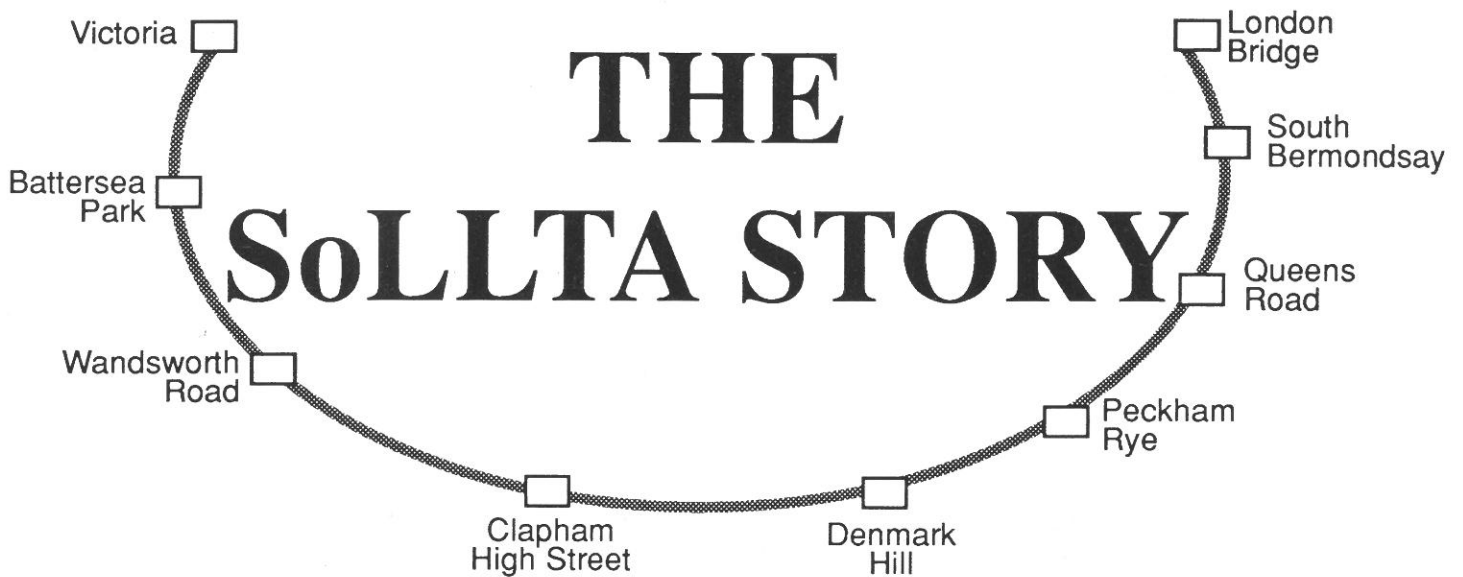


VICTORIA TO LONDON BRIDGE

1867 - 1997



THE SOUTH LONDON LINK TRAVELLERS' ASSOCIATION

1987 - 1997

How local people campaigned successfully to revive a railway line that seemed doomed to close



This picture of Clapham High Street Station, taken in 1987, typifies the state of the line ten years ago. The South London Link, or the South London Line as it was known then, was falling apart. Its stations were decaying, its service infrequent and erratic, its few remaining passengers demoralised. British Rail (BR) ignored the line. The view was widespread that BR saw no future for the line and so was letting it wither away. It was at this time that a Public Meeting, convened by the Railway Development Society, resulted in the formation of the South London Line Travellers' Association (SoLLTA). The story of the next ten years centres on the way this user group, born in the most unpromising of circumstances, successfully campaigned to bring the line back to life.

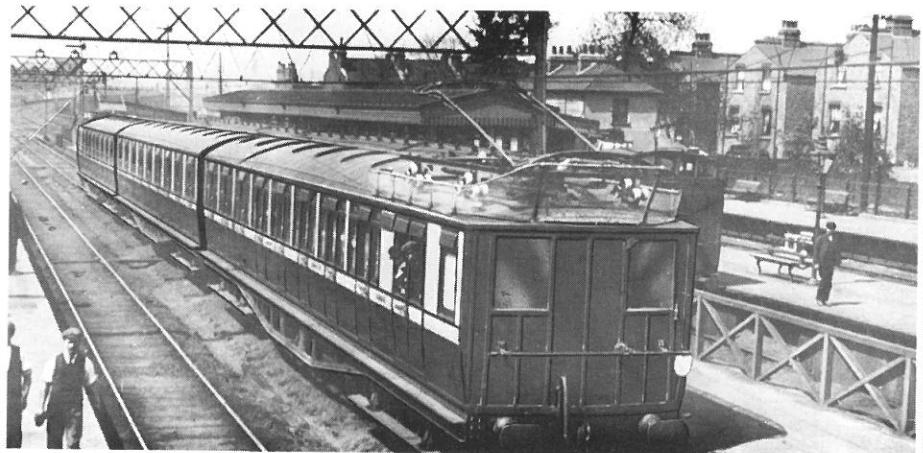
A PROUD HISTORY

The South London Line was a product of the early competition between the railway companies that emerged in the second half of the 19th century. The story started when the Great Exhibition moved from Hyde Park to Sydenham in 1853. The London, Brighton and South Coast Railway (LBSCR) jealously guarded its monopoly on traffic to the site, which was close to Sydenham and Penge stations on the London Bridge - Brighton Line. It constructed a loop from Sydenham to a new Crystal Palace Station, which opened in 1854.

The rail companies were competing to build a line to link Victoria and London Bridge via the new market garden suburbs of Peckham, Denmark Hill and Brixton

Its rivals, the London Chatham and Dover Railway, wanting a share of this traffic, backed a proposal by the "independent" Crystal Palace and South London Junction Railway to build a new line to Crystal Palace from Victoria via Camberwell (Denmark Hill), Peckham, Nunhead, Honor Oak and Sydenham, offering to operate it on behalf of the new companies in return for half the profits. But the LBSCR also had designs to link its London Bridge and Victoria Stations via the new market garden suburbs of Peckham, Denmark Hill and Brixton, and deposited a Bill with Parliament to build the line in 1862. The two companies were by now in a more conciliatory mood and co-operated in building their respective lines, which now form the stretch between Brixton and Peckham Rye. The London, Chatham and Dover Railway started its Crystal Palace service on 1st August 1865, utilising the South London Line tracks between Brixton and Peckham Rye, with their rivals starting a partial service between London Bridge and Loughborough Park (later East Brixton) on 13th August 1867. The service was extended to Victoria on 1st May 1867. And so the South London Line came into being.

The first line in the country to be electrified, in 1909 it was carrying 7.5 million people a year....and even ran on Christmas Day!



National Railway Museum Clapham Collection 174/54

Just over 40 years later the South London Line was the first in the country to become electrified. Again it came about as a result of competition between the rail companies. In the 1860s, several schemes were put forward for a line to Brighton that would compete with the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway's service. However, it was not until 1900 that a Bill was deposited with Parliament for an electric railway from London to Brighton. The Bill failed, but the LBSCR not unnaturally sat up and took notice. In the next parliamentary session the LBSCR gained powers to electrify its whole system. It was not just the threat of a rival line to Brighton that spurred on the LBSCR, but the haemorrhaging of local traffic to the newly-electrified tramways. The LBSCR's consulting engineer was asked to produce a report on the feasibility of electrifying their suburban lines. The report came out in favour of an overhead catenary system. The South London Line was chosen as a test bed to prove the system. Tenders were sought in 1906 and AEG of Germany won the contract. The work was sub-contracted to various British companies and was finished in 1909, after they had overcome various constructional problems. The first electric train ran along the line on 17th January 1909. Not before time, as the SLL's passenger numbers had halved from 8 million carried in 1902. By the end of the first year of electric services the figure had risen back up to 7.5million. A thriving line was in place, ferrying people across South London, even on Christmas Day. Eighty years later very different picture had emerged.

The 1970s and 80s saw a steady decline of the South London Line. East Brixton Station closed in 1976; Sunday trains were lost in 1976; Saturday trains in '81; off-peak trains in '84.

When SoLLTA was first formed in June 1987, it had two clear goals. The longer-term aim was to ensure that the South London Line became part of an improved rail network across South London; in the short term the need was to save the line from extinction. Our early approaches to British Rail were distinctly discouraging. SoLLTA met rail chiefs at their headquarters in Croydon, situated several miles to the south of the line's territory. The distance was not just a physical thing. It seemed to symbolise the attitude of British Rail towards the line: a faraway line of which they seemed to know little and care less. It was an approach that dismayed SoLLTA. British Rail did not seem to have any understanding of the line's potential: a line which passed through densely-populated areas of South London, where car ownership was low and bus travel slow. Nor did British Rail show any interest in doing anything for the existing passengers: timetables were frequently missing or incorrect; lights were not fixed; stations rarely cleaned; trains were regularly turned short at Battersea Park, one stop before the terminus. It is difficult to convey the depth of neglect during this period. It was the line that, in British Rail's mind, didn't exist. It was the only line whose departures were *not* announced at Victoria Station!

SoLLTA's short-term aim was to save the line from extinction

SoLLTA quickly built up a membership of over 200 people - which represented a respectable proportion of the passengers who used the woe-begotten line in those dark days. Not long after SoLLTA started its campaigning, things got worse! The service which had been half-hourly was cut to hourly, peak-hours only. Things were looking bleak indeed. And then, not for the first time or the last, SoLLTA members rose to the occasion in protest and made maximum use of the media to highlight their anger - much to BR's discomfort.



Wandsworth Road 1988: SoLLTA protesting at service cuts

In 1989 SoLLTA used the media again, when it nominated Clapham (as it was then still known) for the Daily Telegraph's "Worst Station in Britain" contest. It duly "won", jointly with Hunts Cross near Liverpool. The effect was instantaneous - shortly afterwards, the graffiti of countless years was miraculously covered up with gleaming new paintwork and plans were announced for a £100,000 refurbishment in partnership with the Government and the Borough of Lambeth. Once again, SoLLTA's harnessing of the power of the Press had paid off handsomely.

Around this time SoLLTA sensed that attitudes in BR were beginning to change. Instead of old-style rail managers committed to the traditional way of doing things, SoLLTA found it was dealing with younger men and women from outside the rail industry who were less hidebound by tradition and who could see the potential of a line like ours, serving a densely-populated area where the roads were congested and many people did not have access to a car. At last, SoLLTA's arguments, that such a line merited restoration of an all-day service, started to be listened to. With the help of a sheaf of letters sent in by SoLLTA members, local area manager Michael Lee eventually convinced his bosses to give an all day, Monday to Saturday service a try, and it was duly introduced in May 1991.



On that day, a special train complete with commemorative headboard conveyed a host of dignitaries along the route including senior rail managers, MPs, the Minister for Transport, two mayors, the Press, and of course the SoLLTA Committee. Speeches were made, plaques were unveiled at refurbished stations, Press cameras flashed, and the party duly retired to enjoy the traditional spread at the Phoenix and Firkin at Denmark Hill. It was possibly the South London Line service's finest hour since its opening day.

A Turning Point

This proved to be the turning point. The route was renamed the South London Link (enabling SoLLTA to retain its now well-respected initials!), and the initial all-day service was steadily extended later and later into the evening as demand grew. Inevitably it was not all plain sailing. Reliability fluctuated, and although major track works associated with the Channel Tunnel route gave the line its most modern infrastructure for years, they inevitably caused disruption and, just as it was getting established, frequent replacement of the new Saturday service by the dreaded, often invisible replacement bus service. BR's Network South East caused considerable irritation when they retimed their Catford Loop trains, serving significant areas of South East London, to narrowly miss connecting with ours at Denmark Hill, and again, when they timed their new Victoria-Dartford service to run within a few minutes of ours between Victoria and Peckham Rye. Station maintenance was not all it should have been, and coupled with the lack of station staff, meant that Clapham High Street (the renamed Clapham Station), South Bermondsey and Wandsworth Road slid steadily downhill again despite the best efforts of a succession of local station managers.

Steven Norris Travels the Line

In late 1992 SoLLTA went straight to the top in an effort to get Central Government resources put into addressing this problem, and invited the Transport Minister to tour the line. He duly did. However, he was able to offer little more than sympathy. All this was going on against a background of unprecedented upheaval and reorganisation within the railway industry as it braced itself for privatisation. Through it all, however, SoLLTA maintained close and generally cordial links with local rail managers, was quick to tell them if anything needed doing and to suggest further improvements. We were now firmly established as a recognised and widely-respected Rail User Group which got results.

SoLLTA's CAMPAIGNING

SoLLTA has been able to identify a number of key ingredients to a successful campaign....

A Campaign Needs To:

Have Clear Objectives

Right at the start SoLLTA identified clear short and long-term objectives. Its immediate aim was to save the line from extinction. Over the longer period it was to get a full train service restored and to see the South London Line becoming a viable part of an improved rail network across South London. Establishing a clear objective at the very start was very important to the campaign. It meant that at all times SoLLTA knew where it was going. **Without a clear objective, a campaign can be blown off course.** It is in danger of doing no more than reacting to other peoples' agendas. **With a clear goal in mind, a campaign can set the agenda.** More often than not the different authorities do not have a well-developed plan for a local rail line. This can leave the way open for a pressure group that knows what it wants to have real influence.

Adopt a Strategic Approach

Most **pressure groups** do know what they want, and indeed at times can be visionary, but **will only achieve their objectives if they have a sound strategy.** That strategy needs to recognise that any campaign will evolve over time and has to be flexible enough to allow for the unexpected; but without a clear idea of how the campaign's objectives can be met, there is a very real danger that the pressure group will get diverted away from its main task. It is essential that a core group of people, probably in the form of a committee answerable to the membership, is set up to plan, finance and implement the strategy.

Make Sound Arguments

The fact that SoLLTA has been able to back up its demands with sound arguments has been very important to the success of the campaign. From the beginning SoLLTA has argued that there are good transport, environmental and economic arguments for rejuvenating the line, that an upgraded line would provide an attractive public transport alternative to the area's congested roads. We have also stressed the line's economic potential, pointing out that it serves one of the most densely-populated areas in Europe. The latter point proved crucial in persuading British Rail to look again at the neglected line. But, while a pressure group's arguments need to be basically sound, they do not need to be backed up by tomes of formidable research. The trick is to produce just enough research to back up your arguments. Too much research can be a distraction, taking up a lot of time and resources which pressure groups, particularly local ones, don't generally have. Negotiation between the pressure group and the operator can then become bogged down in unnecessary detail. **The job of the campaign is not to come up with a fool-proof solution. Its job is to persuade the train operator of the basic arguments.** Once persuaded, the operator can then draw up a detailed solution.

Build up and Keep Local Support

Sound arguments *are* important, but they are rarely enough on their own. There are always a lot of competing demands on national governments and transport operators. Many different groups are putting sound arguments to them. Therefore, they take into account not only *what* is being said but *who* is saying it. **The more people saying the same thing, the more pressure on the authorities to act.** When SoLLTA started campaigning in the 1980s, there was no reason for British Rail to

give it the time of day but for the fact that its membership ran into hundreds of local people who used the line. **It has been important that SoLLTA has continued to seek and reflect its members' views.** This has been done by maintaining close and regular contact with the membership through leaflets, newsletters, updates, meetings and questionnaires (to find out the things that people are most concerned about and present the information back to the rail company). It has also meant that the SoLLTA Committee has been able to call on the support of the wider membership when it has wanted to press home particular points. On several occasions, arguments made by committee members to the train operators have been backed up by letters from members. It has been SoLLTA's experience that if members feel their views are being accurately reflected by an elected, properly constituted committee, they are largely content to let the committee members do the day-to-day campaigning, but are willing to add their voices as necessary - this includes both when the Committee asks and individual letters encouraged by SoLLTA's existence and culture.

Watch the Relationship with the Operators

Getting right what is likely to be a changing relationship with the train operators is always a difficult task. The pressure group needs to gauge when to go in hard, whether to accept hospitality, when to retreat tactically, when to go to the media or when to praise or support the operator. **A pressure group campaign is a continual process of negotiation played out on the bigger stage.** It is also important to be aware of what level of management deals with which matters. For example, it is no point speaking with a junior official about the company's financial policy. Equally, it would be inappropriate to discuss the colour scheme of an individual station with the Managing Director.

Widen the Campaign Beyond the Operators

A pressure group needs allies. It needs other people and other organisations to be voicing its message. That way the pressure on the operators to act becomes greater. Many operators prefer a campaign's demands to stay within the confines of the walls of the rail headquarters. That way, the operator can remain in the driving seat and can respond to the pressure group in his own way and in his own time. **The wider and more public the campaign the more difficult it is for the operator to control it.** SoLLTA has maintained regular contact with relevant MPs, councillors, council officers, amenity societies and other transport and community organisations. It has also raised its issues during local and national elections. All that has entailed attending a wide range of meetings, establishing a good rapport with key people and distributing SoLLTA publications widely. But it has paid off. Many organisations across South London not only know about SoLLTA but understand its key demands and are able to articulate them in a variety of situations.

Use the Media

The media has been a key component in SoLLTA's campaigning. In many ways the strongest pressure that can be brought upon an operator is by exposing his activities to the glare of the media. It is the most dramatic way to put the pressure group in the driving seat. But, simply because the media is such a powerful tool, it must be used sparingly and with care. At times, going to the media might be just the wrong move - if, for example, an operator has made a major concession, it might be counter-productive to hammer them in the media for some detail that may not be right. That said, **handled with care, the media can work wonders.** When the South London Line was at its worst, it provided the media with story after story. These stories created such an 'embarrassment factor' that British Rail could no longer continue to neglect the line. Eye-catching stunts also have a role: they attract the media and can get a serious message across in a fun way.

Make the Message Understandable

People in pressure groups are very often immersed in the details of the campaigns. It is important to remember that people outside the campaign - media, MPs, councillors, the general public, even many supporters - do not consider the details crucial; indeed the details very often can get in the way of their understanding, or even showing an interest, in the campaign. Rail user groups can be prone to get lost in the detail of track lay-out, engine size or the type of carriage. Outsiders find such matters confusing and, frankly, usually quite boring. SoLLTA has found that, to get the level of detail right for the audience being addressed, it is essential to use just the relevant details in its publications and hand-outs.. Often this requires standing back from the detail of the campaign to get across its general message to people in a clear, easy-to-understand way.

Finally, Be Persistent!

There will be many an occasion when things seem very depressing, when little progress is being made. But things do take time. Keep plugging away! **Be persistent!** That, perhaps, is the most important thing SoLLTA has learnt in its ten years of campaigning.

This is the first newsletter London Line Travellers' Assoc after a very useful public Development Society. It's c Victoria-Denmark Hill-London with its present run-down stat which it could be improved. represent everybody who uses complaints or views about t you. We'll be maintaining c and we'll also be producing r keep people in touch with what

London's Cinderella Railway

the South London Line

Graham Larkbey

Within two and a half miles of London Victoria, there are two stations which have no staff, no ticket-issuing facilities, no off-peak services

Not long ago, BR made a proposal to introduce a new off-peak Dartford-Victoria service in May 1989, running via Lewisham and Peckham Rye. This would provide a valuable new rail link right across traffic-clogged South London, and would also restore off-peak and weekend trains to the South London Line itself for the first time for years. BR told the four boroughs involved - Lambeth, Southwark, Lewisham and Greenwich - that in order to do this they would require them to guarantee the estimated gap between costs

VOICE YOUR COMPLAINTS LIVE ON LBC

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BUSY RAIL SERVICES AXED

Services on the South London Line have been cut by half. Trains now only run once every hour.

But don't call these cuts - they are, according to British Rail, 'planned cancellations'! There is a chronic shortage of rail staff in south London, due to low wages and high house prices, so instead of cancelling trains on a day-to-day basis, BR have decided to reduce the number of trains they run 'for the foreseeable future'.

Most lines in south London have experienced a 5 or 10% reduction. Only the South London Line and the Wimbledon to West Croydon Line have been reduced by 50%.

A week before the 'planned cancellations' were due to take effect, passengers had not been informed. It was only after the information had been leaked to the Lambeth Public Transport Group that British Rail hurriedly pasted little notices at the effected stations.

Come the day of the 'planned cancellations', Monday 27th June, few passengers were aware that their trains would not be running.

At Wandsworth Road Station, where LPTG along with the South London Line Travellers Association had organised a protest demonstration, passengers were confused, angry, frustrated and more than willing to vent their anger to LBC Radio who covered the event live.

In the long term..... the staff situation can only be eased by paying higher wages and providing low-cost housing but that would require a change of policy at 10 Downing Street.

RAIL CHAOS AFTER NEW SCHEDULES

MEMBERS' NEWSFLASH - APRIL 1991
ALL-DAY SERVICE STARTS MAY 13TH!

London Regional

Passengers Committee



MEMBERS' NEWSFLASH - MAY 1994

SoLLTA CELEBRATES MORE SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS!

The summer timetable (starting May 31st on our line) brings several further improvements which SoLLTA has been pressing for.

QUESTIONNAIRES

This had gone very well to date; Battersea Park, Wandsworth Rd, Clapham HS had been done, plus some trains. Denmark Hill remained to be done; SC would cover this. A good response had resulted, including a number of new members. This showed users' degree of interest in their line. HH, though unable to attend, had left a note of some suggestions for follow-up:

Yes, it really is happening - four SoLLTA is about to be rewarded. From once again have a half-hourly all-day (Mondays to Saturdays). The existing!

And what of the future? Like nearly everybody else, SoLLTA had grave reservations about rail privatisation, and the jury will be out on it for some time to come. However, as the dust settles there have been some encouraging initial signs in and around this part of South London. The new private operating company (Connex South Central) has answered our call for further service improvements by restoring Sunday services for the first time in 20 years (from Autumn 1996) and after much pressure, again involving a membership letter-writing campaign, increasing the weekday evening frequency from hourly to half-hourly (from May 1997). (Earlier in the privatisation process, SoLLTA scored an important victory by getting the service specification changed so that trains could not be terminated short, at Battersea Park, except in emergencies). Peckham Rye and Queens Road Peckham stations have been completely refurbished, and this year has seen works scheduled at Clapham High Street and Wandsworth Road stations as part of Lambeth's Safer Stations project. Battersea Park has had its London Bridge-bound platform completely rebuilt, and we are now pressing strongly for much-needed improvements at South Bermondsey - which came bottom in a survey of South East London stations a year or two ago. Another welcome development has been the restoration of Sunday services between London Bridge and East Croydon via Peckham Rye and Tulse Hill after a gap of many years.



Wandsworth Road 1997: A packed platform

However, we are still in the "honeymoon" period with the private operator, and none of the extra services - or, for that matter, the first and last trains of the day - are protected by the service specification. Connex could therefore withdraw them at any time if they decide they need to reduce staffing costs or use its resources flexibly - though the popularity of the new services suggests they would be foolish to do so. Usage of the line generally is going up steadily as more and more people discover that it offers a quick and easy alternative to Inner South London's traffic-clogged roads; and reliability is probably now the best for many years. The line is now a success story - a thriving part of the South London Metro instead of a dying and neglected backwater. Had SoLLTA not been formed when it was, the line might be gone altogether by now.

A railway line has been saved....

....but much still remains to be done.

- The next big improvement would be the introduction of a 15 minute service. This is what the rail companies are doing on most of their other lines in Inner South London. It's a proven way to attract passengers. In the words of Chris Green, the former Managing Director of BR's Network South East, "Every 15 minutes - people throw away the timetable - they just turn up for the train."
- The other major step to bring new passengers onto the line would be to provide a station at Brixton, potentially the busiest interchange on the line. It is proving difficult to get everyone involved to pull together on this in the new fragmented railway scenario.
- Elsewhere on the line, South Bermondsey station is still a disgrace and badly needs better access from the main road; Clapham High Street and Wandsworth Road stations will be a challenge to refurbish and keep that way; trains still just miss connecting at Denmark Hill; South Eastern trains run straight through Wandsworth Road and Clapham High Street instead of stopping; the last train of the night is still too early (when will rail operators realise that there is a "third rush hour" in London between 11 30pm and 1 00am?); and no station on the line, other than the terminii, is accessible to people with disabilities.

There is more than enough to keep SoLLTA busy for a good few years to come!

Summary of SoLLTA's Achievements Since 1987

- ◆ All-day services restored
- ◆ Saturday and Sunday trains brought back
- ◆ Improved and extended evening services
- ◆ Substantially more people using the line
- ◆ Refurbished stations
- ◆ Significantly improved publicity for the services (including banners on bridges)
- ◆ Lodspeaker announcements of the service at Victoria Station
- ◆ The principle of replacement buses accepted
- ◆ An improved Public Service Specification Requirement
- ◆ Brixton High-Level Station firmly on the agenda
- ◆ Becoming established as the recognised user group for the line, taken seriously by the operators

SoLLTA would like to thank all the people and organisations which have supported its efforts over the decade, and in particular....

**Lambeth Public Transport Group
Railway Development Society
London Regional Passengers Committee
Roger Clews (former Lambeth Transport Officer)
Kate Hoey MP
Simon Hughes MP
Joan Ruddock MP
Keith Hill MP
Tessa Jowell MP
Stuart Holland (former MP for Vauxhall)
Heather Rabbatts (Chief Executive Lambeth Council)
Michael Lee (Network SouthCentral)
Richard Talbot (Connex South Central))
James Adeshiyan (Connex South Central)
Adrian Hopgood (Network SouthCentral))
Geoff Harrison Mee (Connex South Central))
Howard Read (Connex South Central))
The Phoenix and Firkin Pub, Denmark Hill
South London Press
South London Guardian Newspapers
Thames TV (in particular Mike Pearce, now with Meridan TV)
Rail Magazine
Middleton Press
Railways South East
Modern Railways
The Daily Telegraph**

and, of course, all our members and especially those who have served on the SoLLTA Committee.

**The SoLLTA Story was compiled and written by John Stewart, Graham Larkbey, Hilary Hunt and John Keane.
Photographs by Jonathan Bray, Hilary Hunt and Graham Larkbey.**

To Join SoLLTA: Contact SoLLTA, c/o LPTG, 13 Stockwell Road, London SW9 9AU. Only £2 p.a. subscription.

Ten years ago the South London Link was in a grim state. With crumbling stations and a minimal service, it was dying, neglected by British Rail and almost forgotten by the public. The trains ran just at peak times, and then only once an hour. One station won a prize for being the grottiest in Britain. Today, there is an all-day half-hour service, seven days a week; ridership and revenue on the up; money is being invested in the stations. This is the story of the Line that Refused to Die. But it's more than that...it's the story of the Group That Refused to Go Away. The South London Link Travellers Association (SoLLTA) was formed in June 1987 when the line was at its lowest ebb. This booklet tells the inspiring story of how local people saved their railway line.