

Rail Professional interview: Tim Shoveller

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After four years running East Midlands Trains, Tim Shoveller takes over South West Trains on 1 January. He tells Paul Clifton about the challenge of running Britain's busiest passenger franchise

The train I got to meet Tim Shoveller was 20 minutes late into Waterloo. It crawled through south London at little more than walking pace, every signal at red. 'Emergency engineering work' apologised the guard, although South West Trains' new Twitter feed helpfully informed passengers that the work would continue 'until further notice'.

'How was the passenger information?' is Shoveller's first question on arrival. He knows about the delay. His interest is in how passengers take the consequences, and what more could be done to make an unpleasant delay more bearable. 'It's the biggest passenger company in the country,' he enthuses. 'A real mix between deeply, deeply urban trains and frequencies, contrasting with the Weymouth and Exeter services. In recent years I've been into businesses that have had huge difficulties where the challenge is to turn them round. SWT isn't like that at all.'

Shoveller has worked all over the country. Starting with British Rail, he went to Eurostar, National Express's Wessex Trains, Virgin and East Midlands Trains. 'The "railway tart" phrase some people use is unfair,' he protests. Unlike most of the current generation of high fliers, he did not spring from the final batches of the former British Rail graduate trainee scheme. As a teenager growing up in Farnborough he worked as a volunteer on the Mid Hants Railway at Alresford, playing with steam trains.

'I learned a lot. The old BR management was very much command-and-control: almost military in style. One of the great things about the Mid Hants is that they were all volunteers, very different from the rigid line management in the railway. People expect and want to be inspired by leaders, rather than instructed and ordered. I learned that very early. Yesterday's approach doesn't get the best from people.'

'SWT is a very dispersed railway. There are 4,500 people out there – we can't supervise them all the time. The way to make them work well is to inspire them through leadership to take responsibility. So when something goes wrong – as inevitably it will – the member of staff is inspired to find a way to put it right and do it better; not consider that it's someone else's problem to solve.'

After working on steam trains, the appropriately named young Shoveller went to the University of Southampton – for three days. He walked out. Was it really that awful?



‘I was already in discussions with BR about joining as a management trainee after university, and I just felt I had already found what I loved doing. And after three days at uni I decided I did not want to spend three years doing something else. To the dismay of my parents I got a job in Guildford as a Trainman D – a guard with a mind to go driving. That was exactly 20 years ago, just before Christmas.’

So South West Trains is very familiar territory for the 39-year-old. We’re sitting at a café opposite the mothballed former Eurostar platforms at Waterloo. ‘In 1993 there was nothing there other than a station. I was platforms controller – I designed all the processes here. Then went down to Ashford as project manager, opened Ashford, then came back here as duty manager in 1997.’ He also had spells in Paris and Brussels. Later, at East Midlands Trains, he had to integrate three disparate franchises and teams working with what he calls ‘dreadful rolling stock, not fit for service’.

‘I have a theory that all good leaders stay too long. They don’t know when to leave. I joined BR as a guard. I had no aspiration to climb up the management ranks. A colleague at EMT did a motivational survey on me recently, and found I had absolutely no career motivation at all! I am not motivated by titles or jobs. But I have a huge passion for running the railway: what really gets me going on all cylinders is doing things that make the railway better.’

At SWT that’s quite a challenge. By common consent it is already well-run. National Passenger Survey results are consistently high and change little from one season to the next. It already has the most reliable rolling stock in Britain. And with a tightly written franchise that runs until 2017, he has little room for manoeuvre. Ticketing will be a particular issue. There is a commitment to smartcards. ‘Lots of people want a ticket that isn’t a piece of cardboard with a magnetic strip on the back,’ he says. ‘And they want it to work on the underground as well. But I don’t think it is possible to have no ticket offices on this type of railway, and have only plastic. ‘This isn’t really a question for SWT of course. The government has to decide. We can contribute, that’s all. We can bring in Itso smart cards, sold over the telephone and recharged from machines. But a customer who travels once a

year for a birthday or to the theatre is never going to want a smartcard. They will want a piece of cardboard and we must find ways to meet their needs. 'We need something in between a season ticket and a day ticket. With more flexibility. EMT is trying something called Flexismart which is moving towards that territory. The railway doesn't have a carnet type ticket at the moment because of revenue protection issues. But for many routes with gating, that is no longer the problem it once was.'



Like other London commuter franchises, SWT has seen steady growth, although overcrowding levels are well below those on neighbouring First Great Western. With no new trains on offer, the challenge is to grab the few extra carriages that could be available. Principally, that means the off-lease Class 460 Juniper trains that used to operate the Gatwick Express. Technically they are almost identical to trains used on the line to Reading. 'We're still in discussion with the Department for Transport and Network Rail, so it's commercially confidential. But they could be used to create a series of five-car trains. There are also some two-car Class 456 units from Southern that could strengthen suburban trains from eight-car to 10-car. There are nigh-on 100 vehicles with the combination of those two: significant extra capacity.' Shoveller says agreement was nearly reached before the last general election, but discussions ground to a halt and had to be re-started from scratch. 'There are now conversations on a daily basis and I really hope we can get the contract signed in a matter of months.'

He has little time for the very vocal passengers on the Portsmouth line, who have waged a long-running campaign against the use of high-density suburban stock for a journey that takes around an hour and a half. The campaign is endorsed by MPs on the route and is a regular thorn in the company's side. But Shoveller points out that the old slam-door VEP trains the Class 450 Desiros replaced were also five seats abreast, and says the German-built trains are a vast improvement on what passengers had a decade ago.

He becomes suddenly much more animated when moving on to discuss 'bigger picture' topics. While Shoveller clearly enjoys the day-to-day running of the railway, he starts waving his arms around and shuffling in his seat when he talks about grand ideas.

‘There are some really serious challenges to be faced on the longer journeys,’ he grins. ‘In the peak, the busiest trains are already 12-car. So to go beyond that we have to run more trains. This is where it gets really exciting – we already have 24 an hour on the Up Fast at the moment: that is a busy, busy train set. What do we have to do to turn this into a metro-type operation with trains on even shorter headways? A mix of technology and ways of working smarter, shaving seconds off dwell times. ‘Terminal capacity will be the key limitation here. It would be really difficult to make Waterloo platforms longer. So do we need Crossrail Two to avoid the terminal altogether and dive off at Wimbledon to get people to where they want to go? There are already discussions – this is way beyond SWT’s remit. Long term there’s got to be a vision. For us, I am keen to work with DfT and Network Rail to get more capacity into the railway I have got.’

Shoveller has already left East Midlands Trains. His predecessor at SWT, Andy Pitt, does not retire until the end of December. It’s obvious that Shoveller is already itching to get going. But he won’t be moving back into what used to be his home patch. With a young family in Kettering, he’s staying put. ‘I said I have never been motivated by career,’ he concludes. ‘But there is one job that I really want to do before I retire [remember he’s only 39] – I want to make sure we build the high speed line to the north and I want to open it. That’s my dream job.’

‘It’s a shame it’s called High Speed Two because it is about capacity more than speed. I know from my days at Virgin that the West Coast line is full. I absolutely understand the challenge: we need a new railway. At some point I want to be the one that opens that railway.’