

The Railways of London Docklands: Their History and Development. By JONATHAN WILLIS. 160pp, 170 illustrations. Barnsley: Pen & Sword Books Ltd, 2022. £30 [Hardback]. ISBN: 1526790580.

The first thing to say about this book is that it is a professional memoir. The second is that given even a long career the title is misleading unless one is literal-minded about the fact that there was no such place as 'Docklands' before the 1970s. Jonathan Willis was a transport planner whose career began as an engineer for London Underground. He moved to the Greater London Council where from 1976 he was involved with transport plans for 'Docklands', which designation had gained currency following a Travers Morgan report of 1973 for the Department of the Environment and the GLC titled *Docklands Redevelopment Proposals for East London*, which, incidentally, proposed a 'minitram' system. Willis went on to work for London Transport then Transport for London as Head of Strategy and Planning, working on the Docklands Light Railway and the Jubilee Line Extension, and was Head of Planning for Crossrail (the Elizabeth Line). His memoir is thus enormously valuable insider testimony about important metropolitan railway projects across almost half a century. But it is not a substitute for a more distanced history. Nor is it a useful history of what happened before the 1970s. There are two introductory scene-setting chapters about the building of the docks and the area's earlier railways, but these are perfunctory, just nineteen highly illustrated pages, and not error-free – the City is credited with setting up the London Dock Company, the East India Dock Road is said to have opened in 1827, and the Albert Dock in 1879.

Eleven of the thirteen chapters cover the 1970s onwards, the real subject. The first of these, 'Early Plans and Proposals', begins 'My first involvement ...', as if to nail down the nature of the account. The milestones of the more or less chronological narrative can be briefly summarised. The Fleet Line (Baker Street to Lewisham) proposal of 1965 led to plans that were to evolve to become the Docklands Light Railway and the Jubilee Line Extension, and to the opening to Charing Cross of what had become the Jubilee Line in 1979. Purse-strings tightened thereafter and light-rail ideas resurfaced. Michael Heseltine's setting up of the London Docklands Development Corporation and subsequent unilateral declaration that the DLR would be built in 1981–2 were crucial. Heseltine, a hero to Willis, provided the book's foreword, in which an unfortunate factual inaccuracy (that all the working docks had closed by 1970) might have been corrected – it is immediately contradicted on the first page of chapter 1 with the accurate date – 1981. The DLR (which could have been DART, Docklands Area Rapid Transit) opened in 1987 after radically privatized design-and-build construction, with much ad hocery on a tight budget (£77m). Criticism of it as a 'Mickey Mouse' railway evidently stung. Three chapters trace extensions: to Bank

(1991); Beckton (1994); Lewisham (1999); City Airport (2005); Woolwich (2009); and Stratford International (2011). The DLR now has 56 trains (43 more are coming) and 45 stations. Apart from London Transport underground railways, the Lewisham line included East London's first purpose-built sub-Thames railway tunnel, a demonstration that London's railway planners needed no longer worry about keeping to clay. There is no mention (or perhaps knowledge) of concerns that this line gave rise to regarding the nomination of Greenwich for World Heritage Site status – UNESCO representatives deplored the DLR's station design. The line was a PFI project by The Japanese City General Lewisham Railway plc; thereafter developer funding evaporated. Willis concludes that the DLR is no longer 'Mickey Mouse', 'but an incredibly sophisticated and well used transport system' and 'the most complex light rail system in the world' (see page 114).

The account of the Jubilee Line Extension tracks back to a 1988 LT proposal for a 'Waterloo and Greenwich railway', plans thereafter overlapping with those for Crossrail. After difficult recession years, John Major drove the first pile in December 1993. The line opened in 1999, costs having risen from £2.1bn to £3.5bn. The sheer wondrousness of what was achieved with the JLE is well conveyed through detail. The line is rightly praised as a civil-engineering triumph, but there is no explicit mention of the step up in design quality as compared to the DLR. The book's subject is transport planning and to a lesser degree railway engineering. It does not deal with railway architecture, other than to register the complications of dealing with eleven different architectural firms on the JLE. The focus is more on matters such as compensation grouting, injections of concrete to ensure neighbouring buildings are not destabilised. Crossrail is traced to ideas of the 1940s (the *County of London Plan* onwards) that were revived in 1974 and again in 1988 with relief of congestion the prime motive. Governmental rejection of the project in 1994 is attributed to the absence of private-sector involvement. A decade later, and under a different government, it was accepted that the project need not be privately funded (its ultimate cost was £18.8bn; projected benefits are worth £42bn). Construction began in 2009. Crossrail has been otherwise well and prominently chronicled, not least online (<https://learninglegacy.crossrail.co.uk>) and in Christian Wolmar's *The Story of Crossrail* (2018) which Willis acknowledges as a fuller account covering, *inter alia*, yet more ingenious engineering within and beyond Docklands (*pace* Willis, Whitechapel is not in Docklands). Unfortunate, and for the author maybe embarrassing, delays to completion are skated over, complexity and Covid blamed, though the intended opening date of 2018 antedates the pandemic. The book went to print before the Elizabeth Line opened. Written during the pandemic, it includes a cautious postscript about changing patterns of transport use. Willis understands that railway building could not but be political. But he kept that at arm's length in his career, and does not enter

much into it in his book, maintaining a neutral tone. Yet politics does occasionally show an ankle. The planning of the 1970s that was led by the GLC is shown to be vital, while the shift to the LDDC's essentially 'no-plan' Enterprise Zone is explained uncritically. The resulting disconnect between infrastructure and development that underlay the all-but systematic underestimation that bedevilled the DLR in its early years, when extensive reconstructions had to be carried out, is not explored. In an overall boosterish account of the LDDC the 'surprise' (without plans everything is a surprise) of the Canary Wharf scheme, 'every one was taken aback' (page 64), is registered, but Chief Executive Reg Ward's 'If you build it, they will come' insouciance is not cited.¹ Olympia & York, Canary Wharf's developers, are credited with influencing and in part paying for transport improvements, but only after delays caused by bankruptcy in 1992. Willis fails to mention that administration was overseen by Sylvester Investments (Sylvester being the Looney Tunes cartoon cat who chases but never catches Tweety the canary). The JLE was prioritised over Crossrail because of developer money (£400m of £3.5bn) and because the Conservative Government wanted Docklands to succeed. In the end, Willis, suppressing exasperation, points out that Crossrail could only ever have been publicly funded, and laments increases in land value not being part of cost-benefit evaluations.

Benefit-to-cost ratios are cited throughout as if facts. Clearly, the higher the former in relation to the latter the better, but there is no explanation of how these calculations are arrived at; it seems that criteria were sometimes improvised. Willis's sources are largely material that crossed (or emanated from) his desk, official reports and the like.

The book is a large-format hardback, nicely produced on glossy paper with generous full-colour illustrations and it is reasonably priced. The quality of the illustrations is not always great. The author's own maps, which lack Harry Beck clarity (as of course do TfL's current maps), are marred by crude pixellation. The copyediting is sloppy in places, the sleeve blurb ends 'to match anyway in the world', it is 'wharfingers' not 'warfingers', 'Lansbury' not 'Landsbury', 'Polar Dock' is plausible but wrong, and capitalisation is erratic. The apparatus is unorthodox. References are recorded in brackets, though many are missing in the early chapters and reference 10 for chapter 1 is XXXX. Superscript numbers are reserved for 'Author's Notes', placed between 'Appendices' and 'References', which are comments aside that include some of the book's most incisive and entertaining observations, such as mention of the DLR consultant who had hastily to identify owners of numerous railway-arch properties, 'homes to some very "alternative" businesses often guarded by fierce Alsatian dogs' (page 150).

Fifty years on from the 'Docklands' report of 1973, this book sets out much that has been achieved in the realm of London's railways. It is an impressive record, though it seems less so when one considers fifty years of railway building in London from say 1835 to 1885, or even

1885 to 1935. That is no criticism, of Willis or otherwise, merely evidence that these are, perhaps thankfully and LDDC Chief Executive Reg Ward notwithstanding, less buccaneering times.

Reference

1 – Jack Brown, 'If You Build It, They Will Come: The Role of Individuals in the Emergence of Canary Wharf, 1985–1987', *The London Journal*, vol. 42/1, 2017, pp. 70–92.

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