The Train Operating Companies and the Department for Transport claim that the design of the seats is due to fire safety and crash regulations, together with ensuring seats are vandal-proof, with the TOCs saying that the design is as specified by the DfT. However, many railway professionals suggest that the reason for the poor quality of the seats is down to cost and that fire compliant, comfortable seats are available, but each seat costs £100 more.

Far more comfort is available if you travel by bus from Scarborough to Leeds

The fact is that many long distance bus services have fine comfortable seats with some providing reclining seats. Buses must comply with fire regulations and they also suffer from vandalism. I recently caught a bus operated by Yorkshire Coastrider which runs between Scarborough and Leeds. The seats were firm but very comfortable with tables and USB charging points provided. The journey from Scarborough to Leeds by bus would take just under 3 hours, compared with 1½ hours on the train. The question is – what is preferable, a 3 hour journey in a comfortable seat or a 1½ hour journey sat on an ironing board?

The proposed seats for a Class 196 DMU is an improvement on those on the previous page, but nowhere near as good as those on the bus

(West Midlands Trains)

However, it is not all bad news. When it took over the franchise from London Midland, West Midlands Railway announced the order of 26 new Class 196 diesel multiple unit trains, built by Spanish company CAF, some of which would see service on the Stourbridge line. Before the order was placed, representatives of four Rail User Groups, including SLUG, were invited to the Tyseley Depot to see the specification for the new trains and to choose one of three designs of seats to be used in the new trains. The verdict was unanimous with everybody choosing a design that, although firm, was by far the most comfortable of the three and was moulded to best fit passengers' body shape. These seats may not suit everybody but are far better than the ironing boards used on other new trains. It's a pity that they won't be as comfortable as the seats provided by many bus operators.

BIRMINGHAM - STOURBRIDGE
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STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

PLATFORM

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One of the 8 extra Class 172 units cascaded from London Overground waits at Stourbridge Junction on 24 August as work to replace the canopies proceeds

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A BIT OF A SQUEEZE
by Roger Davis

The Stourbridge Town branch has been one of the success stories of the last decade with passenger numbers soaring since the Class 139s took over the service and enabled a 10 minute service to be introduced. Unfortunately, at certain times of the day, the line has become a victim of its own success and about 30 of the 214 trips per day are full with about 50 passengers on board and only 21 of them seated.

One of the major causes is the influx of students into Stourbridge, creating over 1,500 student movements at Stourbridge Interchange every day to use the bus or train, with some students travelling to/from the Rowley Regis/Smethwick area by train. One of the critical periods is just after 4 pm when over 100 students arrive at Stourbridge Town station within a space of about 10 minutes. This causes problems on the small platform when pushing, shoving and queue jumping, with students very close to the edge of the platform, makes it very difficult for passengers arriving from the Junction to disembark. In addition, with the shuttle car only holding a maximum of about 50 passengers, it can take three trips just to clear the platform.

The queue stretches back along the path as the 1615 service from Stourbridge Junction arrives

The 1620 service departs with about 50 on board and a similar number left behind

SLUG was made aware of these problems and took the proactive stance of organising a meeting, kindly hosted by the Assistant Principal at King Edward VI College, which also involved West Midlands Railway and Pre Metro Operations (who operate the Town Branch Shuttle).

A full discussion was held to try to suggest solutions. One issue is the size of the platform at Stourbridge Town station and a queuing system, operated by station staff, was suggested similar to that used at The Hawthorns on match days. The other problem is the size of the train but a return to the Class 153 units that previously operated the service is not an option and would result in a less frequent service. West Midlands Rail Executive and West Midlands Railway have undertaken to review the Town branch in 2021 but, with no suitable "off the peg" units available, it will be a few years before a replacement is in service. In the short term, the potential provision of a parallel bus service to operate during busy periods was discussed.

The meeting ended with all parties given actions to bring back for discussion at a follow-up meeting which the College is happy to host. It is hoped that the cooperation of the four parties will result in a solution to the overcrowding problem. We will keep you informed of any progress in future editions of *Platform*.

ARE YOU SITTING COMFORTABLY ?
by John Warren

I am of an age where I can remember railway compartments when they had comfortable deep-sprung seats. All was not prefect in those days as age tended to result in broken or missing springs in the seat and this caused the incumbent to sink slowly into the surface and finish up with their knees at or above head height.

Since those days, train seats have got thinner and thinner – and harder and harder. Although firmer seats did not mean more discomfort in the past, the design of many current train seats has turned longer distance journeys into an ordeal.

An "ironing board" seat greets air passengers from Gatwick Airport

Things went downhill when the Department for Transport, not content with simply micromanaging every rail franchise, decided that they would procure two sets of new trains – a complete fleet of electric multiple units (Class 700) from Siemens for the expanded London Thameslink network, and new Inter City Express Trains (Class 800) to replace the venerable High Speed Trains on the (partially) electrified Great Western Main Line and on the East Coast Main Line.

On introduction, both classes were universally condemned because the seats were so thin and flat that they were referred to as ironing board seats. My first two journeys on these new trains were between Haywards Heath and Brighton on a Class 700 and between Bristol Parkway and Newport on a Class 800, and on each occasion my back was aching at the end of the journey – despite both journeys only taking 20 minutes. If the seats are that bad for a short journey, what are they like on journeys from Brighton to Cambridge, London to Penzance or London to Aberdeen which are now "blessed" with these trains.

Similar seats await passengers on a 2¾ hour journey from Scarborough to Liverpool

Unfortunately, some Train Operating Companies have followed the trend when ordering new trains. The Gatwick Express service, used my many foreign visitors entering this country, saw 30-year old trains, built by British Rail with comfort in mind, replaced by new trains with ironing board seats. These trains now operate many services in the London and South East areas. In the north, brand new trains for the Scarborough to Liverpool service have been introduced into service in the past month, but the seats look just as thin and flat.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

University Station Public Consultation. Rail passengers and residents are being offered the chance to have their say and help shape the final design of the new multi-million pound University station. Fresh images of the design were released on August 20 as part of a public consultation by Transport for West Midlands (TfWM) and the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE). The original station, which was first opened in May 1978, was originally designed to handle around 500,000 passengers a year but now has to cope with more than 3.5 million each year. *(Source : TfWM)*

The proposed new University station (TfWM)

£25m for New West Midlands Stations. The Department for Transport has provided £15m of funding towards construction of three new stations at Moseley, Kings Heath and Hazelwell, plus a further £10m of funding towards two new stations at Willenhall and Darlaston. The stations are due to open by the end of 2021. *(Source : Modern Railways)*

Kidderminster station on 10 September

Kidderminster Station Progress. Workers demolished the main Kidderminster station building at the end of July. Demolition of the building, which was built in 1968, will make way for the new glass-fronted building that will be double the size and much better equipped to deal with the nearly two million passengers that use the station every year, a number which is set to increase further. Work is now proceeding on the construction of the new station, with the steel framework taking shape. *(Source : Express & Star)*

Boris Launches HS2 Review. Dudley Council Leader Patrick Harley and West Midlands Metro Mayor Andy Street are two of the ten person review team set up by Boris Johnson to examine whether the HS2 scheme should be amended, scrapped or approved. The review team will report back in the autumn with a final decision on whether to proceed to be made by the end of the year. Since the review was announced, industry and business leaders across the country have given strong support to the scheme. *(Source : RAIL Magazine)*

A Virgin Trains Pendolino at Preston in August 2019

The End For Virgin Trains. A partnership of FirstGroup and Trenitalia will run the new West Coast Partnership franchise from December this year until 2031, replacing Virgin Trains who have operated the franchise since privatisation. The new franchise will see the replacement of the diesel Voyager trains with new electric and bi-mode trains, an additional 263 trains per week and through services from Euston to Walsall. *(Source : RAIL Magazine)*

BRIDGING THE MISSING LINK
by Roger Davis

It all looked so promising in 2017 when West Midlands Trains announced their proposals for the new franchise which included seven new stations in the West Midlands county – two of them at Brierley Hill Town and Brierley Hill Canal Street. While the other five are going ahead and will open in 2021 (see News In Brief, page 6), the Brierley Hill heavy rail scheme, which involved reversing Stourbridge Junction terminators and extending them to Brierley Hill, has been abandoned.

A Tata Steel freight train prepares to leave Round Oak terminal

There are a number of reasons for this. The original cost benefit was already low before Network Rail insisted that, to reverse a train at Stourbridge Junction and maintain the current level of service, platform 4 would have to be reinstated, thus taking a part of the car park. In addition, there were concerns that a 30 minute service could not be maintained when a steel train was at Round Oak as marshalling of the freight wagons sometimes required both running tracks. Finally, Dudley Council had received a planning application from The Armitt Group to build a freight terminal at Moor Street. Although this had been turned down because the poor local road network could not support extra heavy lorry movements, there were further expressions of interest from two other freight companies which did not result in full planning applications. However, there is no active interest at present and steps have been taken to ensure that no development that would affect reinstatement of passenger services will take place.

The land in the middle of the photo was the proposed site of a park and ride car park

Throughout this period, SLUG has been actively keeping a watching brief and has held two meetings recently – the first with the Commercial Director at West Midlands Railway and the second with representatives from Dudley Council Planning Department and West Midlands Rail Executive. We have learned that all parties have now taken a step backwards to do a full study of the route to ascertain the preferred mode of transport – heavy rail, tram-train, Metro, bus or guided bus. Given the problems with the road infrastructure in the area, the final two options would appear to be non-starters, especially when the existing bus service 6 is so unreliable due to traffic congestion. At present, a bidding process is taking place to appoint consultants to undertake this study, which it is hoped to start later this year.

SLUG has been invited to contribute to the terms of reference and scope of the study and is currently finalising its response. The heavy rail solution would have provided both improved journey opportunities for rail travellers from Worcestershire to the Black Country and Wolverhampton, and a park and ride facility in the Brierley Hill area to serve communities to the west of the line. SLUG believes that both of these are essential constituents of any study into a future rail-based scheme, which should also consider a number of other options

- should the line connect with the existing Metro line at Canal Street or should it be an extension of the line from the Brierley Hill Metro terminus?
- should the line follow the current line directly into Stourbridge Junction with the inherent problems of getting from Stourbridge North Junction to Stourbridge Junction alongside existing heavy rail services?
- could a route be found to connect the existing heavy rail line north of Stambermill Viaduct with Stourbridge Town station, thus incorporating the Town branch into the scheme?
- could a future extension via the mothballed Pensnett branch, potentially to Russells Hall Hospital, be incorporated into the study?

SLUG recognises the need to provide a through rail service from Stourbridge to Walsall. However, Network Rail has made it clear that there is little prospect of this until the 2040s at the earliest and has estimated that the restoration of the entire route to Lichfield could cost as much as £900 million. SLUG believes that a rail link is needed much earlier and supports any effort to bridge the missing link to Brierley Hill in a much shorter timeframe.

FOOTNOTE : This article does not mention the proposal made at the same time by West Midlands Railway to extend Kidderminster terminators to a new station at Safari Park. Needless to say, that proposal never got off the ground due to the problems of mixing the heritage railway services with a 30 minute main line service and has now been scrapped.

A SUCCESSFUL OUTCOME
by John Warren

A long campaign by SLUG to replace the canopy ends at Stourbridge Junction station is reaching its conclusion with the work now in progress. The old canopy ends were in atrocious condition and made the entire station look run down. Hopefully, once the work is complete, the station will look a lot smarter.

MISINFORMATION OR NO INFORMATION ?
by Roger Davis

As Webmaster and Newsletter Editor for SLUG, I visit railway stations along the Stourbridge line to update my library of photographs taken along the line. During July, I visited Cradley Heath and Langley Green to ensure that the photographs with London Midland liveried trains could be replaced by photographs with purple and gold trains.

Whilst at the stations, I noticed the "Onward Travel Information" posters and was shocked to find that, at both stations, some of the information displayed was over 10 months out of date.

At Cradley Heath, the poster on the Stourbridge bound platform advised passengers that bus services 12, 14, 24, 124, 129 and 208 offered onward bus travel to local areas. Unfortunately, only service 24 still exists and this now serves different areas to those on the poster, while the other services disappeared as long ago as September 2018. This incorrect information was not as critical at Cradley Heath as up-to-date information was available at the adjacent bus station. However, at Langley Green, the poster was the only source of onward travel information and advised users to catch bus services 120, 120A and 128, all of which were withdrawn on 2 September 2018 and replaced by new services 12, 12A and 13.

West Midlands Railway and the West Midlands Rail Executive have both stated their desire to improve bus/train interchange information at local stations. These out-of-date posters demonstrate that this needs to be done as a matter of urgency.

The discovery of these posters asks a simple question – what is worse, no information or incorrect information? In my opinion, it is the latter. The rail industry seems to thrive on out-of-date or incorrect information – not only on posters, but on public address announcements or station information screens.

At Smethwick Galton Bridge the following announcement was made *"Passengers for Barmouth and Pwllheli should board the front two coaches. Passengers for Aberystwyth should board the rear two coaches"*. It turned out to be a 2-coach train!

Even better was this information screen on the main concourse at Birmingham New Street for a train to Plymouth – *"Train formed of 7 coaches. First Class in rear two coaches. Please note Food and drink service available at seat and First Class is at the front of the train"*. You couldn't make it up.

Seriously, this is the 21st century with digital information readily available and quick to update. The rail industry needs to step up to the plate and give passengers correct information at all times. It's not rocket science.