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## Virgin West Coast trains: Will anyone be nostalgic?

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**By Tom de Castella**  
BBC News Magazine

**Virgin Trains aimed to shake up the railway business when it took over the West Coast mainline. Now, having lost the franchise to FirstGroup, how will its service be remembered?**

The train is somewhere outside Stoke.

You are doing your business in the cavernous disabled toilet when you hear a disconcerting rumble and look up to see the electronic door begin to slide open. Your trousers are round your ankles.

By the time you get up and cross to the door buttons on the other side of the room there are a couple of young women peering in wide-eyed.

You stand there, one hand on the close door button, the other protecting your modesty, trying to look normal. The onlookers' expressions turn from surprise to horror. The door begins to close but at a glacial pace.

You are rooted to the spot, waiting to press the lock button. Eventually the door closes. And outside the laughter erupts.

You complete your ablutions, take a deep breath and face the music. You make eye contact with the two women and attempt a joke about Richard Branson and lavatorial humour.

But the joke is on you. Your trousers might as well still be round your ankles. You retreat to your seat, which mercifully is several carriages away. Your blushes remain all the way to Manchester Piccadilly.

This is one particularly excruciating experience of Virgin Trains, whose electronic toilets' locking method often left users as red-faced as the company livery.

When Sir Richard Branson took over the West Coast mainline in 1997, he wanted to give trains an airline-style makeover. At every stage they tried to stamp their brash, red-liveried identity on to the railway experience.

In the station there were space-age, scarlet ticket machines where the harassed passenger - already late - would have to enter a long reference number like RRXK583F using a hit-and-miss touch screen keypad.

The coloured zones on the platform - gold, purple, orange - were introduced to help passengers stand in the right place for their carriage. The practice is common on France's SNCF network. But it never really caught on in Britain and the idea soon fizzled out.

Virgin's West Coast operation will be most remembered for their sleek, new Pendolino trains. They seemed faster. But the track limited their top speed for much of their service.

Using the euphemisms of an estate agent, the train interiors are "cosy" and "compact" with a "snug" vestibule. In other words, narrow carriages, low ceilings, cramped seats with tiny windows, and luggage racks with room for a couple of bags.

The toilets smell, notes rail expert Christian Wolmar. And a faint whiff of sewage always seemed to mysteriously fill the vestibules.

When Virgin got into trains they had a reputation for excellent customer service on their airline, says Matthew Engel, author of *Eleven Minutes Late*.

A lot of this was down to detail, like serving choc ices after the in-flight movie. There were rumours that they would bring in massages for their train passengers.

In the end there were no choc ices or massages. But you got an in-flight magazine. It was all a bit disappointing for a revolutionary new train.

"I remember Richard Branson saying he wanted to create trains like aeroplanes," says Philip Haigh, business editor of *Rail* magazine. "Sadly he succeeded."

To some the seating areas seemed claustrophobic, while the toilets were vast. On a busy train, Haigh remembers seeing an entire family sitting in one of the disabled toilets.

Then there are the mysterious beeps that go off just as the traveller was being lulled into a blissful sleep.

The series of shrill chimes sound like an announcement is coming. You brace yourself for news of a delay or the arrival at your next "station stop". But nothing happens, leaving you so annoyed you are unable to get back to sleep.

The mystery surrounding the noise [has occupied train enthusiasts on message boards](#). A wrongly activated alarm in the disabled toilet is the most regularly cited explanation.

It was not all negatives. There were heavily discounted tickets for those willing to book weeks ahead and travel outside rush hour.

Virgin was the first train provider to open a shop, says Haigh. This was a real innovation. Suddenly you could go in and choose what you wanted, rather than have to ask. Magazines and newspapers were on sale.

Virgin's breakfasts have developed a loyal following, offering a fresh fruit platter, smoked salmon and scrambled egg, breakfast grill or vegetarian grill.

But not everyone has fond memories of the onboard hospitality. Engel recalls an unpleasant encounter in a Virgin shop.

He was at the counter pondering what to order when the steward addressed him using the most offensive word in the English language and urged him to choose a bacon roll. When he thought he'd misheard, the steward encouraged him to hurry up, this time using another piece of choice industrial language.

"I named the steward in my book. It was the most talked-about thing in it. The odd thing was I never heard a solitary word from Virgin's many PR people, which suggests he was bang to rights."

And announcements for the shop - an interminable list involving cold drinks, tea, coffee, hot chocolate, alcoholic beverages, toasted sandwiches, hot bacon rolls - seemed to be more long-winded than the other train companies.

The Quiet Zone - not a feature unique to Virgin - can be relied on to be full of noisy families and self-important salesmen on their mobile phones repeating "Janice, I'm losing you. Are you there?" as the train enters another tunnel.

Perhaps Virgin was no more guilty than its competitors for these problems. It wasn't necessarily the first to introduce the jarring phrase "station stop" or to provide obfuscatory explanations for delays. But it fitted the image. It had become a symbol for the new, heavily branded corporate railway.

Part of the problem was that the franchise got off to a "dreadful" start, says Engel. In the public mind it became associated with delays, cramped trains and high fares.

A single to Manchester could cost as much as £140. In TV comedy *The Thick of It*, "Virgin West Coast" was used as a term of abuse to shut someone up.

Virgin had its own reasons for being angry. The Pendolino trains were capable of 140mph but for much of their service have been limited to much lower speeds, with the blame heaped on government U-turns on upgrading the track.

Perhaps because of these problems, the company developed an aggressive PR strategy, the rail pundits note. The message the legion

of PRs pumped out of the "iconic" Virgin experience wasn't always the full story, says Wolmar.

It sought to take the credit for bringing in the new trains. But these were in the contract set by the government.

Virgin's legacy divides commentators.

Customer satisfaction levels are now running at an impressive 91%, in contrast to new franchise owner FirstGroup's 83%. It has increased passenger numbers by 10% a year recently.

And the average price paid for a ticket on the West Coast line has actually fallen in the last decade due to the range of discounts available, according to Mark Smith who operates the Man in Seat Sixty-One blog.

For all its problems, it has helped to modernise railways, says Haigh. "It has made a difference. It has shifted the railway from the staid public service-style organisation to one committed to passengers."

**What are your memories of Virgin trains. Send us your stories using the form below.**

Some seven or eight years ago heading for Manchester the lights went out. When asked why, we were told the batteries had failed and there were no spare ones. Sitting in the dark for nearly an hour was a bad start to my Virgin experience.

John Shaw, London

I have been using the 8.17 from Holyhead to Euston to travel to Chester to go to work for many years now. It has always been a pleasure. They are always clean and you are always able to get a seat, unlike the other trains I have to use to return home from work. These trains are packed, the toilets are always smelling and you are lucky if they clean away any rubbish. I dread to think what the standards will be like after Virgin.

Tracy, Bagillt, Flintshire

It was "a relief" to read your experience of the Virgin Train toilet. I thought it was just me - I had the identical experience in Sept 2002. It may have been ten years ago but the trauma remains with me still.

Trouser-wearing female,

I remember going on a Virgin train to Parr back in 97 or 98. Unfortunately the air conditioning was broken and we had to suffer with offers of Virgin Cola. The family who Virgin had double booked in our seats high tailed it to first class saying pregnant women can't sit in hot carriages. On the way back up we were serenaded by some army lads playing bagpipes. It only stopped when we asked them to. Since then I've never had a problem and even had some fun journeys.

Liz Simpson, Wakefield

Despite the high cost of rail fares - especially during peak hours - Virgin Trains is the only operator that allows holders of railcards (16-25; Family; Senior) to travel in peak hours to or from London, without restriction and at reduced fares.

Fred Kerr, Southport, Lancashire

I took the day off work to travel on a Voyager when they were running "Discovery Trips" between Birmingham and Reading. Keen to learn more about these brand new trains I asked the train manager what the strange beeping noise was. He told me it was a level three anomaly. And was into the next coach before I realised he didn't know either!

Simon Moppett, Banbury

The scent from the toilet drifts down the carriage, ruining what would otherwise be a pleasant journey. I once sat in a ponging first class coach and caught myself hoping the smell was worse in standard class - not a proud moment, I admit.

Jody, London

I love travelling on Virgin Trains - they are comfortable, clean, fast, quiet, and always on time to the minute. The only thing I could ever complain about is that the tickets are sometimes overly expensive.

Kayleigh, Liverpool

No mention of the incredible overcrowding on the first off peak service back up north on a weekday. That will be my main memory of Virgin Trains.

Chris Walmsley, Manchester

I dislike trains (give me a car any day), but on the occasions I do have use one, Virgin have, on the whole, kept my grumbles to a barely audible tone - unlike First. There are two ways of viewing the comments made in this article. Did Virgin revolutionise the train industry? Perhaps not. But are Virgin markedly better than the competition in an already embattled industry? I think so. Then again, what does it say about the rest of the rail industry when we accept that smelly toilets, occasional delays and indifferent service is still considered the best of the bunch.

Ollie, Manchester

When my partner attended a concert at the LG Arena, London Midland train staff were on strike. My partner was left partly stranded at Birmingham International & Coventry trying to get back to Rugby at 11pm. It was Virgin staff that took charge and ensured she and everyone else was safe and could get home despite it being after their services had left. They went the extra mile. Other train operators would (and have) walked away in similar situations. They are not a faceless organisation, you know where you stand with them. Great loss for regular rail passengers.

Freddie Sear, Rugby

In the last two years I've travelled by Virgin to London about six times a year and find it much less hassle than flying. It's a relaxing four hours with time to read and if travelling 1st class all drinks and food are included. However one small gripe is that when I travelled standard class and had reserved a window seat, I found that my seat didn't in fact have a window - or only about 6 inches of one. I like a view while travelling so found it extremely annoying. Overall though, I found travelling by Virgin a good experience and will miss travelling with them.

Smithylssy, Ayrshire

My only wish for the west coast service is for the trains to run on time. About every four out of five run at least five minutes late. I have more often missed my connecting train than got it. I know every station on the route due to having to get replacement bus services which I know isn't Virgin's fault. Hopefully with First they might bring in a better warning system than Virgin with whom you turn up to get the train and only then realise you have to get a bus. The other thing that happens is that on a Sunday they will just randomly stop running trains north of Carlisle.

Sara, Glasgow

I never thought I would say this about a multi-national but I was truly saddened to hear that Virgin had lost the West Coast Mainline yesterday. I have travelled for many years from London to Manchester or Liverpool and I have never considered using an alternative route because Virgin were just so good.

Laura, London

I travelled extensively on Virgin Trains - and also on the First Great Western and GNER - and how anyone who travelled on both couldn't see how the decision on the West Coast is a disaster waiting to happen dumbfounds me. Virgin Trains were the benchmark everyone else should have been aiming for - everything from the trains to the personnel to ticketing service was absolute bliss. Glad I don't have to travel by rail any more, I think I'd be in for disappointment!

Matt, London

