

All Change at Oxshott station

By Stephen Spark

From 20 August rail passengers in Oxshott will be travelling with a new train operator. After 21 years, South West Trains (SWT) will depart and South Western Railway (SWR) will take over as the franchisee for the lines out of Waterloo.

Not much is likely to change in the first year beyond the paint schemes, logos, uniforms and other manifestations of corporate identity. We will still have the same four-coach class 455 trains – the oldest are now 35 years old – and the same half-hourly train service, hourly on Sundays.

So what do we know about our new train operator and what's it promising in the long term?

SWR is a 70/30 joint venture of First Group and Chinese-owned MTR, which will operate the franchise for seven years. Like SWT's owner, Stagecoach, First began as a Scottish bus operator that jumped on to the rail privatisation bandwagon. Under CEO Tim O'Toole, it holds the Great Western and Trans Pennine Express franchises, and operates buses in the USA and Panama.

MTR runs the Hong Kong metro system, with a claimed 99% reliability record, although it is fair to say that its network is one-sixth of the size of the South Western system, far less complex to operate and 100 years younger!

In Hong Kong, MTR keeps fares low by developing housing and shopping centres over its stations, but this will hardly be an option in Oxshott, not least because in Britain track and stations are owned by Network Rail, not the train operators. This separation of train operation from infrastructure was imposed by the EU, so after Brexit we may see a return to the vertically integrated railway, where one company owns both the track and the trains (transport secretary Chris Grayling is known to be in favour).

The new operator has made some bold promises: £1.2 billion of investment, 90 new trains (by December 2020), faster and more frequent journeys, more trains on Sunday afternoons, better on-train wi-fi, charging points at every seat, toilets on every train, free 'infotainment' on trains, easier ticketing options and even electric vehicle charging points at stations. It has promised staff it will not try to get rid of train guards, so perhaps we will be spared the disruption that has made the commuter's life wretched on Southern.

How many of these innovations will actually reach the Oxshott line is debatable. Older travellers will remember the slam door trains of the 1970s that had first class seats and (when they worked) toilets, but SWT's new German-built class 707 trains currently sitting at Clapham Junction have neither. However, rail insiders say that First/MTR does not want the 707s – rumoured to be underpowered and uncomfortable - and will buy something better. Either way, new trains of any sort are unlikely to be seen in Oxshott, as our line is a low priority for investment and the 455s will doubtless soldier for another five years or so.

That should not stop us from asking for more – and this is the perfect time to make our case heard. The new operator will be keen to make a good impression and will be open to making changes. On the basis that those who shout loudest tend to get what they want, this could be the best opportunity we will have had for many years to push for better services and facilities on our trains and at the station.