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Virgin Trains finally tilts into action

Virgin Trains has launched its first tilting train into passenger service. This is the key stage in the 20-week countdown to full tilt service, which will start on 27 September.

Sir Richard Branson joined reporters and regular travellers on the history-making run by boarding the 09:35 Reading-to-Manchester Virgin Trains CrossCountry service, which then proceeded to take advantage of its tilt system between Oxford and Banbury.

Clearance of the Oxford to Banbury route for tilt running has been a vital component in ensuring that the CrossCountry fleet can take full advantage of higher speeds on the West Coast Main Line, as various sections are progressively upgraded. This September's timetable will reflect the higher speeds with improved journey times.

The ground-breaking train was a Class 221 Super Voyager diesel, capable of a top speed of 125mph, one of only two types of train in the UK authorised to tilt, the other being the Pendolino electric train, which operates on the West Coast Main Line.

A rigorous safety certification process has been successfully completed, including a new 'Tilt and Speed Supervision' safety system, for controlling both tilt and speed. The challenge is now to have all drivers fully trained, and trains suitably modified, for tilt running for the September timetable.

Speaking from the train, Branson said: 'This is a landmark day for the rail industry. Within a few months, two fleets of tilting trains will be bringing faster and more comfortable journeys on one of Britain's busiest main line arteries. Virgin Trains is delighted to be bringing some of the UK's biggest population centres closer together and improving people's quality of life.'

Branson also visited Alstom's factory at Washwood Heath, in Birmingham, to congratulate the workforce on a mission accomplished, as the last of 53 Pendolino trains started its journey

down the production line. The 900-strong workforce turned out to join the event as Richard toured the Alstom factory at Washwood Heath and congratulated the workforce on their commitment to the project. He said: 'We are delighted with the quality of the Pendolino trains that are coming off the production line. I would congratulate the whole workforce at Washwood Heath on a tremendous achievement.'

He then presented Alstom's workforce with the 'Mission Accomplished', nameplates to fit to the completed train.

Branson then offered the 900-strong workforce a First Class family return to London, to sample at first hand the trains they had built. He then gave away a free family flight to Florida, as well as two runner-up prizes of first class family tickets, valid on all Virgin Trains services for a whole year.

Virgin Trains has ordered 53 state-of-the-art tilting Pendolino trains ^ each costing more than £11 million. From 27 September, they will be operating the majority of train services to and from London Euston, travelling at speeds of up to 125mph and tilting. This will enable frequencies to be increased, and journey times to be reduced.

More than 525 train services are already operated by the new Pendolino trains every week – operating half of all services on the routes to and from London Euston. More services will be converted to Pendolino over the summer months, as the old train fleet is withdrawn from service by the autumn.

Pendolino offers all passengers an on-board audio system, with a selection of music and radio channels. There are also power points to enable passengers to charge mobile phones or to power laptop computers. The award-winning onboard shop offers a wide range of hot and cold food, alcoholic and soft drinks, books, magazines, CDs, sweets and toiletries.

Eurostar's high-speed celebrations

Eurostar, the high-speed train service that carries passengers between the UK, France and Belgium, has completed its 10,000th passenger service on the Channel Tunnel Rail Link. Services began on the new line on 28 September 2003.

The 10,000th train was the 08:13 from Brussels, arriving in London at 09:28 – a timetabled journey of just two hours and 15 minutes that actually took just two hours and 10 minutes.