

North Cheshire Rail Users' Group



**Monitoring rail services from Chester & Ellesmere Port via
Helsby, Frodsham & Runcorn to Liverpool & Manchester**

Newsletter - Spring 2012



FROM THE CHAIR

It's just over a year since I noticed feverish activity in and around the old stationmaster's house at Frodsham Station and, to my surprise, discovered that Network Rail were proposing a complete restoration of the building both inside and out. Following the protracted planning procedure, work finally began in January and is still in full swing with contractors currently working on the roof and the inside of the building. Despite the house being completely surrounded by scaffolding, I find it hard to keep away for more than a day or two in case I miss something! It's fortunate that the station is adjacent to the main shopping area in Frodsham so I can make a quick detour across the footbridge to view the work.

There has also been some activity recently at Helsby Station and we have since heard that Network Rail are proposing to carry out some remedial work on the roof of the house in the next few months in order to make it weatherproof. Additionally, an internal survey has shown that the floors are suffering from dry rot and will probably need to be replaced before the building can be rented out. As with Frodsham, all work will have to be carried out in accordance with its grade 2 listing.

As was reported in NCRUG's last newsletter, customer information system (CIS) equipment has been installed at Frodsham and Helsby. This is, of course, very welcome but is only satisfactory when the trains are running on time as it does not display the expected time when there is a delay. On some Sundays, when there is planned engineering work, it does inform passengers that the trains are replaced by buses but it has not yet been programmed to tell passengers that the first service in the Chester direction is always a bus which frequently causes confusion.

Take a trip along our local line towards Manchester and you will see that there is a lot of work going on. The platform lengthening and other improvements at Warrington Bank Quay which have been ongoing for many months finally seem to be nearing completion so we can look forward to seeing eleven car Pendolino trains stopping there in the not too distant future.

Further along the line there is much evidence of preparation for electrification across Chat Moss. Concrete bases for the poles and gantries which carry the overhead wires are beginning to appear near to Newton le Willows and the actual gantries have been installed on the viaduct near to Castlefields Junction on the approach to Manchester. Three bridges in the Eccles area were raised some months ago to accommodate the wires.

So, keep window gazing and let us know of anything of particular interest. Finally, we are currently negotiating with Northern Rail to confirm the date, (see following article), of our (now annual) special journey round the Halton Curve to Liverpool South Parkway and we look forward to seeing as many people as possible on the train.

Janet Briggs

PARLIAMENTARY TRAIN – CHESTER TO LIVERPOOL SOUTH PARKWAY (LSP)

An important date for your diary! For the third year in succession Northern Rail have kindly agreed to extend the 0750 from Chester to Runcorn Main Line to LSP with stops at Helsby and Frodsham. The details are currently being worked on by Northern Rail and we expect final confirmation, shortly.

The date which we have requested is **Saturday 21st July** and will be confirmed to all our email Newsletter recipients as soon as we have the final details. Needless to say we would like an even higher attendance at this event than the excellent previous figures and we extend a warm welcome to all who can join us on the day. No prior booking is necessary – just buy your ticket at Chester, or on the train if joining at Helsby or Frodsham, on the day.

Readers will appreciate that this event is not only to give a rare opportunity of experiencing a trip along the Halton Curve but, most importantly, to highlight the advantages, for people living and working in the area, to easily access Liverpool John Lennon Airport and Liverpool City Centre, if a regular two-way service along the line was available. This is one of our longstanding projects which we are still working hard to achieve.

We are hoping to be able to incorporate an event on Frodsham station to celebrate the completion of the renovation of the Station House as part of the Parliamentary train event. We expect the contractors will have completed their work well before the 21st July but we have to work with Network Rail and Arriva Trains Wales regarding our plans. More on this as soon as possible.

Once again a vintage Crosville bus will operate the return journey from LSP to Chester via Runcorn, Frodsham and Helsby.

We hope as many as possible will be able to join us on the 21st July.

CWG

WELL WELL!

During the early stages of work on the restoration of the house at Frodsham Station, the contractors discovered a long disused well which was probably used to supply water to the premises in the 19th century. The brick lined circular well, complete with its original pumping gear, was unearthed beneath old railway sleepers under an area being excavated to lay new paving. Photographs of the feature were shown to conservation officers at Cheshire West and Chester Council, who added the location of the well to their historical records, before Spence Refit Ltd (Network Rail's contractors) covered the structure again. However, provision was made for an access hatch, in the event of a future tenant wishing to make a special feature of the well as an example of industrial archaeology.

JB

HELBY TANK CHANGES INTO FREIGHT LOCO

In the 1950's, GWR 2-6-2 Prairie Tank Loco No. 4115 was allocated to Chester, (84K) Motive Power Depot. As a result this loco was regularly used on services from Chester to Birkenhead Woodside and also Birkenhead to Helsby. I frequently used to see this loco at Helsby and I had my first cab ride on it when it was running round its train at Helsby ready to return to Birkenhead.

The Great Western Society has announced that it is to create a new Churchward 47xx 2-8-0 Freight Loco using parts from existing locos which have not been restored. One of the main donor locos will be 4115. The six driving wheels, parts of the main frames and the pony truck, (front bogie), will come from 4115. These will be the main parts to make the rolling chassis. This initial work is being done by the Llangollen Railway.

It is nice to know that a local engine is still being useful so long after steam ceased on British Railways.

WE

STATION USAGE STATISTICS

The latest station usage statistics (2010-2011), which have recently been published show an increased footfall at Helsby, Frodsham and Runcorn East stations.

	2008-2009	2009- 2010	2010-2011	% INCREASE 2010-2011
HELSEBY	71314	77236	79790	3.3
FRODSHAM	927040	100730	115 292	14.5
RUNCORN EAST	121492	136230	147634	7.7

The above figures are based on ticket sales to and from each station and confirm our observations that the number of passengers continues to grow steadily at our local stations but may be constrained by the limited car parking available at Helsby and Runcorn East.

JB

MERSEY GATEWAY – RAIL INCLUDED IN PLANS

The plans for road alterations in connection with the new Mersey Gateway Bridge from Runcorn to Widnes can be viewed on the Halton Borough Council website at www.halton.gov.uk.

As part of these plans it is stated that provision must be made for future railway stations in Runcorn and Widnes. The stations are: -

- a) In Widnes on the Garston to Timperley line which is currently a freight only line.
- b) On the Halton Curve at Beechwood which is currently a south to north line only.

Although this is good news for heavy rail the downside is that provision for light rail, (trams), on the new bridge have been withdrawn from the plans.

WE

HALTON CURVE RE-INSTANTMENT and SERVICE IMPROVEMENTS ON THE ELLESMERE PORT TO HELSBY LINE

Although we continue to work hard on these two projects there is currently not much to report. We are still awaiting Network Rail's decision about funding Halton Curve in Control Period 5 (2014/2019), (CP5), and also bringing the cost down to an acceptable level for local funding and/or encouraging private investment. Current discussions are exploring the potential for reducing costs by taking account of any planned improvement works scheduled during CP5.

We have contributed to the Network RUS – Alternative Solutions, concerning service improvements on the Ellesmere Port to Helsby Line, as described later, (page 4), in this Newsletter.

We will keep readers informed as and when any developments take place. In the meantime your continued support is both welcome and necessary in their advancement.

CWG

HELSEBY STATION

We would like to start by welcoming Jane Beech to the Helsby station working party. Over the past 9 months we have had three new volunteers, all Helsby residents, which is excellent news. New gardening volunteers are always welcome at our regular Friday morning working party sessions.

The gardens are looking good at the moment with the daffodils in full bloom. The circular bed on Platform 2 has been sown with new grass surrounding a bed of daffodils in the middle and the garden at the Frodsham end of Platform 1 has also been tidied up.

Now that we have 8 volunteers working on the station we are able to make further improvements to the gardens. At present we are clearing weeds on the beds on Platform 2 to create a more formal flowerbed.

On Friday 23rd March we had a 'Royal event' when the Royal Train came through conveying the Queen and Prince Philip from Hooton to Manchester in connection with the Diamond Jubilee celebrations. The train was hauled, appropriately, by a silver 67026 'Diamond Jubilee' loco with 67006 'Royal Sovereign' on the tail. On arrival in Manchester 67026 was officially named 'Diamond Jubilee' by Her Majesty.

WE

CUBS VISIT HELSEBY STATION

One of our volunteers has made the following observation which, hopefully, augers well for future patronage at Helsby:- "Last week I was working on the gardens at Helsby when about 6.45 p.m. a complete cub pack with numerous leaders came, very excitedly, onto Platform 1 where they stayed to experience the arrival and departure of the train to Chester. Clearly this was a new adventure for many of the boys and also good instruction for the whole pack in the opportunity of train travel and the safety aspects. I was delighted to see the leaders introducing the new generation to the delights of the station".

RH

NETWORK ROUTE UTILISATION STRATEGY, (RUS) – ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

NCRUG sent a representative to Leeds to attend a Network Rail/ACoRP Briefing on the above RUS. As a result we have made a submission to Network Rail with regard to this RUS and have based our arguments on the advantages of having a regular service on the Ellesmere Port to Helsby line, (EP/H line).

The briefing requested submissions to be focused on the following: -

- 1) Tram or tram/train technologies. We referred to our various meetings with Parry Associates regarding their Parry People Mover vehicle which operates, within the London Midland franchise, between Stourbridge Junction and Stourbridge Town. There is no reason why this technology could not be used to provide a shuttle service on the EP/H line. Capital costs would be approximately half those applicable to heavy rail, (for 2 units), with about £100k required for a Maintenance/Stabling Depot. Running costs again are about half those for heavy rail and could make use of locally available and environmentally friendly LP Gas as fuel for the vehicles from the nearby Stanlow Oil Refinery. We accepted that Network Rail have reservations about mixing heavy and light rail on the same line but pointed out that such operations have been successfully running in Karlsruhe and Kassel, in Germany, for many years. Will Network Rail rise to this challenge? We must wait and see.
- 2) Replacing diesel with electrically powered vehicles. We suggested extending the Merseyrail third rail system to Helsby which, in terms of capital costs, would probably require an electrical sub-station but little else as, we understand, second-hand third rail equipment is available locally.
- 3) Adding value to railway opportunities. The attendees at the briefing spent most time on this topic, in particular, the vexed question of revenue protection. The point was made time and again that not only does the railway badly need this revenue for funding infrastructure and

service enhancements but its absence distorts business case studies where decisions are made purely on Lennon statistics, ie fare paying passengers. Various remedies were discussed and will be submitted by the attendees to the RUS.

This is only a brief summary of our submission which also referred to the severe parking issues at Helsby, and shortly at Frodsham stations. We suggested a regular service on the EP/H line would be an environmentally friendly way to overcome this issue whilst opening up a dormant market which we believe exists both for residents, in Ellesmere Port, Ince, Elton and Helsby, and employees at the various factories along the line.

A draft RUS for consultation will be presented by Network Rail, later this year, which will be followed by a final document at some future date.

CWG

ST PANCRAS INTERNATIONAL

During a recent visit to the capital I had the opportunity to see, first hand, the changes made to this iconic Midland Main Line London Terminal and its adaptation to accommodate Eurostar services to Paris and Brussels and Javelin high-speed services to Kent.

It was impressive to see the famous Barlow shed resplendent in the evening sunshine with pristine platforms, buffer stops, customer information screens and ticket barriers beneath. Quality materials and workmanship give a lasting good first impression of the station, city and country to those arriving from the Continent. Similarly, those arriving at the station to make onward journeys to the Continent cannot help but be impressed.

The Undercroft forms a retail area, with many up-market shops, cafes and restaurants to cater for a wide range of tastes. The Undercroft also houses the Eurostar Check-in desks. Hopefully, this area does not impose the same time-consuming restraints and inconvenience which apply at our Airports. One day I hope to return to test this operation!

The St Pancras 'Renaissance' Hotel is now finished and offers first class accommodation. They could not give me a tariff stating that prices varied considerably depending upon dates, demand etc. They suggested visiting their website for best offers. Under pressure they intimated a guide price for the cheapest room as £190/£210 per room per night, room only.

The former Ticket Office links the Hotel to the Undercroft and provides refreshment facilities within the building and also extending onto the Undercroft for those wishing to keep an eye on departure screens etc.

Escalators, lifts and stairs link the Undercroft to the platforms and more retail outlets above. I was glad to see due homage paid to John Betjeman in the form of a statue at Platform level. He was, of course, a prime mover in preventing the original station being completely demolished. I'm not so sure about the gigantic statue of a couple saying farewell in the trainshed and near the exit!

Finally, there is the longest Champagne Bar in the country located at Platform level which, at the time of my visit, was offering 'Asparagus and champagne cocktail' as a speciality.

Altogether an impressive experience showing what this country can do when it really sets its mind to it. An excellent start - now let's move onto building all stages of HS2 without further delay.

CWG

CORWEN EXTENSION PROJECT REVIEW

Llangollen Railway Trust is encouraged by the positive reaction from the several thousand visitors who sampled the first stage of the extension to Plas Bonwm during the recent mega steam gala Steam, Steel and Stars 3.

The official opening was conducted on 20 April when invited VIPs and volunteers saw music mogul and rail fan Pete Waterman cut the tape at Carrog and the first public train headed west hauled by the new build steam locomotive No.60163 *Tornado* with No.7822 *Foxcote Manor* on the rear. This was the first steam hauled passenger train west of Carrog since the line was closed in December 1964 and a notable occasion which received great applause.

Subsequent access to sample the extension was provided with shuttle workings by the GWR Auto train during the period of the gala, 21 -29 April, and additional trains ran topped and tailed by the visiting stars of the event, albeit at a sedate 10 mph. These trains allowed visitors to see most of the new track to a stop position just short of the Plas Bonwm farm crossing and offered the prospect of further rail travel in the near future.

The achievement in laying 1500 m of track between January & April to open it in time for the gala gained praise from those who visited the railway. Many viewed the Corwen Project's exhibition at Glyndyfrwdy for further details of future plans and made donations towards the cost of concluding the extension work or took away the Corwen Appeal leaflet which allows for gift aid donations to be made.

It is likely that further opportunities for visitors to sample the track extension will be offered when shuttle trains are operated west of Carrog on special occasions during the summer and autumn of 2012. A first opportunity will be during the forthcoming Heritage Railcar Weekend, 23/24 June, when diesel multiple units will allow passengers to have the 'all round' view of the new line in its riverside setting.

FutureProgress

For the immediate future Llangollen Railway Trust now plans to continue to extend track beyond Plas Bonwm using materials already to hand to reach the site of the A5 road access point. This work will conclude the first stage of the current project.

Funding is available to allow for contractors to repair over bridge No.28 now that a bat licence is due to be issued for this work to commence. A contractor will also be employed to recover the trackbed west of Bonwm and this work will proceed during the spring and summer of 2012. However the work needed in the second stage to take track forward and the erection of the temporary platform at Corwen will require the purchase of additional materials and the employment of contractors to conclude aspects of Phase 1 of the project. These planned activities will proceed as and when finance is available to fund the additional costs which have to be met from the match funding that Llangollen Railway Trust needs to raise. The grant aid provided by the Welsh Assembly Government was allocated to materials purchased in the period ended 31st March 2012.

The question of riverbank erosion has been investigated and is the subject of an initial report by consultants, but further work is needed to identify a solution to this potential problem and the cost thereof.

Looking further ahead, work is underway in conjunction with Denbighshire County Council on the scope and funding of the Phase 2 terminal station which will require major civil engineering to develop the site adjacent to the town's car park.

Llangollen Railway Trust is exploring means by which the financial challenge of completing Phase 2 of the project can be met. In the meantime, further support by way of donations is required towards achieving the 2013 target for train services to operate to the Corwen temporary platform.

Llangollen Railway Trust Chairman, Jim Ritchie, said, " The superb quality of the new track as laid by our volunteer work force and staff, aided by the tamper contractor, was acknowledged during operations over the extension. We are all delighted with the interest taken by those who sampled the new track and look

forward to offering the opportunity to others in due course. The positive response from visitors is essential in promoting interest in the project and encouraging further financial support to allow the work to continue.”

Buy a Ticket to Help Fund the Extension

One novel fund raising scheme which has been initiated is through the purchase of limited editions of the traditional type of Edmondson card tickets, specially printed denoting a journey from Llangollen to Plas Bonwm, whereby a donation helps fund aspects of the extension work.

For £5 a buff ticket will be issued in respect of drainage work, £10 a red ticket for platform work, £15 a blue ticket for a sleeper and for £20 a vellum ticket for ballast. These are already proving popular with visitors and a full set is available for £50 from the Llangollen Railway Trust at sales outlets at the Railway, or by post enclosing a stamped and addressed envelope with remittance to:-
Llangollen Station, LL20 8SN.

George Jones
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FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF CHINA

It is probably not fair to form impressions about a country after a two week visit and then only visiting two cities, Beijing and Xi'an. One must also bear in mind not only the size of China but also that the population is approximately a quarter of the world population.

We formed two over-riding impressions, firstly the friendliness of most people, and secondly the cheapness of travel. If only we could copy the latter.

Beijing has an extensive subway system which throughout the city areas is quite deep and not built on the "cut and cover" system. Apparently the 2008 Olympic Games accelerated the growth of the system and it is still growing with about 14 lines, all referred to by numbers. On entering each station, prior to going through the ticket barriers, all baggage, including handbags, haversacks etc. must pass through an x-ray machine.

Then comes the good bit. All tickets, whatever the distance, cost the equivalent of 20p. Compare that with a Zone 1 London tube ticket!

Getting around the system was easy because above each set of doors was a line map of all the stations which was illuminated, and a flashing light marked the next station. The announcements were in Mandarin and English, and before each station we were invited to "Prepare ourselves for the arrival". Which probably meant "Start fighting your way to the door".

Needless to say, the system is always crowded and invariably we had to stand. There was one exception to that, when an elderly Chinese man, complete with wispy beard and wearing a peasant-type tunic, cleared two seats for us by hitting two teenagers on the shoulder and telling them to stand up, which they did with a good grace. When we reached our stop we parted with a very friendly handshake and a smile.

Another example of very reasonable travel was the overnight sleeper we took to Xi'an, to see the Terra Cotta Warriors. This was an experience not to be missed, both for the Warriors and the train journey. The distance between the two cities is 600 miles and the cost of a first class sleeper was the equivalent of £42. The compartments were all four berth, very clean and comfortable. Toilet facilities were good; each coach had a European-type toilet at one end, and an Asian-type at the other. Adjoining these at each end of the coach was a small bathroom with three washbasins in line abreast.

As it was dark when we departed Beijing there was nothing to see after we cleared the suburbs but after about 5.30 am it was light and the view was always interesting and very rural.

The journey took twelve hours, which meant an average speed of 50 mph. There were no intermediate stops. It was interesting to note that at each end of the coach the speed was displayed. Rather a nice feature. Why should the driver be the only person to know how fast one is travelling?

Our return from Xi'an to Beijing was by a Chinese domestic flight, and it must be said that it was a new aircraft with better seat spacing than the long-haul flight had been. The cabin crew were smart and attentive and all announcements were in Mandarin and English.

All in all it was a very successful trip and it would be a pleasure to do again – it only it weren't so far away.

Bob Withy

Editor's Note

It was intended to complete this Newsletter in time for publication in May. However, my computer suffered a catastrophic collapse during the heatwave and a replacement had to be arranged and all the usual difficulties associated with switching data from old to new was encountered. So apologies for the Spring edition appearing in Summer but we hope readers will find the contents interesting and worth the wait.

CWG

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

Visit our website: NCRUG@ORG.UK to leave your comments, favourable or otherwise!

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