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# Lancashire

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A Pendolino train in Avanti livery.

# Introducing AVANTI WEST COAST and HS2

By Andrew Harris

Virgin Trains operated the West Coast rail franchise for more than 22 years – from the 9th March 1997 to the 7th December 2019. In many ways it was a turbulent arrangement affected by disappointing work by Railtrack and Network Rail to upgrade the track and signalling – reducing maximum speeds from 140 mph to 125 – and franchise disputes in 2012 and 2014. Despite these and other problems Virgin Trains nearly trebled passenger numbers from 14 million in 1997 to 39.5 million in 2018. Passengers travelling between London and Glasgow went from 244,000 a year 10 years ago to 717,000 now. It is estimated that this diversion of travel from air and road to rail has reduced carbon emissions by a sixth.

Virgin Trains was a joint venture between the Virgin Group and Stagecoach but the franchise could not be renewed in December 2019 because

Stagecoach was disqualified due to an invalid bid in April of that year. Four months later the Department of Transport announced that the franchise to operate the West Coast rail service from the 8th December 2019 had been awarded to Avanti West Coast. The first phase runs to 2026 with the second phase running to 2031 and involving operating the new High Speed 2 railway but more of that later. But who are Avanti West Coast?

Avanti West Coast is a partnership between the Aberdeen-based FirstGroup and Trenitalia – the leading train-operating company in Italy. The partners respectively have 70% and 30% stakes in the new venture and claim to deliver an innovative railway service that is **“ready for today and fit for the future”**. They have adopted the name Avanti which means ‘Forward’ in Italian. Their new logo

represents the 400-mile mainline route which serves Lancashire and the North West and reaches Birmingham, London and Glasgow. The triangle reflects the mainline service to North Wales. Avanti promise to preserve the best of the Virgin service and introduce many improvements –

- They have taken over the fleet of 56 Pendolino trains which will be refurbished with 25,000 brand new seats, improved catering, more reliable Wi-Fi, nicer toilets, more luggage space and remodelled on-board shops.
- The diesel Voyager trains operated by Virgin on the North Wales route will be replaced by 23 brand new Hitachi trains to be built in County Durham. They are expected to come into service in 2022 and should offer the highest standard of comfort.
- Avanti have committed to providing



Avanti has ordered 23 of these Hitachi trains based on Japanese bullet-train technology. They will operate from 2022.



The Avanti logo represents the 400-mile West Coast route between London, Glasgow and North Wales.



an additional 263 services each week by 2022. These will include more trains to and from Liverpool and stops at Motherwell south of Glasgow.

- Tickets and pricing will be simplified and easier to understand, buy and exchange. Avanti promise new ticket offices and/or machines at some stations and new ways to pay online. They also promise easier ways to claim refunds when delays occur and the threshold for claims is reduced from delays of 30 minutes to 15 minutes or more.

- Avanti plan a more sustainable service. This should include more efficient energy, fuel and water usage, use of solar energy and water harvesting to create a 'cleaner and greener railway'.

Another big change will be the introduction of 'premium economy-style' fares within 3 years to give passengers more choice. It is expected that the new tickets will be priced between the existing first and standard class copying the choice already offered by many airlines.

Avanti explain that while they plan three classes of travel this will not involve creating a third type of seating or carriages. Passengers will be able to pay to sit in first-class seats but without



**Avanti aim to please passengers and dogs.**



region would open by 2027 but nobody believes it. It will run years late and possibly open in 2031 unless it is cancelled. Under the current arrangements it will be operated by Avanti West Coast and use new trains which travel at 225 miles per hour on the main or 'classic' routes reaching Crewe and Manchester. These trains will be called 'captive' and be wider than existing stock. Services running through other parts of our region and onward to Scotland will be provided by 'classic compatible' trains operating at the speeds which the new or old track permit.

It is predicted that HS2 will reduce travel times between our region and London by up to an hour. Crewe reduces from 90 to 53 minutes, Liverpool from 134 to 93 minutes and Manchester Piccadilly from 127 to 67 – saving a full hour. But the project is afflicted by massively rising costs and unforeseen technical problems. HS2 chairman Allan Cook blames poor ground conditions for pushing up costs. He says they are "more challenging than

having free food and drink. Avanti managing director Phil Whittingham confirmed that they are planning three classes instead of just two. Although the details have yet to be ironed out passengers buying the new type of ticket could have "bigger seats and better Wi-Fi and snacks instead of a meal." FirstGroup chief executive Matthew Gregory said

*"Obviously first class can be quite expensive so there are different price points between standard class and first class. It is about seeing if we can provide a more flexible offering"* Your columnist hopes they won't call it 'middle class'!

High Speed 2 is known as HS2. It was hoped that the link to our

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The remainder of our fleet to be **refurbished to as new**



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Catering with household brands



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**More services and simpler ticketing**



263 extra services per week

New and more **direct services** to London



Liverpool to have **two trains p/hour** (Mon - Sat)



More **flexible** fares



Delay **Repay 15**

**Making this railway accessible for all**





Accessible **website and app**



New journey planner to help those with **invisible disabilities**



Changing places toilets at Coventry, Preston, Stockport and Birmingham International

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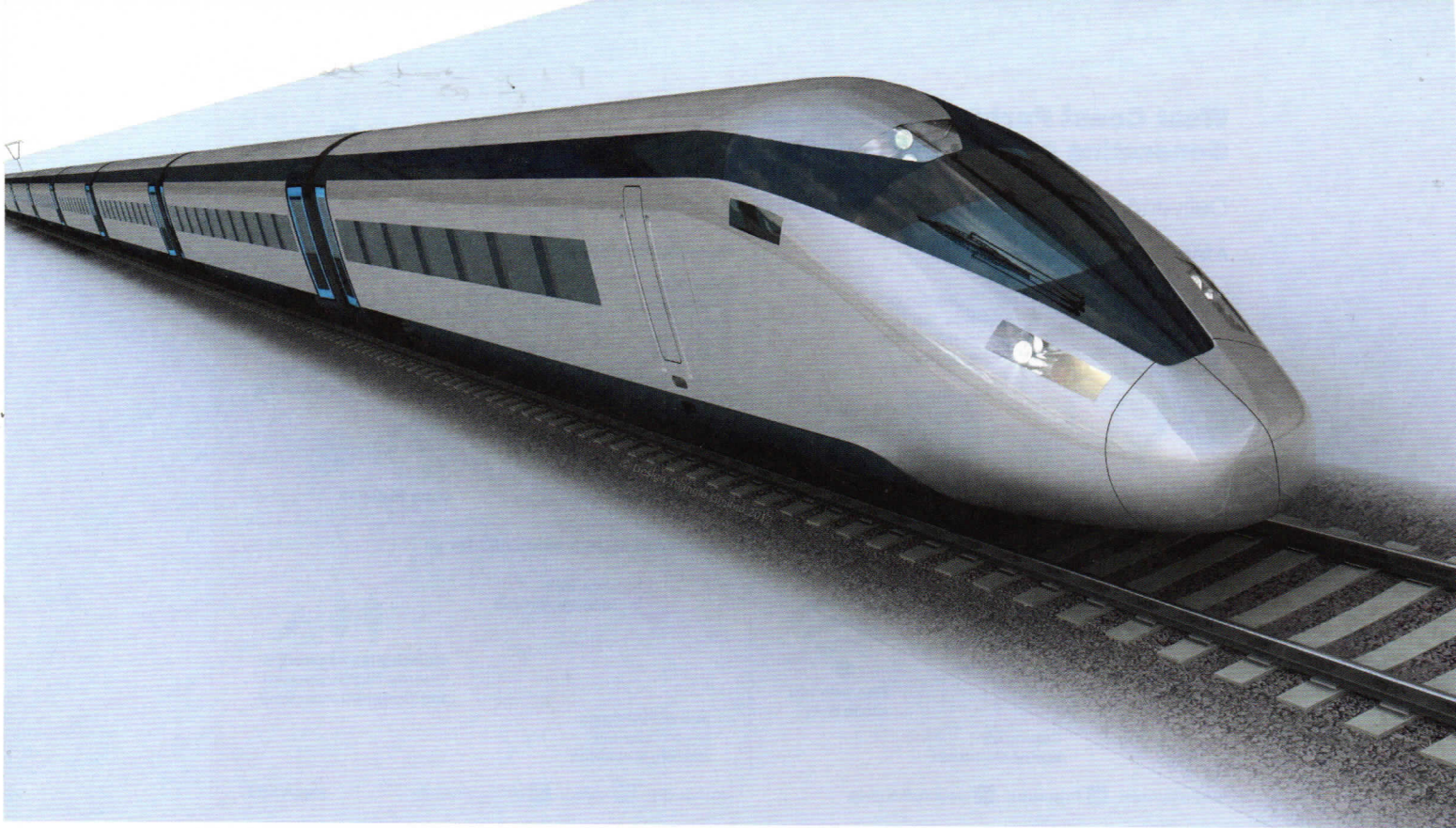
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predicted". Most tracks in the UK are embedded in crushed rocks known as ballast. The HS2 track will have to be fixed to concrete slabs to cope with the forces generated by trains travelling at 225 mph. It is feared that building the track on waterlogged land will require it to be supported by underground concrete piles to stop it sinking. Some of the expected delay and increased cost is

likely to be caused by the need to allow extra time for ground settlement or consolidation. In part of the route in the West Midlands it is said that the ground turns to 'porridge' when it rains.

So much for the future but how has it been going so far? It's early days for Avanti but on the 10th December the 10:17 – three days into their franchise - the southbound train from Preston to

Birmingham New Street only arrived in Preston at 10:50. After a further delay and without leaving Preston the service was cancelled due to windscreen wiper problems. Passengers for Birmingham New Street were advised – i.e. told – to board the 11:17 service to Birmingham New Street but this was also running late. Instead of arriving in Birmingham New Street at 12:05 passengers on the



**A Computer Generated Image of HS2.**



**The 10:17 is still called the 10:17 even when it's 10:50.**

10:17 service got there at 13:15 – 70 minutes late. The claim for a refund due to lateness can take 20 days to process.

The people of the north west deserve and need a better and more reliable mainline rail service. We hope that Avanti West Coast can provide this after their teething difficulties but the promised improvements miss the point. The main need is to have a rail service which passengers can depend upon. Your columnist's previous journey to Birmingham New Street via Virgin Trains never arrived there but

abandoned passengers at Birmingham International so he arrived at his destination 2 hours and 35 minutes late, £22.40 poorer due to the need for a taxi and a 'mission impossible' due to the loss of time. At least the delay was reduced from 155 minutes to 70. Contrary their claim, Avanti West Coast wasn't ready for this day but hopefully will become fit for the future.

**Andrew E. Harris is grateful to Avanti West Coast for the first eight images but not the recent journey. The CGI of HS2 is**



**How to make a railway more user friendly!**

courtesy of HS2 Ltd. The other images are by your columnist. Our May 2015 article 'Are we on the right track? – HS2 & the North West Economy' can be viewed at [www.andreweharris.co.uk](http://www.andreweharris.co.uk) under Published Articles/Community Topics.

