

Meet the new managing director of Hull Trains as he starts on a high with final fleet delivery

Declaring the first commercial journey for the final addition to Hull Trains' £60 million Hitachi fleet as "so much more than the 10.33 to London" it is clear that optimism abounded alongside returning passengers.

David Gibson saw first hand the impact the open access operator's arrival had on the city from his time at the Guildhall. Now he's back in the city in charge of the rail company, but in truth, never really left Hull, having settled in the hinterland.

Awarded an MBE for his military role forming the immediate response to 9/11 while serving as an RAF wing commander in the Middle East when the twin towers were struck, he's certainly no stranger to a challenge.

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"We are only a small team, five trains, but we are very good at what we do," he said.

"The staff have blown me away, they have come back from three very hard decisions, and now it is all about the recovery of the business, returning to profitability, and making sure we have exemplary customer service.

"We have a lot of reasons to be cheerful and optimistic, business is coming back, – the new train that has just left had more passengers on it than the early train, which is

really good news. We are open for business.”

Having hit one million passengers in 2019, the pandemic and subsequent measures to address the spread saw Hull Trains ‘hibernate’ for the three lockdowns, with numbers dropping to 300,000 in 2020.

Hull Trains’ 21st anniversary platform celebrations in pictures



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Predecessor Louise Cheeseman, [now with Transport for London’s bus division](#), had to [cut staff](#) with the company only supported via the furlough scheme, having peaked at a team of 130.

“We’ve taken a couple of staff back, we want the experienced staff back if we can,” Mr Gibson said.

Recovery and return to profitability have been key phrases, and while nothing may compare to turning a 20,000 troop exercise to an operational unit, having seen 35 US aircraft arrive at Thumrait as the world digested exactly what had happened in New York, there have been strategic and operational stand-out achievements in his civvy-street career.

Having worked in management consultancy following his stint at the city council – which came after more than 22 years serving Queen and country, Mr Gibson’s head was turned by the aviation sector when he was invited to apply for the role of chief executive of Cardiff Airport. Missing out to the incumbent chief operations officer “feedback was positive” and he was subsequently offered the role of development director at Luton.

Capacity building projects included a new £110 million perimeter road and the moving of a country park, before the managing director role at Metro in Newcastle emerged.

“The trains were 35 years old, five years beyond their design life, a lot were off service, and we had to rebuild confidence and trust in the company, rebuild the workforce and improve reliability,” he said.

“I have built up a lot of experience in looking at a company’s service from the consumer’s perspective. Punctuality and reliability are core competencies for the customer experience.

“I walked into that business with 90 trains, and 24 were off – and we couldn’t run the business with any more than 12 off. We got that down to four on one memorable day! We got the biggest six monthly rise in customer satisfaction during my tenure.”

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He did some work for Grand Central and Arriva London after, "I really enjoy rail," he said. But then Calmac Ferries emerged. "I thought 'that's different', and how often do you get to be involved in something with a footprint of 30,000 square miles, with 55 ports and 33 vessels. "It had also had the worst technical disruption in many years, and I'd never worked in maritime.

"It is all about transferrable leadership, and I focussed on how important communication was within any disruption, and planning on how you deal with disruption when it occurs."

Serving a £1.2 billion contract with the Scottish government he "went on every vessel, to every port and harbour". "My management style is to be part of the team, I want to know what it is like on the frontline, and that's what I will do here."

He went to the London depot of Hitachi to see the new arrival the day before it pulled into Paragon Station, having stopped off between transport gigs to roll out 292 Covid testing stations with G4S, deploying 9,500 team members in a "big beast of a contract."

Of his first passenger experience as boss, he said: "When I travelled down, I sat in the cab with the driver, to see what it is like, what they are thinking on different parts of the route, I talked with the on-board staff, and went to see our Hitachi team in London. I will be down at Bounds Green, the Hitachi depot. I won't be sitting at my lap top five-days-a-week in Hull. "With Hitachi, we don't want a client/contractor relationship, they are my engineering team and very much a

part of the business. I want them to feel involved and included and make the right operational decision for it.”

One decision being waited on for the city is electrification – with fears the links to Doncaster and Leeds could be victims of Covid cutbacks and the Treasury claws back cash.

The council is urging businesses to make their voice heard, and Mr Gibson is happy to take the microphone.

“It makes us more sustainable,” he said. “We have to run on diesel to Temple Hirst Junction [south of Selby, by Eggborough Power Station] before we can put the pantograph up.

“It is a very long, straight stretch of track for the infrastructure, and I know the city council is lobbying hard. It is important, and we need Network Rail to plan that in.”

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Delighted to mark the first 21 years, the focus from Hull Trains' owner First Group is very much on the coming periods as the pandemic's grip on the UK eases.

Andy Mellors, managing director of the non-franchised businesses for First Rail, has overseen the business through the summer, as a replacement was recruited for Louise Cheeseman.

He said: "The focus of the whole team has to be on business recovery. We have had a really difficult time over the last 18 months, Hull Trains is no different to lots of other businesses and our people have been affected by the pandemic, not just with work, but personally. We're on that road to recovery, getting back to profitability, we have great people, we've just introduced new trains before the pandemic, more capacity, improved reliability and better environmental credentials – we run on electric once we get to Doncaster.

"It is all about getting customers back to our railway. We are really pleased with what we are seeing, Fridays and Sundays are really busy days, and we've started to see in the last few weeks business travellers return. It is about continuing on that journey of recovery and profitability.

"I'm really pleased we have secured another three years, that gives business certainty to 2032, so we can continue to deliver the attractive, high quality service for customers."

On the subject of electrification of the final leg between Hull and just north of Doncaster, Mr Mellors said: "We have the bi-mode trains in Hull and as and when any further electrification happens, we can exploit that. We need electrification. It is so much better for the environment, so we would welcome further electrification. It has to be in the context of a national programme. Later this year, when the main line closes, we will have to divert via Lincoln and that will necessitate running on diesel power. It needs to be part of our national infrastructure strategy, and I'm looking forward to seeing what the government has to say.

"We'd welcome further electrification, it would be good to see

the benefit of that as and when it happens.”