

### By Bus to Hartlebury

By Rob Hebron

Hartlebury is about to benefit from an hourly train service during the day. Amid all the delight about the forthcoming rail improvements, it is important to reflect on what has been the lifeline for residents of the village who rely on public transport. The skeleton service of trains has never proved to be a serious alternative to the bus for at least two decades and the competition (such as it was) never provided any integration between the two modes of public transport.



*Picture by vincentminto on Flickr*

When the Oxford, Worcester and Wolverhampton Railway Company was conceived, Hartlebury was connected with North Worcestershire. The Birmingham and Midland Motor Omnibus Company known as "Midland Red", followed suit by providing two bus routes between Worcester and Stourbridge, one via Hagley, Kidderminster and Hartlebury (315) and the other via Norton, Kidderminster and Hartlebury (316). In the booklet "The ABC of Midland Red Vehicles" published in 1948, the company also lists an additional service to Hartlebury via Wilden (314).

By the late nineteen-sixties, the 316 service was replaced by the 258 Kidderminster to Brierley Hill bus route running via Norton and Stourbridge, leaving Hartlebury with only the 315 but still at a respectable frequency of once an hour, including weekday evenings and Sundays. Short Kidderminster – Hartlebury workings were inserted in the timetable for students at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School and the Primary School.

In the nineteen-seventies, Stourbridge was absorbed into the West Midlands County and Midland Red buses were revised and curtailed at the boundary. Service 315 became 303 (same route) and 258 became 305 (losing the Brierley Hill section). In the process of revision, Hartlebury lost its Sunday service, though a token gesture to Kidderminster and Stourport (304) took its place for a short while.

Worse was to come. The Midland Red which had been absorbed by the National Bus Company was split into sections, with Worcestershire operations falling under the brand "Midland Red West". Passenger numbers began to fall and some 303 journeys needed subsidy from Worcestershire County Council. A necessary economy measure was to merge some services and so Holt Heath was introduced into the route on alternate hours as a diversion of the 303 and re-numbered 304.

The decline didn't stop there. In the 1990s County Council grants from the government were severely shaved and Sunday bus services took the brunt of cuts. With a touch of irony, Kidderminster, Hartlebury and Worcester regained a Sunday bus service (300), albeit a roundabout route via Bewdley and Stourport. The 300 was primarily a means for Wyre forest residents to visit the hospital in Worcester, following the closure of facilities at Kidderminster General Hospital. The 300 operated every two hours and for the first time ever, it was possible to travel to the County Museum in Hartlebury on a Sunday.

The Millennium and austerity measures finished off the 300 service. On the plus side, First Group who now owned Midland Red West, decided to inter-work the 303 and 292 services, thus giving opportunity for a continuous ride from Worcester to Ludlow via Hartlebury, Kidderminster and Bewdley.

First Group has now sold Kidderminster bus garage and its operations to Rotala (Diamond Bus) and an area review is taking place. This is a unique and timely opportunity to introduce a connecting bus service to Hartlebury station originating in Stourport or even Bewdley. This type of bus service would allow residents of towns with no rail head to make longer cross-county journeys by feeding into the trains. SLUG would support any operator that seriously tried to create integrated public transport as it is the best possible practice.

Will the extra trains draw passengers away from the bus service? Who knows how long the 303 will survive in its present form? Perhaps the train will take the strain!