



# Newsletter

Summer 2021

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## The current situation.

Despite the easing of Covid restrictions we are encountering reduced services in our area. Although the Manchester Airport services remain hourly, Transport for Wales are operating 2-hourly services to Liverpool via the Halton Curve. This is particularly galling given the popularity of the route for leisure travellers wishing to experience the highlights of Liverpool or conversely access North Wales from Merseyside. Many services on this attractively priced route have been observed to operate at capacity over the summer holiday period.

Northern Rail have cancelled the Chester – Manchester Victoria and Leeds services via Helsby and Frodsham altogether, citing Covid related staffing issues. This change came into effect on August 2<sup>nd</sup> and is a temporary timetable change with services set to resume on September 13th. Despite the promotional artwork produced by the Community Rail Partnership, the services to Yorkshire were never marketed to their fullest extent by Northern despite some very competitive fares offered in the off-peak ‘unregulated’ window. We can see great potential for this route and look forward to the restoration of services.

Ellesmere Port is provided with a thrice daily ‘shuttle’ service to Helsby, although the early morning train positions from Lime St via St Helens. This arrangement will continue post timetable change next month. An update from Northern is expected at the next Community Rail Partnership meeting in September.

As of mid-June total passenger journeys by rail were at a level last seen in 1872! The Train Operating Companies (or Operational Delivery Partners) are now operating at between 40-50% of pre-Covid loads with some services at as much as 100% on specific routes at certain times of day. Transport for Wales service provision is currently operating at 71-85% of their pre-covid levels.



Previous: North Wales Coast Explorer ‘Leander’ passes Helsby junction 18<sup>th</sup> July 2021 Photo credit: J Hughes





A hark back to when the North Cheshire Line saw regular diversions: A 5 car Virgin 'Voyager' train passing through Frodsham.

Best estimates are that by the end of this year usage will be 70-75% of pre-pandemic levels. The generous subsidy provided by central government to support the rail industry over the course of the pandemic comes to an end imminently and immense pressure will be brought upon the Train Operating Companies to increase fares or pare back on uneconomic routes. At least that is the case for the English TOC's; Transport for Wales have stated they wish to protect what they already have in terms of service provision and will continue to subsidise their own services as required in order to keep frequency and fares as competitive as possible. The TfW – Great British Railways agreement is still to be made although TfW will remain a separate entity, retain their distinctive branding going forward and participate in some of the ticketing components of GBR. It is expected ScotRail will follow a similar model.

In terms of rolling stock; expect to see the brand new TfW Class 197's on our line soon. These new Diesel Multiple Units are from the same CAF family as Northern's Class 195's and will gradually replace the Class 158's currently operating Chester – Lime St via the Halton Curve allowing TfW services to continue further in Wales, including direct to Cardiff. The Class 197's are fitted out to a specification unique to TfW and form a complete fleet replacement package that will ultimately see the end of the ubiquitous 'Inter City' Class 175 units currently in use on the North Cheshire Line to Manchester Airport. Both TfW and Northern have real-time interactive capacity checkers installed on some fleets using sensors fitted to doors to detect embarkation and disembarkation. Apps can be downloaded via the relevant website although some information is now appearing on CIS (customer information displays) at the stations.

As stated above, the September 13<sup>th</sup> timetable change sees the reintroduction of Northern Rail's Chester – Leeds services with stops at Helsby, Frodsham and Runcorn East with some fabulous off peak offers. Ellesmere Port – Helsby remains a shuttle service 3x daily.

TfW are expecting to introduce Loco-hauled services from Manchester direct to Swansea on December 22<sup>nd</sup> this year, here's hoping for stops at our local stations!

**Transport for Wales have an on-line consultation open to help determine their future service provision post-Covid. Given the current frequency of Liverpool services this is pertinent to us and I would encourage individual members to submit a response where possible. The more responses TfW receive, the greater the weight.**

<https://news.tfw.wales/news/transport-for-wales-launch-public-survey-1>



Part fitted-out Class 197 in TfW livery. As with the Class 175's, the Class 197's are 100mph capable. Photo courtesy of TfW.

## **Helsby, Frodsham and Runcorn East stations.**

Following recent inspections TfW have earmarked Chester, Flint and Runcorn East stations as next for refurbishment. Runcorn East has been identified as high priority although I'm sure anyone who has travelled through Chester station recently will testify to the dire state of this facility in its current configuration. Frodsham is due for a 'telecoms upgrade' (meaning new CCTV?) and Helsby is to have a feasibility study into increased parking spaces. Now the grass area at the front of the station has been asphalted it's hard to see how more parking could be accommodated there without purchasing more land.

As shown in the photo below, at Frodsham station it's come to our attention there is no defined route for mobility scooters or wheelchairs from Platform 1 through the Cheshire West owned car park onto the station access road. The situation has been exacerbated by the installation of barrier arms controlling access into and out of the car park. The situation has been brought to the attention of Cheshire West and Chester Council although we are still waiting for a satisfactory response.

As a result of the call for station volunteers put out in the last newsletter and local social media channels we have 2 new volunteers for Frodsham but still need extra help to support the Helsby team. Please contact



[chairman@ncrug.org.uk](mailto:chairman@ncrug.org.uk) if you think an hour or 2 of fresh air and light gardening every now again at the station would be for you. TfW offers excellent support to station volunteers.



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### The Class 153 Active.

This innovative project is being pioneered by ScotRail for use on the West Highland Line. At a time when these single car DMU's (colloquially known as the 'dog box') are being consigned to the breakers, ScotRail have seen the potential for a complete re-configuration of 5 units to support the popular tourist route to Oban.

Refurbished at local works, the 153 Active has accommodation for 20 cycles with additional sporting equipment in addition to seating for 24 people. There is even an e-bicycle charging point fitted. The 153 Active project recognises the shift in thinking that will be needed as staycations become increasingly popular and holidaymakers seek to avoid the endless gridlock experienced on many British roads this summer. TfW have indicated they will be trialling a 153 Active but in the meantime have purchased 8 refurbished Class 153 units in standard configuration as a stop-gap. Let's hope the 153 Active trials are a success and more of these old units can be re-configured.

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### The Train vs the Car.

Despite the excellent TV advertising campaign by *Nationalrail* encouraging people back to the trains, passenger numbers still remain well below pre-Covid levels. Having been dissuaded from rail travel for so long on personal safety grounds, the public will be finding the renewed push to modal shift quite hard to buy. Travel by rail to the office is an obvious example of the advantage of the train; a small bag to carry, time to prepare for work, the station invariably in the centre of town, etc however with office work from home now the clearly established norm, one wonders if that market will ever fully return. With the growing leisure market the case is not so clear cut, especially for long trips away with much additional equipment such as camping gear. Stations occasionally coincide with campsites, but post Beeching this is the exception!

The cost of rail travel has steadily increased over the years; over the last 30 years rail fares have increased by an average of 300%. Itemising the increase in more detail; in real terms regional rail fares are 13% higher than

what they were 15 years ago and long-distance operators are a whopping 34% higher than what they were at the turn of the century. In other words, rail fare increases have consistently outstripped the RPI. This is hardly a supportive measure to achieve the net zero targets the government and local authorities have set let alone keep rail travel within reach of those least able to afford it.

Motoring expenditure is a different story; over the last 30 years motoring expenditure has risen by 150% which is consistently below the actual RPI (180%). To re-dress this imbalance will require a major re-think about how access to the road network is paid for and what level of subsidy is required to keep public transport within reach of the public.

In terms of energy consumption, below are some rough calcs comparing a Class 221 'Voyager' train with a family car.

**Avanti Trains Class 221 SuperVoyager, 5 car (250 passengers):**

Total energy consumption = 17KWh/mile or 68Wh/mile per passenger.

**Typical 4 seat petrol car motorway use:**

Total energy consumption = 1.2KWh/mile or 300Wh/mile per passenger.

Obviously apples should be compared with apples; The Class 221 data was derived from an average journey from Chester – London and the car was based on typical motorway driving. On the face of it, the Class 221 Voyager is over 4 x more fuel efficient per passenger than the family car. The case of electric vehicles (cars and trains) is somewhat more complex. The environmental benefits of both are obvious, so advantages to one over the other come down to practicality and cost per mile. The purchase cost and depreciation of electric cars tip the per mile cost in favour of the train, however if one is prepared to brave the limitations of the charging infrastructure in the UK, the avoidance of VED and emission charges in cities might make the electric car a more attractive choice if the fixed costs are ignored.

For me, personally, the stress of driving on our congested roads will always tip the balance in favour of the train where there is one. It's one of those things one can't put a price on!

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## **2021 AGM**

The 2021 NCRUG AGM is scheduled for 19<sup>th</sup> October 19:30hrs at the Frodsham Community Centre. A guest speaker is yet to be arranged but notwithstanding this, the group has much to consider. There are still committee vacancies unfilled (Secretary and Volunteer Co-ordinator) and I stated my intention to step down as Chair last year, although obviously this was put in abeyance. The current situation, as it stands, with the remaining committee members accommodating these roles is unsustainable. The future structure and functions of NCRUG will of course be in the hands of the membership so come along to AGM and have your voice heard.

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## **Heritage railways.**

*The Mirror* newspaper recently published a piece highlighting the parlous financial state of our heritage railway network after 12 months with high fixed costs and virtually no revenue: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk/save-steam-heritage-railways-face-24658933> The article certainly makes for sobering reading and the takings from a largely restriction-free summer offers no certainty to these treasured examples of our transport history.

For those on email circulation the latest news from the Llangollen Railway by way of the Corwen Central News follows.

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Scots Guardsman 46115 takes on water in Frodsham July 2021. Photo credit: J Hughes

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**Website:** Visit our website at [www.NCRUG.ORG.UK](http://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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