

HIGH NOON FOR HST2

Alistair Darling has raised more than just his own eyebrows this summer by firing the starting gun on the race to replace Britain's much-admired 30-year-old High Speed Trains.

Paul Coleman reports

TTrue, the cab door seals are tired and the noise is awful,' says Andy Botham. 'But the HST mark one is sturdy, good to drive, a real workhorse. The best train I've ever driven,' adds Botham, 38, who has spent the past seven years driving High Speed Trains on Midland Mainline's run between Leeds and London.

The sun used to roast the drivers through the windscreen when the 125-mph trains first began hammering down journey times between London and Bristol in 1976. 'Some drivers used to drive with the cab door open,' Botham reveals. 'Many of the HSTs are now old, noisy and draughty – but still a joy to drive.'

The HST ranks alongside other classic British transport legends, including the Mini, the Ford Transit and the Routemaster bus. The National Railway Museum at York is considering housing a complete HST set, according to Professor Colin Divall of the Institute of Railway Studies. 'HST did most of what it was expected to do from day one,' says Divall.

The first HST programme, involving an outlay of £800,000, was authorised by the British Railways Board in 1970. An HST set a new world speed record for diesel traction of 143.2mph in 1973. By 1982, nearly 200 HSTs had been built by British Rail Engineering at Crewe.

But the HSTs can't hammer on forever. Transport Secretary Alistair Darling has finally prodded HST2, the project to replace the existing fleet by 2015, into life this summer.

Meanwhile, many HST workhorses, now owned by the rolling stock leasing companies, Angel Trains and Porterbrook, are undergoing life-extending engine replacement and 'strip-out' refurbishment. More than £18m is being spent on Midland Mainline's HST power cars and coaches. GNER's new franchise involves a £75m rebuild of its HST fleet to be completed by December 2008.

As for the Great Western fleet, Angel Trains recently unveiled two power cars, at Brush Traction in Loughborough, which have been refitted with powerful, electronically managed MTU 16-cylinder, 1,800rpm engines. The refit is part of Angel Trains' £1.4m HST life-extension trial. The MTUs replace the existing Paxman Valentas that are deemed to be falling down on noise, emissions, fuel efficiency and performance. 'That's our job, to provide a solution between now and the completion of HST2 in 2015,' says Hadyn Abbott, Angel Trains' managing director.

'Drivers would like to see HST2s keeping the power cars at each end of the set,' Andy Botham emphasises, echoing a similar call repeated by GNER chief executive Christopher Garnett. But Darling and the Department for Transport's Rail Group are avoiding loose specification talk. Darling's June speech to the Railway Forum

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firmly set out the Government's 'strategic lead' on HST2, a euphemism for controlling costs, keeping the manufacturers in check and generally sleeping with one eye open throughout the procurement process.

Darling does advocate 'one type of train across the network', a 'one-fits-all' HST2 design for GNER, Midland Mainline and for whichever Toc grasps the chalice of the Greater Western franchise that starts in April 2006. The Greater Western region, where the HST story began and where the majority of the existing fleet still runs, will be the main beneficiary of HST2. 'These trains have served passengers effectively for almost 30 years and have been one of the great success stories of the British railway,' says Darling nostalgically. 'We need to get it right – to properly scope and test the new design.'

A DfT spokesman says the HST2 project group has received an 'encouraging response' from the rail industry. Atoc is already on board in the shape of Adrian Shooter, chairman of Chiltern Railways. Mark Lambirth, the DfT Rail

Group's strategy & finance director, is heading up the project under director general Mike 'Costcutter' Mitchell's watchful eye.

All very well, but shouldn't HST2 have kicked off long ago? The DfT's straight bat to such carp is that delay is preferable to error. 'There are lots of things in the rail industry that should've happened a long time ago,' chides a DfT spokesman.

The prospect of Darling, Blair's 'quiet man' – the 'dour Scot' briefed to take the railways out of the headlines – being bathed in the glory of HST2 should have had New Labour's political enemies swinging furious haymakers at him over the delay in the project's take-off. Why such delay? Is HST2 workable? Affordable? Desirable even?

'Haven't a clue! Blinding me with science,' replies Alan Duncan, Conservative MP for Rutland & Melton. 'Do you expect a politician to know the answers to all these detailed things, on the hoof, on a Friday morning at five minutes' notice?' asks the shadow secretary of state for transport. 'Why isn't it the train operators' decision? They run the railways, not the Government,' Duncan thunders.

'So, in a way, it's damn all to do with government,' he says. 'It's to do with an operating company's decision about how they invest in rolling stock, isn't it? Or am I missing something?'

Duncan missing a swipe at Darling doesn't bother the rolling stock manufacturers, which have been prowling ravenously around the HST train operators and rolling stock financiers for some time. Each train-builder is anticipating what the real meat – the DfT's co-ordinated HST2 specification – might look like when it falls within clawing distance during the first half of 2006.

'We welcome the industry-wide approach taken by the DfT,' says Simon Charlesworth, Alstom's sales and marketing director. 'The Toc-led approach of the past can't work with this project. This is a global-scale, new train opportunity and we're very interested in bidding.'

'We're keen to bid for HST2 and build it at our Derby plant,' chimes a Bombardier spokeswoman. 'We've got a very good product. Further delay would only benefit us if we get some HST refurbishment business. And right now, we haven't got any.'

'HST2 is a huge project and we are determined to win it because we believe we have a good product,' chirps Piers Wood, rolling stock



An MTU 16-cylinder, 1,800rpm engine is dropped into a First Great Western HST power car as part of Angel Trains' £1.4m HST life-extension trial. First Group's chief executive, Moir Lockhead (top, centre) looks on.

sales director at Siemens. Wood is confident that Siemens' Venturio HS2 diesel electric multiple unit, a configuration of two power cars driving motorised axles throughout a nine-coach set, will be a front-runner.

Yet no manufacturer can entirely rule out that the DfT might want to consider some joint manufacturing deal between train-builders. The DfT will be looking for a 'future-proof' design. Much commercial hostility between the manufacturers is directed at Hitachi, the interlopers on Britain's high-speed train territory and now well placed having won the contract to build 30 high-speed 'A-trains' for domestic services on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. Behind the corporate spiel, Alstom, Bombardier and Siemens have been playing catch-up with the Japanese on reducing the weight of trains, a key HST2 concern for Network Rail.

Would Hitachi need to buy a European or UK manufacturing base? 'We're very patient,' whispers Alastair Dormer, Hitachi Europe's general manager. 'The DfT should spend time making sure the specification and procurement programme is right. We want to further our position in the UK and will certainly be bidding.'

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'HST2 is The Big Order,' says Adrian Lyons, director general of the Railway Forum. 'Let's be open, there are too many train suppliers at the moment and the HST2 decision will be one of the indicators of which one will go to the wall.'

Lyons cautions that energy costs might treble over the next four decades and that engine dirt and noise will be increasingly outlawed, a combination likely to squeeze the profitability

of HST2s. 'The whole-life costing of these HST2s must look at the big costs and not the weeds. Energy use will be critical and we mustn't forget that for every kilometre of their eight million-kilometre lives, each new train is going to be smashing along the track. HST2 has a huge energy and infrastructure impact. Lightness will have to be built in from the outset.'

The City speculates that rolling stock financiers will recoup considerable profits from leasing HST2 to the Tocs until 2045. On top of that, nobody has mentioned that HST3 might be up for grabs in 2035. Angel Trains owns 114 HST Class 043 power cars and 366 Mk3 HST trailers (coaches), the vehicles that have covered the Great Western and East Coast networks for nigh on 30 years. 'We're prepared to invest in HST life extension whilst the HST2 procurement process goes on,' says Hadyn Abbott.

'However, HST2 procurement and testing must be well managed. So we don't fall into some of the problems we've experienced on other rolling stock projects,' cautions Abbott. 'Certainly, HST2 is a big project but we wouldn't