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STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Platform

When travelling by train through Kidderminster, look out for locomotive *34027 Taw Valley* in purple livery and running as locomotive *70 Elizabeth II* to celebrate the Queen's Platinum Jubilee

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A MATTER OF GIVE AND TAKE
by Roger Davis

The new timetable which came into force on Sunday 15 May shows only very minor changes on Mondays to Saturdays. However, Sunday services have seen two significant changes, one of them positive and the other negative.

The plus point is that Hartlebury has gained a two-hourly Sunday service. On 12 December 2021, a token Sunday service was introduced from Hartlebury station by West Midlands Railway. Investigations by SLUG has shown that these services were the first timetabled services to call at Hartlebury on a Sunday since 22:05 on 6 September 1964.

Unfortunately, the token service consisted of just two departures – at 10:08 to Dorridge and at 10:10 to Great Malvern – and was not publicised at all by the operator. It meant that passengers to or from Hartlebury could travel in one direction but could not make a return journey on the same day. In fact, a passenger arriving at Hartlebury from Worcester at 10:08 could not even travel back towards Worcester on the 10:10 service as the level crossing gates remained closed until the latter train departed.

SLUG immediately contacted West Midlands Railway with suggestions on improvements to this token service and West Midlands Railway has now responded by introducing a whole day Sunday service. This is our second success concerning Hartlebury services as it was our campaign which sparked the introduction of off-peak Monday to Saturday services at Hartlebury in 2013.

Malvern Link Station is no longer served by direct Stourbridge line services

Unfortunately, what was given in one hand has been taken away in the other. The introduction of emergency timetables due to Covid saw all through Monday to Saturday services to and from Great Malvern withdrawn. West Midlands Railway has now withdrawn the six northbound and three southbound through Sunday services, meaning that no Stourbridge line service operates further south than Worcester. This means that journey times between the Stourbridge line and Great Malvern has increased by an average of 21 minutes, with one journey now taking 42 minutes longer than before.

The rail industry has stated that leisure travel is the key to the recovery of passenger numbers. Forcing leisure travellers to change trains when a through journey was previously available does nothing to encourage rail travel.

The 1053 service from Foregate Street has been truncated to run to Warminster rather than Brighton

The problem lies with the pen pushers at DafT who have promoted the rationalisation of rail services since they started micromanaging the rail network in 2006. Since then, many through journeys have been removed as DafT restricted rail franchises to their own strict boundaries. This strategy was also imposed on Worcester passengers in May when the through trains to and from Brighton were cut back to run to Warminster and back from Salisbury. Thus, three trains are now needed to complete a journey that previously could be achieved directly. In addition, the promised increase in services between Worcester and Gloucester from every two hours to every hour failed to materialise, meaning that connections from the Stourbridge line to the South West via Worcester are still as abysmal as before.

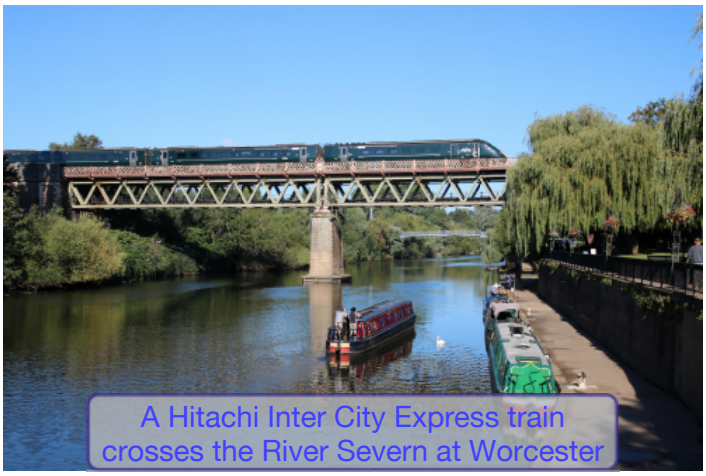
When the Jewellery Line opened in 1995, regular direct services ran as far as Hereford in the west and Stratford-upon-Avon or Leamington Spa in the east. Nowadays, only Stratford-upon-Avon survives as a direct destination. The hourly through service to the tourist towns of Warwick and Leamington Spa was cut back to Dorridge, and Chiltern Railways replaced it with a two hourly local service between Moor Street and Leamington Spa. This service requires one unit, the same as an extension of one train per hour from Dorridge to Leamington Spa. The advantages are obvious - through off-peak services from the Stourbridge line to Warwick and Leamington Spa, plus double the number of trains serving the stations at Lapworth and Hatton.

Evesham station - through services to Kidderminster are opposed by GWR

At the other end of the line, Worcestershire County Council is pressing for through trains between Kidderminster and London Paddington via Worcester. However, such a move is opposed by Great Western Railway which has shown that it has no stomach for expanding outside of its current boundaries.

Hopefully, Grant Shapps (or, preferably, his successor) will get his finger out and implement Keith Williams' report to form Great British Railways. If this organisation does turn out to be a passenger facing company as promised, it is hoped that direct train services will be reintroduced to give passengers the journeys that they want. SLUG will continue to press for better direct journey opportunities from the Stourbridge line to destinations such as Great Malvern, Leamington Spa, London Paddington and Gloucester.

A CRACKING SERVICE
by John Warren


A Hitachi Inter City Express train crosses the River Severn at Worcester

In the past year, rail travel has been disrupted not only by Covid but by train set failures. On 8 May 2021, the national media made hay when it was announced that the new Inter City Express trains, ordered by the Department for Transport from Hitachi to replace the venerable High Speed Trains on GWR and LNER services, had to be withdrawn for emergency repairs when cracks were found above the wheels. While these repairs enabled the trains to be reintroduced into service after a short suspension of long distance services, it has since been announced that permanent repairs will be necessary which will take about six years to complete.

However, it transpired that the cracking issue was not confined to Hitachi units. Northern Rail revealed that cracks caused by a weld failure saw 22 Class 195 units built by CAF temporarily removed from service from 3 April 2021. Given that these units are the same model as the Class 196 units ordered by West Midlands Railway for use on Birmingham to Hereford/Shrewsbury services, any repeat of the problem with the Class 196 units would have a knock-on effect for Stourbridge line services as it would mean that the Class 172s would have to be distributed more thinly.

In fact, the problem of cracks on CAF built vehicles has come a lot closer to home with the complete suspension of West Midland Metro services on three occasions – from 11 to 14 June 2021, from 13 November to 15 December 2021, and from 19 March 2022 to 8 June 2022. This has affected Stourbridge line passengers wanting to change onto the Metro at The Hawthorns or Jewellery Quarter.

A West Midlands Railway Class 170 unit already repainted into EMR livery

However, there have been problems on the Stourbridge line. In May 2021, West Midlands Railway announced that some Stourbridge line services would be short-formed due to issues with the Class 172 units. Unfortunately, this problem has not gone away. Since December 2021, an average of 20 of the 78 weekly diagrams have been short formed while an average of 4 services per week were cancelled due to problems with the trains. Of course, not all short forms are currently due to unit failures. The delay in putting the new CAF Class 196s into service, coupled with the enforced transfer to East Midlands Railway of some of the Class 170 units they are due to replace, has meant that Snow Hill lines Class 172 units are currently being deployed regularly on Birmingham New Street to Hereford services.

However, the biggest shock came on 30 March when the two ultra-reliable Class 139 railcars used on the Stourbridge Town branch were withdrawn because of major engine failures. It meant that bus replacement services were in operation for over 3 weeks until 22 April when the rail service was restored. The suspension of the service was found to be due to a delay in obtaining and fitting replacement refurbished Ford engines which had to be brought in from the United States.

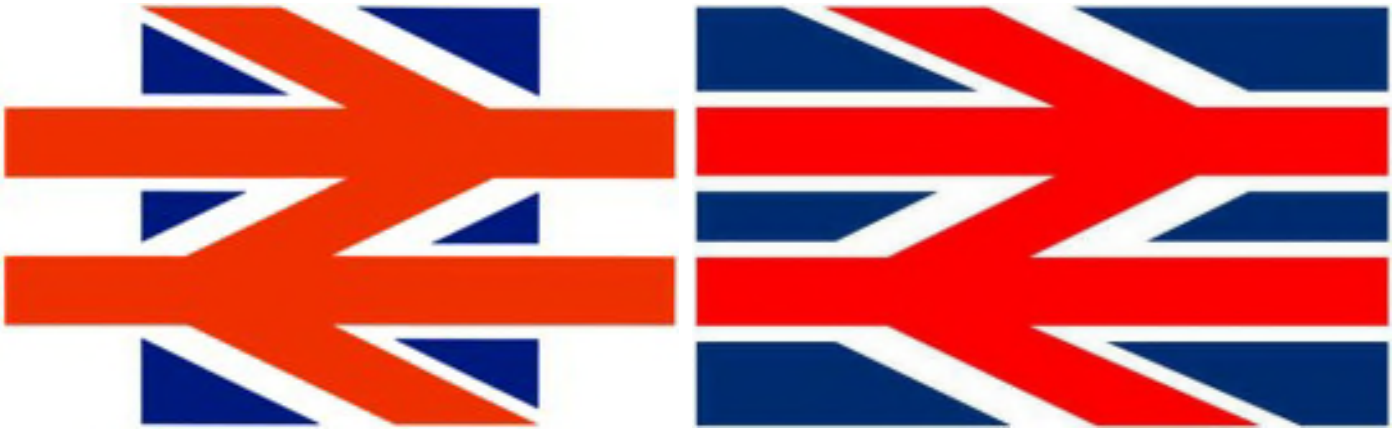
An ex-LMS Pacific on a Paddington to Birkenhead service at Snow Hill

(Colour Rail)

It is easy for somebody of my age to claim that such issues never happened in my day. Unfortunately, they did. For instance, in January 1956, following two serious failures of bogies, the entire "King" Class, which operated the majority of express services on the Paddington to Wolverhampton and Plymouth lines, was withdrawn for significant repairs to the bogies. However, the difference in those days was that the other regions of British Railways had crack (no pun intended) express locomotives spare, and these were loaned to the Western Region for a month to keep services running. Unfortunately, spare trains are almost impossible to source these days. This would mean that, if there ever was a major issue that affected the entire Class 172 fleet, Stourbridge line services would be seriously affected. Surely, a contingency plan should be produced to address this issue.

FLYING THE FLAG
by Roger Davis

As the previous edition of Platform went to press, the proposed new logo for Great British Railways was announced and two variations revealed.



As you can see, it is basically the old British Rail logo on a Union Jack background. It has been criticised by many people as being too nationalistic, and one has to wonder whether it would be better suited to the BNP than GBR. It also begs the questions of whether the intention is for station public address systems to continually broadcast "Jerusalem" or "Pomp and Circumstance March Number 1".

What is wrong with using the original BR logo? It is iconic and is still used to indicate a railway station. It isn't broken, so why fix it?

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Tyseley Blockade. The line between Snow Hill and Tyseley will be closed for major engineering works from 20 to 23 June which will make it easier for trains to get into and out of the maintenance depot at Tyseley. During the four days of closure, Stourbridge line services will run as normal but will terminate at Snow Hill. An hourly shuttle service will run from Acocks Green to Stratford-upon-Avon and from Spring Road to Stratford-upon-Avon. Chiltern services will run between Dorridge and London Marylebone. Replacement bus services will run from Snow Hill to connect with these services. *(Source: - West Midlands Railway)*

Pulling out the Stops. The staging of the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham has provided a logistical challenge to enable easy access to the events which are scattered around the suburbs of the city. The Games run from 28 July to 8 August with trains, trams and buses expected to be extremely busy during this period. To cater for visitors to the Sandwell Aquatics Centre, Shrewsbury bound trains will call at Smethwick Galton Bridge rather than Sandwell and Dudley, thus indirectly benefitting Stourbridge line passengers. *(Source: - West Midlands Railway)*

Station Reopened. Perry Barr station, which will serve the Alexandra Stadium during the Commonwealth Games, reopened to passenger services on 29 May after being closed for a complete rebuilding. The total cost of the project was £30.9 million which included the redevelopment of the adjacent bus interchange. Members of the public will be welcome to visit the station for an official opening and family fun day later in the summer. *(Source: - WMCA)*

Perry Barr Station
(Birmingham Mail)

Everybody Out. Members of the RMT union have voted for a national rail strike by a majority of 89% to 11%. Amongst the grievances are job cuts and reduced services. In addition, Network Rail plans to shed 2,500 maintenance jobs as it tries to make £2bn of savings over the next two years. Understandably, staff and customers feel they should not bear the consequences of the pandemic which has severely reduced patronage. Equally, RMT union does not want safety to be compromised. As we go to press, strike action is scheduled for 21, 23 and 25 June. *(Source: - BBC News)*

Hazelwell, Stirchley or Pineapple Road ?
(WMCA)

What's In A Name? Local residents have been invited to take part in a public consultation to name two of the new stations on the Camp Hill line. The options for the first station are Moseley or Moseley Village, while the second station has three options, namely Hazelwell, Stirchley or Pineapple Road. *(Source: - WMCA)*

A LACK OF RESILIENCE
by Roger Davis

As cancellations due to train crew shortages continue to decrease, the Snow Hill line service is showing signs of improvement. However, there is frustration amongst passengers that the punctuality of many services continues to be a concern. While part of the problem comes from the unreliability of the Class 172 units used on the line, with breakdowns having a knock on effect on following services, the major problem stems from the very short turn round times at destination stations. The following table compares turn round times in the current Monday to Saturday daytime timetable with those in the pre-Covid timetable.

WAIT TIMES (mins)	Pre-Covid Timetable	Current Timetable
Worcester Foregate Street / Shrub Hill	7	3 or 4
Kidderminster	15	8 or 9
Stourbridge Junction	6	Not applicable
Dorridge	5	3
Whitlocks End	10 or 12	10
Stratford-upon-Avon (via Dorridge)	22	22
Stratford-upon-Avon (via Shirley)	3	3

At all destination stations except Kidderminster, trains arrive and depart from the same platform. At Kidderminster, terminating trains have to run empty from platform 2 into a siding south of the station and then come back to pick up passengers on platform 1.

Old Hill is one of the stations to suffer when late running trains skip scheduled stops

The tightness of the schedule means that, once a train is late, it is very difficult to get back on time. There are two methods which West Midlands Railways regularly use to achieve this. The first is to skip scheduled station stops. On the Stourbridge line, this has been achieved on 64 occasions since December by running a service non-stop between Snow Hill and Stourbridge Junction. If this occurs on an all-stations service, it means a gap of an hour between services at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye. The second method is to turn a train short of its intended destination. As an example, since December, 86 services to or from Kidderminster have operated to or from Stourbridge Junction because they were running late.

The obvious solution would have been to allow more slack in the timetable. However, this would have created a Catch-22 situation as longer turn round times would have required extra train sets in service which in turn would have meant more train crews to operate the services. With the train crew situation as it was, this would have led to even more cancellations on an already bad service.

At present, the Monday to Saturday daytime service consists of four trains per hour in each direction. Two of the four services operate semi-fast over the Stourbridge line between Worcester (Shrub Hill or Foregate Street) and either Dorridge or Whitlocks End. The other two services are all-stations services between Kidderminster and Stratford-upon-Avon (one via Shirley and one via Dorridge). It would be reasonable to expect that the semi-fast and slow services would have approximately the same number of late running services. However, it turns out that the slow services between Kidderminster and Stratford are more prone to late running than the Worcester services. Since December, 429 semi-fast services and 590 all-stations services have been at least 5 minutes late at Snow Hill.

An hourly service from the Stourbridge line to Worcester Shrub Hill is proposed from May 2023

West Midlands Rail Executive is currently working on a new Snow Hill lines timetable in conjunction with Network Rail, West Midlands Railway and Chiltern Railways. It has been said that the new timetable will be far more resilient that the current one. However, it will not be introduced until May 2023. Early indications are that the two Chiltern Railways services per hour to London Marylebone, which currently run at 20 and 40 minute intervals, will be retimed to operate every 30 minutes. In addition, the two trains per hour to Worcester will be standardised. The first will run directly from Droitwich Spa to Foregate Street while the second will operate to Foregate Street via Shrub Hill. This will mean a clockface half-hourly service to Foregate Street and an hourly service to Shrub Hill which will be a big improvement on the current "guess which station this train is going to" situation.

SLUG will press for updates from WMRE as the new timetable is developed and make it clear that this timetable must be more resilient. Anything less will be unacceptable. We will pass on any information we receive on the proposed changes.

A CHANGE OF LEADERSHIP
by John Warren

West Midlands Trains has a new Managing Director. He is Ian McConnell who has moved from ScotRail. Ian takes over from Julian Edwards, who is stepping back from the role due to a serious illness within his family.

Brenda Lawrence (right) at the start of work on the new Cradley Heath Interchange

In addition, the final three senior managers who moved from London Midland to West Midlands Trains have left the company. One of these is Brenda Lawrence who had been SLUG's main contact since London Midland days and who had given presentations at SLUG's public meetings for many years. We wish Brenda all the best for the future.