

The Modern Railway

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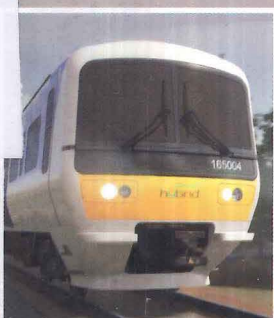
Fifteenth Edition



**THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE
UK'S RAILWAY INDUSTRY IN 2021**

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Unprecedented challenges

If there has been one word to sum up the year 2020, it would have to be 'unprecedented'. The coronavirus crisis has had a profound impact on all areas of our lives, and the rail industry is no exception.

The year began with the railways in something of a hiatus, awaiting decisions on the future of High Speed Two and the outcome of the Williams review.

On the former, there was good news when the Government backed the project, albeit with elements of Phase 2b under review through an Integrated Rail Plan setting out how the high-speed line will be phased with other enhancements such as Northern Powerhouse Rail and Midlands Engine Rail. Despite the pandemic, the go-ahead for Phase One has enabled HS2 to begin construction work, with Phase 2a onwards from the West Midlands to Crewe planned to follow not far behind. 2021 is set to be an exciting year for HS2 with many major milestones, not least the start of tunnelling through the Chilterns and the announcement of a preferred bidder for the rolling stock contract.

The Williams review was set to have more profound implications for the structure of the industry, but its publication and outcomes seem to be perpetually delayed. An overhaul of the franchise system was one expected output, but the dramatic fall in passenger demand caused by the pandemic delivered a major perturbation, requiring emergency arrangements for franchisees to enable services to keep operating.

By the autumn, the cost of this was becoming clear, and the Emergency Measures Agreements introduced in March morphed into Emergency Recovery Measures Agreements, albeit with a few exceptions, including for devolved franchises. While implying longer-term stability, in fact the ERMA's prompted tough negotiations between the Department for Transport and franchisees on the terms under which pre-existing franchise agreements could be terminated. And with passenger demand unlikely to return to pre-pandemic levels any time soon, those historic franchise agreements will not be sustainable for very long.



Changing times on the East Coast main line: in December 2019 LNER withdrew its HSTs from service, with the milestone marked by a four-day farewell tour using a set painted into the original livery. At the conclusion of the tour on 21 December, the set stands at King's Cross alongside one of the Azumas which have replaced them. **TONY MILES**

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps, in a somewhat contradictory statement, suggested the pandemic had helped accelerate some of the reforms proposed by the Williams review while at the same time continuing to delay the publication of either the review itself or a White Paper setting out its recommendations. The ambition seems to be for Direct Award contracts as a pathway to concession arrangements, but that pathway seems unlikely to be a smooth one.

A bumpy ride for the passenger sector then, but a happier picture for freight. While the sector took a hit at the height of the pandemic, this was not so pronounced as that for passenger operators and the recovery in demand was much stronger, albeit freight operators received none of the support available to franchisees. The biggest challenge for freight looks to be decarbonisation, with electric and diesel haulage the only feasible options at the moment for powering heavy freight trains.

The pandemic has perhaps averted some attention from the decarbonisation challenge, but it has also heightened awareness of issues around air quality. The publication of Network Rail's Traction Decarbonisation Network

Strategy (TDNS) and the Scottish Government's Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan both help advance the case for diesel replacement, and both point to the need for a major programme of electrification. Probably the biggest challenge will be securing funding for this in a world where the pandemic has crippled public sector finances.

A pleasing feature of 2020 was the way the railway industry knuckled down and got on with the job amidst an unprecedented situation. Whether this was keeping services running for key workers and freight deliveries or pressing on with projects, the commitment to overcome the obvious challenges does the industry great credit. Aside from HS2, both development and delivery of infrastructure schemes has made reasonable progress during the year, with much more in the pipeline for 2021.

But despite all these positives, there are uncertain times for the railway. The growing passenger demand on which so many plans for enhancement schemes were built has been obliterated in one fell swoop, and rebuilding passenger confidence and getting passengers back onto trains is a major challenge. With both business and commuting likely to be permanently affected, the

railway will need to reorient its focus to a different passenger market.

In this context, a further challenge will be to justify these major projects and enhancements and the investment they require at a time when there will be huge pressure on public finances. Rail will need to fight even harder for every bit of government expenditure, and it seems likely leaner times may be ahead.

Saying all this, the railway has faced tough times before and emerged stronger for it. How the severity of the current situation will compare remains to be seen, but the imperative of forming a united position and presenting a co-ordinated message, both to passengers and politicians, can surely never be greater.

Within these pages we present a snapshot of the industry as it stands towards the end of 2020, in the midst of all this uncertainty. There is much to celebrate and, we hope, much to look forward to, and while the journey may not be a smooth one it is sure to be interesting. ■



PHILIP SHERRATT
Editor, *The Modern Railway*

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Skegness HST: 2020 was expected to be the last year in which East Midlands Railway operated HSTs to Skegness on summer Saturdays. No 43257 leads the 12.35 Skegness to Nottingham service at Heckington on 29 August 2020, with No 43296 on the rear. **PHILIP SHERRATT**

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