

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>.

CHAIR'S REPORT by Mike Battman

Northern's performance has settled down, cancellations and pre-cancellations (where trains are removed from the timetable the day before) are still occurring but not as often. The 0630 from Chester to Stockport is pre-cancelled more often than not and it is on the same diagram as the 1708 from Stockport, so if one is cancelled, so is the other. However, the continuing strikes and infrastructure failures are making the overall performance appear poor. The infrastructure failures, in the form of track circuit, point and / or signalling failures have not been as frequent but are still occurring. The new timetable is due in December, but we are not anticipating any significant changes on the Mid Cheshire Line, however the Liverpool to Crewe line has some changes, see the article by Simon Barber elsewhere in this publication for details.

Passenger usage remains at about 85% of pre-Covid figures although nearer 110% at weekends. Leisure travel is continuing to increase as rush hour and business travel drops. Anecdotally, I have noticed very busy mid-morning trains with parents, grandparents taking their children out for the day and using our line instead of driving; it is good to see. One would hope if the strikes could be settled that passenger numbers will continue to increase. Sadly, there is no resolution to the rear coach of 4-coach trains being locked 'out of use'. MCRUA are continuing to discuss with Northern about this practice. The proposal to close ticket offices has been met with fierce resistance from the public as a whole and particularly from disabled groups. Knutsford, Northwich and the Northern staff at Altrincham along our line will be affected. The ticket office at Altrincham will remain open as it is run by TfGM. Amazingly, the proposals include Piccadilly and Stockport. We have submitted our objections. We are continuing to press Northern for the installation of ticket machines at all our stations on ALL platforms.

Progress on the stations includes the redevelopment of the buildings on platform 4 at Altrincham Station and this is now substantially completed, however it has yet to be accepted by Northern as there is snagging to be completed, including we believe some predictable damp issues. Northwich is progressing well and it is hoped that the building will be watertight by mid-October. However, the ticket office refit is being delayed due to the Government's proposals to close such offices throughout the country. Are there any U3A members out there? Your Chair is doing a series of talks about our line... the times and locations are still to be confirmed but the dates are....

8th November 2023 Knutsford

20th November 2023 Hale History Group (I believe this will be in Altrincham Town Hall at 11:00)

12th February 2023 Hale Science Group

COMMITTEE MEMBERS WANTED

We are still looking to recruit new committee members following a couple of retirements. We meet approximately every 6 weeks on a Monday evening at The Golden Pheasant at Plumley. It is not too onerous, meetings are planned around train times and the social pint and rail chatter is very enjoyable. If you are not sure you are very welcome to come along as a guest to see what you are letting yourself in for!

If anyone is interested please contact the chair at mcruachair@gmail.com

LATE NIGHT ENGINEERING WORK by Andrew Macfarlane

The next bus replacements due to planned engineering work will happen from Monday 6th November to Thursday 9th November (inclusive) and from Monday 18th December to Thursday 21st December (inclusive). These bus

replacements continue to take place every six weeks. The 22.10 from Piccadilly will still run as a train but it will run semi-fast from Altrincham, calling only at Knutsford, Northwich, Greenbank and Chester. So passengers for any station not served by the train need to change at Altrincham onto a replacement bus. The replacement bus will start from stand A in Altrincham bus station at 22.45 (22.50 from December) calling at or near all stations to Chester. The 23.13 train from Piccadilly and the 22.52 train from Chester will be replaced by buses. The bus replacing the 23.13 from Piccadilly starts from Piccadilly at 23.13 and calls at all stations. The 22.52 from Chester is replaced by two buses. The first leaves Chester at 22.52 and calls at all stations. A second bus leaves Knutsford at 23.36 calling at all stations to Piccadilly. We are not currently aware of any forthcoming Sunday engineering work.

NEWS FROM THE CREWE-LIVERPOOL LINE by Simon Barber

MCRUA continues to support passengers using this line and especially those using our three Mid Cheshire stations at Winsford, Hartford and Acton Bridge. The service is well used and anecdotal evidence is that the much improved service at Acton Bridge (hourly throughout the day) is proving popular, with the station seeing higher footfall than before. We have again raised the matter of Acton Bridge car park capacity with the train operator London Northwestern and with Network Rail who own (but do not use) the land beyond the car park fence.

London Northwestern holds regular meetings with stakeholders including MCRUA and we have learnt of some timetable changes coming in December. The effect of these locally is that Hartford station (only) will gain an useful extra train to Liverpool at 0812 Monday-Friday (Lime Street arrival 0842) and an extra return train at 1708 from Lime Street (Hartford arrival 1739), meaning in effect a half-hourly service to and from Liverpool in the peaks for Hartford. This regains a small part of the train service lost at Hartford during the Covid pandemic, but there is no extra peak hour service to/from Crewe and Birmingham (although an extra train will operate in the other direction, it will not call at Hartford).

There is a bigger picture here however, which MCRUA will watch and seek to influence. The train service currently operates with 8 coach trains, but these will be shortened to 4 coaches from December. In the peak hour, the total capacity stays the same because of the extra trains. Between the peaks, however, on Mondays to Fridays, there will be less capacity - 4 coach trains instead of 8 - which saves money for the train operator and hence for the Department for Transport, who appear to be the originator of this change. On Saturdays, passenger numbers are now higher than on Mondays to Fridays, and so a half hourly 4 coach service will start to operate all day. This maintains the capacity between Liverpool, Crewe and Birmingham on Saturdays, but only one of the two trains each hour will call at our Mid Cheshire stations so we do not see direct benefit from this.

MCRUA has asked that the extra weekday peak hour trains should call at Hartford in both directions, not just to/from Liverpool, and at Winsford. We have been told that this is currently prevented by line capacity limitations between Weaver Junction and Winsford, but that could change. We will also be pressing for the extra trains on Saturday to serve Hartford and Winsford. MCRUA would like feedback from members who use the Crewe-Liverpool service about these changes, and particularly any cases of overcrowded trains. If you have any comments, please use our Facebook page or contact me by email at simon@antrobus.net. Thank you.

NORTHWICH STATION NEEDS FRIENDS! by Sarah Muir

Do you have an hour or two you could spare to volunteer at Northwich station? If the answer's yes, then Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership would love to hear from you. The partnership strives to promote rail use to communities along the Mid Cheshire Line. One of the ways they do this is by helping to establish Station Friends Groups at its stations. These volunteers typically work on gardening and art projects and help to engage with the wider communities through holding stalls and other events. For visitors by rail the train station is the first impression people have of a place so volunteering there is a great way to take pride in your community, meet and socialise with others and get fresh air- and spot a train or two!

Community Rail Officer Sarah Muir said "I'd love to hear from anyone who'd be interested in getting involved at Northwich Station. The beauty of being a station friend is people can use their own hobbies and interests to help enhance the platforms and it doesn't just have to be centred around art or gardening. If your interest is wildlife, you could make bird boxes and bug hotels, if you're a local historian then you could research the history of the station for an information board. There's something for everyone-that's the beauty of it!" Please email Community Rail

Officer Sarah Muir on sarah.muir@midcheshirerail.org.uk for more information on volunteering at Northwich Station or at any of the other Mid Cheshire Line Stations.

FREIGHT NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

A new siding for the delivery of slate waste is now due to open at Hope Cement Works in the Peak District in 2025. The slate waste will be coming by rail from Llandudno Junction and may be routed via the Mid Cheshire Line. Unusually, the Hellifield to Chirk log train came through Altrincham on Monday 14th August hauled by locomotive 56096. The Tunstead to Leyland stone train, mentioned in a previous issue, is due through Altrincham at around 08.10.

FARES NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

It is encouraging that 680,000 people have responded to the consultations by Transport Focus and London Travelwatch on the Government's proposals to close most ticket offices in Britain. This would include Manchester Piccadilly, Stockport, Hale, Knutsford and Northwich. As Mike Battman has mentioned above, Altrincham ticket office will remain open because it is run by Transport for Greater Manchester. I personally think that the ticket office closure plan is far too drastic and premature whilst so many travellers do not have access to the Internet and quite a few do not have bank cards. Unlike the London Underground or Manchester Metrolink, the ticketing on National Rail is highly complex and confusing. Trained ticket office staff currently help passengers through this potential minefield. The national rail fare increase in March 2024 is said to be planned to be below inflation.

Through tickets from stations on the Mid Cheshire Line to Metrolink Zones can be purchased from ticket vending machines at stations along the line. Altrincham, Navigation Road and Timperley Metrolink stations are in Zone 4, Brooklands is in Zones 3 and 4 (4 if coming from Altrincham, 3 if going to Manchester), Sale and Dane Road are in Zone 3. Stretford is in Zones 3 and 2 (Zone 3 if coming from Altrincham, Zone 2 if going to Manchester), Old Trafford and Trafford Bar are in Zone 2, Cornbrook is in Zones 2 and 1 (Zone 2 if coming from Altrincham, Zone 1 if going to Manchester). The City Centre zone is Zone 1. Bury is in Zone 4. If travelling through to a Metrolink destination your ticket needs to include all of the zones which you pass through. Through tickets from National Rail stations to Metrolink Zones cannot currently be purchased online. It is now possible to change the train on which an advance single ticket has been booked with Northern using Seatfrog. Also Seatfrog has introduced a Secret Fare deal with TransPennine Express (TPE). You pick your destination, your day of travel and whether you want to go in the morning, afternoon or evening. Your discounted ticket is then emailed to you 24 hours before your departure. Avanti West Coast have introduced Superfares which are cheap fares if you are willing to commit to travel during a particular part of the day on a particular day. You are informed of the actual train time near the date of travel.

NEWS FROM THE LINE by Andrew Macfarlane

Some of the trains on the line are formed of four coaches. In such cases the conductor can usually be found in the third coach (for safety reasons) and the fourth coach is locked out of use. We believe that this is due to short platforms at Mouldsworth (the section of platform under and beyond the bridge cannot currently be used). It is a mystery why the fourth coach cannot be unlocked when Manchester-bound trains arrive at Delamere. The replacement station building at Northwich is nearing completion and the doors have now been installed. The CLC date stone "CLC 1897" from the previous building has been incorporated into the new building ("CLC" are the initials of the Cheshire Lines Committee, the company which owned and ran the Mid Cheshire Line until nationalisation in 1948). We hope that the ticket office at Northwich will actually reopen!

Network Rail plans to replace the road over rail bridges at Greek Street and Stockholm Road in Stockport starting in early 2025. The work is expected to take nine months. The Greek Street bridge is over the cutting south of Stockport station. "Soft provision" is being made at the Greek Street bridge for two additional tracks on the west side of the line to cater for a possible future Metrolink service from Stockport to Manchester Airport. Stockholm Road bridge goes over the Mid Cheshire Line on the double track section between Edgeley Junction No.2 and Cheadle Village Junction and also over the Manchester-Crewe line. Provision is being made here for one additional track alongside the Mid Cheshire Line. The effect of the bridge work on the train service is not yet known. The station footbridge at Hale was nicely restored in early 2023. Work had been completed by May. At the time of writing (mid-October) the new waiting room on platform 4 at Altrincham was still not open. The "hole" in the pavement on Toft Road near Knutsford station has unfortunately reappeared leading to a long detour for pedestrians. We hope that a permanent solution can be found for this issue. It is a mystery why replacement buses which have been booked to run because of engineering work (as for example on Saturday 26th August)

do not run on rail strike days. Northern have issued an Expression of Interest for the supply of up to 450 multiple-unit trains to replace their existing fleet of British Rail-era trains such as the class 150s and class 156s which are used on the Mid Cheshire Line. The first of the new trains would be in service in 2028. Stations on the Mid Cheshire Line did well in the RHS North West in Bloom awards in October. Knutsford got a Level 4 award (Thriving) and Altrincham and Hale got Level 5 awards (Outstanding). Well done to all involved.

METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

There were changes to Metrolink services as from 25th September. The Etihad Campus to Media City service was reinstated and so the Eccles service now avoids Media City during the day on Monday to Saturday. Late night trams were reinstated on Friday and Saturday evenings running every 24 minutes from 23.30 to 01.00. The Sunday service was reduced to operating every 15 minutes but there are now more double trams on Sundays. The first Sunday tram to Piccadilly station now leaves Altrincham at 06.50 and then at 05, 20, 35 and 50 minutes past each hour until 23.35. Metrolink tram times can be found by planning a journey on the Traveline website www.traveline.info. The Penalty Fare for travelling without a valid ticket or pass is now £120 (£60 if paid within 14 days). The penalty for not touching in with a contactless bank card if your card is inspected is now also £60. The crossover south of Sale, installed some years ago, was commissioned in July 2023 but it is clipped and scotched so it can't be used except on a pre-planned basis such as during engineering work.

HS2 PHASES 2A AND 2B HAVE BEEN SCRAPPED by Andrew Macfarlane

At the recent Conservative Party Conference in Manchester Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announced the scrapping of Phases 2A and 2B of HS2. Phase 2B would have crossed the Mid Cheshire Line twice, between Lostock Gralam and Plumley and at Ashley. There would no doubt have been disruption to the train service during its construction. The Government have announced that £36 billion in savings from not building Phase 2 of HS2 will be used for other transport projects, mainly in the North. A list of schemes has been published but it does not include the reopening of the Middlewich line. Perhaps the scrapping of HS2 Phase 2 will improve the chances of the Manchester Airport Western Link from Mobberley to the Airport being built? It would certainly be a useful link to enable faster journey times into Manchester.

LOCAL RAIL NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The Liverpool-Frodsham-Chester Transport for Wales service is to go back to hourly from the December 2023 timetable change. Diggle Junction signal box is said to be due to close at Christmas 2023. TPE is to withdraw its class 68 and Mark 5a locomotive-hauled trains as from the December 2023 timetable change. There were complaints about noise from the locomotives and not all staff had been trained on the locomotives. The move simplifies the fleet and is also a cost-saving measure. TPE is reducing the number of trains between Manchester and Leeds from 4 to 3 per hour in each direction in the off-peak from the December timetable change. The station footbridge at Ardwick station is to be replaced by Network Rail. Progress is being made with redoubling the line through Dore & Totley station including the reinstatement of a second platform and the provision of a new loop at Bamford. The scheme is due to be completed in March 2024 and will allow a third fast train to operate per hour between Manchester and Sheffield although there are currently no plans to provide this. The third service would have to be routed via Marple due to the lack of paths via Stockport. A £72 million investment package was announced for rail schemes in and around Manchester on 25th May. A third platform will be provided at Salford Crescent station and new reversing sidings west of Salford Central and east of Victoria. A sting in the tail of the announcement was the news that the scheme to provide two additional through platforms at Manchester Piccadilly (platforms 15 and 16) has been officially abandoned.

ALTRINCHAM WINTER LECTURE SERIES PROGRAMME

The Altrincham Electric Railway Preservation Society (AERPS) is again holding a season of railway lectures at Altrincham Methodist Hall, a short walk from Altrincham bus/rail/Metrolink station on Barrington Road. The postcode for the hall is WA14 1HF and there is ample free parking. All lectures start at 7.30pm. Admission is £4 (free for AERPS members). The forthcoming programme is:

Friday 10th November. Paul Shackcloth "People and Places 2". Images of the steam railway with at least one person visible.

Friday 12th January. Simon Temple on "South Asian Steam in 1982" - features India, Pakistan and Nepal.

Friday 9th February. John Hooley. "Euston and Destinations: the Potteries and the North West". Steam in action on passengers and freight.

Friday 1st March (note the first Friday of the month). Dennis Flood. "Edge Hill Motive Power Depot". Dennis will entertain us with tales from his career on the footplate in the 1960s.

Friday 12th April. David Beilby. "Transport around the World by GEC and its predecessors". A joint meeting with the Irish Railway Record Society Manchester branch.

STEPHENSON LOCOMOTIVE SOCIETY PROGRAMME

The Stephenson Locomotive Society Manchester Centre continues to meet at the Friends' Meeting House, 6 Mount Street, Manchester M2 5NS, very near to St Peter's Square Metrolink station. The meetings take place at 2pm on Saturdays and are open to non-members. There is an optional donation towards the room hire. The remaining programme for the current series is:

4th November "British Rail: A New History" by Christian Wolmar.

2nd December "Building 72010 Hengist" (a replica of a Clan class BR standard steam locomotive) by Ian Henderson.

20th January "Becoming an International Treasure: The Talylyn Railway and World Heritage" by Ian Drummond.

17th February "Around the UK in Classic Railway Posters" by Jane Ellis.

16th March "Railways between Relief and Rebuilding: Rail Operators' Initiatives and Refugee Evacuations from Ukraine" by Dr Simone Gigliotti.

13th April "The railways of northern Norway and Sweden" by Peter Worsley.

8E RAILWAY ASSOCIATION PROGRAMME

The 8E Railway Association continues to meet at the Gladstone Club off Station Road in Northwich, which is a short walk from Northwich station. The postcode for the venue is CW9 5RB. Meetings take place on the second Tuesday evening of the month from September to May and start at 7.30pm. Free refreshments are provided at the break. Admission is free to members. Non-members are charged £3 except on their first visit, when admission is free. The forthcoming programme is:

Tuesday 14th November John Sloane "BR Steam: The Splendid Years Part 2".

Tuesday 12th December Paul Shackcloth "People and Places 1".

Tuesday 9th January AGM followed by audio visual presentation

Tuesday 13th February Martin Welch "Steam in the Peak District".

Tuesday 12th March Mike Corbett "From Northwich to Wolverton - a Railway Engineering Story".

Tuesday 9th April Bob Barnard "The Lynton & Barnstaple Railway - Then and Now".

Tuesday 14th May Stephen Gay "East Coast Main Line - Part 2 - York to Edinburgh".

IN MEMORIAM

The ashes of former MCRUA member Robert Carrington from Stockport were scattered into a steam locomotive firebox at Irwell Vale station on the East Lancashire Railway on Saturday 8th July.

MID CHESHIRE LINE PEOPLE

We congratulate Tricia Williams on being appointed Managing Director of Northern from March 2024. Tricia is currently the Chief Operating Officer of Northern. We say farewell to Chris Jackson, who moved from being Regional Director West and Central with Northern to become Interim Managing Director of TPE on 28th May. He has now been confirmed as the permanent Managing Director of TPE. We welcome Craig Harrop as the new North West Director of Northern. We say farewell to Michelle, a member of the ISS cleaning team at Altrincham station, who did a very good job and we wish her well in her new job at Wythenshawe bus station. We welcome Bill as her successor at Altrincham. Congratulations to MCRUA member Ian Foster from Alderley Edge, who celebrated his 100th birthday on 17th June.

WELCOME TO NEW MEMBERS

We welcome Beverley and Frank Robinson of Altrincham as new members of MCRUA.

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)

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

Northern Customer Services	0800 200 6060 (0800-2100 Monday to Sunday)
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)
National Public Transport Enquiry Line	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 current and future timetables and details of forthcoming engineering work under “Travelling With Us” and then “Timetables”)

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

www.lnr.co.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).

<https://www.realtimetrains.co.uk/search/detailed/> Real Time Trains. Shows actual train running at any given location on the national rail network. Useful for seeing if your train is running and if it’s on time!

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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, 4 Egerton Moss, Ashley, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA15 0QE.**