BIRMINGHAM - STOURBRIDGE
KIDDERMINSTER - WORCESTER
STOURBRIDGE LINE
USER GROUP

PLATFORM

Issue 8 June 2017

A Brighton to Southampton Central train leaves Portslade. This service has been decimated by cancellations due to strikes and illness. Could we see similar problems in the Midlands?

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CHANGE IS GONNA COME
by Roger Davis

I apologise to the late, great Sam Cooke for using the title of his iconic 1960s civil rights anthem. However, the title is apt to describe this year's Public Meeting as it was one of the most positive in years in terms of our aspirations. The meeting was addressed by senior managers from the five organisations who specify and operate our railway line - Brenda Lawrence from London Midland, David Heathfield from Chiltern Railways, Tom Painter from West Midlands Rail, Peter Sargant from Transport for West Midlands and Ian Baxter from SLC Rail who are consultants to Worcestershire County Council.

Left to right : Brenda Lawrence, David Heathfield, Ian Baxter, William Whiting, Tom Painter, Peter Sargant

After an opening resumé on SLUG's activities over the previous year by Acting Chairman William Whiting, the five guest speakers treated an attentive audience to interesting presentations. Brenda Lawrence set the ball rolling by detailing the improvements made by London Midland and the challenges they have faced and are attempting to resolve in conjunction with Network Rail. Hartlebury had been a major beneficiary with additional services stopping there in both the December 2016 and May 2017 timetables, while ticket vending machines had been installed at Hartlebury, Blakedown and Lye. In addition, a group had adopted Stourbridge Junction station under London Midland's Station Adopting Scheme. Therefore, if any group wishes to adopt any other Stourbridge line stations, they can contact London Midland. Details are at https://www.londonmidland.com/get-in-touch/adopt-a-station.

Peter Sargant told the meeting that rail usage was still increasing. In 2001, 17% of morning rush hour journeys into Birmingham were made by rail compared with 51% by car. By 2015, rail journeys had increased to 34%, the same percentage as car journeys. One major reason was the provision of free TfWM car parks, with over 2,400 spaces available at 8 of the 10 stations along the Stourbridge line. A "save-a-space" trial would shortly be taking place at Rowley Regis. In the future, two major projects were planned in our area. Firstly, an extra turnback platform at Rowley Regis will be built with platform 4 reopened at Snow Hill at the same time. We will keep you abreast of progress in future editions of Platform. Secondly, work on the extension of the Metro from Wednesbury to Brierley Hill had started with the trackbed having been cleared of vegetation. A full report on the Wednesbury to Brierley Hill proposals follows on pages 7 and 8.

Tom Painter, who had recently been appointed as Franchise manager for West Midlands Rail detailed the plans for splitting the new West Midlands franchise into two business units with the West Midlands services managed locally. He then detailed the advantages of local service management. He confirmed that, despite the impending General Election and the possibility of a change of Secretary of State for Transport, there had been no official announcement of any delay to the timetable with the winning bidder (Govia or Abellio) due to be announced in June and the franchise due to start on 15 October.

However, the two "exclusives" were delivered by David Heathfield and Ian Baxter and point towards a successful conclusion to two long-standing SLUG campaigns. David announced to the meeting that Chiltern Railways had bid to provide more through services at weekends to and from Kidderminster from December. These services would need to be ratified at a Timetable Conference to be held shortly. The services that Chiltern want to extend are :-

Saturdays - 1055 BMO to MYB, 1710 MYB to BSW, 1810 MYB to BSW and 1940 MYB to BSW
Sundays - 1012 BSW to MYB, 1155 BMO to MYB, 1810 MYB to BMO, 1940 MYB to BSW and 2040 MYB to BSW.
(Note BSW = Birmingham Snow Hill, BMO = Birmingham Moor Street, MYB = London Marylebone)

This campaign, led by SLUG Officers Don Barton and Keith Flinders, has been a long running one, so Chiltern must be commended for listening to the arguments and proposing to introduce even more services than SLUG asked for.

Finally, Ian Baxter detailed that Worcestershire County Council were well aware of the very poor through services from the county to the rest of the country. The exceptions were excellent connections to Birmingham and average connections to London. One aspiration of the County Council is for an hourly service from Kidderminster to London in the future. He also highlighted the chronic lack of car parking spaces with only 1,235 spaces available at Worcestershire stations, about 10% of the number available at West Midlands stations. However, Ian's exclusive was to provide the audience with a first look at artist's impressions of the rebuilt Kidderminster station. After consultation with London Midland and the Severn Valley Railway, it had been decided that the new station building would be a modern glass-fronted building to highlight that one station was for the heritage railway and the other for the 21st century railway. The forecourt would be redesigned with the trees bordering Comberton Hill removed to open up the view. Improved bus stops would be provided in Comberton Hill, with a pedestrian crossing provided.

On borrowed time !

Thus, as Sam Cooke wrote, "It's been a long time coming but I know a change is gonna come". We have a new franchise, new through services to London, a new Kidderminster station and a new Metro line to look forward to and we will report in more detail on some of the major subjects raised by our speakers in future editions.

TO HELL AND BACK BY TRAIN
by John Warren

Sat : Stourbridge Jct to Bristol TM

Mon : Bristol TM to Gatwick Airport

Mon : Gatwick Airport to Brighton

Thu : Brighton to London Victoria

Thu : London Euston to Cradley Heath

I was in Brighton from Monday 23 May to Thursday 26 May 2016. As I also spent the previous weekend in Bristol, my journey was a triangular one. On Saturday 21 May, a comfortable and punctual journey on board a Chiltern Class 168 turbo followed by an equally comfortable and punctual journey on a CrossCountry High Speed Train took me from Stourbridge Junction to Bristol Temple Meads. On Monday 23 May, two punctual Great Western Railway journeys - a High Speed Train from Bristol Temple Meads to Reading and a less comfortable onwards Class 166 Turbo service delivered me to Gatwick Airport station on time. I had now entered Govia Thameslink Railway territory and the fan was about to come into contact with something a little smelly.

The departure board at Gatwick Airport station made grim reading. My intended Gatwick Express service at 1602 to Brighton was cancelled, as were the 1632 Gatwick Express and 1652 Southern services, all due to a shortage of train crew due to "sickness". The 1605 Thameslink service from Bedford was running 20 minutes late but fortunately the 1612 Thameslink service to Brighton was only 6 minutes late. Given the situation, I considered myself lucky when I reached Brighton only 27 minutes late. On arrival, it was "pleasing" to note that Southern were keeping passengers informed of the situation (see right), although the fact that both Southern and Gatwick Express services on the Victoria line were subject to cancellations for the same reasons seemed to be ignored. It was also educational to listen to the comments and moans of frustrated passengers at Brighton station as the cancelled services were announced.

If I thought Monday was bad, Thursday was positively hilarious. I was due to travel to Victoria on board the 1228 Southern service but a quick check of the Realtime Trains website showed that the Gatwick Express services at 1048 and 1118 were cancelled as was the Southern service at 1128. In addition, Thameslink services were terminating at Gatwick Airport due to major signalling problems in the Sydenham area. It had become obvious that getting a train to London had become something of a lottery.

This local resident is happy to make it home!

Therefore, although the services at 1148, 1158 and 1218 were still shown as operating, I decided that, to be safe, I would get to Brighton station in time for the 1148 Gatwick Express departure.

When I reached the station at 1140, a large number of disgruntled passengers were already heading from platform 5 to platform 4 having been turfed off the 1148 Gatwick Express service due to it being cancelled. The cancelled 1128 service was in platform 4, but four of the eight carriages had been removed. The 1158 service was running late but was due to arrive at 1206. When it arrived and passengers boarded, it was announced that the doors would be locked to enable the four carriages from the cancelled 1128 service to be added. By that time, the 1218 Gatwick Express service had arrived on platform 5 and passengers were boarding. The doors remained locked until 1216 when they were unlocked and passengers were told that the service had been cancelled because of staff sickness. This meant a quick run along the length of platform 4 and onto platform 5 to board the 1218 service, which did something very unusual - it actually ran, albeit a few minutes late. This was the first service to operate from Brighton to Victoria since 1058 (that's the time, not the year). As you would expect, the train was packed - mostly with decent human beings who would have committed actual bodily harm had a Southern/Gatwick Express senior manager been on board.

Having arrived at Victoria, the journey did a "Wizard of Oz" and turned from black and white into colour. A Virgin Pendolino transported me from Euston to Birmingham New Street on time and I also reached Cradley Heath on time on a London Midland Class 172. I had escaped from the hell that is the Brighton Main Line.

You may be reading this and asking yourself what connection it has to the Stourbridge line. The new West Midlands franchise contains two major initiatives that will require the co-operation of the unions. The introduction of Saturday level services on Sundays has been announced to take place in December 2021 to enable negotiations to take place with the unions over changes to the working contract. Central Trains and London Midland have already attempted to change to 7-day contracts resulting in working to rule and cancellations. In addition, an option exists in the Invitation to Tender document for Driver Controlled Operation of trains to be introduced to enable the on-board senior conductors to perform more customer facing duties. This is the issue that is currently crippling services on the Southern network. We must remember that negotiations will be with RMT and ASLEF, unions run by Mike Cash and Mick Whelan, who make Jeremy Corbyn seem like a true blue Tory. West Midlands passengers must hope that future negotiations are more congenial than the stand-off that has taken place at Southern. Otherwise, we could suffer the same chaos that customers of Southern have suffered throughout 2016/17.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

Curzon Street Station Building Revival. Birmingham's historic Curzon Street station is to be brought back into use as a visitor centre and education hub under newly revealed plans. The Grade I-listed entrance building, which is the oldest surviving railway terminal in the world, has been disused for years but will be reborn as a focal point of the new site in Eastside which will eventually house the HS2 station. The HS2 consortium aims to carry out a full refurbishment of the 1830s building to create a visitor centre, meeting rooms, exhibition space and a café on the ground floor. Upper floors are set to be used by Historic England, the government body which lists historic buildings and monuments, and workshops for Birmingham City University's STEAMHouse project. *(Source – Birmingham Post and Mail)*

Curzon Street station today

A Mayor for Movement? The election for a West Midlands Mayor in May is now consigned to local history. The victor in the battle, Andy Street (Conservative) won by a narrow margin over Siôn Simon (Labour). Whatever your politics, this is probably a victory for the average commuter as Mr Street's manifesto was highly focused on public transport for the region. The new Mayor is determined to push forward priority Metro extension schemes and to initiate the re-opening of the Camp Hill Line for passengers. Mr Street has a business background and is not perceived as a career politician. He is likely to work well with Transport for West Midlands officers. Let's hope he can deliver his promises. *(Source – Birmingham Post and Mail)*

NXWM Platinum Bus

New Airport Link. Since 4 June 2017, Stourbridge Line passengers have had a new bus connection to NEC, Birmingham Airport and Birmingham from Solihull railway station. New service X12 is a luxurious "Platinum" bus service with new early and late journeys.

(Source – National Express website)

Change of Ownership. An intriguing document unearthed by SLUG member, Dennis Whittaker offers renewed hope for a Stourbridge to Walsall heavy rail service. The Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) is exploring the "Potential Transfer of Round Oak to Walsall Railway from Network Rail to West Midlands Combined Authority". This proposal opens up a completely new dimension to the means of constructing Metro Line Two and a parallel passenger train line. By eliminating Network Rail from the equation, a heavy rail scheme does not have to fight to be included on the national infrastructure improvement agenda. In addition, the Authority could source its own engineering contractors and obtain a competitive rate for implementation. Of course, this idea is merely a proposal and works would have to meet Network Rail standards and follow NR procedures. With a businessman in office as West Midlands Mayor, there is cause for optimism with any LEP strategies backed up by private enterprise. *(Source Black Country LEP website)*

A METRO TO BRIERLEY HILL
by Roger Davis

On 30 May 1999, Line 1 of the Midland Metro between Birmingham Snow Hill and Wolverhampton St Georges opened, with the forecast that the proposed Line 2 linking Brierley Hill and Dudley to a triangular junction with line 1 at Wednesbury would open in 2006. After several failed attempts to secure funding for the proposed extension, the creation of the West Midlands Combined Authority and the position of Metro Mayor has unlocked funds to build Line 2 "subject to a successful business case being produced". On 4 May, Andy Street was elected Metro Mayor and he made the following pledges in his manifesto. *If I am elected as Mayor:*

- *I will start the construction of the Midland Metro extension to Brierley Hill*
- *Explore other rail lines which could be reopened such as the Stourbridge to Dudley and Walsall line, connecting Worcester and Derby*

The first stage of the work occurred in January when the trackbed between Pedmore Road and Wednesbury was completely cleared of 25 years of vegetation.

Great Bridge

Dudley Port

Dudley Station

Blowers Green

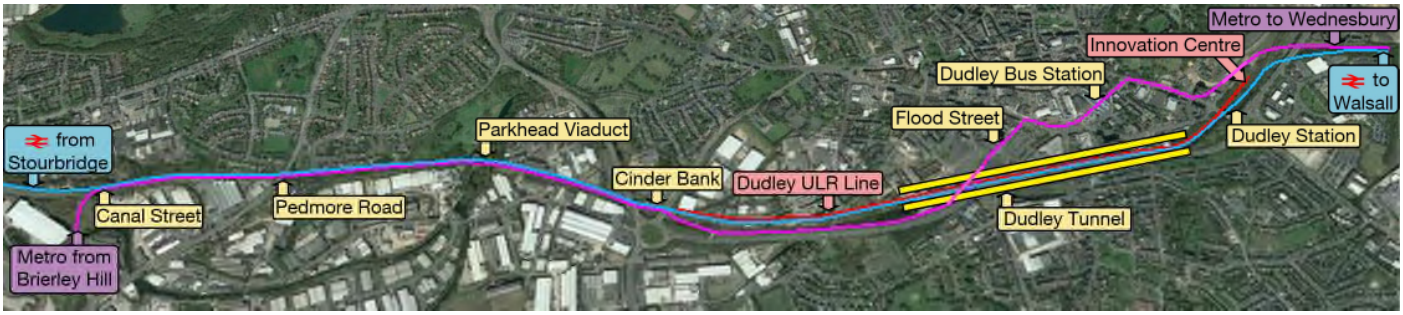
Pedmore Road

The proposed timescale for the line is for construction to start in 2019 with the line opening from Wednesbury to Dudley in March 2023 and to Brierley Hill in October 2023. The line would leave Line 1 via a triangular junction which would enable trams from Brierley Hill to operate towards both Wolverhampton and Birmingham. It would use the northbound track of the Walsall to Dudley heavy rail track, with Network Rail retaining use of the southbound track. Where space allows, double tracking of the Metro line would run alongside the single Network Rail track. Just east of Tipton Road, the Metro would leave the heavy rail alignment and cross Tipton Road on the level and would skirt around the back of the proposed Dudley VLR Development Centre to the side of Dudley Hippodrome before running on-street up Castle Hill, through Dudley Bus Station, along King Street and down Flood Street to run alongside the Dudley Southern Bypass and rejoin the heavy rail alignment at Cinder Bank. At this end of the line, Network Rail will retain the northbound track with the Metro using either one or two tracks to the south of it. The Metro will leave the heavy rail alignment at Canal Street, Harts Hill and head south, crossing Waterfront Way east of the Waterfront development and crossing the car parks towards Level Street. It will then cross the traffic island at the junction of Level Street and The Embankment on the level and run between The Embankment and the canal, before crossing the canal and the Brierley Hill Bypass to reach its terminus near Cottage Street.

The Midland Metro Alliance is investigating whether sections of the route could be operated by batteries rather than wires, and is also looking to build a new depot to accommodate a new fleet of trams proposed to run services on this scheme.

Thirteen stops are definitely proposed, plus four provisional extra stops (*shown in italics*). Four of these stops (marked P) would feature Park and Ride facilities. The stops are at *Golds Hill*, Great Bridge, Horseley Road P, Dudley Port P, Sedgley Road, Birmingham New Road, Tipton Road, Castle Hill, Dudley Town Centre, *Flood Street*, *New Road* P, Cinder Bank P, Pedmore Road, *Canal Street*, Waterfront, Merry Hill and Brierley Hill. A map of the line can be found at http://www.metroalliance.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Wednesbury-Brierley-Hill-Leaflet-print-v3.pdf.

The other factor to consider is the Dudley Very Light Rail Innovation Centre which is scheduled to open in about 2019. The original plan, to operate on both lines between Dudley and Dudley Port, was obviously a non-starter as it precluded the use of the line for either a Metro or heavy rail passenger service. The latest plan, which has been approved by Dudley Council is for a single test track from the site of Dudley Station through Dudley Tunnel to Cinder Bank. The test track would use the northernmost track through the tunnel leaving the southernmost track for use by Network Rail if they decide to reinstate services. This means that Network Rail, having used the southernmost track from Wednesbury would slew across to the northernmost track shortly after the western limit of the Dudley VLR and shortly before the Metro rejoins the heavy rail alignment after its detour into Dudley Town Centre. The following map demonstrates the probable track layout.



While the opening of the Metro will benefit the residents of Brierley Hill and Dudley, it does not address the issue of services from Worcestershire and Stourbridge to Dudley. Transport for West Midlands issued a "HS2 Connectivity Package" document last year which listed 25 transport projects to be completed by 2026 to provide connectivity with the HS2 stations at Curzon Street and UK Central. For rail users in this area, the document named the Brierley Hill Metro scheme and extra platforms at Rowley Regis and Snow Hill among the committed projects. However, a revised document was issued this year because some of these projects were not achievable within the timescale (for instance electrification to Shrewsbury has been put back by the Great Western electrification fiasco). In their place, new projects have appeared and one of these is a rail connection from Stourbridge Junction to Canal Street to connect with the Midland Metro. While this is only a step towards the provision of a direct service between Stourbridge Junction and Walsall, it is encouraging and, combined with Andy Street's commitment to the corridor, it is hoped that the complete reinstatement of the line may occur well before the "after 2043" estimate provided by Network Rail. Let's hope that devolution of powers from London to the West Midlands has the positive benefit to the local transport network that the politicians are promising.