

MID CHESHIRE RAIL REPORT

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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>.

MORE DETAIL ON THE CHANGES IN THE DECEMBER 2022 TIMETABLE. SEE PAGE 2.

CHAIR'S REPORT by Mike Battman

It has not been a good quarter for our line, in fact it has been awful. Strikes, staff shortages, late cancellations and infrastructure failures have meant that the ability to confidently travel on the line has been lost. It is becoming practice for services to be removed from the timetable as late as 22:00 the previous evening. This of course means that any Delay-Repay claims are not valid despite the fact that you may have booked your ticket and planned your journey. Some services, in particular the 18:39 from Piccadilly (and its return from Chester) seem to be cancelled almost as a matter of routine, this is a crucial late rush hour service and it was cancelled 3 consecutive nights during the Old Trafford Test Match, leaving a lot of passengers transferring from the tram at Altrincham waiting a further hour for a two coach train. The Northern staff on the station were abused by the frustrated and somewhat tipsy travellers. Whilst we totally condemn such abuse, the mismanagement of the train planning had a large part to play in inflaming the situation. We have recently received a report of 16-seat minibuses being used to substitute services with most of the passengers being left behind. Sadly, this is far removed from Northern's excellent response to the Delamere Concerts when extra staff and longer trains were provided.

A recent change in working practices has resulted in the rear coach of 4-coach trains being locked 'out of use'. It is to do with the need for the driver to be able to alight the train via his cab and the most westerly stations on our line cannot accommodate this. It does seem a strange decision as the driver can also exit the cab into the passenger area. The coaches can be manually locked/unlocked but this leads to delays in the services. The end carriage is often the coach with one of the toilets in, MCRUA are in discussions with Northern about this practice. The December 2022 timetable is still, at the time of writing, due to reinstate most of the peak hour trains however, the inability of Northern to provide enough staff for the existing services does not bode well for the enhanced timetable.

Northwich station ticket office remains open until planning permission has been obtained for the rebuilding of the station. The ticket office is open from 06.15 to 13.15 on Monday to Friday and from 07.15 to 14.15 on Saturdays. It is closed on Sundays. The ticket office will be closed for an extended period once planning permission has been granted. Altrincham Stations' footbridge's broken windows have been fixed and the recent storm damaged roof on platform 4 has been 'repaired' although there are still holes in the roof and the repair appears to be cheap rather than functional.

Let's hope for a better autumn on our line.

A MESSAGE FROM MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY PAUL WILKINSON

A volunteer is sought to assist in the electronic distribution of the Rail Report, currently done using Mailchimp software. The Rail Report is currently issued some 3 or 4 times a year, plus some occasional extra circulations. You would need to be willing and able to maintain the mailchimp email address database,

formulate emails and link documents to the email. Full training available. Interested? Please contact the Chairman, Mike Battman mcruachair@gmail.com.

MCRUA is also looking to develop its internet social media presence on Facebook and Twitter and needs a volunteer to manage the processes. Interested? Please contact the Chairman, Mike Battman mcruachair@gmail.com.

DECEMBER 2022 TIMETABLE

The actual train times for the December timetable (which starts on Sunday 11th December) are now visible in the journey planner on the National Rail website www.nationalrail.co.uk. As mentioned in the previous issue, **most Mid Cheshire Line trains will leave Manchester Piccadilly at 10 minutes past the hour** on Monday to Saturday so half an hour different from today. They will leave Altrincham at 36 minutes past the hour going towards Chester. **Also Mid Cheshire Line trains will leave Chester at 56 minutes past the hour, 6 minutes earlier than at present.** They will leave Altrincham going towards Piccadilly at 57 minutes past the hour, 3 minutes earlier than at present. Most of the peak hour extra trains are reinstated but trains towards Chester leave Piccadilly at 10 past the hour throughout the day so as mentioned in the last issue we lose the “extra” train towards Chester in the morning peak (currently trains leave Piccadilly at 07.08 and 07.41).

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 is due to happen from Monday 24th October to Thursday 27th October (inclusive) when the 22.52 train from Chester to Piccadilly and the 22.42 and 23.41 trains from Piccadilly to Chester are each replaced by two buses. The first bus replacing each train starts from Chester and from Piccadilly at the normal train time, calls at or near each station normally served by the train but then stops to set down only from Knutsford onwards. The second bus replacing each train starts from Knutsford at 23.25 and 00.25 to Chester and at 23.37 to Piccadilly calling at all stations. This bus replacement will happen again from Monday 5th December to Thursday 8th December (inclusive).

NEWS FROM THE CREWE-LIVERPOOL LINE by Simon Barber

London Northwestern Railway (LNR) has confirmed to MCRUA that the train service on the Crewe-Liverpool line will change from December. Timings will change and in a very welcome improvement, Acton Bridge is to get an all-day hourly service for the first time in many years. MCRUA has been pressing for this for a long time and we thank LNR for listening. When LNR took over the service, Acton Bridge had four-hour gaps in the timetable and was in decline. These were reduced initially to two-hour gaps and now LNR thinks the station has sufficient potential to offer the full hourly service. MCRUA has reminded LNR of the need to extend the car park at Acton Bridge, which is now urgent and is not difficult if Network Rail will agree to re-position their fence which needlessly restricts the car park size.

Winsford and Hartford stations will have the same hourly service, although before Covid, there were two trains per hour at Hartford so we are not yet back to the full service there. On my most recent visit to Hartford station, there was plenty of space at the station car park at 9am when (after parking restrictions were imposed on the roads nearby) it had become hard to get a space, so it seems that peak hour travel has not yet returned to its former levels. MCRUA is pressing LNR for the reintroduction of a more frequent service at Hartford as well as a later service from Liverpool on Saturday evenings. The Saturday evening service ends too early, not by LNR's choice but by Network Rail's requirement to take possession of the line for engineering work on Saturday nights.

If you start your journey at Hartford station, note that the car park payment machine is no longer in the car park, but outside the station building. You need to buy a parking ticket before travelling. It is not 'Pay & Display' but uses number plate recognition. This means that you don't need to return up the steep steps or the ramp to your car to display the ticket, but you do need to remember your car registration number, when the car is out of your sight, at the machine! Parking at Hartford costs £4.50 per day which is regrettable, but it is much cheaper than at Avanti stations such as Crewe or Runcorn. Free parking is allowed for 20 minutes to pick up or drop off passengers. Parking is still free at Winsford and Acton Bridge.

The trains are almost all 8 coaches long now (two 4-coach sets) so there is plenty of space. They are 'Class 350' electrics which are comfortable and fast (top speed 110 mph!). Not all 350s are the same, however, and if you are making a long journey it is worth looking out for the more spacious versions. Look at the train set number which is in large characters above the driver's cab. The number will be 350xxx where the first digit after '350' is 1, 2, 3 or 4. '2' indicates a train with 5-abreast seating and no tables. '1', '3' and '4' indicate a train with 4-abreast seating, spacious seats and some tables - much better! The two sets in 8-coach trains are often of different types. If you are using Winsford or Acton Bridge stations (or Liverpool South Parkway), the platforms are short and the doors will only open in the front four coaches. This is even true at Acton Bridge where six coaches can stand at the platform. If you are alighting at these stations you will need to move to the front four coaches in advance. The conductor will warn you. The trains are always gangwayed so you can walk through to or from the other set.

If you have not travelled this line for a while, it makes a scenic day out. The beautiful Weaver valley is crossed south of Hartford and again north of Acton Bridge. The crossing of the River Mersey just north of Runcorn station is dramatic with clear views up and down river including the two striking road bridges, and the final descent into Liverpool Lime Street station is, as always, down the deep vertical-sided rock cuttings hewn out by Victorian workmen in the 1840s. Lime Street station was beautifully remodelled a few years ago and is now clean, attractive and well-equipped. Your ticket to Liverpool will be valid to any of the central stations including James Street (for Pier Head and Albert Dock). You can change at Lime Street for James Street, or change at Liverpool South Parkway for Liverpool Central or Moorfields, without needing to buy another ticket. From our Cheshire stations in the other direction, it's an easy journey to Birmingham where New Street station is right in the centre of the city and has also been well redesigned recently. For a longer day out, there are very cheap tickets to London, valid on London Northwestern Railway only. You can travel out after the morning peak for just over £30 return with a railcard (£46 without) and return in the evening peak on LNR without restriction. You'll need to change trains to get to London and the journey is usually quickest by changing at Crewe. Take a drink and snack with you because LNR's trains do not have a trolley or buffet.

The railways suffered during Covid when travel was restricted or banned. Now we need to use them if services are to be improved. Please support MCRUA's campaigning and use your railways!

MIDDLEWICH LINE REOPENING NEWS

The following was posted on Facebook on 20th September:

Chairman Stephen Dent today attended a stakeholders meeting with the LEP (local enterprise partnership) and the companies (AECOM and SLC rail) that have been commissioned to create a strategic outline business plan for the reopening of our line and to future proof it, the consortium are looking at various options from a relatively simple shuttle to and from Northwich to Sandbach on our line with a stop in Middlewich / Gadbrook and a much bigger picture that involves our closest large cities. This was possible after a winning bid was placed to the Restore Your Railway fund as the case to reopen is so strong, however from a financial standpoint it has some issues and looking at a wider rail usage, this issue could be elevated. Stephen feels positive about the outcome of the meeting and although we were not given a timetable for when we would get a train service on the line we were given hope that we are not forgotten and the train will arrive. We will of course give you updates as and when we get them.

MUSIC TRAINS ON THE MID CHESHIRE LINE by Michael Ross

The Music Train programme ran through the summer again, after a two-year gap. Since May, Music Trains have run in the evenings each month from Chester - to the Angel at Knutsford and Golden Pheasant at Plumley, and twice from Altrincham to Alexanders in Chester. There have been two Music Trains for groups - one for Chester Vision Support from Chester to the Railway Inn at Mobberley and one for Hale U3A to Alexanders in Chester. Attendance has been lower than pre-Covid but it is building back up. Disruption to rail services is not helping to encourage people to come along, but quite a few of our pre-covid regulars are back again. Next year's programme is planned to run from April to October.

MAKING TRACKS II by Michael Ross

Pete Waterman's model railway was again on display in Chester Cathedral this summer and attracted many visitors. Nicky Thompson's Rail Art posters from the Mid Cheshire Line and the North Cheshire Line were on display as a backdrop and on sale from the Cathedral Shop. Sales were good and our free booklets and bookmarks were popular as well (Mid Cheshire Rail art posters are available by post from Crewe Heritage Centre's webshop).

FREIGHT NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

Slate waste traffic has begun operating from Llandudno Junction by rail but not to the Peak District! The first run was on Wednesday 3rd August and the train runs to Wellingborough (from where it is tripped to Luton) via Chester and Crewe. The slate waste traffic from Llandudno Junction to Earles Sidings (near Hope Derbyshire), which may run via the Mid Cheshire Line, has still not started due we understand to a delay in getting planning permission for the unloading facilities at Hope Cement Works.

FARES NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

There was recently a Northern Flash Sale of £1 tickets, which were on sale from Tuesday 30th August to Friday 2nd September. Travel was between Tuesday 6th September and Thursday 20th October. Many £1 single fares were available between Piccadilly and Chester via the Mid Cheshire Line but only as electronic tickets. More than 130,000 £1 tickets were sold across the whole of Northern. It would have been useful if Northern had publicised the routes where the £1 fares were available and if the tickets had been available for sale for a longer period of time! Good news is that the "Book with Confidence" scheme has been further extended to 30th November (it had been due to expire on 30th September). Under this scheme passengers are able to make changes to the date and time of their Advance, Off-Peak or Anytime tickets free of charge until 18.00 the day before travel, or exchange an unused ticket for a Rail Travel Voucher or an eVoucher.

AVANTI WEST COAST PROBLEMS

Avanti West Coast announced a reduced timetable as from 14th August with only four trains per hour to and from Euston, one of which went to and from Manchester (normally there are three Avanti trains per hour to and from Manchester). Also Avanti's service to and from Holyhead became a Crewe-Holyhead shuttle with just one train a day from Holyhead and Wrexham to Euston and back. This was due to drivers choosing not to work their rest days. Also advance fares only became available a few days in advance when the timetable had been finalised. It would have been helpful if Avanti had publicised the fact that "walk up" tickets (like Off-Peak Returns) can be purchased from ticket offices (without a seat reservation) for dates much further in the future. More Avanti West Coast services were provided from Tuesday 27th September and the company has announced that they plan to reinstate the three trains per hour service to and from Manchester from the December timetable change. On 7th October the Government announced that Avanti had been given a sixth-month extension to their contract, which will now run until 1st April 2023.

NEWS FROM THE LINE by Andrew Macfarlane

Silhouettes of World War One soldiers were installed near the stairs and near the lift behind platform four at Altrincham station by the Friends of Altrincham Interchange during August. They commemorate the men of Chapel Street in Altrincham. 161 men from the street fought in the First World War and 29 of them were killed in action. A further 20 men died of their injuries soon after the war. More men were lost in action from Chapel Street than from any other street in England. As a result King George V called the street "The Bravest Little Street in England". The silhouettes are worth a look if you are visiting Altrincham station. We have been informed that work is to start to repair the canopy on platform 4 at Altrincham on 7th October and work on the roof will begin on 12th December.

METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

Pet dogs have been allowed to travel on Metrolink in a three-month trial starting on 1st August. Two Smart readers had been installed at the south end of platform 2 at Altrincham by 8th August. Also a third smart reader had been installed in the middle of platform 2/3 by the lift by 17th September. These smart readers are welcome but have taken far too long to be installed. We still await the provision of a ticket machine on platform 2 and Metrolink Passenger Information Displays (PIDs). It is confusing having tram departures from

platform 2 showing on the screens on platform 1. Engineering work is to be carried out in Piccadilly Gardens from Sunday 23rd October to Saturday 29th October (inclusive). During this period trams will run from Altrincham to Bury via Exchange Square. Engineering work is also to be carried out inside Whitefield Tunnel during spring 2023 which will lead to at least a partial closure of the Bury line. The section of line from MediaCityUK to Eccles is due to reopen on Saturday 22nd October after a three-month closure for track replacement. Trams have been operating into Altrincham between 7am and 7pm on days when the RMT rail union has been on strike. Outside those hours replacement buses have run between Timperley and Altrincham.

LOCAL RAIL NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The Golborne Spur of HS2 was withdrawn from the HS2 Phase 2b Bill for Crewe to Manchester, which easily passed its Second Reading in Parliament on 20th June. The new Government has yet to make its position clear on HS2 Phase 2b. We have heard much support for the proposed Northern Powerhouse Rail line from Liverpool to Hull via Manchester, Bradford and Leeds but so far no confirmation of support for HS2 Phase 2b from Crewe to Manchester. Salford Central station is to be closed from 2nd January to 21st May next year for work costing £7.3 million to raise the platform heights on the two platforms currently in use, install tactile paving and replace the platform canopies and coping stones. A new information system will also be installed on the platforms. Trains will continue to run through Salford Central without stopping during the closure. In the previous issue we outlined some of the changes in the December 2022 timetable affecting Stockport. Another change is that the TransPennine Express service from Cleethorpes will run through to Liverpool Lime Street via Warrington Central. It will replace one of the existing Northern services and will call at Urmston. The service had been scheduled to also call at Irlam but that will not now be possible due to a platform height issue. So Irlam will only have an hourly service in the off-peak from December until the platform work can be carried out, which has unsurprisingly not gone down well with users of the station. Macclesfield signal box closed on 27th August just gone. The area is now controlled by the Manchester ROC (Rail Operating Centre) at Ashburys. The Manchester ROC is also due to take control of the Crewe South/Basford Hall area from August 2023. This will result in the closure of the signal boxes at Basford Hall Junction, Crewe Sorting Sidings North and Salop Goods Junction.

A WARM WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS

The following members have joined since the previous issue of the Rail Report:

Mr Roger Beattie of Northern Moor Mr W D Harrison of Chester.

IN MEMORIAM

We are sorry to report that former MCRUA member Chris Proudfoot from Norley near Frodsham died on 24th May this year. Chris was actively involved in railway preservation, specifically in fundraising for the project to build BR standard tank 82045 at the Severn Valley Railway. We also regret to report the death of MCRUA member Martin Stone from Whitchurch.

DISCLAIMER

Opinions expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of the MCRUA Committee.

USEFUL PHONE NUMBERS

National Rail Enquiries	03457 48 49 50 or 0207 068 0500
Avanti West Coast ticket sales (to buy any rail ticket)	0871 977 4222 (08.00 to 22.00 every day)
London Northwestern Railway ticket sales (to buy any rail ticket)	03333110006
Northern ticket sales	0800 200 6060 (0800-2100 Monday to Sunday)
British Transport Police for non-emergencies	0800 40 50 40 or text 61016.
Network Rail (to report infrastructure faults)	03457 11 41 41 or 0207 557 8000
Train Running Information - TrainTracker	03457 48 49 50 and then Option 1.
Northern Customer Services	0800 200 6060 (0800-2100 Monday to Sunday)
Transport Focus (complaints appeals)	0300 123 2350
TfGM Bus, Rail and Metrolink Enquiries	0161 244 1000 (0700-2000 Mon-Fri, 0800-2000 Sat/Sun)
Metrolink Customer Services	0161 205 2000 (seven days a week)

Merseytravel Public Transport Enquiry Line
National Public Transport Enquiry Line

0151 236 7676 (08.00 to 20.00 every day)
0871 200 22 33 (07.00 to 22.00 every day)

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.lnr.uk which has live train running information and ticket sales for London Northwestern Railway, i.e. Liverpool-Crewe and very cheap tickets to London.

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 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.railtourinfo.co.uk (lists special trains (both steam and modern traction) on the main line).

YOUR COMMITTEE MEMBERS

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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.**