

# North Cheshire Rail Users' Group



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

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Newsletter August 2012



## **FROM THE CHAIR**

North Cheshire Rail Users' Group were hosts to two very successful events on Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> June and I would like to thank all my colleagues on the committee who helped in the run up to the events and on the day.

For the third year running, Northern Rail agreed to extend the parliamentary service over the Halton Curve with additional stops at Helsby and Frodsham. Approximately, 95 people made the journey, a considerable increase on the two previous years when the passenger count was about 70 on both occasions.

On our return by vintage bus or minibus to Frodsham, NCRUG members, rail supporters and people from the local community came together for our second event of the day; a chance to look round the restored Station House at the station. We are indebted to Network Rail who agreed to allow the visit to take place and in particular to site manager, John Hipwell (Spence Refit Ltd.) who worked extremely hard to make sure the house was cleared and made safe for the public. Network Rail's surveyors, Chris Dawson and Jamal Parara, together with John Hipwell gave up their own time to show people round and explain how the work had been carried out. Working with them has been a most rewarding experience and consequently, it has been a pleasure to write letters of appreciation on behalf of NCRUG.

Having the two special occasions on one day did involve a lot of organizing and liaison but, judging by the number of people who took part in one, or both events, it was worth it.

The following day crowds gathered on the platforms at Frodsham to watch a steam hauled special stopping at Frodsham to take on water. The weather was perfect, resulting in some stunning photographs of the 'Union of South Africa' in front of the wonderfully restored station house lit up in the bright sunshine. What a weekend!

The focus is now on the buildings at Helsby Station where preliminary work has recently started. At the present time the scope of the work is uncertain but we look forward to keeping our readers informed in our next newsletter. This will be made easier now that we have established an excellent relationship with Network Rail.

Many thanks to everyone who supported these events – dreams sometimes come true!

**Janet Briggs**

## **WEST COAST MAIN LINE FRANCHISE**

It has come as a surprise to many that the new franchise, starting in December 2012, has been

awarded to First Group after 15 years of being run by Virgin Trains. When the bidding process was in progress First Group invited NCRUG to attend a Presentation followed by a question & answer session in Liverpool in November 2011. At this meeting, together with other stakeholders, we were able to discuss with First's Commercial Director and Bid Director a number of issues which had arisen during Virgin's watch. We summarize the points raised from the floor at that meeting:-

- 1) Improvements in passenger handling needed at Euston. Not sufficient time from platform announcement to departure. Cross flows if several trains departing within a few minutes of each other and with passengers arriving.
- 2) Revenue protection at Warrington Bank Quay. WCML franchise provides the only commuting service between Crewe, Warrington, Wigan and Preston. Virgin has benefited at Chester from ATW, Northern and Merseyrail installation of barriers but have not been prepared to reciprocate at WBQ even though they will be losing revenue on above local journeys.
- 3) Parking charges at Runcorn are higher than the fares for local journeys which is a barrier and leads to modal switch to road. First Group will examine a smartcard system which they hope will solve this problem.
- 4) Noted that the WCML RUS recommended some infill electrification which included Crewe to Chester. If granted the franchise First Group would push for electrification of Crewe/Chester although probably not through to Holyhead.
- 5) Pendolinos – refurbishment will become necessary during life of new franchise. Re-arrange seating to align with windows. Improve luggage space and try not to give luggage racks the best window views. Deal with alarm system in toilets to reduce the number of times it is inadvertently used causing frequent disturbance to passengers. Clear toilets at terminals to prevent malfunction during journeys. Apparently trains to/from Manchester/Euston do not suffer this problem.
- 6) Proposed 4 tph from Manchester will have a further serious effect upon local services where services have already been withdrawn to accommodate the long distance timetable. Suggested the additional train should serve Liverpool rather than Manchester. The switch of air passengers to rail has already been won.

First Group made the point that their current mix of franchises gives them experience in the different requirements of passengers, namely, local commuters and regional and long distance journeys. Virgin does not have this experience. We must also state that we were not invited to a similar bid presentation by Virgin although, no doubt, they did engage with the major stakeholders. Credit to First Group for coming right down to grassroots level – long may such policy continue.

So we wish the new franchisees every success in building on the improvements made by their predecessors and that passengers, both long distance and commuters, will benefit from a fresh approach to the running of the West Coast franchise. The extra new destinations will be welcomed in Shrewsbury, Telford, Bolton and Blackpool and will be a particular benefit for the latter where a renaissance in the local economy is under way.

Whether the financial aspects of the new deal stack up, only time will tell. The fear is that the huge premiums due during the life of the franchise will lead to fare rises and/or staff losses or pulling out of the contract early. Any of these would be a disaster and we hope First have done their sums properly and that all they have promised will be fulfilled.

We will be pleased to see if any revenue protection measures are taken at Warrington Bank Quay as this has been a long-standing issue affecting the north Cheshire line through Warrington Bank Quay where we know many journeys are made without payment. Not only is the much needed revenue lost but also ridership statistics do not reflect the actual number of passengers using the service which, in turn, can adversely affect decision making for service improvements.

**CWG**



Frodsham Station 22-07-2012

Photograph: Ian Whitley

### **IS THIS THE 1930's AT FRODSHAM STATION ?**

Well actually - no' ! As the date under the above photo shows it was taken on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2012 on one of this summer's few glorious sunny days by NCRUG committee member Ian Whitley. The newly refurbished station buildings lovingly brought back to pristine condition as they would have been back in the late 1930's, except for the missing canopy and the more recent metal waiting shelters, looks magnificent and becomes a great asset to the town instead of the liability it had become. To add to the romance of this scene the throngs of local people are enjoying the rare sight of the famous A3 steam locomotive 'Union of South Africa' hauling an excursion to the Welsh Coast. Whilst steam excursions through the station are not too unusual, the visit of one of Sir Nigel Gresley's magnificent A3 locomotives, is.

**CWG**

### **FRODSHAM STATION**

The station house at Frodsham, abandoned and boarded up for twenty years has finally come to life again. After nearly six months of feverish work starting in January, the scaffolding and hoardings began to come down in the early summer, revealing a building restored to its Victorian splendor with clean brickwork and stonework, new replica windows and doors etc. It's been wonderful to watch the transformation which the whole community has welcomed.

The attention to detail and use of traditional materials both inside and out is phenomenal and the masonry seems to glow when the sun shines on it. Network Rail involved NCRUG right from the first week and it has been a wonderful experience to understand and share the passion of those involved in the restoration.

You may recall that, two years ago, three students from Helsby High School spent six months restoring the garden on the north side of the building to meet the voluntary criteria of their Duke of Edinburgh bronze award. The project was a great success and the garden was admired and respected. When building work started, it was agreed that we could move the plants to a holding area on the other side of the station for the duration of the operation. Network Rail took on board our suggestion that Victorian style rope edgings could be used around the beds would be more in keeping with the building than timber surround. The effect is excellent, the edgings not only complement the elegant north façade of the house; they should also deter drivers from parking their cars on the gardens.

Our co-operation with Network Rail has also resulted in a further project to enhance the station in that they are now seriously examining the possibility of repairing and restoring the cast iron fencing on both platforms.

Towards the end of June, we received geraniums from Cheshire West and Chester Council which were planted mainly in the beds on the platforms. A few boxes were saved for the beds in front of the house and we are grateful to our colleagues at Helsby who gave us some of their allocation resulting in a colourful display for visitors to admire on our open day on 21<sup>st</sup> July. All the plants that were moved in January will be re-planted by the autumn.

**JB**

## **HELSEBY STATION**

Over the past few months, up to the end of July, the station gardens have not been looking as good as usual due to the poor weather. Several Friday gardening sessions had to be cancelled as a result.

Now that the weather has improved we have concentrated on bringing the gardens on platforms 2 & 3 up to a reasonable standard. Following this work we have moved to the gardens on platforms 1 & 4 as they had become overgrown.

We have received our yearly supply of geraniums from Cheshire West & Chester Council which have been planted on platform 2.

Network Rail has started restoring the station buildings on platform 1 which had become very run down. Consequently the station is a building site at the moment with scaffolding and boards erected to protect and separate the building from passengers using the platform. Hopefully the buildings will be in pristine condition when finished and on a par with Frodsham station.

Unfortunately, the building work is attracting local vandals who are using it as a playground. Our hanging baskets have been damaged and the Police have been informed of the situation. The Police have promised to make regular visits to the station as a deterrent. Should any readers notice any anti-social behaviour taking place at the station we should be glad if they would note the date and time to us, (see committee phone/email details at the foot of this Newsletter), as we are keeping a log which we will report to Police. **WE/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).

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