



Newsletter

Spring 2020

FROM THE CHAIR

The under capacity and excessive demands witnessed on the rail network just a few months ago has almost overnight become pared-back schedules and almost empty trains across most of the country. Furthermore, the government subsidy being provided to prop up the train operators to offer a skeletal service for essential travel is in effect a small step short of re-nationalisation. In January this year, who would have thought any of this a plausible scenario for the near term?



Frodsham Station car park on a weekday shortly after lockdown.

Given the nature of events it seems a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to have a complete reassessment of the potential of public transport - how it fits with our current and future education, work and recreation patterns, how to meaningfully incentivise modal shift and reduce dependency on the car, reduce road congestion and vehicle emissions, has been squandered. The near-empty streets witnessed just 5 short weeks ago, ill-

considered public transport policy, a chaotic and inequitable fare structure co-incident with huge public transport subsidies provided a golden opportunity for a level of review that I fear will be missed forever.

Looking to the future, the requirement for additional safety measures including the wearing of face masks on public transport will take some of the previously enjoyed simplicity out of travel by public transport. NCRUG has been lobbying the Train Operating Companies to reinstate services as near as possible back to pre Covid-19 levels as and when guidelines on the use of public transport are relaxed, especially the long fought for Liverpool services which are currently 2-hourly. Come December Northern have signalled their intention to discontinue the Ellesmere Port – Leeds service under the pretence of protecting the Castlefield Corridor for increased Transport for Wales services to Manchester Airport. On the face of it this doesn't bear scrutiny as the Leeds service doesn't use the Corridor and the fear is that Northern will withdraw from Ellesmere Port altogether thus leaving only Merseyrail services to Liverpool. Cedric elaborates more on this development in his report, with a possible small upside.

At our local stations there has been no volunteer work in recent months due to current restrictions, although we expect the situation to change soon. The footbridge refurbishment at Frodsham has been complete for some time save some final paint work and new cycle stands are being installed at Helsby and Frodsham by Transport for Wales. The cycle stands are a somewhat watered-down provision from what was originally envisioned and despite both Train Operating Companies and the Local Authority having funds for sustainable transport connections to the stations there has been a noticeable absence in joined up or collaborative thinking.



Cycle stand footings beside Platform 2 at Frodsham.

Finally; a new coffee shop is set to open imminently on Platform 2 at Frodsham Station in the site used by the Paws and Claws pet supplies. It'll be a handy brew stop for commuters not wanting to chance the walk into town while they wait for their train.

MW

BY TRAIN IN THE TIME OF COVID

Today (15th June) is the day that many 'inessential' shops reopen and it is anticipated that the numbers wanting to travel on public transport will start to go up. So far rail companies have almost discouraged travel unless one was a key worker or the trip was part of an essential work requirement.

The relaxation in travel conditions has been accompanied by official guidance that everyone travelling by bus, tram or train should wear a face covering or mask and with trains, these should be worn on going onto the station premises.

Once on the train, social distancing should be observed, and this still means keeping 2m apart from anyone else, so the capacity of trains will be restricted to perhaps only one third of the norm. As people may be travelling to work in larger numbers from now, peak times are likely to be busier. The train timetables are being restored gradually but travelling on them at peaks is still likely to be more of a challenge if trying to maintain social distancing.

The Government's guidance has been criticised for being vague on some matters and some things do require interpretation. This correspondent still isn't clear about 'support bubbles' other than the term sounding frivolous, but the watchword in all cases is clear enough, try to keep reasonably apart from others when going about your business, particularly strangers, and report it if you feel unwell.

Infection rates for Covid are noticeably dropping now, but it has been calculated that the numbers who have been exposed is less than 10%, meaning that 90% are still vulnerable and have no immunity. It's just as well under these circumstances to take care of yourself.

The prospects for rail travel as demand recovers is another matter entirely, with more car journeys expected in the short term and 'normal' use of trains only acceptable once the pandemic has burnt itself out. It remains to be seen how long this will take, but it seems likely that the previous growth trend in rail use will have taken a knock and demand will remain at a lower level for a year or two (or three) before the previous position is regained.

In the meantime, there's no reason to not try using services unless we know in advance that they will be full and if indeed they are, the incentive is there for the rail companies, in our case, TfW and Northern, to reinstate more capacity early.

RD

Editor's note: At time of newsletter publication social distancing is imminently set to reduce to 1+ metre.

ELLESMERE PORT/HELSEBY LINE

It would be great to be able to report some good news about the future service on this line, but with two small exceptions, (see later in this article for one and article headed 'Changing stopping patterns at Helsby, Frodsham and Runcorn East for the other), we regret no progress has been made.

Despite all the developments along the line since the regular well used through services to Manchester were withdrawn, (when third rail electrification was completed to Ellesmere Port), we have been unable to persuade Northern to provide something more than the minimal franchise specification. Indeed latterly they have provided one train LESS than the franchise specification but because the service is so abysmal, this has hardly been noticed.

We appreciate that, up until very recently, there has been a severe shortage of rolling stock and that, as a result Northern have struggled to maintain their existing services. However, the rolling stock issue has eased considerably in recent months which we had hoped would induce Northern to look at improving the Ellesmere Port/Helsby service to something resembling a useful one for employees, students and residents. Ellesmere Port is struggling and badly needs good rail links to encourage inward investment and to improve connectivity in an easterly direction. The knock-on effects of Covid-19 could have serious negative repercussions on Vauxhall, (we sincerely hope not), but it could be that jobs further afield may be sought which would be facilitated if far better easterly public transport services were available. Evidence for this can be noted at

Deeside Industrial Park where the lack of good public transport has been a barrier to employment for those who cannot afford to own a car in which to commute. Moves are afoot to remedy this by constructing Deeside Parkway station.

A useful service is one which operates, (say hourly), throughout the day and evening for at least 5 days a week and with a limited weekend service. It is only when such a service is available, and is duly well publicised, that patronage will build to acceptable levels. We acknowledge that it will take time and money but we are in no doubt that the market is there for the taking if only a TOC would take it on. Our membership and our engagement with employers and seats of learning along the line confirm this.

Track Access Applications for the December 2020 change apparently indicate that Northern desire to switch their early morning Ellesmere Port departure, (07:15) to West Yorkshire, to Chester, (there are none from Ellesmere Port during the day). The return service from West Yorkshire would also switch from Ellesmere Port as the destination, to Chester, (arrival approx. 18:00). The reason given is to relieve congestion on the Castlefield corridor in Manchester. We failed to understand how changing a departure or arrival station will help relieve the congestion, when the service goes to Victoria, not Piccadilly, thus avoiding the Castlefield corridor altogether!!! However, Northern have now explained that because TfW are withdrawing their extra peak service, (departs Chester at 07:12) and returns from Piccadilly at 17:19 to reduce congestion through Castlefield corridor, Northern will pick-up the service albeit to Victoria not Piccadilly.

We note that in March 2020 Northern effectively became nationalised when the government controlled Operator of Last Resort, (OLR), took over from Arriva. *The pandemic has, of course, led to the suspension of all franchises leaving only the 'Open access' operators in the private sector.* Will this change be for the benefit of the passenger? In the aftermath of the pandemic will the DfT/OLR see the urgent need to subsidise a decent service on this line? Only time will tell.

To finish on a positive note, the one bit of good news is that, Northern's Track Access Application requests one daily peak Ellesmere Port to Liverpool Lime Street, via Runcorn service and a return peak each weekday. We assume approximate timings will be 07:xx out of Ellesmere Port and 17:xx out of Lime Street.

Whilst Ellesmere Port already has a half hourly service to Liverpool via Merseyrail, this proposed new service will provide a much quicker route to the employment areas of South Liverpool and the Airport.

The future of the Ellesmere Port/Helsby service could end up being run by extending Merseyrail services when their Class 777 (battery version) enters service, hopefully towards the end of 2021/early 2022 when the technical issue of battery overheating during recharge, is overcome.

CWG

CHANGING STOPPING PATTERNS AT HELSBY, FRODSHAM AND RUNCORN EAST

Wider industry and stakeholder discussions, under the banner of the 'Manchester Recovery Task Force', was set up in January 2020 to address the peak time congestion on the Castlefield corridor between Deansgate and Piccadilly. As a result there will be a number of changes to Northern and TfW services which serve Manchester in the morning and evening peaks.

The Northern changes are as mentioned in our above article headed 'Ellesmere Port/Helsby Line', namely, the switch from Ellesmere Port to Chester for their Leeds service.

TfW peak services at 07:12 and return at 17:19 will be withdrawn but are being replaced by Northern's Leeds service, which, importantly for us will include outward stops at Helsby,(approx. 07:2x, Frodsham 07:3x and Runcorn East, 07:3x). So passengers travelling to Manchester, (excluding the airport), from these stations will still have a train but it will have to go to Victoria, not Piccadilly. Approximate return timings are Runcorn East

17:4x, Frodsham 17:5x and Helsby 17:5x. It's a compromise but, at least, it does give north Cheshire passengers an extra peak service to and from Leeds.

CWG

TRAVELLING IN FRANCE AND SPAIN

We have experienced problems on our own national rail but last year we had fun. Over the years we have used French local and national services in the south and into Paris, Lyon and Lille with no problems.

We came 'unstuck' on the international France-Madrid and Seville trip last year. We decided to celebrate our 50th Anniversary with a trip to Seville by (1st class) train. We used a recommended agent and paid to travel a few weeks later. The e-tickets arrived. The hotels reservations were made, fortunately not paid for. Then the French decided to call rolling rail strikes on specified dates, but did not specify which services, and allowing certain services to run, announcing them at 5pm on the day before.

We had to alter our arrangements - and travel on a Nimes to Madrid Renfe service a day later than planned and pay extra.

We got on the train, which was sparsely occupied, and settled into our window seats. Less than an hour before we arrived in Madrid the train filled up and we found out that our tickets did not refer to the seats we occupied. We were escorted to a door marked 'private' and shown into a 'cabin'. The 4 upright upholstered seats faced 4 similar seats; we could look out of the windows if we stood up. The other occupants were Spanish staff returning to Madrid - 1st class NOTE.

From Madrid to Seville our issued tickets were valid. We enjoyed our stay in Seville. Whilst there we had to re-book our return journey, (a day earlier due to the strike). After much discussion between a very helpful booking clerk and his back office staff we found out our existing tickets could not be used and we would have to go through the agents for a refund and to buy new tickets.

Seville-Madrid-Barcelona; where we had to book a hotel which we discovered was about 100 yards from the station. Comfortable, reasonably priced and convenient.

The journey to Lyon went smoothly and we chatted to a couple from Whitchurch, who knew Frodsham.

On arrival in Lyon there was chaos. Crowds anxiously staring at the screens which informed them which service operated and which had replacement buses and their times of departure from outside the station. When the Paris train was announced barriers at the platform entrance were removed and the crowd surged forward pushing and shoving. We stayed as planned in Lyon and we trusted our Eurostar train would arrive and depart as per our booking, which it did. Again whilst at the station we saw a repeat of the chaos we had witnessed a couple of days earlier.

We contacted the agency who told us to go to our insurers, who sent the forms but told us to get back in touch with the agency, who said they 'would try' but how hard is any ones guess as we did not get a refund from them.

We decided to be thankful that was the only mishap, cut our losses, learn from experience, and revert back to making our own flexi arrangements, as in the past.

Rosemary Heeley - Founder Member and first Chair NCRUG

Editor's note: It happens on the Continent too, despite what we hear to the contrary.

CONSULTATIONS

National Infrastructure Commission/rail needs assessment for the Midlands and the North. Call for evidence.

This consisted of 11 pre-set questions which called for investment priorities and their impact on the future of the railway and evidence/reasons for backing up our suggestions. This was a joint response from WTUA, (John Ryan), and NCRUG, (Cedric Green).

Railfuture – The Castlefield Problem. A Great Opportunity for Freight?

This was a call for comment on a document produced by Railfuture's Infrastructure, Networks and Freight Committees and from their North West Branch, suggesting a new Rail Freight Terminal site at Cadishead. Traffic would be routed via Skelton Junction, Northenden Junction and then taking the freight only single line to New Mills for a short distance. A new junction is suggested just after this line passes under the WCML (Stockport to Crewe), at Adswood, and a short stretch of new double track would curve in a westerly direction. A new viaduct, (adjacent to the existing Ladybrook viaduct on the WCML), would lead to a connection with the WCML at Cheadle Hulme. This is a bold plan and deserves consideration. John Ryan, (WTUA) and Cedric Green, (NCRUG) have sent a response.

Readers wishing to view these responses should contact the Secretary, (cw.green@talktalk.net).

CWG

CORWEN – CONNECTING THE TRACK

Just when it seemed likely the project might be completed in 2020, along came a virus from the East and stopped everything on the Llangollen Railway. The off-peak diesel railcar service to Carrog was terminated on 17 March and all operations were suspended four days later. Like every other heritage railway and attractions, the Llangollen Railway was plunged into crisis with an urgent appeal going out for financial support which was, fortunately, forthcoming from members and shareholders.

However, to go back to 2019 and continue the story. Last autumn saw the mainline track brought forward from the railhead at Corwen East to cross the former void in the embankment. This had settled down nicely after the infill had been compacted to allow base ballasting and tracklaying. Completion was seen as a major achievement as it provided continuous rail from Llangollen station to the buffer stop at Green Lane, Corwen – all ten miles, as envisaged back in 1975.

To gain access to the platform loop required the installation of two sets of points, one of which would serve a siding. Much measuring of the area and drawing of plans took place before the available point-work was assembled on site, only to find some minor adjustment was needed for all the rails to correctly align into platform 1. This process took several weeks of volunteer effort to complete and was in place by 23 November. A Bomag crossing was then installed across the tracks from a graded pathway up the embankment to ease pedestrian access to the site hut. Viewed from the car park, it is hard to believe there was ever a gap in the embankment.

The crossing provided a location for a traditional 'golden fishplate' occasion arranged to celebrate the completion of the track. On 10 December, in the face of some wintery weather, the railway's Vice - Presidents, Bill Shakespeare and Gordon Heddon, joined current Chairman Liz McGuinness to tighten up the bolts. With everything in place, the Road-Rail vehicle ran through the points into the loop to prove they worked and provided some useful media footage for Welsh TV news.

There was then the need to screw down the point-work on to the timbers using hired-in heavy duty equipment – a four-day exercise. It only remained to set out the Up siding to a length of 300 ft. Completed on 28 December, it provides an impressive length of double track on the final approach into Corwen. During this time the space available for the road-wheeled vehicles to manoeuvre was reduced to a minimum. As a result, they had to vacate the site via the Water Works leaving the rest of the construction work to the Road-Rail vehicle operating within the station loop. Both the HiAB equipped Leyland lorry and JCB digger have given sterling service in the building of the railway and are now retired, pending any future requirements.

In the meantime, work on platform 1 had not been forgotten and, despite continuing damp conditions, the block work was completed and edgings put in place with the tactile strip to follow. Installation of the surface drainage channels followed and the cabling for the platform lamps, four of which have been newly cast for installation, together with two restored GWR columns for the east-end Corwen running-in board. Unfortunately, just as the weather brightened up, work came to a halt when Covid 19 struck and the work site was closed down after the volunteer workforce was withdrawn. The subsequent run of good weather would have been ideal for the laying of the 40,000 pavers to complete the platform surface, but that job, by a contractor, awaits a return to work in accordance with Welsh Government instructions.

Having weathered the period of shut down so far, the next challenge is how to re-open when the Welsh Government allows construction to resume and volunteers feel able to return to continue the project – now three months behind schedule.

George Jones - Corwen Project



Corwen station platform awaiting paving, signage and furnishings.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Frodsham station - The car park was closed from 06:00 on 9th June to 17:00 on 23rd June to allow further work to proceed. Cycle racks, (5 arched tethers), are in process of being erected on each platform.

Helsby station - A cycle rack, (5 arched tethers), is being erected on platform 1.

Cambrian Railway Heritage Trust - Porterbrook, the rolling stock leasing company, has gifted two Pacers and one ex Caledonian Sleeper carriage for the future use of the heritage railway. The Pacers are currently in the sidings at Gobowen station, (which has a measure of security), and the Sleeper is on-site at Oswestry where it is used by volunteers in lieu of hotel accommodation – what a good idea.

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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