PLATFORM

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The Midland Metro extension to Grand Central is open, giving Stourbridge line passengers access to New Street with a single change at the Hawthorns or Jewellery Quarter… with a valid ticket of course !

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INSIDE LONDON MIDLAND
by Rob Hebron

Located a considerable distance from Birmingham New Street Station, the offices of London Midland at 102 New Street are inconspicuous, buried within a multi-tenant building. The exterior is notable for a glass encased elevator. The lift takes visitors to the fifth floor where the company holds hospitality events. The purpose of this visitor's presence was to attend a conference and presentation titled "Inside London Midland". Recognised as a bona fide stakeholder in the Snow Hill Lines, SLUG was invited as a gesture of gratitude for helping LM achieve an impressive eighty six points in the National Rail Passenger Survey (NRPS). Of course, there was an ulterior motive to inviting Rail User Groups but it was an entirely justifiable one: the management of London Midland had a genuine interest in determining the aspirations of RUGs in their responses to the West Midlands Rail Franchise Consultation. I was more than happy to share the SLUG wish list.

The SLUG response has already been submitted but it was a wonderful opportunity to reinforce the expectations of the Group and introduce ideas. Naturally, LM wanted to set out its stall first. Mr Francis Thomas, who presided over the event, assigned managers to each of the passenger representatives. I conversed with several members of the LM team who were keen to explain a new marketing initiative called "Travel Made Simple". London Midland wants to go back to basics and make rail travel convenient and easy to understand. This may be obvious as a theory but it has not always been seen in practice. To implement "Travel Made Simple", reliable up- to-date information must be accessible at every point of entry to the rail network. This must be backed up by technology at stations and by on-line media.

The successes of LM were advertised in the room on poster display boards. These achievements need to be proclaimed in the wider world. The boards also illustrated forthcoming developments funded by £15 million of investment. A large proportion of this figure has been earmarked for lines emanating from Birmingham New Street and is part of the package of measures promised for attaining the Direct Award, (the short extension of the current franchise).

Lye station will gain TVMs, but not much else!

The Snow Hill Lines are not forgotten and three Stourbridge Line stations will benefit from new ticket vending machines, namely at Lye, Blakedown and Hartlebury. Snow Hill Lines Manager, Brenda Lawrence has indicated a willingness to introduce earlier Sunday morning trains into Birmingham, which are already lined up for the Trent Valley and other lines. She has told us to persist with our aspirations which are presently impeded by Network Rail track access requirements.

Brenda and Managing Director Patrick Verwer both wanted to emphasise the commitment to revenue protection. Consultants and officers from other regions have been brought in to advise and assist the Revenue Protection Team whose numbers have swollen to address the ongoing problem of fare evasion.

Recruitment of drivers continues with special attention given to placing personnel at depots where they can be brought in to perform service recovery. Many of these drivers were originally London Midland men/women who have returned to their original employer, having experienced long distance, cross country shifts which are not as attractive as they thought. Some new drivers are ex freight industry staff and need little training.

Better still, LM has created new apprenticeships for school leavers and the range of schemes cover much more than train driving. A successful apprentice may find a job in an office rather than in the cab but will be matched with his or her ability. Now is the time to address skill shortages which might otherwise create issues in maintenance and reliability of rolling stock. This kind of investment is rarely advertised but has a positive impact on the service for the daily traveller.

My conversations led me to believe that London Midland shared SLUG concerns about connectivity to and from the network. I know that London Midland cannot introduce new services without infrastructure changes and sufficient rolling stock. However, I believe that train operators and Rail User Groups must stand together to lobby the DfT to bring forward improvements. My experience of liaising with LM is that the company listens and has delivered a good deal of what we have requested or suggested. The fact is that (at the time of writing), the Group does not know the identities of the other franchise bidders. London Midland is the only entity with which it can negotiate. There is a lot to be said for consistency and Patrick Verwer wants to build on what his company has achieved. I am inclined to agree with his sentiments and I hope that SLUG can do so too.

WHEELS IN MOTION
by Paul Humphreys

As is our usual practice, the SLUG Annual General Meeting was preceded by an Open Meeting. Members and guests were addressed by Malcolm Holmes (West Midlands Rail), Brenda Lawrence (London Midland) Pete Bond (Centro) and David Balme (Worcestershire County Council). Chiltern Railways was invited but was unable to send a representative.

This article offers a summary of the presentation by Malcolm Holmes who is Acting Programme Director of WMR. London Midland, Chiltern, Centro & WCC have been featured in past issues of Platform and its predecessor, the SLUG Newsletter and will continue to be so in future editions.

The economic value of rail:

It is acknowledged that rail is a key economic asset for the region. Tens of thousands of people rely on rail every day for both work and leisure. Rail also promotes and initiates regeneration opportunities and action. Malcolm identified a number of current problems. These include: local influence in rail services is currently limited and key decisions are currently made in Whitehall. Great knowledge of the West Midlands rail network exists in the region but it has not been possible to exert a material influence and it has been difficult to effect change or develop new services.

WMR and WMR Franchise objectives:

WMR aims to increase *local* influence over the rail network through the following:

- a strong role in the specification and bringing about the 2017 West Midlands franchise
- leading the local management of this franchise
- a role in the specification of other franchises that operate in the region
- a fully devolved West Midlands rail franchise.
- WMR Franchise objectives were identified as: better services; catering for and facilitating growth; better stations and access; ease of use; a high quality network. All of the above, well managed – locally.

WMR and franchise competition:

There will be collaboration over the specification and the franchise competition team will include two WMR representatives. It will lead the Stakeholder Consultation exercise; will play a part in the bid evaluation and will sign off the Collaboration Agreement with the Secretary of State. The Agreement will set out:

- structure for franchise management, including a joint Strategic Board
- WMR funding arrangements
- How WMR can seek influence over other relevant franchises
- Longer term path to full devolution.

The West Midlands franchise map will remain largely unchanged. WMR will lead the West Midlands franchise management which is responsible for West Midlands local rail services as well as having influence over services operated by the West Coast Business Unit, including services to Coventry/Northampton and Stafford.

Timetable:

LM and Virgin at Wolverhampton. What will WMR influence in the new West Coast franchise?

July 2016: Publication of invitation to Tender
Summer 2016: Approval of the Collaboration Agreement by WMR Ltd members
September 2016: Signing of Collaboration Agreement by WMR Ltd Chair and the Secretary of State.
November 2016: Franchise bids returned.
June 2017: Contract Award
October 2017: Franchise Commencement.

SLUG will keep members fully informed of progress and will represent your interests wherever and whenever possible.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

A tram stops at the new Snow Hill stop.

Where's the Tram Stop? Midland Metro trams now operate through to Grand Central. The trams which used to call at Birmingham Snow Hill at Platform Four have been diverted. However, there seems to be confusion concerning the Snow Hill tram stop. The designated stop is actually elevated from street level and outside the railway station. Geographically it is nearer to Snow Hill Queensway than Colmore Row. Stourbridge Line passengers are advised to change at Jewellery Quarter for Birmingham New Street or walk from Colmore Row to Bull Street. Confused?

(Source – Centro/ Bob Randle/ SLUG Facebook followers)

Upcoming improvements at stations. At the London Midland Stakeholder Event, SLUG was represented by Bob Randle who reports the following improvements for Stourbridge Line stations.

- New and upgraded ticket vending machines (TVM)
- New TVMs at Blakedown, Hartlebury, Lye, Small Heath & Lye
- 'Click and collect' facilities and contactless payment (Presumably for staffed stations!).

(Source – Bob Randle/ London Midland: Francis Thomas)

Makeover for Railway Bridge. The road bridge in Comberton Hill, Kidderminster has been given a smart new coat of paint. The structure which spans the rail lines at Kidderminster station is now adorned in black and silver. The old murals which were applied in the 1990s were in a sorry state and have been obliterated. Network Rail had not scheduled re-painting until 2019 and so two local councillors stepped in. Councillor Tracy Onslow dipped into her 2015 District Council Community Leadership Fund and Councillor Fran Oborski used parts of her County Council Divisional Fund plus economic regeneration funding from Wyre Forest District Council. The combined cash pots have covered the £2000 plus work which was carried out by local resident volunteers.

(Source – Kidderminster Shuttle)

Hartlebury station

More trains to stop at Hartlebury. The next Stourbridge Line timetable starting on 11 December 2016 will introduce two additional stops for Hartlebury. From this date on Mondays to Saturdays, the 2233 Dorridge-Worcester Shrub Hill (2301 from Birmingham Snow Hill) calls additionally at Hartlebury at 2346. On Saturdays Hartlebury gains a new earlier service: The 0544 Worcester Shrub Hill-Dorridge calls additionally at Hartlebury at 0559.

(Source – London Midland; Brenda Lawrence, Francis Thomas)

STOURBRIDGE JUNCTION TO DERBY - A MAJOR MAIN LINE ?
by Roger Davis

The Stourbridge Line User Group is campaigning for the reinstatement of the Stourbridge Junction to Walsall railway line as part of a wider scheme to link Worcestershire with Derby via Dudley, Walsall, Lichfield and Burton-on-Trent. The Group accepts the concept of a Midland Metro line operating alongside this line as it would properly serve the centres of Brierley Hill and Dudley and provide direct services to both Birmingham and Wolverhampton. However, the Group is demanding that nothing is done to prevent a heavy rail or tram-train line from operating alongside the Metro route to Wednesbury and extended through to Walsall and Lichfield City where it can link up with existing lines.

The Group realises that, to achieve that aim, its arguments must be based on fact. There are other campaigning groups with the same aims as SLUG who are basing their argument on the fact that the line from Stourbridge to Derby was a main line passenger route that was unfairly axed by Doctor Richard Beeching. Part of that argument is patently untrue as the Stourbridge Junction to Dudley passenger service was withdrawn on 30 July 1962, some 8 months before the much beloved doctor published his report on 27 March 1963. Another aspect of the claim also seems unlikely as the Stourbridge Junction to Dudley service was part of the GWR while the lines from Dudley onwards were owned by the LMS.

Walsall station before it was buried in the 1970s

For this reason, SLUG decided to investigate just how easy it was to get from Stourbridge Junction to Derby before the lines closed in the 1960s. What it found was that the journey was even harder than thought. Although it is possible that excursion trains traversed the line in full, a regular timetabled journey needed to use four or five different services with three or four changes of train.

- Stourbridge Junction to Wolverhampton Low Level (GWR/BR(WR)) as far as Dudley
- Dudley to Walsall (LMS/BR (LMR))
- Wolverhampton High Level to Burton-on-Trent (LMS/BR (LMR)) from Walsall with some changes necessary at Lichfield City in 1950, but not 1960
- Birmingham New Street to Derby (LMS/BR (LMR)) from Burton-on-Trent

Timetables for 1950 (in blue) and 1960 (in green) are shown. All services between Dudley and Walsall are shown together with the first connecting services for the rest of the journey. Poor connection times are highlighted in yellow (over ½ hour wait), orange (over 1 hour) or pink (over 2 hours). The resultant timetables are printed on the next page and prove that the route was never considered a though route with connections as they were. Even with good connecting services, the journey would have taken about 1¾ hours for 47 miles at an average speed of about 27 mph. Any journey from Stourbridge to Derby would have made between 13 and 19 stops.

MON TO FRI		1950				
Stourbridge Jct	d	0610	0755	1031	1220	1640
Dudley	a	0631	0815	1052	1239	1703
Dudley	d	0720	0840	1233	1308	1705
Walsall	a	0738	0858	1251	1328	1726
Walsall	d	0823	1028	1316	1652	1756
Lichfield City	a	0847	▼	1343	▼	1820
Lichfield City	d	0850	▼	1507	▼	1854
Burton-on-Trent	a	0922	1122	1538	1746	1931
Burton-on-Trent	d	0954	1143	1714	1815	2007
Derby	a	1011	1203	1731	1840	2023
JOURNEY TIME		4:01	4:08	7:00	6:40	3:43

MON TO FRI		1950				
Derby	d	0610	0748	1246	1715	1715
Burton-on-Trent	a	0628	0811	1310	1738	1738
Burton-on-Trent	d	0650	0823	1312	1745	1745
Lichfield City	a	▼	▼	1341	▼	▼
Lichfield City	d	▼	▼	1644	▼	▼
Walsall	a	0752	0923	1710	1838	1838
Walsall	d	0822	1201	1726	1845	2005
Dudley	a	0844	1220	1745	1905	2024
Dudley	d	0919	1231	1750	2044	2044
Stourbridge Jct	a	0942	1252	1810	2106	2106
JOURNEY TIME		3:32	5:04	5:24	3:51	3:51

MONDAY TO FRIDAY	1960										
Stourbridge Junction	dep	0710	0755	0841	0841	1150	1150	1338	1338	1635	1727	1907
Dudley	arr	0731	0816	0902	0902	1209	1209	1359	1359	1700	1747	1926
Dudley	dep	0735	0837	0918	1018	1218	1318	1418	1618	1718	1755	2018
Walsall	arr	0751	0853	0934	1034	1234	1334	1434	1634	1736	1812	2034
Walsall	dep	0753	1049	1049	1049	1253	1449	1449	1649	1849	1849	2049
Burton-on-Trent	arr	0845	1145	1145	1145	1334	1537	1537	1735	1936	1936	2136
Burton-on-Trent	dep	0859	1213	1213	1213	1416	1706	1706	1759	1956	1956	2150
Derby	arr	0921	1228	1228	1228	1431	1723	1723	1816	2012	2012	2206
JOURNEY TIME		2:11	4:33	3:47	3:47	2:41	5:33	3:45	4:38	3:37	2:45	2:59

MONDAY TO FRIDAY	1960										
Derby	dep	0612	0655	0812	0906	0906	1155	1325	1509	1509	1720
Burton-on-Trent	arr	0628	0717	0827	0924	0924	1211	1341	1523	1523	1741
Burton-on-Trent	dep	0642	0800	0900	1000	1000	1218	1400	1600	1600	1805
Walsall	arr	0727	0843	0943	1043	1043	1303	1446	1643	1643	1848
Walsall	dep	0811	0850	0950	1050	1250	1356	1458	1650	1726	1850
Dudley	arr	0828	0907	1007	1107	1307	1414	1515	1707	1745	1909
Dudley	dep	0840	1030	1030	1430	1430	1430	1616	1712	1749	1930
Stourbridge Junction	arr	0902	1047	1047	1447	1447	1447	1629	1731	1810	1950
JOURNEY TIME		2:50	3:52	2:35	5:41	5:41	2:52	3:04	2:22	3:01	2:30

However, the fact that it was not a viable cross country route in the past does not preclude its use as such in the future. The line will never be the strategic main line with express trains from Scotland and the North East to the South West as envisaged in some quarters, as such services need to serve Birmingham for connections to all parts of the country. However, it could be a strategic feeder line, connecting Worcestershire and the Black Country to services to the North East at Burton-on-Trent or Derby. We need to campaign to get this line reinstated sooner rather than later.

National Memorial Arboretum would be served by the line

CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS

The subject of re-opening disused railway lines can cause heated debate. The purists seem to desire a replica of the line which was closed, without due regard to why it was closed in the first place. Some misguided individuals criticise Rail User Groups for not being more vociferous and confrontational. The fact is that no mothballed railway line has re-opened without a lengthy campaign and a business case. A certain amount of trust must be placed in our transport planners and if a link between two or more towns is reinstated, I don't think the public can complain how it is delivered.

Rebuilding railways or laying completely new lines is costly and not undertaken on a whim. Where there are other modal options, they have to be considered. The Midland Metro (Wednesbury to Brierley Hill and Miscellaneous Amendments) Order Transport and Works Act 1992 was the first step in restoring a railway line through the Black Country. The thinking behind applying a light rail solution was that it could link into the existing Wolverhampton to Birmingham Metro line and access the Merry Hill Centre. Compulsory land purchase costs would be offset by less costly infrastructure than is required for a traditional railway.

A tram approaches Priestfield stop.

SLUG was supportive of Metro, on the understanding that a track bed would be protected for heavy rail at a later date. This entente has remained in place but funding for Metro Line Two has not been forthcoming until now. Twenty four years delay for Metro has to be factored into the Stourbridge to Walsall heavy rail link and currently, West Midlands Integrated Transport authority does not envisage trains or even tram-trains running to Dudley and beyond before 2043. Even so, in documents such as "Movement For Growth", Stourbridge to Walsall is clearly identified as an official strategy.

I now doubt whether I shall see trains from Stourbridge to Dudley and Walsall in my lifetime. Does that mean that I should stop campaigning? If SLUG does not persist then my son and daughter will not realise my dream either. However, subject to a business case being proven (and it's looking likely), I may be able to catch a Metro tram from Brierley Hill to Wolverhampton where connections are available to northern England and Scotland.

Metro is a foundation for building upon. The current Wednesbury – Brierley Hill light rail proposals would not prevent the Stourbridge - Walsall route reopening for conventional freight and passenger train services in the longer term. This can be demonstrated by the fact that shared running of trains and tram services over the same infrastructure already occurs elsewhere in Europe and is shortly to be introduced between Sheffield and Rotherham. To those opponents of Metro who want trains or nothing, I say that a small piece of cake is better than none at all.