

JUST AN ORDINARY FREIGHT TRAIN

by Iain Frew

At around 1530 each weekday a freight service from the Walsall direction thunders through Aston Station in the northern inner suburbs of Birmingham, and takes the sharply curved freight-only route towards Stechford and the south. It is headed by a class 92 electric locomotive - the most powerful locomotive on the British railway system. This is just one of a growing number of "Enterprise" services run by EWS and shows the way that railfreight traffic in Britain is developing. Most of the wagons in this service are long "Cargowaggon" vans that are used on services to/from Europe so it can be presumed that the traffic on this train is bound for the Channel Tunnel and destinations further south. My curiosity has been roused by this working and the traffic that it handles - and also for the diesel hauled intermodal container service heading through Aston towards Stechford at about 1515. The latter train is one of the last (in May 2007) timetabled freight trains to be hauled by a class 56 locomotive. It is bound for Grain (Thamesport) via Coventry and Oxford, conveying a large selection of brightly coloured containers that will be loaded on to ships for far off destinations. This is a long-standing traffic that happily is growing just now.

The class 92-hauled train is the 1515 Bescot Yard to Wembley Yard Enterprise Service, due Wembley at 1849 and routed via Northampton where it waits for a gap between passenger services from 1641 until 1710. There are usually 18 - 20 vans on this service and any form of traffic that is on

offer can be added to the working. Where does the traffic come from, and what is its eventual destination? On Friday 4th May 2007 there were 18 vans all destined for Europe. The staple traffic for the 1515 is motor car engines from Volkswagen's Birch Coppice Engine Works near Dordon to Wurzburg Baunatal in Germany where VW has vehicle assembly plants. Twelve such vans loaded with engines were on the train on the 4th and all would have been tripped from Birch Coppice (a new branch extending north from the long established oil depot complex at Kingsbury on the Derby - Birmingham main line) via Water Orton, the Sutton Park line to Walsall, and then to Bescot Yard. This is very regular traffic and the Birch Coppice - Bescot trip working runs daily. Three vans were from Daventry DIRFT intermodal yard which would have been taken south from Central Scotland on the daily Eddie Stobart service to DIRFT, which then works back empty to Coatbridge via Bescot. Traffic can very easily be dropped off at Bescot for the 1515 on the return journey. These vans are thus taken well south of Bescot on the Eddie Stobart train and have to retrace their steps to reach Bescot. The 1515 passes the DIRFT yard at around 1620 on its way to Northampton but it has been decided not to delay it by adding a regular call there since the use of the return working of the Stobart service does not cost anything extra. On the 4th May there was a single van from Burton on Trent to Dollands Moor and the Channel Tunnel but the eventual destination was unclear. The load was completed by three vans from a busy private siding north of

Carlisle to an unstated destination south of the Channel Tunnel. This is a regular and important growing traffic that comes south on another Enterprise service to feed into the 1515 at Bescot.

The 1515 and the intermodal service before it give an interesting picture of freight on Britain's railways today. There is relatively little freight on the network where the point of origin and destination are both within Britain. There are exceptions - timber traffic from British forests to the timber processing plant at Chirk, certain types of steel traffic, the diminishing transfer of coal from mines to power stations, or the movement of clay from Cornwall are exceptions. Most of the important coal traffic today originates overseas and is hauled by rail between the docks and the power stations. The intermodal traffic to Southampton is 100% international, as usually is the van traffic on the 1515. The decision to locate VW's engine plant in rural North Warwickshire with the provision of the Birch Coppice branch to serve it are decisions of the European Union to help provide employment in needy areas and the result is the healthy daily traffic of completed engines through the Channel

Tunnel. The 1515 would run daily for the VW traffic even if there was no other business but the fact that the train runs means that it is possible for it to be used by any other traffic on offer. The vans tripped from Daventry DIFRT or Burton on Trent would possibly have been refused or carried on a much slower service had there been no 1515. The less attractive service might not have proved suitable to the customer and the traffic would have gone by road. However the various trains all fit together and new traffic is slowly being attracted.

The volume of freight passing through the Channel Tunnel has been disappointing other than that comprising freight filled lorries taken on the Channel Tunnel Company's own shuttle trains. A growing volume of conventional freight traffic was dealt a near death blow by problems with asylum seekers who hitched a ride through the tunnel on north-bound services. Now that this problem is under control freight traffic is again growing and the hope is that many more Enterprise services like the 1515 out of Bescot may soon be taking more lorries off the congested roads.