

A real one-off

PAUL CLIFTON FINDS OUT HOW TIM CLARKE,
MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE FRANCHISE
FORMERLY KNOWN AS GREATER ANGLIA,
HAS ENDED UP WORKING FOR HIS THIRD
SET OF BOSSES IN LESS THAN A YEAR

TIM CLARKE HAD BEEN IN CHARGE OF ONE FOR EXACTLY A fortnight when we met in his office. One what? This is confusing. I mean 'one' – without a capital O – the new lower-case-only name for the Greater Anglia franchise.

The managing director's office is not really a place he can call his own. The new management of the former WAGN, Anglia and Great Eastern combination is camping out in the latter's rather shabby old offices in Artillery Lane, a short stroll from London's Liverpool Street. The journey from agreeing the franchise to starting operations has been only two months long, and there has not yet been time to sort out offices.

So Tim Clarke has been borrowing Bob Breakwell's old room. The shelves are empty. So are most of the picture hooks. Even the cardboard boxes under the window look empty. We perch on the sort-of cheap, black, leather home-office chairs that seem to be permanently on sale in Office World and Staples. In the lobby there's an absurdly large coffee vending machine – with the pressures of the last few weeks, they probably need it.

'We've got to do a lot of talking, a lot of wearing out of shoe leather,' Clarke said, setting out his stall. 'Yesterday afternoon I was in Ilford; this morning I came via Cambridge on a West Anglia service. We've got to get out and about to demonstrate that it's all one operation now.'

Tim Clarke had anticipated running the new franchise for GB Railways, his parent company at Anglia. He was caught by surprise when his bosses sold out to rival bidders, who they had previously criticised for being too big to concentrate sufficiently on detail. Then First Group failed to win it, leaving him with a job that was about to disappear. But the winner,

National Express, came knocking despite him being on the losing side. So although Tim Clarke represents continuity, he's now working for his third set of bosses in less than a year.

'There were two areas of disappointment. Anglia obviously was disappointed when our owners, GB Railways, sold out to First. That was quite a shock. After that, everyone on the railway saw us as odds-on favourites for the franchise. We had Great Eastern and Anglia, two of the best performing train operators anywhere in the country. With all our knowledge, ability, record of achievement – oh yes... losing was a big surprise to everyone.'

Clarke is not clear why the National Express bid was better. This was the best explanation he could give:

'I think the SRA set two targets. One financial and one quality. Once you got a certain level above the quality target, then if you had a cheaper price, you won. Beyond a certain level of quality, the SRA is effectively making choices about what it wants to pay for.'

In fact, the SRA isn't really paying for much anyway. 'one' will make premium payments to the Government throughout its franchise – around half a billion pounds in total. These are some of the country's most profitable railway lines.

As three franchises combine into 'one', most of the previous company directors have been left without jobs.

First Great Eastern's MD, Theo Steel, has become projects director. The new customer services director, Andrew MacPherson, has come through P&O. And the director of Network Rail's East Anglia region, Mark Phillips, has been brought in as operations director.





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The branding of ‘one’ is certainly unusual, and it hasn’t impressed everyone. Within the overall image, each of the old groupings is also retaining its previous identity. So there’s one Anglia, one Great Eastern, one Stansted Express and one WAGN.

‘If you struggle around a traditional railway name, you inevitably end up losing the well-known names. As Anglia we’d got penetration of up to 90 per cent awareness of the name. We didn’t want to throw all that work away. And passengers usually only experience the service group they are on – ‘one’ to them may be one Anglia or one Great Eastern, and they may never see one Stansted Express.’

Jonathan Denby, the other Anglia director who has transferred to the new company, chipped in: ‘one is in no way a traditional railway-type name. A conductor on the train up this morning said some of the older passengers in particular found it more of a departure – younger people accepted it more easily.’

So what are the challenges of the next couple of years?

‘We got to get to grips with the fleet branding,’ said Tim Clarke, ‘including the cascading of Mark Three coaches from Virgin West Coast to our Norwich route. That will be complete by December 2005. We’ve got new timetables in December 2004 and December 2005. The watershed is the new off-peak, two-hourly services to Lowestoft and Peterborough from Liverpool Street.’

‘There’s also a slight unravelling from the original privatisation at Ipswich, where we’re going down from four trains to three an hour. When you talk to non-railway



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lighter on our feet, and you have got to keep that responsiveness. But I have always found that getting people focused is easier when they are part of one organisation. As long as you haven't got the political and financial processes that BR was subject to.'

So could he see vertical integration in East Anglia?

'Oh yes. East Anglia's been trodden over so many times as a pilot area, because it's neat. You can get your hands round it. So if you're going to try it, this is an obvious region. Is it what I would like to happen? Yes, when the railway is ready for it.' Clarke hesitates. 'That's on a purely personal level. I've got to be careful – I don't want to get shot for talking out of turn! But having the least complex chain of decision-making to get a problem fixed is usually the best choice

people about this they get upset. But in actual fact, everyone at Ipswich could happily fit on three trains. The fourth was rail-on-rail competition for revenue, which was not the best use of the public purse.

'And there's the culture change programme. We've got two main customers: the passengers and the SRA. The new contract structure is driving a lot of what we do. It's not like before, where they said: "Here's your franchise, see you in seven years." There's a quality service standard, a performance trajectory – which is very much more invasive. The level of scrutiny is something I'm not a stranger to, because it is similar to the level imposed on Anglia two years ago after its financial restructuring.'

'In some ways it's a natural evolution. There were a lot more fears at privatisation than there are now. We're actually in the fortunate position of putting bits of the railway back together, which some people really like. We know what each bit of this railway does really well, and we're seeking to combine the best of the ideas. This isn't a step into the unknown.'

So how much further would he go down the route of putting the bits back together? What would Tim Clarke like to see coming out of the Government's review of the railways?

There's a small intake of breath. And a slightly sharper one from his PR chief, Jonathan Denby. Overtly political questions, in the current climate, seem to require overtly circumspect answers.

'The acid test for me is whether it makes the railway easier to operate. If a warning board falls over on a wet Tuesday evening, the speed that a guy gets to that warning board and puts it up again can make a phenomenal difference to our day's performance, and to what passengers experience. The guy's desire to get there and get that board back up is what has to be created. Privatisation made us

of what you do with a train on a piece of track at any given moment. That applies whether it's timetabling or recovering from a track failure.'

Tim Clarke talked at length about his plans for creating a culture change among the staff. It's all about encouraging involvement at every level, of stakeholder relations, of 'meet the manager' sessions, team building and bonding. Creating a spirit of identity.

This is where Anglia's reputation was made, and why it won awards. Clarke would argue it was also part of the reason why Anglia consistently had the highest growth in passenger numbers of any train operator.

But this isn't the sort of talk we have heard before from his new masters at National Express. They've not always enjoyed the best of reputations for customer relations.

'I think they recognise that,' explained Clarke. He won them over to his approach, arguing that the close focus on passenger groups, lineside neighbours and employee relations had paid dividends, even if quantifying their financial return was difficult. It helped make Anglia the Train Operator of the Year at this year's Rail Business Awards.

'Most important for me is delivering the culture change. It's a strange phrase but I mean the human bit, the bonding together. I think if you can make the operational people feel good about what they do, they will deliver a good service. That's what I've been saying to staff: it's your business, how do you want to feel about it?

'We want to be the top franchise. I know it's a glib sort of thing people want to say. But unless you have that aspiration, you don't get the best from people. We want to be the best performing train operator. A lot of people in the industry say it's easy to be the best if you're small, like GNER or Chiltern or Anglia. To be the best and be one of the biggest is something no-one else has done. Yet.'