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Airlines feel the strain as UK passengers take the train

By Mark Odell

The shift from air to rail travel in the UK market is revealed by figures out on Monday that show train use on domestic air routes has jumped almost 60 per cent in the past six years.

An analysis of the 10 busiest domestic air routes, mainly between the south of England and Scotland, shows that rail's market share increased from 29 to 46 per cent between 2006 and 2012.

Train usage rose 52 per cent to 7.7m trips. In contrast, airlines saw passenger numbers fall 26 per cent to just over 9m. The total market dropped 3 per cent over the period, reflecting the impact of the economic slowdown.

The Association of Train Operating Companies said the growth in rail use was due to the widespread adoption of airline-style pricing by train companies.

Rail executives said the £9bn upgrade of the West Coast main line, completed in 2009, also boosted the appeal of the train. The work cut journey times between London, Manchester and Glasgow by up to 30 per cent, improved reliability and enabled the introduction of more services.

The cut in journey times has all but killed off the London-Manchester air market, with only 15 per cent of journeys still made by aircraft. Those travellers are normally ones transferring on to international flights at Heathrow.

The main domestic air market is between London and Scotland, where train operators still do not come close to matching airline journey times – measured city centre to city centre.

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