

Railfuture

West Midlands

The newsletter of the West Midlands Branch of the Railway Development Society

Issue 123



OCTOBER 2011

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COMMENT

Little things can make a big difference. I took a Javelin service from St. Pancras International into Kent. It terminated at Faversham, but a Thanet train was just six minutes behind it to change on to. I had not considered that the Javelin would pull across to the Up island platform, ready for its return journey, so I had to lug my suitcase through the subway. An announcement from the train manager at Chatham or Sittingbourne could have given me a same platform connection – and would have cost nothing.

So often, such suggestions for improving the rail experience, can be implemented for free. There is enormous scope for improving the provision of information—and not just for such as when your train has been stationary at a signal for a long time. If you are put off using rail from Lichfield to Solihull by the thought of having to walk from Birmingham New Street to Moor Street, perhaps you do not realise you can do the journey by changing at Smethwick Galton Bridge instead, where there are lifts between the levels. Or if your ticket says, ‘Birmingham Stns’, do you know whether you can use it at Five Ways or Jewellery Quarter? Must the station have ‘Birmingham’ in its name? [So what about Birmingham International?] Making Fares Manuals and the Routeing Guide freely available on the internet would help. Our railway has too many secrets!

A good Train Operating Company welcomes feedback from passengers. When Galton Bridge got its departure screen, there were trains to Dorridge, Walsall, Stratford upon Avon, Worcester and more – but seemingly, no trains to Birmingham. I pointed this out to London Midland and now ‘via Birmingham Snow Hill’ also appears. If we want a better railway, we should all be mystery shoppers.

Keith Flinders

Cover photo: Cotswold Line Redoubling completed. Business is brisk at Evesham. This Great Malvern to Paddington service left almost ‘full and standing’ despite it being a Sunday morning. With track now redoubled from here to Moreton-in-Marsh, a new timetable was introduced from 12 September.

From near the end of the platform, a ramp to Worcester Road was provided in 2007 for those who would struggle with the footbridge. Lacking a sign by the gap in the platform fence, it is not easy to see.

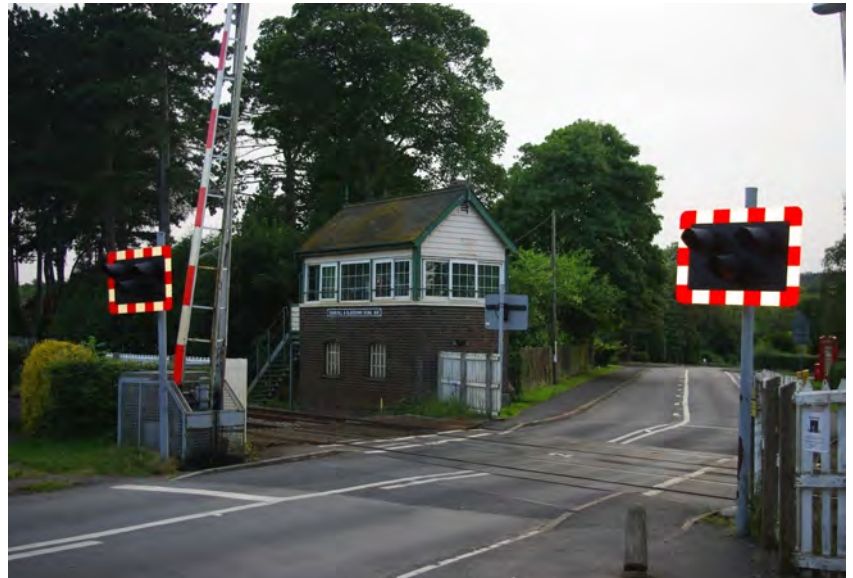
Mystery shopper needed!

SIGNALLING THE WEST MIDLANDS

There are about 59 signal boxes in our region. In ten years' time, it could be down to single figures. Major resignalling in the 1960s gave us our power boxes but these are almost life expired, and progress in signalling technology makes it cost effective to replace them (and most of the remaining mechanical boxes) with control from regional signalling centres.

Alongside the Birmingham to Derby line, almost opposite where Saltley engine shed used to be, is the West Midlands Signalling Centre [WMSC]. It is gradually extending its area of control. For example, the lines now signalled by Wolverhampton power box go over to WMSC in Summer 2014 and Birmingham New Street at the end of 2018.

Next summer will see the abolition of signal boxes at Stourbridge Junction, Blakedown, Kidderminster and Hartlebury, when WMSC takes over from Jewellery Quarter to Droitwich Spa. It will improve headways, so reduce delays and is linked to track alterations for more efficient operating. For example, it will be possible to run directly onto the Severn Valley Railway at Kidderminster, without the double reversal. It also includes resignalling the Round Oak line, in preparation for re-opening through to Walsall.



Blakedown Box 1888—2012

*The cast nameplate still reads
Churchill and Blakedown Signal Box*

Ironically, the last boxes to go could be the oldest. Life extension work is planned for the Worcester and Droitwich Spa areas in 2013, Shrewsbury in 2014 and Hereford in 2015. The Great Western built their signalling to last!

Not every train in our region will be controlled from WMSC. The West Coast Main Line will be signalled from Rugby, all the way to Gretna. Boxes from Harlescott Crossing, north of Shrewsbury, to Nantwich, near Crewe, are closing, to be replaced by the watchful eye of a signaller – in Cardiff!

CHILTERN COMPLETES EVERGREEN UPGRADE

At the end of August, Chiltern completed its 'Mainline'. The previous phase reconnected the bay platforms at Birmingham Moor Street; the next builds a new chord at Bicester for new Oxford—London service. 'Mainline' has upgraded the track to 100mph, rebuilt three junctions for high speed and installed 87 new signals to allow a more intensive service. Moor Street has two trains an hour to London Marylebone, some calling at Solihull and Warwick Parkway only, taking 90 minutes. Typically, Virgin takes 84 minutes, so there is real competition. Some Chiltern services are Mark 3 coaches, rebuilt to a high standard, with a Class 67. Chiltern has simplified the fare structure. The peak return at £75 is £10 cheaper than it was, and changes to the times when Super Off Peak can be used are in the passengers' favour. The leaflet with this newsletter gives more details. Our Branch Chairman is a member of Chiltern Railways' Passenger Board and has provided a personal insight.

EVERGREEN 3: A CRPB MEMBER'S PERSPECTIVE

Evergreen 3 is an incredibly ambitious project costing £250 million. Last February, Chiltern Railways' Passenger Board [CRPB] was extremely critical of Chiltern because we were aware of how much work was still outstanding and had grave doubts, not just that the original May target would be missed, but the September target as well. The project is a bit like the proverbial hydra, one head of which could fail, causing problems to the company goals.

Evergreen 3 sought to remove bottlenecks in the Chiltern route from the West Midlands to London Marylebone to reduce journey times. This meant the removal of speed restraints and capacity restraints, plus other aims specific to the West Midlands.

Class 168 units are capable of higher speeds than Class 165 so, wherever it was needed, the infrastructure was changed to allow 100mph running from Aynho Junction to Great Central Way Junction at the southern end of Wembley Depot. In order to realign the track, two bridges had to be moved, at Princes Risborough and at Northolt. The latter involved realigning a major road and at a special CRPB meeting in February to brief the Board on Evergreen 3 progress, the bridge support piers were not in place and a lot of the signal enhancements had not started or were proceeding extremely slowly with no one on site for days on end.

New track alignments involved moving platforms e.g. the track at Bicester North was moved up to 3 metres to eliminate a 40mph speed restriction at the southern end. This resulted in the platform having to be widened and rebuilt. Bi-directional loops were installed at Princes Risborough and West Ruislip and further track alignments were made at Aynho Junction, south of Banbury.



Marylebone in 90 minutes from Moor Street's reconnected bay. Nigel Cripps

In addition to track alterations south of Banbury, new signalling was provided between Birmingham Moor Street and Tyseley, so that platforms 3 and 4 at Moor Street could be reconnected and Wing Yip Viaduct brought back into use for two turnback sidings. If the Camp Hill chords are built, these sidings will need to be moved further south. Dorridge and Solihull stations were quietly transferred to Chiltern Railways' management under Evergreen 3.

From Aynho Junction to about 4 miles from Marylebone, many new or repositioned signals were provided. Work at the West Midlands end had been completed for the May 2011 timetable change. South of Banbury, however, much was scheduled to be carried out in a major blockade over the two weeks leading up to the August Bank Holiday 2011. All track and platform work was completed in 5 of the 7 days allocated although Board members representing passengers south of Banbury, expressed many concerns about the drivers of the substitute buses not knowing the routes between stations nor where to pick up or set down their passengers. The schedule allowed 9 days for Network Rail to test and approve all the signal alterations. With just 48 hours before the work was due for completion, the project was 48 hours behind schedule. Suddenly teams of signallers arrived from all over England and by 03.00 on the 30th August, the testing was completed and the line handed back in time for the morning rush hour to begin just three hours later.

Don Barton

ROUTE UTILISATION STRATEGIES

In the run up to the DfT's next five year "High Level Output Strategy", Network Rail has completed work on two Route Utilisation Strategies which describe the enhancements that will be needed in the region over the next 8 - 13 years.

The "West Midlands and Chilterns RUS" confirms that longer trains can be justified on a number of routes in Control Period 5 (2014 - 2019). Notably the RUS recommends that both the long distance Edinburgh - Plymouth and Manchester - Bristol services, and the inter-urban Birmingham - Stansted services, should be strengthened. There are also plans to re-route the second Birmingham - Reading service via Birmingham International and Coventry.

The RUS supports Centro's plans to extend the Birmingham - Walsall electrification to a new station at Aldridge and agrees that some services on the Chase Line and to Shrewsbury will need to be lengthened if passenger growth continues at the current level.

Perhaps the most dramatic proposal in the RUS is the recommendation that two new hourly local services should be provided in CP5 linking, alternately Tamworth and Nuneaton to the existing Worcester / Hereford service through New Street; with the Worcester services becoming half-hourly all day.

Enhancements suggested primarily for freight capacity include a new northern access to Kingsbury; re-doubling the single track Kenilworth - Leamington line and an early start on planning to re-open the mothballed Round Oak - Dudley - Walsall line which will be needed if the new deep water port at Avonmouth is as successful as the developers hope.

Elsewhere the RUS supports Centro's plans for a new turnback facility at Rowley Regis and will investigate some possible enhancements to the rather restricted signalling at Hereford.

However it is disappointing to read that there is no business case for further train lengthening on the Birmingham - Coventry or Birmingham—Liverpool services, apparently because someone has decided that the 40 new coaches that are expected to be ordered later this year will all be delivered as complete 4-car trains rather than used to extend some of the Class 350 (Desiro) fleet to 6-car trains.

The "West Coast Main Line RUS" was published in July and discusses what other enhancements will still be needed to cater for growth after 2012 when the additional 106 Pendolino coaches will all be in service.

The RUS predicts passenger growth of over 35% (2.1% pa) on the London - Birmingham route and 34% - 104% (up to 4.5% pa) on the Birmingham - Scotland route over the 15 year period from 2009/10.

The RUS recommends that some 9-car Pendolinos should be allocated to the Birmingham - Scotland service to relieve crowding on this route; but if this is not possible then there is a "theoretical" business case for lengthening the West Coast Voyager fleet.

Suggestions in the draft RUS that the Bournemouth - Manchester service should be diverted to run via Crewe appear to have run into a pathing problem but will be considered further by the Timetable Working Group. Several other options for revised services in the Stoke-on-Trent area were linked to this change and are also awaiting further work. However it is astonishing to read that the RUS was unable to make a business case for providing a direct service between Stoke-on-Trent and Manchester Airport.



The RUS concludes by stating that after 2024 the West Coast will be effectively "full"; and that the most effective and best value for money option to create additional capacity will be to build a new line.

An "Initial Industry Plan" for CP5 will be published in September.

P.R. Cousins

NEW STATION FOR STRATFORD UPON AVON

In early July the DfT announced its approval and a £5m grant from the Local Sustainable Transport Fund for a new Stratford on Avon Parkway station at Bishopton, next to the A34/A46 intersection and the existing bus park & ride facility north of the town. Warwickshire is to find the £3m shortfall to the £8m cost. As part of the deal the County and Centro are underwriting the enhancement of train services and, from April 2012, the hourly semi-fasts will again augment services on Saturdays as well as the provision of later evening trains to and from Stratford – upon- Avon. Opening is planned for December 2013.

Alan Bevan

RAILWAYS AND WALKING

Over the past few months, I have been discovering how easy it is to use the train to the start of a walk in the countryside in the West Midlands.

As a starting point, there are many walks from Shakespeare line stations. I have walked from Henley in Arden, Wilmcote and Stratford Upon Avon. These walks go through unspoilt countryside and some very attractive villages, including Welford on Avon, Bidford on Avon, Clifford Chambers and Preston on Stour. It is also possible to use the Chiltern Railways service and walk from Lapworth or Warwick along the Grand Union Canal towpath, including a visit to Baddesley Clinton National Trust or Packwood House.

The Worcestershire countryside is also accessible by train. Bromsgrove station is almost in open countryside and gives easy access to the Birmingham and Worcester Canal, where you can walk the famous flight of locks at Tardebigge. Similarly there are very pleasant walks from Alvechurch, served by the Cross City line and also Barnt Green which is adjacent to the Lickey Hills. I must also include taking the train to Great Malvern and climbing Worcestershire Beacon on the Malvern Hills which, on a clear day, provides some of the best views you could possibly find in the countryside.

Although Shropshire is not well served by rail links, I have managed to walk on the hills starting at Church Stretton. With two trains an hour from Birmingham to Shrewsbury, then an hourly Arriva Trains Wales service from Shrewsbury to Church Stretton, there is a paradise for walkers with the Long Mynd overlooking the town. I also found a walk that started from Wellington taking me over The Wrekin and on that particular day the views were stunning from the top.

There are many advantages to taking the train. You do not need to worry about driving back after a long walk. Rail fares are often less than the cost of the petrol. As an example an off peak day return to Bromsgrove from Birmingham costs £5.20 and an anytime day return to Stratford from Rowley Regis is £9.10.

So if you like walking, look at some walk books covering the area and discover how many start near a local station. You are also supporting the local rail network.

William Whiting

STATION TO STATION WALK

Hatton to Warwick Parkway, along the tow path of the Grand Union Canal. 3 miles; good surface; interesting locks; mainly downhill; award winning café at Hatton Locks; continue into Warwick if you wish.

AT LOCAL LEVEL: BROMSGROVE RAIL USER GROUP

It was the efforts of fervent rail campaigner, the late Councillor Gordon Selway that instigated the formation of Bromsgrove Rail User Group (BRUG). For a long time Gordon had argued for major rail service enhancements at Bromsgrove, realising that a local rail user group would be the core campaigning avenue.

Gordon Selway arranged an informal public meeting at the Ladybird Inn on 4 April 2006. It was well attended and most ably guided by the then Railfuture West Midland Branch Chairman, Ian Jenkins, who also arranged some welcome Railfuture financial support to help launch the newly formed group's campaigning activities. BRUG membership has since substantially expanded. Mike Ponsonby continues as Chairman and I am Campaigns Coordinator. We are both also Committee Members of Railfuture West Midlands Branch. The group has free use of a room at Bromsgrove Council House for their regular monthly meetings and indeed have a number of local councillor group members. [www.bromsgroverail.org.uk]

BRUG is not the first group to fight for Bromsgrove rail users. Its predecessor fought off total station closure, in fact, the campaigning group's fight went as far as the House of Lords to keep the station open, if only as a single platform halt.

The present station has two wholly inadequate asymmetric platforms. A radical solution is needed before passenger services can expand. The ultimate answer is to relocate the station to the nearby vacant goods yard site. A Department for Transport announcement is imminently awaited, sanctioning an agreed joint Centro (70%), Worcestershire County Council (30%) funding arrangement, which should see the brand new station complex completed by December 2013.

As well as the new station, electrification down the Lickey Incline to Bromsgrove is planned. With enhancement of the Redditch branch, by way of a one and a half mile dynamic loop and second platform at Alvechurch, the Cross City service will become an alternating twenty minute EMU service from both Bromsgrove and Redditch.

Although Bromsgrove will eventually enjoy a vastly improved four trains per hour to Birmingham, the southward service of only hourly towards Worcester remains a concern. Trains to Cardiff pass non stop, except for two early evening services. BRUG is campaigning for early morning Cardiff bound and evening return services, which would also access Cross Country and First Great Western services at Cheltenham. BRUG also realises that a suitable new station complex may inspire First Great Western to consider extending Paddington services, on the re-doubled Cotswold Line, to Bromsgrove.

For the future, BRUG's role for Bromsgrove rail users continues. An expanded remit includes serving rail users at the other Cross City Line service stations in North Worcestershire - Redditch, Alvechurch, Barnt Green - with infrastructural enhancements in place and following the introduction of the expansion of the Cross City Line service, all of which we are more than confident will happen!

Tony Woodward

MORE TRAINS ON THE CHASE LINE

London Midland has proposed a suite of changes to the morning Walsall and Chase Line services to take effect from the December timetable.

The objective is to provide additional seats on some peak-hour trains where too many passengers are having to stand. This will be achieved by introducing a second Class 350 starting from Walsall in place of a 3-car diesel unit. Three trains from Rugeley TV will also run with an additional coach, bringing a 4-car unit into daily use on the line for perhaps the first time.

Overall, although passengers from Hednesford will lose the off-pattern 07:49 working, passengers from Rugeley will gain a more even half-hourly service with an extra train at 08:06 filling the present gap. The changes will also benefit other passengers who commute into Birmingham as the company is proposing to lengthen some services from Great Malvern and Shrewsbury using the vehicles released from the Chase Line.

Peter Cousins

WHY PAY MORE?

If you need to be in London for 09.00 and your meeting will finish just in time for a train back at about 17.00, you are definitely a peak time traveller. Must you pay the Anytime fare? From Birmingham New Street to Euston, that £74.50 each way [or £120 each way First Class].

Consider a First Advance for the outward journey at £88.50 and enjoy the breakfast. You are spending £14 more than the boss expects but you can save more than this on the return journey. One way to do this is to delay your return. On the September day that I chose, a Standard Advance on the 18.43 from Euston was £60 – and a First Advance was £59! The first class ticket allows you to pass the time in Euston's First Class Lounge too.

However, delay a mere 20 minutes longer and you can return for £22.15. This is half of a Standard Off Peak Return. Virgin's website allows you to combine outward and return tickets in this way. If you are willing to wait until 20.23 from Euston, a Standard Advance is only £7.50 – and First Advance, only £22.

Better still, get a railcard if you can. Virgin does not apply time restrictions to Off Peak tickets for railcard holders, so you can take the 07.30 [the only non stop service] and return on the 17.03 for £14.60 each way. You pay less than £30 and save almost £120. If you qualify for a railcard, but don't have one, the message is clear.

The savings for delaying your return are also worth considering for railcard holders. The 20.23 from Euston becomes £4.95 for a Standard Advance or £14.50 for a First Advance – and that includes the food and drink!

Finally, there is a credible alternative. Chiltern Railways from Moor Street at 06.55 taking just 90 minutes for £51 single or £75 Anytime Return, almost the same as a Virgin Single.

Keith Flinders

LONDON MIDLAND SHOWS OFF CLASS 172

On 2nd August, London Midland provided rail officials, local councillors; representatives of user groups and the media with an introductory journey on a new 3 car Class 172 dmu, which traversed the Stourbridge - Snow Hill - Leamington Spa route. Built by Bombardier in Derby, a total of 27 sets, formed of 15 three car and 12 two car trains, will mainly operate on the Snow Hill services. The new trains will begin public services in September and aim to displace the 25 year old Class 150 Sprinters by November. The 172s feature air conditioning, wheelchair accessible toilets, toilet retention, more spacious 2 x 2 seating, lower window sills, wider plug doors and a spacious entrance area. The trains can reach 100 mph and have good acceleration. Continuous destination and station stop displays are mounted on the ceiling. All trains have connecting doors in the nose to facilitate multiple working and selective door opening (SDO) is available for use at short platform stations.

Alan Bevan



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THE TWO TOGETHER RAILCARD

Too old for a Young Person's Railcard? Too young for a Senior Railcard? No children? A new railcard was launched in September aimed at two named people who travel together.

Like other railcards, it gives one third off most rail fares and costs £28 for 12 months. The main restriction is the morning peak on Mondays to Fridays, when it is not valid for travel between 04.30 and 09.30. There is no restriction on Saturdays, Sundays or bank holidays.

The new railcard is being trialled only in our region. Applicants must have one of the following postcodes: B, CV, DY, WS or WV. This is much more than the conurbation, as DY for example, stretches as far into Worcestershire as Cleobury Mortimer. The railcard can, however, be used throughout Great Britain, not just for journeys in the West Midlands.

Passport photos must be presented with the application form at most stations in the West Midlands. Application can be online at twotogether-railcard.co.uk, which requires uploading digital photos.

It will be interesting to see how ticketing and revenue protection will work in practice. Station ticket machines cannot issue tickets for this railcard, including collecting those bought online. From unstaffed stations or where the ticket office is closed, the instruction is to buy on board – or at your destination!

Keith Flinders

14.02 to Birmingham International at Merilyn Crossing at Criccieth, controlled as far as Shrewsbury by the new European Train Management System, being trialled on the Cambrian lines. Problems with it have affected timekeeping of this ATW service.

Photo: Keith Flinders



GATEWAY MAKING PROGRESS



Most building activity until recently at Birmingham New Street has been out of public view. A year ago, Platform 1 was taken out of use for several months and more than £3 million was spent on it. Although it is back in use, screens prevent us seeing what has been done. Now it is the turn of Platform 12. West Dock, the bay platform opposite 12b, has gone and work is underway to extend the footbridge, and to prepare for a new John Lewis store above.

Above the centre of the station, an atrium is being created. Part of the Pallisades Shopping Centre is covered with hoardings whilst work continues above.

Meanwhile at the Smallbrook Queensway end, a start has been made on covering over part of the platform ends to create a new public square, as the image above shows. To the right can be seen the new walkway past the foot of the Rotunda. This will be the new route from New Street station to Moor Street station.

Work has also started on the station's reflective stainless steel exterior, necessitating the partial closure of Stephenson Street. Materials are brought in or removed by train to Bordesley. The first part of the new concourse opens at the end of next year when the existing concourse closes and the whole project is due to be completed in 2015.

Artwork: Network Rail

Keith Flinders

UPDATE ON HS2

Members are invited to a talk by Adrian Shooter, Chairman of Chiltern Railways on Thursday 27 October at 18.30, organised by The Friends of Leamington Station. It is at The Conference Centre, Dormer Place, Leamington Spa [CV32 5AA], five minutes walk from the station. Entry costs £5 and includes a glass of wine or a soft drink. Details from 01926 885532.

SNIPPETS

- From 4 September, through services to Euston via Northampton from Birmingham New Street increased from one to three per hour. All the way by London Midland takes about an hour longer than by Virgin's services, but there are new through services from intermediate stations like Marston Green and Tile Hill.
- When deliveries of new Class 172s to London Midland are completed later this month, Class 150s [and two 153s] move to Northern and First Great Western. LM is, however, to keep three 2 car 150s, so it will have four extra coaches to help cope with increasing passenger demand.
- With the completion of the Cotswold Line project, providing 31 miles of new double track, trains from Worcester to Oxford can now run with a minimum headway of 16 minutes, rather than 27 minutes.
- The DfT proposed fining Chiltern Railways £500,000 for delays in improvements at two stations and some unauthorised timetable changes. This has now been reduced to £350,000 which will be 'reinvested in transport'.
- Berkswell's wooden ticket office, built in 1912, has been replaced by a new modular building and also a new heated waiting room.
- A new station alongside Ricoh Arena, Coventry City's ground should result from approval in mid September of a £19.2 million scheme for the line to Nuneaton. A 15 minute service on match days and half hourly at other times is proposed. Bermuda Park in Nuneaton also gets a station and a new bay will be built at Coventry.
- Four Staffordshire stations, Blythe Bridge, Kidsgrove, Longport and Longton, now have secure cycle storage spaces, as East Midlands Trains, which provides the Derby – Crewe service has invested in Streetpods which secure the frame and both wheels with a single lock.



THE NEXT STATION IS KIDSGROVE



Where: Six miles north of Stoke-on-Trent on the northern boundary of Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire.

Service: Three separate hourly services; provided by three different operators; but a poor service on some routes in the evening.

Through Trains: East Midlands Trains to Crewe or Stoke and Derby;
London Midland to Crewe or Stafford and London;
Northern Rail to Stoke or Congleton and Manchester.

Footfall: Grown rapidly from 50,194 in 2007/08 to 103,804 in 2009/10 following the introduction of the Manchester service.

Facilities: Booking office staffed in the mornings with a smart new waiting room also provided on the island platform. CIS screens and new cycle pods but the only access to three platforms is an old footbridge.

Other Features: Extensive gardens, planted by local volunteers. Station is supported by the North Staffs Community Rail Partnership

Car Parking: Parking is available for approx 50 cars at £2.00 per day. Canal boats can also be moored nearby!

Future: London Midland may provide more Sunday services and later evening services next year.

Text: Peter Cousins

Photo: Nigel Cripps

Each edition will look at one of our stations that seldom makes the news

RAILFUTURE WEST MIDLANDS.....

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THE DEADLINE.....

for the next issue of this magazine is **Thursday, 5 January 2012**. Contributions, please, to Railfuture, 8, Snowdon Rise, Dudley DY3 3YJ or by e-mail to keithflinders@aol.com

Every effort will be made to publish contributions accurately, but letters or items may have to be edited as space is often at a premium. Opinions expressed are those of individual members and do not necessarily represent RDS policy.

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