

West Midlands Oil

The scene is set near the tranquil village of Hammerwich in Staffordshire early on a spring morning. The sun rises over the dew-covered fields and the only sounds to be heard are the birds singing in the trees. Nowhere could be more peaceful - until the oil train arrives!

It could have been a different story though. Most of the trackbed between Brownhills and Walsall remains clear, but the Lichfield Rail Promotion Group says Central Trains has said it cannot afford to reinstate the trackwork and a passenger service without the help of a freight company.

Freight companies now have little interest in the route, since the decision to situate the Channel Tunnel Freight Terminal at Hams Hall instead of Bescot. Had Bescot been chosen, the line would have again provided a direct route into the yard for trains from the north, as it used to many years ago.

Hammerwich is on the remaining part of the nine-mile line from Lichfield to Walsall which was built by the South Staffordshire Railway Company (SSR). This particular section was opened to traffic on April 9 1849.

Stations were built at Rushall, Pelsall, Brownhills, Hammerwich and Lichfield City, with another at Lichfield Trent Valley (High Level) following in August of that year.

It was not the first railway to run through Lichfield, the West Coast Main Line had already been completed, but the SSR line was

Just a few oil trains a week rattle to the terminal at Brownhills, on the freight-only Walsall to Lichfield line. But this West Midlands backwater could have had a new lease of life had Bescot been chosen for the Channel Tunnel freight terminal, says BEN WILLIAMS.

Photographs by the author.

built many years before the Birmingham Cross-City line was extended eastwards from Sutton Coldfield.

March 1 1872 saw direct services start over the route from Dudley to Derby and the line was extensively used, but by the 1950s and '60s the line had lost favour, and on January 18 1965 it was closed to passenger traffic. The stations were closed soon afterwards.

Freight trains continued for a while, but traffic gradually declined until the few remaining services could easily be diverted over other routes.

As a result, the through route closed to all trains in March 1983, and the section of track between Ryecroft Junction and Newtown (Brownhills) was lifted later that year.

This unused five-mile stretch of trackbed remains largely undisturbed to this day.

For the time being it seems unlikely the line will reopen, despite local councils being in favour of reinstatement. A group has been set up in Brownhills to lobby for the scheme because it was feared planning permission may have been granted to build on the trackbed.

The branch line that remains is used solely for the block flow of oil products to the Charringtons Fuel Oils storage depot at Brownhills. Frequencies vary according to the time of year, with less demand for heating oil during the summer months.

In the past the train has traditionally run on Tuesdays and Thursdays, but over the last few years Saturday operation has become quite common, especially in the winter.

Up until late 1996, the train originated at Lindsey oil refinery in North Lincolnshire, leaving as the 6M65 service, but now the train is operating from the Thameshaven refinery in Essex, due to the Total/Fina refinery at Lindsey losing the contract to the Mobil depot at Thameshaven. It is currently timetabled to depart at 2334 as the 6Z21 service on Monday and Friday evenings, arriving at Charringtons at 0557 the following morning.

Biggest in the land

The site at Brownhills is the largest of 21 Charringtons depots throughout the country, but only two others, those at Derby and Cambridge, are rail-connected.

The huge storage tanks adjacent to the unloading sidings have a total capacity of 12.5 million litres - the products stored include heavy, medium and light grade oil for industrial use, gas oil for domestic heating, diesel and kerosene. Each trainload brings in approximately 1 million litres. All the heavy and medium grade oil and more than half the gas oil arrives by rail which is about 60% of the total.

On arrival at Lichfield City the train collects another crew member to carry out shunting and uncoupling at Brownhills. When the train reaches its destination the driver contacts the signalman who releases the groundframes so that shunting manoeuvres can begin. First the locomotive runs round the train before pushing it back into the terminal's two private sidings - the normal train of 34 wagons is equally divided.

Steam equipment is then connected to a pipe above the buffer-beam to ensure rapid and efficient unloading. The steam is pumped into the tanks at high pressure which helps to

