

You don't need new reopened rail lines in England, do you?

(unless you're in London or Manchester!)

- by Roger Davis

I recently received notification of a Centro liaison meeting at which I represent SLUG. It informed me that the meeting would be at Walsall Council House at 6.00 pm on Tuesday 16 July. Now, I avoided driving in the rush hour as much as possible when I was working, so I had no intention of driving to the meeting. Therefore, I decided to use public transport to get me from my home in Kingswinford to the meeting at Walsall.

I had three alternatives.

The first was a 256/257 bus to Stourbridge, a train to Birmingham changing at Stourbridge Junction, a walk across Birmingham City Centre and a final train to Walsall - a very circuitous route. A variation of this which involved a change at Smethwick Galton Bridge onto a Wolverhampton to Walsall stopping train was disregarded partially because it actually took longer as the buses at my end did not connect with the services I needed to connect at Galton Bridge and partially because I never liked changing at that station even before London Midland converted it into an unstaffed halt after 1 pm on a Tuesday.

The second alternative was a 255 bus to Wolverhampton and a 529 bus to Walsall.

I settled on the third, most direct option - a 226 bus to Dudley and a 311/313 bus to Walsall which operates every 10 minutes. As I had plenty of time on my hands, I decided to set out early and have a walk around Walsall on what was a beautiful afternoon. Leaving home at 3.15 pm would get me onto a 226 bus that arrived in Dudley at 3.45 pm, with a 313 bus at 3.55 pm to Walsall getting me there at 4.44 pm.

The first leg of the journey, to Dudley, went to plan and I joined the melee at the 311/313 bus stand just before 3.55 pm and waited and waited. At 4.09 pm, two 313's and a 311 arrived together. I let the swarming mob board the first bus, and this departed 6 minutes late with many people standing at 4.11 pm. I boarded the second bus, which turned out to be the 3.55 pm service 313, and we departed at 4.13 pm, followed by the second 313 which was actually on time when it departed at 4.15 pm. By the time we reached the Black Country Museum, we had joined the back of a queue which stretched all the way to Princes End. By the time we reached Princes End, we were 26 minutes late, and heavy traffic in the Wednesbury area caused by having to cross the Black Country New Road (A41) and the old Holyhead Road increased the deficit to 29 minutes. Mercifully, no more time was lost and the three buses arrived at Walsall together at 5.13 pm.

Thus a journey of only fourteen miles had taken me two hours, including half an hour sampling the "delights" of Dudley Bus Station. The second leg from Dudley to Walsall had taken an hour for a nine mile journey. Could I have done it quicker using one of the alternative routes? If I had chosen the second option of travelling by bus via Wolverhampton, the answer was a definite no, as a Dudley Councillor arrived half way through the meeting complaining that the Wolverhampton to Walsall corridor was "in meltdown" with the 529 buses taking well over an hour for the seven mile journey. However, using the circuitous twenty eight mile route via Birmingham would have seen me arrive at Walsall over a quarter of an hour earlier than I did, assuming that the trains had run on time.

So, to return to my opening statement - you don't need new/reopened railway lines in England do you? I say "in England" as the devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales think otherwise. Both the Walsall to Wolverhampton and Walsall to Dudley road corridors suffer delays even during the off-peak. In the former case, the railway line is in place and a train service operated from Walsall to Wolverhampton until 2008, taking 12 minutes for the journey. It failed because it was infrequent (hourly), had no intermediate stations, suffered regular cancellations due to lack of proper support by Central Trains and because London Midland, when they took over the franchise, needed to use the allocated Class 153 unit elsewhere on their network. Today, it still operates elsewhere on the network - it's in use on the First Great Western network still carrying London Midland colours! A more frequent service with intermediate stations at Darlaston and Willenhall to start off with (other stations such as Pleck could be added later) would provide a link between Wolverhampton and Walsall taking about 15 minutes.

The traffic problems between Dudley and Walsall have been highlighted above. There are also major road problems in the Brierley Hill/Merry Hill area despite (or more probably, because of) highway improvements made by Dudley Council. In 1960, you could theoretically have travelled from Stourbridge Junction to Walsall with stations at Brettell Lane, Brierley Hill, Round Oak, Blowers Green, Dudley, Dudley Port LL, Great Bridge and Wednesbury Town. I say theoretically because, even after over a decade of British Railways, no amalgamation of ex-LMS and GWR routes had been attempted before the lines closed to passenger traffic. However, even at 1960 timings for steam locomotives and first generation DMU's, Stourbridge Junction to Walsall would only have taken 36 minutes, Brierley Hill to Walsall 27 minutes, and Dudley to Walsall 16 minutes. In theory, had a rail service still existed, I could have got from home to Walsall by bus and train in about 45 to 50 minutes, less than half of the time I actually took.

So, do we need new or reopened railways? Yes.

Will we get them in the short term? No.

Will we get them in the longer term? Hopefully, but not unless successive governments reverse their policy of giving London and its newly adopted child in t' North (Manchester) everything that they ask for to the detriment of other major urban areas such as the West Midlands... and Greater Bristol ... and (well, I could go on and on).