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Platform

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

SLUG Chairman Roger Davis met with Natasha Winter (Save Stourbridge Junction Ticket Office), George, Andy Street and Suzanne Webb MP at Stourbridge Junction to discuss the ticket office closure proposals

CONTENTS

2 Rail Users 1, HM Government 0 (after extra time)

3 Chiltern Withdraws Yet Another Stourbridge Service

4 Looking Forward To 2050

5 From HS2 To HS½

6 News In Brief

7 Dudley Deserves Better

8 Christmas Photo Quiz

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RAIL USERS 1, HM GOVERNMENT 0 (AFTER EXTRA TIME)
by Roger Davis

Two Transport Secretaries with egg on their faces

Here's your starter for ten. What do Transport Ministers John Prescott and Mark Harper have in common? The answer is that each has had egg on his face – the former literally on 16 May 2001 during the general election campaign and the latter figuratively on Halloween 2023 after being savaged by nearly ¾ million irate rail users. In true politician mode, Mr Harper passed the blame onto the rail companies by stating that "the proposals that have resulted from this process do not meet the high thresholds set by ministers, and so the government has asked train operators to withdraw their proposals." Given that it was common knowledge amongst the railway community that the Government had instigated and approved the proposals to force the rail companies to cut costs, it is unsurprising that senior rail company managers were apoplectic when the Government was forced into a very embarrassing U-turn.

SLUG was among stakeholders who attended Microsoft Teams meetings organised by Chiltern Railways and West Midlands Trains the day after the initial proposals were announced. What was obvious at the meetings was that the proposals had not been thought through and it appeared that they had been written on the back of an envelope. However, the timetable was clear – set the consultation period to the minimum allowed, get a few objections, dismiss those objections and close ticket offices. History has shown that the weight of objections caused the length of the consultation period to be trebled. In addition, a Parliamentary petition opposing ticket office closures received over 104,000 signatories with Stourbridge constituency leading the way with 2,925 signatories, 1,248 more than the runner-up. In fact, if you add the totals from adjoining constituencies, over 5,000 people along the Stourbridge line signed the petition thanks to the efforts of the Save Stourbridge Junction Ticket Office campaign, brilliantly coordinated by Natasha Winter.

Despite this, the Government and the train companies continued to promote their proposals. At the West Midlands Railway Stakeholder Conference on 27 September, the Customer Experience Director drew the short straw in trying to convince a sceptical and, in some cases, hostile audience that the proposals would benefit everybody. His argument was based on the three facts that the Government had been expounding since the consultation began – there would be no redundancies, passenger figures were only 60% of pre-Covid levels, and only 12% of tickets were sold at ticket offices.

The first claim had been blown out of the water at the first Chiltern Railways stakeholder meeting in July when it stated that its proposals would reduce staffing levels by 19 and that this was "a lot less than the other train operators are proposing".

The second claim was correct if the latest set of footfall totals was used. However, this was for the period from April 2021 to March 2022 when many people were still nervous about travelling after the pandemic. In fact, lockdown restrictions were still in force for the first 3½ months until 19 July 2021 at every postcode in the country except SW1A 2AA (a cul-de-sac just off of Whitehall).

Finally, the 12% figure was not initially backed up with publicised figures except at a few operators like GWR. West Midlands Trains did not publish any figures initially, although they surreptitiously appeared on its website after the consultation had ended. The figures for some Stourbridge line stations were interesting with percentage sales at four stations being over 20% - Cradley Heath 28.1%, Stourbridge Town 35.2%, Stourbridge Junction 23.9% and Kidderminster 30.9%. In fact, the total sales of 80,000 tickets in 2022/2023 at Stourbridge Junction ticket office was the highest at any West Midlands Railway managed station with the exception of Wolverhampton.

It was unbelievable that even the ticket office at Birmingham New Street was proposed for closure

Despite the huge backlash from the public, it came as a very pleasant surprise on Halloween when the Government announced its U-turn, but less of a surprise when it apportioned all of the blame for the fiasco onto the rail operators. Unfortunately, this is only an initial victory. We must remain on our guard as this Government is determined to cut railway running costs by any means and a second attack on ticket offices cannot be ruled out. What the Government has ignored is that inefficiencies in the rail industry have increased since the Department for Transport started micro-managing the services in 2006. Keith Williams' report in 2019 recommended returning overall control of the railways to rail professionals and the creation of a more "joined up" railway system. A draft bill has been included in the King's Speech although it is uncertain that this will become law by the next election. Until the rail industry is overhauled, inefficiencies due to fragmentation and muddled management by DfT will not be resolved.

CHILTERN WITHDRAWS YET ANOTHER STOURBRIDGE SERVICE
by John Warren

From the December timetable change, Chiltern Railways has withdrawn the 0644 service from Stourbridge Junction to London Marylebone on Saturday mornings. The unit still stables overnight at Stourbridge Depot, but will now leave the depot at 0643 and run empty to Birmingham Moor Street to enter service at 0714.

SLUG has contacted Chiltern Railways for a comment. However, the days when Chiltern was a innovative company led by visionaries such as Adrian Shooter and Ian Baxter have long gone. All we have now is another Arriva subsidiary with the same standards as the awful Arriva CrossCountry operation.

A 2-car unit arrives at Shrub Hill from Stratford ..

.. and is strengthened to 4-car to operate to Dorridge

However, West Midlands Railway services see a couple of improvements from December. For the early birds, there is an additional service at 0625 from Stourbridge Junction to Leamington Spa calling at all stations between Stourbridge Junction and Birmingham Snow Hill.

In addition, on Monday to Saturday, two diagrams currently operated using 3-car units and two diagrams currently operated with 4-car units will be lengthened to 5-car units. Despite this, two journeys - 1047 from Worcester Shrub Hill to Stratford-upon-Avon, returning at 1308 - will remain as 2-car units. SLUG will continue to campaign for these services to be increased to 4-car units and extended to serve Foregate Street from June 2024.

LOOKING FORWARD TO 2050
by John Warren

In 2019, West Midlands Rail Executive and Worcestershire County Council each published a rail investment strategy, detailing their vision of rail services in 2050. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 crisis moved the goal posts so both authorities have recently published updated versions of the strategies. The two documents have been produced with collaboration between the two authorities.

As far as the Stourbridge line is concerned, the initial aspiration is to return services between Stourbridge Junction and Birmingham back to six trains per hour, hopefully by 2026. It is intended that this will be increased to eight trains per hour between Rowley Regis and Birmingham in the 2030s by building an extra terminal platform at Rowley Regis on the car park side.

A Worcester to Paddington service pauses at Reading. Will hourly services operate from Kidderminster by 2029?

The biggest enhancement in both strategies is the proposed introduction of hourly through services between Kidderminster and London Paddington via Worcester and Oxford by 2029, extended to/from Stourbridge Junction shortly afterwards. This would be made possible by resignalling and upgrading the tracks between Droitwich Spa and Worcester Foregate Street, and redoubling some of the single line sections between Worcester and Oxford.

Finally, the intention is for the entire Snow Hill routes from Stratford-upon-Avon and Leamington Spa to Worcester to be electrified in the early 2030s. By that time, the Class 172s will be over 20 years old and in need of replacement.

Both strategies may be read in the News and Comment section of the SLUG website.

FROM HS2 TO HS½
by Roger Davis

Let's face it, HS2 Phase 2 was a Marmite project – you either loved it or hated it. In its place has come a "superb" DfT document "Network North – Transforming Britain's Transport" "detailing" how the £36 billion savings will be used on transport projects across the country. "Superb", that is, until you read it. Among the proposals were schemes that had either been completed years ago or were already funded. Within 24 hours of publication, some of the other proposals were removed from the document. Within four days, the Prime Minister stated that some of the proposals were "merely illustrative". For the section of HS2 that survived the cut, there was at least the pledge that the line would definitely terminate at Euston … well, possibly …. well, only if funded using private investment. In addition, a lot of the "detail" is sketchy. Many of the projects listed in the document are unfunded, while industry experts have said that it would be impossible to complete some of the funded projects within the stated budget.

However, for rail users, the news is not brilliant. Of the £36bn pledged, it is estimated that between £13bn and £20bn has been allocated to road schemes as a sop to motorists. This includes £8.3bn to repair potholes. So much for reducing carbon emissions, tackling global warming and encouraging a switch to public transport.

For the Stourbridge line, the only direct improvement is the reinstatement of platform 4 at Snow Hill. What about the electrification of the Snow Hill lines between Stratford/Leamington and Worcester to eradicate diesel trains from the line? What about connecting Stourbridge to the Metro network at Brierley Hill to reduce the horrendous level of petrol and diesel fumes when there is gridlock in the Amblecote area? What about upgrading the track and signalling around Worcester to allow for through Stourbridge Junction to Paddington services?

Unfortunately, the document has a lot in common with the Ticket Office closure proposals. It also looks like it was written on the back of an envelope due to it being produced in extreme haste without being fact checked. The front page proves this. It is a document announced in Manchester about the removal of a high speed line to Manchester. The map on the front page shows Manchester … in the vicinity of Preston! These people manage our railways. You really couldn't make it up!

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

The Coventry VLR vehicle on test in Dudley

Making Light of It. Metro tracks are now embedded in Castle Hill, Dudley and works are proceeding to Flood Street. Though the route is not ready for Metro vehicles, a light rail vehicle has already been running in the town. The Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre sited near Dudley's old rail station has successfully tested a prototype vehicle purposely built for the streets of Coventry, which proved its worth on 7 November 2023 and easily coped with challenges of the test track which includes a tight curve and a 250m vertical hump. *(Source: UK Tram)*

Photo Shoot Opportunity. For the first time in its events history, the Severn Valley Railway is organising its Winter Steam Gala in the month of January (2024). The organisers hope that the wintry backdrop will provide excellent photographic opportunities for amateur and professional cameramen. Trains will operate between 08:00 and 19:00 on Saturday 6 January and Sunday 7 January. The SVR hope to have five engines in steam. *(Source: Kidderminster Shuttle)*

Too Little, Too Late?. The King's Speech on 7 November included plans by the Government to introduce a Draft Rail Reform Bill to create Great British Railways as proposed in the Williams-Shapps report. The Draft Rail Reform Bill will enable parliament to review and test legislation, which will allow for a swifter passage through Parliament when legislation is finally brought forward. Under the Bill, franchising powers currently held by the Transport Secretary would be transferred to GBR, which will provide a single point of accountability for the performance of the railway. However, it is unlikely that the legislation needed to provide GBR with its full powers will pass before the next General Election. *(Source: Modern Railways)*

A Class Act. The new West Midland Railway Class 730 electric trains, which have just entered service between Bletchley and Euston, will be introduced on local routes early in 2024, initially on the Walsall to Wolverhampton route which serves Smethwick Galton Bridge. The Class 730s will later appear on the Cross-City Line between Lichfield, Birmingham and Redditch/Bromsgrove.

A Class 730 EMU on a test run at Wolverhampton

(Source: West Midland Railway)

A Fine Recovery. Leisure travel on the line between Worcester and Oxford is now 5% higher than it was before the Covid crisis. In addition, 544,270 passengers used Worcestershire Parkway station between April 2022 and March 2023, a 75% increase on the previous year and described as "exceeding all expectations".
(Source: Worcestershire Community Rail Partnership)

DUDLEY DESERVES BETTER
by John Warren

In a recent edition of *Platform*, SLUG referred to Dudley as being the "runt of the litter" in terms of public transport provision. This assertion was questioned in some quarters so I have undertaken an investigation.

By using the ruler function in Google Earth and a copy of an A-Z map to determine the boundary points between adjoining boroughs, I have calculated the total passenger track mileage (heavy rail and light rail) for each of the seven boroughs of the West Midlands county. To produce the 2025 figures, I have included the projects scheduled to be completed by 2025 - passenger services through Willenhall and Darlaston, passenger services on the Camp Hill line in Birmingham and the West Midlands Metro extension from Wednesbury to Dudley (Flood Street). The 2029 figures include the following, fully funded, projects - West Midlands Metro extensions from Flood Street to Brierley Hill and from Bull Street to Digbeth in Birmingham and a heavy rail extension from Walsall to Aldridge.

The figures are as follows:-

Borough	2021 Population	Track Mileage 2025	Track Mileage per 100,000 2025	Track Mileage 2029	Track Mileage per 100,000 2029
Sandwell	341,832	30.28	8.86	30.28	8.86
Solihull	216,240	17.69	8.18	17.69	8.18
Wolverhampton	263,727	15.04	5.7	15.04	5.7
Birmingham	1,144,919	60.13	5.25	61.29	5.35
Coventry	345,324	13.9	4.03	18.4	5.33
Walsall	284,124	10.45	3.68	13.05	4.59
Dudley	323,488	6.88	2.13	9.8	3.02

Even if the rail line between Harts Hill (Canal Street) and Stourbridge Junction was opened to passengers, the track mileage in Dudley would only increase to 12.96 miles (4.01 miles per 100,000 residents), still putting it behind Walsall at the bottom of the pile.

Public Transport - Dudley Fashion!

If you include the fact that the buses used on services that do not go to Birmingham are probably the oldest in the region, as residents of Kingswinford will witness as 20 year old relics belch out diesel fumes as they struggle up hills, it is easy to conclude that Dudley really is "the runt of the litter". It is time for the West Midlands Combined Authority to show some commitment and give Dudley the public transport system that its residents deserve.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ - NAME THE TELEVISION SERIES

The following are stills taken from well-known TV series featuring railway locations. 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).