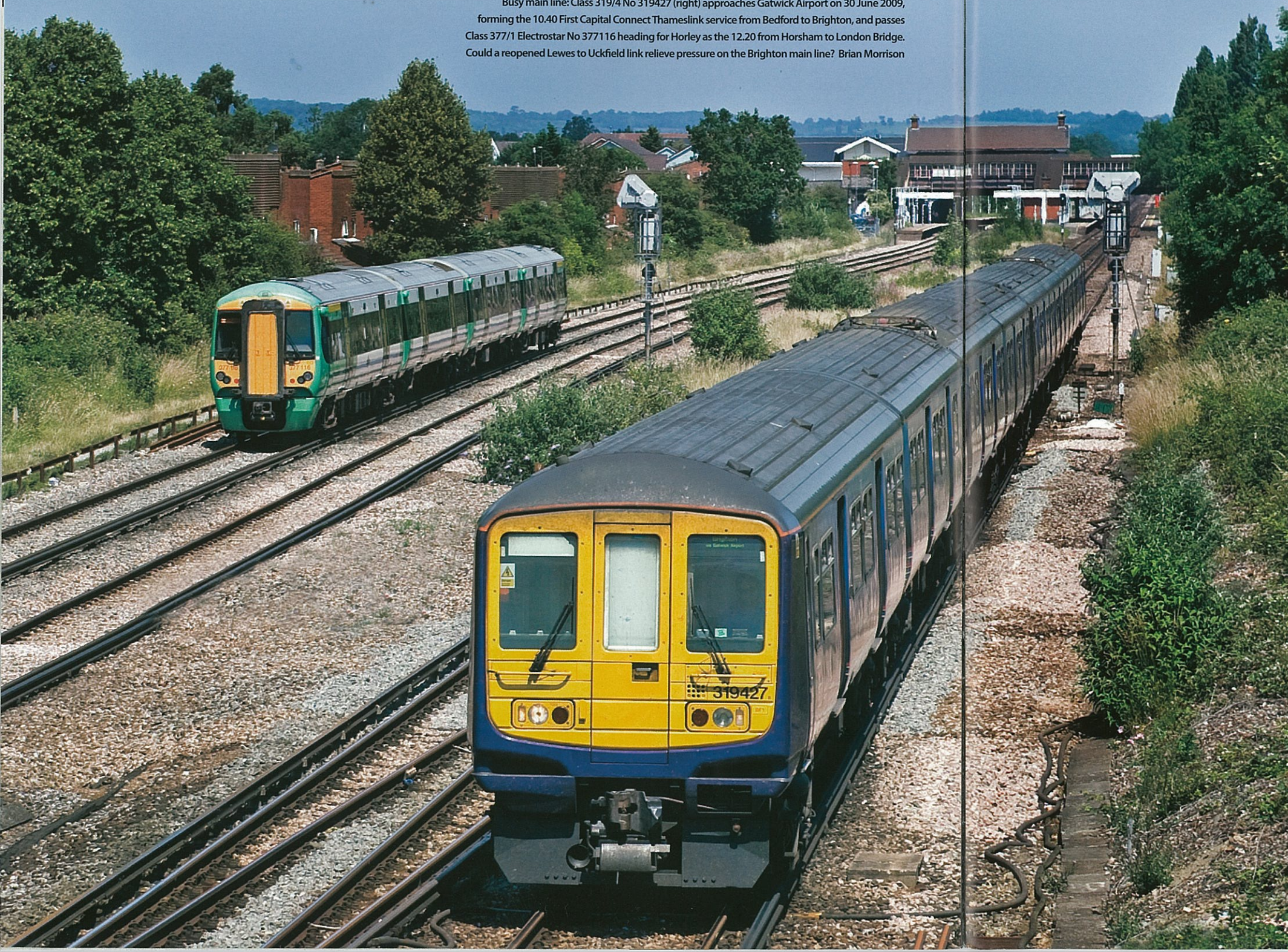
Partnership

The recent history of successful railway development includes, amongst many, two vital

ingredients - partnership and incrementalism. The former has been dwelt on above, and the experience of such as the East London Line extensions Group, the Thameslink Consortium, and the East-West Rail Consortium bear ample witness to the results that are possible. Eschewing public political criticism is also an important lesson lost on some advocates. Those schemes and others, be they the *grand projets* of Channel Tunnel Rail Link, HS2, and Crossrail, or Chiltern's exemplary Evergreen or Airdrie-Bathgate reopening (the latter's first acorn being the Bathgate branch reopening in the mid-1980s) all demonstrate the virtues of achieving success through incremental development.

Thus too for the Wealden line: CP6 deliverables will represent the foundation, not the finished article. bridgethegap@railfuture.org.uk

Busy main line: Class 319/4 No 319427 (right) approaches Gatwick Airport on 30 June 2009, forming the 10.40 First Capital Connect Thameslink service from Bedford to Brighton, and passes Class 377/1 Electrostar No 377116 heading for Horley as the 12.20 from Horsham to London Bridge. Could a reopened Lewes to Uckfield link relieve pressure on the Brighton main line? Brian Morrison



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