

CAPITAL DIRECT
by Roger Davis

Part 2 : Cardiff

Although through trains from the Stourbridge line to London were introduced in the 1850's shortly after the line was opened, through services to Cardiff did not start until the 1880's. In 1887, there was one through train in each direction between Birmingham Snow Hill and Cardiff via Stourbridge, Worcester and Hereford. The southbound service left Snow Hill at 1000 arriving at Cardiff at 1500, while the northbound journey left Cardiff at 1300 arriving at Snow Hill at 1815.

A Birmingham to Cardiff service stops at Smethwick West (previously Smethwick Junction) in 1960. The station closed in 1996.



By the start of the 20th century, the services had been greatly improved and named "The South Wales Expresses". There were four services in each direction. The southbound services left Snow Hill at 1015, 1138, 1555 and 1750, the first running non-stop between Snow Hill and Stourbridge Junction while the last three also stopped at Smethwick Junction (latterly Smethwick West). Two of the northbound services also

stopped at Smethwick Junction, while a third stopped there "on request". One interesting feature of some of these trains was that they combined with services between the West Country and the North West via Bristol and Shrewsbury. As an example, one of the northbound services from Cardiff to Birmingham had additional coaches for Shrewsbury and beyond. It arrived at Pontypool Road just before a West to North service and the two trains were combined. At Hereford, the two trains were split with the Cardiff to Shrewsbury coaches now attached to the West to North train. The two trains then departed from Hereford separately. The same procedure was used on southbound services with trains combining at Hereford and splitting at Pontypool Road.

By 1935, the number of trains had been reduced to 3 in each direction. One of the southbound trains truly was an express, leaving Snow Hill at 0800 and stopping only at Smethwick Junction, Stourbridge Junction, Kidderminster, Worcester Foregate Street, Great Malvern, Hereford, Pontypool Road, Newport and Cardiff, arriving at 1101. By this time, the practice of trains combining and splitting had stopped, although the 1235 Cardiff to Birmingham service had carriages for Manchester London Road and Birkenhead which were detached at Pontypool Road and re-coupled to the 0852 service from Plymouth North Road.

The situation remained much the same after the 2nd World War with service levels not increasing until 1951 when an additional southbound service was introduced. The 0800 service from Snow Hill, which had taken 3 hours and 1 minute in 1935, now took over 3½ hours to reach Cardiff. One innovation was a Saturdays only service which ran over the holiday peak from the end of July to the start of September. The southbound service ran from Kidderminster to Barry Island while the northbound service ran through to Birmingham Snow Hill.



Hall Class 4-6-0 6907 "Davenham Hall" waits to depart from platform 1 at Snow Hill on the 1700 service to Cardiff General in early 1958.

(Michael Mensing)



A Swindon-built Cross Country dmu approaches Old Hill in 1964 with the 1345 Cardiff General to Birmingham Snow Hill service. The single railcar in the background is waiting to operate a service to Dudley.

(Michael Mensing)

9 June 1958 saw a major improvement to the services with the introduction of Swindon-built Cross-Country DMU's to the service. The new service comprised 6 trains in each direction with a running time of between 3 hours 10 minutes and 3 hours 15 minutes - still more than the fastest steam operated service in 1935!

The 1961 Summer Timetable shows one very interesting departure over the line which ran on the evening of Friday 28 July only. It left Birmingham Snow Hill at 2157 and called at Stourbridge Junction (2226), Kidderminster (2239), Worcester Foregate Street (2304), Great Malvern (2317), Hereford (2353) and Cardiff General (0145) arriving at Fishguard Harbour at 0530. It connected with the 0700 ferry to Rosslare and was for West Midlands passengers holidaying in Ireland. Surprisingly, there was no corresponding northbound service a week or two later. Perhaps they were expecting everybody to stay in Ireland!

By 1963, Birmingham to Cardiff services ran approximately every 2 hours (southbound at 0805, 1005, 1205, 1405, 1605, 1805 and northbound at 0735, 0940, 1140, 1340, 1540 and 1845 with one northbound service starting at Carmarthen).

1967 saw services transferred from Snow Hill to New Street, but the services were now on borrowed time and had all disappeared by the end of the decade.

A Class 155 dmu approaches Droitwich Spa on a Birmingham - Cardiff service.



11 May 1987 saw the reintroduction of through services between the Stourbridge line and Cardiff - this time with services running via Cheltenham, Gloucester and Chepstow rather than via Hereford. On Mondays to Saturdays, 5 through trains operated between New Street and Cardiff Central in each direction, while there were 4 through trains in each direction on Sundays. The journey time was reduced to about 2½ hours with stops along the

Stourbridge line at Cradley Heath, Stourbridge Junction, Kidderminster, Droitwich Spa and Worcester Shrub Hill. In May 1990, the Birmingham New Street to Cardiff services were re-routed to operate via Bromsgrove, with the Stourbridge line services diverted to Hereford. The excuse used was that it would shorten journey times between Birmingham and Cardiff, while Stourbridge line passengers had a single change either at Droitwich Spa onto the rerouted Birmingham to Cardiff service or at Hereford onto Shrewsbury to Cardiff services.

Neither of these single connections still exists. Birmingham to Cardiff services were diverted away from Droitwich Spa and Worcester via the Midland main line while Birmingham to Hereford services were diverted away from the Stourbridge line and now operate via Bromsgrove. Both changes were done to “shorten journey times”. There is now only one parliamentary service from Hereford via the Stourbridge line on a Saturday evening at 1911. What it means is that, to travel from the Stourbridge line to Cardiff, you either have to travel into Birmingham and walk across to New Street or change twice - at Droitwich Spa and Hereford.

There is one development that could change the situation in the future and reintroduce a single change service. Worcestershire Parkway station is due to open in 2017 and it is proposed that Nottingham to Cardiff services stop there. Great Western Railway are concerned that the station is to be built with only a single platform on the Cotswold line. They want a passing loop and two platforms to be available from the outset. Although this will not happen when the station is built, passive provision for a second platform will be provided and it is hoped that Great Western Railway will apply enough pressure to ensure that the second platform and passing loop is provided as soon as possible. Stourbridge Line User Group feels that Stourbridge line trains should be extended to serve Worcestershire Parkway station, thus giving our passengers connections onto the trains that stop at the Birmingham to Cheltenham platforms, though line capacity and existing signalling on the single line to Evesham will preclude that until that second platform is provided. The alternative is to extend some of our services to Cheltenham Spa and Gloucester to provide connections there. Stourbridge Line User Group will be liaising with West Midlands Rail to ensure that the new London Midland franchise includes improvements in this area.