

Although the rail service on the Stourbridge line provides frequent journeys, there are times when the average commuter is grateful for an alternative, especially during industrial strife or disruption on the railways.

For some years, an alternative between Stourbridge and Kidderminster has been available in the form of bus service 125, with journey times between the two town centres comparing favourably with the train service. It also offered a through service to Bewdley and Bridgnorth, not possible by rail since the cessation of public services in 1970 and 1963 respectively.

Unsurprisingly, there was a great deal of rural mileage involved with the 125 bus service and the operator, Diamond Bus, found it commercially unsustainable. Consequently, the whole service was under threat of withdrawal. To reverse the threatened withdrawal and preserve the lifeline for isolated communities, local councils and MPs stepped in and, as a result, the 125 was saved between Kidderminster and Bridgnorth only. Thankfully, the Kidderminster to Stourbridge portion has been appended to the tendered bus service 25, creating a through service 25A from Kidderminster to Dudley via Stourbridge, Brierley Hill Town Centre and Merry Hill Centre which commenced on 20 April 2025.



There are many interesting aspects of the new service and important implications for a future rail operation. If patronage is respectable to begin with and shows signs of growth, it provides evidence of a passenger base for a rail-based service from Brierley Hill to Stourbridge. Brierley Hill Town Centre has recently been given a "makeover" and with its thriving three days-per-week market, it offers the alternative, traditional shopping experience to Merry Hill Centre.

It is encouraging that links between Worcestershire and the Black Country have been restored and the new 25A has the advantage of providing through services from Kidderminster to Merry Hill and Dudley for the first time in many years. However, the disadvantages are that the service is only hourly and the circuitous route between Stourbridge and Dudley means that journey times from Kidderminster are 94 minutes to Dudley and 62 minutes to Merry Hill. However, the latter time compares favourably with the previously encouraged route of a train to Cradley Heath, changing onto the very unreliable 4M or X10 bus routes to complete the journey.

Will TfWM cite the 25A bus route as a viable alternative to a rail based service between Stourbridge and Brierley Hill? TfWM has already indicated that a road based rapid transit route between the two towns is not viable due to the poor road infrastructure in the area. Thus, the 25A should be a temporary, but useful, solution.



# Platform



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**CAUGHT SHORT**  
by Roger Davis

For the past five years, SLUG has been monitoring the level of late running services, services that skip scheduled stops and cancelled services. We are pleased to say that the introduction of a more robust timetable in May 2023 improved the first two issues significantly, although both still occur when external factors such as signal failures, trespassers, unit breakdowns and bridge strikes affect the efficient running of the service. In addition, in recent months, the level of cancellations has reduced quite significantly – from an average of eleven per day in the May 2024 timetable to an average of six per day in the December 2024 timetable.

We became aware of the short forming of services in 2021 in the aftermath of Covid, when the number of short formed services increased significantly. As a result, we added the short forming of Monday to Saturday services to the list of items that we monitor on a daily basis. The results for each timetable period up to the end of the June 2024 timetable are tabulated below.

	May 2021	Dec 2021	May 2022	Dec 2022	May 2023	Dec 2023	Jun 2024
Total days	191	132	160	122	170	147	164
Total Short forms	469	421	102	93	205	139	156
Short forms per day	2.45	3.18	0.64	0.76	1.2	0.94	0.95
% services short formed	18.88	24.53	4.9	5.86	8.04	6.3	6.34

However, as we reported briefly in the previous issue of *Platform*, the short forming of services has become a major issue since the start of 2025. We started noticing a marked increase in the number of short formed services on 18 January and raised our concerns with West Midlands Railway.

On 24 February, West Midlands Railway announced the problems were due to delays in getting replacement wheelsets for the Class 172 units from the suppliers which meant that more sets than normal were not available for service. Therefore, an unspecified number of the fifteen daily diagrams would see reduced formations until the May timetable change at the earliest. A thorough investigation by SLUG using the Railcam app and its camera just south of Kidderminster station proved that five Monday to Friday diagrams were reduced (two from 5 to 3-car, two from 5 to 4 and one from 4 to 3) and four Saturday diagrams were reduced (three from 5 to 3 and one from 5 to 4). However, this did not stop a number of the unaffected diagrams also being reduced on an ad-hoc basis. In fact, from 4 March to 24 March inclusive, at least eight of the fifteen diagrams were short formed, with 19 March seeing twelve short formed diagrams. The figures that we produced were sent to both West Midlands Railway and the West Midlands Rail Executive and were referred to in a meeting between these two organisations.



Geoff Grant explained to the meeting that the name West Midlands Trains will disappear when the services are brought into public ownership, although the names of the two train operating companies – West Midlands Railway and London Northwestern Railway – will remain.

He reported on the progress being made to end the current issues of short-forming (covered fully in the previous article). He also reported that performance figures for both West Midlands Railway overall and for the Snow Hill lines had shown significant improvement over the past four accounting periods (a period being four weeks). This was reflected in the annual stakeholder survey which showed that overall stakeholder satisfaction had increased by 9% at WMR and 12% at LNWR.

For West Midlands Rail Executive, the next year should see the opening of five new stations. Moseley Village, Kings Heath and Pineapple Road are due to open in late 2025 with Willenhall and Darlaston following in early 2026.



It is also eagerly awaiting the announcement of the government's spending review to see if the major Midlands Rail Hub project has been funded. If so, this will see extra platforms at both Snow Hill and Moor Street served by new chords from the Camp Hill line onto the Snow Hill lines at Bordesley.

A Pay-As-You-Go pilot scheme for the TfWM area is currently in development and this will require a simplification of rail fares within the area. WMRE is currently seeking approval to remove PM peak fare restrictions to enable a simplified structure to be introduced. One new ticket which is planned for introduction later this year is a "1-Day AnyTrain" ticket.

On a local level, WMRE is currently considering future options for the operation of the Stourbridge Town branch as the Class 139s are getting close to the end of their lifespan. A study into options for the Stourbridge to Walsall corridor is currently being undertaken and should report back this year. Finally, WMRE is looking at ways to provide Access for All at the 15% of stations that do not have this, including Old Hill on our line.

The formal presentations were followed by a question and answer session and all questions were answered honestly by our speakers. Questions included the lack of on-board ticket checks on WMR services, the late start of services on Sunday mornings, overcrowding on short-formed services, the filthy condition of the Class 172 units and the gap between carriages and the platform at some stations.

In conclusion, the members who attended the AGM that followed the public meeting were all pleased with how the public meeting went and with the quality and honesty of the speakers. We look forward to our next public meeting next May.

**ANOTHER SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC MEETING**  
by Roger Davis

SLUG’s annual public meeting took place on 13 May and turned out to be a great success. The three speakers - Harry Burr (Stakeholder Executive and Community Rail Lead at Chiltern Railways), Geoff Grant (Stakeholder Manager at West Midlands Trains) and Peter Sargant (Head of Rail Policy and Strategy at West Midlands Rail Executive) - treated the audience to interesting talks about the issues facing the rail industry today and the plans for the future.

It is impossible to pass on everything discussed at the meeting but a complete set of the slides that accompanied each presentation have been posted on our website at <https://www.stourbridgelineusergroup.info/public-meeting.html>.

A common concern in all three presentations was the uncertainty that currently affects the rail industry as it awaits the outcome of the Government’s spending review, the forthcoming transfer of the operating companies into public ownership and the setting up of Great British Railways. For the operators, although they know the latest date on which they will transfer into public ownership, it is always possible that this could happen sooner with just three months’ notice given. For West Midlands Rail Executive, the level of its influence on local rail services when Great British Railways is set up has still to be confirmed.

The major concern for Chiltern Railways is replacing its six 6-car Silver Sets which are now 47 years old. It has been in discussion with DfT for about a year now about obtaining thirteen six-year-old 5-car loco-hauled Mark 5 carriage sets which were declared surplus to requirements by Transpennine Express. At last year’s public meeting, it was hoped that a



decision would be made well before the end of 2024 with the new units coming into service during 2025. At this year’s meeting, it was “hopefully within the next few weeks or months”. The now legendary inertia at the DfT means that the new sets, if approved, will not enter squadron service until December 2026 at the earliest. This is a significant blow for the Stourbridge line as Chiltern will be stabling some of the new train sets at Stourbridge Depot and is looking into improvements to through trains between the Stourbridge line and London Marylebone when the new sets are introduced. In preparation for this, significant enhancements have been made to Stourbridge Depot including new walkways and colleague accommodation.

In addition, the Class 165 and 168 DMUs operated by Chiltern Railways are currently being refurbished, although this will not affect our services if the new Mark 5 stock is obtained as these new trains will take over the London to West Midlands services. In the longer term, Chiltern Railways will be preparing the business case to replace the diesel trains with new battery-electric trains.

This resulted in the announcement that, from 31 March, six train services would be withdrawn until further notice. Fortunately, none directly affected the Stourbridge line with two being early morning services between Snow Hill and Leamington Spa and four being services on the New Street – Bromsgrove – Hereford line. This slowly stabilised the situation and, from 10 to 19 April, the number of ad-hoc short formed services had reduced to either one or zero.

On 21 April, two things happened without being publicised. Firstly, the six services withdrawn on 31 March were reinstated. Secondly, two Monday to Friday diagrams and two Saturday diagrams on the Stourbridge line were restored to their original lengths, in all cases from 3-car to 5-car. When SLUG asked West Midlands Railway why it hadn’t publicised this change, we were told that it didn’t want to announce something that it might be forced to reverse if the situation deteriorated. Thankfully, up to now, the situation has not deteriorated.



The results for each period are tabulated below. The figures in blue show the diagrams short-formed on an ad-hoc basis and the figures in red show the diagrams short formed on a longer term basis.

	To 18 Jan	To 22 Feb	To 29 Mar	To 19 Apr	To 17 May
Total days	27	30	30	18	42
Total Short forms	62	124	289 (144, 145)	126 (39, 87)	202 (83, 119)
Short forms per day	2.29	4.13	9.63 (4.80, 4.83)	7.00 (2.16, 4.84)	4.81 (1.98, 2.83)
% services short formed	15.3	27.55	64.22	46.67	32.06

Thus, the situation is still to be resolved although the above figures show that the short formation percentage has halved compared with the dark days of March.

There is one other factor affecting the availability of Class 172 units on Snow Hill line services. The Class 196 units used on New Street to Hereford services are now at the stage where the engines need replacing. There are issues with getting replacement engines from CAF and this, in conjunction with the temporary transfer of six 2-car Class 196 units to operate East-West Rail services between Oxford and Milton Keynes, has meant that one of the four all-day diagrams on the New Street to Hereford service is being operated with a 3-car Class 172 unit instead of a 4-car Class 196 unit, thus making it unavailable for Snow Hill line services.

West Midlands Railway has stated that normal service should resume “in the summer” and an unofficial estimate is July. SLUG will continue to monitor the short forming of services and will make our feelings clear to West Midlands Railway and the West Midlands Rail Executive if the situation doesn’t improve. All we can say at present is that the early signs are that the situation is slowly improving.

## BACK TO THE FUTURE by John Warren

The Very Light Rail  
National Innovation Centre



On 17 May, as part of the Railway 200 celebrations, the Black Country Innovative Manufacturing Organisation (BCIMO) organised an open day at the Very Light Rail National Innovation Centre on the site of the old Dudley Station.

One of the highlights of the day was the opportunity to be one of the first members of the public to ride on the Very Light Rail vehicle being developed for use in Coventry. The route headed north to a tight turning circle that had been constructed to test the vehicle before heading south and down the incline through Dudley Tunnel. The train then reversed in the vicinity of the old Blowers Green station before heading up the slope through Dudley Tunnel and back to the starting point.

The Coventry VLR vehicle  
heads towards Dudley Tunnel



The interior of the Coventry VLR vehicle



Each journey took 20 passengers which begs the question as to whether a similar vehicle could operate the Stourbridge Town branch. In my opinion, the answer is an emphatic no. What the Stourbridge Town branch needs in the future is a vehicle with more seating capacity than the current Class 139 units, not one with less.

It was rather unfortunate that, due to the queuing time to ride on the Coventry VLR vehicle, I missed a presentation by a newly formed group with plans to recreate a significant part of Stourbridge's history. This is Stourbridge Lion 2029 whose aim is to "design and build a state of the art version of the Stourbridge Lion through a series of co-lab projects with local education bodies and industries". Full details of this project can be found on the Stourbridge Lion 2029 website at <https://wlddev3.uk/>.

A replica of the  
Stourbridge Lion



SLUG intends to contact this group to find out more about the project. The thought of a state-of-the-art Stourbridge Lion being built to celebrate the bicentenary of the original in 2029 is certainly appealing and we'll report more fully on this in future issues.

## NEWS IN BRIEF edited by Rob Hebron

**Situation Vacant.** SLUG is looking for a new Treasurer/Membership Secretary. The combined roles are critical to the continuity of the Group. Weekly involvement is minimal, but the Treasurer would need to produce statements four times per year, usually by contact through "Zoom" meetings. In the Membership Secretary role, he or she would be supported by the Admin Officer. This job would suit someone who is familiar with basic accounting and spreadsheets. This is an excellent opportunity for anyone who wants to engage with the rail industry and the successful applicant could assist the liaison team if he or she so desired.

**Kicking Off.** The Government has confirmed £2.4bn of transport funding for key transport projects in the West Midlands. This five-year package includes £400m backing for a tram line from the city centre to the proposed new Birmingham City FC Stadium and Sports Quarter at the former Wheels site in Bordesley Green. A later phase would see the line extended to Heartlands Hospital, Birmingham Airport, the NEC and the HS2 interchange at Arden Cross.



(Birmingham City FC)

(Source:- Business Live)

**Levelling Up.** Groundworks have begun in Level Street, Brierley Hill in preparation for the second phase of Metro Line 2. Phase one from Wednesbury to Flood Street in Dudley should be up and running by the end of this year and there now seems a commitment to finishing the route amidst speculation that there might be a funding shortfall.

(Source:- Midland Metro Alliance)

**Inspirational Experiences.** The Severn Valley Railway is hosting a 10-day "Railway 200" event from 27 June to 6 July featuring an exhibition train dubbed "Inspiration". Visitors will also be able to take heritage train rides on 28 and 29 June while a special "Railway 200: Trains Through the Ages" event on 5 and 6 July will feature heritage train rides starring LNER 60163 *Tornado*.

(Source:- Severn Valley Railway)



A new Class 730/2 unit is seen at Wolverhampton station on delivery to Oxley Depot

**A New Fleet.** London Northwestern Railway introduced its new 5-car Class 730/2 electric multiple units earlier this month on Euston to Milton Keynes services. These new units will be introduced onto Birmingham to Liverpool services later this year.

(Source:- West Midlands Railway)

**Innovation for the Nation.** The Rail Innovation Centre at Long Marston, a test bed for train leasing company Porterbrook, is to be upgraded to accommodate 3.5 km of electrified track. This will enable the testing of electric fleets at up to 50 mph. There will also be a capability of supporting European in-cab signalling systems.

(Source:- Rail Technology Magazine)