

IMPRESSIONS OF CLASS 350

by Iain Frew

Four car class 350/1 sets are the latest version of Siemens' highly successful "Desiro" multiple unit. Introduced in June 2005 on Silverlink's Euston - Northampton outer suburban service, and on Central Train's Birmingham - Preston route, these trains will also operate Birmingham to Liverpool and Northampton, and Euston to Crewe semi-fasts. I was able to sample the stock on the 1651 Birmingham - Preston service on 13th July 2005, though only along the short section as far as Wolverhampton.

Externally the stock shows a marked family resemblance to the class 450 emus operated by South West Trains but the external appearance is much less colourful. The cars are finished in a light grey with deep blue doors and a deep blue panel around the blocks of windows. The roof is dark grey and the underframes, bogies etc are black. A thin orange line runs the length of the cars just above the two double doors on each side. There is no Operating Company branding, doubtless reflecting the uncertainty as to which company will gain the franchise in a couple of year's time. The lack of an owning company name will allow flexibility in their deployment as new services settle down. Internally the cars have a distinctly "cool" appearance. On an extremely hot day it was delightful to find that the cars have a very efficient air conditioning system. The walls are pale grey and because the trains are designed for longer runs 2 + 2 seating is fitted throughout giving a wider than usual corridor down the centre of each car. The seats are high backed and covered in a blue material which includes spots of light blue,

dark blue and yellow. This in some ways resembles the carpet which is a light grey with blue and yellow spots. A much darker grey coarser carpet is laid across the width of the car in the door vestibules. The only eye-catching colour is bright yellow for the grab handles on the seat backs adjacent to the central corridor, and a similar yellow used on poles and grab handles near the doors. Most of the seats are arranged in bus style but a few are grouped around a decent sized table. A large pull-down table situated in the back of the seat to the front is available at most other seats. The two end cars include a driving position and there are corridor connections giving access between sets when coupled into longer trains. The two inner cars differ in that one includes a large well equipped toilet suitable for use by a wheelchair passenger and a few tip-up seats exist in this area. The other car includes a 24-seat first class section. Opaque glass screens shield the First Class passengers from view but this is their only benefit from paying the much higher fare. The seating shows the same 2 + 2 arrangement and only 8 of the seats are grouped around a table. A very good sized luggage rack exists above window level along the length of each car. This has a glass shelf so that it is easy to check whether all belongings have been retrieved. There are however no stacks for large items and no buffet outlet. A double sided information displays hangs from the ceiling in the centre of each car and gives details of stopping points etc. Two lines of fluorescent tubes give good, even lighting but there are no individual lights at each seat.

The 1651 Birmingham to Preston has been introduced to provide a relief to the 1703 Virgin Voyager service to Glasgow which has been seriously overcrowded. On July 13th it was about 85% full out of Birmingham and since a very well loaded Manchester service (EWS Class 90 hauling 5 ex-Virgin Mark III coaches and a DVT) had left only three minutes ahead of the 1651 there were few passengers on board for Wolverhampton though a moderate number joined there. There was no sign of the promised refreshment trolley. The 350 gave a quiet but lively run, bouncing noticeably over points that had given no trouble to a Voyager earlier that day. On plain track the ride was flawless. The class 350 seems to be a useful addition to the fleet and I look forward to using them as more of the units enter service.

How well is the 1651 performing as a relief train for the following 1703 Voyager? Inevitably there are pluses and minuses but the 350 is a much more open train and not claustrophobic as some find the Voyagers. The Voyagers have a shop selling a range of food including a few hot items, and this might prove useful for someone travelling

all the way. The 350 will provide hot and cold drinks, crisps, and a very limited range of sandwiches - provided the service is actually given. Perhaps food is not important on a shorter journey. The 350 has a much more capacious luggage rack but anyone unable to lift a heavy case above their head will miss the Voyager's admittedly inadequate seat-level racks- any rack is better than none. The biggest problem results from the two services being operated by different companies. Virgin provides a range of low cost advance booked fares valid only on the train for which they are issued. If the 1703 is known to be packed out and passengers at Birmingham are advised to use the 1651, (a manoeuvre sometimes used by Virgin staff there) Virgin tickets will be rejected by Central Trains. The fragmented railway gets in the way of progress again!

The introduction of class 350 is part of a reorganisation of the Central Trains fleet. It is hoped to concentrate most of the class 323 emus on the Cross City Line making up most of the trains to two-unit (6 car) length in order to cope with the gradually growing traffic.

NORTH BERWICK SOLUTION FOUND?

The problem of what stock to use on the Edinburgh - North Berwick service has been taxing the minds of Scotrail managers. Since the ex-Stansted Express class 322 emus returned south the services have been provided by locomotive hauled sets that are comfortable and popular but very expensive to run. A suggestion that dmus be substituted did not go down well with local politicians and it was later discovered that the platforms on the route would not

accommodate trains made up of two of the new class 170 dmus. Traffic is much too high for a single unit. The surprising solution is for the class 322s to return north for refurbishment at the Hunslet Barclay plant in Kilmarnock and then for them to take over the North Berwick route. The 2 + 2 seating and large luggage space appropriate for an airport route will be replaced by 3 + 2 seating with less luggage accommodation. The lighting and floor coverings will also be