

# Surface access to London Gatwick Airport: present problems and future nightmares

by Jeremy Early

Non-transfer passengers travelling to an airport to take a flight do not magically materialise at the check-in desk. They are obliged to use another form of transport to arrive, be it car, taxi, coach, bus, train or bicycle. Similarly when they leave.

The vast majority of those flying from Gatwick Airport are non-transfer passengers and in 2012, the latest year with details reported by the airport<sup>1</sup>, they totalled 31.5 million, or 88%. The bulk of them used road vehicles to access Gatwick – 39.7% by car, 14.5% by taxi and 7.9% by bus or coach. Rail was used by 35.8%; no mention was made of bicycles. (In any analysis of road traffic, it is appropriate to distinguish not between public and private transport but between road and rail, since this places buses and coaches in the correct area.)

South East England already suffers from congestion on roads and a lack of capacity leading to overcrowding on trains. Forecasts for what is likely to happen in the next 30 years are not encouraging. Some estimates put the potential growth in population at nearly 20%. In 2007, Glaister et al<sup>2</sup> predicted a 28% increase in car drivers to 2041 – seven years down the road, some of this has already taken place. They also projected that the average weekday growth in car trips and distance travelled in the same period would be 40%.

## **Roads already congested**

The principal roads used to access Gatwick are the M23, M25, A23 and A217. In their consultation document<sup>3</sup> regarding a second runway, Gatwick Airport Limited (GAL) asserts: 'More than three quarters of our traffic uses the M23 to travel to or from the airport so does not use the local roads.' No details are given as to exactly how drivers get on to the M23 if they are not using 'local roads', but the degree of congestion on the M23 and A23 marks these routes down as ones which nobody should wish to place under greater pressure.

Highways Agency data<sup>4</sup> show that for the 14 months to the end of April 2014 the A23 running up to the start of the M23 at Coulsdon had a high mark for journeys classified as 'on time' of just 52.2%. In four months in that period, the figure was below 50%. Since March 2011, the score has never bettered 74.4%. In the other direction, from the M23, the high point over the last year was 52.5%. The best record in that direction since March 2011 is 64.4%. As reported in the Daily Telegraph on 12 August 2013, these two sections of the A23 were eighth and ninth in the list of the ten worst roads for on time journeys in Britain during June 2013.

Sections of the M23 closest to Gatwick have a worse record for on time journeys than any section in the southern part of the M25, a motorway which is widely viewed as being little more than a giant parking lot much of the time. Between Junction 8 (with the M25) and Junction 9 (the Gatwick turn-off), the M23's best score stands at 74.6%. Moreover, in five months during the period January 2013 to April 2014 the figure was below 60%, including twice around the 56% mark. Going north, the top mark between Junction 9 and Junction 8 was 74.2%; the figure dropped below 70% seven times. In contrast, on the M25 westbound, between Junction 6 (Godstone) and Junction 7 (M23), and between Junction 7 and Junction 8 (Reigate), the on time figure fell below 70% only three times, with a low of 66%, and was 80% or higher in 18 instances. Going east, the figure was below 70% seven times and above 80% ten times. These figures are better than for the M23 but that is not to say they are satisfactory or acceptable.

In addition to this palpable congestion on the M23 and A23, Reigate and Redhill, the two principal towns between Gatwick and the M25, are choke points for traffic, with three major trunk roads running through them (A25 west-east, A23 and A217 north-south).

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Any problems on the M25 or M23 lead drivers by default on to these A roads (which have little or no scope for widening) and consequently increase traffic levels markedly. Even without incidents on the motorway, traffic jams are much commoner than formerly in both towns morning and evening.

All of which suggests that there is already a problem which, given the projected 'natural growth' in traffic referred to above, is likely to worsen. A mass of additional drivers heading for Gatwick would only exacerbate the position and, using GAL's own figures, there would indeed be a mass. The planning capacity for 2040 under Option 3 shown in their consultation document is for 78 million passengers per annum to be using the airport, a figure from which transfer passengers (12% in 2012, as above) need to be subtracted to provide validity in assessing surface access.

Given that GAL's submission to the Airports Commission in May 2014, which is not available for public inspection, increased the figure for anticipated passengers per year by 2050 to 95 million from the 87 million given in the consultation document, there is a likelihood that 78 million understates the case for 2040, but assuming it possesses some legitimacy, subtracting the transfer passengers leaves 69 million non-transfer passengers. This is more than twice the total number currently using Gatwick.

GAL boldly claims: 'By 2040, we aim for 60% of passengers to travel to or from the airport by public transport.' For reasons that will become apparent, this looks a distinctly optimistic assessment – bear in mind that in 2012 public transport users made up not quite 44% of the total. But taking the 60% target at face value, if around 7% of the 69 million passengers were to use bus or coach, as happened between 2005 and 2012, this would equate overall to 36.5 million using rail and 32.5 million using roads. The latter figure is 65%, or 13 million, higher than now. It would involve another 36,000 or so traffic movements a day (more in summer) on roads which already are proven not fit for purpose and which have little prospect of gaining dramatic growth in capacity even with Junction 9 on the M23 being upgraded, and with the hard shoulder on the M23 and part of the M25 being utilised under the auspices of a so-called 'smart motorway'. (Arguably, any proposal to utilise the hard shoulder of a motorway is itself an indication of desperation rather than of being smart.)

If a second runway is built, an extra 20,000 people or so are forecast to be employed at Gatwick, or in jobs related to the airport. Research commissioned by West Sussex County Council shows a further 20,000 'catalytic' jobs are likely to be created in new firms attracted to the area. The submission made by GAL to the Airports Commission on 14 May 2014 increased the number of catalytic jobs to 100,000 across London and the South East, plus an extra 22,000 new jobs related to the airport. Inevitably, most of these new jobs would be concentrated in the Gatwick area.

Even if we stay with the West Sussex figure of 40,000 new jobs, and if half of these travel by public transport, which is optimistic, it would still mean 20,000 extra car journeys twice a day, adding a staggering 40,000 to the air passenger figure above. An additional consideration would be the effect on local roads of an inevitable increase in the number of light goods vehicles (vans) being used for services and deliveries. Glaister et al noted a considerable increase in van traffic nationally during the initial period of Internet development, with growth of almost 20% between 2000 and 2005, compared with 5.33% for other motorised road traffic. Things have not stood still since 2005. Moreover, modern satellite navigation systems encourage more traffic to use local roads. This already is having an impact, especially east and west of Gatwick Airport, with jams occurring at many junctions in the rush hour. Claims by Hugh Sumner, Gatwick's senior transport advisor, that 'we have re-designed the local road network to be no busier than it is today, even after a general increase in demand' seem a trifle far-fetched and decidedly hard to swallow for anyone living near the airport.

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‘Whilst runways lie partially empty to the north of the M25 it would seem totally illogical to bring all the air traffic and road traffic to one corner of the congested south,’ says Brendon Sewill, Chairman of Gatwick Area Conservation Campaign. GACC are not alone in raising concerns about the pressure on the roads around Gatwick. The position is summarised admirably by Sian Berry of the Campaign for Better Transport, who says: ‘Traffic levels and congestion on the M25, M23 and surrounding roads are already very high, affecting local people's quality of life and their ability to travel by all modes of transport. Widening the M25 will only add to this problem in the long term – and putting traffic on the hard shoulder also worsens noise and air pollution problems as traffic levels increase and vehicles run closer to where people live.’

‘Building a new runway at Gatwick would make all of these problems much worse again – adding even more car and lorry trips to the weight of traffic in the area. Up and down the country, we see airport expansion followed closely by development and road building through green field land. People living around Gatwick deserve better public transport and sustainable development of the local economy, not more flights and more gridlock.’

## **Standing room only on the trains**

The other side to the story is rail. If getting on for 37 million passengers are indeed to use trains for arriving at and departing from Gatwick in 2040, that would represent a more than threefold increase on the 2012 total of 11.3 million. This is a truly astonishing projection considering that the Brighton Main Line (BML) rail service is fraught with problems and set to continue in that vein for the foreseeable future. In passing, the inconsistency of a number of GAL's projections is equally astonishing. The executive summary of their Submission to the Airports Commission<sup>5</sup> states: ‘By 2030, Gatwick's rail capacity will be nearly tripled, with the frequency of trains doubled – there will be a train to Central London every 2.5 minutes.’ Yet at around the same time, Hugh Sumner told the press: ‘By 2019, there will be a train to central London every 2.5 minutes’. GAL<sup>6</sup> repeated this but in the same document they forecast ‘moving from 14 peak hour trains from Gatwick to London to 18’ in 2018, rising to ‘up to 24’ by 2030. Where the truth lies, if anywhere, is a matter for debate. The same applies to GAL's claims that by 2021 Gatwick Airport will have ‘shorter journey times to the West End and The City than Heathrow.’ This conveniently ignores Crossrail, which is due to be operational in 2018-19, making journeys from Heathrow to the West End and the City briefer than those quoted for Gatwick.

Apart from anything else, GAL's quoted times assume that trains heading north from the airport will run on time, which is debatable. From 20 July 2014 to 16 August 2014, a period involving no bad weather, Southern Rail's punctuality figure was 81%, while that of their Gatwick Express service was 80%. The respective figures for the year to 31 March 2014 were 78% and 86%, both lower than the year before. As background to the problems on BML, Network Rail<sup>7</sup> point out that passenger numbers rose by 40% from 2000 to 2010 and are set to rise by another 30% up to 2020. That looks decidedly optimistic given data published by the Office of Rail Regulation in October 2014<sup>8</sup>, which showed that from 2010 to 2014 passenger journeys on franchised services in London and the South-East increased by more than 20%. Peak hour passenger demand projections 2011-2043<sup>9</sup> show an increase of up to 115% at London Bridge for Thameslink & other fast services from Sussex and up to 39% for stopping services. At Victoria, the projected increases are up to 34% for fast services and up to 44% for stopping services. These projections make no allowance for what would happen after 2020 with a new runway at Gatwick. The growth in demand is unsurprising. The Brighton conurbation (including Worthing and Littlehampton) has a population of 480,000, putting it third in size behind London and Bristol in the South East. Brighton on its own is forecast to have a population of almost 300,000 by 2026, nearly twice the number present in 1981.

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In their consultation document, one of Gatwick's 'Priorities for Rail' is given as 'More capacity and resilience on the Brighton Main Line (planned)'. There is an astonishing assumption that more than tripling the number of rail passengers at the airport by 2040 will not create any difficulties for those passengers, or for those who have no connection with Gatwick but who use trains for work or leisure. The word 'planned' itself implies more certainty and organisation than has been evident from planners and governments concerning this rail line for decades.

Under the franchise granted to Govia for seven years from September 2014, the Southern and Thameslink services will be run by one company for the first time. The supposed means of solving the capacity problem, as quoted by GAL, include introducing 108 new carriages on the Gatwick Express service by 2016, a pretty rapid timescale; more frequent and longer Thameslink trains, with 60% more carriages on peak services into London Bridge; twice as many direct trains running between Brighton and London Bridge; and 50% more trains to St Pancras and beyond. But – and it is a big but in terms of comfort – the Siemens Thameslink trains set to commence operations in 2016 will have greater passenger capacity only because the Department for Transport seems to have given up its policy of avoiding passengers having to stand for more than 20 minutes. Respectively the new eight- and 12-carriage Thameslink trains will be able to carry 201 and 336 more passengers than the old ones<sup>10</sup> but those standing will have the potential to outnumber those sitting – by design, not by accident. This may be from as far south as Haywards Heath, where trains from Eastbourne and Lewes join BML.

Adding insult to injury, whichever London terminus they are heading for, all the trains that leave Brighton on the BML, and all those which join the line from Bognor Regis, Chichester, Crawley, Eastbourne, East Grinstead, Horsham, Lewes, Reigate, Tonbridge (via Redhill), Uckfield and Worthing, have to negotiate a notorious bottleneck at East Croydon 15km south of the capital. The act of increasing capacity by running more trains on these routes will merely make things worse unless the bottleneck is sorted out, and possibly even if it is sorted out, an event which is unlikely to be targeted, let alone achieved, until the 2019-2024 Network Rail 'control period' for funding. Two intriguing ideas for effecting improvement at East Croydon are constructing a 'dive-under' tunnel for non-stop trains, or building one all the way from Coulsdon to an unspecified London terminus. Another plan posits creating a new station called Croydon Gateway. In theory this could accommodate not only trains coming via Gatwick on BML but also trains travelling along a reworked BML2 route (costing an estimated £350 million) via Uckfield and Oxted. Crucially, none of these proposals has yet received committed support from the Department for Transport or Network Rail.

Given this prognosis, Gatwick's chances of attaining the figure which they are theorising for customers likely to use trains look slim at best, and if passengers find rail inconvenient and/or uncomfortable, as they surely will, what mode of transport will they choose instead? Almost certainly motor vehicles of one sort or another, which brings us back to square one.

<sup>1</sup> Gatwick Airport Limited. October 2013. Section 106 Annual Monitoring Report 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Banks, Bayliss & Glaister. 2007. Motoring towards 2050 – Roads and Reality: Technical Report. RAC Foundation, London.

<sup>3</sup> Gatwick Airport Limited. April 2014. A Second Runway for Gatwick. Our April 2014 Runway Options Consultation.

<sup>4</sup> Department for Transport. May 2014. Table CGN0106. Percentage of journeys on Highways Agency motorways and 'A' roads that are 'on time': by individual road section, annual averages.

<sup>5</sup> Gatwick Airport Limited. May 2014. A second runway for Gatwick: the strategic argument (summary).

<sup>6</sup> Gatwick Airport Limited. May 2014. <http://www.mediacentre.gatwickairport.com/News/London-Gatwick-road-and-rail-ready-for-second-runway-by-2021-90b.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> Network Rail. 2012. Sussex Route: Summary Route Plan.

<sup>8</sup> Office of Rail Regulation. October 2014. 2014-15 Quarter 1 Statistical Release. Passenger Rail Usage.

<sup>9</sup> Network Rail. October 2013. Long Term Planning Process: London and South East Market Study.

<sup>10</sup> BML2. March 2014. London & South Coast Appraisal: Increasing regional route capacity.