Thursday 11 March - 1200 - Work is proceeding to re-rail the bogie

Ballasting was scheduled to take place overnight from 2200 on Wednesday. However, one bogie on the first ballast train derailed just outside Stourbridge Town station meaning that a team had to be summoned to re-rail the train and work restarted at lunch time on Thursday. Despite this, the work was completed on schedule and, at 0615 on Saturday 13 March, the first passenger service operated over the new track.

Thursday 11 March - Ballast train on site and ballast laid

During the work, Network Rail revealed that some of the clips that attached the rails to the sleepers dated from 1907, and it is thought that parts of the track were from the same era, with the last total track renewal occurring in 1902. Network Rail has proudly announced that the whole process took 8 weeks from start to finish, compared with the normal 18 months.

Apart from the concerned neighbours, Bayer AG and Johnson & Johnson also suffered, having seen share prices crash when sales of Germoloids and Anusol plummeted in the Stourbridge area.

FLEXIBLE TRAVEL
by John Warren

On 20 May, the Government announced that a new national flexible rail ticket would be available to commuters across England once travel restrictions were lifted.

The new flexible ticket will be on sale on 21 June, for use by 28 June. The paperless tickets will allow travel on any 8 days in a 28-day period, with passengers able to tap smartcards or scan mobiles at the station, with no need to select the days of travel in advance. The change has the potential to save commuters hundreds of pounds, providing greater choice and flexibility.

Exact details of savings will be provided before tickets go on sale. However, an example quoted in the announcement stated that three day-a-week commuters from Bromsgrove to Birmingham (a similar distance to Hagley to Birmingham) could save over £120 per annum.

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

PLATFORM

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One of the new four-car Class 196 DMUs passes through Stourbridge Junction on 17 May on a test run from Tyseley to Worcester .

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A GREAT BRITISH RAILWAY?
by Roger Davis

After a wait so long that some people wondered whether it had been translated from its original Latin, the Williams report for the future of railways was published on 20 May - albeit co-authored by Secretary of State for Transport Grant Shapps. What a pity Ernest Marples didn't do the same to take his fair share of the flak in 1963!

The major change will see day-to-day micro-management of the rail network taken away from the civil servants at DfT, who have been responsible for removing many through train services and who also procured the highly successful Class 800 IET trains. In its place will be the publicly owned Great British Railways (GBR), an organisation that essentially will be an amalgamation of Network Rail and the long-defunct Strategic Rail Authority, and which will be led by professional railwaymen.

GBR is due to be formed in 2023 to integrate the currently fragmented railway. It will be responsible for rail infrastructure, contracting of train services to private operators, setting fares and timetables, station management and collecting fare revenue in most of England. It will produce a 30-year strategy to provide clear, long term plans for transforming the railways. It will use a modified British Rail Double Arrow (⇄) to create a single brand for railways. In addition, GBR will be made up of regional divisions (similar to the current Network Rail structure), with their own local budgets. In England, new partnerships with these regional divisions will give English cities and regions greater control over local ticketing, services and stations.

Franchising will be replaced by awarding new Passenger Service Contracts to private companies. Each will be designed to support the needs of passengers and the whole network, as part of an integrated system, and will be different across the network, including on contract length. Operators will have greater commercial freedom on some parts of the network, with revenue sharing arrangements where appropriate. New open access services will also be explored where spare capacity exists. Competition for Passenger Service Contracts will be greater than for franchises and GBR will aim to compete all contracts. If an operator fails, the government will be ready to step in and take control where needed. Temporary, two year, contracts are currently being negotiated with current operators.

One of the biggest changes proposed relates to fares, where a simplified fares structure is promised, with a new GBR website and app introduced. Easy, frictionless payment options for every journey, and digital tickets, are promised across the network. Pay As You Go journeys will be expanded outside London to make millions more trips straightforward. Through tickets between train, bus and tram are promised, as are improved transport interchanges at stations. Hopefully, they will arrange this with National Express West Midlands who seem more content on moving bus services away from railway stations than towards them.

A SMOOTHER RIDE
by Roger Davis

There was an old wives' tale that when Network Rail announced an upgrade to a line, it was appended by the year of completion or, even worse, the decade. Therefore, it was a very pleasant surprise when Network Rail, recently devolved and headed by a very proactive local Route Director, announced at the beginning of February that it had liaised with West Midlands Railway to undertake major improvement works on the Stourbridge Town branch alongside the internal refurbishment of the Town cars … the following week !

The initial 2 week closure from 8 to 21 February, which coincided with the Town cars being refurbished, saw lineside bushes and trees cut back and, in some cases, removed completely to ensure the safe operation of the branch service, and to prevent the reoccurrence of previous incidents when PMOL staff had to manhandle fallen tree branches from the line during stormy weather. The work also involved the removal of graffiti from the lineside and an initial inspection of the track. Not everybody was happy with some neighbours complaining that their view had been spoiled. What they failed to recognise is that the safety of the train service overrides all other considerations.

Sunday 7 March - New track and sleepers ready for track relaying

A second line possession, originally planned from 9-12 March but extended to run from 6-12 March, saw the old track and sleepers removed and replaced by new track, which was welded together to provide a smooth ride. By Sunday 7 March, the new sleepers and track had been moved into position alongside the old track and these had been laid ready for ballasting by Wednesday 10 March..

Wednesday 10 March - New track and sleepers laid, and old track cut up for disposal

THE FIRST STAGE TOWARDS RECOVERY?
by John Warren

In the past year, West Midlands Railway has made five timetable changes, and different operators have changed their timetables on different dates to respond to the varying levels of lockdown. On 16 May, normality returned when the first National Rail Timetable since December 2019 was published, and the rail industry reverted to two timetable change dates per year – in May and December.

With footfall down by 70% on pre-Covid levels and West Midlands Railways short of drivers due to being unable to train new recruits, a return to 6 trains per hour on the Snow Hill lines was not on the table. However, Kidderminster has retained its pre-Covid 4 trains per hour service, with two of these trains extended to Worcester. The new service pattern that has emerged on Mondays to Saturdays is as follows :-

- Stratford to Kidderminster via Dorridge, stopping at all Stourbridge line stations.
- Dorridge to Worcester Foregate Street, stopping at Jewellery Quarter, The Hawthorns, Smethwick Galton Bridge, Rowley Regis, Cradley Heath, Stourbridge Junction, Hagley, Kidderminster, Hartlebury and Droitwich Spa.
- Stratford to Kidderminster via Shirley, stopping at all Stourbridge line stations.
- Whitlocks End to Worcester Foregate Street, stopping at Jewellery Quarter, The Hawthorns, Smethwick Galton Bridge, Rowley Regis, Cradley Heath, Stourbridge Junction, Kidderminster and Droitwich Spa.

West Midlands Railway has made it clear that this timetable will remain until December 2022, by which time a full complement of drivers will be established and footfall hopefully will have increased. December 2022 is the current target date for re-establishing a 6 train per hour service as far as Stourbridge Junction.

Kidderminster now has 4 trains per hour Mondays to Saturdays but only 1 on Sunday

The Sunday service remains at pre-Covid levels. However, when Abellio won the franchise, one of its commitments was to introduce Saturday level services on Sundays from May 2021. SLUG appreciates that Covid has stopped this from happening but is determined to ensure that an improved Sunday service has merely been postponed and not quietly swept under the carpet. SLUG does not expect a 6 trains per hour Sunday service as promised in 2017, but expects a service level equal to that provided on Saturdays. It also expects a Sunday service to be provided at Hartlebury, and a big improvement to Sunday services at Blakedown. The matter was raised by SLUG at the West Midlands Trains Stakeholder Conference on 19 May and the reply from West Midlands Railway was non-committal. We intend to engage in dialogue with both West Midlands Railway and the West Midlands Rail Executive to press our claim for a far better Sunday service than the inadequate one that is currently being provided. We will keep you informed of developments.

On board, they are promising better facilities for bikes and more "pleasant" trains. Hopefully, that will entail swapping the current ironing boards for comfortable seats. Passengers are also told that compensation will be easier to claim, and that clear, consistent information before, during and after their journeys will be provided.

In the future, they are promising that electrification of the network will be expanded, with alternative technologies such as hydrogen and battery power also helping to achieve zero emissions from trains and reduce air pollution. What they don't mention is whether a rolling programme of electrification will be introduced – something that the rail industry wants to reduce costs and maintain skills. What they do say is that the delivery of improvements will be speeded up using project SPEED (Swift, Pragmatic, Efficient Enhancement Delivery), a method recently introduced by Network Rail, and possibly responsible for the swift delivery of the Stourbridge Town branch upgrade.

This resumé only skims the surface of what is promised in the report. The report makes 62 commitments, which SLUG has listed on its website, along with a link to the full report - at http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/williams-shapps.html.

We will have to wait and see if these proposals improve the rail network. The encouraging aspect is that the rail network will be managed by railway professionals rather than civil servants. I finish with two thoughts. Will Great British Railways be rebranded as Great British Rail in about 20 years' time to modernise its image? Also, as passengers, we will be making Great British Railways Journeys. Does this mean that we will be legally obliged to wear bright red trousers and a lime-green jacket?

EXCUSE THE EXCUSES
by John Warren

Why can't train operators be honest when recording the reason for a train service cancellation? For instance, a train from Dorridge to Worcester returns to Dorridge after a five minute wait at Worcester. There have been many instances when the train to Worcester was cancelled because of "Train Crew Issues" but the same unit returning from Worcester was shown as cancelled because of "the late arrival of the inbound service". Of course it was late! It didn't run!

Other excuses also leave a lot to be desired as the following post on the West Midlands Railway website demonstrates.

Changes to on train facilities:
Facilities on the 14:26 Stratford-Upon-Avon to Stourbridge Junction due 15:54.
This train will have 2 coaches instead of 4.
This is Because of a member of train crew being unavailable.

Given that every train service on the Snow Hill lines needs one driver and one senior conductor irrespective of the number of coaches, the above reason for a short formation seems slightly suspect! All we want is some honesty.

THE TRAIN NOT STOPPING
by Roger Davis

Train cancellations can happen at any time – sometimes due to the shortcomings of the train operator and sometimes due to issues out of its control. For most Stourbridge line rail passengers, a cancellation means either waiting for the next service or finding an alternative means of transport. However, passengers for Langley Green, Old Hill, Lye, Hagley, Blakedown and Hartlebury have a longer wait, as the next train passes through their station without stopping.

In February 2020, West Midlands Trains called a stakeholder conference in Birmingham to introduce its new management team, after the previous team had decided to "pursue other opportunities" due to a winter of discontent when service levels reached an all-time low and the Metro Mayor threatened to relieve the company of its franchise. At that conference, I asked why stop orders were not being issued to ensure that, if a train service to a minor station is cancelled, the following service makes an additional stop at that station. I was assured by the new Managing Director and the Head of Corporate Affairs that this would happen in future. Has it happened? Of course not!

This issue has been raised with West Midlands Railway at the last two SLUG committee meetings. It has been claimed that stop orders are being issued but that the stops may not be showing on Realtime Trains due to the short notice given that the train is to make an additional stop. Is this true? SLUG doesn't think so.

An all-stations service calls at Old Hill - a rare occurrence on 1 April !

On April Fools Day (appropriately), West Midlands Railway had a major issue with staff being affected with Covid. As a result, 51 Snow Hill Lines services were cancelled. This included 14 cancelled departures from Snow Hill towards Stourbridge between 1100 and 1830. It was the all-stations services that bore the brunt of this with 9 services cancelled. For instance, during this period, Old Hill only saw arrivals at 1113, 1242, 1342, 1612, 1642 and 1812 – meaning one gap of 2½ hours and two of 1½ hours. Were stop orders issued to enable the following services to call at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye? Almost certainly not! The semi-fast services that operated that day were all on-time on departure from Galton Bridge. Had they made additional stops at the other three stations, I would have expected them to have lost between 3 and 5 minutes between Galton Bridge and Stourbridge. They didn't! They were also on time at Rowley Regis, Cradley Heath and Stourbridge Junction.

SLUG has been logging every service cancellation since October 2019 and will continue to do so. We will continue to fight until stop orders become the norm rather than the exception. Passengers at the minor stations deserve a lot better than they are getting from West Midlands Railway at present.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Covid Delays. West Midlands Railway has told SLUG that Covid has resulted in about 20,000 driver training days being lost. This has delayed the introduction of the new CAF Class 196 units into service until December 2021. These trains, although primarily destined for Birmingham-Hereford and Birmingham-Shrewsbury services, will supplement Class 172 units on Snow Hill services. *(Source: - West Midlands Railway)*

New Arrivals. The fleet of Class 172 units on Snow Hill line services has been supplemented by the arrival of four 2-car units from Chiltern Railways, initially until December. This sub-class (172/1) joins the sub-classes already with West Midlands Trains (172/0, 172/2 and 172/3), meaning that all Class 172 units in the country are now based at Tyseley depot.
(Source: - West Midlands Railway)

Unit 172 102 at Stratford-upon-Avon in July 2015 on a Chiltern Railways service

And Possible Departures. It is thought that some of the Class 196 units, bought to increase capacity in the West Midlands, could be moved to operate the East-West line from Oxford to Bedford when it opens in 2025. *(Source: - Modern Railways)*

Shrewsbury Electrics. A Midlands Connect feasibility study has outlined nearly £500 million of benefits to the economy if the route from Wolverhampton to Shrewsbury is electrified to provide faster local trains and a new hourly train to London from Shrewsbury. This comes at a time when West Midlands Railway and Transport for Wales are purchasing new diesel multiple units (Classes 196 and 197 respectively) for introduction onto the route in 2022 and 2023. *(Source: - Midlands Connect)*

A CrossCountry HST waits to depart from platform 7 at Bristol Temple Meads

Cracking Substitutes. Because of the much publicised withdrawal of all Hitachi Class 800 Intercity Express Trains due to cracks in the lifting gear, CrossCountry Trains operated a shuttle service between Bristol and Swindon on behalf of Great Western Railway - ironically using the 45 year old HSTs that the Class 800s had replaced in 2019 with much ceremony!
(Source: - Modern Railways)

Cracking Trams, Gromit. On 12 June, all services on the West Midlands Metro were suspended and all 21 CAF trams withdrawn from service for inspection after cracks were found on one of the trams. This is particularly worrying as CAF units working on the main line have also suffered from cracks, including Class 195 units which are the same design as Class 196/197 units due to be delivered to West Midlands Railway and Transport for Wales for use in the West Midlands. *(Source: - BBC)*