

► Francis Crick Institute, a new research centre, is being built. Streets around St Pancras and King's Cross, once a haunt of drunks and prostitutes, have been spruced up. By 2016 Google will open new offices nearby.

Stratford International, the first stop on the high-speed route, was a busy hub during the Olympic games last year. Since the high-speed railway was introduced and extended, the number of passenger journeys on the line has increased—from 7.2m in 2010 to 9.5m last year.

Outside London the effect is patchier. Parts of Ashford, once blighted by 1960s planners, are doing well. In the centre of town a brutalist office building is being turned into a block of flats. Over 70% have already been sold, according to the developer. At a shopping centre near the station

the number of customers has jumped from 1.8m to 3.2m over the past four years.

Yet large swathes around the station are pockmarked by stalled developments. Six acres of scrubby land runs alongside the tracks on the walk to the town centre. Across the road Victorian buildings are boarded up, awaiting demolition, as they have been for years. The number of houses being built has not recovered to pre-crash highs. Maidstone, a town with only limited links to the high-speed route, is building more.

Other towns on the route have seen similarly slow progress. At Ebbsfleet International, a large, airy station, muddy fields are all that can be seen of a series of new developments nearby.

When the line was built it was hoped

that even the far reaches of Kent would benefit. If that has happened, it is hard to detect. The county's northern edge remains poor, with unemployment levels high above the national average of 7.8% (see map on previous page). Paul Carter, the leader of Kent County Council, is "brassed off" that too few young families are moving to Folkestone, a neglected seaside town. The railway "sucks life out of regions and reinforces London," adds Kim Clinch, a local estate agent. And some smaller rail services have been cut because of the high-speed line.

Because it coincided with the economic slump, it is hard to gauge the full effect of the railway, argues Paul Wookey of Locate in Kent, a business group. Others argue that places farther out will start to flourish much later as house prices push people east. Cheaper tickets would speed that process. Until last year, fares on the high-speed service went up more quickly than on other lines. This has now stopped, but a premium of 20-30% remains.

Unlike Kent's line, the proposed high-speed railway between London and the north of England would follow routes already popular with commuters. But developers might learn from the first railway all the same. Unless new transport links are coupled with good housing and offices, few will move near to shiny new stations. And if ticket prices are too high, many travellers will stick to their overcrowded original services. High speed is expensive, for commuters and for the state. ■

### Sunday Assemblies

## Wholly spirit

A new atheist church is the opium of north London

**S**OCIOLOGISTS have long insisted that religion is about far more than worshipping a deity or proclaiming ultimate truths. It is also a means of social bonding, sharing pain and sorrows, and experiencing ecstasy together. Do you need to believe in God to do any of that? Not at all, says Sanderson Jones, a stand-up comic and now a kind of preacher. In January he created a "Sunday Assembly"—a regular gathering for non-religious Londoners featuring storytelling, jokes and singing to a live band. Since then, its growth has been divine.

Mr Jones (who once worked as a salesman for *The Economist*) and his fellow comedian Pippa Evans held their

first gathering at a deconsecrated church in Islington. As the congregation has grown, it has moved to the larger Conway Hall, home of the Ethical Society, an august non-religious institution. On October 20th Mr Jones and Ms Evans announced that they were setting off on a 40-day tour to other cities, including in America, where offshoot assemblies are coming together. They also hope to raise £500,000 (\$810,000).

"We have gone from one congregation to about 30 within a year," says Mr Jones, pointing out that this might make the Assembly the fastest-growing church in the world, at least in proportionate terms. A similar mix of grandiloquence and irony pervades his services. They feature familiar pop songs such as "Celebration" by Kool & The Gang, a funk group, and sermons that mix earnestness and silliness. At the end, people eat cakes. Members have set up a book club, a philosophy circle and a small self-help group.

Atheists have been gathering in pseudo-religious settings in London since the 19th century. But most meetings have been rather worthy and cerebral. The latest venture, by contrast, draws on techniques that have also been used to breathe life into traditional religions: a mixture of technology, warm collective emotions and charisma.

New churches often disintegrate acrimoniously once a charismatic leader withdraws or loses control, or once enough money flows in to be worth fighting over. Neither is yet a problem for the Sunday Assemblies. But they might be one day. Such are the trials and tribulations of non-prophet organisations.



And now, let us stray

### Public finances

## The weakest links

The nation's accounts are looking better at last

**F**OR George Osborne, the chancellor of the exchequer, the headlines keep improving. On October 22nd new statistics showed that the national accounts are gradually moving towards balance, with receipts rising more quickly than spending. Good GDP numbers were expected a day after *The Economist* went to press.

During the financial crisis every line of the government's account books was rewritten, generally in the wrong direction. Between 2008 and 2009 the benefits tab jumped by 11% to £165 billion (\$264 billion). Revenue plummeted. Capital gains receipts fell by 6%, and VAT by 13%. Corporation taxes dropped most of all, falling by 25% in a single year as firms started making losses. A huge gap opened between spending and receipts (see chart on next page).

Britain still has a large debt pile, worth ►►