

# RailWestMidlands

Issue 125

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£1 (free to members)

From the West Midlands branch of *Railfuture* -  
Britain's leading independent advocate of rail

## Can the West Midlands really have a light rail system for just £5m?



Image of possible new Parry People Mover - [www.parrypeplemovers.com](http://www.parrypeplemovers.com)

The image above appeared in the Express and Star on 9th January 2012. It shows how a light rail service on the four-mile freight line between Brierley Hill and Stourbridge could be created for perhaps as little as £5 million.

Network Rail's latest RUS (Route Utilisation Strategy) document published in February gives encouragement for light rail vehicles sharing tracks with heavy rail, something that is already practiced in NE England. The 'alternative solutions' being researched fall into three ways of doing things differently:

- Can the application of tram and tram train technologies deliver savings in capital, operating and maintenance costs, whilst simultaneously improving the offer to the travelling customer?
- Are there cheaper and more innovative ways of replacing diesel traction with electrically powered trains?
- To what extent can the further development of community rail initiatives provide locally applicable opportunities for adding value to railway operations?

Read more: <http://www.expressandstar.com/news/2012/01/09/first-glimpse-at-5m-light-rail-network/>

## 2012 could be a new dawn for *Railfuture*



Jerry Alderson writes: This is my last newsletter as acting chairman of the West Midlands branch. I hope you enjoy it, as much as I've enjoyed helping the editor to put it together.

I've also chaired my fourth and final West Midlands committee meeting, which I have enjoyed immensely. We have a good team. John Balmforth will chair the next and intends to stand for election as chairman. However, the composition of the committee from May is entirely up to you, the members of the branch, and I hope that some of you consider standing for election. If not, then please do use your vote.

To encourage new people to join the committee a nomination form is being sent to all members of the branch. Our secretary Peter Hughes will receive the forms and if there are more candidates than places available then a postal ballot will be conducted by the national returning officer, with papers sent to all paid up members of the West Midlands branch by 21st April.

The London and South East branch has been operating anonymous postal ballots for several years, and this is being rolled out with the West Midlands branch commencing this year. The Board of directors of *Railfuture* (of which I am vice chairman) is actively looking at how it needs to change for the future and I am delighted that my colleague David Berman will become the new national chairman from May. He has many ideas on how we can improve. Our first success has been to persuade a well-known figure to become our new President (subject to members agreeing at the AGM), succeeding Peter Lawrence who has decided to stand down.

*Railfuture* has been mentioned in the media several times in the last week (on the BBC and the Scotsman web-sites) and we've just placed an advert in Total Politics magazine, which is an attempt to broaden our membership base. More adverts are planned for later this year. I would like to thank everyone who has completed our members' questionnaire. The response – more than a thousand returned – has astonished and pleased us. We hope to present an analysis of the results at the national AGM. It will influence the campaigning work that we do nationally and at branch level in the future.

My last role will be to chair the branch AGM in Worcester on 12<sup>th</sup> May and I hope to see as many of you there as possible. The new committee will be eager to hear what you want the branch to do in the future, and also to hear matters you wish them to raise at regular liaison meetings with Centro.

I hope that there will soon be regular branch meetings for members and public events to get the rail message across. I am confident that funding and support will be made available to help the branch improve what it does, but we need as much enthusiasm as possible from all of you.

jerry.alderson@railfuture.org.uk

## New trains on the Snow Hill and Moor St lines

William Whiting writes: London Midland is to be congratulated on the new fleet of Class 172 trains. I first encountered the train when I travelled on Friday evening to Worcester from Cradley Heath just before Christmas and I have used the trains several times since. The trains have delivered an improved journey experience for passengers travelling on all the routes serving Birmingham Snow Hill and Moor Street stations.

The Class 172 train is the latest evolution in the Turbostar family of trains. London Midland already run a Turbostar train - the Class 170 and they currently have 23 trains in the fleet. The Class 172 will replace most of the Class 150 fleet which has been in operation for over 25 years. As you might expect, it has a number of advantages over the Class 150. One example is reduction of noise and with old stock elimination of diesel fumes.

### What do I consider has improved?

The Class 172 has some new features designed to improve passenger environment, information, security and access.

### Saloon environment

The saloon environment of the Class 172 is a vast improvement on the existing Class 150s and will significantly improve passenger perception. The benefits include 2+2 seating, air conditioning, more leg room, spacious and bright interior with London Midland branding and open vestibules



### Passenger Information System

On train passenger information. A new system provides automatic audio and visual messages for each journey, with the ability to manually select messages as required. However the automated announcements do not advise passengers about changing at Smethwick Galton Bridge or alighting at Birmingham Moor Street for the Bull Ring or New Street Station.

### Closed Circuit Television

Each vehicle of the train has four internal colour CCTV cameras that automatically record and store to a computer on board the train. To support investigations into criminal or anti-social incidents footage can be downloaded via cables or via a secure wireless connection.



A forward facing camera is fitted in the exterior of each driving cab front, next to the driver's side lamp cluster. Recordings from these cameras can provide valuable evidence to support incident investigations.

### **Inter-unit Access**

All of the Class 172s have unit end corridor connections which are much more convenient. This helps passengers find seats throughout the train more easily, improve revenue protection and provides a more open environment. The trains are also fitted with Selective Door Operation (SDO) which enables them to call at some short platforms.

Class 172 carriages are 23 metres long compared to 20 metres for the Class 150 enabling a similar level of seating to a Class 150 but with 2+2 rather than 2+3 seating. There are 139 seats in a 2-car and 219 in a 3-car train.

Each unit is provided with a disabled access toilet with automatic soap and water dispensers.

The 172s are maintained and stabled at Tyseley, Worcester and Leamington.

Passenger volumes have increased dramatically on the Snow Hill lines in recent years. As an example Rowley Regis Station has increased the number of car parking spaces but on a weekday even these have been filled necessitating parking on the road. There are still problems with overcrowding at peak times but overall the quality of these trains has much improved the travelling environment for passengers and that is to be commended.



Photos: John Balmforth. Moor Street (above). Previous page the Hawthorns

## Does the electronic carnet signal the end of the season ticket?

One of the biggest problems of any scheduled service, whether it be rail, bus or any other form of transport, is the phenomenon of peak demand.

Operators try to have sufficient space for all passengers, and often fail. At the same time, off-peak demand is a fraction of peak demand so staff and expensive infrastructure are under-utilised.

Why do we put up with this inefficient practice? It's because we didn't have an alternative – until now.

The advent of the electronic carnet such as the **Oystercard** in London and the similar card being trialled in WM, gives us the opportunity to flatten peak demand while increasing off peak demand and the width of the shoulder peaks. The idea is to stop selling season tickets and to replace them with electronic carnets. Carnets are prepaid travel cards that are debited each time they are used. The amount of the debit will vary according to the level of demand at the time. One suggestion is to create a range of 10 fare levels for each journey, where level 1 is priced at 10% of the max fare, level 2 at 20% of max fare, and so on.

### Belgian smartcard with carnet option



In 2007 a smartcard was introduced in Brussels for all public transport – the anonymous standard card is in blue, with a personalised card in silver (inset).

The JUMP card allows ten individual journeys each lasting up to a hour across all vehicles involved in the journey.

The fare level would be quoted on the timetable for each journey. It is then up to the passenger whether they pay the highest fare for the peak service or a lower fare for an off-peak train. The fares would be pitched so they are price-neutral for the average commuter, i.e. the chap who goes to town in the morning peak and goes home in the evening, has holidays and days off sick, and occasionally travels at a different time for medical appointments or after-work events, or works at home. Higher paid travellers who must be at their workplace at a fixed time every day would pay the highest fare whilst more price-conscious commuters would contrive to travel off-peak. This would in turn put pressure on employers to be more flexible in working hours.

The effect will be to reduce peak demand and increase off-peak demand without any physical change to the railway. The principle is already being practised by TOCs in the form of simple peak and off-peak fares, and temporary offers to boost off-peak demand. The carnet system now proposed puts the idea on a permanent graduated basis. We will look back on the season ticket as an anachronism, giving a blanket licence to travel irrespective of time of day or number of journeys made.

The benefit will be to carry more passengers on our congested railway while reducing overcrowding. What's more, by only paying for the journeys that are made, part-time workers who are often on a low income can benefit from season ticket fare levels for the first time.

Les Fawcett

## Railfreight in WM – a thriving business

At CENTRO's Transport Strategy Committee meeting on 23rd January an item was presented in connection with the Government's recently published "Strategic Rail Freight Interchange (SRFI) Policy Guidance" and the opportunity this presents to investigate the potential of Bescot yard as an Intermodal Rail Freight Interchange (IRFI). Bescot yard (on the line between Birmingham and Walsall) has excellent rail links to the container ports as well as major urban areas and is adjacent to the M6 motorway.

At present no decisions have been made as to whether Bescot will indeed be an IRFI as much investigation has yet to be done to see whether the site would be suitable and viable. Watch this space!

### Some Sample Rail Freight flows in West Midlands - 2012

#### **Automotive**

Castle Bromwich – Jaguar, export of cars to Port of Southampton.

#### **Construction**

##### *Aggregates*

Brierley Hill – Stone inwards from Croft, (occasional traffic).

Washwood Heath – Stone inwards from Dove Holes, Peak District.

Washwood Heath - Stone inwards from Bardon Hill

##### *Cement*

Walsall – Bulk cement powder inwards from Tunstead, Buxton, Peak Dist.

#### **Energy**

Daw Mill, domestic coal, outward flows to power stations, such as Ratcliffe.

Rugeley and Ironbridge, power stations receive coal from various domestic and import points.

#### **Industrial**

##### *Metals*

Handsworth – Scrap metal, outward flows to Cardiff steelworks, and Liverpool docks for export.  
Handsworth Queens Head - Scrap metal, scrap yard, outward flows to Cardiff steelworks.  
Kingsbury - Scrap metal, scrap yard, outward flows to Cardiff steelworks (occasional traffic).  
Round Oak – Steel terminal receives domestic products from Margam (Port Talbot).  
Washwood Heath – Steel terminal receives imported products, loaded at Boston docks.  
Wolverhampton – Steel terminal receives domestic products from South Wales, Aldwarke and Scunthorpe, and imported steel from Immingham docks.  
Worcester – Steel terminal – receives tin plate from Trostre, Wales. (Normally combined with Round Oak flow).

#### *Petroleum*

Bedworth – inwards petroleum products from Port Clarence  
Kingsbury – inwards petroleum products from Humber and Lindsey and (Robeston)

#### **Infrastructure**

Bescot Yard, Inward / outward; Consolidation / distribution centre for infrastructure materials  
Washwood Heath – Outward – concrete sleepers for infrastructure materials

#### **Intermodal (containerised)**

Birch Coppice – Multi  
Donnington – Multi  
Lawley Street – Freightliner Terminal, receives deep  
Hams Hall – Multi

#### **Transit Traffic - sample movements via West Midlands**

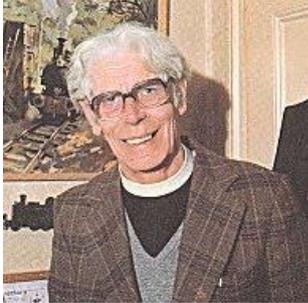
Beeston – Cardiff – scrap metal  
Daventry – Southampton – intermodal  
Immingham – Cardiff docks – petroleum products  
Lindsey – Didcot power station – petroleum products  
Margam (Port Talbot) – Corby – steel  
Middleton Towers – Ellesmere Port – industrial grade sand  
Mountsorrel – Northampton – aggregates  
Newport – Tees Yard – steel  
Redcar – Margam – coking coal  
Rotherham – Cardiff – scrap metal  
Scunthorpe – Eastleigh – steel rails  
Southampton – Leeds and Wakefield, intermodal  
Stud Farm – Westbury – ballast  
Swansea – Immingham – coal  
Tees Yard – Margam – lime and empty steel wagons

#### **Wagonload**

Donnington – Defence stores traffic in containers.  
Kineton - Defence stores traffic in containers and conventional wagons

## Thomas the Tank Engine was a Brummie

**Peter Hughes** writes: KINGS NORTON station is credited as the inspiration for Thomas, Edward, Henry, Gordon, James, Percy, Toby etc. during Rev Awdry's time at Kings Norton.



Wilbert Awdry (1911-1997) was curate at St Nicholas' church on Kings Norton Green from 1940-1946 during which time he worked on his first book published in 1946. Photo: Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilbert\\_Awdry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilbert_Awdry))

Obviously his fleet expanded in later years and aficionados of the genre may consider Toby to be the first tram-train!

Local councillors are asking for views on their idea for Thomas the Tank images to appear on Kings Norton both to brighten up the station and to highlight the historical connection. I am not too sure that this helps the image of a modern efficient transport network and it might make children think there is something exciting to see. But it will give Kings Norton station a distinct personality (Photo: Wikipedia from 2007.)



## **Railfuture response to the IIP (Initial Industry Plan) for development of the railway in England**

*Railfuture* has endorsed the Initial Industry Plan to develop the rail network.

See <http://www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-index.php?page=Submissions> – which has a list of *Railfuture's* responses to all consultations – scroll down to IIP.

The following are extracts from *Railfuture's* submission to Network Rail:

“The plan recognises that economic and demographic trends, alongside government policy, will influence rail's future role (Section 2.1 Government Policy). Whilst the plan considers policy issues it does not address the effect

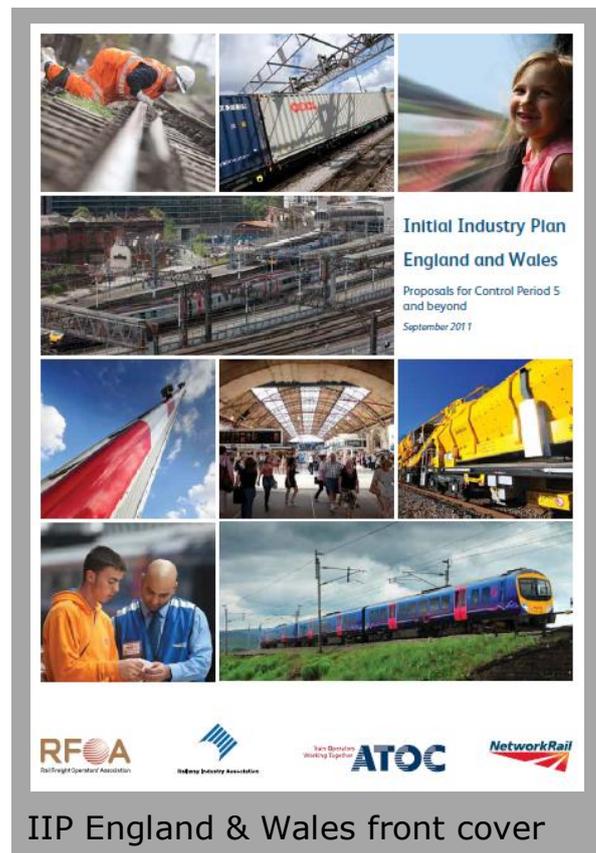
that global economic trends will have upon the UK rail industry, or recognise that they will shape government policy.

In Railfuture's opinion fuel prices will continue to increase in real terms as developing countries require more energy and oil supplies decline. Fuel is a smaller proportion of overall costs for rail than other modes, so rail transport is less sensitive to fuel price inflation. Whilst government policy may attempt to soften the impact, increasing fuel prices will drive a modal shift from road to rail transport in the UK – witness the growth that has occurred since 2007 despite the recession (section 2.5.2).

Since rail's market share is relatively low at 7% overall, even a small percentage modal shift will represent a large percentage growth in rail traffic which could overwhelm the railway industry unless sufficient capacity increases are planned and the necessary investment made. The extra capacity provided and the extra journeys generated must be profitable, otherwise growth will drive a requirement for increasing subsidy, which will not be sustainable or politically acceptable.

The plan should make it clear that the key strategic objective is to put the industry on a sustainable financial footing. Investment is essential, and given the scarcity of investment capital, everything in this plan must contribute to this objective. Whilst unlikely to be achievable in CP5, the long-term objective should be for the industry to become profitable overall, so that future investment can be justified on commercial grounds (one of the key decision areas identified in the Foreword).

The six objectives listed in the Executive Summary all flow from this strategic objective. To achieve it the industry must reduce its unit costs (for example by investment in electrification and introduction of more competition) and increase revenue by increasing volume. Lower unit costs will make the industry more **efficient**, more **affordable to the taxpayer** and drive growth in the industry and **economic growth** overall. To attract more passengers and freight to the railway, higher **reliability**, meeting the **needs of passengers**, and public confidence in rail **safety** are essential. Finally modal shift from road to rail will contribute to a **lower carbon economy**.



*Railfuture's* response was produced following a consultation with branches and specific branch aspirations were included as the following extract shows.

"*Railfuture* would also like to point out that there are many CP4 (2009-2014) works not yet built which should not be forgotten, for example the following in the **West Midlands area** alone:

- Bromsgrove station replacement and electrification for extension of cross-city services.
- Redditch line enhancements for additional services.
- Stourbridge-Walsall restoration for freight, followed by passenger services.
- Coventry-Nuneaton line (the Godiva Line) enhancements.
- Coventry-Leamington redoubling and Kenilworth station.
- Coventry-Birmingham passing loops.
- Walsall-Rugeley electrification and line-speed increase.
- Aldridge station and turn-back siding.
- Birmingham-Tamworth new stations.
- New St-Moor St dedicated pedestrian route.
- Midland Metro extension to New St and restoration of Snow Hill plat 4.
- Stratford-Long Marston reopening.
- New stations on Camp Hill line and Water Orton line, Bordesley chords and new platform 6 at Moor St.
- Electrification of Nuneaton-Proof House Junction, Wolverhampton-Shrewsbury, Coventry-Nuneaton.
- Other route and capacity upgrades, especially linespeed, headways, junction improvements and platform extensions.
- Park and ride and station access improvements.

Most of the above West Midlands schemes are not in CP4 but *Railfuture* felt that the opportunity to promote them should not be wasted.

## Two-together saves on fares – a personal view

The **Two Together Railcard** is still available to those who do not qualify for a senior railcard or young person's card. You just need to have a Birmingham, Walsall, Wolverhampton, Dudley or Coventry postcode so there are many areas outside the West Midlands conurbation where you would qualify for one such as Bromsgrove. I made of it during the fortnight that London Midland were offering £15 anywhere on their network. My wife and I and our two teenage children went from Birmingham to Liverpool for £9.90 each as there was a discount available on a railcard using the 16-25 railcard and the two together railcard. But not only that I found that there were two-for-one offers on the Mersey Ferry and the tower of Liverpool Cathedral. Do encourage people you know to purchase. It costs £28 for a year.



William Whiting

See: <http://www.twotogether-railcard.co.uk/>

# Will the new WC franchise give Shropshire back its London service?

The loss of the much-liked Wrexham, Shropshire and Marylebone Railway (WSMR) service in 2011 was widely regretted.

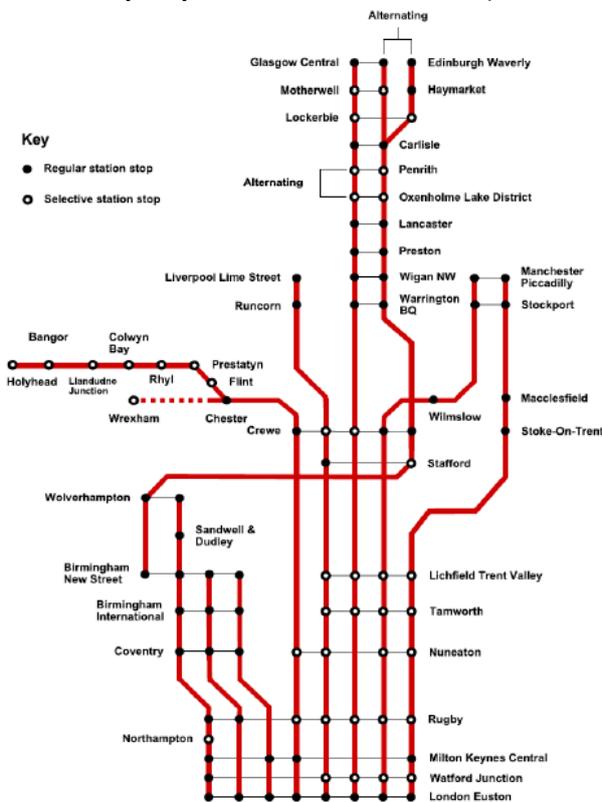
WSMR was not allowed to pick up and set down at stations served by Virgin because of the Moderation of Competition rules written into Virgin's franchise, the service was losing money, and owners DB needed the stock on their new Chiltern Mainline service.



**WSMR Train in 2009 (Photo Brian Carter)**

The new ICWC (Inter City West Coast) franchise for which Invitations to Tender (ITT) have been issued, and coming into service later this year, gives

us the opportunity to restore the Shropshire service and to fill other gaps. The response to the consultation - issued as part of the Invitation To Tender - clearly showed there was high demand from stakeholders for such a service.



**Rail Routes - DfT InterCity West Coast Consultation (2011)**

So what are the options? The four bidders for the franchise are busy researching various alternatives.

Arriva Trains Wales bid to extend their Aberystwyth-Birmingham International service all the way to Marylebone with the current 153 stock when the WSMR service was running. Not surprisingly, it was refused by the ORR (Office of Rail Regulation). Loadings are likely to vary widely between rural Welsh tracks and services going into London, so no stock will suit every element of this long journey.

The solution may be to split trains at Shrewsbury, part going to Wrexham or Chester, the other section going to Aberystwyth. When Voyager services from Birmingham and Manchester all the way under the wires to Glasgow are replaced by electric trains, as surely they must be, the Voyager stock will be available.

Virgin proposed a loop service from Euston calling at Nuneaton (a big loser in the 2008 timetable change), then direct to Crewe, Chester, Wrexham, Shrewsbury, Telford, Wolves, Walsall, via the Sutton Park line to Nuneaton, Euston and vice versa. This was seen as a challenge to the then WSMR service, and with no stakeholder support, Virgin withdrew their bid. There is not enough business to run 2 services in competition, though an hourly path could work well if shared between 2 operators on overlapping routes. A bonus would be the restoration of fast services from Nuneaton to Euston. The franchise bidders will be studying this option with enthusiasm. There is one path available for fast services on WCML, and competition for it. There is not a lot of room for manoeuvre for bidders within the WC mainline, so these peripheral services are their opportunity to show how they can give more than their competitors.

Another possibility, avoiding WCML congestion but reliant on more of the Coventry-Leamington line being redoubled, is for a service from Aberystwyth or Wrexham (or both, by splitting and joining trains at Shrewsbury) to Wolves, Willenhall (a big population without a rail service), Walsall, International, Coventry, Kenilworth (proposed by Warks

**Timetable for new franchise**

Jan – May	Preparation of bids
1 <sup>st</sup> May	Submission of bids
May – Aug	Evaluation, clarification, negotiation and agreement
Aug	Award to successful bidder
Aug – Dec	Prepare transfer of operation

County Council but currently on the backburner due to lack of funds), Leamington Spa, and Marylebone. This has been described as "a railtour of Warwickshire" but the time lost using the Sutton Park line will be compensated by the faster times now customary on the Chiltern line, and the removal of the stop in New St. It will certainly not be fast, but the bonus is direct services to London from many places that do not have them, and a fantastic boost in connectivity, plus potential restoration of services to Willenhall and Kenilworth, both needing a rail service but not meriting dedicated trains.

Shropshire County Council and Telford Council have asked each bidder to consider pricing an option for a service from the Shropshire area, to give "a service of regular frequency, throughout the day, fully costed, viable, and to such a standard that the DfT will be encouraged to consider its purchase".

These are exciting times for WCML, not least because of the poser - who will win? One thing's certain: West Midlands rail users will benefit. **Les Fawcett**

## WM Branch AGM 2012

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the West Midlands branch of *Railfuture* will be held at **Worcester Guildhall**, High Street, Worcester WR1 2EY from **10:00 to 11:00** on **Saturday 12th May 2012**. For directions see the national AGM notice sent with *Railwatch*.

Attendance at last year's AGM was disappointingly low, largely consisting of existing committee members. We are eager that as many branch members attend as possible. It is intended to hold meetings for members in future, and the branch wishes to know when, where and in what format members wish them to take place. Please attend, tell us what you want *Railfuture* to do, and help improve the effectiveness of the branch.

The branch AGM will precede the national AGM of RDS Ltd, held in a main room at the same venue, which commences at 11:15. Therefore the branch AGM will have a strict time limit and will finish no later than 11:00. Please check in at the front desk for both meetings. The branch AGM agenda is:

1. Introduction by acting chairman
2. Apologies for absence
3. Minutes from 2011 AGM and matters arising
4. Report from branch officers
  - a. Acting Chairman, b. Secretary, c. Treasurer – Accounts for 2011
5. Elections –postal ballot results (if applicable) / list of new committee
6. Address from newly elected chairman – plans for the branch in 2012/13
7. Questions from the floor.

### **ELECTIONS TO THE BRANCH COMMITTEE**

The committee is vital to the running of the branch. We have a very friendly group of people who care about the railway in the West Midlands but would appreciate some new members who have something to contribute, particularly younger people, women and those from ethnic minorities. You do not need to be an expert on the railways, finance, or management. You do need enthusiasm, willingness to help, a friendly nature and hopefully have a sense of humour. Committee members give up at least two hours each month to attend meetings.

This year the branch will be adopting a similar process to the election of *Railfuture* directors. There will be no nominations from the floor during the AGM. Instead a nomination form is sent to branch members with this newsletter. This must be completed and sent to the branch secretary at 19 Redwood Road, Kings Norton, Birmingham, B30 1AE to arrive by **Saturday 7th April 2012**.

All details about the elections, whether there are more candidates than places will be posted on the West Midlands page on the national web-site: <http://www.railfuture.org.uk/tiki-index.php?page=West%20Midlands%20Branch>

## Nuneaton North Chord For Freight Trains



Work is progressing on the flyover that will take freight from the east coast ports to the WCML north of Nuneaton without blocking fast services. Completion is due in July 2012. Above: a train of Stobart "Less CO2" Tesco wagons waits beside the construction site for a signal. Below: a track maintenance vehicle proceeds after waiting at a red signal. (Les Fawcett)



## NEWS SNIPPETS

### Station improvements

Work continues to install lifts at NORTHFIELD despite some challenging engineering. Both shafts will tap into the 1892 underpass serving the two operational platforms. An additional shaft should not be a problem in the happy event of the centre island platform being re-opened. Meanwhile at SELLY OAK the work is more advanced with one shaft already built.

At UNIVERSITY work on widening the "to Birmingham" platform seems to have stalled possibly pending completion of the grandly named "Vincent Drive Public Transport Interchange". With new bus lay-bys and stops, that will be an improvement but access by public transport to the hospital main entrance still looks inadequate. The wider platform (after the bank is cut back to the row of poplar trees) will avoid alarming over-crowding at peak times. At this station recently I observed a long queue of young people for 2 ticket machines while the booking-office staff waited for customers!

### New St to Moor St pedestrian link

A planning application is expected to be delivered this year for a project to provide a clear pedestrian route between the two stations. The detailed design will look at improving the St.Martins Queensway Tunnel and making life easier for over one million people a year who have to find their way from one station to the other.

Digbeth-based Glenn Howells Architects have been appointed and promise high quality paving, lighting and artwork. Transportation consultant Peter Brett associates and civil & structural engineers Techniker are also part of Centro's design team. A far cry from and much more expensive than the red line we had a few years ago, which seemed to work rather well.

## Frank Hastilow memorial fund

A fund of £305 has been collected from members to commemorate the life of Frank Hastilow, our long-serving President who died last year. **Peter Hughes** (one of the three trustees along with Mary Hastilow and Nigel Cripps) asks: should we donate the money to the Llanfair PG railway that he loved, or should we have a plaque as a lasting reminder of his contribution to rail in WM? Given his enthusiasm for light rail, a site along the Metro extension route would seem apt for a plaque. It may be difficult to obtain approval for siting a plaque. Do readers have ideas for the best way of spending the fund? Please respond to [peter.hughes@railfuture.org.uk](mailto:peter.hughes@railfuture.org.uk).

## The next station is: Hamstead

Regular Feature

Hamstead (opened in 1862 and titled Great Barr until 1974) is an under-used station in north Birmingham deserving more recognition by both the train operator (currently London Midland) and local people.

Although also on the Birmingham to Walsall route via Soho, only the services via Aston stop at Hamstead, providing just a half-hourly service during the day and no through trains north of Walsall. There is an hourly service on Sundays.



Hamstead station (Andrew Hughes)

The station is only a short walk from heavily populated Handsworth Wood and provides a quicker alternative to the bus but suffers through poor sign-posting and publicity.

Until 1899 the station was on the west side of old Walsall Road with sidings serving Hamstead Colliery but then moved to its present site presumably to allow more space for the coal trains.

The tired-looking station building has a ticket office which the franchise requires to be open 7 days from first train to last. In reality it is only manned until early afternoon but was abandoned by staff on a recent visit. There are no ticket machines which, if installed on both platforms, would be preferable to replacement of the permit-to-travel machine out of use due to vandalism. Manning just the early shift would then be acceptable.

There is no car-park or cycle store and information on bus connections is on the southbound platform only. Despite the lack of tender loving care, footfall has more than doubled in the last 7 years to reach 137,000. With increased frequency and a little initiative this could be increased substantially.

Peter Hughes.

## Railfuture Rail Users' Conference in Birmingham

A reminder that *Railfuture's* West Midlands branch has the honour of hosting this year's Rail Users' Conference in Birmingham on Saturday 3rd November 2012 at Carr's Lane centre, which is just opposite Moor Street station.

## Funding approved for Midland Metro extension

William Whiting writes: Local Transport Minister Norman Baker has said that construction on an extension to the Midland Metro can now begin after Government funding was approved. The extension will run from Snow Hill Station through the city centre of Birmingham to New Street Station.

The £128m scheme will also deliver a new fleet of trams to run on the extended route, with CAF already named as the preferred bidder to build the trams. The Department for Transport will provide £75.4m towards the £128 million cost of the scheme which is being led by Centro. New trams proving 200 seats as opposed to the current 156 will be built and they will replace the current trams. There will be two wheelchair spaces. Initially there will be 19 new trams with a possible option to provide 6 more.

The winning contractor will be announced in April, ahead of main work starting in early 2013.

The question now is should the tram be extended further and if so where. I have personally been very much in favour of extending the system from Birmingham New Street along Broad Street as far as Five Ways to relieve traffic congestion along that corridor but also to recognise that it would serve the ICC, NIA, Symphony Hall and major places of entertainment in Broad Street and Brindley Place. Buses no longer use Broad Street after 8.00 pm on Fridays and Saturdays and it would seem to me to be an obvious extension of the route.

However one other possible extension could be to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. Now that complex has been expanded there is no spare capacity at University Station and it would enable people from the Black Country to travel to the QE and Birmingham University direct.

Responses about the future of Midland Metro are welcomed by the editor.



Current tram (top, Wikipedia, top) and proposed trams (bottom, Railway Gazette)

## On the level about crossings

There are now fewer than 8,000 level crossings in Britain – of which around 1,500 are road crossings - and they are being closed at an accelerating rate to improve safety and to ease traffic flow. Most of the closures are of private user-worked crossings but in the West Midlands we have had some main road crossing closures in recent years such as Tipton (road built under), Canley, Coventry (traffic diverted), Tile Hill (road built over).

Crossings such as Bentley Heath, Langley Green, Portobello, Cradley Heath and Bloxwich are mostly boxed in by adjacent development and are unlikely to be changed. All Centro area level crossings except Bloxwich have cctv allowing signalmen to minimise the delay.

More interesting for us in the West Midlands is the status of level crossings on rail routes planned for reopening. It will be difficult to gain powers to reopen crossings when current policy is to remove them as fast as possible. Examples are Walsall-Lichfield and Stratford-Long Marston. A Halcrow Fox 1996 report on reopening the line south from Stratford poured cold water on reopening the A439 Evesham Rd crossing due to the delay caused to traffic. However, there have been various changes since then:

- Evesham Road has been downgraded to a B road.
- The anticipated national growth in road traffic has stalled.
- The noisy 150 trains that used to ply the Birmingham-Stratford route have been replaced with cleaner and quieter 172's so running slowly close to houses will not be such an issue.

A recent report by Network Rail does not mention a technique used in Sweden and Denmark where the train driver operates the crossing barriers and drives through at low speed, enabling him to stop in case of any obstruction. This "drive on sight" method is suitable for tracks near stations, where trains are slowing or speeding up, as would be the case in Stratford. Is it is time to rethink the prospects of reopening Stratford-Honeybourne while the Gloucestershire Warwickshire railway forges northwards to join it?

The alternative of a grade-separated junction would cost tens of £millions and is unlikely to be viable.

**Les Fawcett**



A typical British AHB level crossing taken from a recent article in The Rail Engineer.

## The Chihuahua-Pacific railway in Mexico.

Foreign Feature

Your editor travelled on this impressive piece of engineering in February. It was built as recently as 1961 and runs from near the Pacific coast up 7,000 feet into the mountains, frequently switching from tunnel to gravity-defying mountainside track, passing Copper Canyon which is bigger than Grand Canyon in some respects, and at one point does a complete loop (el lasso) in order to gain height.



All photos from [www.chepe.com.mx](http://www.chepe.com.mx)

It's one of few railways in Mexico still providing a passenger service, supported by the tourist industry. Thousands of miles of track in this big country still carry freight whilst most of the passenger services were closed in the era of Thatcher/Reagan privatisation. Given that Mexicans (and your editor!) endure very long bus journeys to get around the country, their railway is a sleeping giant awaiting the renaissance of passenger services. Long-distance bus stations are mainly out-of-town needing another bus or taxi to get into town, whilst some elegant old rail stations are lovingly restored as rail museums. A sleeping giant indeed.

Mexico is largely sub-tropical but your editor found the stream frozen solid outside his log cabin in Creel. This web-site photo shows a typical winter.



This impressive Mexican rail route (coloured red in the map below) is 921 kilometres long, and Chihuahua is 268km from the start. Les Fawcett stayed 7,000 feet above sea level in a log cabin in Creel, 300km from Chihuahua.



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Letters to the editor may be sent to [les.fawcett@railfuture.org.uk](mailto:les.fawcett@railfuture.org.uk)  
**44 Carver Close, Coventry, CV2 5NJ.**