

So, what is the future for the Class 139s? The service is currently operated by Pre Metro Operations Limited (PMOL) under contract to West Midlands Trains (WMT). When WMT is brought into public ownership on 1 February 2026, the contract between WMT and PMOL will need to novate across to DfT Operator Ltd along with all other contracts held by WMT. So, in the short term, there shouldn't be any impact on the operation of the Stourbridge Town branch.

However, issues are starting to arise. The Class 139s are starting to become more unreliable. In fact, at the naming ceremony for 139002, PMOL was very concerned that 139001 might need to be swapped as it had developed engine problems. In addition, the maintenance shed at the end of platform 1 is reaching the end of its serviceable life and will need replacing. There was talk a few years ago of a larger replacement shed situated alongside the Town branch close to the rear of the signal box but this came to nothing.

Finally, capacity issues are getting worse. In the past, a small number of services at around 0900 and 1600 were full and standing due to students at the colleges in Stourbridge. In recent years, students have started to move between local colleges for tutorials, meaning that services can be full and standing at times throughout the day. For instance, I have witnessed the 1040 service from Stourbridge Junction arriving at Stourbridge Town with over 40 people on board. There was also one day when I couldn't board the 1230 service at Stourbridge Junction because it was packed. In addition, the joint attraction of a ginger cat and a train that is unique in the country has seen enthusiasts from all corners of this country and from abroad visit Stourbridge to ride on the train and get a welcoming miaow. In fact, for some enthusiasts, a single round trip to the Town and back is not sufficient.



West Midlands Rail Executive has told SLUG that a review into the operation of the Town branch will be taking place, starting in the autumn. It is understood that all options are on the table. For instance, should the Town branch stay on the national rail network or should it come under the control of Transport for West Midlands? Is a larger vehicle needed on the branch and, if so, what type should it be? Could the Town branch be linked to a passenger service to Brierley Hill or even to the West Midlands Metro network? SLUG awaits the outcome of this review and will report back to you when it becomes public.

One hopes that, when the Class 139s reach the end of their life on the Town branch, they will be preserved somewhere. They are unique vehicles which have given the town of Stourbridge great service and are a credit to the man who convinced London Midland to operate them on the Town branch in 2008 - John Parry MBE.



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HAPPY ANNIVERSARY by Roger Davis

This issue of *Platform* celebrates two anniversaries. The most important is the 30th anniversary of the opening of the Jewellery line on 24 September 1995 which saw Stourbridge line services diverted from New Street into Snow Hill and Moor Street stations to form new cross-Birmingham services. An article looking back on that first day appears in the current issue of *Platform 2*.



BR 2-6-4T 80079 at Snow Hill on 24 September 1995

The second anniversary that we are celebrating is the 10th anniversary of *Platform* and *Platform 2*. To find out what has and hasn't changed in the past ten years, we looked back at these first issues. The front cover of *Platform* contained a photo showing the opening of the bus interchange at Cradley Heath station. Unfortunately, since it opened, National Express West Midlands, Diamond and Transport for West Midlands have either withdrawn bus services or moved them away from the interchange. The result is that it is now effectively a white elephant with three of the six stands no longer used as the number of services has reduced to just two – the 4M and the X10. So much for an integrated transport policy!

The first article in *Platform* bemoaned the low level of ticket checks on board trains, pointing out that the only service that saw regular ticket checks was the Stourbridge Town branch. Despite a change in operator in 2017 and regular complaints from SLUG to both the operator and the West Midlands Rail Executive, only one thing has changed since then – ticket checks no longer take place on the Stourbridge Town branch. SLUG will continue to present facts and figures in an attempt to convince the operator that on-board ticket checks are essential to combat revenue loss.



A Class 165 on the 0938 service to Marylebone leaves Stourbridge Junction on 13 July

The following article listed 26 Sunday morning long distance trains from Birmingham and Worcester that Stourbridge line passengers could not catch because of the late start of services along the Stourbridge line. In the past ten years, one slightly earlier train into Birmingham has been introduced from Stourbridge Junction at 0938, but this would only reduce the list from 26 to 23. SLUG has been in constant touch with West Midlands Railway and West Midlands Rail Executive since then, and both organisations have supported our call for earlier Sunday morning services in principle. Unfortunately, they have encountered opposition from the Department for Transport on cost grounds and from Network Rail who claim that they cannot hand back possession of the line any earlier on a Sunday morning. All SLUG can do is continue to press for earlier, and better, Sunday services and hope that the creation of Great British Railways results in a change in policy in this area.

THE CLASS 139 RAILCARS – PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE by Roger Davis

On Friday 8 August, Stourbridge Town Railcar 139002 was named “George The Station Cat” after Stourbridge’s number one personality. Appropriately, being International Cat day, the unveiling of the name was performed by local MP Cat Eccles. At the unveiling, it was announced that the public was to be asked to suggest a name for sister vehicle 139001. The chosen name will be revealed soon.



George proudly admires his name on railcar 139002



Cat Eccles MP unveils the name on railcar 139002

However, do the two Class 139 railcars have a long term future on the Stourbridge Town branch? They were originally built in 2008, and 139001 was displayed at the Tyseley Open Day on 28 June 2008. The intention was to introduce them onto Stourbridge Town services from December 2008 with the Class 153 unit deployed on the branch moved to another part of the London Midland network. As a result, problems with the Class 139s meant that the town branch service was replaced by a coach service for three months until a Class 153 unit was brought back to operate the branch in March 2009. The Class 139s operated the branch services alongside the Class 153 intermittently for the next three months, before taking over the service completely in June 2009. However, the Class 153 was kept on standby for a short time to provide cover if problems cropped up with the Class 139s.

However, since then, the two Class 139 units have operated superbly, with reliability and punctuality figures exceeding 99% period in, period out. This certainly has helped performance figures for both London Midland and West Midlands Trains with 1,370 journeys per week on the branch counting towards the performance totals for both the Snow Hill lines and for the overall company figures.

Each unit normally operates one week in two, with the two units being swapped over before start of Sunday service using the short spur at the northern end of platform 1 at Stourbridge Junction. Of course, if one unit develops a fault, they have to be swapped as quickly as possible. Although they cannot be coupled together for use in service, this is possible if one of the units needs to recover its sister unit. The units are maintained in the small shed at the southern end of platform 1.

When West Midlands Railways took over the franchise from London Midland in December 2017, one commitment was to review the future operation of the branch in 2021. The Covid crisis meant that this review did not take place.

NEWS IN BRIEF edited by Rob Hebron

The Big Handover. The transfer of West Midlands Trains to public ownership on 1 February 2026 will bring both benefits and challenges to the operator, Great British Railways. Although most personnel will simply transfer to the new company, the management structure has yet to be clarified. There are other questions too: Will the trains have a national identity or a regional livery as per the old WMPTE? What will be the role of WMRE and who will set standards? Will the West Midlands Mayor still promote new railway re-openings and new stations? SLUG will endeavour to find the answers to these questions. (Source:- *West Midlands Railway*)

See You Later. Although winter timetables are not yet available, it appears that there will be a later last train from Worcester on Saturday evenings. The 22:12 Worcester Foregate Street to Whitlocks End train will depart 10 minutes later at 22:22. This is a direct result of a recent SLUG campaign. (Source:- *Realtime Trains*)

A Change Of Train. Passengers changing at Smethwick Galton Bridge onto Liverpool Lime Street services will notice brand new 5-car Class 730/2 units operating the service in place of older Class 350 units. (Source:- *West Midlands Railway*)



A Class 730/2 EMU at Wolverhampton on a Birmingham to Liverpool service



The Engine House at Highley

Railway 200 : The Show. The Severn Valley Railway is presenting a pictorial appreciation of the nation's railways entitled *Railway 200 : The Show* in the Engine House at Highley on 28 September between 12:30 and 14:45. It promises to be a unique insight into the rail industry and the people who have been associated with it over the years. Entry is free but donations are welcome for Alzheimer's UK and the Railway Benefit Fund. (Source:- *Severn Valley Railway*)

Safety First. New station safety teams are being introduced at 30 stations in the West Midlands, including those between Solihull and Langley Green, to intervene before passengers suffer delays to their journeys. Contracted to Network Rail, they will bolster existing staff who have been stretched to the limit and will have a regular presence, both on platforms and trains to provide help and support to passengers and keep trains on time. (Source:- *West Midlands Railway*)

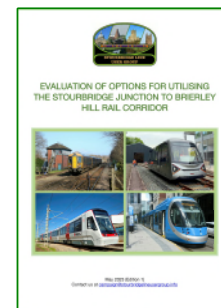
Shakespeare Act IV. The fourth Shakespeare Express from Worcester to Stratford-upon-Avon via Stourbridge Junction will operate on Sunday 9 November. Tickets prices start at £70 (adult), £55 (child) and £220 (family of four). (Source:- *Vintage Trains*)

We also reported that we had asked London Midland, the operator at the time, for an earlier service from Hartlebury to connect with the first Chiltern Railways service to London Marylebone. The result is that the first train of the day from Worcester now stops at Hartlebury at 0527, thus fulfilling our request. In addition, we had expressed our concern to London Midland that the subway was in urgent need of refurbishment while the canopy ends on both platforms were in a serious state of disrepair. It is pleasing to note that both of these issues have been resolved.

The rotting canopies at Stourbridge Junction were replaced in 2020 following a SLUG campaign



Like every other issue of *Platform*, issue 1 had a "News In Brief" page and it was interesting that we reported that Campaign for Better Transport had identified its top three reopening priorities as, in order, the Ashington – Blyth - Newcastle line, the Portishead - Bristol line and the Stourbridge Junction - Walsall line. The Ashington line reopened to passengers in December 2024 while the Portishead line is now fully funded and is due to reopen to passengers in 2028. Is it too much to hope that the Stourbridge to Walsall line will make up the full set of reopenings in the not too distant future? Once again, SLUG is in constant contact with West Midlands Rail Executive and sent an options document to local MPs, the West Midlands Mayor and councillors with responsibility for transport in 2023. A consultants' report is currently being prepared and we look forward to its findings.



The lead article in issue 1 of *Platform 2* detailed the history of through services from the Stourbridge line to London. The final section of the article looked at the services operated by Chiltern Railways in the 21st century and bemoaned the fact that, although services ran in both directions on Mondays to Fridays, there were no services from Marylebone on a Saturday evening and no services at all on a Sunday. Even though Chiltern stabled trains overnight at Stourbridge Depot, they ran empty to or from Birmingham. This resulted in a campaign by SLUG to convince Chiltern that these services should operate in service, at least as far as Stourbridge Junction. Thankfully, this campaign proved successful and we now have two through services from Marylebone on a Saturday evening and two trains in each direction on Sundays.

Finally, a piece of history. We revealed that the first through train services from Kidderminster to Birmingham started on 1 January 1856 using a more circuitous route via Dudley, Sedgeley Junction and Dudley Port High Level to reach Birmingham New Street. The journey time was 70 minutes.

Therefore, we have had some successes and some failures in the past ten years. It will be interesting to look back in issue 81 and see if some of our failures have turned into successes. Whatever happens, it won't be down to a lack of effort on our part.



NEW(ISH) TRAINS FOR OLD by John Warren

For over a year, Chiltern Railways has been waiting to hear from the Department for Transport whether it could replace its oldest trains with newer trainsets, either on a one-for-one basis or preferably to increase the number of trainsets it operates. That decision was made on 31 July when an agreement was made to replace its four 6-car Mark 3 Silver Sets dating from 1977 with thirteen 5-car Mark 5a trainsets dating from 2019.

At the time of privatisation in 1996, Chiltern Railways operated a fleet of 39 Class 165 diesel multiple units (28 2-car and 11 3-car), built in 1991/1992. These units were essentially commuter trains with 3+2 seating and a maximum speed of 75 mph. In order to provide a more viable alternative to Virgin Trains on the London to Birmingham corridor, Chiltern became the first privatised train operator to order new trains when it ordered five 4-car Class 168 dmus with 2+2 seating and a maximum speed of 100 mph, much better suited for services to the West Midlands. These were followed between 2002 and 2006 by a further fourteen Class 168 dmus (five 4-car and nine 3-car) and in 2015 and 2016 by nine 2-car Class 168 sets transferred from Transpennine Express. It was these trains that were used when through services from Marylebone to Kidderminster were introduced in September 2002.

Between 2010 and 2012, Chiltern Railways took delivery of British Rail Mark 3 carriages, refurbished them with sliding plug doors and toilet retention tanks before forming them into four 6-car sets plus a reserve 5-car set. A Class 67 diesel and a driving van trailer (DVT) top and tailed each set with the diesel at the northern end of the train. These were advertised as "Silver Sets" and put into service on Marylebone to Birmingham / Kidderminster services. At least two of the sets were stabled overnight at Chiltern's new Stourbridge Depot. At the end of 2014, the Class 67 diesels were replaced by more modern Class 68 diesels.



The 1042 service to Marylebone leaves Stourbridge Junction on 6 April



A Silver Set DVT at Birmingham Moor Street in December 2017

Unfortunately, although the Mark 3 sets are well liked by the travelling public for their comfort, they are now nearly 50 years old and it is becoming much more difficult to keep them running. At the SLUG public meeting in May 2024, Chiltern Railways announced that it was looking into replacing these trains and had started talking to the Department for Transport about the options available. At a meeting later that year, SLUG was told in confidence that the preferred option would be to take Mark 5a coaches which had been declared as surplus to requirements by Transpennine Express, although only put into service in 2019.

The question was whether the old Mark 3 coaches would be replaced by newer Mark 5a coaches on a one-to-one basis or whether Chiltern would be able to increase its fleet by taking on additional Mark 5a coaches. SLUG was also told that, if additional coaches became available, it might be possible to improve through services to and from the Stourbridge line once the new trains had entered squadron service.



A Mark 5a Set

(Chiltern Railways)

Therefore, the news that the entire fleet of thirteen 5-car sets would be coming to Chiltern, with one set due to be introduced into service in January 2026 and three more following in March 2026, could be good news for the Stourbridge line as some of the new trains will be stabled at Stourbridge Depot. The train formation will be made up of a Class 68 diesel using Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil to reduce emissions, one first class carriage seating 30 passengers, two standard class carriages each seating 69 passengers, one standard class carriage seating 59 passengers and a driving van trailer seating 64 passengers, unlike current DVTs which do not carry passengers. Thus, one of the new sets will carry 291 passengers compared with over 400 seats on a Silver Set and 202 seats on a 3-car Class 168.



Interior of Standard Class Coach

(Chiltern Railways)



Interior of First Class Coach

(Chiltern Railways)

The new trains will be used to reintroduce a half hourly service between Marylebone and the West Midlands, meaning that Class 168 units will be deployed on Chiltern's route to Oxford. As for the future, there are reports in the railway press that Great Western Railway, Chiltern and East West Rail could jointly order new battery electric fleets as the railway seeks to move away from a reliance on diesel power. If ordered, these would replace the Class 165 dmus which are the oldest in the fleet.

SLUG will be talking to Chiltern Railways at a conference in October to get more information on Chiltern's plans for the Stourbridge line (including Kidderminster) when the new trains enter squadron service in December 2026. However, there may be some good news from December 2025 as Realtime Trains is indicating that the 0714 service from Birmingham Moor Street to Marylebone on Saturdays will start back at Stourbridge Junction at 0644. There is also an indication that the 1707 and 1807 services from Marylebone to Stourbridge will be replaced by services at 1637 and 1837. We will let you know through our Facebook page if/when this is confirmed.

