Issue 25 September 2021

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Platform

Despite the arrival of 4 extra Class 172 units from Chiltern (ostensibly on loan until December), short formed services have been common on the Stourbridge line since May.

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

A SERIOUS RELAPSE
by Roger Davis

When the article *"The First Stage Towards Recovery?"* was written for the previous edition of *Platform*, the new timetable had just been announced and it looked as though normality was returning. Unfortunately, instead of normality, the new timetable just deteriorated and got worse as time wore on.

Tuesday 24 August - 0826 Stratford-upon-Avon to Kidderminster - reduced from 5 coaches to 2

Within days, it had become apparent that there were technical issues with the Class 172 units which meant that some of the 13 daily diagrams were short formed. To circumvent this problem, four 2-car Class 172/1 units from Chiltern Railways arrived, initially on loan until December. Despite this, short forming became a daily occurrence, and got even worse in July when an average of 5 diagrams per day were short formed. A particularly bad day was Monday 19 July when 9 of the 13 diagrams were short formed, with 3 of the diagrams operated using a single 2-car set. This meant that just 7 of the 24 2-car sets and 8 of the 15 3-car sets were deemed to be available for service on Snow Hill line services that day.

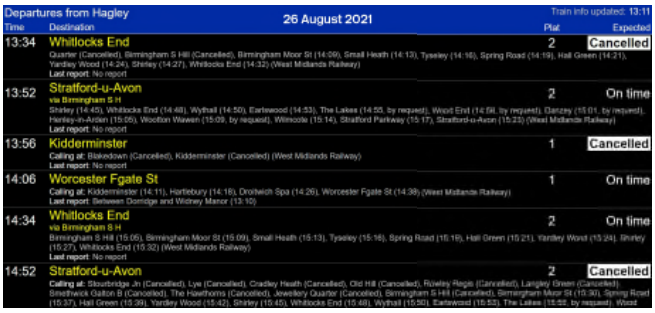
Therefore, with shorter trains, a reliable service was needed. This meant that the announcement from West Midlands Railway that services would be cancelled at short notice due to a shortage of drivers was not well received. SLUG appreciates that existing drivers were having to self-isolate having been "pinged", and that new drivers were unavailable due to Covid delaying the training programme. However, the last two weeks of May saw about 10% of services either completely or partially cancelled, with this rising to over 15% in June and to just over 20% in July.

Another problem arose due to the very small layover time allowed at destination stations in the new timetable. The result was the late running of some services with an average of nearly 17 (out of 133) services per day at least 5 minutes late at Birmingham Snow Hill. To circumvent this, decisions were made at short notice to operate some services non-stop between Snow Hill and Stourbridge Junction to catch up time. This affected services at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye as stop orders were not issued on the following Worcester to Dorridge or Whitlock's End semi-fast services, meaning a gap of at least an hour between stopping services. One reason for this omission was the short layover times provided in the timetable - 3 or 4 minutes at Worcester and Dorridge, 8 or 9 minutes at Kidderminster and Whitlock's End – which meant that four extra stops would result in a late arrival and departure at the destinations.

The randomness of the cancellations and the use of skip-stop operation resulted in some huge gaps between services at some stations – 4 hours at Worcester, 5 hours at Hartlebury, 3½ hours at Blakedown, and 3 hours at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye.

It was obvious that the 16 May timetable was not working. The rate of cancellations got worse as the day wore on with twice as many services cancelled during the evening than during the morning. Cancellations also varied considerably by day - one example being when no cancellations on the Monday was followed by 54 cancellations the following day. Another problem seemed to be a decrease in train crew availability on the days when England played a Euro 2020 match, culminating in over 60% of services cancelled on Sunday 11 July.

West Midlands Railway reacted to the worsening situation by introducing an emergency timetable from 2 August. This saw 20 services per day completely removed from the timetable, with a further 5 services truncated. Most of the cancelled services were the hourly Kidderminster – Dorridge – Stratford-upon-Avon services, and this meant that Langley Green, Old Hill, Lye and Blakedown saw their service reduced from half-hourly to hourly. It also meant that all other stations from Kidderminster to Jewellery Quarter now had an irregular service pattern with gaps as low as 9 minutes and as high as 30 minutes.



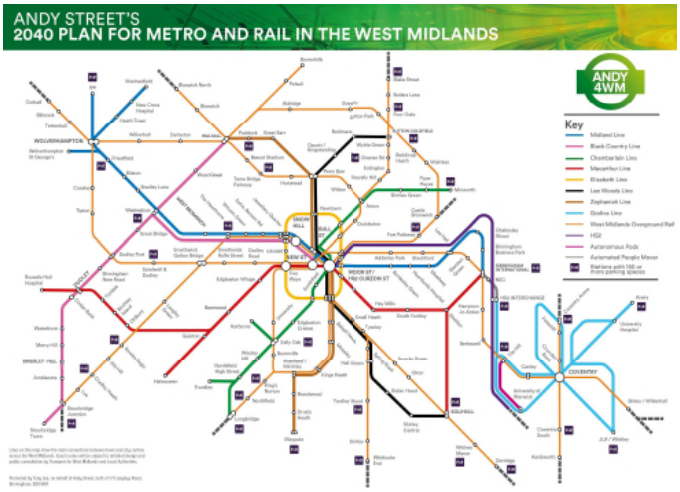
The question was whether the new timetable would solve the problem of short formed trains and large gaps between services due to cancellations. The first fortnight suggested otherwise. At least one diagram was short-formed each day, with six of the ten diagrams short-formed on 12 August. In addition, cancellations rose gradually over this period, from 12 cancellations on the first Monday to 42 on the second Saturday. This led to huge gaps in service along the Stourbridge line yet again – 4 hours at Hartlebury, 3 hours at Langley Green, Old Hill, Lye and Blakedown, 2 hours at Worcester and Droitwich Spa, and over 1½ hours at all other stations. This greatly affected services to/from The Hawthorns on a match day. Insult was added to injury on 4 August when successive departures from Snow Hill at 1206 and 1224 were cancelled, and West Midlands Railway took the decision to operate the following service at 1236 non-stop from Snow Hill to Stourbridge Junction to catch up time. At least, passengers could use their rail ticket on a far slower National Express West Midlands bus!

However, improvements in the service over the final two weeks of August saw the 16 May timetable reinstated on 29 August, albeit surreptitiously with no mention anywhere on the WMR website, Twitter or Facebook accounts. It was picked up by SLUG only because National Express stopped accepting train tickets on its buses.

At first, the service seemed to be improving with an average of 8 cancellations over the first 5 days. Since then, it has got worse, culminating on “Black Saturday” (11 September) when 3 services were short-formed, 38 services totally cancelled, 17 services partially cancelled, and 32 services over 5 minutes late at Snow Hill. Again, the Albion were at home and one friend, who has used the train to get to/from every match since 1995, has said that he will use his car in future. So much for convincing people to ditch their cars and switch to public transport! Luckily, Emma Raducanu was not using West Midlands Railway to get to her match!

West Midlands Railway should be commended for trying to introduce an improved timetable on 16 May, while companies such as CrossCountry retained their emergency timetables. Unfortunately, it is not working. The timetable progressively deteriorated over the 2½ months it operated, and this should have been rectified by WMR management a lot earlier than it was. With things going wrong, they should have taken a proactive approach. The introduction of a reduced timetable on 2 August was reactive and did not address the flaws in the 16 May timetable in terms of recovery time. It was the same as the previous one but with services removed. The recent reinstatement of the May timetable has only served to highlight its flaws. Passengers will accept a lower frequency timetable if that ensures that the service is punctual and reliable, and that cancellations are a rarity rather than a normal occurrence. All they want is a timetable they can rely on. West Midlands Railway needs to take a step back and produce a timetable that addresses these issues. SLUG will continue to monitor the standard of the service and will report back in the next issue of *Platform*. Is it too much to hope that the next article will be titled "*A Full Recovery*"?

A VISION OF 2040 ?
by Roger Davis

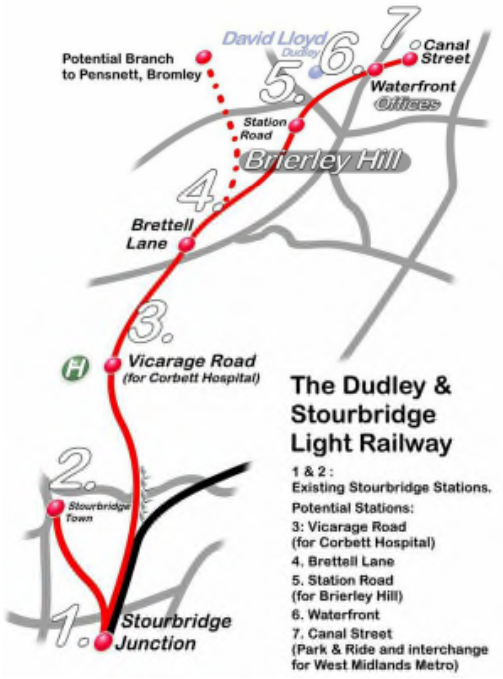


At the start of his successful campaign to be re-elected as West Midlands Metro Mayor, Andy Street produced a plan for the Metro and Rail network development over the next 20 years.

The heavy rail proposals involve extra stations (e.g. Tettenhall, Dudley Road, Fort Parkway and Castle Bromwich) on existing lines, passenger services on existing freight lines (e.g. Sutton Park), and reinstatement of the line from Walsall to Brownhills, although there is no indication that this line will be extended to Lichfield.

A number of new "Metro" lines are proposed, although a number of them are on corridors where TfWM proposes to introduce the awful Sprint buses (the bus that thinks it's a tram!). One of these corridors is a proposed line from Birmingham along the Hagley Road and Birmingham New Road to Dudley and Russells Hall Hospital. Mr Street needs to clarify whether this corridor will actually be a Metro line by 2040 or whether it will remain as a Sprint route.

A CGI of a Sprint bus (TfWM)



The only other proposal in the vicinity of the Stourbridge line is the extension of the Metro line from Brierley Hill to Stourbridge Junction and Stourbridge Town (presumably with a reversal at the Junction). However, this proposal does not tie in with the information that SLUG has received. At an "Ask Andy" Zoom session for Dudley South constituents, I asked what was proposed to fill the gap between Stourbridge and Brierley Hill. Andy Street replied to my question by saying that a feasibility study had concluded that the only viable option to fill that gap was by light rail rather than heavy rail or Metro. Therefore, he supported the application to the Restoring Our Railways Fund by Pre-Metro Operations to further their plan of operating a Town branch style service from Stourbridge Junction to Canal Street to connect with the Metro. He also stated that this would also be in his manifesto for action during his next term of office if re-elected. This is not what the 2040 plan proclaims!

The PMOL proposal also mentions a future possible extension via the Pensnett branch to enable Russells Hall Hospital to be accessed from the west. Given that the Andy Street proposals see Russells Hall Hospital accessed from the east, shouldn't these two schemes be combined to provide a second through Metro route through Dudley to Stourbridge via Pensnett?

Bromley Halt station on the Pensnett branch still exists in the undergrowth, 89 years after closure.

If light rail does turn out to be the only option for reinstating this missing link, SLUG reluctantly would not oppose it, as a rail link between the two points is urgently needed given traffic conditions on the A461. However, a situation whereby a passenger arrives by heavy rail at Stourbridge Junction, changes onto light rail to a stop to the north of Brierley Hill at Canal Street, and then changes again onto Metro to access Dudley and beyond is unacceptable. The ultimate ambition is for heavy rail or tram-train all the way from Stourbridge to Walsall. However, this will not happen until freight services resume on the line, and Network Rail has stated that this will not be until 2045 at the earliest. The alternative is the extension of the Metro, either as an extension from the Brierley Hill terminus or as a spur from Canal Street which would allow tram-train operation in the future and would allow through services from Stourbridge to Dudley and beyond.

SLUG intends to converse with both Transport for West Midlands and the Mayor to press for a "joined up" solution rather than the piecemeal proposals currently on the table. We will keep you informed.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

On Track for Completion. Metro Mayor Andy Street has given an undertaking that the extension of the Metro line to Wolverhampton station will be completed by Christmas 2021, now that both phases of the station rebuild have been completed and the new station is fully operational. *(Source: - Rail Magazine)*

Bridging The Gap. Work has started to build a replacement bridge to carry the Metro extension from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill over Coneygree Road in Tipton. A works compound has also been set up at Parkhead Viaduct in preparation for major works on the viaduct. *(Source: - Midland Metro Alliance)*

On Your Bike. A new 46-space facility costing £50,000 has been installed at Birmingham New Street station to enable cyclists to pay to store their bikes more securely when travelling on a train from the station. *(Source: - Rail Magazine)*

Not as intended. The prospect of Stourbridge Line services being convenient for Birmingham Curzon Street and HS2 has been promoted as an advantage. However, some destinations which were promised may not materialise. Whitehall sources suggest that there will be no money left to fund the HS2 branch eastwards. To reach the east of England from our line, it is essential that the Camp Hill Chords are constructed and extra platforms are opened at Birmingham Moor Street. Stourbridge MP, Suzanne Webb has corresponded to a constituent claiming "I understand that TfWM are still looking at and intend to activate the Camp Hill Chords". We hope for reassurance and confirmation from Mayor, Andy Street. *(Source: - The Guardian)*

Snow Hill Revamp? Papers have been presented to the West Midlands Combined Authority board detailing outline plans for the major redevelopment and transformation of Snow Hill station, and improved transport connectivity within the Snow Hill area. The plans include a fourth platform at Snow Hill, and improved pedestrian routes between the city centre's three railway stations. *(Source: - Express & Star)*

HAPPY 10th BIRTHDAY
by John Warren

Old meets new at Stourbridge Junction in 2011

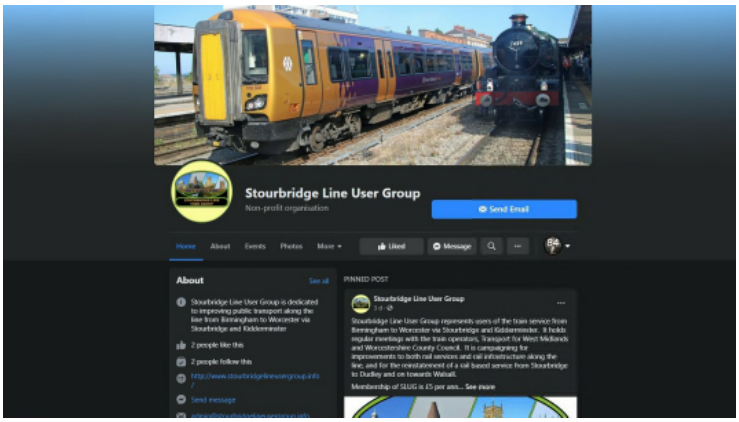
Ten years ago this month, on 1 September 2011, the Class 172 diesel multiple units entered service on the Stourbridge line. They replaced the Class 150 diesel multiple units, built in 1986, which had been in use on the Stourbridge line since the early 1990s.

The units initially suffered from "heating" problems when two of the units encountered engine fires and there have been issues with units being unavailable for service over the past few months. Despite this, they have proved to be popular with passengers, with 2+2 seating throughout replacing the cramped 2+3 seating arrangement on the Class 150s. Since December 2017, the units have been repainted into West Midlands Railway livery and refurbished internally, meaning that they will be the mainstay of our line for a few years to come.

The refurbished interior of a Class 172/0 DMU

The 2011 deliveries comprised 15 3-car Class 172/3 units and 12 2-car Class 172/2 units. They were augmented in 2019 by the arrival of 8 2-car Class 172/0 units from London Overground, and in 2021 by the arrival on loan of 4 2-car Class 172/1 units from Chiltern Railways, meaning that every Class 172 unit is currently based at Tyseley.

BACK TO FACEBOOK



Stourbridge Line User Group has returned to Facebook by setting up a Facebook page. This page will enable SLUG to keep members and visitors up to date with any information it receives and will supplement the website by posting news items that would not merit a website page. Page visitors will be able to comment on any post but are reminded that any insulting, threatening or obscene comments will be deleted. The Facebook page may be reached either by clicking on the f icon at the bottom of every page on the SLUG website, or directly via the following link :-
https://www.facebook.com/Stourbridge-Line-User-Group-109635641360483

A NEW SOLIHULL STATION ?
by John Warren

Although it's not on the Stourbridge line, Solihull is a popular destination for Stourbridge line passengers. Therefore, it is encouraging that Solihull Borough Council is proposing a new larger station building, with construction starting in about 3-5 years' time. Set around an enlarged new internal public concourse, the redesigned railway station will include upgraded facilities, an indoor garden, a new public square at the front of the station entrance, a widened underpass and enlarged lifts to the platforms. The building will also provide space for food and drink outlets, with retail units that face into the ticket hall and out onto the square.

CGI of the proposed station and interchange

(Hawkins Brown Architects)

CGI of the proposed station and concourse

(Hawkins Brown Architects)

A one-way loop will be installed to the north of the station where public and private vehicles are concentrated, while the public square will prioritise pedestrians. SLUG hopes that a smaller bus interchange area does not encourage bus operators (especially National Express) to divert even more bus services away from the station.

WE NEED YOUR HELP

You will have noticed a short questionnaire enclosed with this issue of Platform. For postal members, the questionnaire and a stamped return address envelope has been enclosed. For on-line members, an electronic copy of the questionnaire in pdf format has been attached to your mailing.

However, to make things easier for members with access to the internet, the form is available on the SLUG website at the link shown at the bottom of this article and may be completed and submitted directly from that website page.

The questionnaire will only take a couple of minutes to complete, so can we thank you in advance for your co-operation? We are determined that SLUG will continue to be led by our membership on the issues that we pursue on their behalf.

http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/questionnaire.html
Six digit access code : **670165**