BIRMINGHAM - STOURBRIDGE
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STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

PLATFORM

Issue 18 December 2019

Worcester Shrub Hill will be getting faster services on the route to London this month using bi-mode trains. Up to the 1960s, this route was the domain of GWR Castle Class locomotives such as 7029 *Clun Castle,* seen at Shrub Hill on 24 August.

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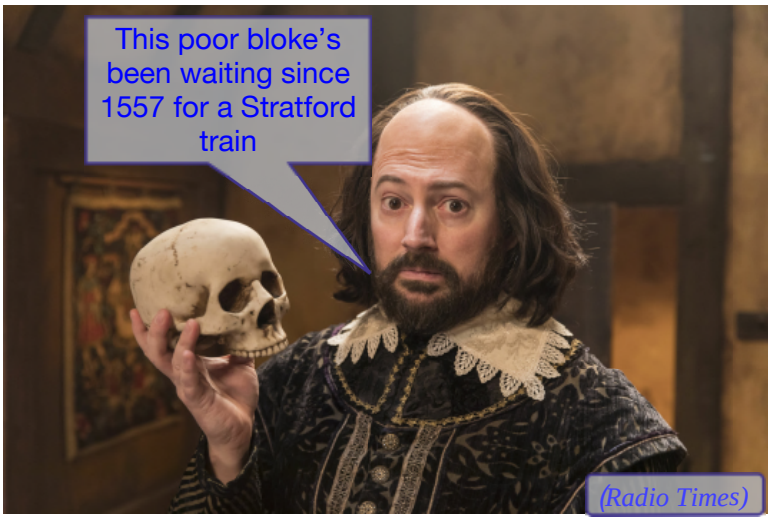
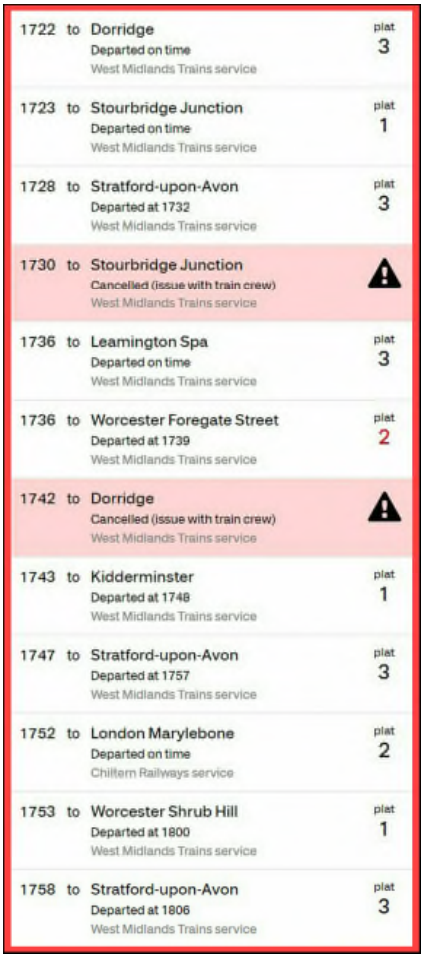
A WINTER OF DISCONTENT ?
by Roger Davis



If you believe Ben Elton's BBC2 comedy series *Upstart Crow*, the speech that starts "Now is the winter of our discontent" was written by William Shakespeare one night when his train from Moor Street to Stratford was cancelled, the following service terminated at Whitlocks End, and he was forced to complete his journey on a replacement stagecoach service. While this is a corruption of the truth, many rail passengers in the West Midlands are asking whether we really are heading towards a winter of discontent to follow what has been an autumn of discontent.

West Midlands Railway has admitted that problems exist and has pointed to "an over-ambitious timetable enhancement in May 2019". This is certainly true on the Chase Line between Walsall and Rugeley Trent Valley where the extension of services to London Euston has resulted in regular late running and an unacceptable level of cancellations north of Walsall. However, on Snow Hill line services, the enhancements consisted of a few extra weekday services at rush hours, longer trains on many services and more evening services on Mondays to Saturdays. Under normal circumstances, you would not expect these changes to reduce reliability figures for the Snow Hill lines from 90% to 75%, a figure which is inflated by the ultra-reliable Stourbridge Town shuttle service.



One reason for an unacceptable level of cancellations recently has been the lack of an available crew to operate a service. Many services are dependent on train crews being willing to work overtime and rest days. If crews are not available, the service is cancelled - quite often at Snow Hill where crew changes are made - to the chagrin of passengers on board that service.

This problem is exacerbated during school holidays when many crew members prefer to spend their rest days with their families. The result was that, in the two weeks from Wednesday 23 October to Tuesday 5 November, 88 services were cancelled because of crewing issues - 43 of them completely cancelled and 45 cancelled for part of the scheduled journey. During that period, another 60 were cancelled for other reasons, meaning that crewing issues accounted for 60% of all cancellations.

On two days during this period, passengers to destinations south of Stourbridge Junction suffered major inconvenience. On Wednesday 23 October, the services from Snow Hill at 1533, 1603, 1613 and 1633 were all cancelled because of crew shortages, meaning that the only services into Worcestershire between 1513 and 1700 were at 1543 and 1643. On Monday 4 November, services at 1533 and 1543 were cancelled, leaving a gap of 50 or 60 minutes between trains to Kidderminster and Worcester respectively. I catch the 1613 service every other Monday and this is a 5-car service which is full and standing. On one occasion, this train was cancelled and the following service at 1623 to Stourbridge Junction was unbearably overcrowded despite Worcestershire passengers having to wait for a later service.

The pretext that this was only a half-term problem was dispelled on 4 December when no trains from Snow Hill ran south of Stourbridge Junction from 1543 to 1643, while no services from Moor Street ran past Snow Hill from 1559 until 1639. Similar cancellation levels on 5/6 December were met with condemnation by frustrated passengers, who are now awaiting each day's service with trepidation.

Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye. Four cancellations in each direction between 1200 and 1700 on 4 December meant an hourly service, with no other services amended to call at these stations

In November, a second threat to the running of a decent rain service emerged when RMT announced that it had declared strike action against West Midlands Trains, having received a clear mandate from its members to do so. As is the norm in any dispute, the two camps made conflicting statements with the truth probably hidden somewhere in the middle.

RMT then announced strike action for every Saturday from 16 November to 28 December. In response, West Midlands Railway produced an emergency timetable with two trains an hour between Kidderminster and Birmingham (extended alternately to Dorridge and Whitlocks End), with a replacement bus service in operation between Kidderminster and Worcester. Fortunately, on 5 December, RMT announced that they had suspended their strike action to allow for a referendum on a new company offer and normal Saturday services resumed on 14 December.

Passengers want a service operated using enough staff to ensure that trains can be operated on time and without cancellations seven days a week without having to depend on the goodwill of train crews to work on their rest days. The next major timetable change proposed by West Midlands Railway is in May 2021 when Sunday service levels are to be increased to match Saturday levels. With the situation as it is at the moment with Sunday services operated using rest day working, this upgrade will be a disaster and the fear is that cancellations due to lack of staff will produce a service that is worse than the half-hourly service enjoyed between Birmingham and Stourbridge Junction at present. Therefore, the message from SLUG to both the Train Operating Company and the unions is - **sort out this mess quickly** … please! Stourbridge line passengers deserve a lot better service than they have at present.

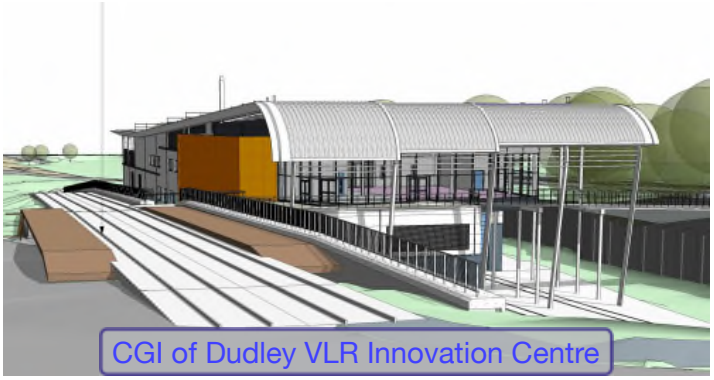
BRIDGING THE MISSING LINK … AN UPDATE
by Roger Davis

Artist's impression of the Metro at Merry Hill (TfWM)

In the previous edition of *Platform*, we reported that SLUG had held a meeting with Dudley Council and West Midlands Railway Executive regarding the missing rail link from Stourbridge Junction to Brierley Hill. At the time, consultants had not been appointed to undertake this study.

We can now report that the study will be undertaken by Steer Consultants and that SLUG has been invited to liaise with them directly. PMOL also announced in December that it has commissioned a survey into the reopening of the link and SLUG hopes that it is also liaising with the Steer study. SLUG will receive updates from all parties throughout the process and will pass any news onto our members.

NEWS IN BRIEF
compiled by Rob Hebron


CGI of Dudley VLR Innovation Centre

Dudley VLR Work Starts. On-Site construction work has started to build the Dudley Very Light Railway Innovation Centre at the old Dudley Railway Station site. This first phase will see a retaining wall built before work on the main building starts early in 2020. The Centre is due to open in June 2021.

(Source : Dudley MBC)

HS2 Review Decision Leaked. With the country in purdah in the run-up to the General Election, the official publication of both the Williams Report into the future structure of the railway industry and the Oakenvee Review on HS2 have been delayed, probably until early 2020. However, the latter report was leaked to *The Times* on 12 November who reported that it recommends that HS2 should be completed in full with the total cost now estimated at £88bn. *(Source : The Times)*

Perry Barr Station Rebuild Planned. Plans have been submitted to rebuild the rundown Perry Barr station in time for the 2022 Commonwealth Games. The new station building will feature new lighting, CCTV, accessible toilets, covered waiting areas, lifts and improved access. There will be improved passenger links to a redesigned bus interchange.

(Source : Railway Magazine)

CGI of proposed Perry Barr Station (TfWM)

A TIME TO CONSOLIDATE
by John Warren

At almost the same time as this edition of *Platform* is published, the December timetable change takes place. On this occasion, no changes have been made to the Stourbridge line timetable except for a change in the number of carriages on some services based on the experience gained since the May timetable introduction. The major rush hour changes on the Stourbridge line will see extra carriages on the departures at 1713, 1730, 1736 and 1753 from Snow Hill, with the 1703 service having one less carriage. These changes have been made possible by the arrival of some electric multiple units from Transpennine Express which will release diesel multiple units currently operating on electrified lines. Although this will help on the Stourbridge line, the major beneficiary will be the Birmingham New Street to Hereford service which currently suffers from chronic overcrowding on many rush hour services.

One disappointment in the new timetable is that Hartlebury will not get any stopping services on Sunday, despite hopes that services would be introduced in December.

The biggest changes are not on the Stourbridge line itself but on other services through Worcester. Great Western Railway has completely revamped its timetable to speed up services after the electrification of its main line and the introduction of new bi-mode Inter City Express Trains. There are slightly more trains on the Hereford - Worcester - Oxford - Paddington line, and these have been retimed and marginally speeded up, with the fastest train now covering Worcester Shrub Hill to London Paddington in under 2 hours. The other change on this line will be the opening of the new Worcestershire Parkway station, east of Worcester (postponed to 2020). When open, most services will call at the station, although 9 services per week in each direction will pass through without stopping, something Worcestershire County Council will be keen to resolve. Nottingham to Cardiff services will also stop every hour.

Worcestershire Parkway - Scheduled opening date 15 Dec 2019 - Actual opening date 2020 ??

(Worcs CC)

Unfortunately, from SLUG's viewpoint, the disappointment is that the service on the Worcester to Bristol service is as infrequent and as slow as before, making a journey from the Stourbridge line to the South West via Worcester as unpalatable as ever. The only "enhancement" is a through service from Shrub Hill to Taunton which, with a departure time of 0520, is great for insomniacs but not much use for anybody else.

SLUG will continue to campaign through the Worcestershire Rail User Group Alliance (WRUGA) for through services from our line to Bristol to improve connections to the South West.

A NEW COMMUNITY RAIL PARTNERSHIP
by Roger Davis

On Friday 8 November, the new Worcestershire Community Rail Partnership (CRP) was officially launched at Worcester Guildhall. The new partnership will encourage communities, businesses and tourist attractions to work with the rail industry and local councils to promote rail services across Worcestershire.

The official launch of the Worcestershire Community Rail Partnership

Stourbridge Line User Group is a member of the CRP, which also includes the West Midlands Rail Executive, West Midlands Railway, Worcestershire County Council, CrossCountry Trains, Great Western Railway, Cotswold Line Promotion Group and Bromsgrove Rail User Group. It covers all eighteen stations in Worcestershire including the stations on our line from Hagley to Great Malvern.

Peter Chapman

SLUG Chairman William Whiting is the Chairman of the new CRP and Peter Chapman has been appointed as the community rail officer. Although not starting his new job until 16 December, Peter attended the SLUG committee meeting in November and told us that, in the next six months, his intention was to encourage the use of public transport and promote integrated public transport, and to liaise with all local rail user groups and local community groups to get their ideas. West Midlands Railway will be assisting by looking at redundant railway station buildings to see if they can be restored and used for other purposes.

West Midlands Railway is already promoting community rail on these lines through its station adoption scheme, and both Stourbridge stations have been adopted by the Friends of Stourbridge Stations (FOSS).

Community Rail is a great way of inspiring residents of all ages and walks of life to get involved in making their local railway station a great and attractive place to be. This can include activities such as gardening projects, art displays and using station buildings for a range of events. Improving the appeal of stations creates welcoming spaces that will encourage rail travel and attract additional footfall. All that's needed then is a more reliable train service without delays and cancellations!

SLUG will be fully supporting the new CRP and will be meeting Peter regularly. Both SLUG and Peter would welcome ideas from members so please get in touch at admin@stourbridgelineusergroup.info with any ideas that you may have.

PROMISES, PROMISES, PROMISES
by John Warren

You would need to be an alien from the planet Zog or have your television permanently tuned to *Dave* not to know that the inglorious 12th saw the latest instalment in the ongoing saga referred to by the alliterative Brenda from Bristol as "You're joking - not another one!".

As usual, transport was not a major issue in the election but all three major English parties promised to improve the railways in their party manifestos. SLUG is an apolitical organisation so we will be stating what each party offered without comment. The only comment that can be made is that the only programme that the BBC postponed to make way for election debates was *Would I Lie To You?*. The headlines from the three manifestos are as follows.

Conservatives

- Replace franchising with a simpler system.
- Build Northern Powerhouse line from Manchester to Leeds.
- Extend contactless ticketing to 200 more stations
- Invest in Midlands Rail Hub
- Make a decision on whether to proceed with HS2
- £500m to reopen lines closed by Beeching
- Invest in improving train lines to the South West and East Anglia
- Give Metro Mayors control over services in their areas and the funding to upgrade their bus, tram and train services

Labour

- Bring franchises into public ownership
- Introduce rolling programme of electrification
- Make fares simpler and more affordable
- Ensure safe staffing levels and end driver-only operation
- Extend HS2 to Scotland
- Build Crossrail for the North
- Co-ordinate line upgrades, resignalling, rolling stock replacement and major projects
- Consult with communities to reopen branch lines
- Promote use of rail freight

Liberal Democrats

- Support Northern Powerhouse Rail, HS2, East-West Rail and Crossrail 2
- Freeze rail fares for commuters and season ticket holders for a parliament
- Extend Britain's rail network and reopen smaller stations
- Restore twin-track lines to major routes
- Convert rail network to ultra low emission technology by 2035
- Provide funding for light rail and trams and integrate rail, bus and cycle routes
- Create a new Railways Agency to oversee railway network operations

Of course, it remains to be seen how much, if any, of these pledges are kept over the next five years. Many people remember the pledge made in 1964 to reverse the Beeching closures of important cross-country railway lines. The result was that the government then sanctioned the closure of lines such as the Waverley line from Carlisle to Edinburgh and the S&DJR line from Bath to Bournemouth. Let's hope that the next government is more honest than that.

Bath Green (Car) Park - the result of a broken election pledge

… AND THE WINNER IS …

It's Friday 13 December and this edition of *Platform* is about to go to the printers. After yesterday's vote, the Conservative Party has a majority. It will be interesting to see if they honour their manifesto and the pledges in the blue box come to fruition.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ - NAME THE FILM

The following are stills taken from well-known films featuring railway locations. Larger images can be viewed on the SLUG website. Can you name the films?

(Answers will be published in the next issue and on the website from early January).