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STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Platform

Through services to Birmingham International, Holyhead, Pwllheli and Aberystwyth will not serve Smethwick Galton Bridge from December

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ALL CHANGE AT SMETHWICK GALTON BRIDGE
by Roger Davis

At a meeting with the West Midlands Rail Executive (WMRE) last November, SLUG was informed that a completely revised timetable was being prepared for West Coast services from Euston, to be implemented in December 2022. This included services between Birmingham New Street and Wolverhampton with a proposal to remove the stop at Smethwick Galton Bridge on Transport for Wales services between Birmingham International and West/North Wales. However, SLUG was told that a public consultation would take place over the New Year period. A few weeks later, the public consultation was cancelled, leading us to assume that the proposed changes would no longer take place in December 2022.

Through trains to Stafford, Crewe and Liverpool Lime Street will be withdrawn in 2024

Thus, it came as a nasty shock in late June when the timetable changes were published as a fait accompli. Even worse was the news that, as well as the Transport for Wales service no longer stopping at Galton Bridge, it is proposed to move the stop on the Birmingham to Liverpool service from Galton Bridge to Dudley Port from 2024 when the West Midlands Metro service opens to Dudley. Such a move renders Galton Bridge impotent as an interchange station with just two Wolverhampton to Walsall local trains and one slow train to Shrewsbury per hour remaining from 2024, although it is possible that a second slow train to Shrewsbury could be reinstated.

At a meeting with WMRE in early August, SLUG expressed its concerns about the new timetable and made the following points: -

- Sandwell & Dudley would have two trains every hour to Birmingham International while Smethwick Galton Bridge would have none.
- The removal of through trains from Galton Bridge to Aberystwyth, Pwllheli, Holyhead, Liverpool Lime Street and Birmingham International would entail a second change at either Wolverhampton or New Street with an inconvenient change of platform necessary in both cases.
- The loss of through connections from Smethwick Galton Bridge affects not only Stourbridge line passengers but also those on the Solihull and Stratford lines who use Galton Bridge as a single interchange to avoid having to walk across Birmingham City Centre.
- While connections to Telford and Shrewsbury from Galton Bridge would be maintained, journey times would increase by 12 minutes to Telford and by 15 minutes to Shrewsbury.
- Extra stops at Dudley Port should only be provided when the line to Brierley Hill is open as the parallel bus service (74) is a high frequency route.

WMRE is sympathetic to SLUG's case for a through service to Birmingham International and had suggested during the timetable preparation stage that one of the two local services from Wolverhampton be diverted to serve Birmingham International. This was rejected by West Midlands Railway who wanted to keep the timetable simple, thus sacrificing passenger needs for operational convenience.

Nothing can be done to reverse the changes in December as the timetable is now set in stone. However, SLUG will continue to canvass both the WMRE and West Midlands Railway for a meaningful connecting service to be provided at Smethwick Galton Bridge in a future timetable change.

The second part of our meeting with WMRE was to discuss the proposed changes to the Stourbridge line timetable from May 2023. The first point was that a return to 6 trains per hour from Stourbridge Junction would not be happening at this time as the Department for Transport would not sanction any increase in service. However, WMRE acknowledged that the current timetable was very unreliable due to the inadequate turnround times at destination stations (especially Kidderminster), and this will be rectified by greatly increasing turnround times in the new timetable.

The Monday to Saturday timetable would see the following changes: -

- Two trains per hour to Worcester Foregate Street calling at all stations except Hagley and Blakedown, with one train operating directly from Droitwich Spa to Foregate Street and the other operating via Shrub Hill.
- Two trains per hour to Kidderminster calling at all stations except Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye.
- No through service from Hagley to Worcester, although SLUG has proposed a minor change that will provide Hagley with one train per hour to/from Worcester.

Worcester Shrub Hill will get a clockface hourly service from the Stourbridge line next May

However, no major changes were proposed on Sundays, which means that, while Stourbridge Junction and Worcester have service levels reduced by ½ on Sundays, Kidderminster's service is reduced by ¾. SLUG research has also shown that connection times at Worcester with services towards Hereford, Paddington and Bristol are poor and need to be addressed. It also shows that the removal of through services to Great Malvern has been done with no decrease in the number of diagrams. All that happens is that the trains run out of service to Henwick Siding and back rather than in service to Great Malvern and back. SLUG has since emailed its research to WMRE. We believe that a better, more resilient, timetable is required on Sundays as well as the rest of the week. The Stourbridge line is not a stand-alone railway but connects at Worcester with GWR services to London and Bristol, and at Droitwich Spa with services to Hereford. The May 2023 timetable needs to take this into consideration when it is finalised.

NEVER ON SATURDAY
by John Warren

It is impossible to open a railway magazine these days without reading that rail professionals are seeing passenger levels at or above pre-Covid levels on leisure services, while business levels remain stagnant. I witnessed this effect on Monday 8 August when a CrossCountry service from Edinburgh to Plymouth, which was made up of seven carriages, was full and standing from Birmingham to Exeter. For the majority of people with a full-time job, leisure travel equates to weekend travel, as normal working hours are still approximately 8.30 am to 5 pm despite a far greater percentage of these hours being undertaken from home as the result of Covid.

Not the 1980s but 2022 as leisure passengers are shoehorned aboard a train at Bristol Temple Meads

Given that no effort seems to be taking place to bring Sunday services up to standard, reportedly due to an edict from the Department for Transport under the leadership of the Treasury, most leisure travel for those in a job takes place on a Saturday. For Stourbridge line passengers, leisure destinations such as Birmingham, Stratford-upon-Avon and Worcester can be reached by a direct train, while a single change at Moor Street , Droitwich Spa or Worcester brings Warwick, Leamington Spa, the Cotswolds, the Malverns and Hereford into easy reach.

This sounds very appealing until you realise that there has been one obstacle – West Midlands Railway! Without being too critical, the service provided on a Saturday afternoon and evening in July and August can best be described as appalling. During this period, a decent service in the morning and early afternoon was followed by carnage. Cancellation totals produced by SLUG has shown that, for four of the seven Saturdays up to 20 August, the number of services either fully or partially cancelled after 1400 hrs were 36, 32, 32 and 31. The other three Saturdays saw every train cancelled due to industrial action with some cynics claiming that this was an improvement as “at least you know that your train is definitely not running”.

Therefore, why should people try to have a day out by train from the Stourbridge line on a Saturday when there is no guarantee that the return train is going to run? West Midlands Railway has published a series of “Snow Hill Route Recovery Plan” documents. However, what Stourbridge line passengers want from West Midlands Railway is not words but action. The apology of a service provided on Saturday afternoons and evenings in July and August must be addressed. SLUG has already complained to the West Midlands Rail Executive about this issue. Let’s hope that West Midlands Railway takes action to restore the reliable Saturday service that Stourbridge line passengers deserve.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Trussed Up. New Prime Minister Liz Truss has promoted Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP to the position of Secretary of State for Transport. Let's hope that she proves to be better than the previous two incumbents and is prepared to act when intervention and compromise is necessary. *(Source: - BBC News)*

What's In A Name? Pineapple Road has been voted by the public as the name of a new station on the Camp Hill line in the Stirchley/Hazelwell area in Birmingham. The station will be named after the adjacent road. Luckily, similar votes to rename Stourbridge line stations will not be held as Langley Green, Rowley Regis, Old Hill, Lye, Hagley and Hartlebury could all become Station Road! *(Source: - WMCA)*

The Coventry VLR vehicle in test at the Dudley Innovation Centre

(Rail Gazette)

VLR Funding Boost. The city of Coventry has been awarded £115m of funding towards its transport projects which will enable its Very Light Railway (VLR) project to move forward. An innovative system of battery operated, driver-less rail vehicles will be established to connect key points in the city and important visitor attractions.

(Source: Rail Technology Magazine)

Capturing the Scene. The Severn Valley Railway is offering budding artists the chance to sketch its trains and stations at prime locations. On 16 October, the SVR will provide tutorials for "Sketching in Mixed Media". SVR is partnering with Bewdley-based "Foundry Artists" to host relaxed 120-minute sessions, helping to create fantastic works which will remind visitors of their experience. An all-in ticket, costing £55 can be purchased which includes all day freedom of the line and the artistry workshop. *(Source: SVR Website)*

More Allies. SLUG has recently added a link from the " External Links" page to the Black Country Transport (BCT) website. This organisation brings together officers from Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton with a team of central officers to provide project management of cross-boundary transport schemes. Of particular interest is the "Projects" section of the BCT website which refers to "Light rail extensions of the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill line" and the aspiration for "tram-train technology along the whole corridor." *(Source: BCT Website)*

A Stadler Class 398 Tram-Train which will shortly enter service on Cardiff Valleys lines

(Wikiwand)

Abellio Sale. Abellio, owned by the Dutch Government, is to sell its British operation. This includes West Midlands Railway which is currently 70% owned by Abellio. A new company called Transport UK Group Limited will be headed by Abellio UK Managing Director Dominic Booth. *(Source: - RAIL Magazine)*

THE RUNT OF THE LITTER
by Roger Davis

West Midlands Combined Authority dropped a bombshell on 21 July when it announced that the Metro extension from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill would only open as far as Dudley in 2024 due to a funding overspend. It stated that it would continue to seek funding solutions for the second phase to Brierley Hill to be built and hoped that this second phase would be built "at the earliest opportunity". Given that Brierley Hill was originally due to get a Metro service in 2006 if funding became available, one has to ask whether "the earliest opportunity" refers to the current decade or not.

It is ironic that the announcement coincided with the opening of the Metro extension along Broad Street to Edgbaston Village, a route that cost £149 million despite it paralleling 6 bus routes that provide 27 journeys per hour in each direction. At the same time, work has started on a 1 mile Metro extension from Birmingham City Centre to Digbeth, currently costed at £227 million and known as the Birmingham Eastside Extension. This route also parallels 12 regular bus routes providing 64 journeys per hour in each direction. It is due to open in 2025 despite its raison d'être being to serve the new HS2 station due to open in the early 2030s. It means that, for the first 5 or 6 years of existence, the line will pass through a gigantic building site under the new HS2 station, so one has to ask if health and safety regulations will allow the line to operate in its entirety.

The Metro underneath Curzon station from 2031, or a building site until then

(Grimshaw)

It has long been said that, as far as transport infrastructure investment is concerned, the UK is London-centric. The "levelling-up" programme of the current government will change this by making the country London/Manchester/Leeds-centric. However, locally, WMCA appears to be promoting policies that makes the West Midlands county Brum-centric.

As far as public transport is concerned, of the 7 local authorities that make up the West Midlands, Dudley is the runt of the litter, a situation that is not helped by the perceived apathy of Dudley's Councillors and local MPs. The West Midlands county has nearly 134 miles of heavy rail passenger lines. Of this total, just 5.9 miles are in Dudley borough. By 2023/2024, there will be 74 railway stations in the county – just 4 of these are in Dudley borough (Stourbridge Junction, Stourbridge Town, Lye and Coseley). The West Midlands Metro system is currently just over 14 miles in length. It will increase to 18 miles when the extension to Dudley is built, but only 1.1 of these miles will actually be in Dudley borough.

The situation with bus services is just as bad. National Express has introduced over 400 new "Platinum" low-emission buses since 2015. Only a minority were bought for use in Dudley borough, and these were all for routes that run to and from Birmingham (87, X7, X8 from Dudley, X10 from Merry Hill and 9 from Stourbridge).

The only reason that route 8 from Wollaston to Wolverhampton has these buses is that the X7 to Birmingham proved to be a white elephant and another route was needed to interwork with the X8 for operational convenience. If you live on a bus route that operates solely in the Black Country, then you are expected to use a higher polluting bus of dubious vintage. For instance, Kingswinford passengers on trunk routes 15 and 16 have to put up with 20 year old buses that are regularly cascaded from Birmingham to spend their last few months before being sent to the scrapyard.

Guess which of these two buses has NOT arrived from Birmingham

Thus, the extension of the Metro south west of Dudley needs to be built immediately. The A461 from Dudley to Brierley Hill (and on to Stourbridge) suffers badly with congestion. This affects the only bus service along the route, the 6, which, as well as being unreliable, only runs 6 times per hour in each direction. However, one has to question the choice of Metro terminus in a car park behind Brierley Hill. This was supposedly to regenerate the town centre which is a ramshackle congested bottleneck that most people pass through when travelling to shop at Merry Hill.

The walk from Merry Hill tram stop takes you down 62 steps and across 2 roads to the shops

Money could be saved by terminating the Metro at a transport interchange at Merry Hill in a far more convenient location than a stop that will be reached by crossing two roads and climbing 62 steps. The reopening of the line from Canal Street to Stourbridge Junction should be prioritised as a tram-train operation using the existing heavy rail track (currently used about twice a day), with Brierley Hill served by stops at Bank Street and Moor Street. Through tram-train services north of Canal Street using the Metro track would provide travellers from Worcestershire and beyond with a single change connection to Merry Hill, Dudley, Tipton and Wolverhampton.

Of course, changes to the current route will not happen and we will be forced to wait until the extension to Brierley Hill is finally built. Will a further extension to Stourbridge ever happen? In 2017, the situation looked good. Unfortunately, the proposal by West Midlands Railway to extend Stourbridge terminating services to Canal Street with an intermediate park and ride stop at Moor Street was rejected on economic grounds due to major infrastructure improvements being deemed necessary at that time. Interestingly, a similar scheme to reinstate passenger services on the Camp Hill line in Birmingham went ahead despite similar infrastructure improvements being necessary at the time at Kings Norton. Since then, services at both stations have been reduced from 6 to 4 trains per hour, thus providing capacity for a new service without infrastructure enhancements.

The link between Stourbridge and Dudley needs to be provided as soon as possible. SLUG and sister campaign group Campaign for Rail believes that money allocated to deliver the Birmingham Eastside Extension should be diverted to enable the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill line to be built in its entirety, with the Eastside extension timed to open in line with HS2. SLUG and CfR will canvas Transport for West Midlands for this to happen. Until our silent local politicians show some support and significant improvements are made to public transport in Dudley borough, it will remain the runt of the litter as far as public transport is concerned.

TICKETS PLEASE!
by John Warren

SLUG has long been concerned that on-board ticket checks on Stourbridge line services are not performed regularly. With gatelines regularly being left open at the few stations that have them, ticketless travel is encouraged, to the chagrin of passengers who actually purchase tickets. Of course, during the Covid lockdown and restriction periods, on-board checks could not be undertaken to ensure the safety of staff. Unfortunately, Covid has been used as an excuse to stop traditional practices (e.g. printed timetables) and, since restrictions have been lifted, on-board checks have not been restored and are lower than they were pre-Covid. To verify this, I have checked every journey I have made since Covid restrictions were lifted.

Operator	Checked on Train	Checked at Station	Not Checked	% Checked On Train	% Checked
Avanti West Coast	1	3	0	25	100
Elizabeth Line (on GW main line)	2	0	0	100	100
CrossCountry	5	5	1	45.45	90.91
Govia Thameslink	1	8	3	8.33	75
West Midlands Trains (Other)	0	5	2	0	71.43
Great Western	11	5	8	45.83	66.67
Snow Hill Lines	2	9	20	6.45	35.48
Stourbridge Town Branch	2	0	18	10	10

This is only a guide but it shows that ticket checking on our lines is unsatisfactory, especially on the Town branch where having your ticket checked was a “gimme” pre-Covid. Of course, a far higher percentage of stations in the GWR and Govia areas have gatelines and the provision of these at larger stations such as Worcester would decrease ticketless travel. However, station gatelines are ineffective both when unmanned and when passengers are changing from one train to another. Therefore, ticket checks on every train are essential if ticketless travel is to be eradicated. SLUG has expressed its concerns at a meeting with West Midlands Rail Executive and it will raise this with West Midlands Railway. We will keep you informed of progress.

The gateline at Snow Hill is useless when left open and when passengers are changing trains