

SAMPLING THE S STOCK AND OTHER THOUGHTS

by David Burnell

I recently had my first experience of the S Stock – a long anticipated event after nearly 50 years of a love-hate relationship with the A Stock. The same day I also travelled on a class 378 on the 'dc' from Watford Junction, so was able to make a comparison between the two new stocks.

My first impression on stepping aboard was one of space and light, not surprising in view of the reduction in seats by about one third compared with the A Stock, but helped by the open gangways between cars with the front of the train disappearing in the distance. But not as spacious as the 378s, where the provision of longitudinal bench seats seems an afterthought and a definite step towards the seatless urban rail vehicle. (Incidentally, as I had the misfortune to be travelling when schools were coming out, the endless space through the cars on both stocks seemed to be a great invitation to frenetic youngsters to rush through – I wait to see the first moving train skate board championships taking place. On the S Stock a toddler was entranced by standing on the moving plates between the cars, the equal to any fairground ride). An advertising card claimed that the ceilings in the new cars are higher than on the A Stock therefore added to the sense of spaciousness. I didn't have a tape measure but my perception is quite different as I could touch the S Stock light fittings but not the A Stock's.

After the loud clunk of the doors closing I hoped we would move off in near silence, but here is my biggest disappointment with the new stock. Throughout the journey the high whine of the traction motors was present and increased on braking, more so even than on the C Stock. On the largely downhill road from Kilburn to Neasden we were subject to irregular but gentle braking as though the train operator was holding back a race horse that wanted to break away from her control. There was no train ahead, so this was a bit irritating and added to the 'traction whine' when the braking was in regeneration mode. Otherwise, there was no discernable noise from other under floor equipment something Met. Line travellers deserve after 50 years of having their eardrums assaulted and bodies shaken by a compressor designed by an engineer with an acoustic grievance against the human race.

Also disappointing was the hard ride – one could sense each rail joint crossed and judging by the erratic lurching of the gangway connectors the quality of the trackwork, even on recently relaid stretches, is not of the highest standard. There was also an unusual degree of rail roar arising, I presume, from the contact of wheel on rail head. This level of ambient noise in the passenger accommodation surprised me, and although much quieter than the A Stock, it compares badly with the 378s that appear to glide over track of often quite indifferent quality on the 'dc', although not quite as 'pneumatic' as the air bag cushioned, now departed, 313s. But, of course, the S Stock's ride is in a parallel universe compared with the A Stock's cost cutting absence of suspension other than the minimal rubber device around the end of the axle that was much vaunted when introduced. One wonders whether the savings would have been justified if London Transport had to meet the osteopath's bills incurred by the unfortunates who hadn't braced themselves when, 'in the good old days', the A Stock hit the Neasden depot points at over 60mph, having just raced down from Kilburn, enjoying what my S Stock train was gingerly prevented from doing.

A future irritation may be the rattle of the interior panelling which was already noticeable. As the trains settle into service will this increase as tight fitting joints begin to loosen as they do in the less than new car? (Remember the creaking R stock?).

Let us be grateful for the large picture windows. They buck the trend discernable in the design of new tube stock to return to the virtually windowless padded cells of the City and South London of 1890. I have in mind the 'letter box' windows on the 2009 Victoria Line stock – a feature repeated on the concept design for the Bakerloo replacement trains. Come to think of it, a lot of money could be saved by not having windows, after all most passengers are either immersed in their mobiles, reading

Metros or just looking at those engaged in the former. Will 2050 bring the seat-less, windowless tube car with in-journey entertainment provided by endless adverts displayed on lcd screens where windows used to be? The large windows in the doors on the S Stock also afford good views of stations from the standing area and here the S Stock has the advantage over the 378s with their door widows of castle-like arrow slit size contributing to the overall poor external visibility from the car.

It took me too long to realise that the attractive dark moquette on the seats was flecked with the separate line colours of the sub-surface lines. A nice touch. The cantilevered seats do offer an opportunity to stow larger bags under them and on the busy Friday evening train this facility was being used to good effect. Certainly the unique luggage racks on the A Stock were rarely used but then perhaps the thick encrustation of black dirt on the rack surface may have put some off. Between Baker Street and Harrow-on-the-Hill my less than well furnished posterior was beginning to be aware of the limited depth of padding of the S Stock seat, but as soon as I sat down on the 378 for my 40 minute journey I was aware that the seats had no padding, so one up to the S Stock for posterior care. But nothing can replace the deep sprung seating on the A Stock even if on occasions it managed to elevate you quite off the seat when the ungiving almost absent suspension met less than billiard table level track – which was quite often.

The lights are a warm pink and combined with the off white panelling give a very good light level, a pleasant change from the cold daylight tones used on the A Stock in recent years when after the previous warm pink fluorescent tubes were replaced almost overnight by this less welcoming but brighter colour. But the tubes are encased in what looks like pieces of perforated sheet metal. OK, the dead flies can fall through instead of accumulating in the plastic diffuser but the overall look is slightly crude and cheap.

I could record many other impressions but the last word must go to the air conditioning – the most lauded feature of the S Stock. Outside it was about minus one degree centigrade. Inside, the car was warm enough where I first sat, but when I tried another position up went my collar and on with the beanie hat to protect me from an arctic down draft. So, rather like the air conditioning on many trains, it depends where you sit. At least, compared with the 378s, it is much quieter and is in another league compared with the Desiros on the parallel London Midland service where there is a constant background 'whoosh'. Maybe it is too early to be using the passenger select feature, although given the arctic weather its use would have been welcomed although the doors at Baker Street were on passenger select ensuring their closure a short while after use.

The A Stock looks tired, not helped by LULs apparent decision to neglect their cosmetic maintenance in recent months. Underground cognoscenti such as myself will miss them. But I know on a wet morning I'd rather stand, uncrushed, in air conditioned comfort, than to be damply squashed on a seat between two large people one of whom has an overloud personal stereo and the other is shouting down their phone about how they got paralytic the previous evening. (And, despite Boris's assertion, all the three seaters are full by Harrow-on-the-Hill, southbound in the peak, with three passengers not the two 'customers' Boris supposes). Bring on the S stock – we've been waiting long enough!