

### **Light at the end of Dudley tunnel by Keith Flinders**

There has been much in the media this year about correcting some of Dr. Beeching's errors. With hindsight, a glaring error was the withdrawal of passenger services from Stourbridge Junction to Dudley and beyond. There are reasons to be optimistic.

The trackbed is available all the way through to Lichfield. Reopening the freight line beyond there could give us an inter regional route from Worcester to Derby.

There is increasing awareness of the need for a freight alternative to the route through Bromsgrove. Our business case is helped by avoiding the cost of Lickey banking engines.

Freight via Bromsgrove avoids Birmingham New Street by using the Camp Hill line through East Birmingham. There are well supported plans, though, to reopen stations on the Camp Hill line for new passenger services into Moor Street, using two new chords near Bordesley. Camp Hill's freight trains need to go via Dudley.

Plans for Midland Metro to use some of the route from Wednesbury to reach Merry Hill would have severely restricted use by heavy rail. The proposed single line sections would probably limit capacity to just the freight traffic, with no room for passenger trains. The decision by West Midlands councillors not to introduce road congestion charging has meant the government is not making money available for Midland Metro extensions. The good news is that the alternative of 'tram-train' operation is now being pursued. This does not need separate tracks and costs less. The 'difficult bits' of the infrastructure are already there. Plain track is relatively easy; junctions, however, need points and signals. The junction at Stourbridge and the first 3 miles of line as far as Round Oak are maintained to a high standard for heavy steel trains. The junction at Pleck, just south of Walsall, is being renewed, so that the stub of the Stourbridge line can be used as a rounding loop for freight trains that need to reverse. Between Round Oak and Pleck, most of the rails are still there - there are short gaps near each end of the Dudley Southern bypass - but reopening would probably involve taking the old track up anyway, improving drainage and then laying new track.

Network Rail is known to be looking at every English settlement with more than 15,000 population that is not rail served. The Dudley line must be near the top of their list.

What we don't have is a time line. Tram-train is about to be trialled in Yorkshire [even though it works safely in other European countries - sceptics call this a government delaying tactic to avoid spending money.] The state of the country's finances could be a curse or a blessing. Let's be optimistic and suggest the reopening as an unemployment relief measure. Stourbridge Line User Group will press for reopening as soon as possible.

### *Post Script - the state of the Pensnett branch (Wombourne Railway)*

The Pensnett Branch from Kingswinford Junction is, I believe, officially mothballed. A proposal about five years ago to use it to supply a new freight terminal adjacent to Pensnett Trading Estate fell to the weight of local opposition when Dudley Council chose not to give the development planning permission. So the trading estate [and the local residents] still endure the hundreds of lorries and vans that clog up the roads of Pensnett and pollute the atmosphere. Network Rail expects another scheme to be presented, one day, so the branch slumbers. If/when it happens, the track will need complete relaying and new fencing.

### **New trains for the Stourbridge Line**

Amongst a string of improvements promised by London Midland for their Franchise agreement, are new turbo train sets for the Stourbridge Line. The 12 two-car and 15 three-car Class 172 Bombardier Turbostars will offer greater comfort and reliability than the ageing 150 units currently in use. The roll-out program is expected in 2010 but there is cause for optimism on early delivery, as proved elsewhere on the London Midland network, where 37 four-car Class 350/2 Siemens Desiros are nearly ready for operation. The first of these will come into service from December 2008, replacing the Class 321 electric trains.

The Group expects seating arrangements in the 172s to be mainly "airline style" in 2 x 2 formation. Although overall number of seats will be slightly less than the 150 units, carriages will be roomier. Another bonus for passengers will be the provision of air conditioning.