# How HS1 reshaped London’s link to continental Europe — and what’s changed in 20 years



High Speed 1 (HS1) transformed the physical and commercial gateway between London and continental Europe. According to the Institution of Civil Engineers, the Channel Tunnel Rail Link — branded HS1 — is a 109 km high‑speed railway that connects St Pancras International and the Channel Tunnel, and was the first entirely new mainline railway built in England for more than a century. Trains on the route run at up to 300 km/h, cutting journey times and reshaping how cross‑Channel travel is organised.

The project married large‑scale civil engineering with sensitive conservation. Engineers drove tunnels beneath London, constructed viaducts and river crossings and built new structures whose combined length of earthworks, tunnels and bridges was comparable to the Channel Tunnel itself. At the same time the Victorian terminus at St Pancras was painstakingly restored and extended to create St Pancras International, including an enlarged Barlow train shed to accommodate Eurostar services. The combined effect was both technical — vast tunnelling and track works — and architectural, reviving a dilapidated landmark for international rail use.

The scale of investment and the civic profile of the works were high. The BBC reported the refurbished station was formally reopened in November 2007 by the Queen after an estimated £800 million refurbishment of St Pancras and as part of an overall HS1 programme that cost in the region of £5.8 billion. The scheme also attracted industry recognition: sections of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and associated works received Major Project awards in national construction competitions for their engineering complexity and contribution to regeneration.

Ownership and long‑term operation have evolved since construction. Although the line was delivered with significant private‑sector involvement, the government assumed ownership arrangements in the late 2000s and subsequently sold the right to operate the route under a long‑term concession. The government announced on 5 November 2010 that it had awarded a 30‑year operating concession to a Canadian consortium for £2.1 billion, while the Secretary of State retained the freehold and regulatory oversight to protect passenger interests.

The new link delivered measurable shifts in travel patterns. Media coverage at the time recorded a notable uplift in international traffic: The Guardian reported a 21.3% increase in Eurostar passenger numbers in the first quarter after the move to St Pancras and the opening of HS1, a rise industry executives linked to shorter journey times, improved punctuality and easier regional access. Government and industry commentary has also pointed to wider economic benefits, including regeneration around King’s Cross and other station areas, and a degree of modal shift from air and sea to rail for some cross‑Channel journeys.

HS1’s current operator describes the route as the UK’s only high‑speed railway and notes it serves four international stations — St Pancras, Stratford, Ebbsfleet and Ashford — carrying services to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam alongside domestic high‑speed services into Kent. The operator and industry statements emphasise sustainability goals and plans to increase capacity and develop commercial opportunities at stations, while noting that claims about environmental benefits and commercial returns sit alongside independent regulatory oversight and investor objectives.

Two decades on, HS1 is judged both a technical landmark and an urban catalyst. Industry archives underscore the project’s engineering ambition — complex tunnelling, long viaducts and intricate station works — and its role in shortening journey times and stimulating local regeneration. At the same time, the route’s ownership model and long‑term concession illustrate the continuing interplay between public interest, independent regulation and private investment in the stewardship of major transport infrastructure.

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## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station), [[2]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station), [[3]](https://stpancras-highspeed.com/our-company/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station), [[2]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station), [[5]](https://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7081809.stm), [[6]](https://www.newcivilengineer.com/archive/20th-anniversary-awards-the-best-of-the-major-projects-civil-engineering-11-10-2007/)
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* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/apr/14/travelleisure.transport), [[5]](https://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7081809.stm), [[6]](https://www.newcivilengineer.com/archive/20th-anniversary-awards-the-best-of-the-major-projects-civil-engineering-11-10-2007/), [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station)
* Paragraph 6 – [[3]](https://stpancras-highspeed.com/our-company/), [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station)
* Paragraph 7 – [[6]](https://www.newcivilengineer.com/archive/20th-anniversary-awards-the-best-of-the-major-projects-civil-engineering-11-10-2007/), [[3]](https://stpancras-highspeed.com/our-company/), [[1]](https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ice.org.uk/what-is-civil-engineering/infrastructure-projects/high-speed-1-and-st-pancras-station> - ICE’s article summarises the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (High Speed 1) and the redevelopment of St Pancras. It describes HS1 as a 109 km high‑speed railway linking St Pancras International and the Channel Tunnel, noting it was the first new railway in England for over a century. The page outlines engineering achievements, including extensive tunnelling, bridges and track works, and the restoration and extension of St Pancras station into St Pancras International. It mentions trains achieving 300 km/h, economic and visitor benefits, government intervention in ownership in 2009, and awards received, providing a concise overview for experienced civil engineering practitioners.
3. <https://stpancras-highspeed.com/our-company/> - HS1’s official website, trading as London St. Pancras Highspeed, explains that HS1 owns and operates the UK’s only high‑speed railway and the four international stations at St Pancras, Stratford, Ebbsfleet and Ashford. It states the line links St Pancras with the Channel Tunnel across roughly 109 kilometres, carrying services to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam and domestic high‑speed trains to Kent. The site highlights station facilities, sustainability goals, investor information and regulatory arrangements under a long‑term concession. It also promotes high‑speed rail’s environmental benefits and outlines plans to develop capacity and station commercial opportunities.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-government-sells-right-to-operate-first-high-speed-railway> - GOV.UK announced on 5 November 2010 that the UK government had sold the 30‑year concession to operate High Speed 1 to a Canadian consortium comprising Borealis Infrastructure and the Ontario Teachers’ Pension Plan for £2.1 billion. The statement explains the concession includes rights to manage the line and international stations such as St Pancras and Ashford, with the Secretary of State retaining freehold of the infrastructure. The press release outlines the competitive sale process, expected benefits for taxpayers, and independent regulation by the Office of Rail Regulation to safeguard passenger interests while enabling new services and investment on the route.
5. <https://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/england/london/7081809.stm> - The BBC reported the opening of the restored St Pancras International in November 2007, inaugurated by the Queen as part of the High Speed 1 project. The coverage highlighted the station’s £800 million refurbishment, the extension of the Barlow shed to accommodate Eurostar trains, and the wider £5.8 billion investment that brought high‑speed rail to Britain. BBC described HS1 as Britain’s first high‑speed railway, detailing engineering works including tunnels beneath London and bridges across the Medway, and emphasised the project’s significance for regeneration, improved connectivity, and faster international journeys to Paris and Brussels, and enhanced passenger experience and accessibility nationwide.
6. <https://www.newcivilengineer.com/archive/20th-anniversary-awards-the-best-of-the-major-projects-civil-engineering-11-10-2007/> - New Civil Engineer’s archived feature on the British Construction Industry Awards documents recognition given to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and related CTRL projects across several years. It notes the Major Project Award given to Channel Tunnel Rail Link Section 1 and Ashford schemes, highlighting the engineering complexity, tunnelling, viaducts and station works that together delivered HS1. The article situates CTRL among other significant national projects, emphasising its contribution to shortening journey times and stimulating regeneration near King’s Cross and St Pancras. It also references the project teams, designers and contractors involved, underlining the scheme’s industry acclaim and technical achievements.
7. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2008/apr/14/travelleisure.transport> - The Guardian reported in April 2008 that Eurostar experienced a 21.3% increase in passenger numbers in the first quarter of the year, attributing growth to the opening of St Pancras International and the new High Speed 1 link. The piece noted 2.17 million journeys between London, Paris and Brussels in the period, improved punctuality and better connectivity from UK regions following relocation from Waterloo. Eurostar executives credited shorter journey times and enhanced regional access for the rise, noting marketing partnerships with UK operators. The article highlights HS1’s role in encouraging modal shift from air and ferry to rail and tourism.