BIRMINGHAM - STOURBRIDGE
KIDDERMINSTER - WORCESTER
STOURBRIDGE LINE
USER GROUP

PLATFORM

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By the time issue 13 of Platform is published, this view of the station building at Kidderminster may be a thing of the past.

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A LULL IN PROCEEDINGS
by Roger Davis

If 2017 was the year of big announcements, 2018 will turn out to be the year when feasibility studies, initial planning and initial works start on the schemes announced.

Since the 2017 public meeting, the only proposal that has been implemented is the introduction of extra weekend services between Kidderminster and London Marylebone, which came to fruition in December 2017.

It was against that background that 25 SLUG members and non-members turned up at Kidderminster Town station on 8 May to hear presentations by Worcestershire County Council, West Midlands Rail, Chiltern Railways and West Midlands Trains.

As Ian Baxter could not represent Worcestershire County Council due to illness, SLUG Acting Chairman William Whiting deputised. The major item of interest to SLUG members was the news that work will start on site in the summer to rebuild Kidderminster station with completion of the project in 2019. An improved station has been a long time arriving, so a definite date of completion is most welcome.

Peter Sargant (Head of Rail Development at West Midlands Rail) started off by apologising for the confusion between the names of the various rail organisations in the West Midlands, and told the meeting that consideration was being given to rebranding West Midlands Rail. He also revealed that the livery applied to rebranded West Midlands Railway Class 172 unit 172 339 was not the finalised livery and that a permanent livery was still being designed, although his presentation did include a computer generated image of the current proposed design.

He continued by detailing the enhancements that the new franchise should bring. From a Stourbridge line perspective, two of these stand out.

The proposed site of Brierley Hill Town station

Feasibility studies were currently being undertaken on providing two new stations at Brierley Hill Town and Brierley Hill (Canal Street), which would need to work alongside current and future freight requirements. The services are assumed to operate as half-hourly extensions of the current Snow Hill to Stourbridge Junction stopping services with a reversal at Stourbridge Junction. Because of this, timetabling work is currently being commissioned to understand the feasibility of this service and what track and signalling interventions may be required to support the new services. Once the feasibility of providing these services has been confirmed, development work on the stations will be commissioned. Both stations are proposed to be single platform stations with the platforms able to accommodate a 6-car train.

Brierley Hill Town station would be situated on the north side of Moor Street with a car park built on the other side of the road. Brierley Hill (Canal Street) would interchange with the Metro line but would also need the proposed regeneration of the surrounding area for it to succeed.

In the short term, it is proposed to extend the Livery Street exit at Snow Hill station so that it would also provide an exit at the east side of the station at St Chad's Circus. This would additionally provide an interchange with the West Midlands Metro at St Chad's tram stop. It is hoped that this will be provided in the next year.

Rebecca Parker (West Midlands Area Manager at Chiltern Railways) detailed Chiltern Railways' achievements during the past year including the extra weekend services to and from Kidderminster.

Brenda Lawrence (Snow Hill Lines Manager at West Midlands Trains) took us through the announcements made in the new franchise agreement and explained that a new management structure was currently being undertaken within West Midlands Trains. She addressed one of the major concerns, revenue protection, by announcing that by the end of the year the intention was to staff gatelines at gated stations from start to end of service, and to increase the number of stations with gatelines.

Her exclusive was to reveal computer generated images of the interiors of the new CAF Class 196 diesel multiple units, due in 2020, which would feature wider entrance/exit doors and vestibule areas. SLUG has since attended a presentation on the layout of the new units and full details will be published in a future edition.

Thus, although there is currently a lull in proceedings, there is a lot to look forward and the 2019 public meeting should provide more concrete news about developments that have passed the planning stage. In the meantime, we will keep you up to date with developments on our website and in future editions of *Platform* as we hear them.

NEWS IN BRIEF
Edited by Rob Hebron

In House. Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) has announced that the Midland Metro system is to be run directly by the Authority, taking over from National Express Group. A decision was taken to bring the operation "in house" and the new branding on trams will be West Midlands Metro with a hexagonal logo. This will give train and trams a corporate identity but not in a combined modal franchise arrangement. National Express is still the largest operator of bus services in the West Midlands and is expected to play a part in the operation of the Sprint rapid road transport system.

(Source – Express and Star)

Highly Rated. In a survey of over 28,000 passengers undertaken by Transport Focus, a high percentage rated London Marylebone fifth for overall satisfaction. Passengers' top priorities for stations include arrival time information, waiting rooms and the overall look and feel of the station. Chiltern Railways which operates many Stourbridge Line trains to the capital should be rightly proud of this achievement. King's Cross topped the poll and Birmingham New Street was placed third. Surprisingly, Birmingham Moor Street did not feature in the top ten and yet it is a far more pleasing environment than the subterranean rival.

King's Cross station

(Source – Transport Focus)

A Pot of Gold. The national lobbying group, Campaign for Better Transport, is appealing to the Department for Transport for a dedicated funding stream. It has launched a petition for a pot of money targeted at re-opening disused railways and stations. The CfBT petition, organised jointly with Railfuture, has collected 4,000 signatures at the time of going to press. The Secretary of State for Transport, Chris Grayling seems receptive to the idea of railway re-openings but of course, the Chancellor's Autumn statement will be the proof that the government is serious. If taxpayers' money can be allocated to railway expansion, it will truly be a pot of gold.

(Source CfBT website)

An Arriva Trains Wales service to Pwllheli at Wolverhampton station

Under New Management. The Wales and Borders franchise currently operated by Arriva Trains Wales has been awarded to KeolisAmey. This is a partnership between international transport company Keolis and infrastructure asset management specialist, Amey. The new operator took over the contract on 4 June 2018 and will run it until 16 October 2033, with rail services transferring on 14 October 2018. The refranchising procedure has been overseen by Transport for Wales which has been offered over and above minimum requirements. Stourbridge Line passengers who use Smethwick Galton Bridge for connections to Wales should feel the benefit of KeolisAmey's investment from 2022 as it has been announced that the Class 158 units currently used for services from Birmingham International to Aberystwyth, Pwllheli and Holyhead will be replaced by new units with more capacity, although the new pattern of services has not been confirmed.

(Source – Walesonline)

Spanning According to Plan. A new road bridge in Worcester was erected at the end of May. The new bridge, located near the Ketch and Whittington roundabouts spans the railway lines and was constructed parallel with the existing bridge. The work is part of a wider project to create dual carriageways in the area. *(Source – Worcester News)*

A LACK OF COMMITMENT ?
by John Warren

The date - Saturday 26 May 2018. The time - 06:45. The location - Stourbridge Junction. Everything seemed normal for this time on a Saturday morning with about 40 to 50 passengers on platform 2, many travelling to London. However, this day was different as the 06:45 Chiltern Railways service was not running, much to the chagrin of some of the waiting passengers. One man was on his phone, apologising that he would be late as his train had been cancelled. Two women were concerned about missing a connection at New Street, but were assured that the next train would get them there on time. A pre-recorded public address announcement at 06:50 informed passengers that Chiltern Railways services would not call at Birmingham Snow Hill and that Leamington to Stratford and Dorridge local services would be replaced by buses. There was no mention of Stourbridge line service cancellations!

As a result, the 06:57 West Midlands Railway departure from Stourbridge Junction was full and standing, and this was probably true of other West Midlands Railway services given that Chiltern cancelled all services to/from Kidderminster that day, meaning that only 6 of the first 10 trains of the day from Kidderminster actually ran.

A quick check of the Chiltern Railways website showed that there were “MINOR CHANGES” that day, and provided a reasonable explanation for the changes.

Saturday 26th May 2018:

An amended Saturday timetable will operate.

In accordance with the Coventry to Birmingham route being closed due to engineering works, Chiltern Railways services between Marylebone and Birmingham will convey additional carriages.

In order to provide additional train capacity, services will serve Birmingham Moor Street only; no trains will serve Snow Hill. Buses will replace trains between Leamington Spa & Stratford upon Avon and also between Warwick Parkway - Hatton - Lapworth - Dorridge.

Additionally, there is a sporting event at Wembley Stadium - The Championship Play Off Final (Aston Villa vs Fulham - 17.00 KO).

An amended timetable will operate for most of the day. In order to free-up resource for additional demand to and from Wembley Stadium, please note that a reduced service of one train per hour will operate on the Marylebone - Amersham - Aylesbury Vale Parkway route for the entire day.

IMPORTANT: Aston Villa supporters are advised to travel from BIRMINGHAM MOOR STREET to Wembley Stadium. Please ensure you purchase AND collect your train tickets BEFORE THE DAY OF TRAVEL - Thank You.
Although our last service to Birmingham will depart from Marylebone at 22.10, passengers travelling from Marylebone and Wembley Stadium are very strongly advised to travel BEFORE 19.00. All trains from Marylebone after 19.00 are expected to be exceptionally busy and we will not be able to guarantee travel.

Amended timetables can be found below.

Given that the Stourbridge line has been conveniently omitted from all notifications, you have to ask how committed Chiltern is to running services on the line, particularly when most presentations given by the Company concentrate on their lucrative new Oxford service. The Chiltern franchise ends in 2021 and, given the propensity of the DfT to rationalise networks when they re-let franchises (as CrossCountry passengers to Blackpool, Brighton and Portsmouth will attest), you have to ask whether they will attempt to remove Stourbridge line services from the new franchise. Rest assured, if this happens, SLUG will campaign strongly not only to retain the services, but to improve them. Stourbridge line passengers deserve better than this.

NEVER ON SUNDAY
by Roger Davis

Yes, I remember Sundays. You donned your best clothes to go to church, before sitting down with the entire family for Sunday dinner while listening to *Round The Horne* and *I'm Sorry I'll Read That Again.* You then visited relatives for Sunday tea, before spending the evening in front of *77 Sunset Strip* and *Sunday Night At The London Palladium.* For better or worse, those Sundays are long gone.

These days, shopping centres and visitor attractions are open and major sporting events take place. West Midlands Railway has recognised this and, from May 2021, local Sunday rail services will operate at the same level as those on Saturdays, albeit starting later. However, this is not a new idea. A look at some 1960s bus timetables shows that many bus routes operated at the same frequency on Sundays as those on Mondays to Saturdays but with a much reduced, or no, service before midday. In fact, there is one example in Bristol of a bus service operating more frequently on Saturdays and Sundays as it served The Downs and Clifton Suspension Bridge, both popular weekend leisure destinations.

Unfortunately, bus deregulation in 1986 saw many evening and Sunday bus services decimated and this will have a major effect on passengers wishing to access the new enhanced local rail services without using a private car or shelling out for a taxi.

A National Express West Midlands service to Wolverhampton waits at Stourbridge Bus Station

People in Worcestershire will look across the border to the West Midlands and think that things are really rosy on the other side. However, is this true? Let's look at the period between 2 pm and 3 pm. Stourbridge Bus Station sees 42 bus departures on Mondays to Saturdays, but only 12 on Sundays (28%). At Cradley Heath, there are 25 departures on Mondays to Saturdays and 10 on Sundays (40%). For departures to Merry Hill, the figures are 11 on Mondays to Fridays and 5 on Sundays. However, this is misleading as the two main bus routes from Cradley Heath to Merry Hill are the 4M and X10. Both run every 30 minutes on Sundays and both depart from Cradley Heath at exactly the same time – at 01 and 31 minutes past each hour, which is ridiculous. Thus the 11 weekday departures per hour is effectively reduced to only 3 on Sundays (27%), despite the number of people who like to visit Merry Hill seven days a week.

While Sunday service levels on National Express West Midlands routes serving Stourbridge line stations are at 45% of weekday levels, only 12½% of the weekday services operated by Diamond actually run. These figures compare with 56% in Brighton and Hove and 57% in Bristol, the latter being operated by a company (First) that effectively abandoned Sunday commercial services in the years after deregulation and ceded a number of areas to Wessex (a sister company of Diamond).

However, a partnership agreement with the local council has seen First make a concerted effort to improve both the bus services and the quality of the buses that operate them, forcing Wessex to withdraw many services.

A brand new Brighton & Hove bus picks up passengers outside Brighton Station

A new electric bus operated by First West of England outside Bristol Temple Meads

SLUG is campaigning for earlier Sunday morning train services by the May 2021 timetable. This needs to be accompanied by earlier bus services to stations on the line. The first train on a Sunday morning currently operates to London Marylebone and leaves Stourbridge Junction at 09:48 and Cradley Heath at 09:54. As an example, the first buses from Kingswinford reach Stourbridge Junction at 10:23 (thus missing this and the 09:57 train to Stratford-upon-Avon) and Cradley Heath at 09:52 (making connection with the London train very difficult).

A Diamond Dennis Dart bus built in 2004 heads towards Stourbridge

However, it is south of "the border" that the situation with bus connections is dire. Of the five stations from Hagley to Droitwich Spa, only Kidderminster station sees any buses at all on a Sunday, and that is service 42 which runs only three times during the day between Kidderminster, Bromsgrove and Redditch. In fact, the only other Sunday service in Kidderminster (population 55,530) is service 3 which runs hourly from the Bus Station to Stourport-upon-Severn, and which involves a walk of nearly ¾ mile from the railway station. This is the only service that serves Stourport-upon-Severn (population 20,292 and a popular tourist destination) on Sunday, while the nearby town of Bewdley (population 9,470 and another popular tourist destination on the River Severn) has no Sunday bus service at all. Even the major long-distance station in the county, Worcester Shrub Hill, only sees a single bus route (38) serving it every 30 minutes.

So, something needs to be done. Worcestershire County Council has published its rail strategy document calling for major rail service improvements across the county. However, more trains are of no use if prospective passengers cannot get to the station. The County Council needs to be more proactive and emulate Cornwall, where First Bus operated a very poor bus service using clapped-out buses approaching withdrawal, before abandoning a large swathe of the county to Western Greyhound.

A new "Tinner" branded First Kernow bus picks up passengers outside Penzance Station

Since the latter's demise, First has moved back in and, with support with the County Council has rebranded itself as First Kernow, regenerated its bus services and introduced 81 brand new buses to operate some of the services. First had also acquired a bad name in Worcestershire before abandoning Kidderminster and Redditch by selling its operations to Diamond. Since then, Diamond has been vilified by customers for reducing services, failing to operate its timetabled service and the poor condition of its buses which has resulted in many breakdowns. If local authorities in Cornwall and Bristol can support a radical improvement in bus services, then why can't Worcestershire?

The message is clear. SLUG fully supports the proposal to improve train services on Sundays, but feels that West Midlands Rail, West Midlands Railway and Worcestershire County Council need to look at ways to ensure that connecting bus services are similarly improved.

SLUG AND YOUR PERSONAL DATA
by Roger Davis

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Data for members whose membership has lapsed is deleted from the file 12 months afterwards, the data being retained for that period in case you have just forgotten to renew your membership.

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