

## BANANAS AND BUBBLES

by Rob Hebron

There is a common misconception that the Stourbridge Town branch line is operated with a train. By definition, a train is either a locomotive drawing carriages or an ensemble of diesel units with a cab at both ends. In fact, the Town branch line is served by a railcar which is a self-contained and self-propelled rail vehicle designated Class 139. Caspar Lucas, Phil Tonks and I have covered the history and technical aspects of the Parry People Mover (PPM), as it is also known but not its predecessors. I will try to complete the story by travelling back in time.

Immediately before the PPM was installed on the shuttle between Stourbridge Town and Stourbridge Junction, Central Trains and London Midland employed a Class 153 railcar. This class was a modification of a Class 155 two car unit with each coach given an extra cab and driving gear. Class 153 units still exist on the UK rail network and either work on short rural lines in isolation or are coupled with other Sprinter sets to strengthen them when required. A Class 153/170 combination is often employed on the Stourbridge Line, while Class 150/153 combinations are regularly seen on the Great Western Railway network.

A Class 153 railcar at Stourbridge Junction with a service to Stourbridge Town.



Going back further when the old Stourbridge Town still stood in Vauxhall Road, another railcar in BR blue livery worked the branch line. This was affectionately known as the "Bubble Car" and provided a good, reliable and comfortable ride with its spring-imbedded upholstered seats. The Bubble Cars used on the branch came from two different classes. The Class 122 railcars were built by Gloucester Railway and Carriage Company and entered service in 1958, while the Class 121 railcars had Pressed Steel bodywork and entered service from 1960. The two classes were easily distinguished as the Class 122 had a small destination screen at roof level, while the Class 121 had the destination screen in the driver's windscreen with a large four track panel at roof level to display the train's reporting number. The Bubble Car is best remembered for overriding the buffers and breaking through the barrier to the demolished Foster Street Bridge. The scene was very reminiscent of the film "Italian Job" but replacing the balancing car with a train.

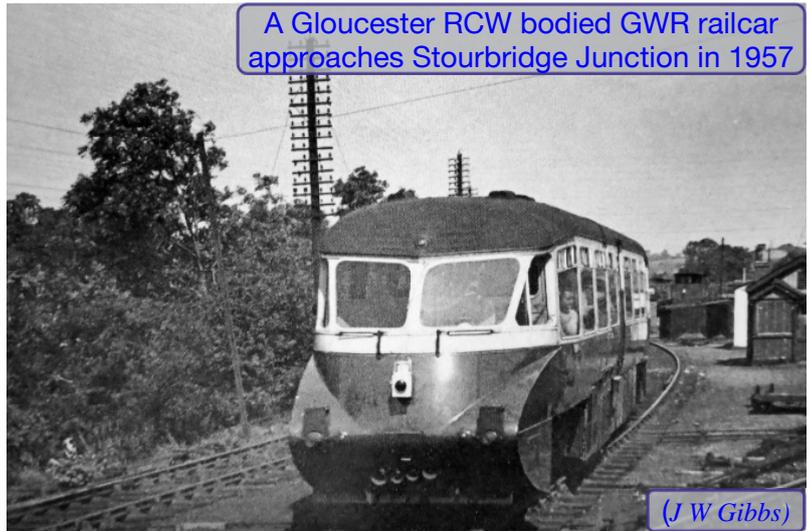
A Class 122 bubble car at Stourbridge Junction with a service to Stourbridge Town.



A Class 121 bubble car leaves Stourbridge Town with a service to the Junction.



I have to turn back the clock even further to find the original railcar. Back in the days of the Great Western Railway, economies of operation were being sought and even then, the company was looking for an alternative to steam power. The answer was found in the revolutionary AEC diesel railcar which was introduced in 1933. The bodywork of the first models, built by Park Royal and Gloucester Railway & Carriage Company, was streamlined and rounded in appearance and consequently the railcars earned the nickname "Flying Bananas". The later models, built by Swindon Works, were more angular. The diesel engines within the railcars were capable of exerting up to 130 horse power which was more than enough to transport dwindling numbers of passengers. In fact, the standard single car, built in 1935 and withdrawn in 1959, could carry 70 persons but had no toilets.



Three of the GWR railcars have survived into preservation, as follows:

*W4W, which has a Park Royal body, is part of the National Collection and is on display at Steam Museum, Swindon.*

*W20W, which has a GWR Swindon Works body, is at the Kent & East Sussex Railway which runs from Tenterden to Bodiam.*

*W22W, which has a GWR Swindon Works body, is owned by the Great Western Society at their Didcot headquarters.*



Before railcars took over the service in the mid 1950s, auto-trains using 14xx 0-4-2T locomotives or 64xx 0-6-0PT locomotives were regularly used for passenger traffic while steam locomotives hauled goods trains up and down the branch to Amblecote Goods Depot. Therefore, trains *did* actually run on the Stourbridge Town branch line but not anymore!