

AWASH IN A SEA OF TEA AND SYMPATHY

Global economic forces are claimed to be pushing Britain's train building industry towards extinction. But, Paul Coleman asks, is that really true?

King Arthur would've been proud. First Great Western has named one of its new passenger trains after Tintagel Castle, the cliff-top fortress and symbol of Britain's ancient heritage. The 'Tintagel Castle' is a patriotic train, a Class 57 locomotive, built by Brush at Loughborough and financed by Porterbrook, the Derby-based rolling stock leasing company.

However, Britain's decline as a nation that builds trains might also be aptly symbolised by what remains of Tintagel Castle, a crumbling pile of stones in danger of falling into the sea. Britain

once breathed gold by exporting trains across the world, fuelled by the Industrial Revolution and bolstered by captive Empire markets. But the industry is suffering in the 21st century. Alstom, the French-owned manufacturer, has permanently ended production at its Washwood Heath factory on the outskirts of Birmingham, tipping 1,200 engineers, many of them in their 50s, back on to the tough West Midlands labour market.

Washwood Heath's demise means Britain has only one train-building factory remaining, Bombardier's plant at Derby. Six months ago, Bombardier almost closed its Litchurch Lane assembly hall following a review of its UK operations. The prevailing wisdom is that it's cost that truly matters and that it's academic whether a train is built in Derby or Beijing. Move over Arthur, the bottom line is now king.

If it's true that it no longer matters where train production is located, then why does the issue inflame raw nerves? 'We'd rather not discuss this; it's very sensitive, too political,' says a

spokesperson for Angel Trains, one of the three main Roscos. Angel Trains is understandably cautious. It owns and leases more than 5,000 trains to British and European train operators, and is owned by The Royal Bank of Scotland Group, one of the UK's largest companies.

'Yes, it's healthy that Britain retains a construction capacity,' says Ian Pritchard, head of communications at Porterbrook. 'But value for money and reliability are now key.'

That bottom-line mantra echoes in Downing Street and Whitehall. 'The future of train building in the UK is a legitimate concern,' says Transport Minister Tony McNulty, adding: 'But we've a responsibility to the taxpayer to ensure that we get the best possible value for money. If an overseas builder is able to offer a better package, then I would expect train operators to take account of that when placing their orders.'

Cabinet ministers like Patricia Hewitt, Alistair Darling and Paul Boateng faced considerable flak after Alstom's decision to end train building at Washwood Heath. Alstom heralded in June



Overseas raider – Siemens Venturio train could replace Britain's ageing HST fleet.



Bob Crow: Insists new trains should be built in Britain.

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2003 that it had won a £100m contract to build four new Jubilee Line trains and 59 carriages for Tube Lines. A day later, the company revealed that the new trains would be built in continental Europe and that 150 years of train production at Washwood Heath was over.

Political shrapnel filled the air. The unions and the Birmingham media cast Alstom as the callous, deceitful global corporation, interested only in the bottom line. Tube Lines donned its tin hat and claimed that European Union rules on competitive tendering prevented it from insisting that new trains are built in Britain. 'We're sorry that British train building is declining,' squeaked a Tube Lines spokesman. 'But EU rules mean there's nothing we can do.'

Transport for London and Ken Livingstone, the Mayor of London, kept quiet. Did they know that Alstom was going to build the new trains abroad? Did anyone pipe up for Britain? Questions all met with a deafening silence.

Alstom hit back at the Government for failing to encourage train operators to order more new trains. Transport Secretary Alistair Darling and Trade and Industry Secretary Patricia Hewitt had listened attentively to Alstom's warnings about the lack of orders but offered only tea and

sympathy. In the House of Commons, Prime Minister Tony Blair told worried Labour MPs from the West Midlands that Washwood Heath's demise was regrettable but 'in the end, these decisions have to be taken by the company'. Few involved in Alstom's badly-handled, sad exit can honestly look back on the episode with any pride.

Amicus and the RMT unions insist that British train operating companies are the only operators in Europe that take EU competition rules seriously. 'We are more than willing to take up with the EU any case of operators in other member states ignoring the competition rules,' responds Tony McNulty. 'But despite frequent allegations, little hard evidence has ever been produced.' Evidence is hard to obtain, but the unions argue that the proof is in the procurement pudding, that all new French and German rolling stock is built in France and Germany. Britain, where everyone sticks to the rules, continues to import 30 per cent of new trains.

It's a percentage that might rise. Siemens of Germany hopes its diesel electric Venturio will strongly contend as a replacement for Britain's ageing High Speed Trains (HSTs). Alstom, Bombardier and Siemens are anxious that Britain's Northern Rail franchise-operator Serco Ned Railways is reportedly considering importing cheaper rolling stock built in China.

Alstom and Bombardier were also spitting sour grapes at last month's surprise announcement by Alistair Darling, that Hitachi is the preferred bidder to supply HSTs to run on the prestigious Channel Tunnel Rail Link. Modelled on the Japanese bullet trains, Hitachi intends to build the HSTs near Hiroshima and ship them to Britain.

RMT leader Bob Crow has hammered the Hitachi deal. 'There is no earthly reason why these trains should not be built here in Britain,' he said. Hitachi cautiously stated they might consider investing in a British train plant if the level of new orders could sustain it.

Undoubtedly, bottom line is precious to the global train manufacturers. Equally, they know they can't dismiss the national location of train manufacturing as mere maudlin sentimentality. 'It's too late for Washwood Heath,' says Bob Charles, a fitter at the factory since 1988. 'But trains manufactured abroad won't always be cheaper.'

Bombardier, a French-Canadian company, is left flying the flag for British train building at Derby. The order book is healthier. The factory's 2,300 employees have to build 47 trains for London's Victoria Line underground network. Try telling them that the British train building industry is dead heritage and not living history.

HITACHI

Chris Randall **finds out the Japanese company's secret of success**

The broad smiles on the faces of the Japanese executives spoke volumes. Grouped in small clusters around the Hitachi stand at last month's Railtex exhibition they enthusiastically demonstrated examples of high-tech wizardry, ranging from the latest in train control to sophisticated passenger information systems.

But it was a mock-up of Hitachi's 'A' train that most visitors to the stand had come to see – and the reason why the Japanese were looking cock-a-hoop. Only the week before, the Transport Secretary Alistair Darling had announced that Hitachi had been selected to

TAKING

A decade ago, commuters in the Midlands were travelling on 'hand-me-downs' from the London Tilbury and Southend railway. These clapped-out old bone-shakers, which had definitely seen better days, were the trains that had earned LTS the title, 'Misery Line'. Little wonder, then, that Central Trains couldn't wait to get rid of them when the much-delayed Class 323 electric multiple units finally arrived.

Although they suffered a catalogue of failures when they entered service, the 323s, which were the first new trains in the Midlands for several years, are now the workhorse of the local rail network. Their arrival was followed by an avalanche of new rolling stock, leaving long-suffering passengers feeling like they had won the rail version of the lottery.

The introduction of new rolling stock, which began almost as soon as the sell-off of British Rail had been completed, has been one of the success stories of rail privatisation. One company, Chiltern Railways, invited tenders for new trains before it had actually won an operating franchise. As a result it became the first to place an order for new trains post-privatisation. A £19m contract placed with Derby-based Adtranz finally brought to an end a three-year gap, during which no mainline

HITACHI'S WAITING GAME

build 30 high-speed 'A' trains to operate domestic services on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (CTRL).

The contract – reported to be worth anywhere between £200m and £500m – ended a five-year wait for Hitachi as it attempted to break into the UK train market. 'The Japanese are prepared to play a long game,' says Alistair Dormer, business development director for Europe. A tentative move at developing a replacement for Mark 1 slam-door trains in the late 1990s was followed by a serious bid for a contract to build metro trains for Connex in south London. When both failed, Hitachi focused its efforts on winning the CTRL deal.

The reason for Hitachi's surprise success at securing such a high-profile contract is, says Dormer, simple. 'We have the best product. Hitachi train reliability is absolutely fantastic.'

Dormer joined the company two years ago

from Alstom. He says he was struck by the 'can do' culture at Hitachi. 'Engineering excellence is at the core of everything we do. There is a sense that what we are doing today is never good enough; improvement is all that matters.'

The 'A' trains, which are modelled on the world-famous bullet train, will be built and tested in Japan before being shipped to Britain in 2007 for a further 18 months of trials. The first trains are due to come into service in 2009, carrying passengers at speeds of up to 140mph to the new St Pancras International station.

In an example of Japanese thoroughness, Hitachi has already spent £1m 'rail-testing' the electrical equipment that will power the 'A' train. 'It is housed in a scruffy old BR train that has been running around between Ilford and Southend,' explains Dormer. 'The idea is to

make absolutely sure that the new train is reliable and won't interfere with track circuits.'

Once the contract for the new trains is signed, probably early next year, Hitachi will begin recruiting British engineers to the project. Dormer says they will spend time in Japan 'learning the Hitachi approach to business'.

Hitachi is already looking to the future. It's next target is to win the bid to replace the ageing fleet of 30-year old High Speed Trains currently used on inter-city routes.

For now though, Alistair Dormer is concentrating on being ready for 2009. 'Winning this contract has been big news,' he says. 'Hitachi is a big company that employs 350,000 people worldwide. But the day after the announcement that we had won the CTRL contract I received a call from the company president. That's how important it is.'

STOCK

Order books for new trains have been bulging ever since rail privatisation was completed in the mid-1990s. Peter Plisner looks at the impact this has had on the Midlands rail network



The 'A' train will reduce journey times for commuters between Kent and London.

rolling stock was built for operation in the UK.

Chiltern's new trains saw passengers in the Midlands reaping the benefit of a high-quality 'Clubman' service to London. Chiltern's plan was to use the Class 168 trains as an alternative to Virgin's West Coast Main Line. At the same time, commuters on Chiltern's outer London suburban network were casting envious glances and wondering when they would get new trains.

They didn't have long to wait. The success of the Clubman service resulted in further orders, this time for 'off-the-shelf' diesel Turbostars which, at one point, were coming off the assembly line like a mass-produced car. The train was also snapped up by Midland Mainline and Central Trains, providing more new trains for the Midlands.

The really big orders, however, were still to come. Virgin's success in winning the Cross Country and West Coast franchises was achieved with bold bids, that promised new train fleets for both franchises, complete with tilting technology that hadn't been seen on Britain's railways since the demise of the ill-fated Advanced Passenger Train.

Competition for the orders was fierce, with GEC-Alstom eventually winning the contract to build Pendolino trains for the West Coast and

Adtranz, which by then had been taken over by the Canadian company Bombardier, selected to build Voyagers for Cross Country. The £1bn contract won by Bombardier covered the design and building of the new Voyager and Super Voyager trains, as well as a maintenance contract up to the end of the existing Cross Country franchise in January 2012.

Turning vision into reality, however, proved more difficult than anyone imagined. The Voyagers were the first of the new Virgin trains to take to the tracks. At the launch in Birmingham in September 2002, Virgin promised nothing less than a revolution in train travel, with more services to more places and a clock-face timetable so easy to remember that passengers were encouraged to tear up their pocket timetables and 'just turn-up-and-go'. Unfortunately, Operation Princess, as it became known, didn't quite go to plan. Just three months after introducing the new timetable amid much fanfare, Virgin was forced to reduce the number of services. On top of that, the Voyagers suffered a number of embarrassing failures, including breakdowns at Dawlish Warren in Devon, when sea water played havoc with the train's electrical system, and in Staffordshire, when a bird landing on the train roof brought the state-of-the-art vehicle to a standstill.

Since their launch, passengers have complained the trains are frequently overcrowded and don't have enough space for luggage. Last year, Virgin announced that it would carry passengers' cases by road during the summer months in an effort to ease the problem. A Virgin spokesman said: 'We thought that sending luggage by road would help to make their train journey more comfortable.' Despite these problems, the Voyagers are popular with passengers, particularly in the Midlands where, at busy times, Voyagers arrive at New Street station in Birmingham every two minutes.

Earlier this year, passengers experienced the second phase of the 'Red Revolution' when Virgin began running Pendolino tilting train services. Designed in Italy and built at Alstom's Washwood Heath factory in Birmingham, the train has a top speed of 140mph and, like the Super-Voyagers, the ability to tilt on the many bends on the West Coast, helping to significantly reduce journey times.

But even more than the Voyagers, the introduction of the Pendolinos was beset with problems. The descent of the West Coast



Transforming travel: Meridian trains have helped Midland Mainline double its capacity.

'Virgin promised a revolution in train travel with more services to more places and a clock-face timetable so easy to remember that passengers were encouraged to tear up their pocket timetables and "just turn-up-and-go"'

modernisation scheme in to chaos and the collapse of Railtrack, ended dreams of 140mph and put a giant hole in Virgin's business plan. What we have today is fewer services than originally planned and modest reductions in journey times, instead of the dramatic ones that were envisaged. Even so, it would be churlish to overstate the problems. The popularity of the Pendolinos can be gauged by the reported reaction of passengers who groan when, occasionally, old trains arrive in their place.

Completing the picture, is the Meridian, the fourth and most recent new train in the Midlands. It was Midland Mainline's (MML) second new train purchase since privatisation. Like the Voyager, it was designed to replace the ageing HST fleet and enable MML to phase out the Class 170 trains, which are being cascaded to other parts of the National Express rail empire.

The similarities with Virgin's Voyagers are not coincidental, as the Meridians are also built by Bombardier. Features include front and rear track monitors, which allow views of the track, and a Train Protection Warning System in each cab. Each carriage contains around 20 miles of wiring and, like the Voyagers, the Meridian has a top speed of 125 mph. The new trains are being built at Bombardier's Wakefield plant, with body shells assembled in Belgium. In all, 23 trains consisting of 127 carriages will help double MML capacity, where passenger growth of more than 50 per cent has been achieved since privatisation.

But embarrassingly for MML, it's recently emerged that some of the Meridians might already be surplus to requirements, following a decision by the Strategic Rail Authority not to fund a planned service between Leeds and London. MML is now having to consider how else they could use the new trains. One suggestion is that they could be used by Virgin Trains.

Now, with the paint on the Meridians hardly dry, comes news of yet another new train, which again appears bound for the Midlands, this time with Central Trains and Silverlink on the West Coast Main Line. Siemens' class 350 Desiro is currently on test in Germany. Thirty of these high-performance vehicles will be used alongside the Pendolinos between London and Liverpool. The trains, with a top speed of 100mph, are a key part of the SRA's West Coast strategy.

Complete with dual voltage traction, for use on Silverlink routes in north and south London, the four-car trains will be maintained by Siemens, which has won a 20-year maintenance contract. And to complete the success story for the Midlands, a new maintenance depot will be built in Northampton with the creation of 100 new jobs.



Siemens Class 350 is Midlands-bound.

Peter Plisner is the BBC's Midlands transport correspondent.