GOODBYE BRIERLEY HILL?
by John Warren

Shortly after the previous issue of *Platform* went to press, the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) announced a funding package to progress phase 2 of the West Midlands Metro line beyond its phase 1 terminus at Flood Street in Dudley.

The new proposals split the extension of the line from Flood Street into three phases.

Phase 2a to The Waterfront, Phase 2b to Merry Hill, Phase 2c – to Brierley Hill

On 9 June, the WMCA Board voted to use the funds and greater powers granted in the Deeper Devolution Deal agreed in March to commit to delivering phase 2a. These funds include a £60 million grant from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and is subject to the approval of the business case. It will be topped up with further support from the WMCA's City Region Sustainable Transport Settlement (CRSTS) and Dudley Council. Phase 2a adds three stops to the route at Cinder Bank, Pedmore Road and The Waterfront, but not at Canal Street where a line to Stourbridge would diverge.

Phase 2b into Merry Hill will follow, but this is subject to a funding contribution from Dudley Council.

The terminus at Merry Hill?
(Midland Metro Alliance)

However, phase 2c is currently unfunded so there is no guarantee that Brierley Hill will be reached. It is suggested that cycle, walking or bus connections could be made to reach Brierley Hill, although the last of these three options has to be treated with scepticism given that the Metro stop is alongside the canal at the top of 66 steps from the nearest road and ½ mile from the nearest bus stop. If the final portion to Brierley Hill is canned, then surely some thought should be given to moving the Merry Hill Metro stop to a location that is not only closer to the shopping centre but also provides direct connections with local bus services.

SLUG's document on options to reopen the line between Stourbridge Junction and Canal Street suggested a phased approach to the extension of the Metro but feels that a cheaper destination for phase 2a is Canal Street to allow for a tram-train connection to Stourbridge. Although not as convenient for Brierley Hill town centre, stops at Round Oak and Moor Street would better serve the town than a terminus at Merry Hill.

We are pleased to say that, shortly after the last issue went to press, we received a very encouraging reply from Andy Street which broadly supported our tram-train idea. We are still waiting for a meeting to be convened with West Midlands Rail Executive and Transport for West Midlands to discuss the way forward to link not only Brierley Hill and Merry Hill to the Metro network but Stourbridge as well.

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP
Issue 33 September 2023

Platform

If the Government gets its way, all ticket offices between Birmingham and Worcester will be closed, including Stourbridge Junction. The ticket office is obviously not busy at 1025 on Thursday 10 August!

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NOT THE FULL TICKET
by Roger Davis

Unless you've spent the last three months on the moon, it has been very difficult to avoid hearing about the proposal from the Rail Delivery Group (RDG) to close ticket offices under the control of the Department for Transport (DfT) and redeploy staff to other areas of the stations. To understand who actually instigated this proposal, you need to appreciate that the relationship between the DfT and the RDG is the same as that between Ray Alan and Lord Charles or, for younger readers, Nina Conti and Monkey. The former speaks the words, but the sound appears to emanate from the latter.

Two things became abundantly clear when stakeholders attended briefings a few days after the initial announcement. Firstly, the proposals had been rushed through by the RDG (aka DfT) as stakeholders managed to drive double decker buses through the holes in the operating companies' proposals. Secondly, the perception that the current structure of the rail industry has created a fragmented railway was reinforced by the sixteen operating companies coming up with sixteen different proposals. To confuse matters, this means that, in England, ticket offices at Hereford and Shrewsbury will remain open because they are controlled by Transport for Wales. However, in Scotland, all ticket offices under the control of ScotRail remain open except the largest one of all at Glasgow Central which is operated by Avanti.

The reaction has, predictably, been hostile with passenger groups, disability groups, age concern groups, political leaders and individuals lining up to oppose the plans, with many threatening legal action to stop the proposals. An attempt by the RDG to restrict the consultation period to the minimum 21 days proved unsuccessful with the weight of opposition forcing a further extension of over six weeks. The consultation closed on 1 September with 716,000 responses, and the report from Transport Focus and London Travelwatch is due to be published by 31 October.

The West Midlands Trains (WMT) proposal is to close every ticket office but create regional customer information centres at six of the busiest stations which would offer "additional customer support when buying tickets". These would be situated at Wolverhampton (busiest), Birmingham Snow Hill (2nd), University (3rd), Worcester Foregate Street (6th), Sutton Coldfield (9th) and Walsall (10th), but not at Stourbridge Junction (7th) or Kidderminster (8th).

It means that all stations along the Stourbridge line would be staffed by new mobile teams who, according to WMT, "would be deployed on a flexible basis by covering a group of stations to undertake customer service, passenger assistance, safety and general upkeep duties".

The above delays were caused by one of the new Class 196 units being delayed by a late running Birmingham to Hereford service at Ledbury and then developing a fault between Ledbury and Worcester, causing it to be cancelled at Foregate Street. It meant that the train had to be transferred from platform 2 to platform 1 to enable it to run empty to Shrub Hill. It didn't help that passengers were told that this was the Stourbridge line service to Stratford, meaning that it had to be held in the platform while the train was emptied.

The faulty Class 196 unit occupies platform 1 at Foregate Street causing a delay to other services

In its Rail Investment Strategy, Worcestershire County Council has aspirations to redouble 5.2 miles of track between Evesham and Pershore and the 11.8 miles west of Ledbury. It also aspires to replace all signalling in the Worcester area and upgrade the infrastructure to allow trains from both Shrub Hill and Worcester Tunnel to access both platforms at Foregate Street. Unfortunately, the current Government policy on rail suggests that services will be cut rather than improved in the foreseeable future.

SLUG's proposal for Worcester services to serve Hagley and Blakedown rather than Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye would increase turnround times at Worcester by 2 minutes. It's not a lot but it would improve this situation where one late train causes a chain reaction.

PLATFORM WINS NATIONAL AWARD
by Roger Davis

Railfuture President Christian Wolmar presents the Best Newsletter Award to SLUG Chairman Roger Davis

On 15 July, I was invited to represent SLUG at the Railfuture Annual Rail User Groups Awards Ceremony at London University's Senate House in Russell Square. I already knew that our newsletters had been nominated for the Best Newsletter Award, but to find out at the ceremony that we had won the Gold Award was a major surprise and a great honour.

The fact that the voting panel consisted of three retired Managing Directors of Train Operating Companies and two renowned railway journalists and commentators made the award even more special as did the judges' comments such as "professional-quality presentation and content", "much more than just a user group magazine" and "has taken user group publications to a new level".

Please be assured that we won't be resting on our laurels but will be doing everything we can to ensure that we maintain these standards in future issues.

CHAIN REACTION
by John Warren

The new timetable, introduced in May, has improved punctuality by increasing wait times at destination stations considerably. However, there is one exception - the hourly service to and from Worcester Foregate Street that operates via Shrub Hill which only has 5 minutes turnround time at Foregate Street.

In June, I made two journeys in two days that involved me travelling back from Foregate Street on the service via Shrub Hill. On both occasions, the train was 12 minutes late. What was worse was that the automated public information system gave false information which caused passengers to attempt to board the wrong train.

The problem at Worcester is down to the poor track and signalling infrastructure in the Worcester area. There are too many single track sections - 4.1 miles from Droitwich Spa to Stoke Works Junction, 9.7 miles from Evesham to Norton Junction, 5.8 miles from Malvern Wells to Ledbury, 11.8 miles between Ledbury and Hereford, 1.2 miles from Shrub Hill through Foregate Street platform 1 to Henwick and 1.4 miles from Worcester Tunnel Junction through Foregate Street platform 2 to Henwick. It means that services arriving late at Evesham or Ledbury cause services in the opposite direction to be delayed, causing a chain reaction at Worcester.

In addition, antiquated signalling means that only one train is allowed in the section between Droitwich Spa and Worcester Tunnel meaning that a late running service could be held at Droitwich Spa for up to 10 minutes if stuck behind another service.

The following table shows an hour at Worcester Foregate Street on 8 June with platform 1 services in black and platform 2 services in red.

	TIMETABLED		ACTUAL	
1	1524	WMR Hereford to Birmingham NS	1538 1540 1545	Arrives 14 minutes late on platform 1 and is cancelled due to a problem with the unit. Automated announcement states that the train is the 1540 to Dorridge and people try to board. After passengers are cleared from the train, departs to Worcester Shrub Hill siding
2	1525	GWR arrival from Bristol TM	1530	Arrives 5 minutes late
3	1527	GWR departure to Henwick Siding	1532	Departs 5 minutes late
4	1534	WMR Birmingham NS to Hereford	1538	Departs 4 minutes late due to train 1 being late
5	1535	WMR arrival from Dorridge	1549	Arrives 14 minutes late having been held at Shrub Hill from 1531 to 1548 due to train 1 in platform
6	1540	WMR departure to Stratford	1550 1552	Automated announcement that the train is the 1548 to Bristol TM. Platform staff hurriedly ensure that people are not on the wrong train. Departs 12 minutes late
7	1546	GWR arrival from Henwick Siding	1555	Arrives 9 minutes late due to train 6 in platform
8	1548	GWR departure to Bristol TM	1601	Departs 13 minutes late
9	1603	GWR Oxford to Great Malvern	1611	Departs 8 minutes late due to train 8 being late
10	1604	WMR arrival from Stratford	1604	Arrives on time
11	1611	WMR departure to Dorridge	1611	Departs on time
12	1612	GWR Hereford to Oxford	1619	Departs 7 minutes late due to train 9 being late

WMT claims that it would use technology to determine times when a particular station needs more or less staff presence which begs the question of the length of time it would take to reach that station. SLUG has asked for details on both the hours at which stations would be staffed and level of proposed staff cuts. Neither question has received an answer.

WMT also states that tickets would be available from Ticket Vending Machines (TVMs) and from "local convenience stores" which means that the expertise that ticket office staff possess would be totally eradicated. How will you buy season tickets, Rangers, split tickets, advance tickets with reservations etc.? You can get these tickets at present because ticket office staff know their job. Will a Tesco Express (other supermarkets are available!) employee be able to get you the ticket you need? Will TVMs sell them in the future? It should be remembered that not everybody has a computer or smartphone, and it is the most vulnerable members of society – the elderly and the disabled - that the Government is attacking.

In addition, although TVMs would be available at all stations, not all would accept cash. The advice at the briefing was that passengers who need to use cash could purchase tickets from the senior conductor on the train. This advice is laughable as there is more chance of encountering the Loch Ness Monster than the senior conductor on a Stourbridge Line train, and there is a chance that a member of the Revenue Protection Team could catch you ticketless on the train and fine you £100.

At present, passengers know where to go if they want advice and that is the ticket office. The proposal is that staff would be on the platform. That will be very interesting when the platforms are full of passengers as finding a member of staff would be more difficult than "Where's Wally?" WMT will not guarantee that these staff would be available throughout the day or if they would be provided with handheld ticket machines for the cash purchase of tickets or the purchase of tickets that TVMs do not support. The advice from WMT at the briefing was that customers could get their tickets from Snow Hill or Foregate Street. That's a joke! How can you get to Snow Hill or Foregate Street to buy your ticket when there are no facilities at your local station for you to buy an unwanted ticket to get there first?

So, what happens next? Hopefully, given the level of opposition, the Government will think again. There are more significant problems with the rail industry that must be addressed immediately. Firstly, control must be taken away from the pen pushers at DfT and handed back to rail professionals. Secondly, the absurdly complicated ticketing structure must be simplified to produce a system that everybody understands. You can't have a system that produces over 20 different tickets between Birmingham and London, and that is before you try to use split ticketing. Only then should other reforms that would benefit EVERY passenger be considered.

HAGLEY AND BLAKEDOWN PROGRESS
by Roger Davis

The 1047 Worcester Shrub Hill to Stratford service passes non-stop through Hagley on 10 August

In the previous edition of *Platform*, we published our proposals to reinstate off-peak through services between Hagley/Blakedown and Worcester. These proposals had been discussed with West Midlands Trains at meetings early this year but had been rejected. However, we persevered, and a formal proposal was handed to the West Midlands Trains speaker at our AGM on 11 May.

I am pleased to report that I attended a timetable planning meeting at West Midlands Trains' Birmingham headquarters on 18 July and our proposal - to swap calling patterns so that Worcester terminators stop at Hagley and Blakedown while Kidderminster terminators stop at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye - was raised as part of the West Midlands Trains formal presentation. The WMT timetabling team told the meeting that they support our proposal in principal and, subject to some detailed checks and final approval from the Department for Transport, the changes would be introduced in June 2024. Once again, it is reassuring (not!) to hear that the pen pushers in London can make the final decision on train services in Worcestershire.

However, it is looking a lot better than it did a few months ago and, hopefully, common sense will prevail and passengers in Hagley and Blakedown will see their through trains to Worcester reinstated. It's just a pity that we have to wait until next June before these services are restored.

One final item to come from the meeting was that the rail companies and West Midlands Rail Executive acknowledge that the worst train service in the area on Sundays is on Snow Hill line services. A SLUG survey has shown that the two stations with the lowest percentage of trains per hour on Sunday compared with Monday to Saturday are Blakedown and Kidderminster at 25%.

The 1008 Stratford to Worcester Foregate Street service passes non-stop through Blakedown on 10 August

The meeting was told that an investigation into how Snow Hill line Sunday services can be improved will start shortly although any improvements will have to be approved by DfT. SLUG has advocated a better Sunday service for many years, and it is hoped that we will be involved in this process early enough to affect the finally agreed timetable and not have to fight for amendments after the timetable has been introduced as we have done with the May changes.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

The Return of Curzon Street. Following on from excavation and groundworks at the site, intensive construction of the prestige HS2 station for Birmingham will commence in spring 2024. The station will be named Birmingham Curzon Street and will incorporate the classic architectural remains of the original terminus (1838-1966). Work is also progressing on the 300-metre-long viaduct that is being built to carry the track into the heart of the city from east Birmingham. *(Source: Birmingham Mail)*

"Black Five" 45110 on display in Highley Engine House on 21 April 2018

Keeping Afloat. The Severn Valley Railway has resorted to selling one of its out-of-service locomotives in order to raise working capital. Post-Covid recovery has been slow and SVR has decided to part with "Black Five" 45110, which has been in storage for four years. The sale price is undisclosed but proceeds will contribute to the £1.5m survival appeal, launched last April. *(Source: Kidderminster Shuttle)*

Thrills and Chills. The popular Polar Express rides return to Birmingham Moor Street this autumn. Heritage locomotives and rolling stock will operate on the weekend of 25/26 November and the event will continue through to 23 December. On board, the 2004 motion picture "The Polar Express" will be theatrically re-created and passengers will be hauled to the secret "North Pole". Tickets are available through Vintage Trains at https://vintagetrains.co.uk/train-rides/polar-express/ and prices start from £49.00. *(Source: Vintage Trains)*

It's Goodnight From Them. A familiar sight for the past 40 years on West Midlands railway lines, including the Stourbridge line at times, disappears on 18 September when Cross Country Trains withdraws its High Speed Trains from service despite not having replacement rolling stock. This is another "initiative" led by the DfT to cut costs which will deter customers as they find that passenger numbers outstrip the number of seats available, with 7-car trains reduced to 4-car. *(Source: Today's Railway)*

Birmingham New Street station on 4 September

A CrossCountry HST arrives from Plymouth

Up For Debate? On 7 September, the parliamentary petition opposing ticket office closures exceeded the magical 100,000 signatures that will force parliament to consider a debate on the subject. The petition remains open until 18 October at https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/636542. *(Source: SLUG Website)*