Upgrade for Hartlebury? The December 2016 timetable included additional stops at Hartlebury making a return trip from Birmingham late in the evening possible. DfT station usage figures have demonstrated that the existing enhanced Hartlebury service has dramatically increased patronage. County Councillors have recognised the benefit of Hartlebury as a rail head, alongside SLUG which campaigned for a comprehensive service. The LTP strategy as mentioned in the last news item, also calls for a revamp of Hartlebury rail station and cites the need for "the complete resignalling and reconfiguration of rail" in Worcester. *(Source – Worcester News)*

South-West Journey Opportunities Threatened. Worcestershire County Council has decided to oppose plans by Cross Country Trains to remove four peak hour trains from Bromsgrove: The Nottingham to Cardiff services provide a direct link to the South West which avoids having to travel back to Birmingham. Although not on the Stourbridge Line, the downgrading of Bromsgrove has implications for SLUG which seeks an extended route to Gloucester and beyond. Worcestershire CC had an agreement with CrossCountry which guaranteed a minimum of calls at Worcestershire Parkway but the Bromsgrove cuts could cast doubt on the future and usefulness of Worcestershire Parkway. *(Source – Bromsgrove Advertiser)*

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP PUBLIC MEETING AND ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Stourbridge Line User Group Public Meeting and Annual General Meeting will take place at the Refreshment Room, Kidderminster Town (SVR) Railway Station on Tuesday 9 May 2017 starting at 7.30 p.m.

Kidderminster Town Station

The Public Meeting is open to members and non-members. There will be presentations from Train Operating Companies and local transport authorities. Members are reminded that their membership renewal is due and a membership form has been included with this mailing. If you are attending the meeting, you can bring your membership form with you and pay on the night.

CHRISTMAS PHOTO QUIZ ANSWERS

The answers to the Christmas Photo Quiz were as follows :-

1 - Dawlish, 2 - Edinburgh Waverley, 3 - Knaresborough (North Yorkshire), 4 - Harlech, 5 - New Romney (Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway), 6 Berwick-upon-Tweed, 7 - Portsmouth Harbour, 8 - Saltash (Royal Albert Bridge), 9 - Bristol Temple Meads, 10 - Kingswear, 11 - Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 12 - St Ives (Cornwall), 13 - London St Pancras International, 14 - Bath Green Park, 15 - Ryde (Isle of Wight), 16 - Forth Bridge (Dalmeny Station), 17 - Conwy, 18 - Teignmouth.

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Porthmadog station on the Ffestiniog Railway can be reached from the Stourbridge line as part of a day trip described on page 4

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PLAYING SARDINES
by Roger Davis

I am of an age where I can remember travelling by train and passing sidings holding spare carriages and engine sheds with spare locomotives. In those days, there was no such thing as a fixed length train. You would often arrive at a station and wait while a station pilot engine either added or removed carriages from your train. I remember travelling to a Division 3 match at Shrewsbury in 1966, and extra carriages were attached to a Plymouth to Manchester train at Bristol Temple Meads and detached at Shrewsbury to cater for the football fans travelling to the match.

These days, train sets are fixed formation. If a service is operated by a 2-car set, then it will be a 2-car set even if West Bromwich Albion are at home to Manchester United. The problem is that spare sets are at a premium if available at all.

2-car units operate regularly at weekends - and are often overcrowded

Stourbridge line services can suffer from terrible overcrowding, and this came to a head in the run-up to Christmas 2016 when 2-car trains were used on Saturday services to and from Birmingham when at least double the number of carriages were needed. This led to outrage on social media and a demand that London Midland obtain extra carriages. It is easy to understand this frustration but there are three reasons why this couldn't happen :-

1. There are very few spare diesel units available in the country at present, and hopes that converted ex-London Transport tube trains could be deployed in the Midlands have been postponed after the test train caught fire.
2. London Midland is not going to fund the procurement of new units when its franchise finishes this October.
3. Even if new units could be procured, it would be 2-3 years before they could be put into service.

The problem is that the wrong decisions were made at the start of the franchise. The franchise agreement stated that London Midland would purchase 69 new Class 172 carriages (15 3-car units and 12 2-car units) to replace 66 Class 150 carriages that had been used on the line since British Rail days. There was also an option to add another 26 Class 172 carriages to the order, but it is understood that DfT pressure prevented this option from being taken up. If this option had been taken up in 2007 then the problems in December 2016 could have been alleviated.

Unfortunately, the Stourbridge line is not unique with most lines into Birmingham suffering from insufficient rolling stock, and this problem exists the length and breadth of the country. Even as I write this article, the BBC website is reporting that a woman was taken ill on a Bath Spa to Bristol Temple Meads commuter service due to "inhumane overcrowding on the 2-car service".

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Clearing the Way. During the week commencing 15 January work commenced on clearing the vegetation from overgrown areas of the disused former South Staffordshire Railway line in order to carry out comprehensive structural and environmental surveys. This is a significant step in preparing for the Wednesbury to Brierley Metro extension and construction of the route in 2019 can follow on from the assessment. Optimistic forecasts of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) anticipate Metro services up and running in 2023. *(Source – WMCA website)*

New Hope. Two recent developments have given a nudge to the SLUG campaign for a Stourbridge –Dudley rail link: The West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has successfully proven the case for the government to back an Enterprise Zone at Brierley Hill Waterfront which is dependent on good public transport links. With the Midland Metro now on course to be built, this has partially satisfied the criteria. However, as SLUG has argued, a route via Wednesbury is not the best way to reach Birmingham, HS2 or the national rail network. A heavy rail link from Waterfront to Stourbridge Junction is the obvious way of maximising connectivity and better to cater for capacity. The Enterprise Zone is expected "to deliver up to 7,000 new jobs and provide Gross Value Added uplift to the economy of £589 million each year". A Train Operating Company would surely investigate the possibilities of penetrating Dudley South with the possibility later of a re-opened corridor to Walsall.

The minutes of a board meeting of WMCA on 17 February 2017 reveal that the HS2 connectivity package has been revised so as to identify Stourbridge Junction to Round Oak (Waterfront) as a "rail" option for passenger trains. This is very significant as the construction needed has actually been costed at £20m and slotted into the priority table above other favoured schemes. SLUG has argued for bridging the missing link and this has obviously been an influencing factor.

(Source : Minutes of West Midlands Combined Authority Transport Board Meeting, Feb 2017)

New Stations for Stourbridge Line? Worcestershire County council has earmarked two locations on the Stourbridge Line for new stations. The fourth revision of the Local Transport Plan identifies Fernhill Heath and Rushwick as areas with demand for rail heads. The latter which is situated between Worcester Foregate Street and Malvern Link might also be served by London Paddington to Hereford trains. The strategy document is aimed at easing road congestion by 2030. Although exact sites are not specified, there are aspirations to purchase land to provide maximum car parking. The LTP also includes a package of measures to improve road links along heavily used corridors so as to tie in with new rail alternatives. *(Source – Worcester News)*

IN COMMITTEE
by Paul Humphreys

Until recently, SLUG engaged with four 'stakeholders' at committee meetings: our two TOCs (London Midland and Chiltern) plus Worcestershire County Council and Centro. Following the recent rewriting of the local transport framework and responsibilities, Centro has disappeared and we now have the addition of Transport for West Midlands and West Midlands Rail. Not all of these organisations have the staffing resources to send representatives to every meeting but they do respond to our questions and inquiries by email when unable to attend. Here is a small selection of the information they provided for the March committee.

Brenda Lawrence of London Midland told us that Hartlebury will gain an additional Saturday service from May with a Dorridge to Worcester Shrub Hill service calling at 18:17. In addition, seven Sunday services currently operated by 3-car units will be strengthened to 5-car units.

SLUG has been campaigning for several years for weekend through services from Marylebone to Stourbridge/Kidderminster. Chiltern has told us "We are continuing to look at the possibilities of weekend through services. It is an aspiration but has to be balanced against other considerations including engineering access and costs". The SLUG committee has issues with these arguments as through services have been provided on occasions such as when there is a big sporting event at Wembley involving local interest and costs may be outweighed by income. There would be passengers on these trains!

SLUG welcomes the new team of Babs Coombes, Peter Sargant and Ayannah Wilson. They are providing us with a good deal of right up to date information, for example on the developments relating to the future of rail travel between Stourbridge, Brierley Hill and Wednesbury on or around the Beeching axed line. Our News In Brief page contains some early news on these developments and a future edition of Platform will contain a full report as soon as we receive detailed information from Transport for West Midlands.

Malcolm Holmes informs us that the timetable for the new franchise is still on schedule with the successful bidder due to be named in June and the franchise commencing on 15th October.

We are optimistic that all our stakeholders will be represented at our public Open Meeting at Kidderminster Town (SVR) station on Tuesday May 9th and give short presentations to the audience and participate in a question and answer session. Make a note of the date in your diary now!

When Virgin Trains gained the West Coast franchise in 1997, they decided to replace all their electric trains with 53 Pendolino trains (34 8-car and 19 9-car). Overcrowding occurred from the start and the 34 8-car trains were lengthened to 9-car in 2004. However, these trains were still very overcrowded at times, not helped by the fact that there were 4 First Class coaches in each set. In 2008, it was decided to purchase 4 new 11-car trains (one of which replaced the unit written off in the fatal Grayrigg crash). Two options were put forward for the remaining 52 9-car trains - either to purchase 104 extra carriages and convert all sets to 11-car, or to purchase 62 carriages and convert 31 of the sets to 11-car. There are no prizes for guessing which option was taken. Continuing problems with overcrowding on 9-car sets saw one First Class carriage converted to Standard Class in 2015, but problems with overcrowding still exist, especially on 9-car units. The lesson is that cost cutting early in the franchise has led to problems in the latter years.

A Virgin Pendolino on a London Euston to Glasgow Central service enters Wolverhampton. Overcrowding is often found on these services.

However, the main contributory factor causing overcrowding is the increase in the number of passengers. Between the time that the Class 172 units were announced at the start of the London Midland franchise in 2007 and their introduction into service in 2011, passenger numbers had increased by 50% at Kidderminster, and this increased by another 25% in the period from 2011 to 2016, meaning an increase of 87% over the duration of the franchise. This huge increase in passenger numbers has not seen an equivalent increase in the number of carriages which remains at approximately the same number used by Central Trains at the start of the century.

Thus, decisions made in 2007 have caused the overcrowding problems of 2017. What we don't want is for decisions to be made in 2017 that will cause similar overcrowding problems in 2026. The one good thing about the new franchise is that West Midlands Rail will have input into the specification. These people are rail passengers in the West Midlands and know first hand the problems that fellow passengers endure. The current franchise was specified by the "suits" in London who have little knowledge, and probably little concern, about rail services in the West Midlands. I remember waiting on the concourse at Marylebone many years ago and hearing one "suit", who was scanning the departure board for his train to Amersham, say to his equally suited companion "where the hell is Storebridge Junction?". Luckily, he didn't try to mispronounce Rowley Regis and Cradley Heath as well!

Thus, SLUG will be watching the new franchise agreement with interest. Additional carriages are needed, not only to provide extra capacity in the short term but to ensure that enough capacity is provided throughout the entire life of the new franchise.

A GREAT DAY OUT FROM THE STOURBRIDGE LINE
by Keith Flinders

'I only sell about two of these a year!' said the booking clerk. Indeed it's a bit of a secret. I have never seen any printed publicity, perhaps because it is such good value.

My circular day tour of Mid and North Wales uses a ticket called 'Ffestiniog Round Robin'. In its basic form, it is one journey from any station round the circle of Shrewsbury, Barmouth, Porthmadog, Blaenau Ffestiniog, Llandudno Junction and Chester. There is an add on to start and finish at West Midlands stations served by Arriva Trains Wales, such as Smethwick Galton Bridge. All we needed to do was buy a single to Galton Bridge because it was before 09.30, but our concessionary passes were valid for the evening journey.

A Class 158 DMU on a service to Pwllheli and Aberystwyth arrives at Smethwick Galton Bridge

From Galton Bridge at a civilised 08.32 (we could have taken the 06.31 and had a couple of hours visiting the Fairbourne Railway), it was a through train all the way to Porthmadog, a comfortable Class 158 with a buffet trolley. We chose our seats carefully because the train splits at Machynlleth, from where the front set goes to Aberystwyth. However, because the train reverses at Shrewsbury, we made sure were in the front set at Galton Bridge, choosing seats that faced backwards and on the side of the train furthest from the platform so that we were looking at the sea all the way from Aberdovey.

Our Ffestiniog Railway service to Blaenau Ffestiniog waits at Porthmadog Station alongside a service to Caernarfon

Arrival was at 12.51; a welcome leg stretch along the main shopping street to the Ffestiniog station took ten minutes and we were in time to see the Welsh Highland train depart along the street and over Britannia Bridge [a sort of stretched out level crossing] to Caernarfon, hauled by a Garrett.

Our Ffestiniog train at 13.35 was a heavy 11 coaches. We chose the coach right behind the engine, Earl of Merioneth, because it was an open coach - no windows - remembering to take a deep breath and close our eyes before entering Moelwyn Tunnel!

The Ffestiniog's top station is shared with the big railway and a Class 150 was waiting for us. As we looked across the tracks, I recalled that an American tourist had recently asked a member of staff if there was a subway here. 'No Sir', came the reply. 'You have to use the footbridge'. 'No, no', said the American. 'Subway, Subway! Food!!'

The impressive Betws-y-coed station on the Conwy Valley line to Llandudno Junction

The one hour journey down the Lledr and Conwy valleys is one of the best rail journeys, if only someone would trim back the vegetation. The next leg stretch is a break of three quarters of an hour at Llandudno Junction. Next door to the station is Asda, so we stocked up on food and drink before the Holyhead to Birmingham International train arrived at 16.46. It was another 158, but unusually this train is non stop to Chester. A quick reversal and we were heading up to Wrexham. This section was singled to save money but now the second track has been relaid at a cost much greater than any savings. Ironically, the second track just sat there, rusting for years as no one could come up with the money to repair damaged signal cables until this month.

Beyond Ruabon, there are two good viaducts and the challenge of aqueduct spotting. The return journey is faster than outwards, with Smethwick Galton Bridge reached at 19.22.

The cost of the Round Robin was just £27.05 each with a railcard - and that includes the ride up the Ffestiniog which, on its own, would have been £13.80.

A Class 158 crosses the Chirk Viaduct south of Ruabon with the aqueduct alongside

Our timetable for the day is shown below, but remember to check the times before you travel, especially on the Ffestiniog Railway where different timetables operate depending on the date. Details are at http://www.festrail.co.uk/timetable-fr.htm

Stourbridge Junction	07:57	Smethwick Galton Bridge	08:17
Smethwick Galton Bridge	08:32	Porthmadog	12:53
Porthmadog	13:35	Blaenau Ffestiniog	14:45
Blaenau Ffestiniog	14:57	Llandudno Junction	15:57
Llandudno Junction	16:46	Smethwick Galton Bridge	19:22
Smethwick Galton Bridge	19:37	Stourbridge Junction	19:57

A final tip: if the booking clerk can't find the ticket in the system, putting in the destination, 'Ffestiniog' gets it.