Issue 37 September 2024

Platform

The 40th anniversary of Kidderminster Town station has been commemorated by an artwork of locomotive 4930 *Hagley Hall* on platform 2 of Kidderminster main line station

CONTENTS

2 Customer Second?

4 A Swing To The Left

6 News In Brief

7 Airport Transfer

8 SLUG Receives National Awards For The Second Year Running

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

CUSTOMER SECOND?
by Roger Davis

I'm writing this on 4 September and the school academic year has just started. Apart from a couple of unit failures, the service on the Snow Hill line this week has been excellent. The last sentence would have been true if I had written it on 4 June and 4 March. The fact is that train staff levels at the three Snow Hill line depots is at or above the full establishment. This contrasts greatly with the situation in the winter of 2019 when the ineptitude of the original management team at West Midlands Trains allowed drivers to leave or retire without new drivers being trained to replace them. The Covid crisis exacerbated the problem by preventing new staff from receiving driver training due to the distancing regulations. Thankfully, driver training is now effectively maintaining driver numbers at the level designated by the train operator. So, is everything rosy on our line? Far from it!

There are still days when cancellations are at an unacceptably high level. Although these are sometimes attributed to "short term staff sickness", the major reason for cancellations is staff leave. It appears that staff can book annual leave up to 2359 hrs the previous day. How can a reliable service operate under such conditions? I worked for a nationalised company for over twenty years, and we were awarded very generous holiday entitlements. Workers who covered 24 hours, 7 days a week also received generous shift bonus payments. However, holidays could only be taken subject to there being minimum staffing levels in your department to ensure that a full service could be provided to your customers. How would customers feel if, say, Marks and Spencer at Merry Hill announced that one of its two stores would be closed all day on a Saturday because there was only enough staff to open the other one?

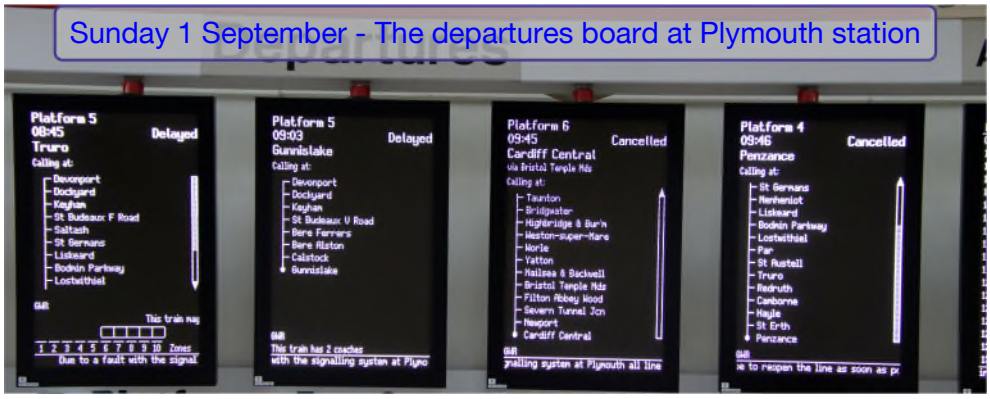
West Midlands Trains correctly state that staff are entitled to book holidays to be with their families. For this reason, it is Saturdays, Bank Holidays and school holidays that bear the brunt of cancellations. Unfortunately, these are also the times when customers and their families wish to travel by train but are forced to do something else because of the uncertainty of their train service actually running. The first Saturday of the summer holidays saw 38 of the 134 services cancelled (28.3%), while Saturday 17 August saw 43 cancellations (32.1%) and Saturday 24 August saw 44 cancellations (32.8%). These figures are appalling.

In addition, other external factors have affected service levels this summer. For instance, there were peaks on 20 June and 6 July while a planned reduced timetable was introduced on 14 and 15 July. Why was this? The culprit was Stourbridge's very own Jude Bellingham and his teammates.

FOR CAUSING THE CANCELLATION OF STOURBRIDGE LINE TRAIN SERVICES

The final of Euro 2024 on 14 July saw the Sunday timetable reduced by 13 services. This seems low, but the Sunday timetable is very poor compared with the rest of the week and the 13 cancellations represent 24.1% of services. The following day also saw planned reductions to the service, possibly due to staff booking leave in advance to celebrate "football coming home" the previous evening. As we now know, football didn't come home. It couldn't! There were no trains to bring it home!

However, I am being unduly unfair to West Midlands Trains as this is a national issue. In mid-July, I spent the weekend in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and travelled to Edinburgh and back on the Saturday. The departure boards at both stations were full of cancelled trains with LNER, Northern, Transpennine Express and ScotRail all guilty. In fact, my journey back from Edinburgh was delayed by 1½ hours because my original Transpennine Express service was cancelled. The upside was that Delay Repay paid for that journey. The departure board at Newcastle on the Sunday was also full of cancelled services, something that is rare on Snow Hill line on Sundays despite the fact that all services are staffed using voluntary overtime.



Sunday 1 September - The departures board at Plymouth station

Last weekend, I was in Plymouth and needed to travel to Dawlish on both Saturday and Sunday. I selected through journeys in both directions on both days, only to find that three of the four journeys were cancelled due to staff shortages while the other was delayed by nearly an hour "awaiting a member of the train crew". It wasn't just these services that were cancelled – departure boards throughout South Devon were full of cancelled services. The result was that all four journeys required a change at Newton Abbot. Of the eight trains I caught, seven were full and standing with four of these journeys on board one of the cattle trucks that laughingly calls itself a CrossCountry Trains Voyager. Does this encourage holiday makers to travel around South Devon by train? I think not.

It is obvious that the customer is still receiving sub-standard service. The rail industry will see major changes over the next few years. What is essential is that the new "nationalised" railway recognises that the customer comes first, and that the passenger network currently operates seven days a week every day of the year except Christmas Day. Staff contracts should be designed to ensure that this happens without the cancellations that occur today during school holidays, at weekends and Bank Holidays and whenever England play in a major tournament. Will it happen? All SLUG can do at present is keep complaining to West Midlands Railway about the current situation. In the future, it will be Great British Railways, as created by the legislation currently passing through parliament, who will need to take action to produce a service that puts the customer first by operating without unnecessary cancellations on all days.

A SWING TO THE LEFT
by John Warren

You will have to have been on holiday on Mars not to know that the Labour Party won the General Election on 2 July after a race that was as one-sided as Usain Bolt taking on Allan Carr over 100 metres.

The new Government was very quick off the mark in introducing the Public Ownership of Railways Bill, which amends the 1993 Transport Bill by bringing Train Operating Companies into public ownership as their contracts expire. Despite the bill having its second reading on 29 July, it still has to be debated in the Lords meaning that it's unlikely to gain Royal Assent until the end of the year. This would mean that the first two contracts to expire – Greater Anglia and West Midlands Trains on 14 September – would probably need to be extended, if only for a short period. However, it appears that Avanti West Coast and CrossCountry, who received new long-term contracts in October last year for improving performance levels from extremely appalling to simply appalling, are in the crosshairs of the new Government and may have their contracts terminated early for failing to improve their services.

West Midlands Trains and Avanti West Coast - Early candidates for nationalisation?

A second bill, to transfer day-to-day management of the rail industry from the Department for Transport to the newly formed Great British Railways, will be introduced after the summer recess. SLUG has already been approached for comments by Cat Eccles, the newly elected MP for Stourbridge, and we will look at the bill when it is made public to ascertain whether we have any concerns.

Lord Peter Hendy (NRM)

The Government also made a significant appointment in the Department of Transport with Lord Peter Hendy named as the Minister with responsibility for rail. Lord Hendy has spent his entire career in the transport industry rising to Commissioner of Transport for London in 2006 before becoming Chairman of Network Rail in 2015. It is unknown what influence Lord Hendy has had on the negotiations between the Department for Transport and ASLEF but the dispute that has greatly inconvenienced rail passengers for the best part of two years has been resolved subject to an ASLEF membership vote. The dispute was prolonged by the intransigence of the previous Minister of State who refused to talk to the unions and who is now seeking job opportunities away from parliament.

However, on the down side, the Chancellor has announced that the Restore Your Railways (RYR) initiative to "Reverse Beeching" has been scrapped. Despite the doom and gloom spread by the popular press, rail industry journalists are not too downhearted. Many consider RYR as a smoke screen. The very few projects that have been completed, like the restoration of the rail link to Okehampton in Devon, were in development and had received funding long before RYR. In addition, it appears that most of the accepted projects were ones that could be implemented on the cheap. For instance, a new station in North Staffordshire was approved despite the stations either side of it only being 1½ miles distant. Conversely, the plan to restore an important rail link in the Midlands, from Stratford-upon-Avon to Honeybourne, which needed the reinstatement of just over 5 miles of track, was initially accepted by RYR and given limited funding to develop a business case before being rejected with indecent haste, to the amazement of many rail insiders.

Unfortunately, it is at a local level where the change at the top is concerning. The new Metro Mayor, Richard Parker, seems to concentrating on the regulation of bus services with the future of the rail network not a priority at present. The announcement that the delivery of the five new West Midlands stations and the Metro line to Dudley would be delayed by a year was no surprise. I have recently travelled past the sites of all five stations and have followed progress on the Metro line from Great Bridge to Dudley and anybody who thought that these would be completed in 2024 was living in cloud cuckoo land.

Work continues on the Metro extension in Dudley on 19 July

The concern is the onward extension to Merry Hill and Brierley Hill. All that the Mayor has said is that the Metro will go to Merry Hill, but extra funds (£30m) will be needed to complete the line to Brierley Hill. If Brierley Hill is scrapped then Dudley Council has wasted over £1m building a footpath to the stop from the town centre. In addition, the line will terminate alongside the canal at Merry Hill high above the shopping centre and well away from connecting bus services. Surely, some executive decision is needed now to either commit to a Brierley Hill terminus or find a more convenient place for a terminus at Merry Hill.

The Mayor's current stance also brings into question the future of a rail link between Round Oak and Stourbridge. The consultants' report is due to be published later this year. Will it go straight into the bin? SLUG will be doing everything it can to ensure that this important link remains on the table.

Thus, there has been a major shift in emphasis in the last two months. It will be interesting to see what evolves over the coming years. We will endeavour to keep you informed.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Stourbridge Junction - the venue for a Meet The Managers session on 23 October

Whistle Stop Talking Shop. West Midland Trains has announced that its next "Whistle Stop" event will take place at Stourbridge Junction on Wednesday 23 October. This is a chance for the travelling public to speak to West Midlands Trains managers and British Transport Police, enabling the company to gain valuable feedback about the Snow Hill Lines.

(Source:- West Midland Trains)

Stourbridge Line Closed. The Stourbridge Line will be closed between Birmingham Snow Hill and Stourbridge Junction from Sunday 27 October to Thursday 31 October for essential engineering works. Bus replacement services will operate twice an hour on the Sunday and four times an hour on Monday to Thursday. A limited rush hour rail service will operate between Snow Hill and Smethwick Galton Bridge. A half-hourly rail service will operate between Stourbridge Junction and Worcester, and the Stourbridge Town branch will operate as normal. Details are at https://www.westmidlandsrailway.co.uk/oct24 *(Source:- West Midlands Railway)*

A Class 323 train arrives at the redeveloped University station on 29 August 2023

The Class of 2025. The Class 323 trains, which have been in operation on the Cross City line since 1994, are now entering the final few weeks of service. It is expected that the route will be 100% operated by new Class 730 trains by October. Three quarters of the fleet of 26 trains have already been replaced by the brand-new 730s. WMT has announced a special farewell trip from Birmingham to Liverpool on Sunday 29 September at a cost of £64.60 (children £32.30) with proceeds to charity. *(Source:- West Midland Trains)*

Dash to the Bash. The Severn Valley Railway hopes customers will book early for a celebration of diesel traction at the Autumn Diesel Bash from Thursday 3 to Sunday 6 October, starring two Class 25s. The event will feature both guest and home locos. SVR will be running a busy timetable over the four days. *(Source:- Severn Valley Railway)*

(Facebook)

And Finally. A world renowned local celebrity has responded to a report on BBC Midlands Today giving his age as ten years old. George, The Stourbridge Junction Station Cat, has revealed that he was only eight when the programme was broadcast and that he will be nine years old on 15 September. *(Source:- Facebook)*

AIRPORT TRANSFER
by Roger Davis

Through trains from Galton Bridge to Birmingham International and Wales were withdrawn in 2022

Since the December 2022 timetable change when the stop at Smethwick Galton Bridge on the Transport for Wales services from Birmingham International to Aberystwyth or Holyhead was removed, SLUG has been campaigning to get a through service from Galton Bridge to International reinstated. This was primarily for people travelling to Birmingham Airport although travellers to the NEC and the Resorts World Arena would also benefit. The December 2022 changes were designed to create the following service pattern between Birmingham New Street and Wolverhampton.

TPH	TOC	Route	Calling at
2	WMR	Walsall – Wolverhampton	All stations
2	XC	Bournemouth / Bristol TM – Manchester Piccadilly	Non stop
2	WMR	Birmingham New Street – Shrewsbury	Smethwick Galton Bridge
2	LNR	Birmingham New Street – Liverpool Lime Street	Dudley Port ††
1	Avanti	London Euston – Glasgow Central / Edinburgh	Sandwell & Dudley
1	TfW	Birmingham International – Aberystwyth / Holyhead	Sandwell & Dudley
1	LNR	Birmingham New Street – Crewe via Stoke-on-Trent	Via Tame Bridge Parkway

†† When Metro opens. Until then one train stops at Galton Bridge, one train at Coseley.

Through trains from Galton Bridge to Liverpool may be withdrawn in 2025

However, changes made in 2024 have seen the service to Crewe cut back to run from Stafford to Crewe only, with the second Shrewsbury service diverted to operate via Tame Bridge Parkway. This means that, when the Metro opens in 2025, Smethwick Galton Bridge will only have one long distance service per hour, while Sandwell & Dudley and Dudley Port will have two. This seems wrong given that Galton Bridge is not only an interchange for Stourbridge line passengers but also for passengers from the Solihull and Shirley lines wishing to travel to Wolverhampton and beyond without having to walk across Birmingham City Centre.

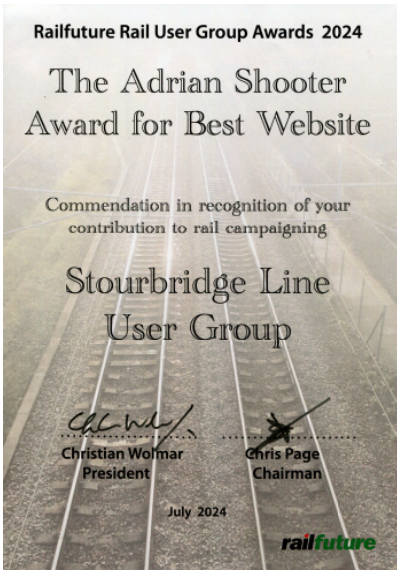
Another development this year has seen West Midlands Trains apply to extend its Stafford to Crewe service to Manchester Airport from 2026. As passenger levels rise, SLUG believes that this service should be extended back to start at Birmingham New Street with a stop at Smethwick Galton Bridge using the path vacated when the second Shrewsbury service was rerouted.

The Air-Rail Link transports passengers from Birmingham International to utter chaos

There is one good reason for this. Birmingham Airport is currently a disaster area. I've been unfortunate enough to use the airport on four occasions this year. On the two outbound journeys, Jet2 was forced to open its check-in desks four hours before take-off because 90 minute queues start outside the building, snake through ground floor barriers, go up a lift and then zigzag through first floor barriers. On the first return flight at 0200 hrs, passport control was negotiated quickly but was followed by a one hour wait for the cases to appear on the carousel. The second return flight at 1130 hrs resulted in a one hour queue starting at the air bridge to get through passport control. This was compounded by the route from arrivals to the Air-Rail Link station being blocked for ten minutes by a queue of passengers at the TUI check in desks.

This doesn't mean that SLUG has abandoned its campaign to get through services to Birmingham International restored. It has submitted a paper to the West Midlands Rail Executive and West Midlands Trains offering suggestions of ways in which that can be achieved. However, it feels that giving Stourbridge line passengers a choice of airports that could be reached directly from Galton Bridge is an option that should be explored.

SLUG RECEIVES NATIONAL AWARDS FOR THE SECOND YEAR RUNNING
by Roger Davis



For the second year running, I was invited to represent SLUG at the Railfuture Annual Rail User Groups Awards Ceremony in Edinburgh on 13 July. I already knew that we had been nominated for awards in one category, but to receive silver awards in both the newsletter and website categories was a major shock, especially as our previous website had received a gold award in 2018 while our newsletter won the gold award last year.

The awards were decided by a panel of Railfuture vice-presidents - Ian Brown (former MD of London Rail), Roger Ford (Industry and Technology Editor of Modern Railways magazine), Chris Green (former Head of ScotRail, Network South East and InterCity in British Rail Days and former MD of Virgin Trains) and Stewart Palmer (former MD of South West Trains). To receive glowing comments from the panel made the awards even more special.

We will be doing everything we can to maintain these standards in the future.