



Monitoring Rail Services &
the Travelling Environment

Newsletter Spring 2017

FROM THE CHAIR

The last 6 months have been an incredibly busy time for the NCRUG committee; if you want a flavour of what we have been lobbying for and doing to support our local users and facilities just read on. Additionally, with the impending re-franchising of the Wales and Borders services we have been making solid representations to potential bidders about the needs in our own particular locality and how those would fit with the greater region. As detailed below; the Community Rail Partnership arrangements have made a significant milestone with the University of Chester agreeing to host the organisation and some additional seed capital to support the establishment costs has been found.

It's Spring (apparently) and the stations are starting to come into their own thanks to the tireless work of the station adopters and the generosity of the local council and Gleaves for the floral displays. There's never been a better time to get involved in the volunteering side and even if you or someone you know might be interested in just half an hour's help every few weeks be it at Helsby, Frodsham or Runcorn East please email our volunteer co-ordinator Ian Whitley: volunteering@ncrug.org.uk

Finally: Given the schedule for work on the Halton Curve leading to re-commencement of services later next year means the Parliamentary Train through Helsby and Frodsham to Liverpool South Parkway tentatively planned for 22nd July this year could well be the last. I am sure the community will want to make the most of this occasion.

Mark Warren

HALTON CURVE UPDATE

Progress continues with a slight slippage in start time for the main work but, we are assured, this will not affect the December 2018 start time for the service.

Work continues on selection of a TOC and timetable details but, again, we are assured these issues will be closed out in good time for service commencement in December 2018.

NCRUG have just received confirmation that any track renewal will be done in such a way as to permit future doubling with minimum disruption and cost.

The timetable for the main work is, as follows:-

- Frodsham Junction Crossover – November 2017
- Frodsham Junction Signalling – February 2018
- Halton Junction Crossover – April 2018
- Halton Junction Signalling – early May 2018
- Halton Junction OHLE – late May 2018

NCRUG have had preliminary talks with Merseytravel regarding publicising the new service. They will contact us shortly regarding an event they are considering to be held on Frodsham station during the summer. Meantime further options for after the line opens are being worked on.

The Merseytravel Halton Curve Team have just had a meeting with the local community in Runcorn to keep them informed about work which will take place on and near the line. The Team were not sure how they would be received as de-vegetation and fencing is involved. However, they need not have worried because the locals were delighted to hear that trains will be returning to the line in 2018.

CWG

PARLIAMENTARY TRAIN OVER HALTON CURVE

We have a provisional date of Saturday 22nd July for this annual trip from Chester to Liverpool South Parkway but it has to be confirmed by Northern and Network Rail. We will keep readers informed on this subject but please make a note in your diaries. As far as we are aware the timings are the same as in previous years with departure from Chester at 0756.

CWG

LJLA/LSP LINK

As reported in our Winter 2016/7 Newsletter the Airport will be up-dating its Master Plan report shortly but, as yet, no date has been given for the start of this consultation. NCRUG will respond to this consultation insofar as the LJLA/LSP Link is concerned.

Meantime progress has been made with regard to NCRUG's proposal for a Person Rapid Transport system, (based on Heathrow POD at Terminal 5).

NCRUG, represented by Cedric Green, were instrumental in arranging for Dr Chris Featherstone of Heathrow POD to visit the area and give a slide presentation to Cllr Liam Robinson and David Jones of Merseytravel on 30th March. NCRUG then took Dr Featherstone, via the No. 500 Bus, to the Airport to meet Robin Tudor and give him a copy of the presentation and discuss airport statistics including throughput figures and the likely effect of Halton Curve and the Mersey Gateway bridge opening, will have on these figures.

We then took the 500 Bus, (top deck), to Liverpool South Parkway to gather some indication of the land profile across which the route of the POD could follow. Dr Featherstone then caught his train home from LSP having taken numerous notes and photos of both locations and significant landmarks between the two.

The Merseytravel recipients of the presentation also took copious notes and asked questions about the suitability of this system as a link between the Airport and LSP. Whilst they were, understandably, non-committal at this early stage, Dr Featherstone and I both felt the proposal was favourably received by open minds willing to examine the project in more detail.

Dr Featherstone has since suggested that a feasibility study should be undertaken to determine the prospects for pursuing the POD as a cost-effective solution for a quick dedicated link between airport

and station. However, the current airport throughput figure is not sufficient to justify the capital expenditure required for such a project. It will require close examination of the effects of the Halton Curve re-opening, the opening and tolling of the two Runcorn road bridges and the increases in passenger numbers generated by a seamless link between LSP and the Airport. It would seem to us that all these three events will lead to more people using rail, via LSP, to reach the Airport and that these linkages provide an excellent platform for increasing throughput substantially.

Further discussions with the Airport are planned and we hope to be able to report favourable progress in our next Newsletter.

CWG

NORTH CHESHIRE COMMUNITY RAIL PARTNERSHIP, (CRP)

Since our last Newsletter this project has progressed. University of Chester has agreed to lead the project and took over the Chairmanship of the last meeting.

It is hoped that a Community Rail Officer, (CRO), will be appointed in June/July. An outline presentation has been prepared for use, by the new CRO, as a tool for enlisting local support for the CRP.

Readers will recall that in our last Newsletter we referred to the lack of service provision on the Ellesmere Port/Helsby line with regard to the new CRP. Later in this Newsletter you will read that the service on this line is being further reduced by Northern which does not help one little bit in establishing a CRP in North Cheshire.

CWG

HELSEBY STATION FORMER BOOKING OFFICE & HELSEBY PARISH COUNCIL

The building that Helsby Parish Council is currently based in is up for auction so we are seeking a new home. After some searching we found the former ticket office at Helsby Station was up for rent.

We made enquiries and made arrangements to view the building.

We viewed the building, and it was the opinion of those that viewed it that this could be an ideal site for the Parish Council, level ground floor access situated in the middle of the village. We asked Network Rail to send us a lease agreement for consideration at the next parish Council Meeting.

One of our Councillors is a retired Chartered Engineer, and on discovering the lease was a 'full repair and insure lease' advised we had a survey done.

We had a structural survey done and the results were less than we had hoped.

The building was suffering from both rising damp and seeping damp, due to problems with the guttering and brickwork round the windows. The damp was evident on several of the walls and the toilet area was particularly damp.

We approached Network Rail to see if they would repair the defects and amend the lease.

We were told that Network Rail did not have funds to repair the problems, but would alter the lease to reflect the condition of the building but it would remain a full repair lease.

At our monthly meeting concern was expressed about someone working full time in a damp environment, and also if left un-repaired what state the building would be in in years to come, and how could we prove this was a result of the problems in the first place.

Sadly, we decided to inform Network Rail we would not be taking up the lease, a great pity as this would have provided us with an ideal office. So, we continue to look for a new home.

On a lighter note, I give you a quick resume of our conversations with B.T. regarding getting a telephone line into a listed building, bearing in mind there is a telephone pole right next to the building and the total length of cable required would be about 7 meters (about 22 feet in old money).

Parish Council *We would like to have a phone line moved to a listed building can you advise how we do this please?*

B.T. *You will need a survey for listed building consent. We can come out next Tuesday between 1pm and 6pm and do the survey. We will let you know when we are half an hour away.*

Parish Council *Many thanks. Tuesday afternoon and the friendly B.T. Engineer arrived at the station.*

B.T. Engineer *Where do you want this telephone line then?*

Parish Council *This is a listed building you know*

B.T. Engineer *Sharp intake of breath. You'll need a survey before I can do anything.*

Parish Council *Yes, we know that's why we have asked for this survey.*

B.T. Engineer *I will have to rearrange for our Surveyor to call and do a survey.*

Parish Council *If you are installing a line here the line in the office won't go off will it ?*

B.T. Engineer *Smiles - no it will be fine*

Next afternoon email from Vice Chair of the Council stating B.T. have cut off the line to the Parish Office..!! Fortunately restored within 24hrs.

Parish Council (talking to B.T.again) *We would like a survey to have a telephone line put in a listed building*

B.T. Engineer *What the building is listing..!!*

Parish Council *No, it's a listed building you know an old restored building we need listed building consent to install a telephone line.*

B.T. *We don't do surveys for moving a line, we can give you a new number and a new line so we will have to do a survey, and within 4 hrs we will swap to your existing number.*

Parish Council *O/K will let you know.*

We have since had a letter from B.T saying we haven't had our telephone and broadband service from them so they can't help.

Despite giving B.T. our B.T. account number having a B.T. Connect email address they still say we are not with B.T.

We have now received a bill for £500 from B.T. for monies owing.....!! Despite paying by standing order for some time.

And it seemed such a good idea at the time..... **Councillor CHRIS ELLAMS, Helsby Parish Council**

Editors' note: Further enquiries are being made by NCRUG in the hope that the issues at the former Booking Office can be resolved allowing the Parish Council to reconsider.

CAPACITY ON WREXHAM/CHESTER LINE AND CHESTER STATION

On 28th February 2017 Wrexham Prison, (known as HMP Berwyn), was opened. It houses 2000+ inmates on the Wrexham Industrial Estate and will exacerbate traffic congestion in an already severely congested area. Despite considerable pressure from rail groups no actions or even decisions have been taken to improve rail infrastructure to alleviate this problem.

An article in the Wrexham Leader newspaper dated 3rd March referred to a proposal by Wrexham Council to the Welsh Government to widen the A483, Wrexham Bypass, to three lanes between junctions 4 & 6, (Gresford Interchange to Ruthin turn-off). Gresford Interchange is just south of the single track railway bridge crossing the bypass. Is this an opportunity to double track the railway at this point? We appreciate the single track railway bridge is not the only obstacle to redoubling as work to stabilise Gresford Bank would also have to be undertaken.

We understand GrowthTrack 360 are examining platform constraints at Chester station with a view to creating an additional through platform.

We have heard nothing further about adding a north facing bay platform at Wrexham General station.

CWG

HOOTON to HELSBY LINE

We were extremely surprised and disappointed to learn from Northern Rail that the current totally unsatisfactory service is going to be completely replaced by a one train per day in each direction from Ellesmere Port to Leeds and back as part of their new 'Connect' service between Chester and West Yorkshire. This means fewer trains than currently operate the service. Whilst we welcome the new service from Chester to Leeds, via Manchester Victoria, the proposal to start one train per day from Ellesmere Port instead of Chester, is acceptable, but not at the expense of withdrawing the existing service. Such an arrangement does nothing to meet the demands which we, and many others, believe exists along the Hooton/Helsby corridor.

This is a classic case of a TOC doing the bare minimum to comply with its franchise commitment and clearly indicates a lack of understanding, or deliberate denial, of the potential along the line despite local evidence which has been presented and which suggests that several major developments have taken place along the line since the service was decimated in the mid 90's. Furthermore, on examining the current Franchise agreement we find the old service is included as a minimum requirement which begs the question "are Northern breaking their contract?"

NCRUG will be making strong representations to Northern at their forthcoming 'open day' in Preston on 3rd May with Sharon Keith, West Regional Director as a first step in a campaign to have a service which meets the requirements of this developing area.

As part of our argument for a much improved service we have drawn up a timetable for an hourly service between Hooton and Helsby, from early morning to late at night, using just one unit. With more rolling stock becoming available in the foreseeable future we find it hard to believe Northern will not give some serious consideration to providing the sort of service which this line has long deserved. But we have been disappointed in the past and may be in the future.

CWG

TRIP ON THE SETTLE TO CARLISLE RAILWAY

I had a meeting to attend in Penrith on the 2nd April, two days after the re-opening of the Settle to Carlisle line after completion of twelve month's work by Network Rail to re-build Eden Brow embankment. Furthermore, due to misinformation at Leeds station last year, I had a voucher from Northern Rail for one day's free travel on any of their services.

So I decided to make a weekend of it and travel up on the Settle to Carlisle Railway and return on the West Coast Main Line with an overnight in Carlisle. A most enjoyable trip despite my nearly missing my split ticketed return from Penrith due to the meeting over-running its schedule.

I started from Hooton for the Merseyrail service into Chester for the 09.59 Northern Rail departure, via the Mid Cheshire Line, to Manchester Piccadilly. I chose Hooton as my starting point because it is the only Merseyrail station allowing overnight parking. The weather was dull with scattered showers but arrival into Piccadilly was on time, (11.30) and the Cheshire route, though long in time, is very pleasant. The train was well used throughout the journey but not overcrowded.

At Piccadilly I was informed that my voucher permitted free travel on MetroLink to Victoria so I used the service and had time for a snack and look round the refurbished Victoria station before catching the Northern service departing at 12.48 for Leeds.

It is a number of years since I last travelled on the route via Bradford Interchange so it made a change from the usual route via Standedge. As we passed Todmorden I pondered the three 'Curves', Todmorden, (now opened), Halton, (shortly to be opened) and Burscough, (????).

The weather now showed signs of improvement. We arrived at Leeds bang on time at 14.10 where I had 39 minutes to kill before my next train to Carlisle. Leeds station was bustling with people going here, there and everywhere but it was easier to move around than at Piccadilly where the concourse was reminiscent of a Premier League football stadium after the final whistle.

Departure from Leeds was prompt at 14.49 and I had a forward facing seat aligned to a window and with the sun beginning to peep through the clouds the contemplation of the trip was almost as good as the trip itself, I thought! Incidentally, have you noticed how people prefer forward facing seats ?

The well cared for stations towards Skipton came and went and we arrived on time at this gateway to the Dales and Craven District with the sun still shining. Again, I pondered – sometime in the future maybe I could arrive at this station having travelled via Blackburn, Accrington, Burnley and Colne when the SELRAP campaign succeeds in re-opening the Colne/Skipton route. It seems like a 'no brainer' and I wish SELRAP well in their untiring efforts to open this much missed line.

Along the line came Hellifield - the small hamlet which became a small town due to the railways in the latter part of the nineteenth century. On noting the line coming in from Clitheroe on the left and heading north I again pondered – would the addition of a southern curve be cost effective in providing an additional path across the Pennines for freight? The current track layout, of course, is used as a diversionary route when the West Coast line is closed and for regular steam specials.

Just before we arrive at Settle I observe the line from Lancaster and Morecambe joining us from the left and heading south towards Skipton and Leeds. I resolve to re-visit that line for a day trip but must plan and allow plenty of time to compensate for the poor frequency of the current timetable.

Settle was its usual bustling self with lots of excited passengers joining the train. Leaving Settle I remarked to myself how beautiful the Yorkshire Dales looked on a sun drenched Spring afternoon. As we progressed north past Horton in Ribblesdale I noted Pen-y-Ghent on the right immediately followed by Ingleborough on the left – remembering my earlier walking days when these two fells formed part of the popular three Peak charity walks of the Yorkshire Dales. Shortly after leaving Ribblesdale station we crossed the famous viaduct with a view of the third peak, Wharfedale, clearly visible to the left.

Dent station, the highest main line station in England at 1,150ft, was next. The view down Dentdale was magnificent with the Howgills and beyond the Eastern Lake District fells, bathed in Spring sunshine. This reminded me that I had been in Dent village, (4 miles from the station), two weeks earlier. I chatted to some locals who remarked that the 'plandampf' experiment with the steam loco 'Tornado' on the Settle to Carlisle line in February had had an enormous beneficial effect on the local economy. More of the same they said. Are there any plans to repeat this success story?

The route between Dent and the next station, Garsdale, is mostly in a tunnel. Reaching Garsdale I again wondered if the day will ever come when the Wensleydale Heritage Railway will join the Settle/Carlisle line at this point, as it did in the past. What a boost for the tourist industry this would be and almost pollution free at that!

Next came Kirkby Stephen once a railway hub with lines to Tebay, (connecting to the West Coast main line), Barnard Castle from where one could travel to Bishop Auckland or to Darlington, (on the East Coast main line). Finally, there was the North Eastern Railway's line which ran into the town centre and continued on to Brough, Appleby East and Penrith.

After Kirkby Stephen came Appleby which marked the furthest north I had travelled in the past on this line. Appleby is an interesting and attractive little town once the County Town of Westmoreland. The River Eden loops around the town. It is famous for the annual Horse Fair which occurs in June and goes back to the 12th Century. However, I am told, not all locals welcome this invasion from other far flung places.

The countryside was now changing as we entered the Eden Valley with more gentle undulating features as we called at Langwathby, Lazonby and Armathwaite. Shortly after the latter we traversed Eden Brow embankment with the River Eden below but I have to confess I could not determine when we were on the newly constructed portion. Is that a tribute to Network Rail or was it because I was sitting on the wrong side?

Finally, the Tyne Valley line came in on the right and we ran alongside it for the couple of miles into Carlisle station. A wonderful and most enjoyable journey with everything running exactly to time.

The journey south on the next day was uneventful, apart from nearly missing my train at Penrith, but I noted on the TransPennine Express service from Carlisle that the reserved seat tabs showed "Oxenholme/Manchester PI kerley". Is this a spelling error or a new station which I haven't heard about?

CWG

BARBARA McGEORGE

It is with much sadness that we report the passing of Barbara who was one of the original NCRUG members and who has been active at Helsby station ever since. Whilst latterly she had been unable to actively participate at the station she always showed great interest in it and in NCRUG. She will be sadly missed by all her colleagues and friends in NCRUG.

CWG

AROUND THE LIVERPOOL CITY RUG'S/ASSOCIATIONS

Just a snippet of some of the topics covered at the April meeting at Merseytravel:-

MCRUA – campaigning for a western rail link from north of Mobberley to Manchester Airport. Re-establishing a service and re-opening Middlewich station on the Northwich to Sandbach line.

NCRUG – as per this newsletter.

OPSTA – potential way forward is being pursued to maintain a through service between Manchester Piccadilly and Southport. Current plans only go into Victoria.

SCRUA – report that Cambrian Heritage Railways has a TWAO for the Gobowen/Oswestry and beyond branch and propose an initial service, using Parry People Movers, to the Orthopaedic Hospital. The Rossett Junction to Saltney Junction second track has been commissioned at 90mph linespeed but the old (jointed) track remains at 60mph.

WBRUA – continue to closely monitor and report performance and information shortcomings and to highlight the various reasons why it is so poor. Continue to campaign for a Deeside Industrial Park station, half hourly service and improved interchange at Shotton.

WTUA - report that the building of a new station at Town Meadow on the Merseyrail West Kirby line is being re-examined. This may be because improved performance of the new rolling stock will create sufficient extra time within the existing timetable to accommodate an additional stop.

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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