

# Why the Humber Express is greeted like its Polar namesake as Christmas comes calling and containers abound

An early Christmas present to the under pressure ports and logistics community, the Humber Express may well feel more like the silver-screen famed Polar version to many.

And while it has been pointed out it is not a magic bullet, the diesel loco delivering containers from around the globe to the heart of the UK's golden triangle of distribution is freeing up HGV drivers to be deployed elsewhere and easing quayside congestion.

Jon Bailey, until recently commercial director at DFDS Seaways, has helped steer the project through.

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Three years of rail enhancements followed by three months of planning after achieving board sign-off led to the first service from Immingham to IPort, the 800-acre multi-modal facility south of Doncaster.

Having just launched his own consultancy with twin brother Richard, Jon was back at the diversified steel terminal to see the work materialise.

"We have made it happen in a couple of months, which is pretty good going for rail," he said.

"This time of year is the busiest time for rail, so to start now is immensely demanding. Now the hope is it will stimulate activity, and we will see more put on. Everyone, all operators

on the port, can access this service, and we can up capacity – sometimes you just need one to get it going.



Jon Bailey, consultant at BaileyRail & Logistics, and former commercial director at DFDS, who played a key role in launching the new Humber Express service.

(Image: Reach Plc)

“It is the first ever regular intermodal train out of Immingham, and should play a big part in aiding the truck driver shortage and making sure we all have presents under the tree for Christmas.”

Launching with 22 wagons, it has scope to take 36. That would be almost 150 drivers re-routed where needed the most.

Work builds on a £17 million programme by Network Rail, once flagged as ensuring “that Britain’s largest port remains competitive, resilient and ready to embrace the opportunities that come with our departure from the European Union,” by a government minister when it launched back in 2018.

It saw the track bed lowered, new bridges installed, platform

realignment and signal relocation to allow high cube shipping containers to run on standard wagons.

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Mr Bailey said: "The gauge enhancements have played a huge part. Network Rail has been very supportive in recent years to support modal shift to enable this. They have made a big commitment and they are really trying to help industry in

getting more freight on rail.”

Coal’s demise has also supported the opportunity.

“Immingham was always at capacity for train,” Mr Bailey said, with 25 per cent of UK freight once leaving the UK’s biggest port by tonnage – often as liquid or bulks, with coal and then biomass dominating the latter. “As energy policy has changed coal movements are nowhere near what they were, and that opens capacity to start running additional services.

“We need these intermodal services, getting supplies to factories, retailers efficiently.”

There have been considerations given to the light railway linking Immingham with Grimsby – one of the UK’s biggest ports for car imports.

“If there is demand there for it, it is doable,” MrBailey said. “It is essentially operational, there’s not much that runs up there unless it is for engineering works. It is about collaboration around these services, businesses coming together, the shipping line, terminals, Network Rail – it is very difficult for one party to start something up unless you want to take a huge amount of risk. Getting everyone together is vital.



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“It is really good that DFDS supported this, it is not a typical rail-experienced business, it is a shipping line, but it recognised the importance of doing something.

“CO2 reduction is a massive part of it, and this will see something like a 70 per cent reduction, so it is a positive

story all round.”

Operating out of the existing steel terminal, 500m from the company’s Nordic House headquarters, it had all the capability required, removing the need for significant capital investment. Containers can be moved around on the specialist vehicles deployed across the port in minutes.

Emma Leam-Saville, route agency and border compliance director at DFDS Seaways, said: “This is a great time to do it, it is supportive of the wider logistics network – we have seen the HGV shortage, and this is something to support that.

“It is not a magic bullet, all modes need to work together – it is a patchwork approach- but it will help.

“The industry as a whole has been impacted, and we have been to a certain extent. The port is there for transit, not storage, and we want to move quickly. If there are not enough drivers the cargo does stand longer, and you do get congestion.”



(Image: Reach Plc)

While it has been strained, Immingham has not had to return to the one-in one-out system deployed around key Brexit deadlines as freight forwarders looked to beat new requirements – some still to be enforced.

“We are constantly reviewing what we are doing and, we’ve not been at the level we saw previously, but rail will help to tackle this,” Ms Leam-Saville added, underlining how for sustainability it is also strong, as electric trucks are looked into. “They are starting to come through, but they are not yet as common as we would like them to be,” she said.

Hull and Humber Chamber of Commerce has strong interests in shipping and transportation due to the estuarial area it serves.

David Hooper, external affairs director, was there to see the first departure. He said: “Starting this service will certainly help with the current shortage of lorry drivers, helping getting goods from A to B more efficiently. It will somewhat ease the supply chain and logistics problems the country currently faces.

“It is an exciting additional opportunity for the South Humber Bank, and I am delighted to see the realisation of the project for DFDS.”

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