

# MID CHESHIRE RAIL REPORT

No. 73

WINTER 2007-2008

ON-LINE EDITION

The Newsletter of the Mid-Cheshire Rail Users Association, the Voice for Users of the Manchester-Stockport-Altrincham-Knutsford-Northwich-Chester and Crewe-Winsford-Hartford-Liverpool Lines.

Visit our website at [www.mcrua.org.uk](http://www.mcrua.org.uk).

## **CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS by John Oates**

We hope you liked our special commemorative *Rail Report* last time. We have had lots of appreciative comments from members and others. We're back to normal now, but perhaps we'll have another special edition when we're 25 years old. We ended up with more articles for the special issue than we could fit in, so we've included some of those here. We have two big events coming up in May. We're relaunching our Mid-Cheshire Steam Day, this year on Sunday 4 May. It's our great opportunity to "showcase" our line to family and friends. This year we have a different engine, 48151 (a freight engine of the type that worked the Northwich hopper trains for many years) as well as the first opportunity for years to travel over the line through Middlewich behind steam. There will be special events associated with this and it should be a great fun day out, whether simply for a return trip over the line from your local station or else for a longer day. Please help us make this a success by letting your friends and contacts know and please bring the children along. Steam engines are really special to them (and many of us rather older kids, too!). Then on Saturday 10 May our Spring Railtour is off to Minehead in West Somerset. This is a longer trip than last year and also travels over the privately-owned West Somerset Railway. We have had a lot of you requesting we return to Minehead after our trip there in 2002. The scenery is really good and it should be a great day out. Again, please help us publicise this, even if it's just putting the form up in your local Post Office, church, club or pub. Booking forms are enclosed for both events. It's better to book sooner so as not to be disappointed. Then after our first highly successful Folk Train in 2007, we're planning more for 2008. More about that next time.

We have two new committee members, both of whom started working with us as volunteers after our request for extra help last summer. Welcome to Roy Beacham and Harry Boardman, both from the Northwich area. Roy has been co-ordinating the passenger counts that many of you will have seen us taking on the line since August. Harry has become our Minutes Secretary and is also helping in other ways. Meanwhile, our Secretary Arthur Sancto has been recovering from a serious operation. He's coming along well and is starting to get back involved with us as his health improves. It's good to have you back, Arthur! The Cheshire Best Kept Station Awards held recently saw both Mobberley and Plumley win awards. It's getting harder to win awards as the competition has been extended to cover the whole of the "old" Cheshire, so we're delighted to have won two. Well done to the villagers of Mobberley and Plumley for cherishing their local railway stations and making them places to be proud of. It's that time of year for membership renewals and a renewal form is enclosed. We now have over 650 members which is a huge number when you consider the length of our line. The fact we have so many members helps us influence future policy more easily. Please rejoin – we hope you feel we're representing you well – and please provide feedback on areas you think could/should improve. If you'd like some of our membership recruitment leaflets to spread around, please let me know.

Mentioning influence, many of you will remember the submission we made to the Draft North West Rail Utilisation Strategy last January. The final strategy produced allayed a lot of our fears, though omitted any improvements for the line. However, since then the latest draft timetable for the line for December 2008 produced by the Department for Transport (DfT) shows the peak hour extra services (that is the ones over and above the standard hourly service) will only run as far as Stockport in the morning peak, and start from Stockport in the evening peak, this to make more space available for long distance trains to run to Manchester Piccadilly. We were dismayed to see this, having put what we felt was a robust case forward to counter this. However, it seems that the DfT is determined to get more and faster long distance trains to run to Manchester, and since they are not willing to invest in improving the infrastructure on that section and it is already full, that means local services have again to be thinned out. Just think – prior to 1990 we had three trains an hour directly to Manchester from/to our line in the peaks – now the proposal is we will have only one. They say they want more people to use public transport, but their actions suggest otherwise. In our view the people of mid-Cheshire are getting a raw deal. We are very unhappy about this, as we imagine most of you will be, and are working hard to do what we can to make our views even more strongly. Performance of train services over the line was at its best since 1998 up until October last. The “Leaf Fall season” together with a long temporary speed restriction made things less good in the autumn and Northern seems to have had a spell of unit unreliability over the last few months. Things have been better since the turn of the year and Northern accept they need to work harder to reduce unit failures. Hopefully by the time you read this we’ll be getting back to our normal reliable service. Thanks again for being part of MCRUA – we value your membership. Please rejoin, support us for 2008 and let us have your views.

### **A REQUEST FOR MEMBERS’ OPINIONS from David Miller**

As you may know, I am the MCRUA delegate on the British Transport Police North Western Area Citizens’ Panel Community Forum. The basic purpose of the Forum is to exchange information between British Transport Police (BTP) and the general public (“the community”) so that BTP can understand better the concerns of the community and the community learns more of what BTP do and how they can be helped. A similar forum to deal with more local matters within Cheshire has also been set up. The 600 or so members of MCRUA obviously have an interest in the railway and could provide a valuable resource by telling BTP of their concerns. Naturally, you would contact them directly about specific matters, but please send me your opinions on more general subjects that BTP can do something about, so that they can be discussed at the next Forums. I do not want to influence your opinions, but you may still be wondering what I am looking for, so here are some issues to prompt you. Do you think they are being adequately dealt with? Do you like the way in which BTP deals with the public over these issues? Of particular interest to MCRUA, do they discourage you from travelling by train?

- Vandalism and graffiti
- Anti-social behaviour on trains and stations
- Intimidation or fear of crime against you
- Random searches of passengers
- Neighbourhood policing (teams allocated to specific lines or areas)
- Passengers venting anger on front-line staff
- Fare evasion
- Ticket checks
- Anti-terrorism measures
- Football crowds
- Trespass
- Does the presence of uniformed officers reassure or worry you?

Please contact me by any convenient means. David Miller, 16, Primrose Hill, Cuddington, Northwich, CW8 2TZ. E-mail: [d.miller@which.net](mailto:d.miller@which.net) Phone: 01606-888093.

The following article should have been included in the 20th anniversary newsletter and apologies are due to the author for that omission.

### **TRAVELLING ON THE MID-CESHIRE LINE by CARYLL BLAKE**

The train ground to a halt somewhere between Northenden and Stockport which was not unusual as there is a signal in the vicinity. I continued to read my newspaper and listen to Classic FM. I suddenly realised we had not moved for some ten minutes! Now in 2007 that was unusual. I started to remember how things were on the Chester line some 15/20 years ago. I began travelling to Manchester about 7:30am each morning from Knutsford. There were only a handful of passengers and we all were on Christian name terms and would spend our waiting time chatting and getting to know one another. I remember two lawyers, a professor at Manchester University, a mature student at Salford University, an insurance broker and an architect to name most of them, plus a few school boys. If the train arrived 15 minutes late that was a bonus – the norm would be about 20 minutes down, but if you carefully timed that down time and arrived when you *expected* it arrive – you missed it because on that day it was on time. The process then began all over again waiting for the following train. The train in those days appeared to be made of wood – probably that which Noah no longer required. It was very comfortable compared to today's standards, but extremely rickety and unreliable. We frequently had to stop mid-journey due to a cow on the line, or a herd even having broken through the fences (not that that was a fault of the railways). One of my lady companions knew all the farmers along the track and when she arrived in her office would telephone them to complain (no mobile phones then!). The guard and driver would alight from the train and shoo away the offending beasts in order to get going once again. This in itself frequently took a little time! It was really all good fun if you didn't mind being late in the office.

The journey home however was more of a nightmare. I originally travelled via Deansgate and then decided to walk up as Piccadilly station, which was not a pleasant venue in those days. It was cold, draughty and wet, the water leaked though the broken glass on a rainy day with nowhere to spend a pleasant wait which could be an hour or so. How different the station is today. After the introduction of Metrolink, I used this as far as Altrincham when I would swap from the tram to the train which never arrived. It was not unusual to wait for 40 minutes or more on Platform 4. We got to know all the station attendants, all about their families, holidays, gardens and life in general. This was all very well on a fine evening in the summer. Come the winter it was abysmal. There was one very small waiting room (still there) which was full of smoke. The staff knocked off at 6:30 approx and locked up. You were then left on a dark, cold platform with no announcements (that is a very recent addition). If the train was cancelled before the station attendant left, he could and sometimes did, call taxis for the travellers. However, if he had gone home – well that was tough. I always kept a supply of complaint forms in my desk at work, which were from time to time replied to and occasionally I was fortunate enough to receive the refund of my fare. When mobile phones were introduced I was one of the first to have one among my fellow passengers, and it was a godsend as I could call up my husband and he would drive to Altrincham to meet me off the tram. On one memorable occasion one icy Saturday my husband and I decided to take the train to London and in doing so needed to change at Stockport to catch the London train. About a mile from Mobberley Station I smelt a very peculiar smell which was shortly followed by an alarm bell at which point the train slithered to a halt. The smell continued and smoke began to creep along the floor. The guard and driver alighted the train and soon returned to explain that the brakes had caught fire and we must abandon the train immediately. There were a few elderly passengers on board some of whom were quite disabled with their accompanying

walking sticks and one lady with a Zimmer frame. Until that time I had never quite realized how far the ground was from the carriage floor! The guard kindly helped us all off the train and we had to walk along the line to Mobberley Station. I completely ruined a brand new pair of stiletto heels trying not to slip on the icy clinker – my legs were not long enough to stretch from sleeper to sleeper. We looked like a forlorn band of refugees laden with bags and suitcases. My husband and I were fortunate to get a lift from Mobberley, thanks to my mobile phone, but I believe it was a very long time before they moved the stricken train. However, it seems almost a distant memory (dare I say that?!). Over the past 2-3 years the punctuality is almost spot on. Only when there is a very genuine reason such as the great storm of 2007, or today – the points had failed – do we have a problem. Even the leaves on the line appear have stuck fast to the branches. There is a vast improvement and congratulations to the people responsible for their hard work in pursuing punctuality! Despite the downside there was of course an upside.... I have made many friends over the years who otherwise I would probably have never even noticed. Eventually my train started to move slowly along the track, once more one hour late! Déjà vu!

### **PHONE NUMBER FOR REAL TIME TRAIN RUNNING INFORMATION**

Northern has a freephone phone number which passengers can use to obtain real time train running information. The number is 0800-528-0200 and it is free from landlines including public payphones. What's more the call is answered in Northern's Control Room in Manchester. It is a matter of regret that this number is not better publicised and MCRUA continues to press Northern on this issue. A useful step would be to include mention of the number in the line's pocket timetable.

### **THE "ALL-LINE" TIMETABLE SURVIVES!**

Against all the odds, the printed National Rail Timetable survived its predicted demise with the December timetable change. TSO (formerly Her Majesty's Stationery Office) has published a UK Rail Timetable in exactly the same format used by Network Rail. Only the system map is missing. The timetable retails at £15 and is available from WH Smith branches at main stations. The branch at Manchester Piccadilly has copies alongside the railway enthusiast magazines. If you want to order a copy to be sent by post, TSO can be contacted on 0870-243-0123 quoting ISBN 9780117020719 and reference code DBC or online at [www.tsoshop.co.uk](http://www.tsoshop.co.uk). Middleton Press is also publishing "Rail Times", which is a monthly A5-size publication costing £14.95. The book includes colour maps and the timetables are half the size of those in the UK Rail Timetable. Middleton Press can be contacted on 01730-813169, by email: [info@middletonpress.co.uk](mailto:info@middletonpress.co.uk) or at [www.middletonpress.co.uk](http://www.middletonpress.co.uk). Thank you to MCRUA member Keith Pennyfather for this information.

### **FARES NEWS**

The annual January fare rise ritual was again played out in the media as the Government continued with its aim of making passengers pay more of the cost of running the railways. 2<sup>nd</sup> January again saw above-inflation increases in both regulated and unregulated fares. Regulated fares (singles, Saver returns and 7-day season tickets) again increased by RPI (the retail price index) plus one percent whilst unregulated fares increased even more. These increases will hardly encourage people to choose rail despite its environmental advantages over other forms of transport. Passengers are being penalised because the Government insists on sticking with the hugely expensive fragmented rail industry structure inherited from the previous administration. This time railcards were also increased in price with the Senior, Young Persons and Family Railcards going up from £20 to £24. The Disabled Persons Railcard remains at £18. Even the newly introduced Cheshire Day Ranger went up in price, from £15 to £16 for adults and the child version now costs £8. The GM Rail Ranger ticket increased to £3.80 for adults and £1.90 for children. The GM Evening

Ranger now costs £1.90 (no reduction for children). A welcome change is that the **West Midlands Day Ranger** (which now costs £15.40) can now be used on Arriva Cross Country in addition to former Regional Railways services. This ticket covers travel from Crewe to a wide swathe of the West Midlands. £10 advance purchase single fares are available on the Manchester-Cardiff route (Arriva Trains Wales) and between Manchester Airport/Piccadilly and Glasgow and Edinburgh (Trans-Pennine Express). The range of National rail fares is to be simplified later in 2008. Members are reminded that MCRUA has a copy of the current National Fares Manual (North West issue). Please contact Andrew Macfarlane (contact details on the back page) if you need any fare information. Through tickets are now available between many Virgin stations including Manchester Piccadilly and Eurostar destinations including Lille, Paris and Brussels via London St Pancras but they must be obtained over the telephone from Eurostar.

## **DECEMBER 2008 TIMETABLE**

More details have emerged on the changes with the December 2008 timetable when Virgin West Coast introduce their VHF (very high frequency timetable) with the completion of further stages of the upgrade of the West Coast main line. As previously announced there is to be an hourly service between London Euston and Chester operated by 125mph Voyager trains. The journey time will be under two hours and Chester will get its fastest-ever train service to London. The service between Manchester Piccadilly and London Euston increases from two to three trains per hour with the introduction of an additional Pendolino train each hour calling at Stockport, Wilmslow and Crewe. This additional train will leave Manchester Piccadilly at 55 minutes past the hour. In the opposite direction the hourly service to Piccadilly via Wilmslow will leave Euston at 40 minutes past each hour. The Cross Country timetable is also revamped from December 2008 with the introduction of hourly services from Manchester Piccadilly to Bristol and Bournemouth, both via Birmingham. Current plans are for the Bristol service to run non-stop between Manchester Piccadilly and Stoke-on-Trent but GMPTE is pressing for the service to call at Stockport. Network Rail has said that a stop can be timetabled. There is also a campaign for this service to call at Macclesfield, which otherwise will have only two fast trains each hour timed a few minutes apart. There is however also a plan to extend the hourly Manchester-Macclesfield Northern local service through to Stoke-on-Trent from December 2008 to provide an hourly service at Congleton.

Other changes from December 2008 include the extension of the Manchester Piccadilly-Marple local services to New Mills Central to provide two trains per hour to and from New Mills and also the Oldham Loop service will become stand alone in preparation for its hoped-for conversion to Metrolink. A dedicated half-hourly all stations local service is introduced on the Manchester Airport line with alternate trains extended to and from Crewe. The December 2008 timetable assumes that the third platform at Manchester Airport will be available for use (construction work on this platform is running on schedule). The Buxton to Blackpool North service is split in two with separate services between Buxton and Manchester Piccadilly and Manchester Victoria and Blackpool North. The existing Hazel Grove to Piccadilly local service will be extended to either Bolton or Preston to maintain something of a link across Piccadilly but the change will see the ending of regular through services from Stockport to Blackpool. As for the all-important mid-Cheshire line, we know that an hourly service will definitely be provided to and from Manchester Piccadilly but the fate of the peak hour "extras" remains unclear. GMPTE says that fears that the December 2008 timetable would lead to cuts in peak hour services have proved groundless. We are seeking clarification as to exactly what this means for the mid-Cheshire line. The December 2008 timetable will see **Winsford** gain an hourly service in both directions on Monday to Saturday. Hartford retains its hourly service.

## **APPEAL FOR PEOPLE WITH MARKETING/PR EXPERTISE**

The MCRUA committee would like to hear from anyone with knowledge or experience of marketing and/or public relations and who would like to serve on one of our working groups. If you are interested, please contact John Oates (contact details on the back page).

## **NEWS FROM THE LINE**

Work has begun on the £10 million package of improvements to **Chester** station. Roadworks have taken place to improve access along Station Road and work has started on providing a glazed roof over the concourse and platforms. Over the past 12 months there has allegedly been a 30% increase in the number of passengers using the station. Network Rail is spending £4 million on improvements to the listed 1848 station building and the remainder of the scheme is being funded by the city and county councils, Arriva Trains Wales, Merseyrail, Merseytravel, the North West Development Agency, the Railway Heritage Trust, Virgin Trains and Visit Chester and Cheshire. Chester MP Christine Russell has taken up the issue of car parking at Chester station with Secretary of State for Transport Ruth Kelly. The main building at **Lostock Gralam** station, derelict for years, was demolished on Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> July. The station ceased to be a request stop from the December timetable change in anticipation of the Lostock Triangle development, which is now under construction. Two additional trains now also call at Lostock Gralam, the St Annes to Greenbank service on the morning peak (at 09.03) and the 15.49 Chester to Piccadilly service (at 16.19). An improvement scheme for the station remains in preparation. The **Middlewich** line was reopened as a through route in November when the new points at Sandbach were finally commissioned under the control of the Manchester South signalling centre at Stockport. A class 37 locomotive based at Warrington was used for train crew refamiliarisation of the route but we are not aware of any regular freight traffic over the line since it reopened.

## **METROLINK NEWS**

Stagecoach has taken over the operation of the Metrolink system under a new 10-year contract, which began on 15<sup>th</sup> July. The only obvious sign of the takeover is that externally the trams are cleaner. The relaying of the track on the Metrolink Altrincham line was completed on schedule and the line reopened on 28<sup>th</sup> August. The ride is now much smoother than previously. There is still no sign of the promised new ticket machines. Through tickets (including season tickets) remain available from any National Rail station to any Metrolink station. Four new trams have been ordered from Bombardier for a new line into the planned Media City at Salford Quays. The new line will branch off the Eccles line and is due to open in 2010. The shuttle bus from Stretford Metrolink station to the Trafford Centre, Arriva service ML1, is under threat of withdrawal. GMPTE has withdrawn its share of the funding for the service and it remains to be seen whether it can survive. The bus provides a useful link with easy interchange at Stretford (particularly in the Trafford Centre-bound direction) and through ticketing from every Metrolink station. GMPTE says that there are many commercial bus services between Stretford Mall and the Trafford Centre. That is true but none of them go from the same convenient location and the through ticketing would be unlikely to survive the withdrawal of the ML1.

## **SAVE THE WOODHEAD TUNNEL**

Members may have read of the threat to the “new” Woodhead tunnel, opened with electrification of the Manchester-Sheffield/Wath line in 1954. The line closed in 1981 and National Grid purchased the tunnel from the BR Property Board in 1993. They now plan to transfer a 440kV power cable from one of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tunnels at Woodhead into the 1954 tunnel, thereby preventing the tunnel from being reopened for rail use. The 1954 Woodhead Tunnel has great potential in view of its modern construction and generous

clearances. Sadly the Government has refused to intervene to safeguard the tunnel for future rail use. A campaign group has been set up to fight National Grid's plans and their website is at: [www.savethewoodheadtunnel.blogspot.com](http://www.savethewoodheadtunnel.blogspot.com). We wish them every success.

## LOCAL RAIL NEWS

Hoole Road bridge, at the west end of Chester station is to be closed to road traffic from 11<sup>th</sup> February for 8 to 12 weeks while five of its spans are strengthened to meet Highway Authority requirements for load capacity. There are to be "possessions" (i.e. closures) of the railway during the work but the mid-Cheshire line train service should not be affected. The *Railway* pub at Heatley near Lymm on the Trans-Pennine Trail (formerly the Lymm line) has recently reopened after a period of closure.

## A WARM WELCOME TO ALL OUR NEW MEMBERS

The following people have joined MCRUA since the previous issue of the newsletter was published:

Ms H Ormerod, Knutsford	Mrs J Harris, Cuddington
Mr A Stokes, Middlewich	Mr C J Tasker, Sale
Dr M A Cotton, Alderley Edge	Mrs C C Horrocks, Ellesmere
D & V Armstrong, Timperley	Mr C H Gilbert, Timperley
Mr D Vaughan, Toft, Knutsford	Mr & Mrs C R Anslow, Wilmslow
P Jackson, Little Leigh	Mr P Bamford, Cheadle Hulme
Mr & Mrs M & S Stone, Hale	Mr C Menzies, Altrincham
Mrs M Ashton, Knutsford	Mr & Mrs J Oakley, Cuddington
Mr M Ross, Chester	Mr D J Wright, Haslington

We regret to record the death of MCRUA member Peter Oldham from Mobberley.

## MID-CHESHIRE LINE PEOPLE

We say farewell to **Neil Roberts**, who has stepped down from the position of Rail Officer with Cheshire County Council. His place has been taken by **Christine Garner**, whom we welcome to her new role. **Garth Goddard**, a public transport officer with Cheshire County Council since 1980 and a former County Transport Co-ordinator, has retired. We wish him a long and happy retirement.

**DISCLAIMER** Opinions expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of the MCRUA committee.

## USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS

National Rail Enquiries	08457 48 49 50 (24 hours a day)
The Trainline (bookings by telephone)	08457 222 333
British Transport Police Manchester Control Room	0161 228 5685
Freephone number to report crime on the railway	0800 40 50 40
Network Rail (to report infrastructure faults)	08457 11 41 41
Northern Rail Train Running Information	0800 528 0200
Northern Rail Customer Relations	0845 0000 125
Passenger Focus (complaints appeals)	08453 022 022
Helpline for Manchester Piccadilly station	0845 0000 033
GMPTE Bus, Rail and Metrolink Enquiries	0161 228 7811 (08.00 to 20.00)

Metrolink Enquiries 0161 205 2000  
Cheshire Traveline (bus and rail enquiries) 01244 602666 (08.00 to 20.00)  
Merseyside PTE Public Transport Enquiry Line 0151 236 7676 (08.00 to 20.00)  
National Public Transport Enquiry Line 0871 200 2233

## YOUR COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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## SUB-COMMITTEES

Middlewich & West Cheshire Sub-Committee. Chairman: Dave Roberts, 5 Whitley Close, Middlewich, CW10 0NQ. Tel: 01606-833404 (home), 07900-194975 (mobile). Email: stationcampaign@aol.com

Hartford & Winsford Sub-Committee. Please contact David Miller (for contact details see above).

## MID-CESHIRE COMMUNITY RAIL OFFICER – Mark Willcox

Email: [mwillcox@valeroyal.gov.uk](mailto:mwillcox@valeroyal.gov.uk) Tel: 01606-867534 or (mobile) 07825-681583.

Membership of the association costs £2 for younger persons (under 21), £5 for individuals, £7 for families, £14 for voluntary bodies and £25 for corporate bodies. If you wish to join please return the form below to MCRUA, 53 Acacia Avenue, Hale, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 8QY. Please make cheques payable to "Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association". Please also send any subscription renewals to the same address. MCRUA is affiliated to Railfuture, the national, voluntary body for rail users.

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Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Family/Individual\*  
New Member/Renewal\*  
\* Please delete

02/08 \_\_\_\_\_ Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

as appropriate