

THE FUTURE OF CROSS CITY

One of the best decisions our transport planners made was to join together two commuter routes into Birmingham, from Lichfield and Longbridge, with through trains. A short extension at the north end took trains to Lichfield Trent Valley to access the West Coast Main Line platforms below. South of Longbridge, services developed to Redditch and later, Bromsgrove.

The whole route was electrified, although a little money was saved by not wiring the fast lines from Kings Norton to Longbridge, nor the Slow/Goods south of Longbridge, nor the Camp Hill route so when engineering work or anything unplanned blocks the West Suburban Line via Selly Oak, rail uses have to put up with buses. One day, it will be done.

The service frequency increased to six trains per hour [6 tph]. 'Turn up and go' attracts more travellers - and reduces complaints as it may not be long before a train arrives, even when timekeeping and cancellations have been dire. Since Covid, the daytime frequency has reduced to 4 tph, but usage is building well, so that 6 tph should soon be back.

Meanwhile, the new kid on the block is the reopening of the Camp Hill line stations with 2 tph terminating/starting at Kings Norton. There is just time to do this in Platform 4 at Kings Norton between Redditch/Bromsgrove trains whilst they are 4 tph, but not when 6 tph returns. The central island platform will then need to be brought back into use. One possibility that Network Rail has examined is to make Platform 3 into a bay platform for Camp Hill trains to reverse in.

Long term plans, though, are more ambitious. The Camp Hill service will be 4 tph, extend to Longbridge, where two will reverse and the other two run to Redditch. With both chords built at Bordesley, these trains will be Birmingham Moor Street services. This station greatly increases in importance as it is adjacent to HS2 at Curzon Street. Redditch will see 4 tph, with the other two going through New Street to Lichfield Trent Valley.

Bromsgrove sees its Cross City trains going to Aldridge via Walsall, providing some new cross city links, like Perry Barr to University. Another is trains from Longbridge through to Wolverhampton via Bescot.

Network Rail's long term thinking gives a major boost to Bromsgrove. Although the 3 tph local service to Birmingham reduces to 2 tph, it gains a semi fast service direct to Worcestershire Parkway and beyond, something glaringly missing when Bromsgrove's new station opened. 'Beyond' is far from decided, but it could be Swindon. There will also be 2 tph to Great Malvern or Hereford and 1 tph via Worcester Shrub Hill to at least Cheltenham. So Bromsgrove to Birmingham gets 6 tph, with four of them only calling at Longbridge and University.

The capacity of Lickey Incline is reckoned to be 10 passenger services an hour and one freight train.



Barnt Green, with a train from Redditch leaving the branch. The first part of the platform is too close to the junction with the line from Bromsgrove for modern safety standards, so is blocked off. Notice the modern footbridge, waiting for lifts to be added.

Cross City North to Lichfield is envisaged as 4 tph as far as Four Oaks serving local stations, with two of them continuing to Lichfield Trent Valley. One of the weaknesses of the current service is the slowness of the journey. Lichfield is 18 miles from New Street and trains take 41 minutes, an average of 27 mph. So Network Rail would like to add semi fast services calling only at Erdington, Sutton Coldfield, Four Oaks and Lichfield City, which would reduce the journey by 10 - 12 minutes. These trains would go forward to a new station at Alrewas for the National Memorial Arboretum [a long standing campaign of Campaign for Rail] and Burton on Trent. This would be 2 tph, with one of them extending to Derby. A very long term aspiration is also restoring the line from Lichfield City through Brownhills to Walsall. So a great improvement in Lichfield's connectivity is possible.

Meanwhile, new Class 730 trains for CrossCity are being built at Derby, but the enormous challenge of training all the West Midlands staff on them means we shall not see them for months. They are being used on short distance journeys into Euston, which involved training a smaller number of drivers and train managers. Like the 323s, they are 3 car units but will work coupled as 6 car. By mid May, 33 of these new trains had been delivered.

Words and photo: Keith Flinders