CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS

Why is train travel so popular? Perhaps "popular" is the wrong word. Many users of public transport have no other choice, due to the expense of running a motor car. Some commuters cannot face driving to work in the daily traffic congestion. The train is the obvious alternative, if not the solution.

I would like to think that the modern train is cleaner, more comfortable and more convenient than ever before. Our colleagues in the south east of England would probably disagree, as they clamber into the overcrowded carriages of delayed and dirty trains. Whilst looking at the track record of London Midland, it is fair to say that other regions would be envious of the Stourbridge Line service. That is not to say that another holder of the West Midlands Rail franchise could not provide a better service. It is the duty of a rail campaign group to ensure that the new train operator is the best one to deliver the network required by the next generation of travellers. In short, London Midland or its successor should make train travel "popular" in the real sense by investment in key areas.

Why is usage of trains increasing but not reflected by bus patronage? Is it a class issue? Trains nowadays are generally classless but buses tend to carry a stigma associated with deprivation and desperation. A closer analysis reveals that in Worcestershire (and other Shire counties) trains operate more frequently than buses and run late into the evening. Some bus routes have not seen a Sunday service in years. There is a touch of irony that the motor omnibus which killed many train services is now dying a slow death by savage cuts. County Council budgets have been reduced by the government and the number of socially necessary bus links that can be subsidised, seems to decrease each year. If we consider the effects of competition and cherry picking, it is no surprise that bus operators no longer want to provide Dr Beeching's favoured alternative to the rural branch line.

Stourbridge has superb facilities for transferring between bus and train

There is an alternative. With a political will, buses could become feeders into the vastly improved train services. An opportunity presents itself at Kidderminster where a new rail station is to be built, complete with a bus interchange. Even now, while the architects are being called in, negotiations could take place between the County Council and principal bus operator. Re-routing existing buses into the station is not enough. The bus network needs to be completely redesigned. Furthermore, there needs to be commitment for a selection of buses to meet all well used trains – evenings included. This is serious stuff because it means commitment to public transport. Commitment can be measured in benefits; more spaces on Kidderminster station car park, no need for taxi fares and an evening economy for Stourport and Bewdley. The Wyre Forest district has a wealth of tourist destinations but the train cannot deliver tourists to the doorsteps of these locations. Need I say more? This is POPULAR public transport. I'm being optimistic. It's not going to happen is it!

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

PLATFORM

Issue 3 April 2016

The magnificent Kidderminster Town (SVR) Station is the venue for the SLUG Public Meeting on 10 May.

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OUR BEST SHOT
by Rob Hebron

The Stourbridge Line User Group has been heavily involved with producing a response to the West Midlands Rail Consultation document. The implications of this consultation, on which the Department for Transport will decide the best franchise regional train operator, are enormous. The process is much more than asking for service improvements, it is framing SLUG campaigns in a persuasive way. By the time of submission on March 15th, the SLUG document underwent seven revisions after thorough and thoughtful debate.

Preparation for the SLUG response has involved various liaison events including presentations at Worcester County Hall (attended by myself and William Whiting) and Birmingham Council House (attended by Roger Davis). Other stakeholders at these meetings have included fraternal Rail User Groups, Centro officers and Worcestershire County Councillors. These parties have been valuable allies who have reinforced SLUG campaigns and general objectives for improved connectivity. Question and answer sessions have, on the whole, been constructive and productive on various levels.

Unofficial sources suggest that there are at least eight interested companies or consortiums prepared to bid for operating trains within the West Midlands Rail Franchise. Names have not been divulged but clearly London Midland wish to continue running a very well used network which is a lucrative market. SLUG has the advantage of meeting London Midland managers on a regular basis and influencing both day to day operation and long term developments.

Better Sunday services are amongst aspirations for the new franchise, including a Sunday service at Hartlebury.

After considering responses from all stakeholders, the Department will decide if London Midland is the best operator to work with the devolved governance of the West Midlands Combined Authority. The WMCA is possibly the most important aspect of the change to franchise. The Stourbridge Line and its cross-city extension pass through three counties. Hitherto, service improvements have been confined largely to the Metropolitan County area because of disproportionate council tax resources. The West Midlands Integrated Transport Authority (WMITA) is slowly realising that investment in Worcestershire and Warwickshire benefits the passengers in its own county in terms of service reliability.

The importance of Worcester is emphasised in SLUG's response: A city with two stations has a deplorable number of long distance train destinations compared with Birmingham New Street.

WHEELS IN MOTION
by Rob Hebron

The SLUG Committee meeting takes place 5 times per year and gives the committee a chance to interact with representatives of the Train Operating Companies and local authorities. At the March meeting, we met with representatives from London Midland, Chiltern Railways and Worcestershire County Council and received a written report from Centro.

Brenda Lawrence, Snow Hill Lines Manager for London Midland, told the meeting that performances which had been disappointing before Christmas, with performance figures of only 81% and 71% respectively, had improved in the last two months with figures of 91.9% and 94.2%. Issues with the fleet had improved after major problems last year that included two unit fires. All unaffected units were being checked in the routine overhaul which is now due. London Midland had gained an overall satisfaction percentage of 86% in the National Rail Passenger Survey, 3% above the national average and 3% above the figure for the previous year. Figures had improved in 31 of the 36 areas surveyed. Chiltern Railways did even better with a rating of 91%, putting them in the top four operating companies.

Class 172 fire at Lapworth

(bbc.co.uk)

There was good news for holders of Centro area National Concession Cards and Direct Debit Season Tickets which are now recognised automatically by the gate lines at Snow Hill and Moor Street.

The meeting was warned that there would be a blockade in the Worcester area during the summer to enable the renewal of 5 mechanical signal boxes. The dates of the blockade are 4 to 14 June, 18 to 23 June and 6 to 10 August. During those days, trains would start and end at Droitwich Spa with onward buses to Shrub Hill direct and to Foregate Street and on to Shrub Hill.

Amongst the good news was the announcement that Hartlebury, Blakedown and Lye would receive card-only automatic ticket machines as part of the direct award. There was also news of extra services stopping at Hartlebury from December 2016. These are the 0544 Saturday service from Worcester Shrub Hill and the 2300 Monday to Friday service from Birmingham Snow Hill.

There was also promising news from David Balme of Worcestershire County Council on the redevelopment of Kidderminster station. A preferred architect had been agreed but had yet to be officially appointed. Thus, detailed work on the project should commence shortly.

Finally, the written report from Suzanne Page of Centro told the meeting that the Brierley Hill Metro extension was planned to open in 2022/23, while the plan to reopen Snow Hill platform 4 and build a turn-back platform at Rowley Regis was in the plan for completion before 2026.

One might think that the above example was unfair, given that the through ticket gave you a choice of routes, and that this certainly wouldn't happen if there was only one direct route, especially if you buy an Advance ticket 12 weeks before you travel to get the cheapest possible fare. Unfortunately, this is not true.

A good example is a holiday to Devon that you have booked well in advance. As soon as Advance ticket booking is available on the CrossCountry website, you go on-line to book two Advance singles from Birmingham New Street to Newton Abbot and back. The website offers you the cheapest tickets on the 1117 outward journey and the 1304 return, both at the same price. The cost is £29.50 (£19.45) each way. This surely must be the cheapest ticket you can get. Unfortunately, it isn't. An Advance Ticket on the 1117 service from Birmingham New Street to Cheltenham Spa will cost you £7.00 (£4.60) while an Advance ticket on the 1200 service from Cheltenham Spa to Newton Abbot will cost you £15.30 (£10.10). Thus, you pay £22.30 (£14.70), a saving of £7.20 (£4.75). This saving can be repeated on your journey from Devon by booking separate tickets on the 1304 from Newton Abbot to Cheltenham Spa and on the 1511 from Cheltenham Spa to Birmingham New Street. This results in a total saving of £14.40 (£9.50) on your journey to Devon and back.

The 1117 service to Plymouth waits at New Street for a right time departure (at 1120)

On both journeys, the tickets are for the same train but, in theory, you might be allocated two different seats for the two portions of your journey. However, you can easily get around that as one of the nice features of the CrossCountry Trains website on a Windows PC is the ability to choose your own seat. (N.B. this feature has recently been made available on the Virgin Trains website). Therefore, it is possible to select the journey from Birmingham to Newton Abbot, go to the Select Your Own Seat facility and make a note of what seats are unoccupied throughout your journey. That journey may now been deleted from your basket and the two partial journeys booked, using the Select Your Own Seat facility to ensure that you have the same seat throughout your journey from Birmingham to Newton Abbot.

The 1117 service from Birmingham New Street passes Dawlish en route to Plymouth

Until the rail industry comes up with a fares structure that is consistent and logical, such discrepancies will remain. The only advice is to be aware of the issues and, if possible, to use the Internet to fully investigate ways of saving money.

Better connections are needed at Worcester

Other references are made to poor evening and Sunday frequencies on our line and the potential of the Dudley Line. The response document is on the SLUG website and Facebook Group Page. The West Midlands Rail Consultation format is not ideal because it is geared up to individuals and not groups. The questions that are set are not necessarily the ones which should have been posed. Nevertheless, Caspar Lucas has successfully identified issues and woven in SLUG campaigns. Roger Davis has provided valuable figures and statistics to add credibility. SLUG has pushed expectation to the limit and aspirations beyond the boundaries. We have given this response our best shot.

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP
PUBLIC MEETING AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Stourbridge Line User Group Public Meeting and Annual General Meeting will take place at the Refreshment Room, Kidderminster Town (SVR) Railway Station on Tuesday 10 May 2016 starting 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.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Paul Humphreys and Keith Flinders

Dudley line development. The Black Country Executive Joint Council has agreed to put £100,000 into the proposed Midland Metro extension link between Wednesbury and Brierley Hill. The money will be spent on revamping outdated plans and costings for the scheme when it was in it's infancy. (*Source: Express & Star 14/03/16)*

Artist's impression of Dudley Innovation Centre

Dudley VLR Developments. Castle Gate to Dudley Port won't happen as planned if Metro comes. I have written confirmation that the test track will not now run to Dudley Port but will go south through the tunnel to Cinder Bank. The possibility is that a future derivative of the Revolution VLR railcar would be considered for a future Stourbridge to Walsall service but that is not necessarily dependent on the proposed Very Light Railway being built at Dudley. (*Source: Dennis R Whittaker on SLUG Facebook Group Page, 20/03/16)*

Crumbs of Budget comfort. Birmingham business leaders have accused the Chancellor of ignoring the Midlands. Chamber Director Henrietta Brealey said, "There is more to England than the North and London. While the Northern Powerhouse was clearly front of [his] mind, the Midlands Engine was not mentioned a single time in his hour-long speech." Prof. John Bryson of the University of Birmingham's Business School said, "There are three reasons to justify supporting the Midlands Engine. First, the Midlands is the only part of the U.K. that has a trading surplus with China. Second, parts of the Midlands consume more tax revenue than they produce. Third, the Midlands region is underperforming."

So the Budget promised some upgrading of the M62, a small amount of money towards planning HS3 across the Pennines - and a vast amount for Crossrail 2 under London. Although our region got no new rail infrastructure, George Osbourne approved making The Waterfront and parts of Harts Hill an Enterprise Zone, potentially attracting 4,000 new jobs. This improves the business case for the Metro from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill, due by 2023, and increases the importance of providing a link from Stourbridge Junction to the Enterprise Zone as soon as possible. *(Sources: Birmingham Post, 16/03/16, Express and Star , 14/03/16).*

The Waterfront

Passengers continue to rely on railway staff. In the context of several booking offices in our region being threatened by closure or reduced hours of operating it is very interesting to note that recent research by Passenger Voice has found that despite the new technology available passengers still value the "human face" of staff on the ground. The research found that

- passengers value the guidance and reassurance that staff provide when buying tickets. However this help doesn't necessarily have to come from behind a ticket office counter.
- staff interaction with passengers, and the information they provide, particularly when journeys are disrupted, is important.
- A visible staff presence makes passengers feel safer at stations and on trains. *(Source: Passenger Voice, March 2016)*

Public plea for Wolverhampton – Walsall direct line to be reinstated. The 12 mile link was closed in 2008 after funding was withdrawn. Today rail passengers wanting to get between Wolverhampton and Walsall have to go via Birmingham New Street, taking more than an hour. At a Government rail consultation held at Walsall Railway Station passengers called for the rail link to be returned. In response, it was stated that this will happen in the same year an electrification project between Walsall and Rugeley Trent Valley is expected to be completed. (*Source: Express & Star, 03/03/16)*

Walsall Station

TICKET TO RIDE
by Roger Davis

The prices quoted below are correct as at 14 February 2016. Prices shown in brackets are those for Railcard holders.

A Nottingham to Cardiff service passes a Cross City service at Bournville station

It has been well documented that major savings can be made on journeys where Advance and Off-Peak tickets are not available at the time the journey starts. For instance, a journey from Stourbridge Junction to Nottingham to arrive at about 1030 hrs involves leaving Stourbridge Junction just after 0800 hrs before Off-Peak tickets are available and a return ticket would cost £47.90 (£31.60). However, by splitting the journey at Burton-on-Trent, an Off-Peak ticket would be available for the second portion of the journey as the Birmingham to Nottingham service stops at Burton at 0948 hrs. In this case, a return Anytime ticket from Stourbridge Junction to Burton-on-Trent would cost £17.80 (£11.75), while a return Off-Peak ticket from Burton-on-Trent to Nottingham would cost £11.30 (£7.45). Thus the total cost for your return journey is £28.10 (£19.20), a total saving of £19.80 (£12.40).

However, what is less well-known is that savings can be made by splitting your ticket even if it is possible to buy an Off-Peak or Advance ticket for the entire journey.

As an example, let's look at a day out at Oxford this Saturday coming. If you buy an Off-Peak return from Stourbridge Junction, it will set you back £39.40 (£26.00). However, an Off-Peak return ticket from Stourbridge Junction to Worcester will cost £7.10 (£4.70), while an Off-Peak return from Worcester to Oxford costs £17.50 (£11.55). This means that you pay £24.60 (£16.25) for the full journey, a saving of £14.80 (£9.75).

Oxford High Street

This does seem a large saving, but the through ticket from Stourbridge to Oxford offers you the choice of travelling either via Worcester or via Birmingham and Leamington Spa. However, most people would not want to exercise that choice so the question that must be asked is why a cheaper Off-Peak ticket is not available that restricts you to travel via Worcester. It happens on other services. For instance, an Off-Peak return ticket from Bristol to Brighton costs £67.60 (£44.60) for travel by any route, but £53.50 (£35.30) if you travel via Salisbury.