



Newsletter

Winter 2019/2020

FROM THE CHAIR

Northern Rail

At the time of writing one of the 2 beleaguered rail franchises in our region, Northern Rail, has been stripped of its franchise only to be taken over by an Operator of Last Resort (OLR). The finger-pointing started some time ago and we await the outcome for Trans Pennine Express...

The government, in the wake of a general election that saw a significant vote swing in our region is now, after over a decade of shoddy services and botched infrastructure upgrades, being seen to swing into action and take control of the situation – something they've actually had control of all along. Not all of Northern's problems can be laid directly at Northern's doorstep; although driver shortages are inexcusable and the company has been plagued by a long running industrial dispute (curiously the move to Driver Only Operation was part of the franchise agreement so the issues were easily foreseen), there have been considerable delays in the delivery of new rolling stock and crucially key infrastructure upgrades have been cancelled or just quietly put into hibernation. A critical component of the 'Northern Hub' program, the upgrade of the Castlefield Corridor including Manchester Piccadilly and Oxford Rd stations, has been shelved in favour of signalling improvements which will provide only marginal benefits to this notorious bottleneck. Expect service reductions in the December 2020 timetable change – it is reportedly too late to have cuts incorporated in May, so the misery of late running services through Manchester is likely to continue right through until the end of the year.

There is however some good news to report regarding Northern services in our area; the new 100mph Class 195 units are serving all diagrams and the May timetable proposals include 5 minutes off the journey from Chester to Manchester Victoria and additional peak time stops at Frodsham and Helsby and Runcorn East. Some very attractive promotional fares are on offer too; Ellesmere Port, Chester, Helsby and Frodsham to Leeds can be had for under £15.00. If buying from Stanlow (co-incidentally England's second to least used station) or Ince, expect to pay over £40.00 for a single. Although this fare anomaly has been brought to Northern's attention, I expect travellers from Stanlow or Ince, once armed with this information will make their own assessment as to the most cost-effective way to book! The same applies to Chester – Manchester fares; fares significantly cheaper than Transport for Wales services can be had with careful searching.

We await the overall affect of the 'deep clean' of Northern's rolling stock as recently promised by the Secretary of State. The last time I travelled on the mid Cheshire Line the train was perfectly clean and tidy. Revenue collection is also a priority for Northern; expect to see inspectors at un-staffed stations any time of day. Broken ticket machines and busy guards will not prevent a penalty charge notice unless a 'Promise to Buy' ticket is obtained in advance. These are readily obtained from any machine including card only.

Frodsham Station

The Frodsham footbridge refurbishment is running over 5 weeks late and completion is now expected end of March. The diversion route represents quite an inconvenience and despite the lack of suitable access to the platforms for those with reduced mobility (either the access road to the tip or Morrisons), the footbridge refurbishment does not include capability for wheelchair use. The situation is unacceptable in a town with an ageing demographic.



Left: the ongoing Frodsham footbridge refurbishment; now expected to be completed end of March



As part of the Transport for Wales Station Improvement Plan, covered cycle stands were recently installed on Platform 1 at Frodsham next to the existing stands. These have subsequently been removed, presumably as the original planning consent was for installation on the east end of Platform 2. The stands are not a particularly secure storage system and an application has been made by the Community Rail Partnership for a cage style storage facility to be installed.

Above: the (temporary) cycle stand installation at Frodsham.

Cheshire Best Kept Station Awards and Mayor of Frodsham Award.

NCRUG received a special award at the recent Cheshire Best Kept Station Awards ceremony for the Halton Curve campaign. The 'John Hobbs' award includes totems to be hung at Frodsham and Runcorn mainline stations. Ian Whitely attended the ceremony on behalf of NCRUG. Separately NCRUG received an award from the Mayor of Frodsham at an event in November. The respective reports are attached below.

MW

MAYOR OF FRODSHAM COMMUNITY AWARDS

At an event on the restored steamship, 'The Daniel Adamson', affectionately known locally as 'The Danny', moored at Sutton Weaver Swing Bridge, NCRUG received the award for 'Best Community Group'. The awards took place on a very wet 1st November evening but with adequate cover, congenial company and ample refreshments, an enjoyable evening was had by all.

CWG

THE JOHN HOBBS AWARD

The North Cheshire Rail Users Group was officially recognised for 30 years hard work saving and preserving the Halton Curve for future rail use. The rail service from Chester to Liverpool Lime Street was withdrawn in May 1975. In 1990 the North Cheshire Rail Users Group was formed to try and prevent the final closure of the Halton Curve. The group succeeded twice in stopping the line being ripped up and in the early 2000's stopped Railtrack (Network Rail) from selling the line to the local highways to extend the adjacent road over the trackbed. The group took their campaign to the House of Commons and in October 2014 George Osborne awarded 10 Million pounds of funding to redevelop the line. The project took 4 years to complete and the final total for reinstating the line was over 20 Million. Passenger services resumed on the line on the 19th May 2019 after a gap of 45 years. **IW**



The NCRUG team and Mayor of Frodsham receive the John Hobbs award.

WEST MANCHESTER FREIGHT LINK

John Ryan and Ced Green, (as members of the Liverpool City Region RUG/Ass.), have been in discussions with Transport for the North to put forward solutions to reduce pressure on the Castlefield corridor in Manchester. Currently up to 20 freight movements per day from Trafford Park Freight Terminal, (to the west of the city), use this corridor to access the WCML en route to Felixstowe, London Gateway and Southampton.

John pointed out that a number of years ago a colleague in British Rail had been tasked with making a case for moving this freight via a westerly route to reach the WCML via Newton-le-Willows/Earlestown. The idea was to re-instate the old CLC line from Glazebrook East Junction to Wigan and St Helens at the point where it crossed the Chat Moss line near the site of the former Kenyon Junction station. The alignment is largely intact although a section now forms the Culcheth Linear Park. The M62 Motorway is in a cutting at the intersection point thus aiding a railway bridge crossing. Work would be required at the Trafford Park end to link the Freight Terminal with the CLC Manchester to Liverpool line in a westerly direction and the cost for doing this was the main reason for the earlier study not to be taken forward.

However, with the passage of time and Castlefield congestion becoming much more severe, solutions have to be found and the westerly route could be the answer. Network Rail would, of course, need to be involved in feasibility studies as the Earlestown/Newton-le-Willows corridor carries a lot of traffic and may not be able to accommodate an extra 20 freight movements per day.

Separate from the freight issue pressure on the Castlefield corridor could be relieved if the Manchester Airport Western Link to the Mid Cheshire Line was built. Our friends, the Mid Cheshire Rail Users' Association, are pressing hard for this project to be started with the minimum of delay.

Let's see how earnest the politicians are in their declarations of how urgent are improvements needed to the North's infrastructure so that it can contribute more to the wellbeing of the whole country!! **CWG**

NEWS IN BRIEF

Class 777 Rolling Stock – The first of the new trains has arrived at Kirkdale Depot and will shortly be in service as further units arrive over the next few months. Technical problems with the battery versions of these new Merseyrail trains are under investigation at the manufacturers. Merseyrail have ambitions to use these battery versions to extend their

services to destinations such as Preston, Wigan, Warrington and, we hope, Helsby, so we are keen that a solution can be found.

Class 230 Rolling Stock – These refurbished and re-engineered ex London District Line units are expected to be in service on the Borderlands Line from the May timetable change.

Chester/LSP/Liverpool service – Reports from both TfW and our members indicate good and building patronage on this service. We are currently working on an analysis of the service for the period October/December and hope to give details in our next Newsletter.

CWG

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Contacts:-	<u>PHONE</u>	<u>EMAIL</u>
Chairman: Mark Warren	07979 513205	chair@ncrug.org.uk
Vice Chairman: Bob Swann	0151 4201910	bob.swann@blueyonder.co.uk
Secretary: Cedric Green	0151 6258017	cw.green@talktalk.net
Membership: Bob Florence	01928 731209	r.florence45@btinternet.com
Newsletter: Cedric Green	0151 6258017	cw.green@talktalk.net
LSP contact: Mike Taylor	0151 4272288	mikeporg@btinternet.com
British Transport Police:	0800 405040	

Website: Visit our website at www.NCRUG.ORG.UK to leave your comments, favourable or otherwise, and to catch up on latest developments. We are on Facebook too.

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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