

HARROGATE LINE SUPPORTERS GROUP - NEWS BULLETIN No. 26

BREAKING NEWS

FIRST VIRGIN AZUMA TRAIN COMES TO HARROGATE!

Approaching midnight on Friday 20th April, the very first Virgin Azuma train came into Harrogate Station – marking the countdown towards the promised two-hourly service between Harrogate and London Kings Cross due to commence in May 2019.

The train came specifically to check how well it fitted against the platforms. It appeared to fit comfortably within the overall length of the platform and beneath the platform canopy. The gap between the doors and the platform edge appeared to be closer than the existing Class 43 HST trains. It successfully switched from Platform 1 to Platform 3 and went on to Skipton.

FIRST EVER VIRGIN AZUMA TRAIN IN HARROGATE STATION



Photograph by Andrew Whitworth, HLSG, 20/04/18

HARROGATE WELCOMES THE AZUMAS

The new train was welcomed by Brian Dunsby, former Chief Executive of Harrogate Chamber of Trade & Commerce, who has been campaigning for extra London trains since 2008. That was when Mark Leving then MD of Hull Trains first proposed new direct trains between Harrogate and London, but the Office of Rail Regulation declined to allocate paths for them.

Brian has since lobbied at all levels in local and national government to demonstrate why Harrogate needed more trains, both on the East Coast Main Line to London Kings Cross and on the local line to Leeds and York. This AZUMA was the first practical realisation of his vision!

Virgin Trains East Coast won the DTI's ECML franchise competition in 2014 and began operating with the existing diesel Class 43 HSTs and electric Class 91 trains in 2015 which will be replaced by the new bi-mode Class 800 Azuma trains in stages by 2019.

Harrogate Chamber has campaigned actively to get a two-hourly service to the capital. Brian said *"The six new direct services will make an enormous difference to the Harrogate economy. As a town which relies heavily on the visitor economy, both through tourism and the conference trade, strong links to London and the south of England are absolutely vital."*

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"On top of that, we have many professional service businesses in Harrogate and they need to be able to get to and from the capital with ease in order to grow and operate successfully. These new trains will make that ambition a reality and we look forward to working closely with Virgin to ensure Harrogate remains a key consideration in their East Coast operations."



Brian L Dunsby is "hands on" the first Virgin Azuma Train into Harrogate 20/04/18

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

This train was the prototype for the East Coast main-line services, built by Hitachi at Kasado in Japan and shipped to the UK. Hitachi has since constructed a new factory at Newton Aycliffe, near Darlington, where they are currently building similar trains for Great Western Railway services that are now running between London and the south-west of England.

The special test train led by engine number 800101 brought nine coaches from Doncaster Carr Depot via Wakefield and Leeds into Harrogate main station for the very first time to test the platform clearances at each door. The train stayed for over 30 minutes before moving on to repeat the station platform checks at Skipton, Keighley and Shipley

This train did not carry any fare-paying passengers – just a team of Network Rail and Virgin Trains East Coast engineers who checked the clearances between the train and the edge of the platform by each door. It started on Platform 1 and then moved northwards to the points behind the ASDA store where it reversed on the other line towards Leeds to check Platform 3.

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EAST COAST MAINLINE FRANCHISE CONCERNS

In view of the recent concerns over the future of the East Coast mainline franchise we sought assurance from Virgin who responded officially on 7th December 2017 as follows: *"We are not aware of any government plans related to the new East Coast Partnership from 2020 which will affect additional services to Harrogate, Lincoln and Bradford under our planned May 2019 timetable."*

This was also queried in the House of Lords in February 2018 as follows:

Lord Shutt Of Greetland: *Further to the announcement by the Secretary of State for Transport on 29 November that the Stagecoach–Virgin partnership would cease to operate the East Coast Rail franchise in 2020, whether they expect that the commitments in the original franchise that were due to be met before 2020 will continue to be met; and in particular, whether they expect (1) direct services from Middlesbrough to London, (2) two-hourly direct weekday services between Bradford, Harrogate, Lincoln and London, and (3) new direct peak-time services between Huddersfield and London, to be established by May 2019.*

Baroness Sugg: *We are in discussions with Stagecoach to ensure the needs of passengers and taxpayers will be met in the short term whilst laying the foundations for introduction of the East Coast Partnership from 2020. We expect to provide additional services between Lincoln, Harrogate, Bradford and London from May 2019. It remains our intention to deliver additional services to Middlesbrough and Huddersfield. Virgin Trains East Coast has contingent rights to run services from London to Middlesbrough from May 2020 and firm rights from May 2021.*

VIRGIN TRAINS EAST COAST STATEMENTS

Virgin Trains East Coast – direct Harrogate-Kings Cross services from 2019

At the September 2017 Harrogate Chamber Meeting, Paul Smith, Commercial Manager for the Central Area of Virgin Trains East Coast, outlined the benefits of the new trains.

The new Virgin Azuma trains currently being built by Hitachi start to arrive in 2018, meaning:

- 65 trains, comprising 42 electric, 23 bi-mode
- Increase from 155 to 205 services per day
- London - Leeds up to 37 per day
- London - Newcastle up to 44
- London - Edinburgh up to 27
- Direct trains every 2 hours to Harrogate, Bradford, Lincoln & Middlesbrough

From 2019, the Harrogate-Kings Cross services will be dramatically improved in frequency and speed:

Current services:

- 1 service per day north & south
- Northbound: 2 hrs 52 mins
- Southbound: 3hrs 01mins

Access Rights from May 2019 for...

- 7 services per day north & south
- Northbound: 2 hrs 37 mins
- Southbound: 2 hrs 48 mins

The new AZUMA trains are currently under construction at Hitachi's factory in Newton Aycliffe as part of the Government's £5.7 billion Intercity Express Programme.

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VIRGIN TRAINS EAST COAST STATEMENT

David Horne – VTEC update on 5th February 2018

I am writing to update you on the East Coast Main Line following the Secretary of State for Transport's franchising statement (05.02.18).

As you will be aware, the Department for Transport (DfT) announced new plans for the wider UK rail network in November 2017, including the introduction of a new public-private partnership on the East Coast route from 2020 under a new competitively tendered East Coast Partnership franchise.

We have been in discussions with the DfT to facilitate the transition to the new East Coast Partnership whilst continuing to meet, or exceed, all of our commitments to customers and taxpayers. As was made clear in yesterday's statement, the current contract will come to an end over the coming months and be replaced by a new contract. The Secretary of State has said that any new contract agreed with VTEC would be on a not-for-profit basis during the life of the contract, and we remain focused on seeking to reach an agreement.

Our highest priority is to ensure the best possible service for passengers and continue our investment programme. Since 2015, this has delivered a completely refurbished train fleet, more services to new locations, an expanded timetable, better on board journeys with first class catering, on-demand entertainment, m-ticketing and advanced purchase on the day tickets for our customers – as well as creating 300 new jobs. At the same time, we are preparing for the introduction of 65 new state-of-the-art Azuma trains in December which will see thousands of seats added to services. These passenger benefits were reflected in the recent National Rail Passenger Survey results, where we were the highest rated long distance franchise operator.

This step-change in delivery has been achieved in a challenging economic environment, with significantly lower rates of journey growth across the UK rail network and delays to future infrastructure upgrades. While we are very disappointed that passenger growth and revenue has not met our forecasts since we took over the East Coast franchise, I want to reassure you that we remain fully committed to the customers and communities we serve.

We will provide further updates in due course.

**David Horne,
Managing Director, Virgin Trains East Coast**

NEWS BULLETIN COMPILED BY

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