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## Virgin and East Coast fight for top spot in 2014

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The December timetable change marked the heating up of competition between West Coast operator Virgin and government-run East Coast for passengers on the London to Scotland

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route.

Virgin hopes to lure passengers away from the East Coast by extending 24 of the 28 Scottish services, which used to terminate in Birmingham, on to London Euston but concedes that it takes an hour longer than rival East Coast.

To counteract this, Virgin has announced that certain fares will be cheaper. The new services also offer new direct rail service to Coventry, Milton Keynes and Dudley.

This development echoes transport secretary Paine who a few months ago said to see a revitalised East Coast one that rekindles the spirit of competition for customers and competes with the west coast on speed, quality and customer service.

East Coast's commercial and customer service director, Peter Williams, said: "East Coast already competes strongly between Edinburgh and London with the car, coaches and airlines and we're steadily gaining market share in competition with flights."


Mr Williams added: "We also offer up to 42 weekday East Coast trains on our more direct east coast route, compared with just 13 trains via the west coast."


All this is a far cry from the 1896 informal agreement between the West Coast and East Coast operators, which was not torn up until the 1930s,



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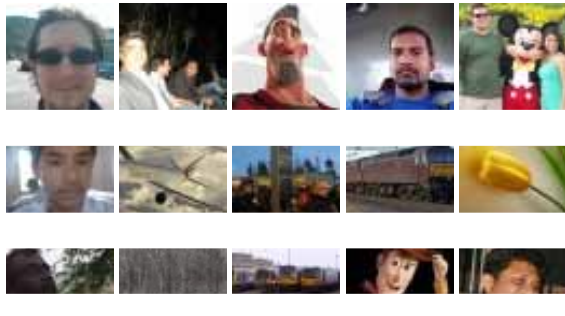
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resulting in an understanding that neither operator would try and reduce the time taken to travel between London and Scotland to less than 8 1/2 hours. This led to trains taking approximately 1 1/2 hours longer than they needed to to make Anglo-Scottish journeys. It was only dropped when it was realised that the agreement was aiding the railway's new enemy , the long-distance road coach.

Virgin is in the running to operate the East Coast franchise, which is due to commence in February 2015, with an announcement due in October on which bid has been successful.

Report by Jonathan Webb

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