PLATFORM

STOURBRIDGE LINE USER GROUP

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On pages 5 and 6

The 0600 Leeds to Plymouth service passes Dawlish on 21 June. This service will stop at Worcestershire Parkway in the future if Worcestershire County Council gets its wish.

CONTENTS

2 Better Late Than Never

4 Fit For The Purpose

5 A Brighter Future For Worcestershire's Rail Services ?

7 News In Brief

8 Through Trains To London

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BETTER LATE THAN NEVER
by Roger Davis

After a two month delay, seemingly caused by the calling of the General Election, West Midlands Trains Ltd was named on 10 August as the preferred bidder to run the next West Midlands franchise which now starts on 10 December 2017 (eight weeks after the original start date of 15 October) and runs until March 2026.

West Midlands Trains Ltd (WMT) is a joint venture between three companies (Abellio, East Japan Railway Company and Mitsui & Co Ltd), and we will profile these three companies in more detail in the next issue of *Platform*.

On the day of the announcement, a document was issued by West Midlands Rail (WMR), a consortium of 14 local authorities from across the West Midlands who will take responsibility for the management of the majority of passenger services in the West Midlands region. This document detailed the benefits in store for the Stourbridge line.

- free Wi-Fi will be available on all main line trains by the end of 2019. This does not include the Stourbridge Town branch
- carriages will be fully refurbished and supported by an investment in 80 brand new diesel carriages introduced from 2020 dedicated to operating services in and around Birmingham
- enhanced evening frequencies between Birmingham and Kidderminster in each direction Monday to Friday by December 2018
- enhanced frequencies by May 2021 on the Snow Hill lines on a Sunday with services from Birmingham increasing to 6 trains per hour to Stourbridge Junction with 4 extending to Kidderminster
- earlier first services on the Snow Hill lines by May 2021 on a Sunday
- a service quality regime to improve the quality of stations, trains and customer service for passengers
- earlier first services between Stourbridge Town and Stourbridge Junction on a Saturday in both directions
- frequency on a Sunday increases from 4 to 6 services an hour by May 2021 on the Stourbridge Town branch

The mock-up of a West Midlands Trains Class 172 at Stourbridge Junction

To get more information on how the new franchise would benefit Stourbridge line passengers, SLUG officers William Whiting and Roger Davis visited the headquarters of the West Midlands Combined Authority and spoke to Tom Painter, Franchise Delivery Manager at West Midlands Rail. Tom was willing and able to provide us with the following extra information.

The current fleet of diesel multiple units consists of 135 carriages, of which 132 are used in the West Midlands. The new franchise will see 80 brand new carriages with 2+2 seating and extra wide doors and vestibules introduced from 2020 and these will be made up into 2- and 4-car units. In addition, 16 Class 172 carriages (similar to those currently used on the Stourbridge line) will cascaded from London. These 96 additional carriages will replace 66 carriages that date from the 1980s and 1990s. While the brand new carriages will be predominantly used on Shrewsbury and Hereford services, they will be seen on some Stourbridge line services alongside refurbished Class 172s. WMT have also stated that they are committed to keeping a 2nd member of staff on every train service. In addition, WMR and WMT have agreed that, before March 2021, they will conduct a joint review of the Stourbridge Town shuttle to investigate capacity issues plus the condition of the two PPM railcars.

WMT have also said that they want to introduce earlier train services on a Sunday morning from May 2021, but this will be subject to a successful application to Network Rail to permit earlier services.

However, some potentially good news has just emerged. As part of the franchise bid, the bidders were asked to promote schemes that exceeded the base requirements set out in the Invitation to Tender. WMT have responded by saying that they are undertaking feasibility studies to potentially introduce service improvements from December 2018 onwards. This includes potentially introducing four brand new services. Walsall to Wolverhampton and local services to Moseley and King's Heath are two of them, while the other two are extensions of Stourbridge line services.

- A new service to West Midlands Safari Park from December 2019 as an extension of Birmingham to Kidderminster services which will operate along the Severn Valley Railway
- A new service to Brierley Hill as an extension of Birmingham to Stourbridge Junction services

The former plan would need co-operation from the Severn Valley Railway, but the precedent of National Rail services accessing heritage lines has been set across the country - including the Paignton & Dartmouth, Swanage, West Somerset and North Yorkshire Moors Railways. The latter plan would require the reversal of trains at Stourbridge Junction to operate to Brierley Hill from December 2019, with an extension to Round Oak (Canal Street) from December 2023 to connect with the Midland Metro route to Wednesbury and provide a direct heavy rail link from the Waterfront Business Park to HS2 in Birmingham. These new services would need approval from TfWM so we will have to wait and see whether they ever come to fruition. However, the fact that the new train operator has put them on its wish list must be encouraging.

In conclusion, the future looks bright with committed improvements such as better evening and Sunday services, and more carriages available for Stourbridge line services. If the uncommitted new services to the Safari Park and Brierley Hill do go ahead, then we may look back on this franchise as a huge success. Time will tell!

FIT FOR THE PURPOSE
by Rob Hebron

The wraps have come off the long awaited design for a new Kidderminster station. The plans were unveiled at the SLUG committee meeting in July in documents submitted by Worcestershire County Council. As expected, a modern station building is to replace the existing life-expired structure. The County Council has purposely chosen a design that will contrast with the heritage Severn Valley Railway station on the Comberton Hill site. Realistically, the Group did not expect a period design as it would not fit in with the modern footbridge which spans the platforms and dominates the scene.

The artist's impression shows a much bigger station building which is light and airy. The enlarged internal concourse will encompass a ticket counter, improved toilet facilities and a shop/café. In essence, it will offer what the daily commuter expects, rather than imitate what the leisure traveller is offered at the SVR station.

(Worcestershire County Council)

(Worcestershire County Council)

Sited a few yards further down the line than the old station building, the new one will greatly assist the arrival and dispersal of passengers. The new position enables land to be utilised for dropping off and picking up purposes. The new station will totally transform the forecourt and Comberton Hill itself. The taller station building will be much more visible from the surroundings, especially when adjacent trees are felled. The familiar cobblestones will be removed from the driveway but SLUG officers feel this is a small price to pay for a complete and sympathetic modernisation. The cobbles will be re-used in a heritage railway environment.

Drawings and computer-generated images alone cannot answer all the questions which users of the train service might pose. To further investigate the situation, SLUG officers William Whiting, Roger Davis, Paul Humphreys and Gary Adams attended a public exhibition at Kidderminster station on 12 July. Facebook administrator Bob Randle was also at this County Council event to ensure that he and Roger could publicise it on-line at the earliest opportunity. Ian Baxter, Contract Director for SLC Rail answered their questions on behalf of the Project Team. Ian is well known to SLUG from his earlier career at Chiltern Railways. He answered honestly, making the point that funding had been secured and any dramatic changes were outside of the stipulated budget. Any improvements to facilities on Platform Two would have to wait until a later date. Ian put an emphasis on the need to promote safety by means of comprehensive layout and segregated walkways.

Internal e-mails circulated the next day showed that there was unanimity of the SLUG committee that the plans should be supported. There are shortcomings which were recognised. For instance, the bus interchange is no longer on the forecourt and is sited on Comberton Hill but at least it now has a shelter. There is an argument that splitting services between the forecourt and the main road could not be construed as integration. Nor is the siting of the pedestrian crossing ideal. It might be better placed at the junction with Lea Street. However, the new station has been a long time coming and SLUG must support Worcestershire County Council in moving the scheme forward.

(Worcestershire County Council)

(Worcestershire County Council)

Feedback from the public was released to the press and posted on the WCC website. Ian Baxter presented a YouTube video which can also be viewed on the SLUG Facebook Group page. Kidderminster has the second largest footfall in the County of Worcestershire. It handles 1.6m passengers and that figure is expected to grow by 50% in the next five years. Tenders are being sought for construction work and the project is expected to be completed in the summer of 2019. SLUG has campaigned for Kidderminster and finally, it will gain the station that it deserves, fit for the purpose.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR WORCESTERSHIRE'S RAIL SERVICES ?
by Roger Davis

For those of us living across the border in the West Midlands, Worcestershire has always seemed to be the poor relation as far as rail services and facilities are concerned. Connections are poor to most parts of the country except Birmingham, with irregular services to London Paddington and an almost apologetic two hourly service to Cheltenham Spa and the South West. Worcester Shrub Hill, which was on the Cross Country network until the 1980s, is now bypassed and Worcestershire is probably the only county on the Arriva CrossCountry network where the trains pass through non-stop. For passengers travelling to local railway stations by car, parking facilities are sparse and Worcestershire residents on the Stourbridge line must look enviously at the free park and ride facilities provided from Stourbridge Junction northwards.

However, things are looking up in Worcestershire, with Bromsgrove getting a new larger station, Kidderminster seeing their station greatly improved (as detailed earlier in this edition of Platform) and a new station being built at Worcestershire Parkway where the Worcester to Oxford and Birmingham to Bristol lines intersect.

This shows that Worcestershire County Council is making a great effort to improve rail services within the county, and it is very gratifying to discover that they have employed a team of highly experienced railway professionals to produce a Rail Investment Strategy for the county that was put out for consultation in July.

The Strategy proposes four major improvements to services backed up by five infrastructure improvements that are necessary to support the improved services. The service improvements proposed are :-

- 2 trains per hour on the Worcester-Oxford-Paddington line
- 1 train per hour on the Kidderminster-Droitwich Spa-Worcester-Paddington line
- Bristol to Manchester and Plymouth to Newcastle services to call at Worcestershire Parkway
- A regional semi-fast service from Birmingham, Kidderminster or Bromsgrove and Worcester to Cheltenham Spa, Gloucester and Bristol

Bristol Temple Meads

A direct service from the Stourbridge line ?

These would be supported by the following infrastructure improvements :-

- Upgrading the North Cotswold Line between Worcester and Oxford by redoubling all or part of the single line sections along the line
- Upgrading signalling and trackwork in the Worcester Area and redoubling the line between Droitwich Spa and Stoke Works
- Providing new car park capacity and/or new railway stations
- Regenerating Worcester Shrub Hill station
- Electrifying both the Bristol to Birmingham and the Snow Hill lines

Infrastructure at Worcester Foregate Street means that the train to the right cannot access Shrub Hill.

The Stourbridge Line User Group has studied and broadly supports the proposals. The idea of through trains from the Stourbridge line to both London Paddington and Bristol Temple Meads is very appealing especially if the northern terminus for the London service was Stourbridge Junction. However, we have emphasised that these services should only be introduced if the current level of service into Birmingham is maintained as well. To support the introduction of such services, it is essential that the proposal to upgrade signalling and trackwork in the Worcester area is actioned as early as possible as the current layout inhibits decent through services and connections from the Stourbridge line. There is also the concern that the electrification schemes that would support these services could be threatened by the Government's latest cost cutting exercise which replaces electrification with diesel/electric hybrid trains to the detriment of the environment.

The Strategy also looks at improvements to Hagley, Blakedown and Hartlebury stations and increased car parking at the latter two to serve the Kidderminster area. It concludes that Blakedown would be the preferred option, although SLUG has responded that thought must be given to improving facilities at Hartlebury as well as it is more convenient for both Stourport and Bewdley.

So, in conclusion, this is an excellent strategic document which must be supported. The SLUG response to the document is available on our website at http://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/wris%20response.html.

NEWS IN BRIEF
edited by Rob Hebron

In the Bag. West Midlands transport chiefs have backed a £3.4 billion shopping list of new rail and metro lines, cycle routes and road upgrades. They also confirmed many projects on the plan, covering the next 10 years, are either wholly or part funded - most through HS2 spin-off and devolution funding from the Government. The plan includes projects such as the Camp Hill Chords project and the Midland Metro tram route between Brierley Hill and Wednesbury, both of which indirectly benefit Stourbridge line passengers. SLUG contributed to the consultation on this plan. Let us hope that the shopping is finally in the bag. *(Source – Birmingham Post)*

Alive and Kicking. Little mention of the Worcestershire Rail User Groups Alliance has been made in these pages recently. Despite not featuring in *Platform*, WRUGA is very much "alive and kicking". SLUG Chairman, William Whiting, attended the last meeting of WRUGA on 2 August during which there was a full discussion on the WRIS document (see pages 5 and 6). The executives of Worcestershire County Council and the project delivery team are keen to have the backing of WRUGA and those present were able to scrutinise the WRIS and point out omissions such as the aspiration for a station at Fernhill Heath. *(Source – William Whiting/WRUGA)*

Worcester Shrub Hill

More Than a Lick of Paint. At the same WRUGA meeting, it was disclosed to the Alliance that the County Council wished to develop its principal inter-city station under The Worcester Shrub Hill Master Plan. Discussions are to take place with the City Council with a Master Plan to be produced by December 2017. It would be a regeneration scheme for the area including looking at a bus/rail interchange. This is welcome news for the residents of Worcester who feared that Shrub Hill would be closed upon completion of Worcestershire Parkway station. The station has many interesting architectural features and deserves more than a lick of paint! *(Source – William Whiting/WRUGA)*

A Severn Beach train at Stapleton Road station

Community Spirit. Paul Webster, Operations Manager of the Association of Community Rail Partnerships, was invited to the WRUGA meeting and gave a brief history of ACoRP. The Partnership initiative started about 20 years ago when the Penistone Line from Huddersfield to Sheffield became the first CRP. There are at present 55 to 60 CRPs. They are not restricted to rural lines. The Severn Beach line in Bristol is an example of a suburban type railway, adopted by local groups. A part time officer is appointed in a CRP, often paid for by the train operating company but it seems funding is not an issue. The sub group of which William is a member will report back to the December meeting. Examples were given of community involvement including schools doing art work and having rail safety talks. Who knows? Maybe Stourbridge Junction could resemble Great Malvern station, restored to heritage colours and adorned with floral hanging baskets? *(Source – William Whiting/WRUGA)*

THROUGH TRAINS TO LONDON
by John Warren

A Chiltern Silver Set at Stourbridge Junction on a through service to London Marylebone

In the previous edition of Platform, we reported that Chiltern Railways had told the SLUG Public Meeting that they had applied to operate additional weekend through services between Kidderminster and London Marylebone. These proposals would restore Saturday evening services from Marylebone to Kidderminster for the first time in over 10 years and provide Sunday services between Kidderminster and Marylebone for the first time ever. We can now report that these additional services have been approved and will commence on Sunday 10 December 2017. Stourbridge Line User Group is pleased that a long running campaign has finally reaped dividends. We hope that rail passengers along the Stourbridge line will support this initiative and make the new services a success. As a guide, the timetable from December is printed below, showing the times that all Stourbridge line stations are served plus the times at London Marylebone. Intermediate stops between Birmingham Moor Street and London Marylebone are not shown below due to lack of space but can be viewed by clicking on the link on the Stourbridge Line User Group website home page.

	S	S	S	T	T	T	S	T	S	T	T	S
Kidderminster	0609	....	0705	0730	0809	0637	0712	0813	0910	1011	0940	1113
Stourbridge Junction	0618	0638	0714	0738	0823	0645	0722	0824	0920	1019	0948	1122
Cradley Heath	▼	▼	0722	0744	0829	0651	▼	0830	▼	1025	0954	▼
Rowley Regis	0630	0650	0729	0751	0835	0657	0733	0836	0931	1031	1000	1133
Smethwick Galton Bridge	0638	0658	0736	0757	0841	0702	0741	0842	0939	▼	▼	▼
The Hawthorns	0642	▼	0739	0800	0844	0705	0744	0845	0942	▼	▼	▼
Jewellery Quarter	▼	▼	0745	▼	0849	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Birmingham Snow Hill	0650	0707	0750	0807	0852	0712	0751	0853	0951	1052	1012	1149
Birmingham Moor Street	0655	0711	0755	0810	0855	0715	0755	0856	0955	1055	1015	1155
London Marylebone	0834	0907	0938	0959	1040	0910	0941	1041	1146	1241	1210	1340

	S	S	S	T	T	S	T	S	T	T
London Marylebone	1615	1715	1815	2010	2110	1710	1940	1810	1940	2040
Birmingham Moor Street	1755	1900	2002	2202	2301	1900	2128	1955	2138	2230
Birmingham Snow Hill	1759	1904	2006	2210	2315	1905	2133	1959	2142	2234
Jewellery Quarter	▼	▼	▼	▼	2318	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
The Hawthorns	▼	▼	2013	2217	2322	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Smethwick Galton Bridge	▼	▼	2017	2220	2325	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Langley Green	▼	▼	▼	▼	2329	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Rowley Regis	1813	1917	2023	2225	2333	1918	2145	2012	2154	2246
Old Hill	▼	▼	▼	▼	2336	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Cradley Heath	▼	▼	▼	2231	2340	▼	2151	▼	2159	2251
Lye	▼	▼	▼	▼	2343	▼	▼	▼	▼	▼
Stourbridge Junction	1825	1926	2033	2236	2349	1930	2157	2023	2205	2257
Kidderminster	1841	1938	2045	2247	....	1944	2210	2036	2218	2310

Monday to Friday | Saturday | Sunday | S - Silver Set, T - Turbo DMU