# Last year, the Eurotunnel carried 20 million passengers, and the tunnels still operate at around half of their capacity. (Pascal Rossignol/Reuters)Twenty years later: How the Chunnel plans to stay on track

Twenty years ago, a British monarch and a French president jointly inaugurated the Channel Tunnel, an event that is being celebrated Tuesday by Groupe Eurotunnel SA, a company that flirted with financial death but is now reborn.

The anniversary is a chance to celebrate the world’s longest sub-sea crossing – and also a marketing opportunity for the tunnel operator. Eurotunnel owns and operates the tunnel and shuttle trains that transport cars and trucks across the Straits of Dover. But it wants to expand its business much further than the Kentish and Normandy coasts.

# Eurotunnel already leases (= to rent) part of its capacity to Eurostar, the French high-speed train that links London to Paris. Its greater ambition is to lure rail competitors into the tunnel, linking London by fast trains to cities far afield: Amsterdam, Geneva, Cologne and Frankfurt

The tunnel’s launch ceremony on May 6, 1994, was a rare moment of official warmth between the two countries. Queen Elizabeth described Eurotunnel's achievement as a happy marriage of “French élan and British pragmatism” while president François Mitterrand recalled the D-Day landings and graciously thanked Britain for its role in liberating France from Nazism. It was a moment to celebrate what the American Society of Civil Engineers dubbed one of the seven wonders of the modern world.

Thanks to the restructuring, Eurotunnel is today stable, profitable and eager for growth. Last year it succeeded in carrying 20 million passengers, a level that it was originally forecast to attain within a few years of launch. But its tunnels still operate at half of their capacity and the opportunity to lure trains and passengers beckons.

For all the obstacles, there is little doubt that the tunnel is changing life at both ends of the link. London is now the sixth largest French city, home to 250,000 French citizens. A new generation of French expats is changing London, encouraging state primary schools to establish French streams and even adding a French style of play to amateur rugby clubs. Meanwhile, older Brits have invaded France in force, buying homes for retirement and establishing small businesses in quest of a more pleasant lifestyle.

It is tempting to believe that future generations will barely notice the Channel.