

RATIONALISING THE RAILWAYS

by Roger Davis

Anybody of a certain age can remember the days when through services ran between unexpected places - Brighton to Plymouth, Worcester Shrub Hill to Crewe via Wellington, Leamington Spa to Stourbridge Junction via Worcester, Birmingham Snow Hill to Shrewsbury via Bewdley and the wonderful Cleethorpes to Exmouth via Bath (with through carriages to Sidmouth).

These days, trains from A go to B rather than a choice of destinations. In the last 15 years, many destinations have disappeared from timetables as services have been rationalised. Cross Country services have

been removed from Blackpool, Liverpool Lime Street, Portsmouth, Weymouth, Poole, Margate, Ramsgate, Eastbourne and Brighton, the final ones because the DfT appear to think that people living north of London enjoy the thrill of travelling across central London on a claustrophobic overcrowded tube train. Gloucester, which was promised that it would not lose its long distance express trains when Eastgate

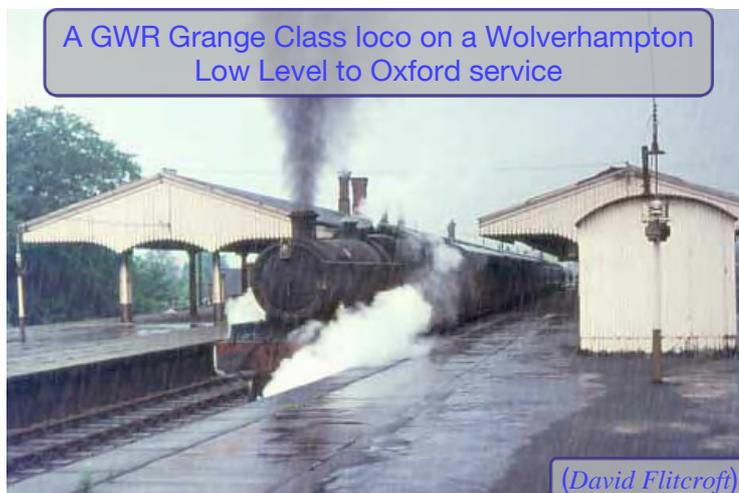


Deltic D9000 arrives at Margate on a Virgin Trains service from Birmingham New Street

Station closed, now has a parliamentary service of one train per week, while Worcester has lost through services to the South West and the North.

The DfT specification of the Arriva CrossCountry franchise brought further rationalisation. Through journeys such as Bournemouth to Edinburgh and Bristol to Glasgow via Carlisle disappeared as the DfT decreed that the new CrossCountry network would have four basic services - Bournemouth to Manchester, Bristol to Manchester, Plymouth to Edinburgh and Reading to Newcastle, although some services still served Aberdeen, Dundee, Guildford, Torbay, Newquay and Penzance.

The Stourbridge line has also suffered from rationalisation. After over 80 years from



A GWR Grange Class loco on a Wolverhampton Low Level to Oxford service

(David Flitcroft)

the 1880s to the 1960s, through services to Cardiff were withdrawn before being temporarily resurrected for three years from 1988 to 1990. Rationalisation of trains from Paddington via the North Cotswold line has resulted in all services that operate past Worcester continuing to Great Malvern or Hereford, rather than some of them heading north towards Stourbridge. Thus, the historic through services that operated in the

days of the GWR and British Railways have disappeared.

With the opening of the Jewellery Line in 1995, the Stourbridge line had 10 weekday services to Hereford, a further 12 to Great Malvern and 8 to Warwick and Leamington Spa. Further rationalisation decreed that Hereford would be best served by trains via



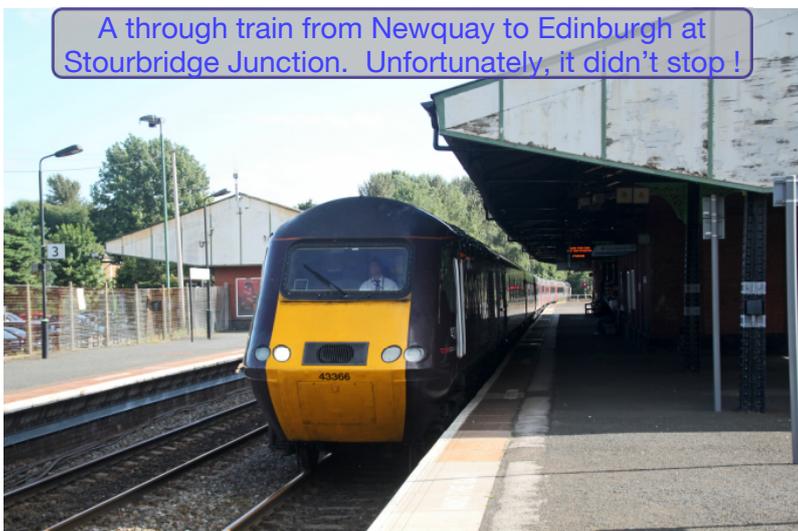
Hereford has only one train per week to the Stourbridge line - at 1912 on Saturdays.

Bromsgrove rather than Stourbridge, at the same time removing direct services to Cardiff from Droitwich Spa and Worcester Shrub Hill as they now operated directly via the Midland main line. The only “good” news on the horizon for Worcestershire (but not Worcester) passengers is that these trains are scheduled to stop at Worcestershire Parkway once it opens. In addition, many Stourbridge line services to Great Malvern were truncated to terminate

at Worcester with Great Malvern served by extra Great Western trains from Paddington and Bristol. The result is that the Stourbridge line now has 1 through train per week from Hereford and 4 through daily services to Great Malvern. All of the off-peak services to Leamington Spa were truncated to terminate at Dorridge with Leamington Spa being served by Chiltern Railways services from Birmingham.

As far as the Central Trains/London Midland services are concerned, the Stourbridge line is now a purely local line. Journeys that used to be direct now require one or more changes of train. Fortunately, the Stourbridge line still has peak time Chiltern Railways to London Marylebone and efforts need to be made to negotiate improvements to these very successful services, such as Saturday evening and Sunday through journeys to and from London. The current franchise expires in 2022 so it is necessary to ensure that the DfT does not attempt to rationalise the replacement franchise to operate from Marylebone to Birmingham only.

Is rationalisation a good thing? On the plus side, it has helped to create clockface timetables which people can remember. On the minus side, journeys that could previously have been done directly can now involve multiple changes. It might be nice to go back to the days of through journeys from the Stourbridge line to Cheltenham, Gloucester, Hereford, Cardiff, Oxford and London Paddington.



A through train from Newquay to Edinburgh at Stourbridge Junction. Unfortunately, it didn't stop!

However, we must remember that, in those days, the Stourbridge line did not have two trains per hour from Worcester, four trains per hour from Kidderminster and six trains per hour from Stourbridge Junction.