West Midlands Railway proudly announced a “big improvement” to the December 2019 timetable. It stated that they provided “improved connections with the Cotswold line to Evesham, Oxford and Paddington at Worcester Shrub Hill for the 1318 London departure on weekdays”. This was achieved by diverting the 1239 departure from Stourbridge Junction to Foregate Street to operate via Shrub Hill.

WANTED : A through train from Paddington !

However, this is a drop in the ocean. Most connections with services to Paddington, Bristol, Hereford and Cardiff at the south of our line are poor. In fact, the journey from the Stourbridge line to South Wales, which used to be a through service, now requires two changes which is at least one too many.

The Stourbridge line deserves better connections … or, better still, through services to these destinations. It is more than just a commuter line into Birmingham.

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP PUBLIC MEETING AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Kidderminster Town Station

The Stourbridge Line User Group Public Meeting and Annual General Meeting was due to take place at the Refreshment Room, Kidderminster Town (SVR) Railway Station on Tuesday 12 May 2020.

However, due to the Coronavirus crisis and the need to protect our members from any risks, this meeting has been postponed and will be rescheduled when it is safe to do so.

Members are reminded that their membership renewal is due and a membership form has been included with this mailing. Unfortunately, the option to pay at the Public Meeting will not be available this year. We apologise for the inconvenience.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ ANSWERS

The answers to the Christmas Photo Quiz were as follows :-

1 - Carry On Girls, 2 – Robbery, 3 - The Ghost Train, 4 - Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid, 5 - A Hard Day's Night, 6 - Bridge On The River Kwai, 7 - Brighton Rock, 8 – Paddington, 9 - Back To The Future III, 10 - Get Carter, 11 – Trainspotting, 12 - Two Way Stretch, 13 - The 39 Steps, 14 - The Elephant Man, 15 - 10 Rillington Place, 16 - Passport To Pimlico, 17 – Clockwise, 18 - The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

PLATFORM

Issue 19 March 2020

The most expensive railway bridge on the Stourbridge line. This Banksy mural appeared at Jewellery Quarter station overnight just before Christmas with value estimated at £2m!

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

THE TICKING CLOCK
by Rob Hebron

On 29 January, the Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, announced that the Northern Rail franchise would be taken over by the government. This intervention was prompted by months of delays and cancellations attributed to the train operator. Passenger satisfaction with the company was at an all time low and so drastic action was needed by a political party which is normally fundamentally opposed to nationalisation. Mr Shapps stated that government would directly run the franchise from 1 March 2020.

CAF Class 195 units (similar to WMR Class 196) - 7 months late and less reliable than the deposed 1980s units (inset)

(Michael McNiven)

Northern Rail was the brand name on the trains, but the legal identity was Arriva Rail North. It is a pity that the company could not draw upon experience gained from their other Arriva franchises to produce timetables which were workable. In the end, Northern commuters could not rely on being at their workplace on time and so there was a measurable cost to the economy.

Chris Burchell, Arriva MD UK Trains, defended his company by claiming: "We had a clear vision for the Northern franchise that would better connect the cities of the North with more frequent, reliable and modern services…. It was clear however that, largely *because of external factors*, the franchise plan had become undeliverable".

He continued: "The scale of the challenges we faced outside of our direct control were unprecedented, *particularly around delayed or cancelled infrastructure projects* and prolonged strike action".

Mr Burchell has identified the root cause of problems which I have highlighted in his quotes. In addition, delayed electrification projects prevented diesel rolling stock being cascaded to Northern lines thus exacerbating ongoing capacity issues. This issue is as a result of government dithering and cost cutting. However, does playing the blame game help the ever-suffering passenger?

Our members might wonder how the Northern Rail fiasco has any relevance to the Stourbridge Line. It is in fact, a prequel to what threatens the West Midland Trains franchise.

On 3 February 2020, West Midlands Mayor, Andy Street, made public a letter to the Transport Secretary. In this communication, he referred to his ultimatum to WMT. In essence, at the end of 2019, the dismal performance of WMT had resulted in decreased passenger satisfaction. Mr Street felt it was necessary to intervene. He had challenged WMT to up its game or lose its control of the network.

NO THROUGH ROAD
by Roger Davis

In the years up to the early 1960s, through trains operated between Birmingham Snow Hill and Cardiff via Stourbridge Junction, Worcester, Hereford and Newport. The final years of this service saw the frequency increased to operate every two hours. Unfortunately, the Beeching cuts saw the line downgraded with services south of Kidderminster only operating intermittently as far as Worcester.

Smethwick West - 1959
Snow Hill to Cardiff via Hereford

(Michael Mensing)

In 1987, a new two hourly service was introduced between Birmingham New Street and Cardiff via Stourbridge Junction, Worcester, Hereford and Newport, which not only gave us a through service to South Wales but also made journeys to the West Country easier with a single change at Cheltenham Spa. Unfortunately, this did not last long with the service diverted via Bromsgrove and Worcester to reduce end to end times. This still gave Stourbridge line passengers a single change link with Cardiff, but a later change saw the Birmingham to Cardiff service bypass Worcester thus rendering it useless for the Stourbridge line.

Droitwich Spa - 1988
New Street to Cardiff via Gloucester

(miac.org.uk)

In exchange for the loss of a through Cardiff service, the Stourbridge line got through services to Hereford and by 1995, when the line into Snow Hill opened, about 10 services in each direction were running. Unfortunately, as with the Cardiff services, it was decided that the Birmingham to Hereford service should be speeded up by operating it via Bromsgrove instead of Stourbridge Junction, meaning that through services west of Worcester diminished rapidly with just a handful of services running through to Great Malvern. In May 2019, the last through service from Hereford to the Stourbridge line – at about 19:00 on a Saturday evening – was axed.

It is still possible to get from Stourbridge Junction to Hereford with a single change but there are two problems. Firstly, you need to know where to change. For the majority of connections, Droitwich Spa is the interchange station. However, on some services you need to travel on to either Shrub Hill or Foregate Street. Secondly, many connection times are poor with an average connection time of over 20 minutes on Mondays to Saturdays and over 30 minutes on Sundays. In fact, you can wait for up to 40 minutes on Mondays to Saturdays for an onward connection and up to 48 minutes on Sundays. These days, a journey from Stourbridge Junction to Hereford, which took just over 1 hour 10 minutes in 1995, can typically take about 1 hour 35 minutes on Mondays to Saturdays and over 2 hours on Sundays.

Access for All. The Transport Secretary has announced that funding will be provided for improving access at 124 railway stations in the UK. The statement made on 26 February identifies the need to assist disabled persons and to continue the programme with a further £20m from an overall £300m package. At time of going to press, the stations concerned have not been named. SLUG hopes that Stourbridge Line stations that are not customer-friendly will benefit. *(Source : Rail Technology Magazine)*

SECOND CLASS SERVICE
by Roger Davis

It came as a nasty shock to both SLUG and the West Midlands Rail Executive when Chiltern Railways announced that its May 2020 timetable changes would affect two morning rush hour services from Kidderminster to London Marylebone. Its original plans saw the reduction of the 0730 and 0809 departures from Kidderminster from 4-car to 3-car trains and the removal of all stops between Stourbridge Junction and Birmingham Snow Hill except Rowley Regis. This is totally unacceptable and means that Cradley Heath, which has a 10 minute off-peak frequency, would have two gaps of 20 minutes between rush hour services. WMRE has made its opposition to this proposal very clear and SLUG has added its weight by condemning this appalling proposal. Since the proposal was first made, it appears from Realtime Trains that Chiltern has backtracked as far as the 0809 service is concerned and reinstated the stops (although possibly not the extra carriage). However, this still leaves a gap at Cradley Heath from 0735 to 0754 which needs to be filled.

However, Chiltern Railways has "previous" as far as the Stourbridge line is concerned. All services west of Moor Street are sometimes cancelled when :-

- The West Coast line to Euston is closed
- There are engineering works at the south end of the Chiltern line
- There is a major sports event at Wembley. This happened when Aston Villa played in the League Cup Final at the end of February. Didn't they realise that the Villa has fans west of Birmingham!

The above actions need to be questioned given that some of the trains originate at Stourbridge depot and run empty to Birmingham Moor Street on these days. In fact, Chiltern gives the impression that it is a London-centric company that only tolerates operating services over the Stourbridge line because it built its depot there. Its emphasis these days seems to be on its new London to Oxford service.

A Chiltern service to Marylebone stops at The Hawthorns

Chiltern's franchise terminates in 2022 and will be either re-let or replaced depending on the recommendations of the Williams Report. SLUG will press for the incoming operator to provide a far better service to the Stourbridge line than Chiltern seems willing to provide at present.

The ultimatum had been made prior to January performance figures being released. The improved reliability justified a reprieve for WMT, but the new benchmark did not appear to be sustainable in light of staffing problems.

WMT has responded to criticism by appointing a new Managing Director, Julian Edwards, who has promised season ticket holders a 10% discount on travel during summer months as part of a compensation package. In addition, he outlined further strategies to resolve passenger issues. Among the initiatives were:-

- Simplification of the timetable throughout 2020
- Recruiting 86 more drivers and senior conductors to improve train crew availability
- A reduction in instances of skip-stopping, which will only be used as a last resort in extreme circumstances

Mr Street recognised the pro-active response from WMT, but he was not sufficiently impressed. In a post on his Facebook page, he commented: "West Midlands Trains have got better since my ultimatum, but it's still *not good enough*. So, today I am keeping them under strict review with the continued threat of franchise removal, asking the Government to impose a serious fine (and) urging the Government (DfT) to hand over local rail powers".

The fact is that the existing service needs to be fixed before expansion of the West Midlands rail network goes ahead. It is no use re-opening railway lines if the operators are of the same calibre as Northern Rail or WMT. Hopefully, a zero-tolerance policy from the regulators will sort out some of the current problems. They will not sort out the infrastructure failings because that is the responsibility of Network Rail which is publicly owned. The old train companies undertook their own track and station maintenance and so they prepared for day to day problems. Separating trains from tracks has not been a successful experiment.

Franchises in the firing line - Transpennine Express and South Western Railway

Of course, the newly nationalised part of the network will not stay like that for very long and it is understood that a new franchising model is being contemplated before government decisions are taken.

Contemplation, reviews and studies inevitably cause delay to achieving an efficient and integrated railway. In the meantime, climate change pressures precipitate the need for electrification of motor vehicles and trains. The clock is ticking and if motorists are not prepared to change to public transport then diesel reduction targets are unachievable.

INNOVATION IN DUDLEY
by John Warren

Previous editions of *Platform* have mentioned the building of the Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre at the old Dudley railway station site but have not elaborated on what it will offer when it is opened in 2021.

A Very Light Railcar is one which weighs less than 1 tonne for each metre of its length and is a lot cheaper to build and to operate than a conventional railcar, as it can run on track that can be laid over existing utilities, if necessary, without the need to relocate them. At present, two prototype VLR vehicles are currently being built.

The first is the Revolution VLR which is currently being assembled in Coventry and is scheduled to be demonstrated in April. This railcar is 18.9 metres in length, has 56 seats and weighs 18 tonnes – less than half the weight of a standard DMU coach, such as the Class 153 unit previously used on the Stourbridge Town branch. This prototype would use a hybrid powerpack with starting/braking using battery power and a Euro 6 Cummins diesel engine only being used on the move between stations.

The second prototype VLR is a smaller battery powered vehicle for the proposed Coventry VLR network. It is due to be demonstrated in November and has about 20 seats and the ability to hold up to 70 passengers – essentially similar in capacity to the Town branch Class 139s.

Revolution Very Light Railcar

(IDI UK)

Coventry Very Light Railcar

(University of Warwick)

What was needed was a testing facility for these prototypes and the facility at Dudley is designed to do this. A test track through Dudley tunnel towards Cinder Bank will enable the prototypes to be tested and developed. However, the Innovation Centre will provide much more than this. It will have its own Research and Development team with research labs, offices and a workshop to assemble further prototype vehicles and systems, which can then be evaluated and tested on the test track. It will also offer conference and exhibition facilities and, more importantly, Masters level courses for next generation light rail technical specialists, and training courses in maintenance and operation of light rail systems.

Whether a railcar such as the Revolution ever sees service on main lines will depend on their acceptance by DfT and RSSB. However, it could prove a cheap alternative to conventional vehicles on segregated branches and may, in the future, be the perfect solution to the overcrowding on the Stourbridge Town branch.

NEWS IN BRIEF
compiled by Rob Hebron

Cotswold Line Proposal. A proposal has been submitted to DfT to invest £200 million to redouble the North Cotswold line from Oxford to Hanborough and from Evesham to Pershore. If approved, the plans would enable a core frequency of two trains per hour to be introduced between Oxford and Worcester with most of these services operating to Great Malvern, Hereford or Kidderminster *(should be Stourbridge Junction! Ed).* It would also handle new services to Stratford-upon-Avon if the line from Honeybourne was reopened in the future. *(Source : RAIL Magazine)*

Running Rings Around. The Government has pledged £500m to kick-start the reopening of lines closed by Beeching. Three local rail user groups (SLPG, CLPG and SALRUA), with support from a local MP, all local district and county councils and WMRE, have bid for £75,000 to undertake an economic impact study to support the reopening of the Stratford to Honeybourne line. One indirect impact could be creation of a Snow Hill-Stourbridge-Worcester-Stratford-Snow Hill circular service.
(Source: SLUG Liaison Officers)

Class 196 vehicle being fitted out at Newport

(WMR)

A New Delivery. CAF expects to deliver the first four-car Class 196 diesel multiple unit from its Newport factory to West Midlands Trains by the end of March. The first three four-car sets were built in Spain, and two of these are currently on test in Velim in Czechia.
(Source : RAIL Magazine)

On Second Thoughts. Planners have revised the design of proposed Curzon Street station. The Birmingham terminus of HS2 is in close proximity to Moor Street on the Stourbridge Line. Changes at the interchange station will include the creation of additional dedicated pedestrian and cycle access routes into the station.
(Source : BusinessLive)

Parking Clampdown. Police are warning motorists they will be ticketed over careless parking in the streets close to Stourbridge Junction Station. Officers slapped three fixed penalty notices on January 28 on vehicles parked in a "dangerous manner" in Redhill close to the junction of Glasshouse Hill and to another car in Rectory Road, Oldswinford, which was causing an obstruction. *(Source : Stourbridge News)*

Brierley Hill Metro Extension. Work officially started on the Midland Metro extension to Brierley Hill on 29 January when West Midlands Mayor Andy Street and Dudley Council leader Patrick Harley officially broke the ground at the old Dudley station site. On 24 February, diggers started work on Castle Hill in Dudley to remove the central reservation to relocate utility services. *(Source : RAIL Magazine)*

Metro works on Castle Hill on 6 March