

# Britain's most unloved trains?

## NEWS ANALYSIS 2: NEW SCRAP

*What do you do with a nearly-new train that nobody seems to want? That's the dilemma that rolling stock leasing company Porterbrook faces if South West Trains' desire for Desiros is to win over its jaded and jinxed Junipers, as Paul Clifton explains*

SOUTH WEST TRAINS WANTS TO HAND BACK ITS unloved Alstom-built Junipers. The train operator loathes them. This is a problem for Porterbrook, the rolling stock leasing company that owns the trains.

Unlike a car dealer, Porterbrook can't just knock a couple of thousand pounds off the profit margin to get lower budget buyers through the showroom door. By the time the lease on the Class 458 trains ends in a year's time, there will be a surplus of new third-rail electric trains. It will be a buyer's market and there is a strong possibility that £90m of five-year-old trains will end up stuck in sidings. For Alstom, it would be the worst possible advertisement.

'We should have painted £ signs on them. Because that's the only thing they're good for,' said a South West Trains source. 'Alstom has had to pay a fortune in compensation for poor performance of the train. They have been hopelessly unreliable. The very first day we can hand them back to Porterbrook, we will do so. That will be in February 2005. Of course, SWT would much prefer to have reliable rolling stock that can run for more than a handful of miles without breaking down.'

That's an understatement. After four years carrying passengers, South West Trains' Junipers are still only managing a little over 4,300 miles between breakdowns – and that's an average figure across the whole of 2003. A recent period dropped back below 4,000.

The desperate statistics are in part to blame for the terminal decline of Alstom's Washwood Heath production line. One would struggle to find a single person at SWT with a good word to say about its output.

So what went wrong, and what are the implications? 'The trains are trash. Atrocious,' said the SWT source. 'The latest problem is with the appalling build quality. When it rained in November, the cab roofs started leaking. The electrics went haywire. The train management system

Jaded Juniper...



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is also unreliable. It's complex and it's not user friendly.

'The traction package is actually very good, but the drivers don't have confidence in the trains. If you were a driver, would you be happy taking out a train that has a fair chance of not completing the day's diagram, and dealing with the disruption that causes?'

Compare this performance with South Central's Electrostars. They've had teething troubles, certainly, but they are now running at 19,000 miles per casualty and the train builder is contractually obliged to reach 40,000 miles per casualty in a year's time.

But here's another comparison. Gatwick Express's Class 460 Junipers are almost identical to the SWT fleet. Yet the Gatwick trains run happily along at 17,609 miles per casualty as a 2003 average, and the most recent four-week period shows 34,469 miles per casualty.

How can South West Trains' figures be so different?

'Bad maintenance and bad reliability go hand in hand,' I was told by a manager outside SWT. 'Gatwick Express has a strong maintenance regime, and it has one of the most reliable new trains anywhere on the network. SWT doesn't. They're not bad trains intrinsically but, unloved, they can be terrible trains.'

Another factor, of course, is that the Gatwick trains run a non-stop express route – whereas the SWT rolling stock is on a tougher, frequent stop commuter regime on the busy Waterloo to Reading line.

Perhaps the trains were never really wanted in the first

place. Remember that, when Stagecoach bought Porterbrook, buying some new trains for SWT was a sweetener to secure the deal. They were not a requirement of the original seven year franchise. In fact, the fine print of the contract apparently said Stagecoach/Porterbrook only had to 'procure' the trains, which is different from actually having to run them.

If they are handed back and there are no takers, it will be the first time a rolling stock leasing company has caught a cold. In theory, the Junipers could be converted for use outside the southern region, but would potential users entrust Alstom to do the work? And pick up the bill when better-performing alternatives are available?

'Whether the trains come out of service in 2005 depends on the success of the Desiros,' said Porterbrook's Rupert Brennan-Brown. 'Reliability is improving now, helped by having Porterbrook and Alstom people at Wimbledon where they are maintained. But we admit the reputation of the 458s is going to struggle to recover.'

If it doesn't recover, the Rosco will have to accept a big financial knock. It took the risk, and it hasn't paid off. It will have to take the pain, and it's reasonable to assume Porterbrook has made provision to write them off. Until now, every post-privatisation train that has been built has been put to good use, and speculative orders have been snapped up. If Porterbrook believes the trains are essentially sound, and finds itself unable to shunt all the blame for past problems onto Alstom, it may alter the way Roscos go about ordering rolling stock in future.

'The most likely outcome is that a £90m investment is going to rust in the sidings. Nobody wants these trains,' said my SWT informant.

The other third rail users won't need them. South Eastern and South Central are each part way through their rolling stock replacement programme and each has as many Electrostars as it needs. It seemed unthinkable only three or four years ago, but there will be glut of new commuter rolling stock.

By the middle of this month, SWT will have 17 Desiro sets in passenger service. With delivery reaching a peak in the spring, two or three more will arrive every week. More trains than SWT needs have been ordered. The company will take 10 of the five-car Class 450 trains, but shorten them to four-car formations. The rest will have to be sent somewhere else. The Government has underwritten their purchase, so the industry is obliged to take them from Siemens. Their most likely destination is for commuter services on the West Coast Main Line, which are currently operated by Silverlink.

There is one glimmer of hope for the trains. If the leasing costs were to be reduced dramatically, they could be of interest to marginal routes that would not normally merit new rolling stock. The East London Line is small and self-contained, and the trains could continue to be maintained at Wimbledon. That would depend on the reliability being improved, but it would be a huge waste if the trains were left to rot.

The trains themselves aren't bad to ride on – especially for Reading line passengers who have spent the last three decades travelling on some of the oldest Mark One slam-door stock. The seating is a bit tight, and the 458s could easily win an award for Britain's ugliest train. But they were always intended for high volume, outer suburban routes on which there was never going to be enough room for every passenger to have a seat.

But, until their reliability can be improved five-fold or more, the SWT's Junipers can probably justify their sobriquet of being Britain's most unloved train.



Desirable Desiro...