

# 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](http://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**

I trust you all have had an enjoyable summer, since my last report we have had a change of government, and the strikes have ended. In theory we should have had a better and more reliable service on our railway, however, staff shortages and the continued reliance on volunteer staff to run a reliable Sunday service means that cancellations are still occurring. On three Sundays in September, no trains ran and there were no replacement buses, Northern issued 'Do Not Travel' notices for the mid Cheshire Line. Northern do seem to be reducing p-code cancellations, where services are removed from the timetable late on the previous day.

New Customer Information Screens are due to be fitted at Greenbank and Ashley in the near future; we have also been informed that the civils works at Mobberley was carried out during one of the recent possessions, so hopefully a CIS will soon follow. The Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership's show garden at RHS Tatton won a silver gilt medal, for those who don't know that is one below Gold. The 'long border' show garden was a massive success and attracted many people, the CRP manned the garden with volunteers and handed out information and promotional leaflets. There was great interest in the series of walking booklets.

Despite complaints from the local councils and ourselves the introduction of parking charges has happened at Mouldsworth and Cuddington on the Mid Cheshire Line. There wasn't even a consultation process on the Crewe to Liverpool line, but charges are now imposed there too. Cash payment is not available. Delamere has gained a reprieve due to (we believe) land ownership issues. Northwich Station fit-out remains stalled, we have spoken to Northern, but at this moment in time, they do not know when we can expect the buildings to be completed, other than some time in 2025.

The steam train that was due to come down our line on 28<sup>th</sup> September had its itinerary rearranged, going to Kidderminster instead of Holyhead, consequently, it went via Macclesfield instead of Knutsford. Very disappointing. Finally, the rebuilding of the road bridge at the south end of Stockport Station is planned for 2<sup>nd</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2025; there will be no trains between Altrincham and Piccadilly along our line during that period. Additionally, there will be preparatory work at Easter 2025 and final tidying up in October 2025 involving weekend closures.

## **LATE NIGHT ENGINEERING WORK by Andrew Macfarlane**

There will be the usual late night bus replacements due to planned engineering work from Monday 18<sup>th</sup> November to Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> November (inclusive). These late night bus replacements continue to take place every six weeks. The 22.10 from Piccadilly still runs as a train but it runs 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 starts from stand A in Altrincham bus station at 22.50 calling at or near all stations to Chester. The 23.13 train from Piccadilly and the 22.52 train from Chester are 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 train 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 aware of any forthcoming Sunday engineering work.

## **CROSS COUNTRY SERVICES**

We have some information on which seats are unreserved or unreservable on Cross Country Voyager trains, the type used on services from Manchester Piccadilly via Birmingham to Bristol and Bournemouth. If the train is a 5-car the whole of coach B will be unreserved for the whole journey. There are a further 12 seats which are unreservable, four at the high numbered end of coach C and eight at the high numbered end of coach D on both 4- and 5-car trains. Cross Country have a reduced timetable until 9<sup>th</sup> November.

## **FREIGHT NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane**

The modified class 66s, one of which was trialled on the Tunstead to Lostock limestone hoppers in April, have not been seen on this traffic since. Class 66/0s are being used with 22 wagons, 2 of which are not loaded. A new daily freight train for Tesco from Daventry to the Trafford Park Euro Terminal operated by DRS and hauled by a class 88 electric locomotive started on 1<sup>st</sup> October. The train runs every day except Sunday and some goods are taken by lorry direct from Trafford Park to local Tesco stores. Royal Mail ceased using their own trains (class 325 electric multiple-units) to convey mail and parcels on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> September. They have said that they are now using commercial rail freight services but it is not clear what those are.

## **NEWS FROM THE LINE by Andrew Macfarlane**

Two new sets of seats had been provided on the Chester-bound platform at Northwich by 8<sup>th</sup> October. The shelter on that platform has been removed. We understand that Northern intends to provide a new shelter in its place. As Mike mentioned in his Chair's Report, the steam train with "Bahamas" via the Mid Cheshire Line to Holyhead, planned for Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> September, was altered to run from Manchester via Stoke to Kidderminster instead with Black Five locomotive no. 44871. Passengers changed at Kidderminster for a trip behind Bahamas on the Severn Valley Railway. Bahamas is due to run from Birmingham to Blackpool North and back (through Winsford and Hartford) on Saturday 16<sup>th</sup> November on a trip organised by Vintage Trains. There is a bookcase in the new waiting room on platform 4 at Altrincham containing railway books which can be taken (or borrowed!) free of charge. There is also lots of free literature from the Community Rail Partnership including the popular walks booklets. A new public toilet is being installed behind platform 4 at Altrincham. At the time of writing (13<sup>th</sup> October) it is not yet in use. Customer information screens have been installed on both platforms at Ashley. The planned new station at Cheadle (between Navigation Road and Stockport) has been given planning permission by Stockport Council and may be completed before the end of 2025. Transport for Wales are planning to replace the existing ticket office at Chester station with a customer service desk next to the ticket barrier. Andrew Cooper, the new MP for Mid Cheshire, is lobbying for long-overdue improvements to access at Northwich station and for the reopening of the ticket office. Network Rail have said that work is due to start on the ticket office in September 2025(!) but they are going to try to start the work sooner. They say that uncertainty over the national position on the future of rail ticket offices was a factor in the delay. However ticket offices were saved nationally in October 2023! There is to be no prosecution over the collapse at Northwich station due to unclear demarcation of responsibility for the building between Northern and Network Rail.

## **WEST WAY FORWARD FOR MANCHESTER AIRPORT by Simon Barber**

This is a shortened version of an article by our Treasurer, Simon Barber, first published in the July edition of Railwatch, the magazine of Railfuture, which campaigns for a bigger, better railway.

The Manchester Airport Western Link is an idea whose time has come. It has been one of the longest running campaigns of MCRUA. The 3.5 mile connection between Manchester Airport rail station and Mobberley on the Mid Cheshire Line was proposed by British Rail in the early 1990s, a few years before privatisation. It was the western half of the original Manchester Airport rail link project, but only the eastern part (Heald Green to Manchester Airport) was built because economies were made in the run-up to privatisation. However, the route at Manchester Airport is safeguarded and can provide a through line, allowing trains from North Wales and Chester to run direct to the airport and beyond. It will deliver big time savings for passengers, as it is 21 miles shorter than the present route from Chester which is via Warrington Bank Quay and the Castlefield corridor. The Western Link would avoid the need to use Castlefield and the conflicting junctions at Warrington, Earlestown and Ordsall Lane. Today's journey time of 84 minutes from Chester to the airport on the TfW through service would be cut to about 40 minutes via the Mid Cheshire Line and the Western Link.

Importantly, the Western Link would not add to congestion in the Manchester area. Services operating over the link would pick up existing train paths between Piccadilly and the Airport, in effect extending some existing services that terminate at the airport into Cheshire and beyond. Paths could be freed up at Stockport without new paths being required elsewhere.

### **Benefits**

There would be a big financial advantage. Network Rail has calculated the financial benefit of saving one pair of hourly paths through the Castlefield corridor as £800M over 60 years. The diversion of North Wales/Chester trains onto the Mid Cheshire and Western Link route would provide this opportunity. The Western Link would also provide the shortest route between Liverpool and Manchester Airport, via Liverpool South Parkway the station for Liverpool Airport. There would be major benefits for Mid Cheshire passengers, and the economies of the towns, which would gain a direct route to Manchester (via the airport) for the first time since 1989. That was when Mid Cheshire trains were diverted via Stockport so that the former Altrincham line could be handed over to Metrolink. The Western Link route to Manchester is six miles shorter than the Stockport route. Today, trains from Knutsford (14 miles from Manchester in a straight line) take 44 minutes and trains from Northwich (20 miles in a straight line) take 60 minutes. Congestion at Stockport and on the approach to Piccadilly means there is never more than one train an hour to Manchester. Knutsford has the unenviable distinction of being the busiest station in England (by annual footfall) with only a basic hourly service. This slow and infrequent service means that Mid Cheshire residents cannot readily reach jobs in Manchester, and Mid Cheshire employers cannot recruit staff – such as young graduates – who live in Manchester. Yet this modest 3.5 miles of new railway can deliver these congestion-busting and journey time savings.

### **Current Status**

Rail planners and consultants are well aware of the proposed link but it lacks a major sponsor. We believe this is because the proposed route crosses the boundary between two transport authorities – Greater Manchester and Cheshire East – meaning that the benefits are split between two boroughs (and beyond), and neither has taken the lead.

### **No duplication with HS2**

There has been confusion between HS2 and the Western Link with some commentators saying that the HS2 station at Manchester Airport will make the Western Link unnecessary. This was always a misunderstanding, because HS2 is a north-south railway whereas the Western Link is an east-west one. The places that would benefit from the Western Link are not served by HS2 – they serve different markets. Fortunately, the HS2 proposals did not impede or obstruct the route of the Western Link in any way.

### **Northern Powerhouse Rail creates an opportunity**

In contrast to HS2, NPR is an east-west railway, but on present proposals it does not serve any of the towns that would benefit from the Western Link. The route of NPR is not finalised and there have been no proposals to run NPR services to Chester or Wales. The Western Link, being only 3.5 miles long, could be built in a fraction of the time that it will take to plan and build NPR and could quickly bring benefits to Wales, Cheshire and Greater Manchester. If NPR proceeds with a route via Manchester Airport, we would propose a junction with the Mid Cheshire Line where the two cross, probably near Ashley. Links with any crossing rail lines were never planned as part of HS2 – the speed differentials would have been too great. NPR, however, will not be a 400km/h railway, and a link to the Mid Cheshire could be a good alternative to the Western Link, bringing extra traffic which helps the case for NPR.

### **The Union Connectivity Study**

The recent report by Peter Hendy (at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/union-connectivity-review-final-report>), who is now the Rail Minister, acknowledges the Western Link idea and its potential benefit in providing economic links between the towns of north-east Wales and north-west England as well as Manchester Airport. There are many cross-border economic links. Many people cross the England-Wales border for work. The Hendy report argues that these links should be improved and running train services to Manchester Airport and Manchester via the Western Link is one of the ideas proposed. At the time of writing the report is with the government for consideration.

**METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane**

The line between Oldham Mumps and Rochdale reopened on 19<sup>th</sup> August after a lengthy closure due to ground movement between Derker and Shaw. Tram times can be found by planning a journey on the Traveline website [www.traveline.info](http://www.traveline.info).

### **TRAVELLING FROM CREWE**

Further to Simon Barber's article in the previous issue, if you are driving to Crewe to catch a train, the car park at Crewe Alexandra's football ground on Gresty Road can be recommended. It is cheaper than the station car park and is not a long walk from the station.

### **LOCAL RAIL NEWS**

The National Trust gardens on the 1892 approach viaduct to Manchester Central station may be expanding. Planning permission has been sought to extend the gardens further along the viaduct so that they would increase in length from 150 to 350 metres. London Northwestern Railway (LNR) have announced a plan to run trains from Manchester Victoria to London Euston. The service would be an extension of their existing London Euston to Crewe service and would run via Warrington Bank Quay to Manchester Victoria. The trains would be ten coaches (two five-car class 730 electric multiple-units) which would seat more than 1,200 passengers. Journey time between Manchester and London would be 3 hours 10 minutes. LNR are submitting detailed proposals to the Office for Rail and Road (ORR) and if ORR give their approval the service will start in summer 2026. MCRUA is lobbying for the service to call at Winsford, Hartford and Action Bridge. LNR are also looking to extend their Stafford to Crewe shuttle to Manchester Airport. Northern began using the overhead wires between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge as from Monday 5<sup>th</sup> August with their Southport to Stalybridge service which uses class 769 bi-mode units. The line between Marple and New Mills Central reopened on Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> September after a lengthy closure due to a landslip at Hague Bar. A freight train derailment took place on the Denton Junction to Ashton Moss North Junction line on 6<sup>th</sup> September. The line is due to reopen in early November. The Yorkshire Dales Explorer service run by Northern on Saturdays only from Rochdale via Manchester Victoria and Clitheroe to Ribbleshead has carried good loadings since it began running in June. The service runs all the year round and there are connections at Ribbleshead for stations further north to Carlisle. A 4-car class 331 electric multiple-unit will operate on the Manchester-Hadfield line from the December 2024 timetable change. The Liverpool-Birmingham service goes back to half-hourly from the December 2024 timetable change but the second train does not call at Acton Bridge, Hartford or Winsford due (we are told) to pathing difficulties between Weaver Junction and Crewe. The train does call at Mossley Hill in south Liverpool.

### **TICKETING ISSUES**

Members may well have read about the recent issue of someone who bought a discounted anytime ticket from Broadbottom to Manchester with a 16-25 railcard, used the ticket before 10.00 and was then threatened with prosecution. There is a £12 minimum fare with that railcard before 10.00 on Monday to Friday (except during July and August). They bought the ticket on the Northern App. Clearly the app needs to make it much clearer that anytime tickets (despite their name!) are subject to the minimum fare. Also the correct procedure for Northern to have followed in this case was to charge an Excess fare for the difference between the fare paid and the correct fare (£1.90 in this case). Northern have now withdrawn their threat of prosecution in this and other similar cases and are looking to review previous similar cases since 2020. In future they will charge an Excess fare in such cases. Members are advised not to use The Trainline to purchase rail tickets. They charge higher prices than Train Operating Company websites and apps, ticket offices and ticket vending machines. Also if trains are p-coded (cancelled by 10pm the night before), train operators can contact passengers who bought tickets through their own websites, whereas with Trainline customers this doesn't happen. Train Operating Company websites sell tickets for all rail journeys across the country. Day return tickets are often cheaper than buying Advance Single tickets for each journey. Brfares.com is a good website to look up fares. Senior railcards give 33.4% off rail fares at all times of the day. Restrictions on the use of Senior Railcards at peak periods only apply in London and the South East. The railcard discount was reduced from 34% to 33.4% as from 15<sup>th</sup> September. "London-style" ticketing across bus and Metrolink is to be introduced in Greater Manchester in March 2025. Passengers will be able to tap in on buses with a contactless bank card and tap in and out on trams and the system will work out the fare (no more than the daily cap) overnight.

### **A TALE OF TWO TOWNS by Mike Battman**

My wife and I recently travelled to Hebden Bridge. What a lovely station, but that's another story. On leaving the station, I was struck by the bus stop in the car park, a Bronte Bus was waiting to depart, and another bus was

approaching. At the end of the station approach road was another bus stop on the busy A646. It started me thinking; how does this town compare to Knutsford a similar town on the Mid Cheshire Line?

Both towns have a café and bar culture, although both towns have independent shops, Hebden Bridge appears to be 95% independents, no sign of a Booths, Boots, Waterstones, Greggs or WH Smiths. Both towns attract visitors and the leisure market. Hebden Bridge also has a big LGBT reputation and an excellent concert venue. According to the last census the population of Knutsford was 13,259; Hebden Bridge was 5,223, so Knutsford is considerably larger. Then we compare trains, Knutsford has an hourly train service in each direction and a paltry 2-hourly service on a Sunday. By contrast Hebden Bridge has 4 trains in each direction and even 3 on a Sunday. Is it any wonder that Hebden Bridge in 2022/3 had 680,000 passengers compared to Knutsford's 322,000; these figures are still recovering from the pre-pandemic highs of 792,000 and 467,000 respectively. What about transport integration? I mentioned Hebden Bridge's very visible bus connections, where is Knutsford's Bus station, is it sign posted from the railway station? Is there a regular bus to Tatton, like there is from Hebden Bridge to Haworth? I write this in the week of the RHS Tatton show, a show that states, "If you want to avoid using your car, get the complimentary shuttle bus from .... Altrincham". The RHS realises that the local station's services are not good enough.

### **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 12th November	Ted Buckley "Navigation Road and All That". Local scenes from the 1960s.
Tuesday 10th December	Ian Pilkington "Steam in North Wales and the Borders since 2010".
Tuesday 14 <sup>th</sup> January	Annual General Meeting and presentation by Jon Penn.
Tuesday 11 <sup>th</sup> February	Martin Welch "Macclesfield Area Railways in the 1950s and 60s".
Tuesday 11 <sup>th</sup> March	Phil Braithwaite "A Love Affair with South African Railways".
Tuesday 8 <sup>th</sup> April	Noel Coates "Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Engine Sheds".
Tuesday 13 <sup>th</sup> May	Stephen Gay. "Sheffield to Cleethorpes Part 1. Sheffield to Kirton Tunnel".

### **ALTRINCHAM WINTER LECTURE SERIES PROGRAMME**

The Altrincham Electric Railway Preservation Society (AERPS) continues to hold a series of winter railway lectures at the Altrincham Methodist Hall, which is on the corner of Barrington Road and Woodlands Road and is a short walk from Altrincham station in the direction of Manchester. The postcode of the venue is WA14 1HF. Lectures start at 7.30pm. There is plenty of parking around the venue. Please drive clockwise around the church. Admission is £4 for non-members of the AERPS. The forthcoming programme is:

Friday 8 <sup>th</sup> November.	Bob Barnard "The Lynton & Barnstaple Railway Then and Now".
Friday 10 <sup>th</sup> January	Noel Coates "Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Engine Sheds".
Friday 14 <sup>th</sup> February	Martin Welch "Macclesfield Area Railways in the 1950s and 60s".
Friday 14 <sup>th</sup> March	Ted Buckley "Navigation Road and All That". Mainly steam in the Altrincham and Dunham Massey areas in the 1960s taken by Ted's father Bill Buckley.
Friday 11 <sup>th</sup> April	Ian Pilkington "Steam, Diesel and Electric in the Northern Fells". A joint meeting with the Irish Railway Record Society Manchester branch.

### **STEPHENSON LOCOMOTIVE SOCIETY PROGRAMME**

The Stephenson Locomotive Society continues to meet every month at the Friends' Meeting House in Manchester on Saturdays at 2pm. The venue is near St Peter's Square Metrolink station. There is a voluntary donation towards the room hire. The forthcoming programme is:

Saturday 2 <sup>nd</sup> November	Alasdair Renfrew "Narrow Minded: 44 Years of the Isle of Man Railways".
Saturday 7 <sup>th</sup> December	Richard Marks "A British Industrial Giant: the Story of British Rail Engineering Limited".

### **IN MEMORIAM**

Former MCRUA member John Hilton, who lived in Timperley before emigrating to South Africa, died on 30<sup>th</sup> August. John worked on the railways in the 1950s and 60s including in signal boxes in the Stockport area. He also worked at Northwich station and in signal boxes in the Northwich area including Acton Bridge and Plumley West

and others. MCRUA member John Boardman from Sale died on 11<sup>th</sup> October. We send our condolences to his brother Harry who is also a member (and is a former Committee member).

## 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](http://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](http://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](http://www.networkrail.co.uk) (includes a link to download the National Rail timetable).

[www.lnr.co.uk](http://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.tfgm.com](http://www.tfgm.com) (the website of Transport for Greater Manchester).

[www.metrolink.co.uk](http://www.metrolink.co.uk) (shows any current problems with the tram service and details of engineering work).

[www.traveline.info](http://www.traveline.info) (a national public transport journey planner for bus, train and tram).

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

[www.railfuture.org.uk](http://www.railfuture.org.uk) (the website of Railfuture, the independent, national, voluntary body for rail users).

[www.traintimes.org.uk](http://www.traintimes.org.uk) (an unofficial website which provides rail information derived from official sources).

[www.brfares.com](http://www.brfares.com) (lists all available fares on the National Rail network).

[www.railtourinfo.co.uk](http://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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