Issue 30 December 2022

Platform

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

InterCity 125 livery returned to Kidderminster on 27 September when a charter train operated from Leeds to Bridgnorth and back.

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PLATFORM is published by:
The Stourbridge Line User Group, 46 Sandringham Road, Wordsley, Stourbridge, West Midlands, DY8 5HL

Find us on Facebook

www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info

NEVER ON SUNDAY
by Roger Davis

The first Sunday service to stop at Hartlebury in December 2019, after a five year SLUG campaign

As reported in the previous issue of *Platform*, Monday to Saturday services on the Stourbridge line will be revised from next May, while Sunday services remain the same. In fact, the only changes made to Sunday timetables over the past couple of years have been the introduction of stopping services at Hartlebury and the cutting back of through Great Malvern services to terminate at Worcester Foregate Street. The reluctance to improve Sunday services seems incongruous given that the rail industry considers leisure travel to be the key to restoring passenger numbers to pre-Covid levels. The current Sunday timetable discourages passengers from using services along the line because of low frequencies and the exceptionally late start of services.

In the past three months, I attended two meetings with West Midlands Railway (WMR) – at Worcester Foregate Street and Birmingham Symphony Hall – and spoke to senior timetabling and long term planning managers. Many issues were discussed at these meetings including cancellation levels, late running services, skip-stop operation, changes to connecting services at Smethwick Galton Bridge and the May 2023 timetable changes.

However, a major objective was to find out why nothing is being done to improve the appalling Sunday service that Stourbridge line passengers have to tolerate at present. I stressed that the percentage level of Sunday services compared with Monday to Saturday services was unacceptably low with Kidderminster having just 25% of services compared with the rest of the week, while Snow Hill line percentages were much lower than local services through New Street station. For this reason, I asked the following four questions.

Kidderminster - 4 trains per hour Mondays to Saturdays, 1 train per hour on Sundays

Why were Sunday services cut back from Great Malvern to Worcester in May 2022, thus making journeys from the Stourbridge line to Malvern Link and Great Malvern more inconvenient, especially when connection times at Worcester are poor?

The ~~excuse~~ reason given by WMR was that Monday to Saturday services were cut back to Worcester during the Covid crisis. As a result, the number of drivers with route knowledge to Great Malvern has reduced, thus making it more and more difficult to find available staff to operate these services on Sundays. This seemed fine until I spoke to a Worcester Depot driver who drives both Snow Hill line services and New Street to Hereford services.

Why wasn't the Sunday timetable altered when Great Malvern services were cut to make more efficient use of train sets that currently run out of service from Foregate Street to Henwick Sidings where they wait for over 30 minutes before returning to Foregate Street to re-enter service?

The reply from WMR was that the change was made at short notice because of the lack of drivers signed out for the line between Worcester and Great Malvern. However, this does not explain why changes could not have been made in later timetable changes.

Given that Monday to Saturday services are being revised in May 2023, why is nothing being done to revise Sunday services at the same time?

WMR stated that, after the disastrous timetable change in May 2018 which caused chaos on services emanating from New Street station, a change to the Sunday timetable as well as the Monday to Saturday timetable had been discouraged, in particular by the Department for Transport (DfT). However, this does not explain the December 2022 timetable changes on the New Street to Wolverhampton service where radical changes have been made to timetables over all seven days of the week.

When the franchise was awarded in 2017, there was a commitment to improve Sunday services to Saturday levels. Covid and the replacement of franchises with service contracts has rendered this commitment redundant but improved services are needed as soon as possible. When is this likely to happen?

The response from West Midlands Railway was that DfT now controls the purse strings and will only allow changes to be made to services if no additional costs are incurred. Therefore it would appear that DfT will not sanction an improved service, even if the income generated greatly outweighed the additional cost.

Lye, Old Hill and Langley Green - First Sunday service after 1030 hrs, last Sunday service about 1800 hrs

The rail industry had hoped that direct control by DfT would be eliminated by 2024 if the Williams-Shapps Report was implemented. However, the current upheaval within the Government has resulted in a merry-go-round of transport ministers which has caused the bill to create Great British Railways to be put on hold, and there is now concern within the rail industry that it may never happen.

The outcome of our meetings with WMR is that the company has listened, just as London Midland and WMR listened when SLUG campaigned for over five years for Sunday services at Hartlebury. SLUG will continue to press for better Sunday services in the hope that our case is listened to and heard so that we don't have to wait for another five years before these improvements happen. A Sunday service that supports leisure travel is needed … and it's needed now.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF RAIL TRAILS IN WORCESTERSHIRE
by William Whiting

Worcestershire Community Rail Partnership was formed three years ago and is part of a network of over 72 Community Rail Partnerships. These Partnerships and other groups engage communities and help people get the most from their railways, promoting social inclusion and sustainable travel, working along train operators to bring stations back to life and improvements to the local network. Part of this work includes station adoption groups undertaking gardening work and promoting their local area.

Andy Stevenson, Lyndon Bracewell and William Whiting at Malvern Link before pioneering the first trail

Many CRPs have produced line guides which include places to visit on a line. They have also promoted walks from stations and Worcestershire CRP has decided to produce rail trails from stations in the County. These are linear walks to encourage people to take the train and then walk back. We have been fortunate to secure the services of Worcestershire Ramblers and Worcester University to produce these trails. I pioneered the first rail trail from Malvern Link to Worcester Foregate Street with a member of Worcester University and Worcestershire Ramblers in September. The walk did not follow the route of the railway line but instead took us through Madresfield, Stanbrook Abbey, a former Benedictine nunnery, now a hotel and Powick Church before returning to Worcester along the River Teme and River Severn.

It is hoped that the first phase of these rail trails will be completed in January 2023 along the Cotswolds and Malvern Line from Great Malvern to Honeybourne covering a distance of 42 miles. It is then intended to devise rail trails along the Worcester to Hagley rail corridor.

BACK TO THE FUTURE
by Roger Davis

After a break due to the Covid-19 outbreak, both Worcestershire County Council and West Midlands Rail Executive have recently published updated draft Rail Investment Strategies to cover the years up to 2050. Like other stakeholders, SLUG was invited to respond to both strategies and has taken the opportunity to comment on the parts of each strategy that relates to the Stourbridge line and connecting services.

The full strategy documents and the SLUG responses are available to read on our website at the following locations.

Worcestershire - http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/wris-2-response.html

West Midlands - http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/wmre-ris-response.html

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Developments at Worcester. The revised South Worcestershire Development Plan sets out plans for more than 11,000 new homes to be built by 2041 including a 5,000-home town near Worcestershire Parkway station, 2,000 homes at Throckmorton Airfield near Pershore and 1,000 extra new homes in Rushwick. If the plan is approved and actioned, Pershore would gain an expanded station with a second platform, new passenger bridge and 500-space car park, while Rushwick would be provided with a brand-new railway station. *(Source: Berrow's Journal)*

Whitlocks End Park-and-Ride. The Government sees potential to create a park-and-ride facility at Whitlocks End by the middle of the decade. *(Source: RAIL)*

Heading East. The Metro Birmingham Eastside extension is progressing with demolition of commercial buildings in Kings Parade, Dale End due for completion by next spring. Then, following utility diversions, track should be laid later in 2023. The extension will add new stops to the Metro network including Curzon Street Station and Birmingham Coach Station.
(Source: Business Live)

The first section of track on the Eastside extension is laid at the top of Lower Bull Street

Going Underground! A controversial idea to construct a tunnel under Birmingham New Street station has resurfaced in a WMCA document and may gain some credibility this time around. It is suggested that local and cross-city train services could depart from subterranean platforms and free up paths above for inter-city expresses. The document has been out for public consultation and it will be interesting to see how the idea is received.
(Source: Birmingham Live)

The uninviting tunnel that links New Street and Moor Street stations

An Improved Route? A Government report describes the walking route between Moor Street and New Street stations as "extremely hostile and unattractive". It is prepared to finance improvements over the next five years *(Source: RAIL)*

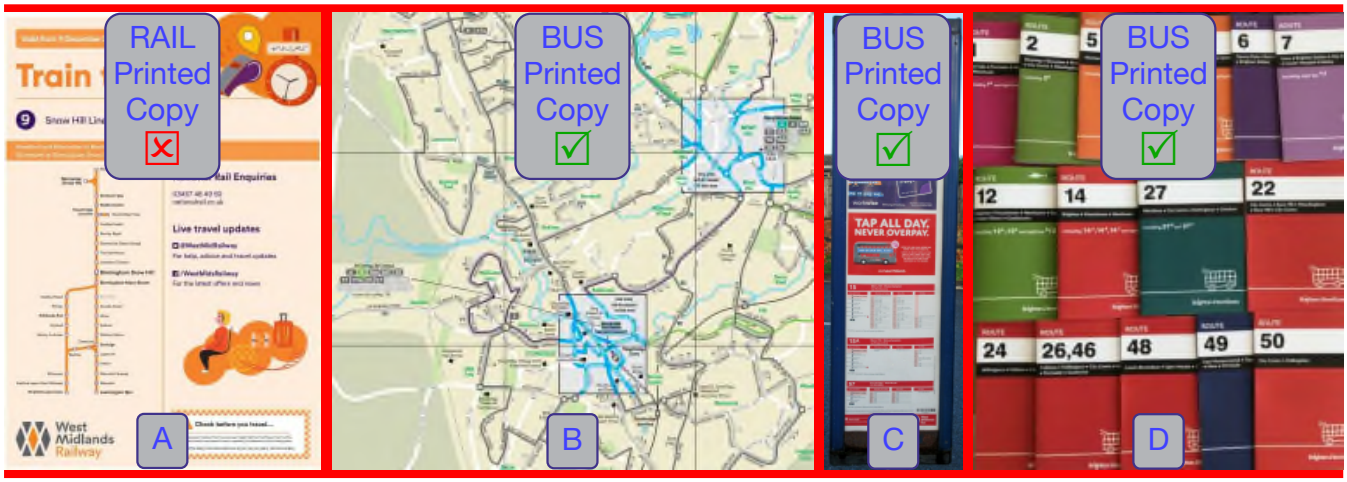
Yet Another Change at the Top. The latest appointment as Minister of State for Transport is Mark Harper, MP for the Forest of Dean. The new Minister with responsibility for rail is Huw Merriman, MP for Bexhill and Battle, who became a member of the Transport Select Committee in 2017 and its Chairman in 2020. Given that this committee called for a 30-year rolling programme of rail electrification, it is hoped that we now have a rail minister who supports rail. *(Source: gov.uk)*

A LITTLE LESS INFORMATION
by Roger Davis

Sadly, the Covid-19 pandemic was responsible for too many casualties. As far as the rail industry is concerned, one of the biggest casualties has been paper. During the many phases of lockdown, train timetables changed regularly to react to the level of restrictions imposed by the Government and this made it impossible and expensive to keep printed timetables and station posters up to date. However, the return to normality and twice yearly timetable changes (in May and December) has not seen the return of printed information.

Recent figures show that about 88% of the population own smartphones, but this decreases by age to about 78% of over 55s and 69% of over 65s. About 92% of the population have access to the internet but this reduces to 54% for people aged over 75. I am over 70 and use my smartphone and laptop regularly. I am also computer literate having worked in the industry since the abacus was upgraded in the early 1970s. However, if I am out and about and want to know the time of a train, I want to get something pocket sized out of my pocket and access the information quickly. In this situation, a printed pocket timetable [A] is far more convenient, especially when some rail companies develop websites and apps that are even more impossible to navigate than a large Ikea store or the Magic Roundabout in Swindon.

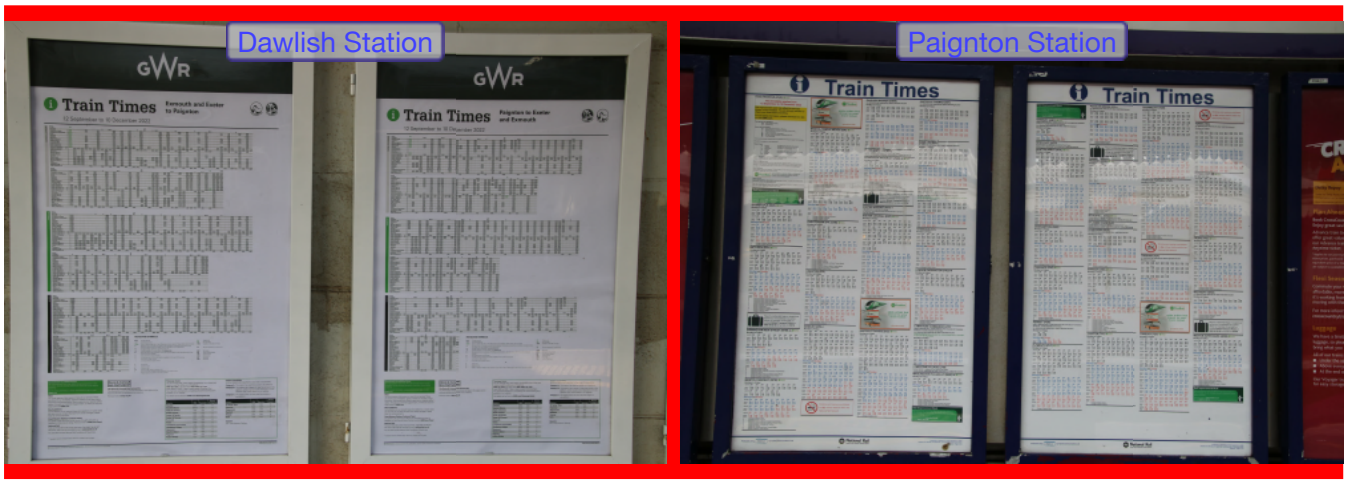
However, the percentage of (mostly older) people without access to on-line information is still too high for paper based solutions to be discarded completely. The old adage that "you can't teach an old dog new tricks" still applies, and the rail industry should have taken this into consideration when it decided to consign printed information to history. If the above figures are correct, nearly ⅓ of pensioners are excluded from having the relevant information due to the lack of a smartphone.



The situation is slightly better in the bus industry, although ~~Worst~~ First Bus seem to be making no effort to provide printed information. In the West Midlands, timetable leaflets have yet to reappear, although area maps for 2022 have been produced [B] and every bus stop has up-to-date information [C]. For a year, the excellent Brighton & Hove bus company has stocked A4 printed timetables at its enquiry office and recently replaced them with pocket sized timetables available also on buses [D]. In Cornwall, the county council still produces its excellent all routes timetable book.

However, the finest example comes from Bournemouth where the local Yellow Buses company ceased operation in August. The rival Go-Ahead owned Morebus company increased its network to cover the cancelled routes and posted a timetable book with full details of its new network to every household in the area. If bus companies can make the effort, why can't the rail companies?

SLUG has, not unexpectedly, received complaints from a number of its members about the unavailability of printed timetables and station posters. As a responsible user group, we have taken this up with West Midlands Railway and, as a recognised stakeholder, we were able to speak to a very senior timetabling manager rather than the customer services department. We were told that the Department for Transport (DfT) had included an edict in the service contract agreed with each operator which precluded the production of printed timetables and station posters. One reason was cost, although the other reason given was that printed information could not be guaranteed to be 100% accurate when short term changes needed to be made for operational reasons. Given that short term timetable changes have occurred ever since Isambard Kingdom Brunel decided to compete with the stagecoach on the London to Bristol route, this seems a poor excuse. In addition, if you use an on-line journey planner a few days in advance to plan a journey, there is no guarantee that it would hold the revised information, as was proved when cancelled early morning services on the day after a strike day were still showing on the planner.

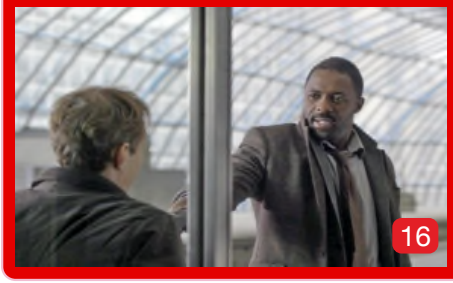


SLUG appreciates that pocket timetables are expensive to produce. However, station posters aren't! West Midlands Railway and London NorthWestern Railway operates 148 stations. With timetables changing twice a year, it would only need to produce 296 sets of posters each year. Why is the DfT putting an embargo on that? However, it would appear that its edict has not found its way over the bush telegraph into Devon. In October, I passed both Dawlish and Paignton stations (ironically to catch buses) and saw posters at both stations. Dawlish had timetables for Exmouth to Paignton services which included long distance services, while Paignton displayed departure times to each destination station. Both posters had a clearly visible disclaimer which reads "Rail improvement work may affect the services shown in this timetable. You are strongly advised to check your times before travelling."

SLUG believes that printed timetable information is still necessary and will continue to press for this to be made available.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ - WATCHING THE DETECTIVES

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



(Answers will be published in the next issue and on the website from early January).