

## COMMENT : SLAM DOOR SAVIOURS

**Condemned as unsafe after the Clapham rail disaster nearly two decades ago, the last remaining Mark One 'slam door' trains are finally due to be taken out of service later this year. But, as Paul Clifton reports, one train operator believes the 40-year-old relics could be the key to securing the future of a little-used branch line in Hampshire**

Most slam door trains are heading for the scrap heap. But not the one from the Lymington branch line. The kids at the local college call it their 'Lymo', which isn't far from the truth, as once lessons have started each morning, the service runs almost empty.

The journey from the picturesque market town of Lymington to the main line junction at Brockenhurst takes just 10 minutes. And, if you exclude the college kids, it usually carries fewer than 10 passengers.

'It gets a bit busier in summer,' says the conductor, Margaret Young, 'A few people get

the ferry from Lymington to the Isle of Wight. But the train is never full.'

As the law stands, the last slam door trains will have to be withdrawn in the next few months. A new four-car Desiro is lined up as a replacement on the Lymington branch line. It cost £4m to build, which translates as a lease charge of £30,000 a month. The economics of running a train like this on such an underused line don't stack up.

So to cut costs, South West Trains has asked Her Majesty's Railway Inspectorate (HMRI) for permission to keep the 40-year-old trains running for many years to come.

Margaret Young reckons it's a good idea. 'Lots of people go and see steam trains. Well, soon the younger generation will be coming here to see what rail travel was like in the olden days!'

That's exactly what SWT's managing director, Andrew Haines, is planning.

'We think there's an opportunity to develop a heritage line, with the last of the Mark Ones. It would stimulate business on the route. We'll get a pair of Mark Ones – spick and span, so they're something to be proud of – re-paint them in the original BR colours, improve facilities for disabled passengers and create good fit-for-purpose trains.'

HMRI isn't yet saying what it thinks of the idea. After all, it wants slam doors to be abolished on safety grounds. But the Strategic Rail Authority is enthusiastic. It fits well with its Community Rail Partnership strategy, cutting costs and using imaginative local marketing to boost passenger numbers.

'Driving a new Desiro is certainly an experience,' says Steve Morns, leaning out of the cab window of a Mark One at Brockenhurst station. 'But these old trains are still good. They're fantastically reliable and they've got a good few years of life in them yet. And if it puts this line on a stronger footing, that's got to be a good thing.'

SWT is buying the trains outright from the current owners, HSBC Rail, thereby ridding itself of lease charges. 'There's an argument that HSBC Rail ought to pay us to take them on, because it saves the cost of scrapping them,' says SWT's Andrew Haines. 'As you can imagine, there are some more conversations to be had there!'

Is a Mark One actually worth anything?

'I guess the issue is where you can use them. There are not exactly many third rail 750 volt operators in the world, and that's why the trains are all being scrapped. This is a good opportunity to deliver an economical solution and retain a bit of our unique southern region rail heritage.

'The operating costs will be very efficient. The trains don't do a lot of miles. There's no issue with the track – it was all re-laid this time last year. So we can see what the Lymington line is going to cost for a number of years ahead.

'It's a genuine win-win-win. We've got one of the most over-crowded networks in the country and we can usefully re-deploy the spare new stock; we can stimulate interest in



South West Trains driver Steve Morns says Mark One trains are 'fantastically reliable' and believes they could help secure the future of the Lymington line.

Golden oldies? If South West Trains gets its way, Mark One trains could be running on the Lymington branch line for decades to come.



the branch line; and we can develop some local pride.'

Every passenger I spoke to was in favour of the idea. There was no dissent. For such a short journey, the train was considered adequate. 'Archaic' and 'cold' were about the most critical comments offered.

SWT had previously considered de-electrifying the line, and running a Class 170 diesel instead, extending a local service that already runs across Southampton. It had the opportunity when the line was closed for two months last year for re-laying, but couldn't get a decision from the SRA. The moment passed.

The biggest safety issue with Mark Ones is about performance in a collision, or what is sometimes referred to as their 'crash worthiness'. The low-speed Lymington line has a single three-car train shuttling back and forth on its own, so all it could ever hit is a buffer at

the harbour or a vehicle on a level crossing. But the train would still have to run on the main line to Bournemouth for routine maintenance.

'It would run as empty stock, and we can demonstrate that the risk on that is marginal,' says Haines. 'We've yet to hear if HMRI has any objections. It's not raised any fundamental issues so far. The outstanding issue is whether or not to fit secondary door locking. It's technically feasible, but our risk assessment suggests it is not necessary. And if we are trying to build a sustainable future for the line, we ought not to be imposing unnecessary costs.'

The idea is not dissimilar to the nearby Island Line, which is also run by Haines. Its former London Underground trains were built in 1938. But with recently refurbished interiors, they are the most reliable trains in

the country. They can go for months without a cancelled service.

A quirky little railway for the Isle of Wight passes largely unchallenged by people on the mainland. But an almost equally quirky connection through the New Forest to a town with a high percentage of wealthy yacht owners and a ferry terminal is a bigger step.

By the time it could get HMRI approval, SWT expects to have withdrawn all its other Mark One stock. That should happen by April or May. SWT was the last third-rail operator to start slam door replacement, but it expects to be the first to the finish the job – except for the Lymington branch, where the 'Lymos' could continue for decades.

The final decision rests with the safety inspectors. If they approve, this will soon be the only place in Britain to catch what will become a 'heritage' slam door train.