Issue 26 December 2021

Platform

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Lye is used to trains passing through non-stop, even services that are scheduled to stop. A more welcome visitor (7029 Clun Castle) passes through on 2 October.

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STILL ON THE SICK LIST
by Roger Davis

The last sentence of the article *A Serious Relapse* from the previous edition of *Platform* read "Is it too much to hope that the next article will be titled *A Full Recovery?"*. Unfortunately, it was too much to hope for - hence the above title.

At first, things appeared to be improving, but the three weeks around the October half-term week saw a marked deterioration with cancellation totals of 178 and 194 rising to 251 during half-term week itself. That meant that over 31% of all services were either totally or partially cancelled. SLUG had already contacted the Shakespeare Line Promotion Group (SLPG) to discuss the appalling state of affairs, and the two groups joined forces with the Cotswold Line Promotion Group (CLPG) and the Solihull and Leamington Rail User association (SALRUA) to compose a mutually agreed and strongly worded letter, which was sent to the Head of Rail Franchising & Partnerships at the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) with copies to the Executive Director of WMRE and Andy Street, the West Midlands Metro Mayor. This letter can be read on the SLUG website and on the SLUG Facebook page.

As a result, the Chairmen of the four Rail User Groups were invited to a face-to-face meeting with senior officials from WMRE and West Midlands Railway (WMR) on 10 November chaired by Malcolm Holmes, the Executive Director of WMRE. The meeting could be described as a very frank discussion. WMR stated that training of new drivers had now been stepped up and that two new drivers would be passed out for service by the start of December. However, they admitted that it would be this time next near before a full complement of 164 drivers would be available for Snow Hill line services. The User Groups made the point that proactive action by WMR was needed in the short term to obviate the need for the short notice cancellations that are seriously inconveniencing travellers on the line, even if that meant introducing a reduced frequency (but reliable) timetable. It appears that the current timetable will see a serious degradation in service levels during school holidays as local terms and conditions agreed with the unions over previous decades means that a driver can take holiday during school holidays even if that means that a reliable service becomes untenable. WMR told the meeting that it was looking into providing an emergency timetable over the Christmas holidays to provide a more reliable service. At time of writing this article, nothing has been announced, and a rumour from one of the other User Groups is that WMR intends to "tough it out" over this period with a normal timetabled service. You can be assured that SLUG will be monitoring performance over this period and that the four groups will be sending a follow-up letter unless there is an improvement in performance. As we go to press, a follow-up meeting has been called by WMRE. Hopefully, this meeting will have more positive news. We will keep you informed of developments.

However, cancellations are not the only problem on the line. Late running of services has become a major problem. For instance, during the week commencing 22 November, 209 services were at least 5 minutes late at Snow Hill. Some of these delays were due to external factors such as a track circuit failure at Kidderminster and Storm Arwen. Others were due to ongoing problems with the Class 172 units, which has seen some services operated with defective engines isolated. However, the main reason is the tightness of the timetable which only allows turnround times of 3 minutes at Stratford-upon-Avon, Dorridge and Worcester and about 8 minutes at Whitlocks End and Kidderminster. This means that one of two actions are taken on some late running services. The first is to skip all stops by running non-stop from Snow Hill to Stourbridge Junction or Kidderminster. This affects the smaller stations (Langley Green, Old Hill, Lye and Blakedown) as the short turnround times means that stop orders on the following semi-fast Worcester service cannot be issued. The second is to terminate a train short of its intended destination – for instance by turning a Kidderminster service at Stourbridge Junction.

You would hope that the 12 December timetable change would address these issues. However, the only changes are to divert three trains on Monday to Friday and two trains on Saturday to operate to/from Shrub Hill rather than Foregate Street "to improve connections", and to retime trains from Snow Hill to Worcester to depart at xx:39 rather than xx:36 to "reduce congestion on the railway near Kidderminster". All that will do is reduce the run time from Snow Hill to Worcester and back to Snow Hill by 3 minutes. Once again, SLUG will continue to monitor late running services and press for a timetable that works.

Hartlebury gets two new Sunday services from 12 December - at 1008 and 1010 !

However, let's end with some good news – well, almost. From 12 December, Hartlebury will see Sunday services for the first time in 60 years. However, the services that will stop at Hartlebury are at 1008 (0953 Worcester Shrub Hill to Dorridge) and 1010 (0907 Whitlocks End to Great Malvern). It means that someone from Worcester can travel to Hartlebury and then straight back to Worcester! More seriously, it will provide connections from Hartlebury onto London services at Kidderminster and Worcester and to the south west from Worcester for passengers who are not returning the same day. Unfortunately, it does not encourage day trippers. SLUG has written to West Midlands Railway commending the start of Sunday services at Hartlebury but has identified other services later in the day which could stop at Hartlebury. The letter points out that leisure travel is playing a major role in restoring rail passenger numbers, especially on Sundays and that, by adding additional services, day trips to many destinations from Hartlebury, as well as to Hartlebury Castle and Worcestershire County Museum, would be made available. We will let you have news on this when we get it.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Another Station Adopted. Droitwich Spa station has been adopted by Friends of Droitwich Spa Railway Station, a volunteer group set up to improve the appearance of the station. Stourbridge Junction and Stourbridge Town stations have already been adopted by FOSS (Friends of Stourbridge Stations). The Worcestershire Community Rail Partnership (WCRP) is now actively seeking volunteer groups to adopt other stations along the Stourbridge line.

(Source: - WCRP)

Droitwich Spa Station

Dasher Dashed. The funding bid to the "Restore Your Railways Fund" by pre-Metro Operations to prepare a business case for a light rail line from Stourbridge to Brierley Hill has been rejected. PMOL is now looking for other sources of funding including Transport for West Midlands. *(Source: - Department for Transport / PMOL)*

Curzon Street Station

Not as built. It is pleasing to see that the original Birmingham Curzon Street station is being restored to former glory. It will feature as part of the new HS2 station but will not be the main entrance. Structural work could take up to twelve months and there are future plans to use it as a HS2 visitors centre, incorporating facilities for office space, exhibition purposes and catering. *(Source: - Business Live)*

Return to Willenhall. Work has started on the construction of the new station at Willenhall as part of a £54m project to reopen this and Darlaston station. Two trains an hour will serve these stations when they reopen. *(Source: - WMCA)*

Hydrogen Powered. Train builder Alstom and train owner Eversholt Rail have announced plans to design, build, commission and support a fleet of ten three-car hydrogen multiple units (HMUs). These will be based on the Alstom Aventra electric multiple units, similar to the Class 730 units on order by West Midlands Railway for the Cross City line, and will be built by Alstom in Britain. *(Source: - Alstom)*

(Alstom)

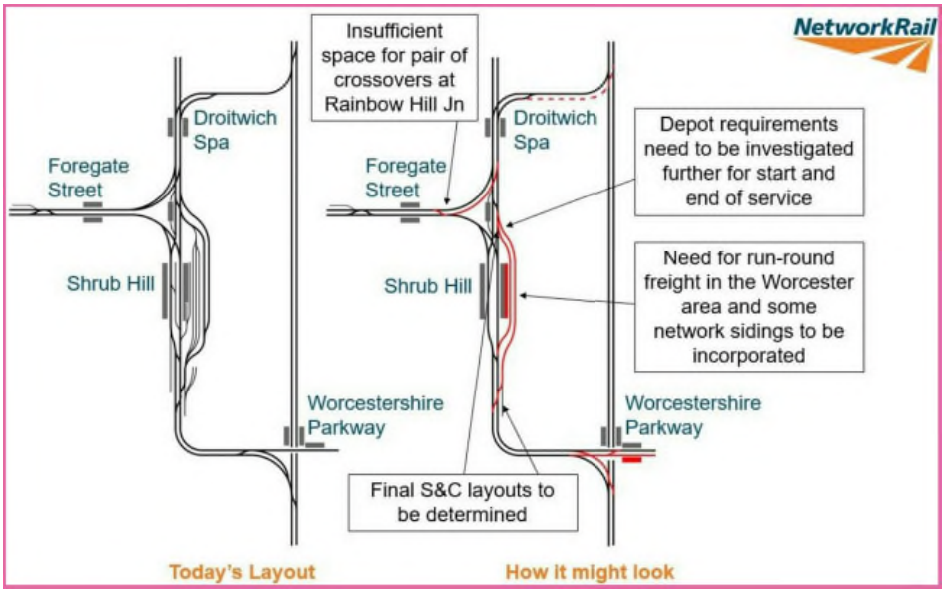
And Finally … An Apology. The editor would like to apologise for the use of the offensive phrase "t***n s*****n" in the last edition of *Platform*. In his defence, the item was cut and pasted from the original article in the *Solihull Observer* and the editor did not notice that the term "railway station" had been corrupted. He has promised that this error will not be repeated in future. *(Source: - Editor)*

GO WEST
by John Warren

With the current doom and gloom surrounding Stourbridge line services, it is good to be able to report proposals that would significantly improve matters, albeit in the longer term.

At our last committee meeting, SLUG was told by the West Midlands Rail Executive that a business case was being produced for the electrification of local diesel routes with the Snow Hill line at the top of the list. However, the antiquity of the rail infrastructure in the Worcester area would mean that electrification would be confined to the line from Stratford-upon-Avon to Kidderminster until improvements were made at the Worcester end.

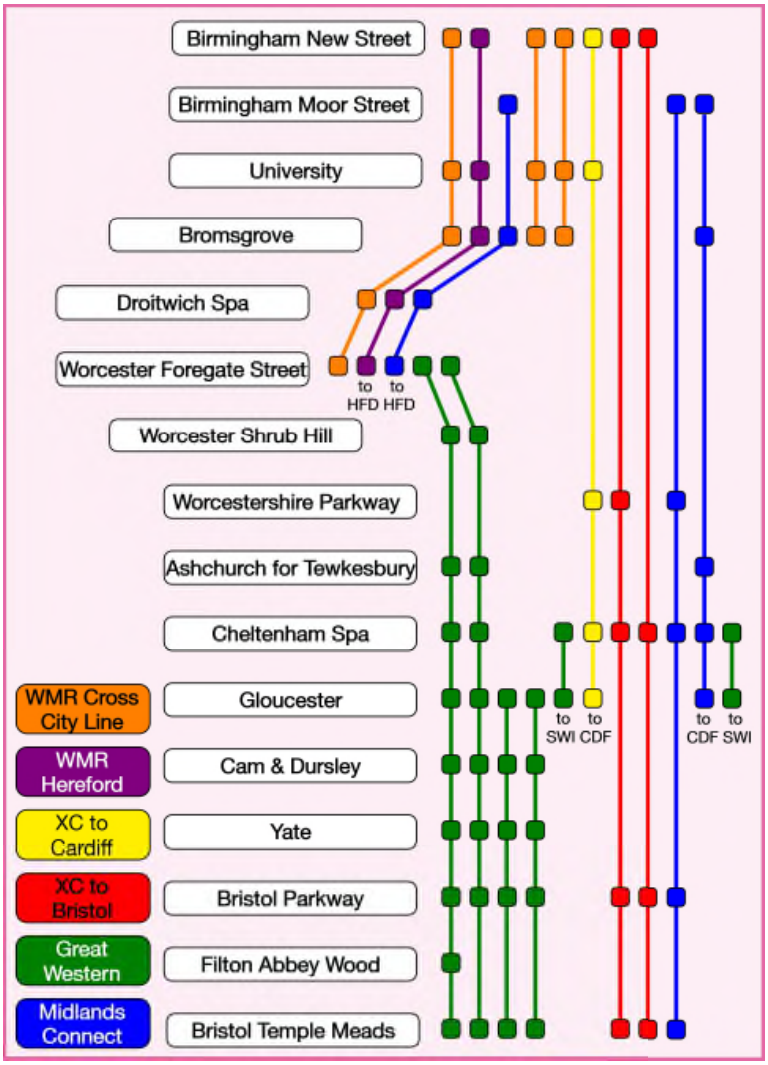
Therefore, the publication of a second document brought good news. This was entitled "Bristol to Birmingham Corridor Strategic Study" and was produced by Network Rail (Wales and Western Region). This document proposes a train service specification (TSS) for services along the route from Birmingham to Bristol via Bromsgrove, including services from Droitwich Spa and Worcester. A pre-requisite of the TSS is the upgrading of the infrastructure along the route. This includes the Worcester area and this is now scheduled to happen between 2024 and 2029. The improvements would see 4 minute headways between Worcester Tunnel Junction and Droitwich Spa and the reinstatement of Rainbow Hill Junction to allow trains from both the Stourbridge line and Worcester Shrub Hill station to access either platform at Foregate Street station. Other proposals include increased platform capacity at Shrub Hill via a third through platform, while the map suggests double track through Worcestershire Parkway with a fourth platform built.



The enhancements would allow three through trains per hour from Birmingham to Bristol with two of these stopping at Worcestershire Parkway. In addition, three trains per hour would run from Birmingham to Foregate Street via Bromsgrove, with one of these proposed to be an extension from Bromsgrove of a Birmingham Cross City service. This would necessitate the electrification of the line and make the extension of the WMRE electrification proposals from Kidderminster to Droitwich Spa a no brainer. In addition, the current two-hourly service from Worcester to Bristol (due to be increased to hourly in May 2022) is proposed to increase to two trains per hour.

How do these proposals affect the Stourbridge line? SLUG has long pressed for improved services to the West Country via Worcester to obviate the need to travel via Birmingham. There are three ways in which this could be achieved with a maximum of one change.

i. Increase the frequency of the service from Worcester to Bristol (and beyond) to greatly improve the current poor connections available at Shrub Hill or Foregate Street.
ii. Extend one Stourbridge line service to Gloucester to provide a single connection to express services at Cheltenham Spa.
iii. Extend one Stourbridge line service through Worcestershire Parkway to provide a single connection to services at that station



While it is hoped that the hourly frequency promised next year for Worcester to Bristol services will improve the situation, there is concern that connections might not be convenient. The strategy study recommendation of two trains per hour, backed up by the promised infrastructure improvements in Worcester, should solve this problem. However, SLUG feels that consideration should be given to extending one of these two services from Foregate Street to Stourbridge Junction - something that would be possible as the infrastructure improvements would allow trains to operate between Shrub Hill and Stourbridge Junction with a reversal at Foregate Street.

While the above would be a great improvement on the current situation, the trains from Foregate Street or Shrub Hill to Bristol would still be slow, all-stations, services with a reversal at Gloucester. Journey times would also be further impacted if the proposed reopening of the stations at Stonehouse Bristol Road and Charfield go ahead. For this reason, option iii could prove to be the preferred solution. At present, Worcestershire Parkway is not a satisfactory interchange station with only the hourly Nottingham to Cardiff service stopping at the low level platforms. However, if the recommendations of the strategic study were implemented, this would be supplemented by the hourly Manchester Piccadilly to Exeter St David's service and a new Birmingham Moor Street to Bristol semi-fast service, thus making Worcestershire Parkway an attractive interchange station.

Two proposals currently on the table could make through services from a Stourbridge line to Worcestershire Parkway a reality. The North Cotswold Line Task Force is proposing two trains per hour from Paddington to Worcester with one extended to Kidderminster. SLUG fully supports this proposal but is pressing for the northern terminus to be Stourbridge Junction. An alternative hourly service is also proposed if plans to reopen the Stratford-upon-Avon to Honeybourne line come to fruition. This would provide the opportunity to extend Stratford-upon-Avon – Snow Hill – Worcester services to Honeybourne and Stratford-upon-Avon to form a circular service.

Of course, these are longer term aspirations. The priority at present is to get a decent service restored on our line and then look at how we can take advantage of the improvements proposed for the southern end of our line. We will keep members informed of any developments.

A QUESTION OF SLUG
by Roger Davis

Thanks to everybody who responded to the questionnaire we enclosed in the last edition of *Platform*. Please be assured that the SLUG committee will take on board the comments you have made. It was pleasing to note that members think that we are doing a good job at a time when the train service leaves a lot to be desired.

A small number of you expressed a wish to be more involved with SLUG activities or to come along to a SLUG committee meeting but did not leave any contact details. If you are interested in either of these, please contact us at the address at the bottom of page 1 of Platform, or send an email to admin@stourbridgelineusergroup.info. We would be pleased to welcome you.

IT'S COMING HOME
by John Warren

In a competition which, like the baseball World Series, is confined to just one corner of the globe, Stourbridge Junction won this year's World Cup of Stations competition organised by the Rail Delivery Group. Having lost narrowly to Glasgow Queen Street in last year's final, the station gained a narrow victory over Glasgow Central this year. That's the equivalent of Lye Town losing narrowly to Celtic and then beating Rangers. The victory was put down to the great staff at the station, the greatest feline superstar in the world, and a superb train service into Birmingham. As Meatloaf once sang, "Two Out Of Three Ain't Bad".

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ - NAME THE TELEVISION COMEDY

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

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