

Scandinavians' quick march

COMMENT
BY MICHAEL WEINBERG

The first section of our railway system to be privatised was Gatwick Express in April 1996.

About that time Michael Heseltine (remember him?) appeared in newspapers and on TV "signing a contract" for the purchase of new trains for the new private company, with the accompanying message that this massive new investment was arriving as a result of privatisation.

Of course we now know that the whole episode was a public relations stunt and that the actual order for eight trains took some time before it was signed.

This was brought to mind by a short visit in June, to Copenhagen and the new Oresund link joining Denmark with Sweden.

Some members may know that this involved building a massive road and rail bridge over one half of the Oresund, together with a tunnel under the other half, plus an artificial



Plenty to smile about: Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark and Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden at an Oresund link opening ceremony

island in the middle to link the two parts. It also included a new rail line into Copenhagen airport together with a fleet of 27 electric multiple units to operate the new services across the link and to the airport. A quick look in the atlas will show

the scale of the work involved. While at Copenhagen central station, I watched the new trains in action, all looking in pristine condition. The link was financed through international capital market loans guaranteed by the two governments. On

arriving home, a minor piece of research elicited the information that the main Oresund contracts were in place at the beginning of 1996, that the first segment of the bridge was floated out in August 1997, and that the trains were ordered from Adtranz in September 1997. It was officially opened on the target date of 1 July last year!

Thus the Danes and Swedes together organised the building of a bridge over the sea, a tunnel under the sea, an artificial island, the link to Copenhagen airport plus the construction and entry into service of 27 trains in about the time it has taken the magnificent entrepreneurial management of our beloved privatised railway to get four of the eight trains ordered, into reasonably reliable service on a line already there!

Note that the new Gatwick expresses don't go any faster than the old ones, the ride is considerably worse and judging from the one or two I saw at Clapham Junction the other day are already looking filthy!

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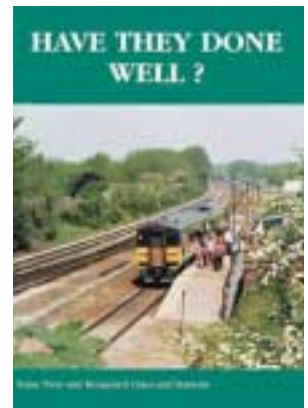
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