HYPOTHETICAL JOURNEYS
by John Warren

Although SLUG supports the building of the Metro route from Brierley Hill to Wednesbury for local passengers, it also supports the longer-term reinstatement of a parallel national rail service between Stourbridge Junction and Walsall, with potential extensions at each end - to Lichfield and Burton-on-Trent in the north and Worcester in the south.

History shows that Stourbridge Junction and Burton-on-Trent were never directly connected by a through service - either by train or by bus. By train, changes were needed at Dudley and Walsall, whereas a bus journey involved changes at Dudley, Walsall and Lichfield. However, how long would these journeys have taken had through services been available?

The table to the right shows that, had a through train been available in 1960 using a first-generation diesel multiple unit, it would have taken 37 minutes from Stourbridge Junction to Walsall and 77 minutes to Burton-on-Trent - and that is on a train stopping at every intermediate station.

	Train 1960	Bus 1960	Train 2020	Bus 2020
Stourbridge Jct	1000	1000	1000	1000
Brettell Lane	1006	1009	1005	1011
Brierley Hill	1009	....	1007	....
Round Oak	1011	1018	1009	1021
Blowers Green	1018	....	1015	....
Dudley	1021	1032	1018	1038
Dudley Port LL	1024	....	1021	....
Great Bridge North	1027	....	1023	....
Wednesbury Town	1031	1053	1026	1102
Walsall	1037	1109	1031	1121
Pelsall	1043	....	1036	....
Brownhills	1048	....	1040	....
Hammerwich	1052	....	1043	....
Lichfield City	1058	1139	1048	1208
Lichfield TV	1101	....	1051	1211
Alrewas	1106	1155	1055	....
Burton-on-Trent	1117	1219	1104	1241

This compared very favourably with a hypothetical through bus service which needed 69 minutes (an extra 32) to get to Walsall and 129 minutes (an extra 52) to Burton-on-Trent. However, the intervening 46 years has seen increased traffic congestion, not helped by failed road schemes such as Dudley Council's successful plan to bring Brierley Hill to a standstill. As a result, bus journey times have increased considerably and a 2020 bus journey would take 12 minutes more to get to Walsall and 22 minutes more to Burton-on-Trent compared with 1960 bus times.

A local service leaves Brierley Hill just before the line closed in 1962

(*Michael Mensing*)

Conversely, research has shown that stopping train services in the West Midlands now take about 5/6 of the time they did in 1960. Therefore, in theory, a all-stations train journey from Stourbridge Junction could now reach Walsall in 31 minutes and Burton-on-Trent in 64 minutes, beating the bus by 97 minutes. In addition, the current rail journey via Birmingham takes 70 minutes even when the connection times are perfect. Therefore it would be nice if this hypothetical journey became a factual one.

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

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An unusual visitor passes Kidderminster's new station building which nears completion on 25 May. The reason for the visit is revealed on page 5

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EDITOR'S COMMENTS

This edition of *Platform* will have a different look to previous editions as we are living in strange and deeply concerning times. The Covid-19 pandemic has decimated the use of public transport and the latest advice is that the rail network should only be used for essential travel as social distancing will reduce capacity by up to 90%. Even though I am only a leisure traveller and not a commuter, I have made 36 rail journeys this year. However, the last was on 12 March and it seems that I will be unable to use a train in the foreseeable future. Therefore, what does the future hold? I have asked two regular contributors to this publication for their personal thoughts.

CRISIS AFTER CRISIS
by Rob Hebron

As I write these words, the country is still in lockdown. The world is facing a crisis brought about by the virus Covid-19. This enemy not only commits indiscriminate genocide but it threatens to change our lives and lifestyles permanently. When restrictions imposed on the population are lifted, the people will not only have to face an economic crisis but many more crises, as a consequence of the original one. The full impact of Covid-19 has yet to be assessed but it must be contemplated.

The streets are strangely silent. Trains, trams and buses are running around virtually empty - rightly so to minimise contagion. The government is offering financial support to operators and staff, but the present situation is unsustainable. Already, temporary train timetables are in place and frequencies have been scaled back to provide transport for key workers only. Buses too are running less often, and some have been suspended. Such is the case with Diamond Bus 303 which would have deprived Hartlebury of a vital link if SLUG had not successfully campaigned for an hourly train service. The residents of Hartlebury are still connected to the outside world but key workers in Ombersley must use their cars. Diamond Bus 146 has also been suspended but thankfully, Birmingham is linked to Redditch by train. These suspensions may be an early indication of vulnerable bus services. The question is if post-virus train services will be able to take up the slack of withdrawn bus routes. Trains do not necessarily pass through the same towns and villages, even if end to end points are the same.

A train service calls at Hartlebury. Diamond Bus has withdrawn its commercial 303 bus service

After the lockdown, I fear that the upsurge in rail travel witnessed in the last decade, will halt and even decline. I base my case on the practice of working from home which has become essential rather than by choice. This method is attractive to the employee who saves travel costs. It also allows the employer to dispose of unwanted offices and therefore, business rates. How does this lack of demand leave schemes for re-opened railways and new Metro lines?

NEWS IN BRIEF
compiled by Rob Hebron

Reversing Beeching Bids Unsuccessful. Bids made to the Government's "Reversing Beeching" fund to further investigate the reopening by Pre Metro Operations of Stourbridge to Brierley Hill as a light rail line, and to undertake an economic impact study to support reopening Stratford to Honeybourne have been unsuccessful in the first round of bids. Rail journalists have condemned the 10 successful schemes as widely acknowledged essential reopening schemes were rejected. *(Source : gov.uk)*

Birmingham Curzon Street Approved. Curzon Street became the first HS2 station to obtain planning permission with Birmingham City Council approving three applications for the station and the surrounding landscaping on 23 April. On the site of the new station, an archaeological programme has unearthed the world's oldest railway roundhouse. *(Source : Modern Railways)*

CGI of Birmingham Curzon Street Station

National Trust Criticised. The National Trust has faced criticism as its 2020 Handbook only shows SatNav details for access, thus discouraging access to its properties by public transport. *(Source : RAIL Magiazine)*

Strategic Rail Freight Interchange Approved. A Freight Interchange alongside the West Coast Main Line at Four Ashes, north of Wolverhampton has been approved by the Secretary of State for Transport. The interchange will be able to accommodate 10 trains per day of up to 775 metres in length. *(Source : Modern Railways)*

A Change of Name. The Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) changed its name to the Community Rail Network (CRN) on 6 April. This organisation brings together 70 community rail partnerships across the country as well as hundreds of station "friends" and other groups. *(Source : RAIL Magazine)*

CGI of Moseley Station

Moseley Station Application Submitted. A planning application has been submitted for a new station at Moseley on the Camp Hill line. Applications to build new stations at King's Heath and Hazlewell have already been approved, although there is a fierce debate on whether the latter station should be named Stirchley. *(Source : Birmingham Mail)*

WMRE Appointment. Amanda White has been appointed Interim Programme Director at West Midlands Rail Executive, to work on the development of stations in the region (including five new ones). The role is initially until the end of the year but could be extended. *(Source : RAIL Magazine)*

One sector not totally affected by the lockdown has been construction and May saw the completion of two projects in this area. Firstly, the retaining wall at the Dudley station site which will separate the Metro line from the Very Light Rail Innovation Centre was completed at the end of May.

Work was proceeding on the retaining wall at Dudley on 6 March, just before lockdown

The new entrance to Wolverhampton station

(West Midlands Trains)

Secondly, the first phase of the new railway station at Wolverhampton was opened on 25 May and this will enable the existing booking hall and adjoining buildings to be demolished and rebuilt to enable the completed station to open early next year.

However, the most significant construction project on the Stourbridge line has been the rebuilding of Kidderminster station which was nearing completion when the editor passed it on 25 May and took some quick photographs.

The new Kidderminster station building nears completion on 25 May

The new station opened on 8 June and a full review will appear in the next issue.

HS2 will go ahead. The jobs and skills it will create are vital to revive the economy. However, the connectivity package associated with HS2 will probably be downscaled, as renewed economic austerity will deprive councils of funding to invest in public transport. Aspirations to eliminate the north-south divide will have been in vain. Investment in transport infrastructure will only happen in London.

In a series of articles which starts in the accompanying issue of *Platform 2*, I have examined the scope for ordinary British citizens to roam the country on public transport. Railways are a legacy of the Industrial Revolution and enabled workers and their families to take holidays to the seaside and country haunts. It is an essential freedom for the masses which must not be sacrificed. Will holidays abroad be replaced by British vacations? Seaside landladies would welcome new visitors. Sadly, there must be hundreds of coach companies which face bankruptcy if bookings do not resume after the lock-down. Will seaside branch lines be re-laid? I think not.

Mallorca or Minehead ? Benidorm or Butlins ? Will holiday habits change because of Covid-19

I do not want to be a merchant of doom. The Great British Spirit will overcome this present crisis. The Great British Public must be prepared for what might come afterwards. The last thing we want is crisis after crisis.

WHAT CRISIS AFTER CRISIS?
by Keith Flinders

Yes, we are living through a crisis caused by the measures needed to beat the Coronavirus, but we will beat it. Then what might life be like? Let's be optimistic!

It's the morning rush hour at Bristol Temple Meads during lockdown.

(BBC)

This could be the end of rush hour as we knew it. Before the virus, working from home was put at 15% of the workforce. Experts have suggested this could become 45%, having been forced to do it and having found quite a few advantages. You don't need to get up so early to start work at office time, don't need to fight for the last space on the station car park, don't even need to dress smartly. Apparently, lipstick sales have collapsed. Having to stand on your commute could be a thing of the past. And businesses would love not to have to pay for so much expensive office space.

From the train operators' perspective, we may do without the extra rolling stock to meet peak time demand. It has been very expensive to lease, maintain and staff extra coaches for one breakfast time and one tea time journey a day.

We are sociable creatures and online meetings are seldom as good as face to face, so there will continue to be reasons to travel. There is now more awareness of the advantages of flexibility. We can go and come back when trains are quieter, when it's easier to get the laptop out and get as much work done on the train as we would at home.

Even a deadly virus can have a silver lining. With very little traffic on our roads, we have found how much sweeter the air smells. It has even been suggested that the reduction in deaths linked to polluted air will be greater than deaths from the virus. Wise politicians will now take seriously clean air zones schemes and charging for the true costs of road transport. With fewer wheezing patients, one major beneficiary would be the NHS!

It's time to revisit plans for roads spending, and it is certainly time to look again at rail electrification. During the crisis, train frequencies have generally halved. That has left plenty of capacity for freight. More freight is now moving by train - and more efficiently, with many freight trains arriving hours early, not needing recessing for passenger trains. Awareness of the advantages of rail freight is increasing.

HS2, although not itself a freight railway, will create space on the classic network for more freight trains to take business from lorries. Although HS2 may seem expensive, public transport integration need not be. With rail franchises dead, now is the time for some joined up thinking. Bring together the timetabling brains for rail and bus and tram - and town planners and so on. Ban the word 'competition' and substitute 'complementing.' So when your train gets to the station, you know the bus for your next leg of the journey will go in a couple of minutes, and, if your train is a bit late, the bus will wait. Where it has been tried, it works - and people choose it.

Brighton in the 1960s. One rail company. Three bus companies operating an integrated joint service that connected with trains at all stations. It can be done!

Just like long distance rail journeys, where we were told 'people won't sit on a train for more than a couple of hours. They'll fly.' After Coronavirus, there will be few UK internal flights, and fewer to mainland Europe. Eurostar's new services to Amsterdam are a great success and St. Pancras to Bordeaux will be available soon. When the virus is gone, we will still travel, possibly more than before. Furloughing is making some people aware there is a better quality of life to be had. Leave Enhancement Schemes are increasingly popular (where you forego a week's salary for an extra week's holiday) and the four day week has been shown to make people more productive than working five days. Let's have that long weekend exploring the Settle Carlisle Line. Let's hop on a train to Evesham for a summer evening's drink by the river. Let's leave the car at home. Do we really need the car?

LOCKDOWN RUNDOWN
by Roger Davis

While, for some of us, an excursion has involved putting the dustbins out, the lockdown period has seen some significant developments in the West Midlands.

Of course, lockdown meant a significant decrease in the number of passengers and this led to a reduced Monday to Saturday timetable being introduced on the Stourbridge line on 23 March. Effectively this meant two trains an hour linking Kidderminster and Birmingham with one of these trains extended to serve Worcester. The Stourbridge Town car saw the frequency reduced to every 15 minutes over a reduced operating day. A timetable enhancement on 18 May saw an additional two trains per hour linking Stourbridge Junction and Birmingham, while the Town car saw a ten minute frequency operating from 06:15 to 19:40. Throughout this period, all main line trains have run to or from Dorridge or Stratford-upon-Avon.

Going underground at Kidderminster on 25 May

The reduced timetable has seen an unusual visitor to the Stourbridge line as Vivarail has taken the opportunity to test their new Class 230 units which have been ordered by Transport for Wales. During May, the units, which are converted ex London Underground stock, ran on test from the Vivarail factory at Long Marston to the Cotswolds main line at Honeybourne and thence via Worcester to Stourbridge Junction. A number of round trips between Stourbridge Junction and Worcester followed before the unit returned to Long Marston in the evening.

However, more significantly for our line, Friday 17 April saw the arrival at Tyseley depot of the first 4-car Class 196 unit. It had travelled from the CAF factory in Spain via a test track in Czechia and thence by road and sea. It had been expected that the first complete unit would be delivered at the end of March from CAF's new factory in Newport, who are building 60 of the 80 carriages on order. However, the lockdown saw this factory stop production, although a phased restart was implemented in mid-April. Although these new units are primarily destined for New Street to Hereford and Shrewsbury services, some are expected to supplement Class 172 units on Snow Hill line services.

The first 4-car Class 196 is seen on four low-loaders at the Cuxport Terminal in Cuxhaven, Germany en route to Tyseley depot

(Allelys Heavy Haulage)