



# Newsletter

Spring 2022



C W Green 1934-2022.

## **Cedric Green**

NCRUG are deeply saddened to announce that our secretary and member for many years, Cedric Green aged 88, passed away peacefully on March 19<sup>th</sup> after a short illness.

Cedric devoted many years of his retirement to supporting the work of NCRUG and was hugely instrumental in the campaign for the re-opening of the Halton Curve through his extensive lobbying both with the Liverpool City Region, the Welsh Assembly and at a Parliamentary level. Ced was highly respected by all those who came into contact with him; softly spoken, witty and authoritative, Ced was always the consummate gentleman. His tireless work for the improvement of local rail services was immeasurable and I think it's fair to say that without Ced's enduring tenacity the Halton Curve campaign would not have succeeded.

Our sincere condolences and thoughts go to Cedric's family at this sad time. He will be sorely missed not only as a valued NCRUG member, but as a loving father and grandfather.

Funeral arrangements have been made for 3pm, April 14<sup>th</sup> at Landican on the Wirral. There will be a NCRUG attendance.

Rest in Peace Cedric Green.

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## **2021 AGM**

The 2021 AGM was held on the evening of 19<sup>th</sup> October. The event was well attended, given the Covid restrictions at the time and the AGM itself was preceded by an excellent presentation from Cllr Liam Robinson, Chair of Merseytravel. Cllr Robinson detailed, amongst other items, the expansion plans of Merseyrail with the introduction of the Class 777 Stadler units, work of the Manchester Recovery Taskforce and future HS2 paths in the region. In terms of Merseyrail expansion, it was interesting to note Merseyrail's aspirations to extend Ellesmere Port – Helsby services onward to Runcorn East in the future. Merseytravel itself is working toward a fully integrated 'London Style' transport network for the Liverpool City Region.

At the subsequent business part of the AGM, the vacant positions of Secretary and Volunteer Co-ordinator remain un-fulfilled, as does the Deputy Chair position. Remaining committee members were re-elected to existing positions unopposed. The ability of the committee to function as a viable concern is assured as representative roles with external organisations have been shared out equally amongst members with Bob Florence continuing in the specific roles of Membership and Treasurer and note-taker at meetings. As has been mentioned previously; the committee meetings are fairly informal and if anyone wishes to sit in on one just to get a feel for it, a warm welcome is always extended. Drop me a note to [chairman@ncrug.org.uk](mailto:chairman@ncrug.org.uk) and I'll make sure you're included in the agenda circulation.





The recently re-furbished Helsby signal box sits resplendent alongside the re-furbished footbridge. Transport for Wales has recently announced a staff 'volunteer' day at the station (date TBC) to support the work of the NCRUG volunteers.

## Stanlow Station

As has been brought to the committee's attention by long standing NCRUG member Peter Zemroch; the station at Stanlow has been closed since February due to significant structural issues identified with the station footbridge. Stanlow holds the record as England's least used station, not least of all because it must surely count as one of England's most poorly served stations. Stanlow is in a unique situation; a platform any member of the public can readily alight upon yet the station itself is right in the heart of the Essar facility. Although warning signs serve to remind members of the public not to proceed any further than the platforms, the station location does not sit well with the owners of the refinery complex. A prolonged closure of this station, possibly permanent, could quite easily be justified on the basis of footfall alone but of course it's the lack of an effective service on the line over the years that has led to the terminal decline. As detailed in a recent interview with Cheshire Live, any future business case for improved services on this line will be supported by the potential for employees to connect directly to the refinery at times that suit the shift patterns. Given the very low footfall at the Ince / Elton station, one ponders if this will be the thin edge of a wedge leading to a line closure...

## Future of the Ellesmere Port – Helsby line.

Given the TFW service reduction to 2-hourly from Chester to Lime St, an intriguing possibility was mooted after the presentation at the NCRUG AGM; could a service from Ellesmere Port pick up the slack? Whilst Ellesmere



Port already connects directly to Liverpool in approximately 30 minutes via The Wirral, a connection via the Halton Curve could connect Ellesmere Port and Elton directly with Frodsham, West Coast Main Line services at Runcorn, Liverpool South Parkway for LJLA as well as the communities of West Allerton and Edge Hill. A service every other hour would complement the current TFW provision and bring hourly connections back to the Liverpool City Region and furthermore provide a complete circular rail service in both directions around the Mersey. Passengers from Ellesmere Port wishing to travel to Manchester or further afield would need to change at Helsby or Frodsham, but by routing traffic around to Lime St rather than through to Leeds would help keep clear the Ordsall Chord approach to the Castlefield Corridor. Obviously, such a service would need to be diesel traction for the time being at least, but would provide an opportunity for an Operational Delivery Partner such as Merseyrail to build on their current market and eventually work towards a metro-style service such as the rest of Merseyside currently enjoys. The future of the line would be safeguarded and the potential for new stations, such as Beechwood in Runcorn could be explored over time.

Merseyrail and Northern are both aware of these outline proposals.



The quiet platforms at Ince / Elton looking towards Helsby. Already one of England's least used stations, is the temporary closure of Stanlow the thin end of a wedge for line closure?



## Services in our area.

There are no expected changes to services in our area with the May 2022 timetable change. Transport for Wales have finally finished with the painfully slow Chester – Lime St bus replacement service that was implemented over the New Year due to staffing shortages and have re-instated the 2 hourly rail services. This frequency is expected to continue until this December at the earliest, but could in fact be in place until as late as December 2023, depending on the Class 197 introduction to service.

Northern are back to the normal Chester - Leeds schedule although there are reductions on other parts of the network; notably Manchester to Barrow, Carlisle, Preston and New Mills.

Avanti West Coast have restored an extra direct service Chester to London Euston with a journey time of a little over 2 hours in effect doubling to twice daily using the Class 220 Voyager units, although approximately 10 services per day are possible with a change at Crewe. Liverpool to Euston services have returned to hourly. **Avanti have announced closure of the West Coast Mainline from April 15<sup>th</sup> -18<sup>th</sup> for maintenance work**; bus replacement services will be in place for some portions of the route so please check with the operator if you are affected.

Merseyrail services are generally back to a 15minute frequency having been operating on a reduced schedule earlier this year due to Covid related staffing issues.

In April, 5 Vivarail Class 230 Hybrid diesel / battery units are set to replace the 2 venerable Class 150 units serving Wrexham – Bidston. The Class 230 is in fact an innovative re-purposing of former London Underground units with a diesel engine and extra battery capacity for a theoretical 60 miles range. The extra rolling stock provision will see this route benefit with an increase to ½ hourly services up from the current hourly. It will be interesting to see how these units perform on the line, given some of the steeper gradients, in the long term.



Chester workings: 5 car Class 220 'Voyager' units couple in the afternoon...





...and leave for London Euston as a 10 car service.

## Integrated Rail Plan (IRP)

The government's long awaited Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands was finally unveiled on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2021. Some suspicions were aired in the lead up to publication, many of which it transpires were prophetic. This weighty document, coming in at 164 pages (without appendices) sets out the justification and reasoning for the paring back of the aspirational schemes proposed in the wide-ranging plans of Northern Powerhouse Rail, (NPR) amongst others.

The IRP does however set out a comprehensive set of achievable objectives that can be delivered within a given time frame, and incorporates these objectives on a holistic basis. As always, the devil is in the detail (or lack thereof) and in that respect there is much reading between the lines needed to understand the implications of the proposals. Even the high aspirations of NPR could have been achieved with the appropriate financial support, but what we have instead is a set of schemes designed to achieve an improvement to what is on offer today at a budget that this (and future governments) can stomach. It's important to note the traditional Cost / Benefit Ratio (CBR), as derived from the Government Green Book has been substantially re-drawn to reflect what is now called Value for Money (VfM), which now incorporates social benefits amongst other inputs. This VfM measure has been modified to reflect what are expected to be post-Covid rail usage and freight requirements.

Specifically for our area the IRP supports HS2 from the existing Lime St station along the existing West Coast Main Line to Ditton where it will pick up the currently disused Fiddlers Ferry freight line to Warrington Bank Quay bringing the old low-level platforms at that station back into use. This compares to the original NPR proposals for a new station near Lime St joining a completely new line leading to a Warrington 'Parkway' station. From Bank Quay, the proposed line splits to join HS2B to Crewe / continues to Manchester Airport where a new station will be constructed (subject to a satisfactory local funding agreement) to accommodate this 'Western Link', and then on to an upgraded Manchester Piccadilly. The original proposals for a completely new underground station at Manchester Airport joined to an underground station in central Manchester and new line through to Bradford have been dumped in favour of upgrades.



In terms of detail, there is no clear explanation as to how the existing WCML from Lime St to Ditton Junction will accommodate the additional traffic (are we just moving the existing Castlefield Corridor problems to Liverpool?), what if any upgrades will take place on the Castlefield Corridor itself and why Piccadilly will remain a 'turn back' station for all services. The latter is actually justified on the grounds that many major cities in Europe also use the 'turn back' configuration for their primary termini, although it must be noted this configuration is often nothing more than an historical planning legacy and ignores the point that Manchester, unlike Liverpool, lies along a busy rail corridor and not at the end of one.

On the positive side, both the Chat Moss (Liverpool to Manchester via Earlestown) and CLC Lines (via Warrington Central) will both see upgrades reducing the journey times through to Manchester and Yorkshire but disappointingly there is no mention at all of Chester Station, the Wirral (including Bidston) services or the North Cheshire Line through Helsby and Frodsham. Whether or how the new Western Link from Manchester Airport might connect to local (Mid Cheshire?) services is not explained, or even if we will continue to enjoy the existing High-Speed connection at Runcorn for existing WCML services. Finally, should we fast forward to 2040, what will a journey on a fast train from the North West to London actually cost, bearing in mind a standard class anytime single from Liverpool to Euston currently comes in at an eye watering £171.30.

If it is any consolation, the IRP does promise the North West a seamless 'tap on tap off' ticket system within the next 4 years.



More Chester workings: 2 car Class 197 undergoing trials at Chester. Crew training is ongoing. All seats and interior fittings are covered in plastic wraps to avoid damage.



Close-up of a Class 197 on the Chester sidings. The seats are covered in wraps, but some of the mechanicals hanging from the chassis are not. Is this storing a future maintenance issue? These units will be stabled at Crewe and Chester.

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