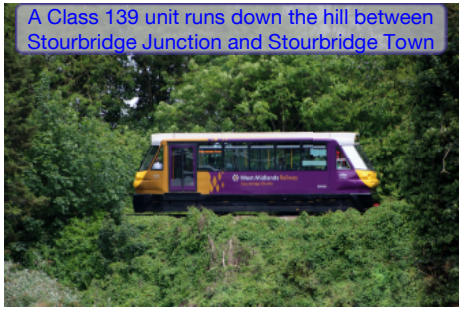
West Midlands Railway has tried to provide the best standard of seating that is allowed under railway guidelines. With this in mind, representatives from local rail user groups, including SLUG, were invited to a presentation at Tyseley depot to try out four types of seats, which included the “ironing boards” favoured by rail operators in the London area. One design was unanimously agreed as the most comfortable and this has been adopted in the new units. These are cantilever seats which provide good storage space underneath each seat.

As we go to press, construction of the first unit has started at Beasain, Spain, with the first unit expected to arrive in the UK in the late summer for certification tests.

(West Midlands Railway)

HAPPY 10th BIRTHDAY ... CLASS 139
by John Warren

Ten years ago this month, the Class 139 railcars built by Parry People Movers entered service on the Stourbridge Town branch, replacing the Class 153 single-car units which had operated the branch since BR created them in 1991/92.



A Class 139 unit runs down the hill between Stourbridge Junction and Stourbridge Town

After early teething problems, which resulted in bustitution for a few months and the return of a Class 153 unit for three months, the full Class 139 service was introduced in June 2009 and operated by Pre-Metro Operations on behalf of London Midland. This resulted in a 10-minute service being introduced on the branch, which has resulted in a marked increase in passenger numbers. It has also resulted in the line being known as the friendly line with regular passengers and train staff knowing each other by name. Whether the Class 139 will turn out to be a victim of its own success and will be replaced by larger units in the next ten years remains to be seen. Whatever happens, they will always be remembered for transforming the fortunes of the line.

PLATFORM

Issue 16 June 2019

Not the usual train photo this issue but a photo of Stourbridge Junction’s Cat Controller. More details of this personality are on page 3.

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

FRIENDS OF STOURBRIDGE STATIONS HOPES TO BLOOM!
by Phil Tonks

This year, the Stourbridge branch line between Junction and Town celebrates its 140th Anniversary – and also 10 years of the "Stourbridge Shuttle" operation, using the innovative Class 139 "Parry People Movers". There's also a chance to create a longer-lasting legacy from this momentous year – the creation of a Friends group, which can provide a splash of colour to the proceedings!

Station adoption groups are on the rise – and recognised as a community asset by the rail industry and locals alike. Since gaining the local rail franchise in late 2017, West Midlands Trains – with their West Midlands Railway and London North Western operations – have enthusiastically taken on the task of overseeing ever-increasing numbers of station adoption groups. With the support of Stourbridge Shuttle operator Pre Metro Operations Ltd, I have taken on the task of setting up "Friends of Stourbridge Stations" – a community group that will "adopt" Stourbridge Junction and Stourbridge Town stations.

So, what are we going to do?

First, we need some members! An initial "gang of three", including local historian Dr Paul Collins and railway author Stephen Burdett have managed to set up the group and become the official "adopters", but now we need some enthusiastic members who "love their station"!

There's no doubt Stourbridge's railway stations are popular. Footfall continues to rise year-on-year, the car parks are as full as ever and we're carrying record numbers on The Shuttle. But whilst railway stations for many are a means to an end to catch trains, after 8 years of driving the branch line service I've detected a bit of affection for our railway stations amongst some. Railway stations are landmarks. They represent the daily grind, but also normality. They're at the start of our working days and at the end of them. The beginning of magical journeys to places far away. In Stourbridge, there's history and modernity. The current Junction station is 1901 vintage, the Town from only 1994. But they're our stations. Community hubs.

The new group will make our stations bloom with splashes of colour. We're hoping keen gardeners will join us and showcase their skills with plants and flowers. We're aiming to bring back the golden years of the Great Western Railway, where stations would compete for the title of best looking station, with carefully cultivated gardens and flowers – and we're hoping to bring a simple smile to travellers every day, and continue a sense of pride in our local railway.

NEW TRAINS FOR OLD
by Roger Davis

When the new West Midlands Railway franchise was announced in 2017, new trains built by Spanish company CAF were promised for delivery in 2020. This would see 26 trains (20 2-car and 6 3-car) built in the 1980s and 1990s replaced by 26 new trains (12 2-car and 14 4-car) – an increase in the number of carriages from 58 to 80. Although these new units are primarily to be used on Birmingham – Bromsgrove – Worcester – Hereford and Birmingham – Wolverhampton – Shrewsbury services, they will also supplement our Class 172 units on Stourbridge line services.

(West Midlands Railway)

The new units will be designated Class 196 with 2-car units seating 141 passengers and 4-car units seating 311. Like the Class 172s, they will have through gangways between the trains and can be used in multiple to form 6 or 8-car trains. However, the Class 196 has a different coupling mechanism to the Class 172 which means that the two Classes cannot operate together.

The new trains will have quicker acceleration than the trains they replace and will be compliant to the latest emissions legislation. As they are primarily designed for longer distance services, they will have passenger Wi-Fi, at seat power/USB points, seat back tables at all seats, overhead luggage racks, good seat to window ratio with large windows, LED lighting, self-regulating heating, ventilation and air conditioning, and a universal access toilet. A separate area will be provided for cycle storage and passengers with reduced mobility. Six large 21½" passenger information screens with high brightness and resolution will be fitted in each carriage. Like the Class 172s, they will have clear vestibules for improved passenger access and egress.

(West Midlands Railway)

Brexit Spin-off. The impending departure of Theresa May as a result of not delivering Brexit may have consequences for rail development in the West Midlands. Many candidates for the Prime Minister's job are either anti-HS2 or depend on supporters from that camp. SLUG has supported HS2 for the reason that it would release capacity on congested local rail routes. One ex-cabinet member (who is not in the leadership contest) has jumped on a report produced by the Taxpayers' Alliance. David Davis MP claims that the £50 billion saved by cancelling HS2 could fund 28 rail infrastructure projects with money to spare!

The proposed HS2 station at Birmingham Curzon

Amongst the wish list is a re-opened Sutton Park line, Stourbridge to Lichfield line and Whitacre Junction to Hampton-in-Arden. The report also promotes the electrification of the Chiltern railway line.

Although the theory and figures are persuasive, funding has already been committed to HS2 beyond the planning stage. The Group would need to be convinced that the £50 billion would actually be reassigned as forecast unlike the Brexit saving benefit for the NHS as displayed on Boris's bus! *(Source : Birmingham Post)*

If the Mountain Won't Come To Mohammed. The application of West Midlands Railway livery on the Class 172 units has been carried out over the past few months at Tyseley Depot. However, the Class 139 railcars used on the Stourbridge Town branch could not be sent to Tyseley as they are not allowed on the main line. Thus, the application of the new livery on these units took place at the small Stourbridge Junction depot over the last two weeks of May, with unit 139 002 entering service in the new livery on 26 May and 139 001 on 2 June. *(Source : Pre-Metro Operations)*

Before

After

Far from the Madding Crowd. Football fans will have noticed a new approach to queuing at stations on match days. New queuing systems in place at Birmingham Snow Hill and The Hawthorns are now being used to manage the flow of supporters travelling to and from high-profile matches by train. New methods trialled at the stations are now standard practice. This reorganisation will keep passengers moving safely and efficiently through the stations when passenger numbers are particularly high. *(Source : WMT Business Update)*

If you'd like to join us, we'd love to hear from you! We've just set up our new website at www.friendsofstourbridgestations.com and we'll be adding to it in the coming months. You can email us at hello@friendsofstourbridgestations.com or call 07860 721554 (Phil – but if I don't answer straight away, do leave a message – I might be driving the Shuttle!)

Phil Tonks is Chairman of Friends of Stourbridge Stations, Marketing & Promotions Officer of Pre-Metro Operations and a Stourbridge shuttle driver.

KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR GEORGE
by Phil Tonks

Keen-eyed regulars at Stourbridge Junction may have spotted a new member of staff patrolling the station – and keeping a watchful eye over the booking office.

Whilst the station receives an orange makeover as part of the West Midlands Railway revamp, a similar-tinged furry feline is showing off his professional napping skills to travellers!

(Phil Tonks)

George, the Stourbridge Station cat is gaining a cult following amongst station-goers, and can often be seen enjoying 40 winks in his special cat bed behind the window at the Junction. Sometimes, he's a bit more active and can be seen practising his hunting skills in the undergrowth around platform 1.

He's a very friendly character and is also often seen being sociable with passengers outside the booking office. He's on a special diet, so titbits aren't allowed, despite what he might tell you!

George is following in the paw-steps of many a famous station cat, including Felix, the Huddersfield station cat, who also has a book out and a yearly calendar with some very fetching photos!

He lives in a house close to the station, but loves the hustle and bustle of station life. George does occasionally make it home though – especially when it's tea-time!

You can follow the antics of our lovely feline friend on Facebook, where he has his very own page – search George, The Stourbridge Station Cat.

A FUTURE PERSPECTIVE
by Roger Davis

The refreshment room at Kidderminster Town station once again provided the backdrop for SLUG's annual public meeting on 14 May, and attendees could not have failed to notice the work going outside to redesign the access road to the main line station as part of the redevelopment of that station. The next stage will see the temporary booking office arrive as a prelude to the demolition and rebuilding of the main station building.

Work progresses on the access roads at Kidderminster station on 14 May

The meeting was addressed by David Heathfield (Head of Corporate Affairs at Chiltern Railways), Brenda Lawrence (Head of Stations at West Midlands Railway), Ian Baxter (Director of SLC Rail, on behalf of Worcestershire County Council) and Peter Sargant (Head of Rail Development at West Midlands Rail Executive). All four guest speakers gave very interesting presentations and space constraints mean that it would be impossible to detail everything said in this edition of *Platform*.

The guest speakers prepare to address their audience

So, what were the headline announcements? Although the franchise is due to end in 2021, David Heathfield was hopeful of Chiltern getting an extension, although that would depend on the outcome of the Williams Review. The company is working on converting a Class 165 DMU into a hybrid unit by the end of the year to enable it to run on battery power in built up areas.

Brenda Lawrence told the meeting that WMR was about to introduce the biggest timetable change in over a decade at the time of the meeting with extra carriages and services at rush hours and improved services to Kidderminster on Monday to Saturday evenings. It was admitted that some trains would continue to be very busy and that customers may need to travel slightly earlier or later than at present to benefit from the additional capacity. SLUG will continue to liaise with WMR on this issue.

Ian Baxter confirmed that, in Worcestershire, work on new stations at Kidderminster and Worcestershire Parkway would be completed this year and a Worcester Shrub Hill master plan was being developed which would see Elgar House demolished to provide a plaza in front of the station, with a new boulevard linking the station with the city centre.

The proposed Shrub Hill plaza

(Worcester City Council)

He went on to say that SLC Rail is currently in conversation with Great Western Railway about improvements in the next direct award of the franchise. It is hoped that this direct award will bring a train service between Stourbridge/Kidderminster, Worcester and Paddington plus hourly services between Worcester and Bristol. Major improvements on the Birmingham - Kidderminster/Bromsgrove - Bristol corridor are required and a Task Force of all local authorities along the line has been set up.

Finally, Peter Sargant detailed the WMRE Rail Investment Strategy for rail improvements over the next 30 years. In the short term, at Snow Hill, work on a third entrance had started and it was hoped that funding could be obtained to reopen platform 4 at Snow Hill as early as possible. A master plan for developing Moor Street station had been produced to link Moor Street to the adjacent HS2 station and to major developments planned by Birmingham City Council in the Digbeth area.

The next 12 months should be interesting, particularly with the Williams Review due to produce its report, hopefully to Chris Grayling's successor. Whatever happens, we will be back at Kidderminster on Tuesday 12 May for our 2020 public meeting. We look forward to greeting you then.

NEWS IN BRIEF
Edited by Rob Hebron

Goodbye Network West Midlands. The "Network West Midlands" branding will disappear later this year and will be replaced by "West Midlands Network" with a logo similar to that used by West Midlands Railway/Bus/Metro. It is uncertain at present how the various network tickets will be rebranded. A new website is expected at the end of 2019. *(Source :TfWM)*

Stand and Deliver. Newly refurbished Class 172/0 trains have now entered service. The modified units have been delivered to West Midland Trains, having been relinquished by London Overground. Class 172/0s are active on the Leamington Spa to Nuneaton line and are also calling at Droitwich Spa on their way through to and from Hereford. The bad news is that this version of the Class 172 has fewer seats to accommodate more standing passengers. When they are substituted for the current 172 stock on the Stourbridge Line, SLUG expects complaints from commuters. Arguably, standing is no hardship on short journeys at the Worcester end of the line but from Stourbridge to Birmingham, pass holders are going to feel short–changed if they regularly do not have a seat. The substitution may be temporary whilst the existing 172 stock is modified. However, in the meantime, passengers may feel they are being robbed. *(Source : WMT Business Update)*

A Worcester to Dorridge service, formed of two 172/0 units, picks up at Cradley Heath on 3 June