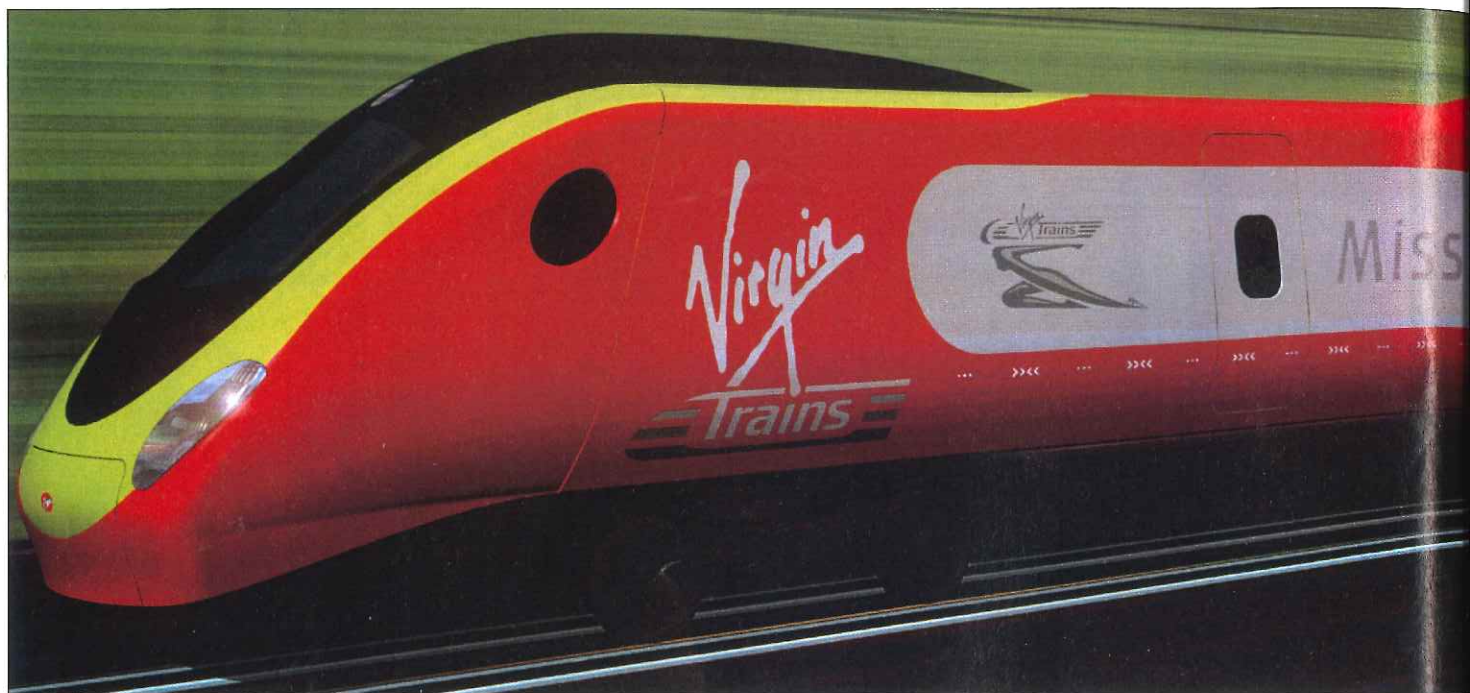


Virgin's first West Coast tilt train 'on te



Above: Called Mission:Control - the computer design studio for Virgin's new tilting trains at Alstom, Birmingham, is in a refurbished building. The former supports for an overhead travelling crane remain. All of the design work for the new trains will take place in this building. ALSTOM.



By Steven Knight

BIRMINGHAM-based Alstom has created a dedicated design and pre-production studio to handle Virgin Trains' order for 54 eight-coach tilting trains.

The order is part of the West Coast Main Line (WCML) upgrade project, valued at £1.2bn. The first train, built at Alstom's Washwood Heath Birmingham factory will be tested by July 2000.

Virgin boss Richard Branson opened the design facility - called Mission:Control - on November 17. The studio will handle all aspects of the contract from initial train design to testing and in-service maintenance support. There will be extensive use of computer design.

The trains, costing £500m, will be built by a partnership of Alstom and Fiat Ferroviaria, and will be leased to Virgin Rail through Angel Train Contracts.

A prototype pre-series train will be built which will allow technical difficulties to be resolved. The prototype will be tested on the Old Dalby test track near Melton Mowbray in July 2000 and then on the WCML for at least six months.

The first of the tilting trains will go into service in March 2001 and delivery of all 54 sets is due to be complete by May 2002.

Opening the studio, Mr Branson said: "Today is a milestone in the process of taking a run-down railway, which has had significant under-investment over the past 25 years, and turning it into one of the best in the world.

"Long-distance passengers in Britain have had to put up with unreliable and slow trains for far too long."

The WCML will be upgraded in two stages. By 2002 track speeds will be increased to 125mph, and to 140mph by 2005. This will allow London-Manchester journey times to be reduced from 2 hours 30 minutes to 2 hours in 2002, and to 1 hour 45 minutes by 2005.

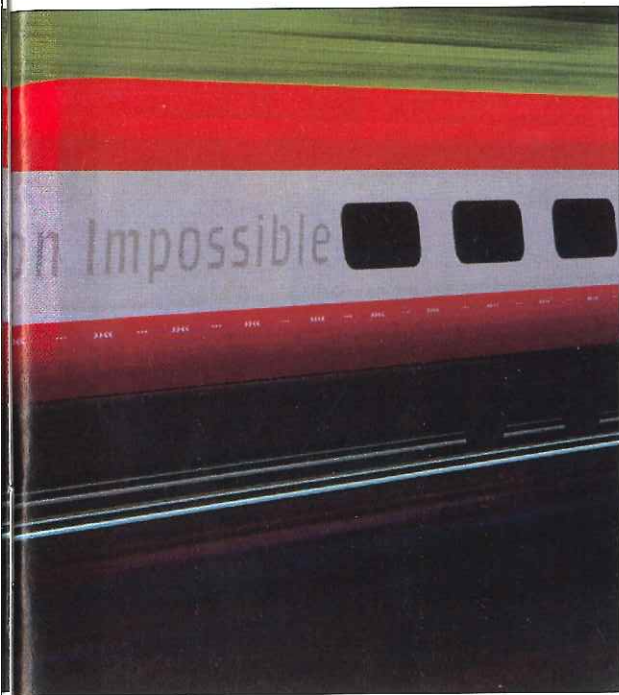
The existing 5 hours 20 minutes London-Glasgow journey time will come down to 4 hours 20 minutes in 2002 and to 3 hours 50 minutes by 2005.

The second stage of the upgrade will be financed partly through increased track access charges and a revenue share deal between Virgin Trains and Railtrack. Railtrack will share in up to 20% of Virgin's revenue over a pre-defined threshold.

The number of West Coast train paths available to Virgin will also increase from five each way to six each way in 2002/3 and to 11 each way in 2005.

Left: A newly refurbished HST (43008/13) was used for a special 0720 London Euston-Washwood Heath for the design studio launch on November 17 and is seen entering Alstom's site. Passengers included Richard Branson, senior Virgin managers and the media. A platform was built in the factory. This was the first passenger train to enter the site since a Networker Turbo ran from York in December 1991, when Networker production lines at ABB York and Metro-Cammell Washwood Heath were inspected. BOB SWEET.

st by July 2000'



Above: Richard Branson in front of the mock-up of the tilting train's driving cab. Notice how the artwork shows a slightly different front-end design and an alternative livery. STEVEN KNIGHT.

Left: Artwork showing how the WCML tilting trains will look.

Below: At the launch a full-size mock up of Virgin's new train was rolled out. STEVEN KNIGHT.

