



Newsletter

Autumn 2020

FROM THE CHAIR

The NCRUG committee re-convened at the Frodsham Community Centre in September after a lengthy adjournment. Among the agenda items discussed were the ability of NCRUG to influence the restoration of services in our area along with possible future structure of the rail network in accordance with re-nationalisation.

Following the collapse in ticket revenue earlier this year as a result of Covid, Train operating Companies (TOCs) have been paid a set management fee by the Department for Transport (DfT) on top of their operating costs in order to continue services. In financial terms the new arrangement hasn't made much difference for the ToCs (they're still doing quite nicely thank you) although much of the risk has been taken out of their business model. Although ToC fragmentation in what is effectively the partly re-nationalised system still exists, we are told this represents a transitional phase in place to keep the trains running as normal while the DfT works towards a new arrangement - the nature of which is yet to be decided although at the time of writing it has been announced that TfW (Transport for Wales) will be nationalising the TfW rail franchise currently held by Keolis-Amey. Some unique opportunities present themselves at this time of re-organisation, not least of all being implementation of the recommendations set out in the Williams Report, including chaotic components of the current system such as ticketing and fare structures. It has been observed that on some platforms 3 separate ticket machines can be found (one for each TOC) each with its own labyrinthine combination of fares and journeys to suit that operator. How much of the Williams report the government has the stomach to implement in one hit remains to be seen, but one thing remains clear; the concept of a clear and simple system to meet needs of the passenger has played second fiddle for far too long in favour of keeping the rails outsourced and fragmented.



Old and newer dwell at Frodsham: Class 175 Manchester Bound passes Class 150 just off 'the curve' for Chester.

NCRUG will be monitoring developments closely and sees this as a unique opportunity to lobby hard to see public transport brought back to suit the needs of the people and all the benefits a good rail network brings to the communities they serve. It will be a long time, if ever, before any element of 'profitability' emerges and we must be mindful of the potential for another 'Beeching' type review once post Covid traffic levels stabilise and new commuting and employment patterns become established.

MW

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING POSTPONMENT

In view of the coronavirus pandemic our AGM, normally held in October, has been postponed.

A virtual meeting was considered but it was decided that this would not be as inclusive as we would desire and has been postponed tentatively until May 2021. A date will be advised, in due course.

TRANSPORT FOR WALES NATIONALISATION

In mid-October it was announced that TfW was to be nationalised by the Welsh Government. It is rather an odd situation because TfW is already owned by Welsh Government. The operators Keolis and Amey will remain in the private sector as contractors to TfW in a similar manner as an Operator of Last Resort (OLR). So on the face of it not much will change.

We believe this change has been brought about by shortage of funding from the contractors which has been seriously exacerbated by the pandemic and the consequential drop in revenue.

CWG

CHESHIRE BEST KEPT STATION AWARDS (CBKS)

CBKS are pleased to announce that their Virtual Awards Evening for Cheshire Best Kept Stations 2020 will be on **Tuesday 24th November at 7pm** but do not worry if you cannot be seated for 7pm - as you can watch this event anytime later by dropping into CBKS's YouTube Channel.

A number of groups will be gathering over Zoom to watch the evening and CBKS are encouraging you to use **#cbks2020** on social media.

The Annual Awards Evening is being filmed before the event from a former Cheshire Station.

We are pleased to see that work continues at our Cheshire Stations and, although we are still in uncertain times, Community Rail in Cheshire is thriving.

To find out more about the Evening and enjoy some lovely images of previous evenings go to the CBKS's YouTube channel.

CONSULTATIONS

We have not made any submissions since the last Newsletter. We are, however, eagerly awaiting sight of the AECOM consultation which took place during 2019 on the Hooton/Helsby line, (see Hooton//Helsby Line feature, below).

HOOTON/HELSEBY LINE

NCRUG had input into this consultation which is now completed and under consideration by Cheshire West & Chester Council, (who commissioned the report), the Department for Transport and Transport for the North.

Our friends the Wirral Transport Users' Association also had input into the consultation which, in their case, mainly centred on the possibility of re-opening Ledsham station in view of the large housing development taking place in close proximity to the site of the old station. Whilst Ledsham is on the Hooton/Chester line, (not the Hooton/Helsby line), it seems a sensible decision to consider both projects together to improve the agglomerative effects of each.

In the short term the service on the Ellesmere Port/Helsby line has been subject to several changes but none which increase the number of trains and none which provide more attractive timings for passengers. It has been clear to us for some time that Northern are not interested in this service and are providing the minimum service to comply with the original franchise contract. In fact recent changes have reduced service provision making Northern non-compliant with the franchise. However, in the light of other changes which have taken place recently that is purely academic.

CHRIS DALE

It was with great sadness that we heard of the sudden death, in June, of Chris Dale. Chris appeared regularly on both TV and radio and was a font of knowledge on railways and all things 'public transport', which he freely imparted to colleagues in a friendly and often humorous way no matter how serious the topic. We will miss him greatly.

NORTH CHESHIRE COMMUNITY RAIL PARTNERSHIP (CRP)

The CRP is active and the Community Rail Officer is looking out for new projects to bring communities to their local stations.

The Castle Park display board joint scheme between CRP/NCRUG has stalled after it was submitted to Cheshire West & Chester Council and was not discussed at the June meeting, as expected. Maybe the virus has got in the way?

Our chairman, Mark, has proposed a series of local interest maps, based on local stations, and focused on nearby attractions such as the Sandstone Trail. An outline draft has been prepared and has been well received by the CRP. This is a work in progress.

The CRP is well supported by two out of the three TOCs whose area it partly covers, but they have received no recognition from Transport for Wales because, TfW say, the CRP's area lies entirely in England! *Given that TfW actually manages 3 of our local stations (Helsby, Frodsham and RUE) and the North Cheshire Line is ordinarily the most profitable in the network, this situation is patently absurd. (Mark)*

CWG

LLANGOLLEN RAILWAY TRUST - FANTASTIC PROGRESS AT THE NEW CORWEN STATION

Press release 27 September 2020 - Viewed from Corwen town car park visitors can see the Llangollen Railway's station project has made dramatic progress in recent weeks and the casual observer may visualise how the finished product might look!

Following the erection of steelwork to form the structure of the on-platform waiting room, the block paving of the platform surface has proceeded apace.

Seen in the picture below, the new platform surface at the western end of the platform with the historic canopy columns ex-Blackfriars, London and new steelwork in the background.

The steelwork was fabricated and erected by Barnett Engineering Ltd of Rhosllanerchrugog to provide the internal structure measuring 15x 4 x 3 metres within the foundations of the waiting room.

The steelwork is now a feature of the skyline as seen from the car park; it forms an integral structure with the heritage columns to support the canopy which requires six 'A' frames fabricating for future erection.



Starting at the eastern end of the platform, local contractors Wrexham Paving Co. laid the tactile edging and blockwork through to the final pair of canopy columns, followed by a second phase of work at the western end around the emergency exit and the subway stairwell.

With the project team members working to complete the platform reinstatement and drainage channels around the base of the waiting room and toilet block, a final phase of block laying will complete the platform surface in early October. Some 40,000 blocks will have been laid using a brickwork design for the outer areas and a herringbone design for the inner spine.

As seen in the photo below, the platform paving view looking westward with the steelwork in the background;

With sponsored lantern tops now in place on the four reproduction lamp posts and a running-on board delivered for the east end of the platform, the project team has made rapid progress since the release from lockdown.

Additional to which the S&T Dept has been active installing a ground frame and running the point rodding for the east end loop and siding, pending the anticipation of track ballasting in November.



And a first train has been in the station, albeit when two Mermaid wagons were brought down from Llangollen by the 08 shunter to deliver ash for depositing on the embankment sides, see pic above.

Project Leader Richard Dixon-Gough said,

“Progress with the steelwork and paving are further examples of how the overall project is now coming together after many years of planning and hard work by a small band of volunteers on site.



“Once completed and passed fit for purpose, the new build station and infrastructure will be opened to the public and, when the trains arrive, will increase footfall within Corwen helping to boost the local economy.”

George Jones

NCRUG VOLUNTEERS

On a much smaller scale than required by the above scheme we also need volunteers to help keep our stations looking smart and tidy and to check information boards and screens are fully operational. Any time you can offer, no matter how short, will be very much appreciated and make a huge difference to the attractiveness of our stations. Younger volunteers could even add this activity to their CV's. It's all experience and every little helps !!

NEWS IN BRIEF

Helsby Station – The footbridge has a small defect and a light installation is malfunctioning. Both have been reported to TfW.

Frodsham/Helsby - Some clearance work has taken place.

TfW – All RUG's which cover the Wales & Borders network report extreme difficulty in communicating with TfW at any level. This criticism started long before the coronavirus set in and is cause for concern.

CWG

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Note: The opinions expressed in this Newsletter are those of the individual contributors and are not necessarily those of the North Cheshire Rail Users' Group, (NCRUG).

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