

North Cheshire Rail Users' Group



Monitoring rail services and the travelling environment from Chester & Ellesmere Port via Helsby, Frodsham & Runcorn to Liverpool & Manchester

Newsletter Winter 2014



FROM THE CHAIR

We reported in the autumn newsletter, that Pauline Jenkinson had been short listed in the 'Outstanding Volunteer contribution Category' in this year's Association of Community Rail Partnerships (ACoRP) awards. Thanks to sponsorship by Arriva Trains Wales, Pauline, Philip and I were able to travel to Scarborough at the beginning of October for the awards ceremony. Along with colleagues from ATW, we were delighted when Pauline won first prize for all the work she has done over the last seventeen years. Although this was an award for which NCRUG could only nominate an individual named person it should be seen as a reward for the whole group and in particular, all those who have spent many hours working on Helsby Station.

Pauline has since met up with Louis Wall from South West Scotland who was the runner up in the ACoRP outstanding volunteer category. Louis visited Helsby station while on a trip to see relatives in Birkenhead.

Footfall continues to grow at all our local stations and according to ATW's employee magazine "Aspect", (autumn 2014) stations between Warrington Bank Quay and Helsby are the busiest unstaffed stations on the ATW network outside the Cardiff area. As a result of this growth in usage, ATW will be re-introducing a loco-hauled train on the 07.38 service from Chester to Manchester to cater for the demand. We would be very pleased to receive feedback from regular users regarding this service. We were dismayed when we discovered that, the train might not be calling at our local stations on its mid-morning return run. Fortunately, ATW reinstated the stops following our objections.

In 1990, British Rail proposed the closure of the Halton Curve because the line and points needed replacement and NCRUG was formed to try to prevent this from happening. Services were reduced until (a parliamentary service) of a train in one direction, running on Saturdays during the summer timetable was left. NCRUG has been campaigning for restoration ever since and at last there is positive news with the promise of government funding. As a result, we can look forward to our 25th anniversary in March 2015 with more optimism than in previous years.

With best wishes for Christmas and the coming year. **Janet Briggs**

COMMEMORATIVE GARDEN CREATED AT RUNCORN EAST

This garden has been created at the entrance to the Railway Station on ground which was formerly not receiving any maintenance.

The work was facilitated by Arriva Trains Wales (ATW), North Cheshire Rail Users Group (NCRUG) & Halton Borough Council (HBC), The actual work was undertaken by the National Citizen Service (NCS), and funded by grants from Ineos Chlor & granted through The Mersey Forest Plan. Additional funding came from ATW for the plants, wood chip and top soil.

We hope that passengers passage through the station is enhanced by the work undertaken, which is part of a project to improve the environment for passengers at Runcorn East and also to reflect Commemorative activities based on the First World War Centenary over the next five years.

The Garden was submitted for the North West in Bloom Royal Horticultural Society its "Your Neighbourhood Awards 2014" and the North Cheshire Rail Users Group (NCRUG) was delighted to discover that the Garden has been short listed for an award in its category.

Thursday 23rd October saw two representatives from NCRUG and two from Halton Borough Council (HBC) attend the Royal Horticulture Society - Awards Evening, in Southport. Special thanks must go to Arriva Trains Wales for paying for tickets to go to the function. Many organisations from across the North West attended the event.

Earlier in the year, as noted above, young people from the National Citizens Scheme (NCS) from Halton Borough had been given the challenge of landscaping an area of derelict land by Runcorn East booking office. Geraint Morgan, Stations Community Relations Manager of Arriva Trains Wales agreed to budget the plants and about £300 was spent on shrubs which were carefully selected by NCRUG members Ian Whitley and John Hobbs and Arriva Trains Wales Geraint Morgan.

The area took about two days to clear out and a day was spent planting up. The end result totally transformed the area and judges were most impressed when they came on site to inspect.

The event at Southport was well attended with many people winning awards through the course of the evening. Hopes were high that Runcorn East would scoop its second award of the year after its success at Cheshire Best Kept Stations. We were not disappointed when it won a RHS Neighbour Hood award in "Level three developing". Station Adopters Ian Whitley, John Hobbs, Kerry Fairchild (Community Development Officer) and Paul Wright of Halton Borough Council, all went on stage to collect the award.

To fulfill the obligation as a Commemorate Garden for the First World War, which was the reasoning behind the creation of the garden, a wreath and crosses were provided by NCRUG with assistance from the British Legion and were laid on the 7th November in time for Remembrance Sunday and Armistice day.

With all the above happening NCRUG are hoping for success, at Runcorn East, at this years forthcoming "Cheshire Best Kept Stations Competition 2014" , which will be held in Northwich on January 13th 2015.

JH

GROSS OVERCROWDING AT MANCHESTER PICCADILLY

On Saturday 30th October, Philip and I experienced the worst case of gross overcrowding we have known in recent years. The ATW 16.50 service from Manchester Piccadilly to Llandudno was cancelled, due to a train failure resulting in chaos as everyone tried to push on to the 17.50 an hour later. There had been no advice for waiting passengers waiting on the station and the only announcement made was to inform waiting passengers that the 16.50 train had been cancelled. Crowd control on the platform was non-existent and when one person stumbled getting on, others were almost swept of their feet because of the pressure from behind. The situation on the platform could definitely be described as dangerous.

On the train parents were sitting on the floor trying to pacify small, frightened children and several standing passengers were feeling faint. Many people had bags full of Christmas shopping while others had large cases etc. I counted at least 80 passengers getting off at Runcorn East and people were still standing after that! Of course, I understand that ATW can't easily slot in a replacement train at Manchester but the incident does show how fragile and vulnerable the rail network can be.

JB

NEW MERSEY GATEWAY BRIDGE

There is an interesting forum on Facebook concerning the bridge construction.

Search for 'Mersey Gateway Construction' on Facebook and you will find hundreds of pictures and comments about the work which is currently going on. I suspect a lot of this information is from construction workers employed on the site and its surroundings as they are advising what is going to happen before it happens, e.g. when barges are coming up the Mersey with equipment.

I have found this a very interesting site and recommend readers pay a visit.

WE

FOLLY LANE SIDINGS

Six months ago these sidings were almost deserted. There were only 2 trains per week using the facility. They were the chlorine trains for Ineos Chlor, 1 on a Tuesday morning and the other on a Friday morning.

Now that the Incinerator has started production frequent trains, carrying waste from Manchester, are coming into the sidings.

If you view the sidings on a Tuesday or Friday morning you will see 2 freight trains in there. The Ineos Chlor train is DBS hauled and the waste train hauled by Freightliner.

From being almost deserted it is now a busy place.

WE

Editor's note:- Halton curve re-instatement could open up some additional waste suppliers for the Incinerator from origins to the west. The waste would come in by rail and thereby appease Runcorn residents who are fearful of an increase in HGV's causing congestion and pollution on local roads. NCRUG/GHD will continue to keep in touch with Ineos Chlor/Incinerator on this matter.

TWO THOUSAND AND FOURTEEN

As the year draws to a close we have reflected on the highlights and progress made in what must be considered a good year for the railways and the passengers who use them.

The Northern Hub progresses although it has slipped somewhat due to objections to the proposed alignment of the Ordsall curve. Hopefully this will be resolved shortly to enable construction to start on this vital part of the project which will enable trains to travel between Manchester Piccadilly and Victoria stations.

The Todmorden curve has been re-instated but services will not commence running over it until May 2015 due to a shortage of rolling stock. What a shame - but better late than never for the people of Burnley.

Electrification has proceeded apace until Network Rail hit unforeseen problems in erecting the poles in the Roby/Huyton area. We understand land instability is to blame. Meanwhile the four tracking of the line between Broadgreen and Huyton has been completed and part of it is now in use.

The High Speed Rail line debate continues and some progress made although there is much discussion still to take place concerning the route north of Crewe. Liverpool City Region has, belatedly, made a strong plea to have a direct High Speed line into the city centre. Liverpool's case is strengthened by the Chancellor's statement in the summer when he launched a 'Northern Powerhouse' campaign. This would link northern cities with a 'higher speed line', (as distinct from a High Speed line), capable of substantially reducing journey times between northern cities and also providing for increased freight movements.

The freight aspect is extremely important as the Port of Liverpool's new riverside quay is completed in time to take the largest container ships in the world. The Panama Canal widening scheme is nearing completion which will substantially reduce journey times from the Far East and, due to its geographical location put Liverpool in a strong position to win some container business from Felixstowe and Southampton. Liverpool Superport will take shape in the next few years and much thought is being given as to how the increased freight which will be generated, will be moved to and from the port. Readers may know, through sitting in traffic congestion, that the main route currently used is via Dunning's Bridge Road up to Switch Island and the Motorway network. This route is heavily congested and a proposed bypass road in the Rimrose Valley is vehemently opposed by local residents as it would go through greenbelt land. The case for developing rail freight is strong but the solutions are not straightforward.

Nearer to home, the Helsby station house building has been restored and is a huge improvement to the station. The Booking Office is being worked on and the Railway Heritage Trust, with NCRUG involvement, has expressed a wish to restore the buildings on Platform 2. In addition the substandard platform 1 has been raised to make it compliant and safe to use for all passengers.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer's other very welcome statement in the summer announced funding of £10.4m for re-instating the Halton curve, subject to a satisfactory business case being completed by Merseytravel/Network Rail. This seems to be progressing but still keep your fingers crossed, particularly with a General Election coming up in May 2015. NCRUG are keeping the pressure on and asks all supporters to do likewise whenever the opportunity arises.

Finally, a recent government announcement mentioned that tests will be taking place in Bristol, Greenwich, Milton Keynes and Coventry on driverless cars. This seems very futuristic but tests are already underway in Scandinavia, Germany and the U.S.A. so the rail industry will have to consider how this will affect their future business. Will it relieve or increase road congestion? Automatic safe distance driving may appeal to some motorists or frustrate others. Journey times may increase due to the automatic imposition of speed limits. All sorts of questions will arise and it will be interesting to see if the answers benefit the railways. Food for thought in 2015!!

CWG

TICKET GATES FOR WARRINGTON BANK QUAY?

NCRUG have long suspected that there is considerable revenue loss at Warrington Bank Quay station and have campaigned over many years for better protection there, but without success. However, we have recently received information that ticket gates could be installed at WBQ sometime next year. Virgin trains have never been in favour of gates, so at present, we don't know whether they have had a change of heart or been pushed into action by higher authority, possibly as a condition of their franchise extension!

JB

MIDDLE EASTERN MEMORIES

During 1968 and 1970 I was supervising construction work in Bandar Shahpur, Iran, which is situated at the northern end of the Persian Gulf. The port itself is some eighty miles east of the Shatt-al-Arab, which is the estuary and river which divides into the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Nearby is Bandar Mashar, the principal port for freight destined for distribution in Iran.

The railway line goes to Tehran, after which it divides and goes north west, ultimately to join the Russian rail system and north east to the Caspian Sea, altogether approximately 1000 miles, possibly more.

The freight arriving at the port covered a broad spectrum of goods, including shiploads of very large American cars, which were loaded onto flat-bed trucks. It was always interesting to see the trains set off from the port, as many of the cars had people in them enjoying a free ride!

There was also a daily sleeper service which left about 4 pm and arrived in Tehran at 7.30 am. As I flew frequently to Tehran on business I twice took the opportunity to use the train. What a pity that so much of the journey was in darkness. The route passes through mountainous scenery, through deep cuttings, tunnels and viaducts over precipitous drops. It would have been marvellous to travel the whole route in daylight.

Imagine my surprise, therefore, when looking recently through a magazine "Railways" dated January 1942, to find an article about the line written by a ship's engineer visiting the port. He compared the building of the line to the building of the Panama Canal. He also wrote that construction after 15 years was not complete and that the death toll had been stupendous.

At the time I travelled on it trains were handled by American General Motors diesels. Whether they were double headed north of where I joined it I cannot say.

Bob Withy

LLANGOLLEN RAILWAY DECLARES CORWEN TRAINS A SUCCESS

At the end of a short season for passenger trains on its new extension to Corwen, the Llangollen Railway hails the operation a great success which exceeded expectations. In the ten days of operations since the first trains for supporters ran on 22nd October, nearly 4000 passengers sampled a ride on the 2.2 mile extension beyond Carrog.

For seven days of the half term holiday the trains operated as one steam locomotive with four coaches for the scheduled three trains a day, when the engine ran with a special headboard "The Corwen Revival". The trains early in each day were fully loaded with visitors eager to experience the journey to the new temporary terminus, known by the bilingual name as Dwyrain Corwen East.

Kevin Gooding, General Manager, for Llangollen Railway, said, "We are delighted with the public response to the Corwen train services. Visitors have come from near and far to sample the extended line. As well as those who travelled by train from Llangollen, others joined the train at Corwen to sample the reverse journey option. This is a passenger flow we wish to develop next year when a full season of operations will commence following an official opening for the station at Dwyrain Corwen East on 1st March 2015."

Mr Ken Skates, Welsh Assembly member for Clwyd South, who was on the first public train on 27th October, said, "It is fantastic to see this Welsh Government supported project going full steam ahead after decades of incredible hard work and dedication by an amazing team of volunteers."

While this restoration project has been a genuine labour of love for those involved, the unbelievable amount of blood, sweat and tear that's gone into this fantastic achievement cannot be over estimated. They have turned a mission impossible into a reality and created something we can all be exceptionally proud of."

During the final weekend of trains, on 8th/9th November, the locomotive, Black Five, No.45337, ran with a special headboard "The Remembrance" to mark the national commemoration of the First World War. In addition, the owners of the locomotive, the 26B Loco Company, arranged for the nameplate "Ayrshire Yeomanry" to be fixed to the running plate, as formerly carried by long lost class mate No.45156.

Whilst the train operations were successful, some lessons have been learned as regards passenger expectations and their needs will be incorporated into the procedures for the next series of trains to Corwen during the Mince Pie Special season from 26th December. In the meantime work will continue with the fitting out of the facilities at the temporary station which requires, amongst other things, the provision of electric power with a link up to the mains supply and the completion of a footpath to the entrance.

George Jones, for Llangollen Railway, said, "Everyone is pleased with the success of the trains on the extended line. However, the operation has demonstrated the limitations of terminating at the phase 1 station which is without facilities to run an engine around the train. This emphasises the need to proceed to the phase 2 terminal station nearer the town centre directly funding can be secured for this final stage of the extension project. Only then will all the advantages of serving Corwen be realised."

George Jones

ACCIDENT IN 1958

As we put the finishing touches to this Newsletter we note it is the 11th December. On this day 56 years ago your editor was returning from a day's hard toil in Liverpool on the 5.30pm express from Liverpool Central to Manchester Central.

Shortly after we raced through Urmston station there was an almighty thump followed by upheaval as the packed carriage left the tracks and heaved to the right onto the down line. It remained upright but was skewed at a crazy angle. After several minutes the dazed passengers, including me, managed to open some doors and scramble onto the grass on the cutting. One hero went to see if the driver and fireman were alright as the engine had been overturned by the impact but he walked on the down track and was killed by the on-coming Manchester Central to Wigan train which collided sidelong with our train but was not derailed. 37 passengers and enginemen required hospital treatment of which only two passengers and three enginemen were detained.

The accident was caused by a collapsed jib on a contractor's crane which was working on the construction of the Barton Bypass, now part of the M60 Motorway. The skip on the jib was full of wet concrete and fell onto the track.

After wading through the wet grass of Lewis's staff playing field most passengers caught the next bus into Manchester and, presumably, found their way home from there. I picked up my old Austin Eight at Manchester Central and finally reached home at about 9.30pm. My wife and Mother-in-Law put it down to my warped sense of humour when I strolled in, with mud on my shoes, and announced that 'I've been in a train crash'. I was vindicated only when the late news came through on the radio!

I returned, by train, to Liverpool the next day so the experience did not put me off train travel. It was only when the full details of the accident emerged that I realised I had had a lucky escape.

CWG

HALTON CURVE

To the best of our knowledge work on the business case continues on schedule enabling the scheme to be ready for construction to commence during the 2016/19 Control Period 5. We are seeking confirmation of this information from Merseytravel and hope to be able to include this in our Spring 2015 Newsletter.

In the meantime the pressure continues.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Frodsham station platform edges: Network Rail have recently pared off several inches from the edging stones at the west end of platform 2 at Frodsham to provide improved clearance for the new loco hauled stopping service.

Loco hauled stopping patterns: During the summer, we received draft copies of the ATW's local timetable for December 2014 which were difficult to interpret and came with health warnings about stopping patterns of the loco hauled train on its return journey from Manchester in mid-morning. As soon as we realised that the train was not timetabled to stop at local stations, we made representations to ATW and contacted Graham Evans MP, (Weaver Vale). Some weeks later, ATW informed us that the stops had been re-instated. Good news for North Cheshire but less good for some stations along the coast.

Visit by Railway Heritage Trust: A team from the trust visited a number of projects in Wales and Cheshire in November. Their tour included Helsby and Frodsham where they viewed heritage work carried out at the stations in the last three years. RHT are now considering how the buildings on the island platform at Helsby could be restored and used. Frodsham and Helsby stations are among the projects featured in the recently published Railway Heritage Trust Annual Review.

Network Rail community rail day: A group of NCRUG committee members will be supporting this new Network Rail initiative which is being held at Network Rail's Manchester offices in the 'Square One' building near to Piccadilly Station.

Manchester Victoria ticket gates: The new gates at Victoria are now in position but still under wraps. One suspects that there is currently considerable revenue loss at the station so any comments on how they are working once they are in operation would be welcome.

Winter bedding plants: Cheshire West and Chester Council have once again supplied pansies for Helsby and Frodsham Stations. 1000 pansies have been planted at Frodsham while planting is still in progress at Helsby.

A meeting of minds: ACoRP 'outstanding volunteer contribution' winner Pauline Jenkinson and Louis Wall from South West Scotland who finished as runner up in the same category met up on 17th November. Louis was visiting relatives in Birkenhead and took the opportunity to visit Helsby and Frodsham stations.

JB

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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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