

Two years and counting ...

SINCE 1 APRIL, ALISON FORSTER HAS BEEN MANAGING DIRECTOR OF BOTH FIRST GREAT WESTERN AND FIRST GREAT WESTERN LINK – THE NEW NAME FOR THAMES TRAINS. SHE TOLD PAUL CLIFTON ABOUT HER AMBITIONS OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS AND LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS OF A BIGGER WEST COUNTRY FRANCHISE

ON THE MANAGING DIRECTOR'S TABLE SIT TWO SMALL bowls. One contains Mint Imperials, and the other is full of Fox's glacier fruits. In a corner stand two large plastic buckets of the same sweets. Alison Forster buys them in bulk.

'It's my trademark,' she explains. 'Even people who haven't been here for years remember that I always have sweets on the table.'

Ms Forster doesn't conform to the stereotype of a railway MD. She wears her lapel name badge, just as any platform staff would do. Orange and yellow hi-vis jackets hang on the coat rack. Visitors are given the impression of someone who can get her hands dirty.

Alison Forster is the seventh managing director of Great Western in the eight years since privatisation. She said: 'I've worked for all the other managing directors, so there is continuity. Actually I've been on the Western since 1988.'

Was her promotion a surprise, given the very sudden departure of her predecessor, Chris Kinchin-Smith? 'No, it wasn't.' Would she care to elaborate? 'No, I wouldn't.'

She has been a director for the last five years and, until February, she was deputy MD. She sees two key tasks ahead – improving day-to-day performance and bringing rapid change to the former Thames Trains. If she achieves both, she will be in pole position for the Greater Western franchise from 2006.

'It is clear there is going to be no major infrastructure





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improvement on the Great Western. We're going to have to put up with what we have got, and that is possibly our greatest challenge. The first real opportunity will be the Reading signal box renewal somewhere around 2010.

'We're also discussing extending the life of the HSTs. This is a decision for the SRA, or whoever is in that controlling position following the strategic review of the railways. But one would imagine, at this stage, that we're looking at keeping the HSTs for quite a long time.'

First's hugely-profitable tenure has not always been popular. It was slated for poor customer service and performance during the early years. Only in the last

18 months has it seen significant improvement. After years of cutting back staff numbers, the company changed tack. It recruited more customer-facing staff on trains and on platforms, and pumped money into training. It has since received awards for its training and staff development programmes.

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'Great Western is to blame for less than 20 per cent of all delays in this region, and two thirds of the delays due to us are because of the limitations of our rolling stock – the cost benefit of investing more and more in that area is not great.

'So, the real gains must come from better management of our operation. A few months ago, we put senior managers into Paddington and Bristol, whose only job is to ensure that trains get away on time. We've had a 29 per cent increase in right-time departures since then.'

So how will that apply to Thames Trains – now re-named First Great Western Link? There will be the inevitable new range of sticky labels on the sides of its trains.

'Managing that operation minute by minute, it could be much better. We will move the Thames control to the joint control room we share with Network Rail in Swindon. Over the summer we will get all the right people in the same room. This year we will heavy-clean Thames stations and trains and then keep them maintained to a higher overall standard – it will take weeks and months to find the right level. But the critical change comes in December with the new timetable.'

From September, Great Western will gain five HST sets cascaded from Midland Mainline. They'll be fitted with Automatic Train Protection, and put onto the Welsh route. Most of the Birmingham-built Adelante trains will then be switched to Thames Trains, running to Oxford and Worcester. They will also run additional services from Paddington to Exeter – an extension of Thames services which currently terminate at Great Bedwyn in Wiltshire. The Adelantes will be able to run faster than the Thames Turbos into Paddington, and will benefit overall time-keeping.

In addition, a joint venture with BAA will bring four new Siemens Desiro trains for a stopping service from Paddington to Heathrow. Complementing the Heathrow Express, it is aimed at airport workers living in places such as Hayes. Heathrow is one of Europe's largest single employment centres, and this is seen as one way to have a measurable impact on road traffic.

Overall, there will be an 18 per cent increase in seats through the Thames Valley, with faster journeys on many commuter routes in more comfortable trains. It should bring a step-change in quality.

There have been strong murmurs that the management of Thames Trains have been less than entirely co-operative since being told they were losing the franchise.

'It's difficult to say,' Alison Forster comments guardedly. 'They have certainly been very formal in their approach. But I've got nothing to compare that with, so perhaps it's just the way the process works.'

She insists that all the ideas for the two-year FGW Link franchise come from her team, rather than from the SRA.

'We put in an unsolicited bid in June 2002 because we believed it was the right thing to do. Later, the SRA required us to put in a base option and what we called the "wider benefits option" – which is what the SRA has bought. This is very much a First idea and we are

Have you heard what's happening



at Westinghouse Rail Systems?



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pleased the SRA has had the foresight to buy it.'

What's the cost? 'I don't think that figure has been made public.' A ballpark figure, then? 'I don't think so.' Being interviewed is not something Ms Forster really enjoys.

In fact, over the next year, the SRA will give a fraction under £3 million in subsidy to First Group to run the Thames Trains franchise. That's to run the new services and improvements to customer care. Last year, it ran with no taxpayer subsidy at all. Then, in 2005, First will have to hand back a £1.3 million premium in return for being allowed to run the business.

Great Western has 2,700 staff. Thames adds a further 1,000. They will remain as separate companies, with separate book-keeping and separate safety cases. But the directors of Great Western will all be directors of the new company too.



Are any of the Thames directors being retained? 'That's not a question I'm prepared to answer at this stage. It isn't appropriate.' Clearly there will be some slimming-down, then? 'You want the benefits of those synergies, yes.'

Alison Forster senses that First's bid for the longer-term franchise on the Greater Western from 2006 will rest largely on her efforts over the next 12 months. If she fails to produce a significant improvement on the former Thames Trains routes, it will be as if the

previous eight years' work on Great Western counted for nothing: 'Yes, one would imagine that to be the case, and I'm confident we can deliver.'

In fact, she will have barely a year to deliver. The pre-qualification process could well be under way by this time next year.

'The condition of the infrastructure is the biggest threat to us. We had big problems last summer, with a lot of speed restrictions. As you know, if an HST slows down to 50 miles an hour, it takes a very long time to get back up to 125 again. We've had long periods where it was impossible ever to arrive at Reading on time from Paddington. Since taking over maintenance in the Thames Valley, Network Rail has now started to make a real difference. But it has a lot more to do - there's a big backlog to pick up.'

First, like Stagecoach and National Express, advocates a system in which it manages both track and trains. The Transport Minister, Kim Howells, has highlighted the Great Western, South West Trains and Scotrail as suitable test-beds for such a system, and the idea is being considered as part of the strategic review. First believes it could be done without the need for major legislation.

Most rail managers have diagrams of their routes lying around the office. Alison Forster doesn't. Instead, she has a complete set of Ordnance Survey maps covering Paddington to Penzance. It's hard to think of a clearer indication that she looks at the wider picture.

But the clock on the wall is just bizarre. It works backwards. Looking at it conventionally, the hour after midday is eleven o'clock. So when the time is ten to eleven, it looks like ten past one. You have to read it anti-clockwise. What's the point of that?

'Time is very important on the railway. We all run by the clock. But you have to work at reading this clock. It's a constant reminder to me that you have to make time work for you, and not the other way round. People who come into this room have missed trains by misreading that clock. I haven't.'

And that's encouraging, because with such a short period to prove themselves between now and the new franchise, Forster could do with the power to control time and make every minute count.

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