

Drips, delays & dignitaries - Hitachi trains enter service Monday 16th October 2016

On Monday morning we were woken by some loud noises at 6.25am. Looking out of the window, it was possible to see fireworks 1.5 miles across the city at Bristol Temple Meads. Twitter revealed that these fireworks were the send-off for the first Hitachi 800 bi-mode train (IET) out of Bristol Temple Meads, the 6.00am departure to London Paddington.



Luminaries such as Transport Secretary Chris Grayling and the Chief Operating Officer of Hitachi were in attendance at this important roll out - new IET units will gradually replace the 41-year old Intercity 125 HST trains. The delayed first IET ran under diesel as far as Maidenhead, and then picked up a further delay at the point where it switched to electric overhead wires. (Update: Hitachi say there was a problem with an air valve.) There was also a problem with the air conditioning which saw water cascade onto seats and passengers. The train arrived 40 minutes late into Paddington and was then taken out of service for the rest of the day.



In the meantime, I decided to catch the second IET service out of Temple Meads at 9.30am to see what all the fuss was about. Most people were staring at the strange sky rather than the strange train. The sun was orange with a red halo on Monday, an effect caused by Saharan dust blown north by Hurricane Ophelia.

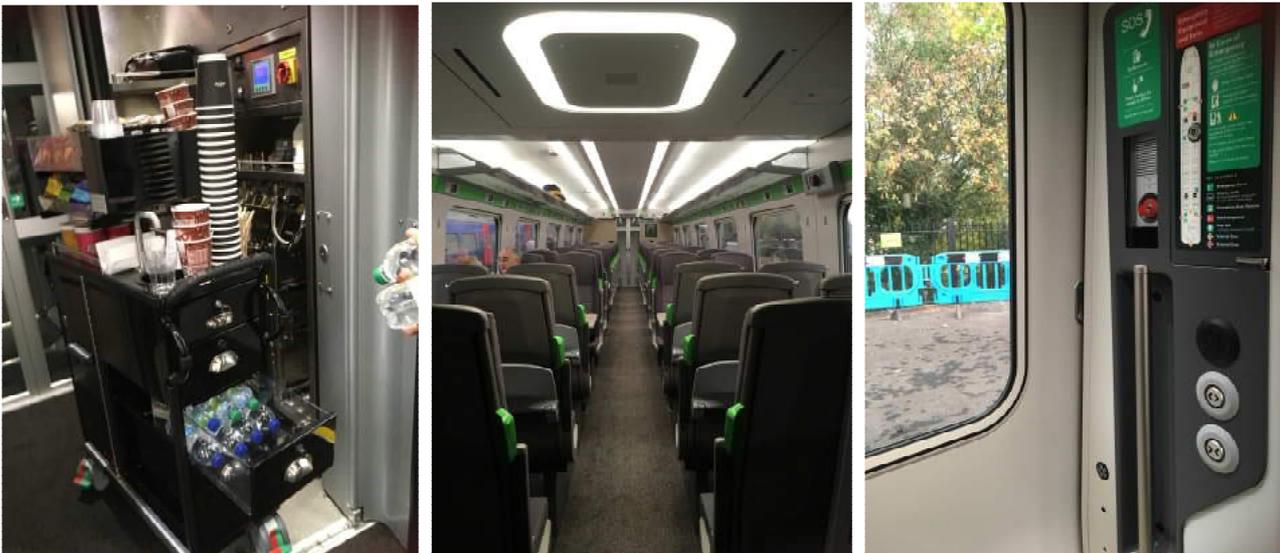


Departures	Plat	Expt
09:13 Falmouth	12	09:22
09:16 Severn Beach	1	On time
09:21 Cardiff Central		On time
09:22 Portsmouth Harbour	13	On time
09:26 Weston-super-Mare	10	On time
09:30 Edinburgh	5	On time
09:30 London Paddington	15	On time
10 coach Intercity Express Train		
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This train departed punctually so I had only 10 minutes to explore the train before disembarking at Bath. A significant change from the HSTs is the automatic button-operated door closing - no more slam doors or leaning out of the window. There is a digital reservation system but old style reservation cards seemed to be still in use. The seats are firm but adequate and a refreshment trolley was near. It is not possible to walk from one end of the train to the other - the 800s currently run as two 5-car sets coupled together (9-car units are still in production).



The advantages of the 10-car units are that they give a 24% increase in seating (652 seats) compared to an 8-car HST train. IETs have faster acceleration than the HST 125s, and can reach 125mph under electric (on specific track stretches possibly 140mph) but only 115mph when on diesel engines. The electrified section of the route will reach west to Didcot in 2018 and then Bristol Parkway (and thence Cardiff) and Thingley (Chippenham) by December 2018. Electrification beyond Thingley to Bristol Temple Meads has been "deferred". When the new timetables are introduced in early 2019 there will be a 17 minute reduction in journey time between Temple Meads and London.



Transport Secretary Chris Grayling's remarks sounded almost Trumpian in tone: "These are the smartest trains in the country, probably the best we have ever had in the country. This going to be a fantastic service, really regular trains and far more capacity."

Problems continued on Tuesday with a rock fall onto signals near St Annes Park causing delays, and ongoing issues with the doors failing to open on the 800 in some carriages.

It's hard not to feel sorry for the staff who worked on this roll out, which included a laser show at Bristol Temple Meads, fireworks and live helicopter footage of the train on approach to London. Despite relentless positive messages from the GWR social media team, news coverage inevitably focused on the technical problems and delays.

Let's hope these "teething troubles" subside. and that eventual electrification further west to Bristol Temple Meads and beyond will facilitate roll-out of the fully electric trains. I caught a Intercity 125 HST back to Temple Meads, for the moment still the workhorse of the route.