

# HAINES

## TAKES THE LISTENING TEST

**Train companies regularly claim to be listening to what their customers tell them. But is that really true? Rail Professional put the theory to the test by bringing South West Trains' managing director, Andrew Haines, face-to-face with two regular passengers. Paul Clifton monitored the outcome**

PHOTOGRAPHY: PAUL CLIFTON

A couple of passengers sit round a table in an office overlooking the busy platforms at London's Waterloo Station. They have free rein to ask Andrew Haines whatever they like. He's promised to give straight answers.

Unsurprisingly, for a train operator whose current performance is bumping along at the bottom of the London commuter league, most questions are about punctuality and the imminent timetable changes.

### OUR PASSENGERS

John Friedberger from Hampshire sits on the Rail Passengers Committee for southern England. Jim Reside from Chiswick is a member of the South West Trains Passengers Panel. Neither has conducted an interview like this before.

### TIMETABLES

**John Friedberger:** 'Is re-casting the timetable in December going to make your services any more reliable?'

**Andrew Haines:** 'We started planning the new timetable three years ago, when we didn't know the details of the power upgrade, so we didn't know what the point to point time was going to be. We're using 1,500 amps, and at the train's capacity of 2,000 amps the journey times would have been considerably shorter. There are no plans to reach that, and I think it's a crying shame. But we had a timetable in terminal decline. Changes to safety regulations, particularly for defensive driving, and 35 per cent passenger growth in the peaks, were making the timing too fragile. And the new Desiros have longer station dwell times.'

**JF:** 'A lot of journey times will be longer than

before. Journey times from Clapham to Waterloo will vary from eight to 15 minutes. Will some trains travel more slowly or will they sit outside the station?'

**AH:** 'The West of England trains are especially affected by this. Our aspiration is to keep a very simple, robust timetable. We're trying to keep trains to the same Waterloo platforms all the time. The trade-off is that some trains will have to wait outside Waterloo for the right platform. The timing of nearly every train at nearly every station is going to alter – that's 25,000 changes every day. The last change on this scale was in 1967. Apparently it was an unmitigated disaster, with mass confusion.'

**JF:** 'We appreciate some passengers will have a better journey. But others will have a much worse deal. On the Alton line, where it already takes an hour to travel 40 miles, it's going to increase by 10

minutes in many cases. That seems an awful step backwards.'

**AH:** 'The Alton line has no extended peak journey times. But the off-peak flows, which are very small, will have some changes. If you're looking for the single worst impact of the changes, then Alton is the extreme. For those people it will be a significant impact, sure, but the numbers are extremely small compared to the large number of people who will gain.'

'Timetabling is the art of compromise. We've gone for an operationally robust one, rather than a revenue-maximising timetable. It involves 400 different work strings. Things like ticket office opening hours, how staff get to work, revenue protection diagrams, car park utilisation, train cleaning rosters, the timing of tanking of train toilets...'



Customer service... John Friedberger (left) makes a point to Andrew Haines.



## PERFORMANCE

**AH:** 'If we can lift that cloud we will be a very difficult act to beat.'

**JF:** 'But in terms of performance you are still bottom of the table. Do you still suffer staff shortages? Maybe on the maintenance side?'

**AH:** 'No. Our fleet team won Maintenance Team of the Year. Our fleet is by far the most reliable in the country. When you compare by fleet type, they're streets ahead of almost all other operators.'

**JF:** 'So what is the performance inhibitor?'

**AH:** 'There are two things. We had weekend disruption from January to May this year for major track relaying in the Waterloo corridor. Network Rail's delays here are still 50 per cent worse than before Hatfield, whereas ours are about nine per cent worse. But they're coming down on a very

**Confident: Haines predicts that in a year's time South West Trains will be the top performer in London.**

**'Timetabling is the art of compromise. We've gone for an operationally robust one, rather than a revenue-maximising timetable'**

sharp curve. Our big challenge is the introduction of new trains. At the moment we're going through a rough patch. And we've got 85 German engineers over here, working full-time on modifications to the doors, the braking systems, the TPWS, and the shoe gear. Our contract with Siemens states they have to deliver close to 60,000 miles per casualty. They're doing around 10,000 to 15,000 miles. That is actually not bad for brand new trains.'

## ROLLING STOCK

**Jim Reside:** 'If I go into a car showroom and buy a car, despite all its sophisticated software, it's 10 times more reliable than the cars I used to buy 20 years ago. Why are new trains not the same?'

**AH:** 'Imagine if you had bought a car in 1967, and didn't replace it until 2003. You'd have a huge technology leap. There's been no incremental development in between. *Rail Professional* has quoted me in the past as being "incandescent with rage" about the performance of other train types [the unloved Alstom Class 458 Junipers] but with these [Desiros] I'm very confident the train will come right.'

**JF:** 'But have you got enough trains, because the original order was bigger?'

**AH:** 'We did order more, but that was for the 10-car railway concept that went with a 20-year franchise. Ideally, we could eat another 15 units. Each new train costs £4m. And the extra ones are needed once a day in the morning peak for two hours. The rest of the day they'd sit in a siding. That's not an economic use of £4m.'

**JR:** 'Are you keeping the Alstom 458s on the Reading line, or are they destined to sit on a shelf?'

**AH:** 'It comes down to the economics. The Rosco [rolling stock leasing company] wants to make a return on those units and it's impossible for us to justify keeping them for the long term, given their performance. They come off lease in February and we're in negotiations to keep them for a while to tide us over Mark 1 removal and Desiro introduction. But they will go.'

**JF:** 'Is there any chance of getting some more diesel trains to strengthen the west of England line?'

**AH:** 'This is an issue for the industry. There aren't many spare diesel trains around. There will be some from Midland Mainline as the Meridians come in, and in 2006 there'll be some from TransPennine. But it's going to require a change of heart by at least some of the Roscos, because those trains are not going to be in a particularly good state. If you compare the Class 158s with our 159s, ours are much more reliable and have a far better ambiance. We spent a great deal of our money on reliability modifications. Unless a Rosco is going to invest its own money on that, they're going to have those trains parked up in a siding. If they look for the short-franchise operator to pay those refurbishment costs, it would be cheaper to buy a new train. We, as train operators, are all going to fall



Grilled: Andrew Haines (centre) listens to John Friedberger (left) and Jim Reside (right).

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**...it's a bit depressing really'**

foul of that. It is going to cause no end of grief.'

**JF:** 'From a passenger's point of view it would be crazy to have trains sitting in a siding when we're overcrowded already, and I would have thought from a commercial point of view a growing market would dictate the demand for trains.'

**JR:** 'And trains with air conditioning don't take kindly to sitting around all day. They deteriorate very quickly. Somebody has to grab this problem.'

**AH:** 'Absolutely. At the moment it's only a marginal issue. Providing trains from Salisbury to Bristol for example. But by 2006, when the TransPennine trains arrive, it's going to be very significant. The West of England line is classic territory for cascaded trains.'

**JF:** 'It's the Roscos at the heart of this. They're the flaw in the whole set-up. It would be so easy to regulate the bean counters at the banks.'

#### FRANCHISING

**JR:** 'Next year you will start bidding for a new SWT franchise. Are you getting a sense from the SRA about what sort of franchise they favour?'

**AH:** 'Let's not set up any false premises; the pitch is going to be about cost. All the indications are that they will look for low cost, value for money bids. It's a bit depressing really. From an operator's

perspective, you want a longer franchise. The shorter the franchise, the poorer value for money the Government is going to get. Because your ability to invest is reduced, the extent to which you absorb any risk is reduced. I don't believe short franchises are a sensible choice for employee stability or for serious progress.

'If the SRA does go, I don't believe the Department for Transport will want to take detailed decisions about the length of particular trains or specific station improvements. If the franchises are short, then someone's got to take the lead. We will work with whatever structures they impose, but Stagecoach has made it quite clear we need a further rationalisation of structures. The White Paper is a step towards that but we don't think it goes far enough.'

**JR:** 'What will the service be like a year from now?'

**AH:** 'We may not be top of the national performance league, but I expect us to be the top performing operator in London. You'll be able to step back and say: "These guys have got a great deal to do, but boy, have they made a difference." Because we'll have lifted the cloud of performance. I really, passionately believe that's where we're going to be.'