PLATFORM

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Issue 1 October 2015

Cradley Heath Interchange opened on 26 July 2015.

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PLATFORM is published by:
The Stourbridge Line User Group, 46 Sandringham Road, Wordsley, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY8 5HL

CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS

I hope you like the "new look" newsletter with its new title. Paul Humphreys and Roger Davis have worked very hard to introduce *Platform* and its supplement. Of course, SLUG is very much more than a newsletter, website and Facebook page - it is a vigorous campaigning group representing all the people who use the Stourbridge Line. Campaigns take many forms and although they don't always involve battles, they pay off. Frequent liaison and engagement helps to keep the train operating companies on side. This Group and its Alliance partners keep them on their toes and make sure they are not allowed to lose sight of key issues. It is perseverance which has brought forward the plans for a new Kidderminster station and the same determination is now being applied to motivate London Midland and Network Rail in regard to the deplorable state of Stourbridge Junction canopies.

The Group is sorry to lose the services of John Rutherford but incoming officers, Caspar Lucas and William Whiting have not only given the committee a new look but strengthened it in the process. SLUG has enough officers to carry out the campaigning and administration and we are not asking for more participation from the members. The way that you can help is to 'phone a friend' to encourage them to subscribe. It strengthens our 'bargaining' hand if we can say we represent a LARGE number of members. In this instance, big is good.

TICKET CHECKS ON TRAINS
by Roger Davis

"You never get your ticket checked". "You never see a conductor on this service". These are the perennial moans of Stourbridge Line User Group members, and I am one of the most vociferous.

In 2002, I started recording details of every rail journey that I took, both local and long distance. I noted the date, train operating company, departure and arrival stations, scheduled and actual departure and arrival times, the delay to the arrival time and whether my ticket was checked on the train, at a station gate line or not all, and stored these on an Excel spreadsheet.

Unmanned gate lines at Snow Hill and Moor Street stations on Monday 21 September greeted passengers who had not had their tickets checked on board the service from Stourbridge Junction.

The original idea was to do this for about a year but, 14 years on, the spreadsheet is still growing with about 5,000 journeys recorded. I decided recently that the time had come to analyse the ticket check results and find out how true those claims of fellow passengers were. Fortunately, I had rudimentary knowledge of Visual Basic to write some programs to interrogate the ticket check data.

The ticket checking statistics can be summarised as follows:-

- All statistics are based on journeys that either start from or end at Stourbridge Junction or Cradley Heath.
- The majority of journeys were off-peak journeys on semi-fast services.
- Over the 14 year period, on-board ticket checking levels has been poor with tickets checked on less than 50% of journeys.
- The percentage of tickets not checked at all on the Stourbridge line dropped significantly after 2009 due to the introduction of gate lines at Snow Hill and Moor Street, but this may account for the drop in on-train ticket checks.
- Unfortunately, the percentage of journeys to and from Snow Hill and Moor Street with no ticket checks proves that the gate lines are left open and unmanned far too often which necessitates on-board ticket checking as well.
- Overall, the highest percentage of on-board ticket checks were done under Central Trains (44.9%), this dropping to 32% when London Midland Class 150's operated the service and rising slightly to 34.9% when the Class 172's took over. Chiltern Railways fare (pardon the pun) even worse with tickets checked on only 24.2% of journeys.
- The situation is gradually getting worse, with tickets checked on over 40% of journeys between 2002 and 2006 (Central Trains) but less than 40% on most years since (London Midland), and as low as 25% in 2014.
- Ticket checking percentages on Chiltern Railways services have been worse than Central Trains/London Midland in 8 of the 14 years.
- The highest percentage of on-board checks (74.6%) is on the Stourbridge Town shuttle and this figure is higher than those when the Class 153 DMUs operated the branch - 63.2% under Central Trains and 61.2% under London Midland.

Unfortunately, it would impossible to detail all of my findings as they would fully occupy the next three editions of Platform. The full statistics are available on the Stourbridge Line User Group website (*www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info*) under the News and Comment tab.

Fare evasion is a problem in the West Midlands. It would seem that more still needs to be done by the Train Operating Companies to counteract this.

THE SUNDAY MORNING LIE-IN
by Roger Davis

CH	0825	Birmingham Moor Street	London Marylebone
VT	0830	Birmingham New Street	London Euston
VT	0845	Birmingham New Street	Preston
CH	0855	Birmingham Moor Street	London Marylebone
XC	0901	Birmingham New Street	Manchester Piccadilly
XC	0903	Birmingham New Street	Edinburgh via Leeds
XC	0904	Birmingham New Street	Bournemouth
LM	0905	Worcester Shrub Hill	Hereford
LM	0914	Birmingham New Street	London Euston via Northampton
CH	0915	Birmingham Moor Street	Glasgow Central via Preston
XC	0930	Birmingham New Street	Penzance
VT	0930	Birmingham New Street	London Euston
LM	0930	Birmingham Moor Street	London Marylebone
GW	0935	Worcester Shrub Hill	London Paddington
LM	0942	Birmingham New Street	Liverpool Lime Street
XC	0952	Birmingham New Street	Leicester
CH	0955	Birmingham Moor Street	Edinburgh via Leeds
XC	1004	Birmingham New Street	Bournemouth
AW	1004	Birmingham New Street	Shrewsbury
XC	1012	Birmingham New Street	Cardiff Central
LM	1014	Birmingham New Street	London Euston via Northampton
CH	1015	Birmingham Moor Street	London Marylebone
XC	1030	Birmingham New Street	Plymouth
VT	1030	Birmingham New Street	London Euston

What connects the above 26 services? They are all long distance trains serving towns and cities across the country. In addition, they all operate on a Sunday morning, although engineering works may see some of them truncated on some Sundays.

However, most importantly, none of them can be caught by Stourbridge line passengers unless they drive or take a taxi to Wolverhampton, Sandwell & Dudley, Birmingham or Worcester, although Usain Bolt might just have an outside chance of catching the final two services at 1030 from Birmingham New Street. In addition, any Stourbridge line passenger needing to get to Birmingham International (for the airport and NEC) will be pleased to know that there are 12 services from Birmingham New Street between 0830 and 1030 that they cannot catch.

The fact is that the first northbound service on the Stourbridge line leaves Kidderminster at 0945 and Stourbridge Junction at 0957, arriving at Birmingham Snow Hill at 1022 and Birmingham Moor Street at 1028. The first southbound service leaves Stourbridge Junction at 0954 and Kidderminster at 1003, arriving at Worcester Shrub Hill at 1022 and Worcester Foregate Street at 1030 - okay for shoppers but not much use for long distance travellers.

Stourbridge Line User Group has raised this issue with London Midland at regular meetings but has been told that there is no chance of additional services under the current franchise. However, the current London Midland franchise ends in March 2016, and London Midland are currently negotiating with the Department for Transport for a direct award extension to the franchise until October 2017. It is not known what improvements London Midland will be required to provide, although a number of stakeholders have made Sunday morning services a priority, but the situation is clear. If Department for Transport specify earlier Sunday morning services as part of the direct award, then they will happen. Otherwise, London Midland will not make any improvements to service levels if they haven't been specified by Department for Transport. Unfortunately, it is too late to influence the contents of the direct award as it is now at final negotiation stage. All we can do is watch this space.

The situation after June 2017 is more interesting. West Midlands Rail, representing the region's metropolitan, shire and unitary authorities, plans to gain greater influence and control over local rail services from 2017, leading to the creation of a fully devolved West Midlands Rail Contract. WMR is a partnership of fourteen local councils - Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Herefordshire, Northamptonshire, Sandwell, Solihull, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Telford and Wrekin, Walsall, Warwickshire, Wolverhampton and Worcestershire. For issues that aren't incorporated in the Direct Award, Centro will make sure that West Midlands Rail consider them as part of its wider work with the Department for Transport. There will also be the chance to formally raise these in the public consultation on the franchise when this happens later in the year, and Stourbridge Line User Group will certainly take that opportunity to put forward suggestions for improvements on the Stourbridge Line.

As part of the campaign, Stourbridge Line User Group has written to all MPs representing constituencies along, and close to, the line. The letters reiterated our campaign for earlier Sunday morning services as well as our wish for better evening services and longer trains at weekends. We have received positive responses and are due to meet one MP soon to discuss our campaigns. Hopefully, earlier Sunday morning services will be a fact of life by 2017 at the latest.

WHEELS IN MOTION

This feature consists of extracts from the meeting on Sept 8th 2015. It is a summary of the London Midland Report with reference to Centro. The Centro Report, Worcestershire County Council Report and Chiltern Railways Reports have been omitted due to lack of space but will appear (updated) in a future edition. The Editor has included all that is newsworthy.

Timetables

SLUG requested that the first train out of Hartlebury to Kidderminster could be retimed so as to make a connection with the Kidderminster to London Marylebone service. Brenda Lawrence from London Midland agreed to take this request back to the timetable planners. She emphasised the problem with knock on effects caused by retiming. However, she agreed to investigate the scope for calling the first train out of Worcester at Hartlebury

Ticketing

SLUG asked whether the applications on Shere and SMB ticket machines had been extended. Brenda indicated that Group travel was the next ticket type which London Midland hoped to make available on vending machines. Plus Bus travel will be applied for under Direct Award. However, loading Excess Fares onto machines was not an easy task and the two systems could not be married or consolidated. Erica Pearson, the Centro representative agreed to investigate the Excess Fare problem.

Performance

Brenda reported that for the period ending June 27th - PPM for Stourbridge Line was 87.3% and 99.6% for the Town Branch. For the period ending July 25th it was 90.4% for the Stourbridge Line and 99.4% for the Town Branch. For the period ending August 22nd it was 93.9% & 100% for the Town Branch.

Station improvements

Brenda confirmed that Cradley Heath Interchange was in operation. She reported that Stratford-upon-Avon was the next station to gain a makeover. SLUG has seen the plans which include a new glass-fronted booking office. A date is to be set for a public consultation on the design.

Brenda reported that consultation is also taking place on Kidderminster station design. Mr. David Balme, the Worcesteshire County Council representative was not present to give further detail.

Costings are being obtained for refurbishment of the subway at Stourbridge Junction. SLUG raised the subject of Stourbridge Junction canopies which are in a serious state of disrepair. Brenda advised the Group that replacement of the canopy end boards was expensive and the responsibility of Network Rail. However, the matter had passed through several stages of London Midland management and was now being referred to Network Rail.

The Key Smartcard

Brenda reported that 324 people were using the Key daily and 1,929 had been issued to date.

Any Other Matters

It was accepted that, for a variety of reasons including a fire today (Sept 8), it had been a particularly bad period for London Midland. Brenda asked if SLUG had received any feedback from the public on strengthening of the units and all carriages being used. The Chairman responded that strengthening would always be welcomed by SLUG.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Paul Humphreys

Number of rail journeys has doubled since privatisation. According to the Rail Delivery Group 1.65 billion journeys were taken in the past 12 months, compared to 801 million in 1997. The report found that 24.7 rail trips per head of population were taken during the year, a 60% increase from 1998. This is a faster growth than in France, Germany and the Netherlands. Just as interesting, the price per mile has risen 6.7% since the mid-1990s but operators profits have fallen from 3.6% in 1997 to 2.3% in 2014. Clearly the cash flow is far from being a straight-forward matter. *(Source: Metro, 15/9/15).*

Birmingham New Street station opened fully. In case you have been on Mars recently and have not heard, Birmingham New Street station was opened fully to passengers on 20 September, followed four days later by the Grand Central shopping centre above it. The atrium and new concourse is five times the size of that at London Euston *(Source: Various)*

Only five train operators hit punctuality targets. New data released by ORR showed these to be Arriva Trains Wales, c2c, Virgin Trains East Coast and open access operators First Hull Trains and Grand Central. The data relate to the first quarter of 2015-16. Targets are determined jointly between the franchises and Network Rail through a performance strategy. First Great Western lagged behind all other TOCs by failing to meet its punctuality target of 91.1% by 2.3%; all the other companies fell behind target by less than 2%. *(Source: Rail Technology Magazine, 11/9/15)*

GWR Returns. The Great Western Railway brand returned on 21 September, when First Great Western was relaunched and rebranded. The new deal will see 29 AT300 bi-mode trains ordered from Hitachi for services to Devon and Cornwall, operating alongside the Class 800 Super Express Trains already ordered. The AT300s will arrive in 2018 and the SETs in 2017 *(Rail, 30/9/15).*

Stourbridge – Walsall – Lichfield a priority. The Campaign for Better Transport (CBT) has named the South Staffordshire Railway as its third top priority for rail re-opening [behind only Ashington – Blyth – Newcastle and freight only Portishead – Bristol], allowing freight trains to by-pass Birmingham as well as new passenger services. This is of course one of SLUG's top campaigning priorities. *(Rail 1/9/15)*

Fancy a short trip down the line? On 2nd January 2016 Pathfinder Tours is running an inaugural 'Mini Tug' excursion which includes Stourbridge Junction to Round Oak (as far as the line is currently signalled) as well as bypassing Worcester Shrub Hill on the freight lines, travelling what is left of the Thame & Princess Risborough line which now serves the BMW group plant + several Goods loops on the return journey from Oxford towards Birmingham New Street. *(www.pathfinders.co.uk)*

Old line or new line? A good deal was made in the media recently about the opening – by the Queen - of the so-called Borders line which was originally part of the Edinburgh-Carlisle line, completed in 1862. Most of the newspaper coverage appeared to acknowledge that this was actually a re-opening but some still ran headlines such as "Longest New Railway for a Century" and described it as "the first domestic railway to be constructed in the UK in 100 years" (The Independent on Saturday). I asked the question to SLUG Research Officer, Keith Flinders and he said that apart from a bit of deviation near the Edinburgh end, it is not a new route. So the media spin was very largely inaccurate. Perhaps a Guardian headline, New-Old Line, was the most factual. *(Various)*

Which is the worst railway station in Britain? No, it's not one on the Stourbridge line! According to RTM it is (or more accurately, was) Wakefield Kirkgate, so labelled by former Transport Secretary Lord Adonis. But following the recent completion of a £5.6m overhaul one presumes there will be now be a new claimant to the title. Any offers? *(Source: Rail Technology Magazine, 15/9/15)*

Network Rail told to cut it's budget by at least 25%. Chancellor George Osborne has said that Network Rail must prepare to accept cuts like any other Government department; these are currently targeted at 25% - 40% over the next three and a half years. The source (Sunday Times) says this stunned NR executives and has also set the Treasury on a collision course with the independent regulator, the Office of Rail and Road (ORR). Since 1993, the five-year budget of NR and its predecessor Railtrack has been protected by law and set in agreement with the ORR. Overturning that could result in a legal challenge from the watchdog. *(The Sunday Times: Business, 23/8/15).*