

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.

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CHAIR'S REPORT by Mike Battman

Firstly, can I take this opportunity to wish everyone a very happy new year, let's hope 2026 is a good one on the railways and on our lines in particular. Having spent most of 2025 congratulating Northern on an improved service with many fewer cancellations, December proved to be a very poor month, with many cancellations and delayed trains. The majority of the cancellations attributed to 'problems with train crew', which translated usually means, Northern were short of staff that day. We have also seen a reduction in 4 car trains as Northern are struggling with unit numbers throughout their region, together with transferring more units to the immensely successful Ashington Line in Northumberland. It is worthy of note that this reopened freight line was constructed on a business case based on 200,000 passengers per year. That figure was reached within 3-months, it reached a million after about 14-months with two stations still to be completed. Now, I'm not saying that reopening of the Middlewich Line will generate as many passengers, but maybe the predicted usage needs to be revisited.

Network Rail's element of work on the Northwich Station ticket office fit-out has been finished and the building has been handed over to Northern. Northern have now completed the fit-out and the ticket office and waiting room are open again. TfGM have released a report outlining their vision for the railways within Greater Manchester, by implication any changes or improvements will inevitably impact lines outside GM including the Mid Cheshire Line and the Cheshire stations on the WCML. The Report is viewable on the TfGM website Rail: on the right track for growth | Bee Network | Powered by TfGM.

MCRUA is often contacting our MPs along the line to keep them informed and to ask for their views and support when issues arise and it is pleasing to note that they are usually very supportive. In particular Andrew Cooper and Esther McVey have helped with issues such as Middlewich reopening, two trains an hour, Cheadle Station and in recent times the Ardwick Blockade. Additionally, Connor Rand and Andrew Cooper took part in the Railway 200 Walk. The Mid Cheshire Line has been nominated in two categories for the National Community Rail Partnership awards, a great achievement which highlights the effort of the volunteers. The CRP has put up History Boards at all the stations along our line, look out for them.

ARDWICK JUNCTION AND MANCHESTER PICCADILLY MAIN STATION CLOSURE 14th TO 22nd FEBRUARY by Mike Battman

A recent problem for travellers on our line (and further afield) was the disruption at Ardwick Junction about a mile to the south of Piccadilly. There were no passenger trains out of Piccadilly going south for 9-days from 14th February until 22nd February (inclusive). Platforms 13 and 14 remained open but they became a terminus, with limited services to Liverpool Lime Street and Blackpool North. The TPE Scottish service was terminated at Preston, passengers from Manchester being advised that they should make their way to Preston from Piccadilly or Oxford Road using Northern services. London (Avanti); Birmingham, Bristol, etc, (CrossCountry) and

Cleethorpes, Sheffield, etc (TransPennine Express) started from Stockport, as well as some local Northern services to Buxton, Stoke-on-Trent and Crewe. Northern's stopping services from Sheffield and Hadfield were terminating at Guide Bridge; Transport for Wales services were terminating at Crewe; the East Midlands Railway service from Norwich was terminating at Sheffield. There were rail replacement buses from Piccadilly to Stockport.

Which finally brings us to the Mid-Cheshire Line, and once again Northern treated us abysmally, they ran a 2-hourly service between Chester and Altrincham (hourly at peak periods on Monday to Friday) with no dedicated rail replacement buses being provided for passengers to get to Stockport for onward travel. Passengers for Stockport were told to catch the Bee Network service buses 370 and 371 from Altrincham. These buses can take well over an hour and provided no service for Navigation Road. We found this unacceptable, we wrote to all the MPs along the line, we are aware that at least two of them have written to Northern. Northern's response was poor, showing a complete misunderstanding of the situation. At least we again had ticket availability on Metrolink between Altrincham, Navigation Road and Manchester city centre Metrolink stops.

LATE NIGHT ENGINEERING WORK by Andrew Macfarlane

There will be late night bus replacements due to planned engineering work from Monday 23rd February to Thursday 26th February (inclusive) and from Monday 6th April to Thursday 9th April (inclusive). These late night bus replacements continue to take place every six weeks. On these occasions the 22.10 train from Piccadilly to Chester will not be affected and will call at all stations. 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 bus leaves Chester at 22.52 and calls at all stations. A second bus leaves Knutsford at 23.36 calling at all stations to Piccadilly.

REOPENING THE MIDDLEWICH LINE by Andrew Cooper, MP for Mid Cheshire.

Sixty-six years ago the last regular passenger train called at Middlewich Railway Station, drawing to a close ninety-two years of passenger rail travel from the town. The line, which was originally opened by London & North Western Railway in 1868 as a freight route to take advantage of the lucrative salt industry in Mid Cheshire, runs between Sandbach and Northwich and continues to be used to this day to move quarried stone across the country. As a passenger service, the affectionately named "Dodger" mostly ran between Crewe and Acton Bridge, but after the Second World War, the frequent services of the 1920s and 30s never returned. The station was eventually closed to passengers on 4th January 1960, before closing entirely in 1967. Since 1992, campaigners have sought to restore passenger services to this vital link. The Middlewich Rail Link Campaign – later renamed the Mid Cheshire Rail Link Campaign, of which I have been a proud member since 2015 – has been relentless in trying to persuade anyone that will listen of the huge benefits that investing in this connection will bring, not just to Middlewich, but to the wider subregion. Middlewich, now a town of close to 14,500 people, is the largest civil parish by population in Cheshire not to be served by a railway station. Alongside the rest of Mid Cheshire, it is crying out for transport infrastructure investment to help it fulfil its untapped potential.

The benefits to Middlewich are obvious. For people wanting to get to the city centres for jobs, the Universities, appointments, concerts and countless other opportunities, this link makes that connection. The benefits for young people wanting to use the cinema, schools and sixth form college in Northwich should also not be overlooked. But these benefits go both ways. Better connections to Middlewich – and indeed Gadbrook Park in Northwich, which would also be set to benefit – will encourage employers to locate here. It will allow people who previously have had to move out of town for work to stay in Mid Cheshire, and for us to retain that talent locally. And time and again we see when new railway stations open, it kickstarts regeneration in the area and lifts land values all around it. The two studies campaigners successfully persuaded the Cheshire and Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership to undertake underscore these points, as well as the wider economic benefits this scheme would bring, especially when paired with the Manchester Airport Western Link.

However, it's important to acknowledge that the context of transport infrastructure investment in the North West and across the country is very different to how things were under the last government, and that requires a rethink on how to get schemes like this over the line, however much of a "no brainer" they may seem to us. The previous government's approach was to announce periodic one-off funding schemes that local authorities could bid in to. Pinch-point funding. Restoring your Railways. Levelling Up. This government has taken a different approach and instead intends to end the beauty-contest of areas bidding against each other for limited pots of funding with opaque criteria and decision-making, and instead empower Mayoral Combined Authorities to develop schemes and decide what's best for their areas. This is why devolution for Cheshire and Warrington is so important. Without someone to make the case for strategic cross-authority investment; without the power and budget to develop schemes to the point where an investment case can be made, we will continue to lose out to our larger neighbours to the north – and the south. We should not kid ourselves that devolution is a panacea. The cancellation of HS2 north of

Handsacre and the continued wranglings over the NPR route will mean that Network Rail and the DfT's focus will continue to be on the Castlefield Corridor, and how to get HS2 trains to Manchester without crippling the West Coast Main Line. But with a strong Mayor that understands the benefits that investment in our rail infrastructure can bring, we will finally have a chance to deliver the kind of rail service that Middlewich and Mid Cheshire needs and deserves.

TOUR OF ALTRINCHAM INTERCHANGE AND NAVIGATION ROAD ON THURSDAY 15TH JANUARY 2026 by Community Rail Officer Sarah Muir of the Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership

On the afternoon of Thursday 15th January, a tour of Altrincham Interchange and Navigation Road stations took place to showcase the fabulous work initiated by Friends of Altrincham Interchange (FOAI) with the support of the Mid Cheshire Community Rail Partnership (MCCRP). As you will discover the enthusiastic and dedicated volunteers from FOAI have had great success at reaching out to the local community during 2025 and involving them in projects to enhance these two stations-embodiment of the ethos of community rail! At 2pm with the rumoured torrential rain thankfully holding off, the invited guests including special guests Mayor of Trafford Cllr Jane Brophy and Mayor's Consort John Brophy assembled on Platform 4 at the Interchange. Other guests included the station volunteers, project funders, CRP directors and members of the community who have been involved with CRP/FOAI projects.

MCCRP Community Rail Officer Sarah Muir welcomed the group to the Interchange and invited them to first look at the newly installed Altrincham running in board. FOAI Chair Ian Stuart explained that this traditional railway sign was the brainchild of the FOAI volunteers and created by local joinery company Atlantic Timber with funding provided by Northern Train Ltd. Ian then treated everyone to a short recital of a poem written by Altrincham local Dylan before inviting the mayor to snip the red ribbon on the running in board. The guests were then invited to view the platform art in the poster case nearby. FOAI volunteer Bev Robinson explained that these brightly coloured pictures were created by local children for display in the case and everyone agreed they made a cheerful addition to platform 4.

The next stop on the tour was the waiting room which is always a warm and welcome sanctuary from the winter weather with Northern staff member Roy often on duty to provide a friendly face and assistance to rail users. Here Bev pointed out the framed knitted totem made by local knitting group Library Knitters, the well-stocked platform library and the many awards which FOAI have won over the years for their work. All the guests posed for a group picture in the waiting room before moving on to view one of the recently installed Mid Cheshire line history panels. These panels are a CRP project managed by CRO Sarah Muir who worked with rail historian Trevor Booth to produce the content. The panels, which were created to mark Railway 200 in 2025-(the 200th anniversary of the modern railway) have been installed at 13 of the Mid Cheshire Line stations this January. They detail the history of each station and the surrounding area as well as providing information on the whole line. They have already attracted a lot of interest from rail users who have been pausing to read them.

At the Interchange there are 2 matching history panels, one at the bottom of the stairs to the footbridge and one on the brick wall by the lift. Sarah Muir thanked Trevor Booth for his months of work researching and writing content for the panels and also the funders Northern, TransPennine Express, Community Rail Network and Mid Cheshire CRP for supporting the project along with Johnsons Printing for their expertise in producing them. The mayor officially marked the occasion by snipping the red ribbon on the panel by the stairs. The guests then made their way to the "Flourish rooms" on platform 4 to enjoy refreshments. Community Interest Company Flourish had kindly allowed use of their rooms for the event, to find out more about their work check out www.flourishtogether.org.uk While the invited guests mingled and enjoyed refreshments a small group including the mayor broke off to take a look at the smart new fully accessible toilet pod which has been installed at the back of platform 4 in the car park. The mayor posed for a picture with Cllr Michael Welton outside, they were very impressed by this clean and fully accessible pod which will no doubt be a welcome addition to rail users. Back in the Flourish rooms, local poet Pam Bradshaw recited a poem from the CRP funded book "Hare and Rabbit: Travels on a Train". This illustrated poetry compilation details the adventures of best friends Hare and Rabbit along the Mid Cheshire line and Pam's performance was greeted with a loud round of applause. After the tea break the tour continued on the bus station side of the Interchange where the guests admired the aerial photo panel. This image was taken by Manchester based aerial and landscape photographer Andy Mallins who used a drone to take a nighttime shot showing the Interchange and surrounding areas bathed in green blue and orange light. The light trails caused by the moving trains and trams were particularly impressive. After admiring this eye catching image the mayor cut the red ribbon on the photo panel which had again been printed by Johnsons Printing. To see more of Andy's amazing images go to www.andymallinsphotography.com The guests then walked through the bus station concourse and admired the ceramic dove mosaics mounted on the walls. These artworks, installed in 2023, were the creation of young people

from Blessed Thomas Holford Catholic College and were created using a mixture of new and foraged Victorian tiles. The doves, tradition symbols of peace, lend a peaceful quality amongst the hustle and bustle of the bus station. Then it was time for the short hop on the tram to Navigation Road with free travel kindly arranged by one of the guests Sarah Grimes of Transport for Greater Manchester. The mayor, who had drawn quite a few curious glances on the journey thanks to her ceremonial chain, disembarked with the other guests for the final call on the tour. Here they admired the 16 art panels which had been created by Altrincham and District Scouts and Explorers (which are based a stone's throw from the station) under the guidance of scout leader Tom Hartley. Last summer the young people had gone out exploring the Mid Cheshire Line with camera and note pads to gather inspiration for the finished work which showcase the landscapes and land marks at each stop. Funding and support was provided by Northern, Transport for Greater Manchester, Community Rail Network, Friends of Altrincham Interchange and the Mid Cheshire CRP. The design and printing was arranged through Johnsons Printing who have worked on a number of projects for the CRP.

The scouts and explorers had a barbecue and open day on Sunday 30th November to celebrate the project completion but unfortunately couldn't attend the tour due to being at school. Everyone was very impressed with these brightly coloured art works which really add some cheer on the Northern platform and take the viewer on a visual journey along the Mid Cheshire Line. With a final cut of the red ribbon on the art panels the mayor declared she may have achieved a new personal record in ribbon cutting! With the tour concluded the guests said their goodbyes with smiles and waves and made their way home by tram or train. Hopefully those who attended were inspired by viewing the fantastic collaborative work which has been achieved to enhance Altrincham Interchange and Navigation Road station in the last year.

A GOOD NIGHT AT THE CHESHIRE BEST KEPT STATIONS AWARDS EVENING

The Mid Cheshire Line had a good night at the Cheshire Best Kept Stations 2025 awards evening at Crewe Alexandra's football ground on 5th February. Stockport, Altrincham, Knutsford, Lostock Gralam, Northwich and Delamere stations all won awards. These were the awards:

Stockport – Art Project Award.

Altrincham – Cheshire Life Photographic Award for the photograph “Altrincham Library Knitters Poppies on Display” by Bev Robinson (a MCRUA member and a member of the Friends of Altrincham Interchange). Also the Railway 200 Award Highly Commended.

Knutsford – Cheshire East Award.

Lostock Gralam – CrossCountry Rising Star Award Highly Commended.

Northwich – CrossCountry Rising Star Award.

Delamere – Chester West and Chester Award.

Congratulations to everyone involved with securing these awards.

2026 MUSIC TRAINS PROGRAMME by Mike Battman

The outline Music Trains Programme for 2026 is: -

Thursday 23rd April - Evening - Chester to Plumley - Golden Pheasant

Thursday 14th May - Evening - Altrincham to Mouldsworth - The Goshawk

Thursday 11th June - Afternoon - Chester to Altrincham - The Railway

Thursday 30th July - Evening - Chester to Plumley - Golden Pheasant

Thursday 24th September - Evening - Altrincham to Mouldsworth - The Goshawk

The bands playing each time are to be confirmed.

FARES AND TICKETING NEWS

Northern currently has a £12 day ticket offer in conjunction with local, regional and national newspapers. Tokens are in newspapers (including the Manchester Evening News) up to Sunday 8th March. Two tokens are needed to purchase day tickets for up to four people. Weekend tickets are also available for £20. You print off a form from the Northern website and take it (with the tokens attached) to any rail ticket office at a station served by Northern. Travel is after 08.45 on Monday to Friday and all day at weekends. Travel is up to and including Friday 27th March. Full details are at: <https://www.northernrailway.co.uk/tickets/newspaper-offer/reach-plc>. In a very welcome move, regulated rail fares have been frozen until March 2027. Regulated fares include Off Peak Returns, Anytime Day Returns and 7-day season tickets (which are used to calculate all other season tickets). Regulated fares are about 45% of all rail fares. Advance single fares are not regulated. Local rail fares for journeys wholly within Greater Manchester were simplified from 7th December 2025. There are now just Anytime and Off Peak fares between any pair of stations. Advance purchase fares have been abolished for on the day travel. This will greatly simplify matters for passengers arriving at Manchester Airport and travelling by train to Manchester city centre who were previously met with a bewildering array of fares, many tied to particular Train Operating Companies.

The same goes for journeys between Stockport and Manchester Piccadilly where there were a ridiculous number of fares.

NEWS FROM THE LINES by Andrew Macfarlane

An automated public address system on the rail platforms at Altrincham station went live by 1st December, a welcome move. The system announces scheduled train departures and we understand that it also announces rail replacement buses. In a welcome move Avanti West Coast now call at Hartford station with one train per day on Monday to Friday only to and from London Euston (the train services are from and to Liverpool Lime Street). Departure times are 08.10 from Hartford to London Euston arrive 10.03 and 18.43 from London Euston arriving at Hartford at 20.36. These services started from the December 2025 timetable change. We understand that the Department for Transport has instructed Transport for Wales to provide a proper ticket office at Chester station when the present ticket office is moved to a new location near the ticket barrier line. There had been a plan just to provide two open counters. London Northwestern Railway and West Midlands Railway were transferred to public ownership on 1st February. Member of staff Stuart has returned to Northwich station and in a very welcome (but long overdue!) move the ticket office at Northwich station reopened in week beginning 16th February 2026. This was nearly five years after the collapse of part of the station building on 18th May 2021. The ticket office is only open on “early turn” as before. The opening hours are 06.30 to 13.15 on Monday to Friday and 07.15 to 14.15 on Saturdays. The ticket office remains closed on Sundays. The reopening of Cheadle station between Stockport and Altrincham has been delayed until 2028/29 at least. There is an unresolved timetabling issue whereby there isn't enough time in the existing schedules for trains to call at Cheadle without missing out stops elsewhere on the Mid Cheshire Line (Ashley or Plumley). MCRUA is against Ashley and Plumley only having a two-hourly service so that trains can call at Cheadle. A replica Manchester and Birmingham Railway plaque, which stood outside Piccadilly station at the top of the approach from the 1960s, went missing during the rebuilding in the late 1990s. Stockport-based enthusiast Mel Thorley spotted that the plaque had not been replaced at the end of the rebuilding in 2002 and was determined to track it down with the help of his friend BT Policeman Dave Smith. In 2019 Mel spotted the plaque on sale on eBay and tracked it down to a scrap yard in Retford. With the help of Lord Peter Hendy the plaque was seized by BT Police and eventually restored. The restored plaque was unveiled at a new location between platforms 10 and 11 at Piccadilly on 5th December 2025. The restored plaque is well worth a look. The original plaque is in the NRM at York. As mentioned in Sarah Muir's article above, a new heritage-style running-in board was unveiled on platform 4 at Altrincham station by the Mayor of Trafford Councillor Jane Brophy on 15th January. The creation and installation of the board was done by the Chairman of the Friends of Altrincham Interchange Ian Stuart with help from other FoAI members. Drax Power Station is to go onto standby status from 1st April 2027 due to a reduction in Government subsidies. This will mean that the power station will mainly only be used in the winter from that date. The change is bound to see a reduction in the quantity of biomass carried by rail to the power station. The woodwork on the exterior of Deansgate Junction signal box is to be renewed during the night-time track possessions in the week beginning Monday 23rd February. The clock in the clock tower outside Altrincham station was working again by 18th February. Two special trains are due to travel along the Mid Cheshire Line in the near future. On Saturday 28th March the Railway Touring Company is running “The Cheshireman” with steam locomotive 45407 once owned by the late Paddy Smith of Mobberley from Cleethorpes to Chester via the Hope Valley, Guide Bridge, Stockport, Altrincham and Northwich. The train returns from Chester diesel-hauled. More details are at <https://www.railwaytouring.net/tc-28-03-26>. On Saturday 11th April UK Railtours are running “The Not Holyhead” diesel-hauled train, which returns via Chester, Delamere, Northwich west curve and the Middlewich line. More details are here: <https://www.ukrailtours.com/product/the-not-holyhead/>. The train will be hauled by two class 50s.

METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The land once occupied by the former slow lines through Old Trafford Metrolink station (formerly Warwick Road station) and most of the way towards Trafford Bar station (formerly Old Trafford station) has recently been cleared of vegetation and concreted over. We understand that this is in connection with some forthcoming engineering work at Cornbrook. Perhaps there is a plan to store materials on this area of land? Metrolink tram times can be found by using the journey planner at www.traveline.info.

LOCAL RAIL NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

London Northwestern Railway (LNWR) have announced that they plan to extend their hourly Stafford-Stoke-Crewe shuttle service at both ends from the December 2026 timetable change. They plan to start the service from Birmingham New Street and call at the new stations of Darlaston and Willenhall in the West Midlands. North of Crewe the plan is to extend the service to Manchester Airport calling at Wilmslow and Styal. If this service replaces the existing hourly service at Styal, Styal passengers will have to change at Manchester Airport to reach Manchester Piccadilly. The LNWR proposal to extend their London Euston to Crewe service via Warrington Bank

Quay to Manchester Victoria is not now happening in 2026 due to capacity issues at Manchester Victoria. The plan to build a new reversing siding in the Miles Platting area east of Manchester Victoria has been delayed but some work has now started. There is no catering and there are no seat reservations on LNwR services. The Settle & Carlisle line is again to be used for diversions from the West Coast main line at Easter (on Saturday 4th April and Sunday 5th April) and from Saturday 11th April to Sunday 19th April.

POSSIBLE MCRUA SPECIAL TRAIN

We hope to soon have some exciting news about a possible rail tour in August. The possible dates are Saturdays 15th, 22nd or 29th August. You may wish to keep these dates free!

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. The forthcoming programme is:

Tuesday 10 th March	Steve Blakemore	“Canadian Rocky Mountain Steam Express 2004”.
Tuesday 14 th April	Paul Shackcloth	“People and Places 7”.
Tuesday 12 th May	Ian Crowder	“76077: The Forgotten Standard”.

MCRUA COMMITTEE NEWS

We say farewell to Mike Ross from Chester, who has stepped down from the MCRUA Committee after many years. We thank him for his work for the line (in particular for the music trains) and wish him well for the future.

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

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.lnr.co.uk which has live train running information and ticket sales for London Northwestern Railway.

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

<https://www.realtimetains.co.uk/search/detailed/> Real Time Trains. Shows actual train running.

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MCRUA is affiliated to Railfuture, the national, voluntary body for rail users. MCRUA is on Facebook.

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