

A VIEW FROM ACROSS THE POND

In the first of an occasional feature looking at rail developments in the United States, Michael R Weinman reflects on a fatal train crash in California with chilling similarities to two accidents in the UK, and examines progress – or the lack of it – on developing Crossrail-type links in America's major cities

This article was to have been solely about our attempts here in the United States at developing versions of Crossrail. Sadly, however, I must start with January's fatal train crash in Glendale, a suburb of Los Angeles which combined the circumstances of the Great Heck and Ufton Nervet accidents in the UK, with similarly devastating consequences.

In Glendale, a seemingly suicidal person (who had unsuccessfully tried to stab himself) stopped his vehicle on the Metrolink (former Southern Pacific) route north from Los Angeles toward the San Fernando Valley. He drove onto the tracks at a highway crossing a mile north of Glendale passenger station, at about 06:00 hours and then abandoned the vehicle and watched the scene unfold.

Between the crossing and Glendale was an interlocking with main track crossovers and a lead from a siding on which a Union Pacific freight train was waiting for two commuter trains to pass before heading north. A southbound commuter train, with a cab-control car (driving trailer) leading, about to slow from 79 mph for the Glendale stop, struck the motor vehicle. Between the collision and wedging of the wreckage within the gauge, and passing over the crossovers, this train was derailed and diverted into the freight locomotive, pushing it over, causing the commuter train to jack-knife and spread across the main tracks. It struck a northbound commuter train just accelerating from Glendale station, pushing one of its cars over as well. All the commuter cars were state-of-the-art Bombardier aluminium bi-level cars with steel underframes.

Twelve people died and hundreds were injured

in the crash. The cars apparently held up well, at least in terms of the structural framing and underframes. The superstructures, with their human cargo, took some punishment, and the investigation will determine whether they lived up to their protective potential.

Still, for an accident so clearly unrelated to any fault by the railway industry and its people, some media references to the tragedy have included insinuation of a lack of safety, and safety consciousness, by the industry as a whole (indeed, it has been discussed in the same breath as a fatal hazardous materials release some months back, resulting from freight train crew error).

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Surely, I could preach about how such generalisation is a travesty, and a disservice to the fine folks who operate and maintain the Los Angeles railway network, including Michael McGinley, P.E., the Metrolink chief engineer, one of the finest railway men I've ever known (and author of *Double Jacks*, a wonderfully entertaining, semi-autobiographical tome on American railway operations), and Richard Phelps, Amtrak's General Superintendent for the south western United States, an equally brilliant railway officer who heads the group charged with operating the Metrolink service, and of course, all their staff. These men are surely cast from the same mould as Brunel and Fiennes.

Perhaps, though, it is the U.S. railway industry which needs to rethink its position and take the offensive, not in being safe (which it is, beyond any doubt or any competitor), but in proclaiming this rather dramatic safety success throughout the land (and all the other virtues of our industry as well). While the railway business is front page news almost every day in the UK, perhaps due in part to the dominance of the passenger sector, railroading tends to be a stealth industry in America, at least until an accident like the one at Glendale makes headline news.

Moving on, the news about the slow progress of London's Crossrail (and the respectable, imaginative, 'stand-up-and-take-notice' attributes of the Superrail plan and its impressive team) has inspired me to think a bit about such central connecting links here in the United States.

In 1965 I was involved, as an undergraduate working for a predecessor of Philadelphia's SEPTA commuter rail system in 1965, in the planning of the 'Centre City Connection' – America's first Crossrail. This connected the city-centre termini of the Pennsylvania Railroad and the Reading Company. The tunnel and its new Market East station replaced the historic Reading Terminal (now, like Manchester Central/G-Mex, a convention centre devoid of tracks).

Surveys indicated commuters would drive 20 miles to arrive at a central station a few minutes' walk closer to work. This scheme permitted such distribution, and ultimately, contributed to some impressive downtown development. But there have been few similar plans implemented in North America despite the many reasons to do so. Better distribution and customer choice is a leader, but there is also improved equipment and crew utilisation, the enhancement of efficiency resulting from the elimination of 'stub end' (buffer

stop) terminals, greater suburban destination choice (increasingly vital in an era in which suburban commercial development creates substantive reverse commuting – now up to 50 per cent in each direction in locales such as San Francisco), and the linking of sympathetic nodes, such as multiple airports.

With London's huge and varied central districts and its multiple termini on the periphery, the need for Crossrail, and Thameslink for that matter, is obvious. The same argument could be made for New York City. The Hudson River has always been a barrier, and even though breached in 1910 with the construction of Pennsylvania Station and the tunnels and tubes between New



Emergency workers at the scene of January's accident at Glendale.

Jersey, Manhattan, and Queens/Long Island (and in 1917, to The Bronx and points northeast via the Hell Gate Bridge), there is still no through commuter service between New Jersey, Manhattan, and Queens/Long Island (or points northeast) – nor even a station to serve Manhattan's growing east side.

Similarly, Washington DC, which has had a through line from Virginia to the nation's capital, and on to Maryland, since the 1920s and has seen spectacular growth in commuting, still has no through commuter service. In both New York and Washington, it has been harder to overcome the institutional barriers of multiple train operators (and their sponsor agencies) than to perform miracles of civil engineering!

New York's rail lines fan out in almost every direction from the two Manhattan stations, Penn Station and Grand Central Terminal, and from New Jersey and Long Island termini for trains not entering the heart of the city. However, some 13 key routes, which would be well used for today's growth, have been lost to the commercial reality of the now-hopefully obsolete thought process in which 'the automobile is our future'. A few may return, but most are gone, and with them, some of the impetus for a Crossrail. However, a grand scheme called 'Access to the Region's Core', with inter-terminal connections, is now being floated

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by key agencies, and, who knows, work may begin when our great-grandchildren are around (their fathers and grandfathers will do well to join the ranks of the consultants and planners, of course).

Chicago flirted with inter-station connections, then consolidated termini, and finally found many of the commuters heading for new job-creation areas north and west of the central business district. A light rail scheme, using in part an old freight line, was studied and then scrapped, and so express and local bus lines, a summer-only boat service, and a lot of pedestrian traffic, serve as the land and water bridge between railway station and workplace. Despite limited 'run-through' capability in Chicago Union Station,

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since 1930 there has been no through commuter rail service.

Boston just spent the equivalent of the gross annual product of several small nations on its 'Crossrail for automobiles', the Central Artery project. The project buried and enlarged a critical elevated motorway, but did not even include provisions for railway connections between North and South Stations, a scheme that would also have facilitated the linking of Amtrak's Boston-to-New York and Boston-to-Portland services.

San Francisco, with its peninsula orientation, will probably never see a Crossrail, whereas Los Angeles is now designing and constructing both main line (Amtrak) and light rail links to permit trains to go through Union Station, and not simply terminate there. Interestingly, the incentives are so strong that some Amtrak trains from north of the city back in and then head south again, to provide a through service. The new connections will create both Amtrak and Metrolink travel opportunities in true Crossrail fashion. Finally, Seattle, which has had a city-centre main line railway tunnel for decades, is now in the early years of a growing commuter service, and may see through-services (with but a single, central station). A new light rail scheme, using an existing trolleybus tunnel, will also enhance through-downtown travel opportunities.

So, regardless of the nation or the city, Crossrail schemes almost all seem to be in a time warp, in which the demand, the facilities, and the services are out of synchronisation with each other, in every possible direction. But I still have the satisfaction of knowing that I helped plan one of the most successful schemes, the Philadelphia Centre City tunnel. Ironically, 30 years later, I moved my company from New York City to Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, within 300 meters of a station which has (for now at least) a train every 30 minutes to Philadelphia – and then onward to Lansdale and Doylestown (change at one of the three Centre City stations for all other points).

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