# MID CHESHIRE RAIL REPORT

No. 122

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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 <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Mid-Cheshire-Rail-Users-Association-MCRUA-124008736132899">www.mcrua.org.uk</a>. We are also on Facebook at <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Mid-Cheshire-Rail-Users-Association-MCRUA-124008736132899">https://www.facebook.com/Mid-Cheshire-Rail-Users-Association-MCRUA-124008736132899</a>.

## **CHAIR'S REPORT by Mike Battman**

I hope you all had a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

2025 is year of celebration in the rail industry being 200 years since the opening of the Stockton to Darlington railway. The railways are having a year-long celebration "Railway 200" with various events around the country taking place; MCRUA are working with Northern to plan a special event, hopefully we will have more information in the next Rail Report. Additionally, there are plans to create history boards for each station and hopefully a relay walk along the length of our line. More details will follow.

It was good to see a steam train come down our line on 1<sup>st</sup> March on its way from Piccadilly to Holyhead. It received much publicity on social media and the number of people watching the train, especially children, was impressive. Let's hope we don't have to wait quite as long for the next one. As you will be aware, Northern's services along the Mid Cheshire Line have been abysmal in the back end of 2024; the first two months of 2025 have shown a significant improvement but it will continue to be unreliable until an agreement with the guards on rest day working is reached.

Another recurring theme is the inability of Northern to make decisions which are in the best interests of the passengers when thing go wrong. There has been a nightmare story of passengers being told to disembark at Mobberley, then the train ran non-stop to Chester. The promised bus did not arrive, and the passengers were left at a station with no information boards, no idea when the next train would arrive, additionally it was during the cold snap and it was minus 4.

Northwich Station fit-out remains stalled, we have spoken to Northern, the local MP is involved but at this moment in time, they do not know when we can expect the buildings to be completed, other than probably in summer 2025.

Stockport Council and TfGM are fully backing the opening of a new station at Cheadle. It is currently not approved by Northern or Network Rail. MCRUA have grave reservations about this scheme as it will further slow our services, which will affect presentation times at Edgeley Junction and Mickle Trafford Junction. To compensate for the time taken to stop at Cheadle it is being suggested that some stations along the line be reduced to a 2-hourly service, Ashley and Plumley being the most likely to be affected. If you live in Cheshire East please contact your local councillors and MP and tell them this is not acceptable.

The rebuilding of the road bridge at the south end of Stockport Station is planned for  $2^{nd} - 22^{nd}$  August 2025; there will be no trains at all through Stockport or between Altrincham and Piccadilly along our line (see the article below). Additionally, there will be preparatory work at Easter 2025 and final tidying up in October 2025 involving weekend closures. We are pressing Northern for an hourly Chester to Altrincham service during the August blockade with rail tickets valid on Metrolink between Altrincham and Manchester.

#### STOCKPORT CLOSURES FOR WORK ON GREEK STREET BRIDGE by Andrew Macfarlane

As Mike mentioned above, there are to be closures of the railway at Stockport in 2025 for the replacement of the Greek Street overbridge. The bridge was built in 1958 and has reached the end of its life. The Stockholm Road bridge over the Mid Cheshire Line in Stockport will also be replaced. The first of the weekend closures is at Easter (from Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> April to Monday 21<sup>st</sup> April inclusive). There will be a two-hourly train service between Chester and Altrincham with a connecting bus service between Altrincham and Stockport. Passengers can change replacement buses at Stockport to get to Piccadilly. Metrolink services will be available from Altrincham (change at St Peter's Square for Piccadilly station) but as far as we are aware rail tickets will not be valid on Metrolink during this blockade. Through tickets from stations on the Mid Cheshire Line to Metrolink fare zones (Zones 1 to 4 are needed for a journey to Manchester) are available from stations between Cuddington and Hale (inclusive) but as far as we are aware these tickets are only available from ticket vending machines or ticket offices. There are no discounts on these through tickets for railcard holders so it is best to use your railcard if you have one to buy a ticket to Altrincham and then a separate Metrolink ticket. Wayfarer tickets (which can be purchased from ticket vending machines, press the Rangers and Rovers icon) are valid on rail services from Northwich and stations towards Manchester and on Metrolink. The main blockade for the demolition and replacement of the Greek Street bridge is from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> August (inclusive). As Mike mentioned above, MCRUA is lobbying for an hourly Chester to Altrincham train service during this blockade and for rail tickets to be valid on Metrolink between Altrincham and Manchester. There will again be a replacement bus service between Altrincham and Stockport during this blockade. There will be no rail shuttle between Piccadilly and Stockport during the August blockade due to work taking place at Heaton Norris Junction at the same time (work is taking place in many locations to take advantage of the 21-day closure). More work will be carried out on the Greek Street bridge in October and over Christmas. There is an interesting mosaic pointing the way to "Edgeley Station" on the north parapet of the Greek Street bridge, which I hope survives the rebuild.

## THE END FOR THE HOPPERS by Andrew Macfarlane

Tata Chemicals Europe announced on 12th November that the Lostock soda ash plant in Northwich was to close at the end of January 2025. The closure has brought an end to the limestone traffic from Tunstead quarry in the Peak District to Northwich, known as "the hoppers". The traffic has been on rail since 1874 and at one time consisted of eight trains a day each way to and from three soda ash plants in the Northwich area: Lostock, Winnington and Wallerscote. Some members will remember 8F steam locomotives on this traffic hauling the distinctive vacuum-braked bogie wagons (16 plus a brake van). The trains were some of the first freight trains in the country to be continuously braked when the vacuum-braked wagons were introduced in 1936 and the wagons remained in use until the end of 1997. Tata have blamed high energy costs and soda ash is to be imported from the USA, where it occurs naturally. There is a large soda ash import terminal at Canada Dock, Liverpool. The last loaded Tunstead to Lostock train was on Wednesday 22nd January. The empty wagons went from Warrington Arpley yard to Tunstead on the morning of Monday 27th January. Tata Chemicals Europe announced the start of the shutdown of the Lostock plant before lunchtime that day. There had been a plan for the Lostock plant to continue in operation until the end of February but that was thwarted by a plant breakdown, one of several in recent times. The train came back from Tunstead to Arpley empty with locomotive no.66074 and that was the end. A great shame that the finale was not marked in any way. At least the Mid Cheshire Line remains busy with other freight traffic.

## LATE NIGHT ENGINEERING WORK by Andrew Macfarlane

There will be the usual late night bus replacements due to planned engineering work from Monday 24<sup>th</sup> March to Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> March (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.

#### **MEMBERSHIP REPORT by Ralph Warrington**

I am pleased to report that our membership numbers have stabilised and our numbers are healthy. Of course, the more members we have the better, as it gives us a stronger voice when we represent rail users to the rail companies

and the agencies of government, so please encourage others to join. As well as receiving a copy of this Rail Report (and if you are reading a friend's copy - please consider joining us to receive future editions), members get advance notice of future events that we are planning - look out for these this year. Sadly during 2024 we lost five of our longstanding members, whose names have been reported in previous Rail Reports. On a happier note, we gained seven new members over the same year, and had a similar number of lapsed members re-joining, which is always pleasing to see. We try to keep the membership fees as low as possible, and we feel that membership represents good value for money, particularly if you pay by standing order, as this shields you from any increase for five years. We also have good value corporate and voluntary body membership, which I'm pleased to say has been taken up by most of the Parish Councils along the line, a great indicator that they value the Mid Cheshire Line and the positive benefits it brings to all those that they represent. Accompanying this Rail Report is a renewal form for 2025 (if you pay every year), as our membership year runs from 1st March. Please post it back if you wish to pay by cheque, or you can pay electronically on the MCRUA website. If you pay by standing order, it'll all happen automatically. Thanks, and have a train-filled 2025.

## **ALTRINCHAM AREA NEWS by Judie Collins**

Altrincham is one of two rail stations in Greater Manchester that is run by TfGM because of its multi-modal structure. This is becoming increasingly important with the Bee Network (buses controlled by the Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham) reaching Trafford in January. The Friends of Altrincham Interchange try to embrace local tram and bus services as many rail passengers transfer, especially to the tram, for such events as football. Altrincham became one of the four pilot sites in Greater Manchester for use of 'redundant buildings' as community rooms on train stations. It has not been an easy experience but we are now working with Flourish (the tenants of the rooms on platform 4) and when the toilets behind platform 4 are operational we hope they will be accessible to passengers. On the railway side there has been much activity with an 'Outstanding' award again from North West in Bloom - It's Your Neighbourhood; The Friends were also involved in the prize-winning Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership long border at the RHS Tatton flower show. A much acclaimed Mid Cheshire Line themed children's book, Hare and Rabbit: Travels on a Train, has now been produced. A cosy waiting room on platform 4 features our free library linked to others elsewhere. Our heritage mosaic doves on the exterior of the main station building have been much admired. The Interchange has played a major part in Altrincham receiving the annual award of a Purple Flag for its night-time economy. The Friends continue to appreciate the hard work from Northern and TfGM staff including our excellent cleaners. Network Rail continues to present us with a challenge to progress in so many areas particularly ourselves and Hale but much work is happening at Navigation Road our third station which, being so busy, deserves a better passenger experience. Altrincham has always supported Paint the Town Pink for Prevent Breast Cancer. It is a great opportunity to be involved. We are always looking for watering volunteers at Altrincham. Thanks to Bev and Hilary for all that they do.

# FREIGHT NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

Paths are now in the system for the new flow of slate waste from Llandudno Junction to Earles Sidings. The train will run after the last passenger train from Chester and is confirmed as running via the Mid Cheshire Line and Cheadle Heath. It will be operated by Freightliner Heavy Haul. It is not clear exactly when the train will start running regularly.

## NORTHERN STAFF TO REMAIN AT ALTRINCHAM by Andrew Macfarlane

Northern had a plan to redeploy Roy and Damian, the two members of Northern staff at Altrincham, to Manchester Oxford Road station. MCRUA objected to this (as did the RMT rail union) and we are very pleased to report that the plan has been dropped. Thank you Northern. Roy and Damian will be relocated to an office on platform 4. They will also be present on a Sunday again (Sunday working had been dropped). Hopefully train announcements will be re-introduced at Altrincham. The plan would have left platforms 3 and 4 at Altrincham completely unstaffed.

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

Northwich station has again been staffed as from November 2024. There is a member of Northern staff in a Portakabin outside the station in the mornings to provide information to passengers. Work on reopening the ticket office is said to be starting in June. The new waiting shelter on the Chester-bound platform at Northwich is now in use. There has been an amended Sunday timetable on Northern routes across the North West from 22<sup>nd</sup> December but in the case of the Mid Cheshire Line it is the same as the normal Sunday timetable. The opening hours of Altrincham ticket office were reduced as from 9<sup>th</sup> December. The office now closes at 18.20 rather than 20.20 on Monday to Saturday. Paper train timetables for the Mid Cheshire Line (guide 17) are still available from

Altrincham ticket office. As Mike mentioned above, on Saturday 1st March the Railway Touring Company ran a steam special from Piccadilly and Stockport via Altrincham and Chester to Llandudno Junction and Holyhead and back. The locomotive was ex-LMS Black Five no. 45212, which is normally based on the Keighley and Worth Valley Railway. Apologies if you didn't get to hear about this. A statue of the nineteenth century railway engineer Thomas Brassey, who built a third of Britain's railways, three quarters of France's railways and one in twenty of all the railways in the world, is to be erected outside Chester station. Born in Buerton near Chester in 1805, he also constructed Chester Station and worked alongside noted engineers of his time such as George and Robert Stephenson, Joseph Locke and Isambard Kingdom Brunel. The planning application was made by The Thomas Brassey Society, which fundraised for the statue. It will be sculpted by Andy Edwards, who also worked on The Beatles Statue in Liverpool. According to planning documents, the design itself will be of Brassey in his mid-40s, his age when he completed Chester Station in 1848, and will depict him reading a map of the Shrewsbury-Chester Railway, which he completed in the same year. Positioned on land to the front of the station on Station Road, it will be cast in bronze at 1.2 x life size, standing alongside a piece of contemporary railway track at life-size, also cast in bronze. It will stand on a short plinth faced in York sandstone to match the surface of the pedestrian footway it stands on (information courtesy of The Standard website). There is a plan to open a Station Tap pub in the West Wing at Chester station. Plumley station house was put up for sale in January. It is currently showing as under offer with a price of £795,000. Customer Information Screens are being installed on both platforms at Plumley. A special train topped and tailed by class 50 diesel locomotives and featuring 4-TC Mark 1 coaches "The 16 CSVT Explorer" run by the Branch Line Society will be travelling along the Mid Cheshire Line on the evening of Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> May and the afternoon of Monday 26<sup>th</sup> May. Further details are at https://www.branchline.uk/fixture.php.

#### MID CHESHIRE LINE DOES WELL AT CHESHIRE BEST KEPT STATIONS AWARDS EVENING

The Mid Cheshire Line did well at the annual Cheshire Best Kept Stations Awards Evening on 6<sup>th</sup> February, held for the first time at the Crewe Alexandra football ground. The whole line won the John Hobbs award for the award-winning railway-themed long border at the RHS Tatton flower show, masterminded by Harry Allen of Plumley. Mouldsworth station won the award for Best Unstaffed Station. Delamere won the Cheshire West and Chester award. It also won this Award in 2023 and 2017. This is in recognition of work carried out on the station by young people from the Petty Pool College in Sandiway, Northwich. Hale was Highly Commended for the Transport for Greater Manchester award. Altrincham Interchange was Highly Commended for the Community Rail Network Award for Community Engagement. Well done to all involved with these stations.

#### **METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane**

The Metrolink timetable was changed from 6th January in response to feedback from the public. There are now earlier first trams. The full timetable can be found here: <a href="https://www.railwaydata.co.uk/timetables/metrolink/jan25/">https://www.railwaydata.co.uk/timetables/metrolink/jan25/</a> Engineering work on Metrolink from 1st to 16th March in the Mosley Street/York Street area saw all trams running via the Second City Crossing, for example all trams from Altrincham ran to Bury via Exchange Square. On Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> March and Sunday 23rd March, track renewal works will take place at Trafford Bar and Deansgate-Castlefield. The Altrincham line will run from Altrincham to Old Trafford. There will be a replacement bus service between Old Trafford and Piccadilly station. From Tuesday 25th March, until the end of service on Wednesday 23rd April, work will take place on the Metrolink tracks between Market Street and High Street/Church Street in the city centre. During this time, no trams will be able to operate via Market Street or Shudehill. All trams from Altrincham will again run to Bury via Exchange Square. In theory trams could run from Altrincham to Piccadilly station but they will all run to Bury to maintain the six-minute frequency on the Bury line. Trafford Centre services will operate to Etihad Campus and the Eccles to Ashton service will also run so passengers from the Altrincham line will be able to change at St Peter's Square to reach Piccadilly Gardens and Piccadilly station during this period. The 10mph speed restriction for trams heading from Deansgate Junction towards Timperley station was increased to 30mph some months ago. The 10mph restriction had been in place for around 25 years. Tram times can be found by planning a journey on the Traveline website www.traveline.info.

#### **LOCAL RAIL NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane**

On 20th January Network Rail announced a consultation on a scheme to remodel the track layout at Manchester Oxford Road station. The scheme will result in the number of platforms being reduced from five to three, two through platforms with a bay platform between them (the present platform 3). The platforms will be lengthened and additional signals will be installed between Deansgate and Oxford Road to increase the line capacity from 12 trains per hour to 14. A new footbridge with lifts will be provided. Further details can be found at <a href="https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/network-rail-launches-consultation-on-plans-to-improve-">https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/network-rail-launches-consultation-on-plans-to-improve-</a>

manchester-oxford-road-station. The station will be closed for two years from 2029 to 2031 for the work to be carried out but trains will still pass through without stopping. Having the bay platform in the middle will be less convenient for passengers using trains which start and terminate there as they will have to use the footbridge. At present there is level access to the existing bay platform 5. On 21st January Network Rail announced that a £1 million scheme to repair Stockport viaduct was under way. More details here: https://www.networkrailmediacentre.co.uk/news/gbp-1m-restoration-for-the-iconic-stockport-viaduct. overhead wires between Lostock Junction (west of Bolton) and Wigan North Western went live on 1st January. Electric trains should start using the line from the May 2025 timetable change. Trains from Oxford Road and Stalybridge to Southport will change from electric to diesel and vice versa at Ince station. TransPennine Express class 802 bi-modes began using the overhead wires between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge from Sunday 1st December. They change to diesel mode in the Clayton Bridge area. Northern class 769 bi-mode trains use the overhead wires all the way to Stalybridge. A third platform is being provided at Salford Crescent station adjacent to the present "non-platform" line. The work is being carried out during 2025. The line between Denton Junction and Ashton Moss North Junction reopened on the evening of Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> November after repairs to damage caused by a derailment.

## **TICKETING NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane**

Regulated rail fares (singles, Off Peak Returns and 7-day season tickets) increased in price by 4.6% as from Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> March. It was of course a national increase but there is a good case for saying that it should not have applied on the Mid Cheshire Line (and other routes operated by Northern in the North West) due to the poor service which we had in late 2024. Happily the service has been much more reliable since the New Year. The prices of national Railcards also increased from Sunday 2nd March. The one-year Senior Railcard increased from £30 to £35. The three-year version (only available online) increased from £70 to £80. More details can be found at <a href="https://www.railcard.co.uk">www.railcard.co.uk</a>. Senior Railcards can be used at any time in the North of England. Morning peak restrictions on their use only apply in London and the South East. Good news is that advance tickets can now be purchased for travel on the day at Northern ticket offices. Tickets are available up to 15 minutes before the departure of the train. There is now ticket acceptance across Government-controlled train operators during service disruption. These operators are Northern, TransPennine Express, LNER and South East Trains. "London-style" ticketing across bus and Metrolink is to be introduced in Greater Manchester on 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.

#### 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 sandwiches 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 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 final lecture of the current season is:

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 £3 voluntary donation towards the room hire. The final meeting of the current season is:

Saturday 12th April. Stockton and Darlington 200 - Caroline Hardy and/or Niall Hammond, a joint meeting with the Railway and Canal Historical Society.

#### **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**

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

<u>www.northernrailway.co.uk</u> (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).

<u>www.lnr.co.uk</u> 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 (the website of Transport for Greater Manchester).

www.tfgm.com/tram-improvement-works shows details of planned engineering work on Metrolink.

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).

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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Visit: http://www.midcheshirerail.org.uk

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 <a href="www.mcrua.org.uk/membership">www.mcrua.org.uk/membership</a>. Alternatively, you may pay by standing order, details available from the Membership Secretary <a href="membership@mcrua.org.uk">membership@mcrua.org.uk</a>. 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.

03/25