Issue 36 June 2024

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

Platform

The Very Light Rail unit destined for Coventry is seen in test in Dudley on 16 May

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A CHANGE IN DIRECTION?
by Roger Davis

Thursday 2 May saw a change in direction when the incumbent Mayor of the West Midlands, Andy Street, was ousted by Labour opponent Richard Parker by just 1,508 votes. Of course, many people voted along tribal lines as they only knew Andy Street as the one who liked having his photo taken and Richard Parker as the one who shared a boat with an Indian boy in a 2012 Oscar winning film. However, from a public transport viewpoint, the change of Mayor muddies the waters as, although Andy Street's plans for a 2040 public transport network were well publicised, Richard Parker's ideas for the development of public transport in the area are unclear.

His manifesto states that he will complete the current Metro projects, including the extension to Brierley Hill, and will open the five stations currently under construction – Moseley, Kings Heath, Stirchley, Darlaston and Willenhall – although he manages to get two of these names wrong! However, the tone of the manifesto implies that these are being completed under obligation and that any new major rail projects in the West Midlands will be reset "to uplift capacity on key routes to the rest of the country".

The only new public transport policy that has been fully publicised will see bus services brought back into public control. The deregulation of bus services by Margaret Thatcher's government in 1986 has long been a Marmite subject – proponents citing the success of bus services in towns and cities such as Brighton and Hove, Nottingham and Reading and opponents citing the resurgence of bus services in Cornwall since the County Council took control in 2015.

A success for deregulation - Brighton

A success for public control - Cornwall

Certainly, deregulation has seen bus services decimated in Worcestershire and, to a lesser extent, in the Stourbridge area. This means that, unless Worcestershire County Council takes the decision to regulate bus services in the county, the dross currently being served up by First and Diamond will continue. However, regulation of services in the Stourbridge area is on the cards and might even break the pro-Birmingham stance that the largest bus operator seems to adopt.

One concern is that the cost of the exercise to return bus services to public ownership in Greater Manchester is said to be £143 million and that amount of money would have to be found from somewhere in the West Midlands budget. Even at today's inflated prices, this would more than pay for the four brand new railway stations in the West Midlands identified by the previous administration.

A traffic queue in Amblecote High Street stretches back to the Stourbridge Ring Road

Another issue is that a bus service is only as good as the road network it operates on, irrespective of whether it is publicly or privately run. Traffic congestion in the Stourbridge region can be horrendous, especially in the Amblecote and Wordsley areas. Therefore, SLUG's concern is that a rail link from Stourbridge, that would not only ease road congestion but would also integrate with the Metro network at Brierley Hill to provide faster through journeys to Dudley, Wolverhampton and Walsall, may be shunted into a siding even though it was in Andy Street's 2040 Transport Plan. We are assuming that the consultants' report, due by the end of 2024, will be produced and presented to the West Midlands Combined Authority but what happens after that is up in the air. You can be reassured that SLUG will be making as much noise as possible to keep this link on the table.

All we can do is wait and see what the new Mayor is proposing to do to improve rail and Metro services in the area. He has a tough act to follow, but we hope that many of the projects proposed by his predecessor are progressed. The aspiration is that, when voters stand at the ballot box in four years' time, they can look back at the progress made and not regret the decision that taken this year. We wish Richard Parker well as he takes up his new job and hope that progress is made to give the Stourbridge area the improved public transport network that it needs.

A GREAT BRITISH REALITY?
by John Warren

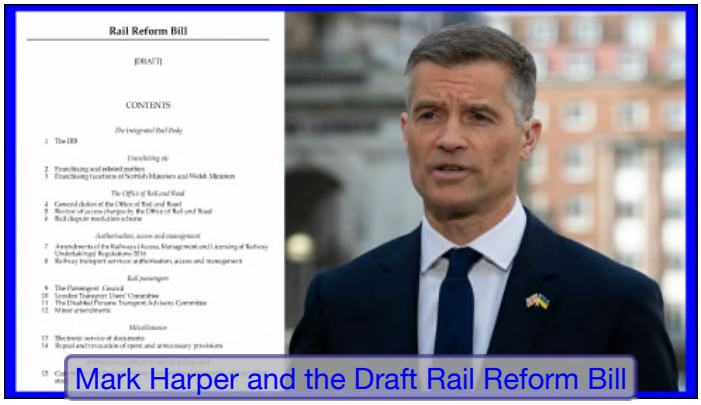
In the previous issue of *Platform*, I expressed concern that nothing seemed to be happening to wrest day-to-day micro-management of the railways from the Department for Transport and create Great British Railways (GBR).

As the Williams Report had been published in May 2021 and read and endorsed by the then Secretary of State for Transport, Grant Shapps, the Conservative Government has had three full parliamentary sessions to introduce and pass a bill to create GBR as recommended by Sir Keith Williams. Part of the problem has been the current Secretary of State, Mark Harper, who has shown little support for the rail industry by leading the initiative to close most ticket offices in England and allocating over 70% of HS2 savings into road schemes. However, given that his constituency has only one railway line, 22 miles long, with one unstaffed station, his disinterest in railways could be explained.

In 2021, a Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) was formed and now employs just over 200 staff in Derby, where GBR will have its headquarters. In February, the Government introduced a Draft Rail Reform Bill but progress was abandoned by the calling of July's General Election. It is uncertain whether a Conservative government will reintroduce the draft bill or introduce a full Rail Reform Bill in the first King's Speech of the next Parliament if returned to power.

However, on 25 April, Shadow Secretary of State, Louise Haigh, introduced the Labour Party's document "Getting Britain Moving : Labour's Plan to Fix Britain's Railways" with a commitment to introduce the bill to create GBR in its first King's Speech should it gain power. The Conservatives' draft bill and the Labour document are very similar. Both support the formation of GBR (although the draft Rail Reform Bill refers to it as the Integrated Rail Body), ticket reform and open access rail companies using the network. The draft bill differs slightly by naming Network Rail as the company that would run GBR whereas the Labour Party document states that GBR will be a brand-new company with Network Rail absorbed into the company.

Louise Haigh and the Labour Rail Reform Plan



Mark Harper and the Draft Rail Reform Bill

The major difference between the two parties is in the way that the train operating companies will operate. The Government Draft Bill envisaged that private companies will be awarded contracts to operate a service when old ones expire as now. The Labour Party document intends to wait until each company's contract is due for renewal and then bring it into public ownership as part of a single organisation. There are already six publicly owned train operators - Transport for Wales and ScotRail are controlled by the respective national assemblies, while London North Eastern Railway, Northern Trains, South Eastern and TransPennine Express are publicly run by the Operator of Last Resort after franchises were stripped or contracts were terminated by the Department for Transport. In addition, in late 2019, the then West Midlands Mayor called for West Midlands Trains to be stripped of its franchise due to major performance issues, while 2024 has seen calls for both Avanti West Coast and CrossCountry Trains to have their contracts terminated for the same reason.

It now seems that the reform of Britain's railways will happen sooner rather than later, irrespective of which party wins the next General Election. Hopefully, the contents of the King's Speech will be known by the time we publish September's *Platform*.

FOOTNOTE : A comment has been made that I have erroneously referred to the 2021 report as "The Williams Report". All I will say is that I have read *Murder On The Orient Express* but I wouldn't have the effrontery to call it a Christie-Warren novel.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Extra Ticket Gates at Moor Street Station. Passengers at Birmingham Moor Street station will benefit from the addition of seven new ticket gates to help reduce congestion and make it easier to enter and exit the city's second busiest station. The six-month project has doubled the number on the main concourse, and added two new gates on platform 1. The wider aisle gates should greatly assist passengers with mobility issues and those with push chairs.

The improved ticket gate lines at Moor Street station

(Source:- Chiltern Railways)

Cross City Stalwarts Sign Off. After 30 years operating the Cross City line from Lichfield to Bromsgrove or Redditch, the Class 323 electric multiple units are slowly being replaced by new Class 730 units. Many of the Class 323s will see further service in the north west.

(Source:- RAIL Magazine)

The old Hanson's Bridge before demolition in December 2023

Old Ale, New Rail. A new bridge is being installed over Birmingham New Road in Dudley this month to carry Metro Line 2 tracks. It will bear the famous "Hanson's Mild Ale" advertisement which was painted on the old structure. Although no longer available, Hanson's mild and bitter were popular Black Country tipples in the 60s and 70s. It would be fitting if Marston's, who own the brand, could brew a commemorative Hanson's mild ale in readiness for the line opening to passengers.

(Source:- Midland Metro Alliance)

The Roaring Forties. The hugely popular "Forties Weekend" returns to the Severn Valley Railway on 6/7 July. Visitors to the heritage railway will be able to be part of the congregation at a 1940s wedding, bargain with the black market traders at a bumper vintage marketplace, learn to jive at a dance class, listen to a rousing speech from Winston Churchill and much, much more. Naturally, a highlight of the event will be the big band show at Kidderminster Town station on Saturday evening between 7:45 and 11:00pm.

(Source:- Severn Valley Railway)

Lipstick on a Pig? Work has started on refurbishing CrossCountry's Voyager units. The work includes a completely new "brighter" livery for the units which operate Edinburgh or Manchester to Plymouth or Bournemouth services. All units, including 12 that will be transferred from Avanti West Coast, should be refurbished by 2027.

(CrossCountry Trains)

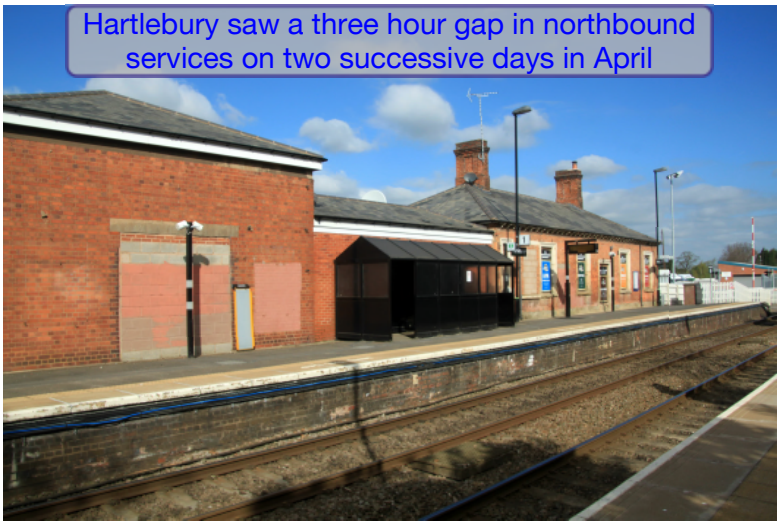
(Source:- Modern Railways)

THE TRAIN NOT STOPPING
by John Warren

The period from 2019 to 2021 saw dark days when nearly a half of the services were cancelled, a similar number over five minutes late, and more than ten services skipping station stops to make up time. Thankfully, these days are behind us. The May 2023 timetable change increased dwell times at destination stations and this has resulted in far fewer late running services and station stops being skipped, while the increase in traincrew strength to the target level has reduced cancellations. In comparison with 2021 figures, the average number of cancellations per day on days in 2024 not affected by strike action are down from 18 to 7.2, with late running services down from 14.7 to 8.2 per day and station stops being skipped down from 2.4 to 0.7 per day.

These totals are still significant, but many disruptions are down to circumstances beyond the train operator's control – flooding, line blockages, signal failures, bridge strikes and tragic incidents such as the one that occurred at Hoobrook Viaduct the other week.

Despite these improvements, SLUG continues to monitor services on a daily basis. While looking at a typical non-strike working week starting on Monday 22 April, we found that, of the 685 services that week, only 31 were cancelled. That means that about 95½% of all services ran, with close on a 100% service on Monday, Tuesday and Friday. Even on Wednesday (the worst day) over 91% of services ran.



Hartlebury saw a three hour gap in northbound services on two successive days in April

However, we found issues that need to be resolved. Of the 12 cancellations on Wednesday 24 April, the 1611 and 1715 services from Worcester Foregate Street were both cancelled. This may not seem too disruptive as the 1540, 1645 and 1740 services all operated. However, the unfortunate people at Hartlebury did not see a service from Worcester to Birmingham stopping there for three hours from 1531 to 1831. Looking on Realtime Trains at the timings of the services that did run during that period, there is no indication that a stop order was issued on a service that normally passed through Hartlebury non-stop.

On the Thursday, the 11 cancellations that day included the 1801, 1831 and 1901 services from Snow Hill to Worcester and the return services from Worcester at 1915 (F St), 1947 (S Hl) and 2011 (F St) were all cancelled due to train crew issues. Again, intervening services operated to and from Kidderminster, but it appears yet again that no stop orders were issued for these to call at Langley Green, Old Hill and Lye. Thus these three stations, as well as stations south of Kidderminster, saw gaps of two hours between services in both directions.

It also meant that no services ran from Worcester towards the Stourbridge line for two hours, with Hartlebury not seeing a service for three hours from 1831 to 2127. Added to this, on both the Wednesday and the Thursday, the final service of the day at 2300 from Snow Hill to Worcester was cancelled. Hopefully, replacement coaches or taxis were arranged to get passengers to their destination stations in both cases.

SLUG has raised these issues with West Midlands Trains and it has promised to investigate. We will continue to monitor services and report issues such as these to West Midlands Trains on behalf of our members. Action needs to be taken to ensure that stop orders are issued at the smaller stations so that passengers do not have to suffer unreasonable delays when services are cancelled.

A 2 hour gap between services from Worcester towards the Stourbridge line is unacceptable

A GOOD NEWS WEEK
by Roger Davis

The third week of May was a good week for SLUG members and their committee to get updates on developments along our line. On Tuesday 14 May, this year's Public Meeting and AGM took place and an audience of about 30 people listened to three very interesting presentations from senior representatives of West Midlands Trains, Chiltern Railways and West Midlands Rail Executive. A Q&A session followed, with Mal Drury-Rose, the new Executive Director at WMRE, giving frank and honest answers to questions on how the change of Mayor could affect future rail projects and the effect the creation of Great British Railways could have on local control of local rail services. The other major issue discussed was the poor level of Sunday services on our line compared with weekdays, and it was made clear to the WMT representatives that the current Sunday service is unacceptable.

Hopefully, we will see extra through services to/from Marylebone in the next year or so

One surprise announcement at the meeting came from Chiltern Railways stating that it intended to reintroduce the early Saturday morning through service to Marylebone from Stourbridge Junction, hopefully from December, with further improved through services intended from 2025, not only to/from Stourbridge Junction but possibly to/from Kidderminster. These changes would need to be given the green light by DfT but, rest assured, SLUG will be pushing for them to happen.

Two days after the public meeting, I attended the quarterly West Midlands Trains (WMT) Stakeholder Meeting. The main topic at that meeting was a presentation on improvements currently being made to stations managed by WMT.

The first is to provide a new step-free side entrance from platform 1 at Jewellery Quarter station through the new housing development into Pitsford Street. The second will see the long overdue provision of passenger lifts at Worcester Shrub Hill. At present, wheelchair passengers have to wait for a member of staff to take them across the boards at track level to and from platform 2 and, on one occasion, I witnessed a wheelchair-bound passenger stranded on platform 2 for over ½ hour. Work is now scheduled to start in November with completion due in February 2026.

The new side entrance at Jewellery Quarter station (WMT)

The old goods bridge at Shrub Hill will be used for passenger lifts

The work at Shrub Hill is part of the Accessibility for All Scheme to ensure that there is an accessible route for passengers and staff between at least one station entrance, all associated drop off points to each platform, and between platforms. One station that isn't mentioned is Old Hill where disabled passengers travelling towards Stourbridge have to travel to Rowley Regis and change trains there. SLUG will be talking to West Midlands Trains to press for Old Hill to be made accessible for all.

However, there are other projects in progress across the region, including on Stourbridge line stations. These include :-

- Installation of LED lighting to make stations brighter and reduce carbon emissions.
- Provision of new Digital Customer Information Screens (DCIS), Passenger Help Points and high definition (HD) CCTV systems.
- Provision of tactile platform edge paving and provision of RNIB Tactile Maps to aid visually impaired customers.
- Introduction of non-slip flooring. This has already been introduced on the main concourse at Snow Hill station and on the stairs at The Hawthorns.
- General repainting of stations. This has recently been completed at Hartlebury.

We will keep you informed of any further improvements at Stourbridge line stations.

Blakedown - DCIS and HD CCTV

Stourbridge Jct Help Point

Snow Hill - RNIB Tactile Map