

IRELAND: English rail chief steers railway through 13 year transformation

Rags to riches: the remarkable rebirth of Irish Rail

IRISH Rail has seen unprecedented government investment in everything from new trains to the reopening of old lines in the past 13 years. **Paul Whiting** travelled to Dublin to talk to Irish Rail chief executive Dick Fearn about how the state funding commitment has transformed a decrepit rail system into the fastest growing passenger operation in Europe.

FOR around seven years Dick Fearn has been at the centre of what can only be described as a railway renaissance in Ireland.

It's a story of huge investment in new trains, line reopenings, modernised signalling, stations revamped ...the list goes on.

Dick, 55, who joined Irish Rail as chief operating officer in 2003 after a career that took him to some of the top jobs in British Rail and Railtrack, admits his timing for crossing the Irish Sea was opportune.

But the face of the man who became the network's chief executive in 2006 takes on a serious look as he admits that even with such huge state investment, financial reality always kicks in - particularly now, when Eurozone Ireland is facing a massive public deficit.

On the day Railnews visits Dick at his lofty-ceilinged office at Irish Rail HQ, next to Connolly station in Dublin, the railway has announced the suspension of services on the Rosslare to Waterford route.

A steep fall in passenger numbers over a number of years and the loss of the sugar beet freight business has made the service no longer economically viable.

"The service costs around 4 million euros a year to operate but generated only 40,000 euros from ticket sales," Dick tells me. "Once, foot passengers were regulars on the ferry to Rosslare,

now they fly in on low cost airlines. We have to be realistic."

For the future, a final decision has to be taken by the National Transport Authority, and various options are being considered for the route from the port, including the possibility of a heritage line.

It's a setback in the success story, but in these financially stringent times these casualties are inevitable.

But Dick is keen to allay fears about the general picture of railway investment in a country that, 13 years ago, had a crumbling railway infrastructure, old and tired rolling stock, shabby stations and little real funding.

By the time Dick arrived in Ireland as chief operating officer a different picture was emerging, but service quality and frequency of trains was still a major issue and meant that he could still make his mark.

When he decided to cut his ties with Railtrack, where he had been director of Midland Zone - following roles running South Eastern and Network SouthEast's Thames and Chiltern division - he made his reasons clear. He wanted to "get his arms around a whole railway again, not just part of it".

Irish Rail offered him that opportunity. State-owned and vertically integrated, it meant he would have the chance to be responsible for both track and trains, making it easier to deliver benefits to rail passengers.

And not only that: the purse strings had been loosened and investment cash was pouring into the rail network again. Under a 10-year transport programme called Target 21 - which runs until 2015 - Irish Rail has a budget of around 500 million euros a year.

"No one is saying we should stop, and this is a great credit to the government," he says. "We will still be spending about 400 million euros a year - that's a huge commitment to rail. This has been a tremendous programme of investment."

In fact, between 2004 and 2007 Irish Rail grew faster in passenger numbers than any other passenger operation in Europe - a rate of 15 to 16 per cent across the network. The impressive level of growth - 45 million passenger journeys a year - is in most part a direct result of the changes Irish Rail has been making, most significantly in the quality of trains and frequencies. There are 536 passenger services daily.

"In the mid '90s many trains were life expired - we had one of the oldest fleets in Europe. Now it is one of the most modern fleets."

One of Dick's biggest concerns was poor frequency of services. "When I first came in 2003 I was, frankly, shocked by the frequencies. Cork, Ireland's second city, had a two and a half hour gap between services. The rolling stock - long, loco-hauled trains - was also inappropriate.

"If you caught a train from Dublin to Cork at 07.10 there was not another one until 10.55.

"But bit by bit we increased the services to trains every two hours and now, with new, 117 million euro push-pull trains, one every hour, on the hour, from Heuston station in Dublin."

New diesel train fleets have been at the crux of the vastly improved services. Irish Rail runs train services under three distinct brands - Intercity, Commuter and the Dublin Area Rapid Transit system, known as the DART, which is celebrating 25 years of operation this year.

Working on the tried and tested philosophy that good frequencies grow your rail business, Dick and his top team have overseen the introduction so far of 183 new Intercity rail cars. The stock is made up of 10 sets of six-car trains built by Rotem of Korea in partnership with Mitsui of Japan and Tokyu Car Construction of Japan which offer first class and catering services, plus another 29 three-car sets. Still to come are 19 three-car sets, which will complete the new fleet.

The Intercity trains 'feel wider and



'There are still a great many exciting things happening, such as DART Underground, and investment is still going into the rest of the system. The government, through Dr John Lynch, the chairman of CIE - the government-owned transport group under which we come - is being very supportive, even with all its problems. We have been allowed to do so much.' Dick Fearn, chief executive, Irish Rail



A DART line train arrives at Connolly station where passengers change for Commuter, Intercity and Enterprise services.

more spacious', with seating predominantly arranged as four table seats aligned to windows.

"Remember, we have a 1600mm (5ft 3ins) gauge here in Ireland," says Dick. "When I go over to England I always ask former colleagues, 'How's it going on the narrow gauge?'" he laughs.

The Commuter fleet has also been modernised, with four-car sets built by CAF in Spain. By 2009 its number of rail cars had risen to 180.

"On our Commuter trains we can accommodate 1,000 people on an eight-car train. They have huge vestibules for standing passengers who are often only on board for around 20 minutes."

The new fleets have brought huge

benefits to most areas of Ireland served by the rail network.

There are now better long distance frequencies to Sligo in the north west, served by trains from Connolly station in Dublin, while services from Dublin Heuston station to Balina, Westport, Galway, Limerick, Tralee, and Waterford all have more trains.

Dick says: "The new Intercity trains are quality DMUs - Diesel Multiple Units. We did not want them to be like the noisy and cramped Voyagers introduced in Britain, which have been, I believe, a disappointment.

"We wanted comfortable trains, with under-train noise from engines well suppressed, and nearly all seats at

table. I think we have achieved this." The Intercity fleet looks sleek in its silver livery - a move away from the 'old world' orange and black.

Meanwhile, the DART - the only electrified railway in Ireland - which serves the Dublin city area and its environs, has also seen a record expansion of the train fleet with old trains completely refurbished by Siemens.

The proposed DART Underground, which is destined to be tunnelled under Dublin, will link the two separate overground lines and interchange with many other transport services.

Over one service, however, a major question mark remains - the Dublin to Belfast cross-border Enterprise service, which has three push-pull trains of older locos and rolling stock rotating at low frequencies.

With the peace process now making it easier to operate, Irish Rail has been looking at how the joint service with Northern Ireland Railways could be improved in what is the most heavily populated coastal strip between the two cities.

"This is a truly joint service, but we need new rolling stock. Northern Ireland Railways must take their share but they cannot get a commitment on investment, so nothing is happening," says Dick.

See page 10 - Plans unveiled for Dublin's first Underground system



An Intercity unit and a Commuter diesel train await departure from Connolly station.



Restoring the missing links

IT is not only new train fleets that have been grabbing Ireland's rail headlines. Lines have been reopening.

On 29 March this year the link between Limerick and Galway was reopened to passenger traffic - some 34 years after the last passenger train ran.

The Western Rail Corridor, as it is called, has been completely renewed at a cost of 106.5 million euros between Ennis and Athlery to facilitate the reopening of the link in the west. Thirty-six miles of track has been renewed, 100 level crossings eliminated, new stations built at Sixmilebridge, Gort, Ardahan and Craughwell and signalling modernised.

It was the longest section of line, and the first Intercity line, to be reopened, all funded by the Irish government under Transport 21.

Further south, the line between Midleton and Cork - a commuter belt - has reopened while Pace is the proposed site of the first parkway station near to the M3 motorway on a line to be opened between Clonilla and Pace.

Over several years much of the rail network has been resigalled, with old local signal cabins being dispensed with and much of train control moving to the Dublin-based Central Traffic Control Centre where signallers and controller can monitor the whole network.

But with many routes only single line, localised signalling has been maintained in some areas so that signallers can interact. "We have passing loops, but if trains run out of course we have to have local signalling intervention," says Dick.

Punctuality levels are generally high, with some routes hitting the mid 90 per cent of trains running on time - a 'within five minutes of right time' is a management target while '10 minutes of right time' is measured under the Passenger's Charter.

Irish Rail staff numbers are now around the 4,500 mark, compared with more than 5,000 a few years ago. Catering is now outsourced to Rail Gourmet and there has also been 'staff slimming' through signalling schemes and DOO - Driver Only Operation - on trains.

Dick has never regretted his move to Irish Rail. "There are still a great many exciting things happening, such as DART Underground, and investment is still going into the rest of the system."

"The government, through Dr John Lynch, the chairman of CIE, the government-owned transport group under which we come - is being very supportive, even with all its problems. We have been allowed to do so much."

SIX things you may not know about Irish Rail

- In the '90s, services had an average frequency of two and a half hours and some of the oldest rolling stock in Europe (see picture below).
- Under a 10 year transport programme, it has an annual budget of 5.6 billion euros (£4.5 billion sterling).
- DART - the Dublin Area Rapid Transit system - is the only electrified railway in Ireland.
- The Enterprise service between Dublin and Belfast is run as a joint service between Irish Rail and Northern Ireland Railways.
- Much of the Irish rail network is controlled from one place - the Dublin-based Central Traffic Control Centre.
- Passengers travelling without a valid ticket face a stiff 100 euro (£84) fine.



Left: Connolly station where Intercity trains leave for Sligo and Commuter services depart for Longford, Dundalk and Bray.



Right: The new Phoenix Park station.