

## News

# It's back to the future for train tunnel scheme

REVELATIONS that Manchester council bosses are considering building a tunnel below the city to ease congestion has echoes of an earlier plan which is now part of Manc folklore. JOHN CONNOLLY has been digging up the history of an idea which goes back at least 100 years...

THE dream of building an underground link between Piccadilly and Victoria is almost as old as the railway itself.

The two main stations were built by rival businesses in the Victorian era, which meant they created two

rail systems which had few connections between them.

Even today, passengers struggle to cross the city efficiently. A direct underground tunnel would alleviate this and cut congestion.

Over the past century, there have been at least six separate attempts to build a rail network below the city, from tramways under a drained Irwell river, to a monorail stopping at the airport. Of all these plans, the Picc-Vic tunnel of the 1970s came closest to being realised.

A series of fortunate conditions made it possible. The formation of a new body responsible for transport,

SELNEC (South East Lancashire and North East Cheshire) in 1958, created a local force which would push for ambitious infrastructure projects.

Meanwhile, national laws around local government and infrastructure funding made it easier for cities to apply for transport grants.

Under SELNEC, the project was born and a Tunnel Steering Committee was created as part of the Passenger Transport Authority to carry out the necessary works.

The plan was bold. Two tunnels, 18ft in diameter were to be bored into Manchester's red sandstone

bedrock for 2.75 miles. Running along them would be high-capacity, electrified trains, picking up passengers every two-and-a-half minutes. As well as the tunnel connection, a further 60 miles of track would be added to create an entirely new rail system across the city. The whole project was expected to cost £92,713,000.

New platforms and lines were to be built below Piccadilly and Victoria, and other underground stations were planned across the city.

A new station was to be built below St Peter's Square. Further entrances were planned on Lower Mosley Street and Albert Square.

A station at the Royal Exchange was also planned to serve the city's growing number of shoppers. The station would directly link to the nearby Marks & Spencer store, Market Street and the Arndale Centre. Tunnels still exist below the Arndale that were built to accommodate the never realised station.

Designers also planned 'a moving pavement' Travelator, so commuters could quickly nip from Piccadilly to Piccadilly Gardens.

The early stages of engineering and design work began in the 1970s to test viability and measure costs. The Manchester architecture firm, Essex Goodman Suggitt, was com-

missioned to design the platforms and stations. The project was so far developed that promotional materials were produced showing how easily commuters would be able to cross the city.

A Tube-style map was mocked-up with five new stations so residents could imagine travelling into the city centre in minutes.

An interactive 'Futuroute' machine, which can still be seen at the Transport Museum in Cheetham Hill, was installed in Piccadilly station. Users would plug in their destinations and the machine lit up with the routes they could take.

But two things would be needed: parliamentary approval and funding from London.

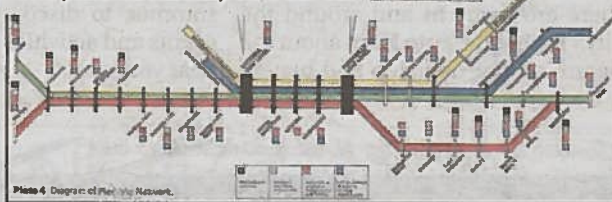
The Picc-Vic tunnel succeeded in getting the first when legislation was passed in 1972, but was derailed by the Minister for Transport Industries, John Peyton, who could not justify the costs of the project to a cost-cutting chancellor.

The project stalled further and eventually disappeared as transport law and the way infrastructure spending was approved shifted.

Attempts were made in the early 70s to resurrect the project, but by then the oil crisis and Stock Exchange crash of 1973 and 1974 made such a costly venture unlikely.

The story of the Picc-Vic tunnel

The planned rail map for Picc-Vic



Sir Robert Thomas, leader of GMC, Fred Mulley, Minister of Transport, George Mann, chairman of GMC Transportation Committee and Angus Munro, director, with a model of the planned Piccadilly station in 1974

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Borehole testing for the tunnel is carried out



A poster promoting the Picc-Vic tunnel from the 1970s. Above right, the futuroute machine which showed passengers how the system would work

seems to follow a similar route to other Mancunian infrastructure projects. An ambitious vision is proposed and much needed investment is promised, only for Whitehall to pull the funding.

The recent decision by Chris Grayling to scrap rail electrification in the North seems to mirror this perfectly.

But it may just have been that the project was merely unlucky.

Dr Martin Dodge, senior lecturer in human geography at the University of Manchester and researcher into the project, believes that the tunnel's failure was mainly due to bad timing as the UK economy suffered.

Although he believes greater regional autonomy may have made the tunnel possible, he also expressed scepticism about how

necessary a tunnel is to improve transport in the city,

"You don't need a tunnel, it's not economically needed. What's really needed for economic efficiency is lots of local improvements, but that's not as glamorous and doesn't sell the scheme.

"Do you build a tunnel, or do you spread, say £500m across a lot of things that improve transport for

millions of people across the city?"

Asked about the council's latest plan for the tunnel, Coun Angeliki Stogia, executive member for environment, planning and transport said: "As the city centre continues to thrive, with new jobs and homes created, we will need to ensure we have the transport infrastructure in place to support and accommodate this growth. As we think about the

plans for the next 20 years, we need a balance of shorter term measures... as longer-term solutions.

"An underground 'metro' tunnel is one of the longer-term measures which we may need to consider."

Whether or not Manchester Council decides to pursue the tunnel project again, one lesson from Picc-Vic remains clear: solving transport in the North will never be a simple task.