

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 2016

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FROM THE CHAIR

A very happy new year to all NCRUG members and newsletter readers.

There has been a considerable amount of positive publicity recently regarding the future development of rail in the north west. The proposals in the recent franchise announcements will hopefully see some of the biggest and far reaching changes for many years with through services from Chester across the Pennines to Leeds for the first time since the 1980s when our younger son used the service to travel to and from Hull University

The changes are sometime ahead but there are other delights to savour In the meantime. Work on the refurbishment at Manchester Victoria station has enhanced the whole area and greatly improved the ambience for passengers with much more natural light and under cover access to both rail and Metrolink services. Many of the heritage features have been restored and are clearly visible to travellers and visitors passing through. Access to the arena and platforms has now been separated allowing better crowd control.

My one personal criticism of the modernisation is that passengers still have to negotiate a lot of steps to access the through platforms. Yes, there are lifts but they are not easy to locate on crowded platforms and escalators would move passengers quicker.

Arriva Trains Wales' aspirations to run through to Manchester Airport has taken a step forward in that the timings for a number of services appear (shaded) in the consultation timetable for May 2016. Turn-round times for the trains at the airport would be approximately sixteen minutes considerably reducing the time spent in a siding just outside Manchester Piccadilly station.

The latest station usage statistics (2014-2015) show an annual passenger increase of 14.26% for Runcorn East; 10.7% for Frodsham; with Helsby remaining static.

We are always pleased to receive your comments on the content of the newsletter, together with articles and news items on any rail or transport related issues.

Janet Briggs

ARRIVA TRAINS WALES FACTS & FIGURES

George Jones extracted the undermentioned facts following a presentation on Monday 21st December by Ben Davies, Stakeholder Manager, to the Railway Travel and Correspondence Society:-

Customer satisfaction at record levels – 89% Spring 2015

*Outstanding performance – consistently the best regional and second best national ‘right time’ performing rail operator in the UK.

*£31m of investment since the start of the franchise vs £400k contractual requirement.

*One of the largest employers in Wales, employing around 2,200 people and creating more than 300 jobs since the beginning of the franchise in key locations such as Carmarthen, Pwelli, Machynlleth, Holyhead and Cardiff.

*National Awards Winning Apprentice Scheme; recruitment has included 21 apprentices and 13 graduate trainees.

Key Performance measures

*Public Performance Measures: Annual reliability and punctuality currently 97.9% and 93.5% respectively.

*Best regional ‘Right time’ operator.

*UK’s second-best right-time operator (trains arriving and departing within 59 seconds of scheduled time).

National Rail Passenger Survey

*Overall satisfaction has now risen to 89%, up 10% from when the franchise started and 8% above the franchise benchmark.

*31 out of the 32 different areas of measurement have improved over the past decade.

Investment in franchise

*ATW has invested £31m against a franchise requirement of only £400k. ATW investment includes:

Over £11m on train refurbishments (class 158 fleet and loco hauled services)

Chester station £2m.

Train driver simulators £2m.

Improved staff facilities £2m.

Ticket gates £3m.

123 Ticket vending machines all across the network £5m.

Brand new depot at Machynlleth £3m.

New wheel lathe £2m at Cardiff Canton.

Numerous other small projects, such as station lighting enhancements worth a total of £10m.

National Station Improvement Programme in partnership with others, plus numerous improvements to accessibility. Major station refurbishments included Aberystwyth, Llandudno and Rhyl and new stations at Ebbw Vale Town, Pye Corner, Energlyn and Churchill Park, Fishguard and Goodwick.

New and Improved services

*ATW has consistently acted to add capacity and improve services whilst working with a limited fleet size. We provide 20% more services (65,000 services every year) than the franchise agreement specifies and added over 525,000 annual seats to the timetable in 2012 alone.

*Around 5,000 extra trains a year were added in May 2013 for Gowerton following the station improvement and Loughour viaduct redoubling – all at no additional cost to the taxpayer.

*In 2015 at the request of the Welsh Government, extra services were added to the Heart of Wales and Cambrian lines and timetables were extended to the New Ebbw Vale Town

station.

*Two new innovative Smartphone m-Ticket products were launched as were the UK's first video assisted ticket vending machines. ATW is a key supporter of community projects including Disability Sport Wales, Velothon Wales and Cardiff Half Marathon.

Franchise Overview

*ATW's network extends throughout Wales and the border counties of England, providing local and long distance services to destinations including major cities such as Swansea, Cardiff, Newport, Birmingham, Chester and Manchester.

*2,204 employees, Franchise started August 2003; 1.009 route miles; 956 services operated per day.

*30.5 million passenger journeys per year.

*A fleet of 128 trains.

*247 stations (10% of the UK total) 55 of which are staffed.

*ATW works with a wide range of local and national partners, such as the Welsh Government, to grow and improve rail transport for the public they serve.

GJ

NEW NORTHERN ELECTRIC SERVICE INAUGURATION

I was fortunate to be invited to attend the inauguration of "Northern Electric" services from Liverpool (Lime Street) to Warrington (Bank Quay) on Monday 14th December when Class 319's took over most of the trains on the route via Huyton and Earlstown.

The day did not start well for the Mayoral contingent from Warrington, as they planned to travel from Warrington (Central) on the 08.30 departure which was cancelled as this had travelled via Chat Moss to Liverpool! They therefore enjoyed a "Pacer" on the next "Stopper". In addition one of the 319 sets used on the Warrington service received a graffiti attack overnight while stabled at Preston and had to be replaced by another unit off Allerton Depot.

The modern scene at Liverpool (Lime St) was set, however, with three Class 319's and the old guard in the form of a "Pacer", forming a backdrop. An honour guard formed of Warrington Borough Council Leader Cllr. Terry O'Neill, Merseytravel Chairman - Liam Robinson and Northern Trains - Director Alex Hynes, (see our web site for picture), all standing in front of the 09.47 inaugural service to Warrington Bank Quay. The celebratory party then travelled on this inaugural service, formed of 319.365, to Warrington Bank Quay.

Again, to be seen on our web site, at Warrington Bank Quay is Chris Dale, Chairman of Travel Watch North West who was part of the "Official Party", at Warrington Bank Quay with Unit 319.365 having just arrived with the inaugural service from Liverpool (Lime Street), on the 14th December.

Later, (see the web site), Cllr Terry O'Neill addresses the Official Party in the Mayor's Parlour in Warrington Town Hall and celebrates the arrival of "Northern Electrics" into the Borough. Alex Hynes and Liam Robinson look on with others and enjoy the occasion.

In their addresses the Speakers welcomed "Northern Electrics" to Warrington and hoped they could look forward to electric trains on the CLC! This could be an early "Electric fix" as there are few infrastructure problems on the CLC route as this line is electrified at both ends already; we will wait and see.

However, the Warrington Bank Quay service is a major step forward and we suggest you try a trip from your local station and enjoy the fast service via St. Helens Junction to Liverpool; or even St Helens!

JH

Your Editor, in his capacity as Secretary of NCRUG, is now going to eat some humble pie and confess to not providing the 2014 report on Runcorn East station to our AGM attendees on Oct 21st this year. John Hobbs has done a tremendous amount of work on the station and it is only right that his report is given due recognition. So here it is:-

RUNCORN EAST REPORT - 2014

The last year has been very constructive at Runcorn East and flowing from the Station's 30th Birthday last October we have followed through with an award at the "Cheshire Best Kept Station" Competition which now adorns the Booking Hall at the Station. This was a first in this area for Runcorn East.

Kerry Ramsbottom, (*now Fairchild*), a Community Development Officer for Halton Borough Council has been proactive throughout the year and she has promoted the station and provided advice and guidance on funding through the Halton Borough network. This has included considerable new signage in the station area which most importantly included a sign which stated "RUNCORN EAST"; this actually shows passengers where the station is and is a considerable improvement to the area. Additional signage to cycle ways, footpaths and the bus stops has improved the situation considerably and was certainly a factor in the Cheshire Best Kept Station competition. ATW also installed a ticket vending machine during the course of the year.

Kerry initiated a competition in schools near the Station in the "Litter Bug" campaign and this resulted in numerous entries, Halton Borough Council (HBC) officials selected the Winners and Arriva Trains Wales (ATW) provided appropriate prizes while funding through "Community Development – The Mersey Forest Team" was used to reproduce the art work which is now displayed on the station and raises the environment, at the station, to a higher level.

A further initiative with the National Citizen Scheme (NCS) with plants and soil provided by ATW enabled a formerly overgrown area of the station, adjacent to the Booking Office, to be converted into a Memorial Garden. This project has been awarded a prize by the Royal Horticultural Society (RHS); this event takes place tomorrow at Southport and four of us will be attending; two from HBC and two from NCRUG.

In addition; with funding from the Mersey Forest and in conjunction with Norton Priory and the nearby Murdishaw Community Centre; courses have been run making bird, bat and bug boxes and flower identification. These activities were all supported by local chemicals manufacturer INEOS Chlor Vinyls through the "Landfill Communities Fund as part of the Mersey Forest". Further courses are to be run with the remaining funding.

Starting in February Kerry & I joined together with Sally Buttifant the Community Rail Officer for Cheshire West & Cheshire to bring "Over by Christmas" to Runcorn East this production by "Theater in the Quarter" from Chester was introduced by The Deputy Lieutenant of Cheshire Peter Waterman and the Mayor of Halton. This featured a WW1 Commemoration and was performed additionally at thirty stations across the North West. At Runcorn East this featured five local schools, the British Legion, The Railway Chaplain; a flock of doves, the Irish Guards Singers, local suppliers (ASDA), the RSPB and performances from schools, community art and history groups and a miniature steam railway and a steam fire engine provided by the Fire Service.

The Choral & Theatrical presentation was a moving enactment of the events of World 1 with cameos of various aspects of that time, from the departure of loved ones from a station, to the Christmas Day football matches at the front and all highlighted by a news boy shouting out the harrowing headlines as the war progressed. After that performance local schools combined together to perform a new song; "On the Station" especially written for them by Matt Baker of TiQ and this formed the finale of the "Over by Christmas" presentation.

The organization also involved a filming session with steam train, eight rehearsals, on one day, at various locations on the on the East Lancashire Railway, a further special train and a further two performance at Bury Bolton station together with all the organization that that entailed.

We look forward to another year of progress at Runcorn East station supported by HBC & ATW who have worked with us consistently through the year.

JH 21.10.14

TRAVELLING BY TRAIN IN GERMANY

In the autumn newsletter our chairman told of experiences in Austria. I thought that you might be interested in my experiences of travelling in Germany. Years ago the DB used to be as good as the SBB (Switzerland), but not any more! In the last 10 years I am afraid reliability has become worse than in Britain. So here are a few examples from my experiences.

Wrong destinations. What would you think if you turned up at Bank Quay for a train to Euston, where the platform departure indicator said that the train was for Euston, and indeed all the displays on the train said that was where it was going. But when you were on the train, somewhere before Stafford an announcement was made saying the train would terminate at Stafford and you would have to get on a bus to Lichfield, and yet all this was planned: it wasn't an emergency. But this happened to me in Germany: I discovered that the destination indicated is not the destination of the train, but of the journey. At Hannover Hbf the platform indicator said my train was going to Aschersleben, and that's what it said on the front of the train, but it was only just before Ilsenburg that an announcement was made saying that at the next station we would have to all get out and continue on a bus. [The journey rather than the destination of the train appears to be common continental practice: In Copenhagen I noticed that the boat train to Ystad was advertised as going to Rønne, the destination of the Bornholm ferry – it's like being in Leeds and seeing that the 10:19 service is for Douglas IOM, rather than Heysham Port].

Connections. In Britain we moan about connections not being held for late running trains (Virgin arrives late in Oxenholme just as the TPE train for Windermere leaves). But on one journey in Germany from Amsterdam to Hannover, our train waited at Minden for 15 minutes for a late running connecting train, and then made an additional stop on the way, so that we arrived 20 minutes late at Hannover Hbf and I only just caught my on-going connection. Somewhere between these two extremes would appear to be right.

Engineering work. Twice have I experienced changes in the timetable in the interval between planning the journey, booking tickets and actually making the journey. On one occasion I planned to travel from Köln to Brussels, only to find that for one day – the day I was travelling, a Friday – there were no trains between Aachen and Liège, and apparently no replacement buses. Fortunately I had an Interrail ticket so I was able to come back to Brussels via Utrecht and Rotterdam and still catch my Eurostar. After this experience I now always check the journey times on the internet just before travelling. We had a holiday in Vienna and on the return journey decided to travel on the high speed line from Frankfurt to Köln. We had tickets and seat reservations, but before the journey I discovered that the train from Vienna to Frankfurt had been re-timed and the seat reservations onwards from Frankfurt would be useless. DB refused to give us new reservations, for which we had paid. Then when actually on the train we discovered that the *reiseplan* gave the same times as when we had originally booked. I asked the train manager whether the times on my internet print-out, or the ones on the *reiseplan* were correct. He said that the *reiseplan* was always correct. But it wasn't: when we arrived at Nürnberg Hbf, the time on the departure screen agreed with the internet. When I tackled the train manager about this he said that head office doesn't always keep us informed!

Strikes. In 2014 returning from Hamburg to Amsterdam, the German equivalent of ASLEF went on strike on a bank holiday weekend. The train I was due to travel on was cancelled, and so after two hours I managed to get another train (which was full to bursting) to Osnabrück, and there catch a local train to Bad Bentheim (services by local companies were unaffected), and there get the Dutch train back to Amsterdam. But I arrived too late to catch the ferry from IJmuiden to North Shields and had to spend an extra night in Haarlem. Eventually I got 30 Euros compensation from DB for this!

IAN WATSON

SPINNING AROUND MANCHESTER

I decided to utilize a Greater Manchester –Concession “Peak Wayfarer”, at a cost of £6 on Tuesday 17th November and go for a spin around Manchester. The ticket is valid after 9.30pm, for those over 60, and I was to meet my friend in Stockport so I set off on 09.44 TPE service from Warrington (Central), the 09.22 Liverpool (Lime St) to Scarborough; this gave some time to look in the Ian Allan bookshop at the Piccadilly Station approach before setting off on 10.30 to Cardiff; as far as Stockport.

A Class 37 was stabled at Stockport its “Test Train” having failed with a severe wheel flat and the whole ensemble being safely secured in the Stockport carriage sidings; awaiting further attention. My friends train from Cardiff was a little late; so I had a chat with a member of the station staff about railway matters; I found my friend in the first car of the Class 175. We continued back to Piccadilly and then went through to the undercroft to catch a tram around to the Etihad Stadium, where many of the trams turn back. We waited for a few minutes before continuing through to Ashton-under-Lyne by tram; it is difficult to identify where the tram goes now - so much has changed around Ancoats, Clayton and Droylsden but approaching Ashton we noted we were passing near the former “National Gas Engine” works just pass Ashton Moss Junction. A short walk took us to Ashton Station where a fine example of a Distant Signal, on a bracketed post, can be seen at the west end of the Station. We only needed to wait a short while before a Class 150 appeared and took us to Manchester (Victoria). Here we examined the rebuilt Station with its fine restored booking office reminiscent of that formerly at London (St. Pancras); in addition one can sample the fine restored refreshment room but tea is no longer 6d a cup; the cupola over-head however is worth a look. The WW1 Memorial is a treat as is the newly restored L&YR map above it; outside stations served by the railway in former times are listed on the glass panels on the canopy edge facing the cab road. Another nice touch is the retention of lettering reminding us of the existence of the former “Regional Railways” organization.

We then ventured out to Rochdale; where new west facing bays are being installed, at the station, to facilitate trains from Manchester turning back as capacity in Manchester (Victoria) is now limited and many services will continue to Rochdale in future, when these are completed. The tramway to Rochdale town centre had been completed since my last visit, so we tottered down there on the first available service; this terminates close to the old Town Hall. Rochdale it seems has a new Town Hall. Only ceremonial duties are carried out in the old one – how strange! Why a community should wish to down grade one of the finest civic buildings in the Country is beyond me! Other European Cities are proud of their gilded edifices but not apparently in Rochdale. We did not alight but stayed on the same tram and returned via Rochdale Station and then over the new flyover then shortly passing the well known Ellen Road Engine House at Milnrow, which houses various stationery engines which are steamed once a month. Then via Oldham and the new formation through the town centre before rejoining the old line at the top of Werneth incline, formerly one of the steepest adhesion worked inclines in the country. However the trams veer right and go via Failsworth to reach Newton Heath, and reach Manchester Victoria via a Junction with the tram line from Bury at Oldham Road Junction which was a disused line which has been returned to use.

Back at Victoria we choose to ride across Manchester to Deansgate and sample the single line working across the City Centre, along Mosley Street; there was a veritable tram jam here with ten cars waiting to travel through in each direction. We soon retraced our steps to Victoria; where we took a “Northern Electric” Class 319 on a Liverpool service across Chat Moss to Newton-le Willows.

This was my first chance to savour one of these electric trains across the historic “Liverpool & Manchester Railway”, on the way we noted that the Huskisson Memorial has been restored in all its glory near Lowton Junction and that the interesting Newton-le-Willows Station still retains many original features together with some interesting information displays on the L&M Rly.

We had hoped to catch the 13.01 Holyhead to Manchester (Piccadilly) at Newton but although the paper timetable display advertised its call, the electronic Customer Information System (CIS) did not and it roared through with its Class 67 at the head. A few minutes later a Manchester Airport service arrived with another Class 319; which this time took us via Ordsall Lane Junction and Castlefield Junction to Manchester (Oxford Road) and Piccadilly; passing Liverpool Road Station, now part of the site of the Museum of Science and Industry, which is of course also the Worlds First Inter-City

Passenger Station. All this history on such a short journey! At Piccadilly, my friend set off back to Shrewsbury on a Cardiff service while I returned to Ian Allan, as I had decided on my Christmas present during the course of the days ramblings.

The final journey for me was with a Class 67 on the 16.50 Manchester (Piccadilly) to Llandudno as far as Warrington (Bank Quay) not a bad day for £6; excluding the price of the Christmas present of course!

JH

THE NEW NORTHERN & TRANS-PENNINE EXPRESS FRANCHISES

As readers will be aware these two franchises were announced in December. They make good reading and are set to provide the services which will be required to bring the 'Northern Powerhouse' concept to fruition.

There is still a lot of detail to be announced and we wait, with baited breath, for more information about services, particularly those which affect our line(s).

We are already aware of a new hourly service from Chester to Leeds, via Manchester Victoria. As well as opening up new connections in the north west this service will relieve overcrowding on the existing service to Manchester Piccadilly and Llandudno.

We do not know if there are any service improvements on the Hooton/Ellesmere Port/Helsby line. We made strong representations to all the bidders and can only hope they have listened to our pleas to take into account the positive changes in the demographics along this line in recent years.

We are pleased to note the new Northern franchise map shows a short extension from the Chester/Warrington Bank Line, to 'Runcorn'. This short extension is, of course, the Halton curve. Again we hope that in 2018, (when the Halton curve is planned to open to allow bi-directional working), services to and from Liverpool to Chester, via Liverpool South Parkway will commence and be the precursor of extensions to Wrexham and the North Wales Coast.

It is gratifying to note the dreaded Pacer, (Ellesmere Port/Helsby line), will all be gone by 2019.

We hope more details will be available for our next Newsletter and that the news is all good.

We shall have to wait and hope.

CWG

CHESHIRE BEST KEPT STATION AWARDS

This annual event was held at The Grange Theatre, Hartford on 12th January and was attended by dignitaries from most of the Local Authorities throughout Cheshire. Special guests were the Lord-Lieutenant of Cheshire, David Briggs M.B.E.,K.St.J, Professor Paul Salveson and Mr Alex Hynes, Managing Director of Northern Rail. Master of Ceremonies was Mark Barker who took it upon himself to organize the whole event following the retirement of John Hulme. We congratulate Mark on a most successful and enjoyable evening.

We are delighted to have won awards for each of our stations, as follows:-

The Halton Award – Runcorn East

The Best Kept Gardens Award – Helsby

The Cheshire Community Award – Frodsham

Congratulations to all our volunteers on these stations and a big thank you for all your efforts.

CWG

NEWS IN BRIEF

Rockfall at Frodsham: Work on the sandstone cutting has now been completed and the private car park area has been tidied up. Hopefully natural vegetation will eventually cover the wall.

Helsby signal box: A safety cage has now been constructed round the new toilet waste pipe at the rear of the box

ACoRP awards: Frodsham was one of **nine** stations shortlisted in the large garden category at the 2015 awards. Apparently, this category proved to be the most difficult to judge and Frodsham did not make it into the last three. ACoRP have advised that changes to the guidelines and judging are being considered for next year.

Ticket Machines: NCRUG supported the introduction of ticket machines at our local stations but unfortunately, they are proving to be notoriously unreliable! The following scenarios have been experienced or reported:- no tickets but card deducted; outward ticket but no return; tickets for the wrong destination; problems with pre-booked tickets and seat reservations. The refund procedure is time-consuming and tedious – be warned!

Contacts:-	<u>PHONE</u>	<u>EMAIL</u>
Chairman: Janet Briggs	01928 732142	chair@ncrug.org.uk
Vice Chairman: Martin Patrick	0151 4201910	martinpatrick@btconnect.com
Secretary: Cedric Green	0151 6258017	cw.green@talktalk.net
Membership: Bob Florence	01928 731209	r.florence45@btinternet.com
Joint Editors: John Hobbs	01925 818791	johnhobbs@aol.com
	Cedric Green	cw.green@talktalk.net
LSP contact: Mike Taylor	0151 4272288	mikeporg@btinternet.com
British Transport Police:	0800 405040	

Website: Visit our website at www.NCRUG.ORG.UK to leave your comments, favourable or otherwise, and to catch up on latest developments.

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).