

MID CHESHIRE RAIL REPORT

No. 112

AUTUMN 2021

ISSUED FREE TO MCRUA MEMBERS

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. We are also on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/Mid-Cheshire-Rail-Users-Association-MCRUA-124008736132899>.

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

FROM THE SECRETARY:

TAKE NOTE: The Annual General Meeting of the Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association will take place on TUESDAY 16 NOVEMBER 2021 at 7.30pm.

Due to the continuing COVID issues, the meeting will be held on-line via ZOOM. Printed Agenda papers are enclosed with this Rail Report for the meeting.

Those members wishing to join the meeting via Zoom can apply to the Secretary (secretary@mcrua.org.uk) by MONDAY 8th NOVEMBER, who will send the meeting log-in details.

Members can take part by post or email by voting to accept the critical parts of the Annual General Meeting by returning the voting paper - or by sending a simple email to the Secretary (secretary@mcrua.org.uk) by MONDAY 8th NOVEMBER.

Following the death of Richard Bragg, and the resignation of the Chairman due to family relocation, we also say *thank you* to John Hulme and Harry Boardman who are not seeking re-election. A full appreciation will appear in the December Rail Report. **The committee is keen to seek new members to be initially co-opted to the committee for the first 12 months.**

Please speak with any member of the committee for further details.

CHAIRMAN'S COMMENTS by John Oates

Welcome to our latest Rail Report as we move to Autumn, a lovely time of year for Autumnal leisure trips out. This is to be **my last Chairman's Comments** as my wife Steff and I are moving from Mobberley after 23 years to mid-Wales. It was always our intention to move about this time in our lives and for us it's an exciting time house hunting whilst also having our house on the market. I expect to stay on the committee until we move, date yet to be determined, though will be stepping down as Chairman at the Committee Meeting following our forthcoming AGM.

Patronage on both our Crewe-Liverpool and Mid Cheshire Lines is steadily returning to the levels seen prior to "COVID". This is particularly noticeable with leisure travel and at weekends, with loadings on some Saturdays on the Mid Cheshire Line being so heavy the trains have been unable to keep time leading to many trains arriving 5 or more minutes late. Saturday 25 September was a recent example of this with the poorest "on time" performance figures we have seen for many months. With commuter travel this has also been coming back since early-September. We hear Northern has one of the highest levels of return to pre-COVID patronage of any of the train companies in Great Britain. Whilst on this subject, many of you will know that the **pre-COVID timetables have yet to be reinstated**. On the Mid Cheshire Line this means the morning and evening peak hour extras have yet to be reintroduced. This has created a bizarre situation on the Mid Cheshire Line of providing a train every 60 minutes throughout the day, though **in the morning peak from 7am to 9am towards Manchester this is reduced to a train every 72 minutes**. Quite ridiculous. This is causing a lot of difficulties for scholars as young as 11 in particular arriving far too early for school when the gates are still closed and leading to some very long days and very tired pupils. There have been a lot of complaints about this to Northern. It appears that now that the franchises are abolished

and the train companies are operating to the “Emergency Measures Agreements”, that the timetables to be operated are determined by the Department for Transport (DfT) in London. We have heard that the DfT is not inclined to support a return to the normal timetable until passenger loadings are at least 80% of what they were pre-COVID. Whilst this makes sense for many lines, especially for those with currently a more regular service than hourly, this is clearly not sensible for the Mid Cheshire morning peak service towards Manchester. We know this is causing so much difficulty especially for the scholars, that we hear many parents have cancelled the scholar season tickets they bought and have clubbed together to drive their children to and from schools in Knutsford, Hale and Altrincham. We know users have written to Northern and also to their MPs complaining about this. Meanwhile, if this is affecting you, please let Northern and then your MP know (as your representative to the Secretary of State for Transport and through him to the DfT), explaining the difficulties. Sarah provides her report as Community Rail Officer below. I know Sarah covers this, but I want to pay a special tribute to the hard work put in by our member Michael Ross of Chester in all the organisation and support of the involvement of the Mid Cheshire Line with **Pete Waterman’s “Making Tracks” exhibition at Chester Cathedral**. Quite a mammoth effort and very ably supported by fellow member, John Hulme as well as by Sarah. Very well done, All.

The outcome of the Manchester Rail Recovery Task Force due in March 2021 as discussed in our May Rail Report is still “**delayed**”. It looks to be in the “too difficult box” at DfT, but whilst this hiatus continues rail users in the North West continue to have to put up with sub-standard service patterns and some of the least reliable and most crowded train services in Great Britain. How this continued lack of action sits alongside the Government’s “levelling up” process is hard to understand. That’s it from me for my last Chairman’s Comments. I will be remaining as a member and supporter of MCRUA, even though distantly from mid-Wales. Enjoy reading the articles below in our Rail Report. If you have questions or comments, please use the enquiries form on our website – <https://www.mcrua.org.uk/contact-us/> or email or write to any of our committee members – details on the back page. Here’s to a benign and enjoyable Autumn.

MCRUA SEEKING NEW COMMITTEE MEMBERS

In this Rail Report you will have read that MCRUA has vacancies for committee members, which happens from time to time in all voluntary bodies. So what does being a committee member at MCRUA involve?

The committee normally meets every six weeks or so, and in normal times (Covid restrictions permitting), in one of the pubs near a Mid Cheshire Line station. MCRUA's role is to represent users of the Mid Cheshire Line and the mid-Cheshire stations on the Crewe to Liverpool line, so we are keen to hear from people with experience of using these services and of the stations they serve. We press for better stations, better trains, more frequent services; we support station volunteers, we maintain noticeboards, we respond to consultations, we speak on behalf of users with train operators, borough councils, other transport groups and influencers. As with all voluntary bodies, some of the work is concerned with maintaining MCRUA itself, but all of our committee members whatever the role have a passion and belief in rail-based transport.

MCRUA has been established for over 30 years and is on a firm financial footing. We have good working relations with industry bodies including the train operators. On our committee we welcome people with a background in the rail industry or none. At the moment we are keen for new committee members who live or work in the Cheshire East borough, especially Knutsford, but residents all along the line are welcome. We normally suggest that potential committee members attend a couple of meetings as guests to decide if they will fit in and be able to contribute, before we co-opt them as new members. There is no need to be elected at an AGM before attending a committee meeting. If you are interested please get in touch with the Secretary or any committee member. Contact details are on the back page.

COMMUNITY RAIL OFFICER’S REPORT by Sarah Morgan

Recent activities at each station are shown below.

Mouldsworth

1. Repairs to planters with Mid Cheshire Community Sheds
2. Removal of old artwork and new artwork to be created by two local primary schools

Delamere

1. Wildflower project in partnership with the Station House Café
2. New signs to replace the old Forestry Commission signs to be sought
3. Plans with Petty Pool College for new art and planters
4. Discussions with CWAC (Cheshire West and Chester Council) about the reopening of the stepped access which is temporarily closed following road works
5. Discussions with Forestry England about improving the access from the station with new signage and maps and promotion of rail travel to the Christmas lights event
6. Leaflet holders need replacing

Cuddington

1. New handrail to be installed (funded by the Northern Access Fund) – to be confirmed.
2. Fencing repairs to be carried out by the Mid Cheshire Community Sheds following a donation of wood by via the parish council

Greenbank

1. The Mid Cheshire Community Sheds will be replacing some of the broken fencing
2. The painted fencing will be repaired by Northern
3. The Friends group has plans to add wildflowers and is considering a memorial tree project - to be agreed with Northern.

Northwich

1. Awaiting updates on building plans.
2. Meeting with local volunteers to discuss plans for a volunteer day - possibly next spring when plans are known for development.
3. Plans for a railway photograph exhibition with 8E Railway Association
4. Travel plans to be developed as part of the CRP Activity Plan

Lostock Gralam

1. Ongoing basic maintenance by Northwich Town Council
2. Plans to add wooden sculptures and mural to the station following a meeting with the parish council – brief to be drawn up

Plumley

1. Plans for area to the side of the parking area to be put forward by the local group - a picnic area is being considered and support will be given by Network Rail to clear the area which is in the Northern lease.
2. Information re future HS2 funding has been shared with the local council to consider an application to improve the road crossing for pedestrians.

Knutsford

1. The CRP is meeting with Network Rail to discuss the future development of the station
2. Plans to install new artwork by Knutsford Academy, Wildlife artworks and the heritage railway noticeboard in memory of Richard Bragg.
3. A water butt will also be installed for the In Bloom group

Mobberley

1. Plans are coming together for a new team of volunteers to work on the planting at the station and a request has gone to Northern to change the colours of the station to cream and maroon.

Ashley

1. A new volunteer started earlier in the year. The CRO is to work with the volunteers to develop a plan for station improvements

Hale

1. The CRO is working with the local Friends, Trafford Council, Northern and Network Rail to develop a Conservation Plan for the station. Meetings have been held to discuss ongoing developments and problems with the listed buildings
2. The Civic Society is working on plans to replace the fencing and install a defibrillator and bike storage.
3. The Friends group is working on window art for the Chester platform.

Altrincham

1. The disused buildings are now funded for refurbishment and a business plan is being put together by the Altrincham Hub for the use of the rooms.

2. The Friends group have multiple projects ongoing including the installation of soldier silhouettes, a poem project, history board, book swap and more planters for the platform.
3. Plans are being made for the clearance of overgrown areas for development into Japanese gardens
4. Plans to work with BTH (Blessed Thomas Halford) school to create a mosaic pigeon display.
5. There are also talks about commissioning a mural.

Navigation Road: No projects at present.

Stockport

1. There is a large project being planned for community artwork to be produced and displayed along the wall on the Edgeley approach. This project is being developed in partnership with the Stockport CRO, John Kenny, Avanti and Network Rail.
2. The CRO also met with the Avanti station team to discuss smaller projects including a Christmas train, hand drawn map, window photo display and platform planters

Access Fund updates: The application for a new handrail at Cuddington was approved and members of the Friends of Cuddington Station and the CRO met with the PR Officer from Northern to make a short promotional video. An application to remove the stepped access and install an accessible gate for Mouldsworth station was made independently of the CRP and the CRP met the applicants during the making of the PR video for Northern. One of the applicants has now joined the Northern Accessibility User Group to input on other decisions about access improvements.

Northwich: The CRP submitted a response to the consultation by CWAC in relation to the access options for the station. A stakeholder consultation for the rebuild of the station is expected imminently.

The wildlife art trail at Vickersway Park in Northwich was launched at the start of the summer and was toured as part of the Northwich In Bloom entry that was led by Northwich BID. The exhibition is still on display and currently has no end date, but the art competition to win Cheshire Wildlife Trust memberships closes for entries on 31st October. See <https://www.marvellousdaysout.org.uk/> for more details.

Making Tracks at Chester Cathedral: The Marvellous Days Out railway posters were displayed alongside Pete Waterman's model railway throughout the summer with the CRP producing a new poster and booklet in partnership with the North Cheshire CRP. John Hulme put in a huge amount of work to create the free booklet which received lots of praise from visitors and brought together information about the exhibition and the CRPs. This project also received a lot of support by CRP Member, Mike Ross, who attended the exhibition regularly and dealt with the posters and leaflets, taking multiple trips to collect and deliver items. Poster sales exceeded 10 per day on some days of the exhibition and these remain on sale in the Cathedral shop. The poster display is also remaining at the Cathedral for the time being. The exhibition had many visitors and there may be another exhibition next summer which we hope to be involved in.

Cheshire Best Kept Stations: Stations have now been judged and the committee is considering plans for the presentations later in the year.

Refresh Knutsford: A community event took place in Knutsford on 11th September at St John's Church and the CRP had a stall for two hours to distribute leaflets and network with other community groups.

Along Cheshire Lines: Several volunteers have been helping to distribute the new newsletter along the line. **If you are based south** of Northwich or around Altrincham and would like to help with the distribution, please let me know.

Go Green by Rail – 18th to 24th October: Community Rail Network Campaign for the first annual Community Rail Week to promote the green credentials of rail use.

DECEMBER 2021 TIMETABLE

Disappointingly there are to be no significant changes to the train service on the Mid Cheshire Line in the new timetable starting on Sunday 12th December. The Sunday service will remain every two hours.

MEMBERSHIP MATTERS by Paul Wilkinson

2021 Membership update (data correct as at 2nd October 2021) - Thank you for your continuing support.

If you received this Rail Report by Post: Please check your envelope for your membership number. If it is in the form of:

20xxx - your membership ran out on 28 February. We invite you to renew using the enclosed form.

21xxx - you have recently joined or already renewed. Thank you for your continued support.

Members who receive this Rail Report by email will also be invited to rejoin if not already done so:

Renewal form attached for those 2020 members who have not yet renewed.

MUSIC TRAINS

The Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership is looking to restart the music trains on the line from April 2022, Covid permitting.

LATE NIGHT ENGINEERING WORK by Andrew Macfarlane

The last train from Chester and the last two trains from Piccadilly are still being replaced by buses every six weeks due to planned engineering work. This happened from Monday 11th October to Thursday 14th October (inclusive) when the 22.52 train from Chester to Piccadilly and the 22.42 and 23.41 trains from Piccadilly to Chester were each replaced by two buses. Buses start from Chester and Piccadilly at the normal train times, call at or near each station normally served by the train but stop to set down only from Knutsford onwards. Buses also start from Knutsford to both Chester and Piccadilly calling at all stations. This bus replacement will probably happen again from Monday 22nd November to Thursday 25th November (inclusive).

CREWE TO LIVERPOOL LINE NEWS by Simon Barber

London NorthWestern are currently running one train per hour on their Birmingham-Crewe-Liverpool route, which means half the previous weekday service at Hartford (no change from previous at Winsford and Acton Bridge). However all trains are diagrammed to be 8 coaches (2 x class 350s) so there is plenty of space. LNW have told stakeholders that there is no date for reverting to two trains per hour (which would benefit Hartford passengers) but they will continue to hold the 'slots' in the timetable for this and intend to revert to two trains per hour when passenger numbers increase. There will be changes to other LNW services over the next year or two as Avanti make the changes they promised in their franchise. It appears that the Crewe to Euston service will be speeded up somewhat (a benefit for Cheshire passengers wanting cheap tickets to London) and the Crewe-Stoke-Birmingham service will take a different route into Birmingham. New trains are under construction to replace the 350s (which are themselves much younger than the trains operating Northern's Mid Cheshire Line).

FREIGHT NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The Dean Lane Refuse Transfer Station at Newton Heath reopened on 16th June following the rebuilding of the structures on the site. Trains of refuse derived fuel are once again running from there to the Energy from Waste plant at Runcorn, which powers the Ineos Chlor chlorine factory (once part of ICI). The traffic from Dean Lane is combined with that from Brindle Heath (Salford) and the combined train travels via the Mid Cheshire Line in the late evening. Biomass traffic between Liverpool Docks and Drax Power Station remains buoyant. Normally only the loaded trains travel via the Mid Cheshire Line but due to the Miles Platting blockade from 31st July to 15th August the empty trains also did so. Similarly normally only the loaded bin trains from Knowsley (Merseyside) to Wilton (Teesside) come via the Mid Cheshire Line (two per day) but the empty trains also did so during the Miles Platting blockade.

METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The Metrolink through service between Altrincham and Bury resumed as from Tuesday 31st August. So there is again a 6-minute frequency service on the Altrincham line on Monday to Saturday. The Altrincham-Bury through service does not run on Sundays. New trams up to 3131 have now arrived in Manchester. Weekly capping was introduced in September for Metrolink passengers using contactless bank cards. Trams were replaced by buses between Altrincham and Manchester on Sunday 17th October due to engineering work.

FARES NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

New 8 days in 28 days season tickets were introduced as from 28th June for commuters who are no longer working in the office full time. At the time of writing the details of the January 2022 national rail fare increase are unknown. A fares freeze would clearly be preferable to encourage passengers back onto the railways post Covid and to encourage motorists to choose a more environmentally-friendly mode of transport. Ongoing increases in the price of petrol may well help with the latter!

NEWS FROM THE LINE by Andrew Macfarlane

There was a serious incident at **Northwich** station on the morning of 18th May when a gable end wall crashed through the platform canopy onto the Manchester-bound platform. Miraculously no one was hurt but a number of nearby waiting passengers were traumatised. The line reopened the following day with trains using the goods line behind the Chester-bound platform but not stopping at Northwich. Normal service was resumed the day after. The “Chester end” of the building was partly demolished soon after the collapse and has now been completely demolished. Northern have said they plan to rebuild the station and there are hopes that disabled access to the Chester-bound platform (by means of a new footbridge with lifts) will be incorporated in the plans for the rebuilding. All of the ticket vending machines across the whole of Northern stopped working from 13th July due to a malware attack. Each ticket machine had to be visited individually to be reset, which took a fair amount of time. The station building at **Mobberley** was up for sale on 8th June and was sold in September. You can now borrow books from a new library set up by the Friends of Altrincham Interchange in the waiting room on platform 4 at **Altrincham**. Books can also still be borrowed from the booking hall at **Knutsford**. We are seeing the emergence in stages from behind scaffolding of a much-improved original station building at Knutsford, thanks to its new private owner. As Sarah mentions above, a new ramp and an accessible gate are to be installed on the Manchester-bound side at **Mouldsworth** station, which will provide disabled access to the Manchester-bound platform. This and a new handrail at **Cuddington** are being funded by the £250,000 Northern Access Fund. Most of the shipping containers visible from the train on the right just before Ardwick Junction approaching Manchester Piccadilly have been removed. Housing is to be built on the site, which has an interesting history. The site was the home of Manchester City football club’s ground until they moved to Maine Road in 1923. After that it became the Permanent Way yard at the back of Hyde Road tram depot where many trams were set on fire after the end of Manchester and Salford Tramways in the late 1940s. It was later a skid pan for training bus drivers. Stagecoach sold the land to the container firm after they took over Hyde Road bus depot after bus deregulation in 1986. Avanti West Coast diverted trains between Crewe and Holyhead via Sandbach, Middlewich and Delamere every weekend in September due to engineering work at Beeston Castle.

LOCAL RAIL NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The frequency of Merseyrail trains between Chester and Liverpool was improved as from Sunday 26th September. They now run every 15 minutes during the day on Monday to Saturday (every half hour on Sundays). It was announced recently that the line between Lostock Junction (Bolton) and Wigan Station Junction is to be electrified with completion scheduled for 2024/2025. The £78 million scheme includes lengthening platforms at Westhoughton, Hindley and Ince stations to take 6-car trains. The provision of additional platforms at Lostock on the Wigan lines is not part of the scheme, which will provide an electrified link between Bolton and Wigan North Western. The line into Wigan Wallgate station will not be electrified at this stage due to limited clearances under the bridge which carries Wallgate over the line. Macclesfield signal box, which is a BR standard box dating from 1965 and still contains a lever frame, is to be abolished over the Bank Holiday weekend in August 2022. Its area of control will be taken over by the Manchester ROC (Rail Operating Centre) located at Ashburys. Transport for Wales have purchased the 30 Mark 4 coaches which were to have been used by Grand Central for their cancelled Blackpool to Euston open access operation. They will be used on the Manchester-Swansea service from 2023 hauled by class 67 diesel locomotives. Network Rail are to move their office staff from the building called Square One on Travis Street near Manchester Piccadilly station to Manchester Victoria station, where the offices in the 1909 main station building are to be refurbished for use by Network Rail. Square One is to be demolished at some stage because it is in the path of HS2 into Manchester Piccadilly. Norton signal box at Runcorn East station was abolished as from 20th September. Warrington Power Signal Box now works to Frodsham Junction signal box.

INTEGRATED RAIL PLAN FOR THE NORTH AND MIDLANDS by Andrew Macfarlane

This long-delayed Government plan, which will set out the plans for HS2 in the Midlands and the North of England and HS2’s relationship with Northern Powerhouse Rail (the proposed Liverpool-Manchester-Leeds new line) is said to be due for publication on Tuesday 26th October, the day before the Budget. There have been strong hints that the eastern arm of HS2 from Birmingham via Toton to Leeds is to be severely cut back or possibly cancelled altogether. This would see HS2 trains from

USEFUL WEBSITES

www.nationalrail.co.uk (includes a journey planner which shows times and fares and a facility to obtain real time train running information for any station)

www.northernrailway.co.uk (includes details of forthcoming engineering work under “Travel” and then “Improvement Works”)

www.networkrail.co.uk (includes a link to download the National Rail timetable)

www.eastmidlandsrailway.co.uk (to buy any GB rail ticket using a credit or debit card)

www.tfgm.com (the website of Transport for Greater Manchester)

www.metrolink.co.uk (shows any current problems with the tram service and details of future engineering work)

www.traveline.info (a national public transport journey planner for bus, train and tram).

www.transportfocus.org.uk (the website of Transport Focus, the statutory body for rail and bus users).

www.railfuture.org.uk (the website of Railfuture, the independent, national, voluntary body for rail users)

www.traintimes.org.uk (an unofficial website which provides rail information derived from official sources in a user-friendly format).

www.brfares.com (lists all available fares on the National Rail network).

www.railwayherald/railtours (lists special trains (both steam and modern traction) on the main line).

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FRIENDS OF ALTRINCHAM INTERCHANGE – Please contact Andrew Macfarlane.

MCRUA is affiliated to Railfuture, the national, voluntary body for rail users. MCRUA is on Facebook. Type MCRUA in the search box to find our page with our latest news and discussion.

MCRUA MEMBERSHIP

You can join online at www.mcrua.org.uk/membership. Alternatively, you may pay by standing order, details available from the Membership Secretary membership@mcrua.org.uk. Standing Orders are fixed price for five years from the start of the payments. You may also pay by cheque made payable to **Mid Cheshire Rail Users Association** and sent to the **Membership Secretary, 48 Romana Square Altrincham WA14 5QB**.