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STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

PLATFORM

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This could be a scene from the 1960s. Instead, it was 7 October 2020 when 34046 “Braunton” sped through Hagley station

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2020 : A BAD YEAR FOR REDEMPTION
by Roger Davis

2020 has been a year that we will all remember for the wrong reasons and, for West Midlands Railway, it has been a year when any hope of restoring confidence has been thwarted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The year started with West Midlands Railway (WMR) being vilified from all angles and with good reason. The service provided was pitiful with services cancelled every day due to train crew shortages. Calls for the company to lose its franchise came from the Metro Mayor, WMCA, local MPs, and rail pressure groups such as SLUG and CfR. The only good thing that could be said about the Stourbridge Line service was that it was far better than the service on the Chase Line, which really plumbed the depths. As a result, a number of senior executives, including the Managing Director, decided to "further their careers in other areas" in January. The incoming Managing Director, Julian Edwards, convened a stakeholder conference and apologised, admitting that the company had failed its customers. He laid out a recovery plan which included introducing more robust timetables, employing extra drivers and getting the ordered new trains into service as soon as possible.

Six weeks later, the world changed. New drivers had been taken on, but lockdown stopped training in its tracks. Even the easing of restrictions hindered driver training as social distancing meant that two people could not occupy the restricted area of a train cab. Delivery of the 26 new trains, being built in Spain and South Wales, was delayed by the virus and introduction into service was further delayed by restrictions in testing, training of drivers, and route mileage accumulation. The new trains finally made it out on test runs between Tyseley and Stratford-upon-Avon in August, and testing was stepped up in October with extra paths between Tyseley and Crewe, and Tyseley and Bromsgrove. Therefore, introduction into service is behind schedule and not expected until 2021.

New DMU 196 103 passes through Tipton on a test run from Crewe to Birmingham New Street on 26 October

The pandemic and the large fall in passenger numbers saw service frequencies reduced over the summer and this resulted in the best performance figures in years with a reliability figure over 95%. However, on 7 September, WMR scored a political own goal by reintroducing a full timetable, even though many other companies, such as CrossCountry, continued to operate a much reduced timetable with longer trains.

The result was that train cancellations increased as the rate of Covid-19 infections rose sharply, and the company was forced to reduce the timetable twice (from 26 September and 26 October) to make the service more reliable. It wasn't helped by external factors – a major signalling failure at Langley Green that lasted 2 days, a bridge strike by a lorry at Cradley Heath, a broken down freight train at Hagley, and leaves on the line being examples. The result is that social media trolls – including a handful who use the SLUG Facebook Group as their platform to excrete bile even though they are not members of SLUG – have gone onto the attack.

SLUG's position is clear. WMR deserved to be stripped of its franchise at the start of the year. The promised improvements have since been instigated but have been delayed by the effect of Covid-19. Once the Covid-19 crisis has passed, SLUG will be able to gauge whether these initiatives have resulted in improvements. Only at that stage can SLUG take the appropriate action.

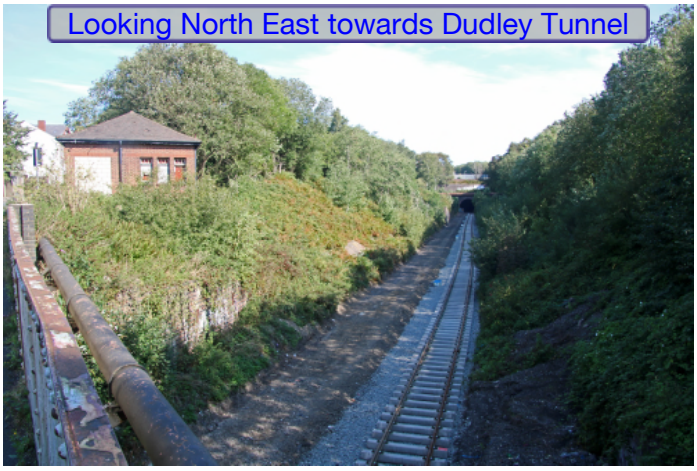
PAUL HUMPHREYS

The SLUG committee was stunned to hear in late October that Paul Humphreys, who had been a member of the SLUG committee since 2012 and Secretary for the past 4½ years, suddenly passed away on 16 October.

Paul was a very enthusiastic member of the committee and a good friend. His death leaves a big hole in the committee which will be difficult to fill. He was also a supporter of the Severn Valley Railway and funeral donations in his memory were made to benefit the SVR, including one from SLUG. Our sympathies go out to Paul's family at this difficult time.

BACK ON TRACK
by John Warren

In August, the government agreed to meet a near £13 million shortfall in funding for the Dudley Very Light Rail Innovation Centre scheme on the site of the old Dudley station. Tracklaying started at the south end of Dudley Tunnel and, by 13 September, track ran through the old Blowers Green station to the east of Cinder Bank where the test track ends just before the Metro rejoins the heavy rail line.



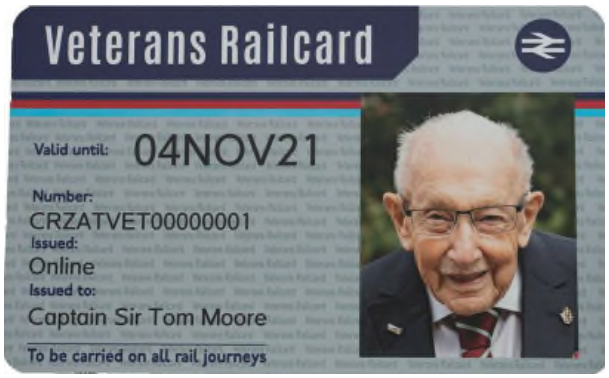
Looking North East towards Dudley Tunnel

Looking South West towards Cinder Bank

NEWS IN BRIEF
compiled by Rob Hebron

Forces' Favourite. From 5 November, National Rail is introducing a new Veterans Railcard which can save card holders up to ⅓ on selected rail fares. Additional benefits mean that former servicemen will also be able to buy discounted tickets for an accompanying named adult and up to 4 accompanying children. There is an introductory offer at a discounted £21 or a 3-year card discounted to £61, both offers available until 31 March 2021.

(Source: - West Midlands Railway)



Fewer Changes. Up until recently, Stourbridge Line passengers wishing to reach Kinver have been obliged to change vehicles twice – at Stourbridge Junction and then Stourbridge Town for the No. 228 bus service. Following the withdrawal of the 228, the Green Bus Company have stepped in with a new 242 service which calls at Stourbridge Junction (Brook Road) then onto Kinver via South Road. Now only one change is required.

(Source: - The Green Bus Company)

Purrfect Station. A national competition on Twitter has been held to find the most popular railway station in a world cup scenario. Thanks to George the Station Cat, Stourbridge Junction, where he resides, has been awarded second place. Glasgow Queen Street claimed a very narrow victory over Stourbridge (31.3% against 31%). Nevertheless, our friendly feline has contributed to the Junction's acclaim because of his rapport with station staff and passengers.

(Source: - Stourbridge News)

Hartlebury Expands! Hartlebury is one of four stations in the West Midlands to receive upgraded and extended platforms from February 2021 in preparation for the introduction of new, longer Class 196 trains. The design and build programmes are already underway and will increase pedestrian capacity at Hartlebury, Albrighton, Bilbrook, and Oakengates. The work will be carried out through short possessions at night, so will not disrupt train services.

(Source: - Railstaff Magazine)

Grand Design. Worcestershire Parkway station, which was the first new station to be opened in the county in more than a century when it opened in February, has been crowned the West Midlands' top civil engineering project for 2020. It won the large project and geo-technical categories before being crowned the overall winner at the 2020 Institution of Civil Engineers West Awards.

(Source: - Business Live)

Worcestershire Parkway station

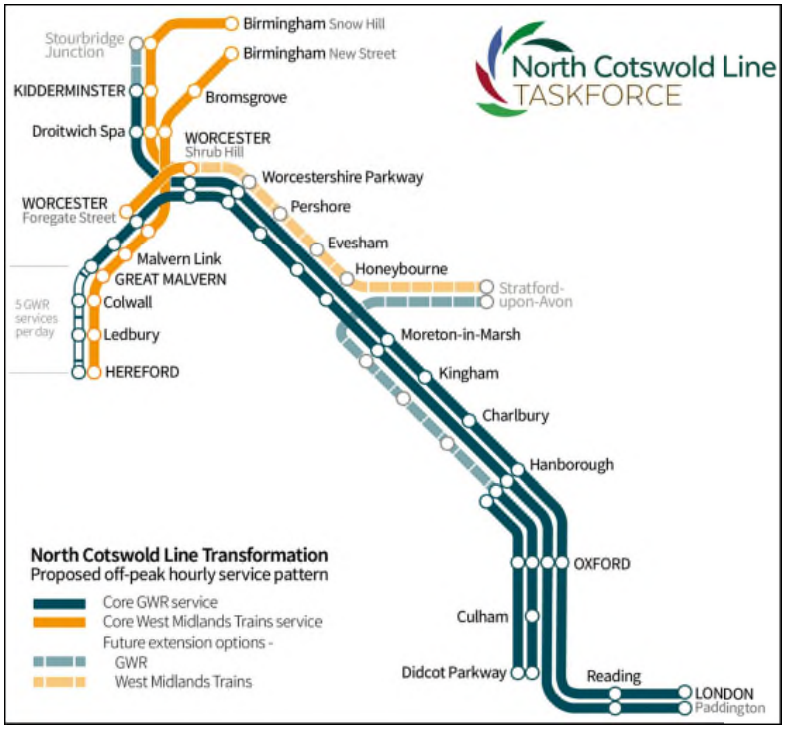
A METRO FOR OXFORD
by Roger Davis

Many of you will have read the title and asked what this has to do with the Stourbridge line. As it turns out, a half-hourly train service around Oxford could also lead to an hourly service from Kidderminster to London Paddington if proposals by the North Cotswolds Line Task Force (NCLTF) come to fruition.

NCLTF brings together five county councils (Oxfordshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Gloucestershire), five LEPs and the Cotswold Line Promotion Group. It proposes the redoubling four miles of track from Hanborough to Wolvercot Junction and five miles from Evesham to Pershore, as shown on the diagram to the left.

It claims that this could provide 4 trains per hour from Hanborough to Oxford as the first stage of the titular Oxford Metro service. It would also provide 1 train per hour from Great Malvern to London Paddington (with 5 trains per day extending to/from Hereford) and 1 train per hour from Kidderminster to London Paddington. These two trains would stop at different intermediate stations between Worcester and Oxford to speed up these services.

NCLTF also supports the reopening of the Honeybourne to Stratford-upon-Avon line and propose two services per hour along this line if it reopens. The first would be a Didcot Parkway to Stratford-upon-Avon service, while the second would see a Birmingham Snow Hill to Worcester service (via the Stourbridge line) extended to Pershore, Evesham, Honeybourne and Stratford-upon-Avon – and possibly extended back to Snow Hill to form a circular service.



SLUG supports these proposals but has two major concerns. Firstly, the NCLTF map suggests that services from Snow Hill would only extend beyond Worcester if the Honeybourne to Stratford line reopened. SLUG believes that these services should extend to either Evesham or Honeybourne to provide connections at Worcestershire Parkway even if Honeybourne to Stratford is not reopened.

Secondly, NCLTF membership includes five shire counties but not the West Midlands. As a result, their proposals result in an hourly service from Paddington to Kidderminster and only consider operating to Stourbridge Junction as an optional future extension, even though it only adds 8 minutes to the journey time. This is ridiculous. Stourbridge Junction has now surpassed Kidderminster as the most used station along the line and has excellent facilities for terminating services to turn back. In addition, an extension to Stourbridge Junction would benefit Worcestershire travellers as the station is widely used by residents of North Worcestershire to avoid car parking charges.

As far as I know, they have not yet set up Checkpoint Charlie across the line somewhere between Hagley and Stourbridge Junction, although it sometimes seems so. Members can take it as read that SLUG will be campaigning for direct Stourbridge to Paddington services from the start, and not as an afterthought.

CHANGES FOR THE BETTER?
by John Warren

The autumn has seen two announcements that will radically affect the future of rail services across the country.

Concerns have been expressed about the rail franchising system ever since it was first introduced by John Major's Government in 1996. Failures in the system caused Teresa May's Government to instigate a review headed by Keith Williams with the findings of this review expected by 2019. However, nothing happened, and the franchising system limped on with new franchises being awarded – for instance to Avanti West Coast to replace Virgin Trains.

March 2020 saw the start of the Covid-19 crisis, with lockdown decimating passenger numbers and making the existing franchise terms unworkable. The Government stepped in and introduced Emergency Measures Agreements (EMAs) which transferred all revenue and cost risks to the Government. The EMAs ran until September when they were replaced by Emergency Recovery Measures Agreements (ERMAs) which will run until at least 2021 depending on the Franchise.

Merseyrail - run as a concession rather than a franchise.

In September, Grant Shapps announced that the ERMAs were the first step towards a completely new system for the railway system which he claimed would deliver a simpler, effective model to reform Britain's railways over the coming months. He stated that the long-awaited Williams Report would be published and that a White Paper would be published to respond to Williams' recommendations "when the course of the pandemic becomes clearer". It is known that Williams will recommend a move towards concessions or management contracts – a system that is currently used on London Overground and Merseyrail. It will be interesting to find out what is proposed. Hopefully, this time, the Government will come up with a system that works and puts passengers first.

At the same time, Network Rail published its Traction Decarbonisation Network Strategy (TDNS) which details its proposals for removing diesel trains from the 9,570 miles of unelectrified track to achieve zero emissions by 2050. Most of these lines are recommended for electrification with at least 7,270 miles electrified, with the remaining unelectrified lines operated by battery or hydrogen powered trains.

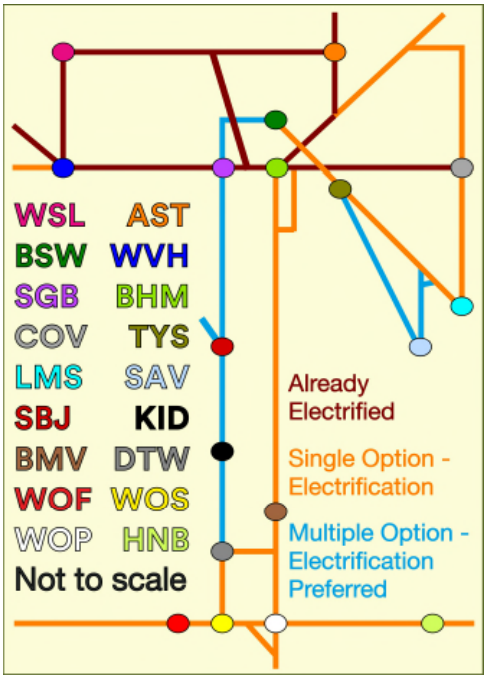
Penzance to Bristol
Electrification

Truro to Falmouth Docks
Battery

Norwich to Great Yarmouth
Hydrogen

The lines requiring action have been split into two groups. The first group details those lines for which Network Rail have identified only one solution. For instance, Penzance to Bristol would be electrified, Truro to Falmouth Docks would have battery trains, while Norwich to Great Yarmouth would use hydrogen trains.

However, some lines have been identified as having an optimal solution, but a secondary solution is also possible. For instance, York to Scarborough is recommended for electrification but battery operation has not been ruled out.



How does this affect local lines in the West Midlands? Almost all non-electrified lines have been identified as having a single option – electrification. These lines include Marylebone - Birmingham Snow Hill, Oxford – Worcester – Hereford, Worcester – Droitwich Spa – Bromsgrove, Bristol – Bromsgrove, Wolverhampton – Shrewsbury and Birmingham – Derby.

This leaves two lines: Stratford to Hatton and Tyseley, and Droitwich Spa to Snow Hill via Kidderminster and Stourbridge Junction. As far as Network Rail are concerned, the optimal solution is electrification, but battery or hydrogen operation has not been ruled out. It is hoped that common sense will prevail and that all lines emanating from Snow Hill will be electrified to eliminate the need for inefficient bi-mode trains to operate the services. However, common sense did not prevail when the Government cut back the electrification of the Paddington – Bristol, Paddington – Swansea and St Pancras – Sheffield lines to Chippenham, Cardiff and Corby respectively, thus necessitating the purchase of inefficient Hitachi bi-mode trains.

In future years, SLUG will need to monitor progress to put pressure on the decision makers (hopefully, not the Government!) to ensure that every line in the West Midlands is electrified. One argument in our favour is that our line is used as a diversionary route by Cross Country services. Common sense says that this should ensure electrification of our line. However, there is a fear that a Chris Grayling Mark II might turn up at the wrong time to make an irrational decision.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ - NAME THE TELEVISION SERIES

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