

North Cheshire Rail Users' Group



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

Newsletter - November 2012



FROM THE CHAIR

As we come to the end of 2012, I think that we can all agree that this has been a vintage year for NCRUG in many respects; particularly with our local stations in north Cheshire. After nine months of work at Frodsham, phase one of the restoration on the grade 2 listed house has been completed and more work is anticipated once a tenant is found. Work is also now underway on the house at Helsby which is also a listed building.

Customer information screens have now been installed at our three local stations and, although the system is not yet perfect, Arriva Trains Wales have continued to make improvements throughout the year. The installations now give audio announcements and display expected time rather than indicating that all trains are always *on time*.

In the last few months, we have had an on-going dialogue with the Customer Services Director at Arriva Trains Wales regarding the first service to Chester on Sundays, which always runs as a bus. ATW have now agreed to discuss this in their timetabling group meeting to see whether it is possible to run this service as a train. At least, the service is now acknowledged and appears on the CIS screens so intending passengers are not standing on stations waiting for a train that never arrives!

We will continue to negotiate with ATW regarding the inadequate shelters at stations, particularly at Frodsham where there is no undercover seating on platform 2.

So much has happened this year that our publicity leaflet and power point presentation are in need of a radical update. However, we must not be complacent and we constantly need to look at new approaches to longstanding issues such as the Halton Curve and the Helsby to Ellesmere Port campaigns. At present, much of our work is done by a very small number of people and consequently, we urgently need a wider participation among members who are prepared to be pro-active and drive forward new ideas. We are also particularly keen to recruit people who travel regularly on peak time services.

From now on, we will be holding our committee meetings in the small committee room at Frodsham Community Centre, Fluin Lane, Frodsham. A list of dates is included elsewhere in this newsletter.

With best wishes for Christmas and the New Year.

Janet Briggs

FRODSHAM STATION

Phase 1 of the restoration of the old station master's house at Frodsham was finally completed in September when the contractor moved off site. However, this was not quite the end; just as the last of the temporary cabins was being taken away, a fencing firm from Widnes appeared on the scene to

renovate and restore the traditional railings which form part of the curtilage of the building.

The building surveyors had previously examined the fence and agreed with NCRUG that it was worth investing in the work to complement the renovation of the building. NCRUG undertook the job of cutting back vegetation that had grown up against the fence to allow the specialist firm to have free access to the railings.

Many of the panels were badly corroded, particularly at the ends, possibly due to the fact the profile of the uprights at the end of each section were found to be slightly concave, giving an easy ingress for water. Many of the end pieces have therefore been cut off and the sections have been re-joined to new upright posts. The whole fence has been cleaned and repainted and should have a new lease of life for many years thanks to Network Rail.

Since the work was completed, we have tidied up the beds and planted winter pansies supplied by Cheshire West and Chester Council. All the plants that had to be removed from the garden on the north side of the house for the duration of the building work have now been re-planted.

JB

CHRISTMAS READING

If anyone wants to know what you would like for Christmas, ask for a copy of '*Mr Briggs' hat*' by Kate Colquhoun which is the strange tale of Britain's first railway murder. The victim, businessman Thomas Briggs was travelling home on a late evening train in July 1864. Minutes later, when two bank clerks entered the carriage, they noticed blood on the upholstery, floor and windows. However, there was no sign of Mr Briggs, the only things found in the carriage were his walking stick, his bag and a hat, that strangely, did not belong to the victim.

This book is a compelling fictional account of the crime but is very much based on fact and presents a fascinating portrait of Victorian London in the early days of the railway. If you are interested in the early history of the railways, Victorian life in a big city or criminal investigation in the 19th century, this is the book for you.

The book was recommended by our daughter, Helen, who spotted it in a London station bookshop when it was launched as a paperback earlier this year. As far as we know, Philip is not related to the ill-fated Thomas Briggs but as Helen said, the 1852 photograph of Thomas shown in the book does, "look a bit like Dad" I have to agree that there are some similarities!

JANET BRIGGS

Ref: Colquhoun, Kate, '*Mr Briggs' Hat*' published 2012 by Abacus in paperback @ £8.99.

CORRECTION TO OUR AUGUST NEWSLETTER

This is the sort of situation where the editor could suggest a deliberate mistake was made, or a typing error, or just a way of getting an immediate response from readers.

Unfortunately, it is none of these excuses. I refer, of course, to incorrectly stating, in our August Newsletter, that steam locomotive 'Union of South Africa' is a Class A3. I was very quickly rebuked/informed that the only remaining A3 is the 'Flying Scotsman' and that 'Sir Nigel Gresley', 'Dwight D Eisenhower', 'Union of South Africa', 'Dominion of Canada', 'Bittern' and 'Mallard', are all Class A4 locomotives.

So profuse apologies from the editor for getting this wrong. The mistake did, however, bring to light the fact that all six preserved A4 locos will be assembled together at the National Rail Museum, York, in 2013, following the return of 'Dwight D Eisenhower' from Wisconsin and 'Dominion of Canada' from Toronto; see following item for more details of this exciting event.

Here are the details as supplied by our member, Will Ellams.

"For your information, there is only one A3 preserved and that is 60103 Flying Scotsman which is at

present undergoing a major overhaul at the National Railway Museum at York.

There are six A4's preserved. They are: -

*60007 Sir Nigel Gresley
60008 Dwight D Eisenhower
60009 Union of South Africa
60010 Dominion of Canada
60019 Bittern
60022 Mallard*

Of these, 60007, 9 & 19 are operational. 60022 is at the National Railway Museum. 60008 is normally at the Green Bay National Railroad Museum, Wisconsin, USA. and 60010 is normally at the Canadian Railroad Museum, Montreal, Canada.

The expatriates 60008 and 60010 have been shipped back to England. They arrived in Liverpool from Halifax, Nova Scotia, in October 2012 for 4 year stay. They have been transported to the NRM and Shildon so they can be made ready for a lineup of all six A4's sometime next year to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Mallard's record breaking 126 mph.

We are lucky we still have an A3, even though it is costing a fortune to fix it. The head of the NRM has fallen on his sword following cost over runs on Flying Scotsman. It was built as an A1, turned into an A3, (higher pressure boiler, long travel valves, increased superheat) but carried an A4 boiler latterly (even higher pressure and heavier)! An A4 boiler had a higher operating pressure but is a heavier load for the chassis."

Thanks for that, Will.

WE/CWG

PHIL EDWARDS

We have tributes from two past Chairmen of NCRUG following the sad passing of Phil on 8th November.

Phil Edwards aka "Grandpa", a resident of Frodsham and formerly from the West Country, was a founder member of NCRUG.

Phil was a stalwart Class 37 "Basher" and spent many happy hours chasing Class 37's around the country since his retirement and especially on the North Wales Coast. He was well respected by his fellow enthusiasts and was a fount of knowledge on railway matters. He accumulated an amazing mileage behind various Class 37 locomotives often into the thousands of miles on individual locomotives but especially 37/4's.

Phil was known amongst the "Gricing" fraternity as "Grandpa" and his fame was sealed in a television programme in which he featured as he chased his favorite Class 37 diesel locomotives about the land.

To the NCRUG Phil was a stalwart committee member, Treasurer and expert timetable decipher. He was a founder Member and has served NCRUG for over twenty years.

He had been unwell for around a year and was latterly in a care home in Frodsham after a period in hospital.

His Funeral was held on November the 20th at St Lawrence Parish Church in Frodsham.

We offer our sincere condolences to the family on his sad passing. **John Hobbs**

...and from our first Chairman, Rosemary Heeley:-

I first met Philip shortly after he moved to Frodsham; he found a house situated between the station and the church, which both played a prominent role in his life. There was enough room for the family activities and for his collection of railway books, magazines and name plates.

As Chairman of the Frodsham Society, I responded to Cheshire's Structure Plan consultation and argued that the Halton curve should be kept in use to allow heavy freight to be moved easily and to allow passengers easy access to Liverpool City centre, the Airport and London, via Runcorn.

Local RUG's suggested that a new RUG be set up for the lines to Liverpool and Manchester from North Cheshire. It was to Phil who I turned for advice. He attended my 'round the dining table' meeting to discuss the way forward. Three weeks later a Public Meeting was held, out of which came the Inaugural Meeting of the North Cheshire RUG.

We owe a lot to his quiet working; Phil knew who to contact etc. I respected his considered views. He was a gentle man.

Incidentally, rail enthusiasts came to his funeral from all over the country, Edinburgh to Gloucester.

Rest in Peace, Phil.

A UNIQUE SERVICE?

I travelled on the afternoon Helsby to Ellesmere Port service on Thursday November 15th as a friend from Billericay wished to sample the service. He arrived at Warrington Bank Quay, from London Euston and we witnessed the Empty Coaching Stock (ECS) move from Wigan, which provides the stock for the afternoon service, tear through Warrington at about 14.00. I thought this went straight on the branch but it actually it went to Chester. Here one unit was exchanged for another one so the first unit was a 150 and the second a 156. This runs up to Helsby empty behind the 14.52 departure from Chester.

At Helsby, this unit 156.472 received a caution signal on approach and then the starting signal was pulled off. The train was then allowed behind the shunting signals beyond the junction; these cleared (they are known as dollies), it then set back into the far platform 4. Such a move was once common at country station junctions but is virtually unheard of today.

The Customer Information System (CIS) correctly identified the service as the 15.17 to Ellesmere Port. It is interesting to reflect that there were four (4) passengers! We ran from platform four through the facing crossover, the signal at the platform giving authority for the movement. We called at Ince & Elton and at Stanlow & Thornton although no more passengers availed themselves of the service.

At Ellesmere Port the connecting Merseyrail 508, 508.110 was in the platform at the north side waiting to form the 15.42 to Liverpool. As at Helsby the train runs through a facing cross over to gain the running line and is again signaled from the starting signal at the platform end. I cannot think of another line where up & down journeys commence with a fixed signal on to a facing cross over with mechanical signals at each end of the journey! In fact the whole journey is controlled by mechanical signals!

The return journey was the 15.34 to Helsby with just the two of us this time and no passengers all the way back to Helsby. Here the unit reverses and forms the 15.48 to Ellesmere Port, once again the CIS gave the correct information. This time there was one passenger!

The Fiddlers Ferry to Ellesmere Port freight was held at the signals waiting for the Warrington and Ellesmere Port services to clear; this had a new Class 70 diesel in charge. We caught the 15.55 to Warrington and my friend went back to Euston.

Mechanical signaling is turning into an anachronism in the 21st Century, safe as it is. The systems have been in use with little change except to the shape of the signal arms and the materials used from wood to metal, for around 150 years. How many 150 year old traffic lights have you seen at road junctions! Now Network Rail are working to have all the signaling systems controlled from a few central locations within the foreseeable future. Enjoy mechanical signaling while you can. The Helsby Ellesmere Port line is a classic example of it. **JH**

ENGLAND DOES NOT NEED HS2 HIGH SPEED RAIL LINK

Earlier this year NCRUG were asked by Chester Debating Society if they would like to send a representative to oppose the above motion which was to be debated on November 6th. We duly accepted and Cedric Green attended on behalf of NCRUG.

The debate was a joint meeting with Prenton Debating Society and was attended by almost 40 people. We, (NCRUG), understand this is a good turnout. Speeches made from the floor indicated that travel by rail is a subject which is of great interest to local people. Inevitably, therefore, other rail issues cropped up such as the fragmentation arising from privatization, the franchising fiasco, the lack of a transport strategy and, somewhat off message, moving the Capital to middle England, (Coventry was suggested), to obviate the need for HS2. One gentleman asked why a Maglev system was not being considered to which we were able to reply that Gordon Brown had been to Beijing to experience this technology in use between the city and its airport; but like many innovative ideas, it has not been taken any further, possibly because energy costs are extremely high. It would also not fit well with the existing European high speed rail network with which we need seamless connectivity.

Getting back to the evening's main subject, NCRUG first made the important point that HS2, despite its name, is primarily about capacity constraints on the existing 'Classic' network, with reduced journey times as a bonus but not the main purpose. This surprised the majority of attendees and, we surmise, took the wind out of the sails of a number of intending debaters. This point highlights the need for proponents of HS2 to emphasize the capacity issue more than that of reduced journey times.

Comments from the floor highlighted fears about budget and timescale over-runs. There were some doubts expressed about the overall stated costs and on whom these costs would fall. It was suggested that fares on HS2 would be so high as to limit the market towards the better off and that patronage would, therefore, not be sufficient to meet costs and that a good proportion would have to be met by the taxpayer. To counter this it was pointed out that Chiltern's infrastructure improvements had not called for any taxpayer investment nor resulted in increased fares. It had been achieved through private investment and a 20 year franchise.

It was interesting that one contributor thought the timescales currently quoted were far too long and that they could easily be shortened. NCRUG agreed with this speaker and also pointed out that several recent rail infrastructure schemes had been completed on budget and on time and that the industry had, in recent years, got to grips with these issues and had performed extremely well. We also pointed out that the London Olympics had been completed within a seven year timescale from start to finish. Britain can do it if it wants to with or without some external pressure from the International Olympic Committee.

Another debater thought the battle to reduce domestic air travel had already been won and referred to the Manchester/London route. In this regard had the title of the debate been 'Great Britain does not need HS2....' then the domestic flight issues would have included Edinburgh/Glasgow and even Aberdeen to London flights the upshot of which is to considerably strengthen the case for HS2.

The NCRUG representative has been concerned, for many years about the lack of any Government transport strategy. It was encouraging, therefore, to hear from a debater that he considered this to be a serious omission which needed to be addressed with some urgency. Three cheers for that although this subject needs to be on the Secretary of State's agenda before it can advance any further. Here's hoping!

Several agreed that a new line would enable more freight to be carried on the railways and that this would be advantageous to the environment. Environmental issues did not, surprisingly, feature prominently in the debate.

It was a most enjoyable evening and also one which illuminated the general public's concerns about the railway and its workings although all matters which came out are already well known within the industry.

Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, the motion was lost by 17 to 7 with 9 abstentions. However, should there be a follow up debate in the future we are confident of a better outcome having 'cut our

teeth' on this one.

CWG

CORWEN PROJECT EXTENSION PROGRESS UPDATE

Revised railway station scheme for Phase 1 of Project becomes Corwen East.

In September the Board of Llangollen Railway Trust announced it had reluctantly concluded that, due to the present economic climate, it will not be possible to fund the proposed Phase 2 terminal station at Corwen in the foreseeable future without substantial grant aid.

However, the Board believes it is essential to run steam train services to Corwen as soon as possible and to achieve this aim a modified Phase 1 scheme will provide for the early completion of a 'Corwen East' station.

To allow steam trains to operate to Corwen on a regular basis a run-round loop will be installed some 170 metres east of the platform on land which is available within the boundaries of the line.

The five coach train platform for Corwen East station will be constructed near to the end of the existing embankment.

This new location for the platform end ramp will provide for a graded access on to the entrance track for Welsh Water's Corwen Sewerage works. Some form of portable building will be provided in this area as a temporary shelter for passengers and to offer basic facilities for railway staff.

Track laying - Whilst there has been a lull in the track laying since the big effort to get the extension ready for the SSS3 gala in April, efforts have continued throughout the summer to prepare the next section for track. After stripping of the surface vegetation, the centre line for the track has been undertaken by contractors using GPS positioning. Continued attention has been given to the lineside vegetation clearance and fencing, as well as culvert clearance and embankment access at the Corwen end.

The provision of an Otter Licence has allowed for the installation of an otter fence alongside the environmentally sensitive River Dee section. Meanwhile the stockpiling of material has progressed using the gated access point from the A5 at the Bonwm Halt site. An alternative source for ballast at an economical price has been sourced and additional supplies can be expected shortly.

It should be noted that there is no intention to reinstall a halt platform at the old site which would no longer meet modern requirements or be safe in terms of its access to the A5 road. However it is the intention to position a board here to advise this was once the site of Bonwm Halt as provided by the GWR.

Work on extending the track west of the current rail head at Plas Bonwm farm was due to restart in the autumn, once delivery of ballast supplies is completed. This will see the stop block moved forward to the area adjacent to the A5 road. Beyond there work will proceed on the laying of the base ballast and the distribution of concrete sleepers towards Corwen. The demand for volunteer resources to tackle work on the operational line now means it is unlikely that further track is laid until the winter of 2012-13.

However, the over bridge No.28a near Plas Derwen, a farmer's occupation access, requires major repairs and in consultation with a contractor the way forward is now seen as the water proofing and concreting of the cap which work is imminent. This will allow the bridge to dry out before repairs to the arch and the abutments are made in the spring.

During the summer months, on various special event days, a shuttle service of trains ran west of Carrog to show visitors the extent of the current extension and to maintain interest in the project. These occasions saw both the Class 109 Wickham DMU operate and the single coach auto train with pannier tank 6430. An unusual opportunity to provide viewing of the work was provided during the Classic Transport event at the end of August, when an open top bus, amongst others, gave the high level view of the length of the extension from the A5 road through to Corwen. The first passenger train

to be diesel hauled west of Carrog occurred during the autumn gala event on 22 September when a class 31 locomotive ventured onto the extension.

Funding - All this work will proceed subject to the availability of finance and Llangollen Railway Trust continues to work hard to raise the match funding for the grant aid of £500,000 provided by the Welsh Assembly Government which kick started the project. To date the Trust has received over £110,000 from donations from supporters and well-wishers, including gift aid claimed. In a review of progress to elected representatives at Corwen the current estimate of the costs indicated a requirement of £169,000 to complete phase 1 of the project.

It is worth considering that the cost of a sleeper with rail section and associated fittings can be estimated at £25, and a further 3000 or so are needed to complete the section towards Corwen, plus ballast and other civil engineering work.

The acquisition of funds remains a challenge for the Trust and an appeal for sponsorship from local businesses has been launched, but further support from well-wishers is needed if the project is to be successfully completed to allow trains to run in 2014.

George Jones, Press Officer Llangollen Railway Trust

ANNIVERSARIES IN 2013

The line from Hooton to Helsby, which is unique in being entirely straight, was opened in 1863. Helsby station, originally opened in 1852, was rebuilt in 1863 to accommodate the new line from Hooton. We are working with Cheshire West & Chester Council, (CWAC), and Wirral Transport Users' Association to celebrate the 150 year anniversary of the line from Hooton to Helsby. CWAC are in touch with Northern Rail to investigate the possibility of a special trip on the line to celebrate its opening 150 years ago. If there is a positive response from Northern Rail then it will give us a rare opportunity to publicize the line and its advantage as a link to south Merseyside, for the Airport, and other destinations on the national network. We hope to be able to advise full details in our next Newsletter.

SB/CWG

MEETING DATES

Committee meetings will be held at Frodsham Community Centre at 7.30 pm. Normally, we meet on the third Tuesday in the month but there are occasional exceptions. Forthcoming dates are given below: further dates will be published in the next newsletter.

Tuesday 18th December (informal evening with refreshments – bring slides etc on CD's or memory sticks)

Wednesday 23rd January (note: Wednesday instead of usual Tuesday to avoid Cheshire Station Awards).

Tuesday 19th February (Ben Davies, Stakeholder Liaison Manager and Michael Vaughan, Franchise Director; Arriva Trains Wales will be joining us at this meeting)

Tuesday 20th March

Tuesday 17th April

Tuesday 23rd May

All members are welcome to join us.

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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, favorable or otherwise!

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