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Platform

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

The first Sunday service at Hartlebury for nearly 60 years stops at the station at 10:08 on Sunday 12 December 2021

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LET'S GO TO THE MATCH
by Roger Davis

I well remember my dad taking me to my first ever Football League match**. Getting to the match was easy as we lived only a ten minute walk from the ground. However, most people living further afield used public transport, including the team and its sole England international. The ground was easily accessible by public transport with 13 city bus services from most parts of Bristol passing the ground, supplemented by another 8 country bus services from as far afield as Gloucester and Swindon, and 8 Football Special bus services to and from those areas not served by regular direct bus services. In addition, the local railway station at Stapleton Road was only ¼ mile from the ground and was served by both local and long distance trains. As the years went by, public transport dwindled and the private car became the principal means of getting to the match, to the chagrin of local residents who couldn't park their own cars.

A line-up of special buses wait for spectators to leave a Bristol Rovers match in the 1960s

The six West Midlands league teams are all served by railway stations – West Bromwich Albion at The Hawthorns, Birmingham City at Bordesley (served when the team is at home), Wolverhampton Wanderers at Wolverhampton, Aston Villa at Aston or Witton, Coventry City at Coventry Arena and Walsall at Bescot Stadium – the last two having moved from grounds that were not conveniently served by rail. Therefore, the train should be promoted as the best way to get to the match.

The opening of the Jewellery Line in 1995 saw many Albion fans switch from car to train. The service was frequent and reliable. Unfortunately, the notorious cancellations and late running of services to and from The Hawthorns has forced a major rethink and fans are returning to their cars in droves. One friend who has resorted to this told me that he experienced having to wait until after 6 pm for a return train to Stourbridge Junction after a match that finished before 5 pm. Another attempt to use a train for a 7.45 Tuesday evening kick off resulted in a wait until nearly 11 pm for his train home. Another friend told me that the standard of information when trains were delayed or cancelled is appalling. On the evening of Storm Arwen, he asked somebody in a Hi-Viz jacket the time of the next train to Smethwick Galton Bridge and was told that "this is Smethwick Galton Bridge". On 11 December. West Midlands Railway issued the following advice to fans travelling to The Hawthorns - find an alternative means of travel and DON'T use the train!

It is not just the Hawthorns where fans have become disillusioned with the train service. Bordesley is on the same line and suffers the same problems. Coventry Arena is on the NUCKLE (Nuneaton - Coventry - Leamington) line. At the start of the season, 35 of the 62 Saturday services were operated by replacement buses, and the other 27 were subject to cancellations and delays – for example, Saturday 27 November saw 13 of the 27 services cancelled. From 27 December for 2 months, all train services were cancelled and replaced by buses due to staff shortages.

On the plus side, West Midlands Railway increased the number of stopping trains at Bescot Stadium from 2 to 3 per hour on Saturdays from December. It also tries to provide extra services to and from The Hawthorns for evening matches, but this is currently achieved by cancelling trains from other parts of the line (e.g. Kidderminster).

Once rail passengers return to their cars, they are difficult to get back. People realise that, due to the current climate change crisis and global warming, public transport is the best option. However, a lack of confidence in the train service will prevent them from doing so. Perhaps an incentive is needed to get football fans back onto public transport. When it moved into the Amex Stadium, Brighton and Hove Albion took steps to ensure that most supporters reached the ground by public transport. The ground is close to Falmer railway station with a frequent service, and regular bus services stop outside the ground. However, the match ticket price includes travel by bus or train from an area ranging from Worthing to Eastbourne. Special bus services are also provided from two off-site park and ride facilities, while the club has its own Seagulls Travel providing services from most parts of the county. If West Midlands supporters fail to return to the trains, should the local clubs talk to Transport for West Midlands to see if similar offers can be provided in this area? If nothing is done, and trust in the train service fails to improve, the areas around our football grounds will get more clogged up with traffic. If that happened, and Albion played AIK Stockholm in a friendly, we may see Greta Thunberg organising a sit down protest in Birmingham Road.

Falmer Station and the Amex Stadium

***Incidentally, that first match was on 8 March 1958. The result was Bristol Rovers 3 Liverpool 1. If that happened today, wise men would be searching the eastern sky for a bright star!*

PUBLIC MEETING AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

After two years of disruption due to Covid, the Stourbridge Line User Group Public Meeting and Annual General Meeting will take place face to face at the Refreshment Room, Kidderminster Town (SVR) Railway Station on Tuesday 10 May 2022 at 7.30 p.m.

Kidderminster Town station

The Public Meeting is open to members and non-members. There will be presentations from Train Operating Companies and local transport authorities.

Members are reminded that their membership renewal is due and a membership form has been included with this mailing. If you are attending the meeting, you can bring your membership form with you and pay on the night.

REHEARSING REVERSING
by Rob Hebron

As I watched televised coverage of the Dartmoor Line re-opening on 20 November 2021, I was heartened by what had been achieved by rail campaigners. The route from Okehampton to Exeter St David's has not seen scheduled daily passenger trains for nearly fifty years. The restoration of services has been enabled by the government's "Reversing Beeching" programme. If this was the taster for what is to come, I would like to think that in theatrical terms, this re-opening was a rehearsal for forthcoming productions in the West Midlands.

Okehampton Station on the official reopening day (GWR)

There is a consensus amongst politicians that Doctor Beeching's knife removed too much flesh from the body of the British Railways network. However, it has always been recognised that some surgery was needed. Even Jimmy Knapp, a former General Secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen acknowledged this in a forward to "Atlas of Railway Station Closures." Therefore, reversing all of the Beeching cuts would not result in a modern, efficient railway.

The Doctor has unfairly been linked to closures carried out well before his tenure at British Railways and so the term "Reversing Beeching" is inaccurate as it suggests that routes which were lost in the early twentieth century would be excluded. Each nominated re-opening which is submitted for inclusion in the scheme must be judged on its individual merit. Without a provable business case, many aspirations to restore passenger railway lines will be doomed to failure.

The Stourbridge Line User Group has long campaigned for the restoration of the railway from Stourbridge Junction to Dudley and beyond. There is one major obstacle – Midland Metro Line 2 is soon to occupy the trackbed north of Brierley Hill. For this reason, West Midlands Combined Authority did not submit a bid for funding of a heavy rail alternative. However, Pre-Metro Operations Limited *did* apply for "Reverse Beeching" capital to operate the Stourbridge to Brierley Hill section of line with a bespoke light railcar. This would entail the route being reclassified as a Very Light Railway (VLR). SLUG has reservations about a VLR running parallel with a heavy rail line which still carries freight. The Group did not throw its weight behind the Pre-Metro bid and neither did WMCA despite local MPs supporting the so-called "Stourbridge Dasher" initiative.

SLUG is in talks with the Authority to ascertain how the missing link from Stourbridge Junction to Brierley Hill can be restored but "Reversing Beeching" may not be the appropriate means of achieving this. Thankfully, much of the engineering that is needed for restoring a Stourbridge to Dudley service is already underway and is progressing within the Midland Metro works.

Structures such as the Parkhead Viaduct are being repaired and maintained to heavy rail standards and a bi-modal system may be possible at some future date. Even so, a single-track passenger / freight line to Dudley might be the most optimistic outcome. Single line working has inherent drawbacks, bottlenecks and poor frequency. Metro trams score higher every time!

Parkhead Viaduct totally encased on 27 February 2022

It should be noted that the Dartmoor Line re-opening is not all it seems: The timetable will initially be only every two hours albeit a seven-day operation. Trains call at only one of the intermediate stations (Crediton) for connections to the Tarka line for Barnstaple. Yeoford and Newton St Cyres are still open but are used by Tarka line trains only. Sadly, stations such as Sampford Courtenay, North Tawton and Bow stations remain closed. If they are now private residencies, why should the occupants be evicted?

Clearly, the present-day Dartmoor Line needs to meet the needs of modern society and a brand-new station is proposed, namely Okehampton Parkway. This would be the rail head for commuters living in the deprived-of-station areas. This does not sit well with the recent COP 26 climate talks, as it would actively encourage motoring as part of the full journey to and from Exeter.

Are we witnessing a reversal of our railways decline? There was certainly a "Golden Age of Railways" but the term is subjective. When the United Kingdom was covered in a multitude of railway lines, we tended to overlook the fact that some were lightly used and many rural stations might have greeted only a couple of trains per day. Some stations were miles away from their named communities and totally inconvenient. In contrast, some towns and cities were served by rival railway companies and gained two or three stations but no integration of services. A nationalised railway had to shed duplication and wastage. Beeching was harsh but he galvanised the opposition and created the conditions for Heritage Railways.

We must be thankful too, for councillors who had the foresight to protect railway assets. West Midlands Passenger Transport Executive had a vision to restore what is now termed "The Jewellery Line." A replacement Birmingham Snow Hill is now a principal station on the Stourbridge Line and what was only a basic halt (The Hawthorns) is now an interchange for Metro trams. In fact, nearly every former GWR station has either a train or tram service.

It has to be said that every railway line re-opening from the 1980s until present has been a resounding success. Patronage has invariably exceeded expectations whether it is a national or local initiative. There is no reason to suppose that Metro Line 2 will not follow the trend. It really must succeed because it is the rehearsal for the reversal of a closure which (in hindsight) should never have taken place.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Making Tracks... The first section of rail has been installed in Dudley. A total of 300 metres of tramway is now in place, after it was successfully delivered to the Castle Hill site, late in January. The press release issued by WMCA stated that "the laying of this section marks a significant step forward for the Metro extension project. The proposed network will become the biggest of its kind in the UK. It will facilitate regeneration in and around Dudley and could pave the way for city status". *(Source: - WMCA)*

..To A New Interchange. No sooner have tracks been laid in Castle Hill than a station is being prepared further up the line. A £24 million Dudley transport interchange has taken another step forward with the submission of a final detailed planning application. Trams are set to enter a new eco-friendly interchange, fit for tram and bus passengers, which will be built on the site of the existing 1980s bus station. Outline planning permission was granted by Dudley Council in 2019. Full planning consent will be followed by the appointment of a contractor later this Spring to carry out the construction. *(Source : -WMCA)*

Reimagining Transport. The County Transport Authority has published its latest strategy document, WMLPT5, dubbed "Reimagining Transport in the West Midlands". It is a bold attempt at forecasting passenger demand, post-Covid and examining the multi-modal transport provision that is required for the future. There is much within the document to commend but WMLTP5 relies heavily on behavioural changes. Part-walking and part-cycling are the new focuses. *(Source: - WMCA)*

Going Purple. To celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee, West Country Pacific 34027 *Taw Valley* will temporarily operate on the Severn Valley line in a special purple livery and will be renamed *Elizabeth II* while operating in that livery. *(Source: - SVR)*

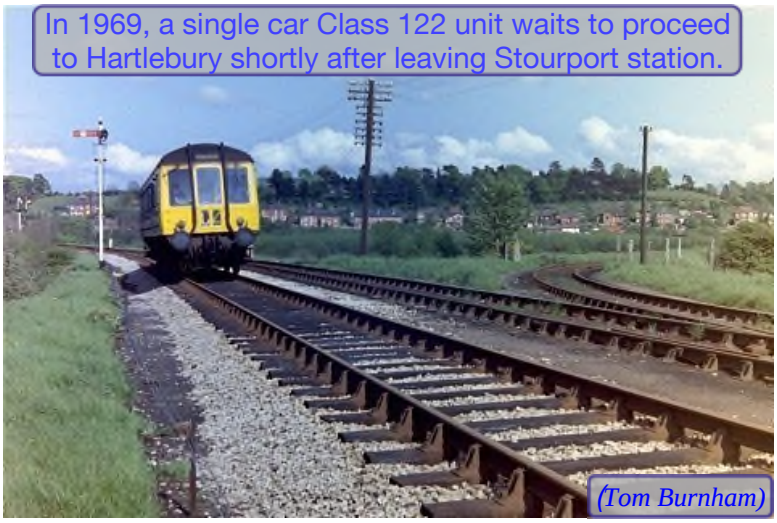
Bridging The Gap. Network Rail is currently replacing the footbridge linking Hoo Road and Chester Road South to the south of the two Kidderminster stations with works due for completion by the end of March to enable the Severn Valley Railway to reopen on 2 April. The proposed design will be a single span constructed in 'weathering steel' with new abutments at each end. All traces of the existing bridge will disappear, including the central brick pier. *(Source: - SVR)*

CHANGE AT HARTLEBURY FOR STOURPORT
by Andy Cope

Your User Group has been actively championing improved services from Hartlebury to both Worcester and Birmingham for some time. Recently the first Sunday services since before the Beeching Cuts have stopped at Hartlebury although at the moment these are timed not to be very useful for day trips. Thus, SLUG is continuing to champion for improvement. Of course, Hartlebury station is quite handy as a "Park and Ride" facility for the nearby town of Stourport-on-Severn for Birmingham or Worcester commuters, Stourport having lost its direct rail service in 1970.

(Steam Railway Museum)

1970 was quite late in the day for Stourport to lose its train service as most Worcestershire branch lines had closed by 1965. The service had struggled on after the closure of the rest of the Severn Valley line and the Tenbury branch in the early 1960s. So, what was on offer in the late 1960s if you wanted to use the remaining train service from Stourport station? I thought it would be interesting to see what the situation was in the late 1960s and maybe get some clues as to why the direct service to the town petered out.


In 1969, a single car Class 122 unit waits to proceed to Hartlebury shortly after leaving Stourport station.

(Tom Burnham)

I am not one to believe in conspiracy theories but, when the 1969 service from the town of Stourport is examined, it does seem to be a service provided grudgingly for the convenience of railway operation. With a couple of exceptions, typical journey times from Stourport to Birmingham took about 1½ hours, often with an extended wait for a connecting train usually at Hartlebury. Most services were covered by single car class 122 diesel railcars with a few services covered by 3 car suburban class 116 diesel units. Kidderminster itself was much better served from Stourport by the regular Midland Red bus service than by rail and I can't imagine that anyone travelling on a shopping trip to Kidderminster would have considered rail an option. However, although Worcester and Birmingham was in theory a reasonable commute, the reality was quite different.

Trains to Hartlebury in the morning were at 0642 (single car, 24 minute wait at Hartlebury, arriving Birmingham at 0816), 0745 (single car, 9 minutes at Hartlebury, arriving Birmingham at 0851) and 0845 (single car, with no onwards connections anywhere from Hartlebury). Travelling via Bewdley the options were 0706 (single car, change at Bewdley with 12 minute wait, arriving Birmingham at 0841), 0725 (single car, change at Kidderminster with 8 minute wait, arriving Birmingham at 0850).

On Saturdays, an additional 3 car train ran from Kidderminster, connecting out of the 1205 from Birmingham, arriving Stourport at 1317. This then formed a 1345 back to Kidderminster via Bewdley giving a connection from Kidderminster arriving at Birmingham at 1453. Of course, there was no Sunday service.

Coming back from Birmingham the situation was dire with the 1505 from Birmingham requiring a 31 minute wait at Hartlebury for a Stourport arrival at 1648. The only other train was the 1605 off Birmingham with again a 30 minute wait at Hartlebury arriving Stourport at 1725. There were no possible journeys via Kidderminster or Bewdley in the evening despite two direct Birmingham to Bewdley services at 1712 and 1816.

Worcester was slightly better served but would have found it difficult to compete with Midland Red's direct Stourport to Worcester service. Train services at 0642 and 0745 to Hartlebury connected with services to Worcester arriving at 0732 and 0822 respectively, while return afternoon services at 1612 and 1625 connected at Hartlebury with services that arrived at Stourport at 1648 and 1725 respectively.

The 1345 (SO) Stourport to Kidderminster service waits at Stourport station in 1969

(Tom Burnham)

The same service, operated by a 3-car Class 116 unit, is seen from the other end of the platform

(Tom Burnham)

So, it is no wonder that the Stourport service was found to be uneconomic. Impossible to reach Birmingham in under an hour and a return service that was useless for commuters. It doesn't seem possible that Stourport station will ever reopen but hopefully the revival of Sunday trains from Hartlebury, albeit at the moment not anywhere near what we would wish for, plus better car parking at Hartlebury which SLUG is lobbying for, may see an increase in rail usage from Stourport residents using Hartlebury as a railhead. The service has significantly increased from Hartlebury in recent years and the latest addition of a Sunday service is a step in the right direction. Let's hope these additions prove fruitful and don't wither on the vine like previous Stourport services.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ ANSWERS

The answers to the Christmas Photo Quiz were as follows :-

1 - W1A	2 - Yes Minister	3 - Going Straight
4 - Citizen Smith	5 - Reggie	6 - The Goodies
7 - To The Manor Born	8 - Only Fools and Horses	9 - Hancock
10 - Ripping Yarns	11 - This Country	12 - Three Up, Two Down
13 - Waiting For God	14 - Outside Edge	15 - Butterflies
16 - Get Smart	17 - Inside No. 9	18 - Sykes