FIRST GENERATION MULTIPLE UNITS
by Roger Davis

On 1 December 1954, the British Transport Commission published a document entitled "Modernisation and Re-equipment of British Railways", now better known as the 1955 Modernisation Plan. There were five main recommendations, the following two directly affecting passenger services.

1. Steam must be replaced as a form of motive power, electric or diesel traction being rapidly introduced as may be most suitable in the light of the development of the Plan over the years; this will involve the electrification of large mileages of route, and the introduction of several thousand electric or diesel locomotives. *Total cost £345 million.*

2. Much of the existing steam-drawn passenger rolling stock must be replaced, largely by multiple-unit electric or diesel trains; the remaining passenger rolling stock, which will be drawn by locomotives (whether electric, diesel or steam), must be modernised; the principal passenger stations and parcels depots will also require considerable expenditure. *Total cost £285 million.*

Two first generation DMUs sandwich a second generation unit at Stourbridge Junction.


(*John Carter*)

The report also stated that "the total number of multiple-unit diesel vehicles that can be employed on British Railways for the services listed above is estimated at about 4,600, including the 300 now in use or on order. The cost of the 4,300 vehicles to be built under the Plan is approximately £35 million".

On a more optimistic note, it proposed the immediate electrification of the East Coast Main Line, something that didn't happen in its entirety until 1991, and electrification of the Ashford to Hastings line which still hasn't happened over 60 years later.

The view from the front seat of a first generation DMU.


(*Dave Enefer*)

Thus, in indecent haste, a plethora of diesel multiple units were sourced from many manufacturers - Birmingham RC&W, BR Derby, BR Swindon, Cravens, Gloucester RC&W, Metropolitan-Cammell, Park Royal, Pressed Steel and D Wickham & Co. However, as a child growing up in the 1950s, the new multiple units were treated with awe as, if you were able to get a front seat, you could see through the glass partition into the driver's cab and past that to the line in front of the train.

For the Stourbridge line, 17 June 1957 was the changeover day when 29 3-car suburban units built at BR Derby took over the suburban services radiating from Birmingham Snow Hill. After a fanfare of publicity, posters and pamphlets showing diesel trains, and having a set on exhibition at Snow Hill on 14 June, it was a bit of an anti-climax to find that less than half the trains on the first day were actually diesels. The public was disappointed and sceptical, and at least two DMU services failed that day. In addition, the steam hauled trains working to the DMU schedule had difficulty keeping time because of running around and water stops. In fact, up to 1965, diesel multiple unit services were augmented by steam operated services, particularly in the rush hours and it wasn't unusual to find a GWR "Castle" class locomotive on a local train to Stourbridge Junction.


BR Derby Suburban Unit (Class 116) at Snow Hill

(warwickshirerailways.com)

A year later, on 9 June 1958, the long distance services from Birmingham Snow Hill to Cardiff General via Kidderminster were converted to multiple unit operation, using 3-car cross-country sets built by BR Swindon, supplemented by 3-car cross-country units built by Gloucester RC&W. Unfortunately, as the 1960s wore on, through trains via the Stourbridge line ceased, leaving the line with very few services operating south of Kidderminster.


Gloucester RC&W Cross Country Unit (Class 119) at Snow Hill

(miac.co.uk)


BR Swindon Cross Country Unit (Class 120) at Snow Hill

(Douglas Clayton / Industrial Railway Society)

From 1970, British Rail started allocating Class numbers to its diesel multiple units and the Derby-built suburban units became Class 116. Incidentally, the cross-country units previously employed on the line became Class 119 (Gloucester RC&W) and 120 (BR Swindon).

The Class 116 units had proved popular with the Western Region and the batch built for Birmingham area services were followed by batches built for the Cardiff Valley lines and Bristol suburban services. Thus, due to the decimation of the Bristol suburban network and some reduction of the Valley Lines services in the 1960s, some of these units transferred to Tyseley for use in the Birmingham area.

By the 1980s, the first generation DMUs were badly in need of replacement, and sets were being reformed using serviceable vehicles. Second generation units started to appear in 1984 when the first Class 150 Sprinter units were introduced. Sprinter units were introduced between 1984 and 1992 for use across the country. The appalling Pacer units were introduced between 1985 and 1987 and continue to cause misery to passengers in the West Country, Cardiff Valleys and Northern England. Hopefully, the end of these "bus bodies" is nigh. Finally, Turbo units were introduced between 1991 and 1993 on local services out of Marylebone and Paddington stations. However, although many parts of the country benefited from these new units, the Birmingham suburban network continued to be operated using the aging First Generation units. To keep these services running, vehicles from DMUs of many classes never seen before in the West Midlands were cascaded to Tyseley - Metro-Cammell Class 101, BR Derby Classes 114, 115 and 127, Pressed Steel Class 117 and Birmingham RC&W Class 118.


Pressed Steel Suburban Unit (Class 117) at Stourbridge Junction

(Andrew Smith / miac.co.uk)

My first ever ride on the Stourbridge line occurred shortly after I had moved home from Tipton to Kingswinford in 1986. I boarded a Class 116 unit at Cradley Heath en route to New Street. The unit had obviously just arrived from Cardiff given that it had maps of the Valley Lines network along the roof line as well as a number of notices in English and Welsh. It became obvious that the set was not well and we finally ground to a halt just before Old Hill Tunnel, having to wait until we were rescued by the following service which coupled up to our rear and pushed us up the rest of the bank.


BR Derby Suburban Unit (Class 116) at Langley Green in 1983

(Andrew Smith / miac.co.uk)

The latter years saw services operated either using surviving vehicles of a single class or by making up sets using vehicles from different classes. Fortunately, the introduction of the last class of Sprinters (Class 158) from 1989 to 1992 enabled second generation DMUs to be cascaded and released enough Class 150 units to start the conversion of Birmingham suburban services to Class 150 usage. This, and the electrification of the Cross City line in 1993, saw the end of the first generation DMUs in the West Midlands.

In issue 13, we will look at the First Generation "Bubble Cars" used on the Stourbridge Town branch.