

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

With Christmas and New Year well behind us, hopefully 2024 will soon see a resolution of the industrial action that has been blighting our railways. The end of 2023 has seen the government cancel the northern leg of HS2, and whatever your views on this scheme it does appear to demonstrate our government's anti-rail and pro-car agenda. We shall see what other projects may be funded, it would be good if the Middlewich line could be re-opened and even the Airport Western Link built. The proposal to close ticket offices has been reversed, so the few offices we have will remain open for the time being. At the same time we are continuing to press Northern for the installation of ticket machines at all our stations and on ALL platforms.

Northern have stated that passenger numbers have exceeded pre-Covid figures reaching as high as 110%. Leisure travel is continuing to be the main driver of this increase, with rush hour and business travel not recovering as well. I suspect with the increased occurrence of 'working from home' that rush-hour will never fully return to pre-Covid numbers. The waiting room on platform 4 at Altrincham Interchange has now re-opened and the Friends group have jumped in and decorated the room. Sadly, the lease of the other rooms has fallen through mainly due to the appearance of damp patches due to a leaky roof (they were warned!!). In February scaffolding reappeared on platform 4 to enable the roof repairs to be undertaken and these repairs have now started.

Northwich was progressing well, and the final stretch is nearing. However, Network Rail have missed a couple of handover deadlines and at the time of writing we do not know when it will be handed over to Northern for the final fit-out. Your Chair has been doing a series of talks about our line, mainly to U3A Groups in the Altrincham / Knutsford area, if any one along the line knows any group that would like a talk, please do not hesitate to contact me and we'll arrange a date.

The first steam train down the line for some time is happening on Saturday 25th May, when *The Mancunian* is running from Piccadilly and Stockport to Holyhead with Jubilee Class *Bahamas* due to haul it. Final times have yet to be confirmed but it is due to leave Piccadilly c1030. Finally, Northern has announced that in the June timetable some of their Rochdale to Blackburn trains will be extended to travel up the Settle & Carlisle Line to Ribbleshead. This means that you will be able to catch a regular train from Victoria and enjoy the splendour of the Yorkshire Dales and Ribbleshead Viaduct.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS WANTED by Mike Battman

We are still looking to recruit new committee members following a couple of retirements. We meet approximately every 6-weeks on a Monday afternoon or 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

2024 MCRUA ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2024 AGM will be held at the Golden Pheasant near Plumley station on Monday 8th July at 7pm. There will be more details in the next issue of the newsletter, due out in June.

SUNDAY AND LATE NIGHT ENGINEERING WORK by Andrew Macfarlane

Sunday trains were and are replaced by buses between Stockport and Chester all day on Sundays 10th, 17th and 24th March due to planned engineering work. The replacement bus timetable was and is different from previous Sunday bus replacements. In particular, there was and is a much earlier bus towards Stockport. There were also late night bus replacements due to planned engineering work from Monday 11th March to Thursday 14th March (inclusive) and there will also be the same late night bus replacements from Monday 22nd April to Thursday 25th April (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 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.

NORTHWICH STATION NEWS from our Vale Royal correspondent Simon Barber

MCRUA members may well be wondering whether anything is happening at Northwich station after the well-known building collapse in May 2021. And the answer is yes, but too slowly. Network Rail (NR) are still in charge of the station buildings whilst they complete the rebuild. It is looking good, with the original building architecture being closely matched and the builder's stone 'CLC 1897' being replaced in its original position above the main entrance. NR had originally said that the main structural work would complete by August 2023. This date was missed and a new date announced of 30 January 2024. That too has been missed and NR have not yet given any new date when Northern can re-occupy the building.

NR's work is only the building reconstruction. It's essentially the waiting room, a one-room brick extension to the surviving building, with unique architecture but no other complications. If you built a one-room brick extension to your house it wouldn't take this long (but don't ask Network Rail to do it). Once NR's work is finished, it is up to the tenant, Northern Rail, to do the fit-out. Northern have asked MCRUA and local bodies what they want to see in the building. There will of course be a railway ticket office, which we're told will be staffed as before by Stuart (who's currently working at Sandbach station). It will be open the same hours as before, which unfortunately means it is closed in the afternoons and evenings and on Sundays - and so is the waiting room. It's not that big a space, so how to fit it out is a question of how the space should be fitted with power sockets, how to finish the walls, whether any partitioned space or cupboards are needed. Northern have suggested that Hattersley station ticket office (on the Hadfield line), which was recently rebuilt and extended, may be a source of ideas to copy. I'll take a look there. If you have suggestions for the Northwich re-fit please contact any member of the MCRUA committee.

In the meantime, Northern have told us that the existing small shelter on the Chester platform is to be replaced by a larger and more modern structure. It will however not be weather-proof because the space is too narrow for a four-walled shelter. The canopy on the Manchester platform largely survives and is to be cleaned as part of the rebuild, so is a better place to wait on a rainy day - as is the waiting room, when it is open. As the rebuild continues, our CRO, Sarah Muir, has led a series of meetings to establish a Station Friends Group at Northwich. The response has been excellent with meetings usually attended by 15-20 people and support from local councillors and other town organisations. There is not much that volunteers can do whilst the station is still a building site, but we have been safety-trained by Northern Rail in anticipation of Northern getting control of the station again soon, and the volunteers have agreed to do a litter-pick around the station in early March, something that is sadly needed but will also help build team spirit in the new Friends group. The formal establishment and launch of the group will take place after the building works finish, when we will have more opportunity to do projects.

There is also too-slow progress on the parallel project to improve access to the Chester platform at Northwich. Readers may remember that the argument was made to upgrade the station as part of the rebuild project, but Network Rail and the Department for Transport (DfT) refused to do that. Instead, a full 'Access for All' application was made to DfT in early 2022. Cheshire West & Chester Council sponsored a specialist architect to design the 'Access for All' proposal which would bring lifts and a new bridge to connect across to the Chester platform, and also other works such as tactile paving, better signage, and space for buses to turn in the forecourt. The scheme

tries to address other disabilities besides restricted mobility but the railway is unfortunately a long way from being usable by people of any disability. However, after well over a year, still no response has been received from DfT.

Much the same can be said of the excellent business case made by Cheshire & Warrington Local Enterprise Partnership ('the LEP') to re-open the Middlewich line to passenger trains. This refers, of course, to the Northwich to Crewe railway (also known as the Mid Cheshire Rail Link) so it would be a boon for passengers to/from Northwich as well as Middlewich, Gadbrook Park, Knutsford and much of Mid Cheshire. This was the second business case to be made for this project and was submitted at the DfT's request after they had evaluated the first case submitted. That request clearly suggested that the DfT wanted to see and approve a case for the line. This latest case was submitted in October 2022 as part of the DfT's "Restoring Your Railway" programme but again, no response has been received. Your MCRUA committee contributed to the proposals for all these projects. We will continue to monitor all these developments in the interests of local rail users, present and future.

CONSULTATION ON CAR PARK CHARGING AT FOUR STATIONS

Northern are to start a consultation on introducing car parking charges at Cuddington, Delamere, Greenbank and Mouldsworth stations. They will be operated on the Ringo system where you pay via phone or online. The consultation is due to start on the 18th March and there will be a dedicated website to submit your comments.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT by Ralph Warrington

Our membership levels over 2023 stayed fairly static, with new members replacing those who left for one reason or another on a near one-for-one basis. An increasing number of people are taking up the facility of a Standing Order with their bank to pay their annual subs. Don't forget – if you take this facility up, you are protected against cost increases in your subs for five years. As ever, we have ongoing issues on the line that we campaign on with Northern, Network Rail &c. We are taken more seriously depending on the "mass" of people we represent, so we would encourage you to spread the word and encourage others to join MCRUA.

We welcome the following new members since the last Rail Report:

Roger Bentley and family	Plumley
Ashley Donson	Northwich
Hoz Bennett	Crewe
Ian Bowland	Sandbach
Paul West	Hale

We are saddened to report the death of the following members:

Anthony Walker Knutsford
Chris Gray Timperley (on 24th January).

STEAM-HAULED SPECIAL TRAIN ALONG THE MID CHESHIRE LINE by Andrew Macfarlane

As Mike Battman mentioned above, a steam-hauled special train is due to travel along the Mid Cheshire Line for the first time in a long while on Saturday 25th May. 45596 *Bahamas* is due to haul the Railway Touring Company's special train "The Mancunian" from Manchester Piccadilly (departing at 10.30 approximately) and Stockport (departing at 11.00 approximately) via Altrincham, Northwich and Chester to Holyhead and back. Details including fares, approximate return times and how to book can be found on the Railway Touring Company website here: <https://www.railwaytouring.net/the-mancunian-05-05-24> or they can be reached by phone on 01553 661500.

FREIGHT NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

DB Cargo withdrew the last of their class 60 diesel locomotives in January and since then the Tunstead to Lostock limestone hoppers have been hauled by class 66 locos with 20 loaded wagons rather than 24 wagons with a class 60. DB Cargo are modifying ten class 66 locomotives with different gearing so that they can haul more wagons. There is a closure of the eastern end of the Hope Valley line from 16th to 24th March (inclusive) for resignalling and remodelling work including a new loop at Bamford and reinstating double track through Dore & Topley station. Freight trains which normally use the Dore south curve will be diverted via Cheadle Heath, Altrincham and Middlewich.

FARES NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

Regulated rail fares (singles, seven-day season tickets and Off-peak return fares) increased in price by 4.9% from 3rd March. The Greater Manchester Wayfarer day ticket (valid from Northwich and stations towards Manchester and on all of Metrolink after 09.30 and all day at weekends) went up to £16.90 for adults and £8.45 for children (aged 5 to 15). The GM Concessionary Wayfarer (for anyone with an English National Concessionary Travel pass including pensioners and the disabled) is now £11.15. Wayfarer tickets can be purchased from ticket offices, station ticket vending machines (press the 'Rangers and Rovers' icon and the next screen should show Wayfarer tickets) and Paypoint outlets. Railcard discounts are not available on through fares between rail stations and Metrolink zones. If you have a railcard it is best to buy a railcard-discounted ticket for the rail part of the journey and then buy

a separate ticket on Metrolink (or buy a concessionary Wayfarer ticket to cover both rail and Metrolink if you have a bus pass).

NEWS FROM THE LINE by Andrew Macfarlane

Since 23rd October the ticket office at Altrincham has closed at 19.20 rather than at 20.20. As Mike referred to above, in a very welcome move the plan to close most ticket offices across the country was scrapped on 31st October after 750,000 comments were received by Transport Focus and London Travelwatch. The new waiting room on platform 4 at Altrincham opened on 23rd October. Tactile paving has been installed on both platforms at Ashley and the white lines on the platform edges have been repainted. The fourth coach remains locked on services on the line which are formed of four coaches. Many (or most) passengers are still unaware of this until the train arrives in the platform and they attempt to board the fourth coach. It would surely be better if the locking of the fourth coach was advertised. There was some overcrowding on the line between 13th and 19th November when there was no train service on the line between Manchester and Chester via Warrington due to engineering work, no Transport for Wales trains were diverted via Northwich (we understand that route knowledge has now been lost) and none of our trains was strengthened. We understand that route knowledge of the Middlewich line has also been lost by Avanti West Coast drivers so diversions of Crewe to Holyhead services are no longer possible via that route. On the subject of the planned station at Cheadle (between Navigation Road and Stockport) there are challenges currently with the timetable modelling which are being worked through with Northern. Bishop Trains will be running a High Speed Train charter from Newcastle to Chester on Saturday 3rd August. The train is due to come back from Chester via the Mid Cheshire Line. Funds from the cancellation of HS2 north of Birmingham are to be used for the Access for All scheme to improve access at rail stations. Dare we hope that Northwich might benefit from this source of funding?

ON DEMAND BUS SERVICE SERVES AN AREA INCLUDING CUDDINGTON, DELAMERE AND MOULDSWORTH STATIONS

Cheshire West and Chester Council have introduced an on demand minibus service serving an area including Cuddington, Delamere and Mouldsworth stations. It is called itravel and operates between 07.00 and 19.00 on Monday to Friday. There is an App to book journeys which can be found by searching for 'itravel | on-demand bus' or journeys can be booked by ringing 0330 678 1545. Journeys can be booked up to one hour before travel (subject to availability) and up to 30 days in advance. A review of the scheme can be found on the busandtrainuser website here: <https://busandtrainuser.com/2023/09/24/cheshire-west-joins-the-drt-party/>.

METROLINK NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

There were changes to Metrolink services from 2nd January in advance of the opening of the new Co-op Arena near the Etihad Stadium in east Manchester. Altrincham to Piccadilly services are now operated by double trams and most Altrincham to Bury services are now single trams (which has led to some complaints). Trams from Altrincham to Piccadilly are extended to Etihad Campus in the evenings and all day on Sundays. Metrolink tram times can be found by planning a journey on the Traveline website www.traveline.info. Since 22nd January there have been changes to Metrolink services due to a cracked crossing at Victoria. This has been replaced with plain track as a temporary measure pending repair or replacement of the crossing. This prevents access to the second city crossing from Victoria. So the East Didsbury to Rochdale service has been diverted via Market Street with more double trams and the East Didsbury to Shaw service has been cut back to terminate at Exchange Square. It is not known how long these temporary changes will last. On 22nd February it was announced that Metrolink would benefit from £21.4 million worth of improvements. This will include track replacement in several parts of the city centre, including Piccadilly Gardens and London Road, and on parts of the Altrincham and Bury lines. Plans also include a programme of modifications to the trams themselves, installing state-of-the art systems to keep passengers safe. These include sensors in the middle of double trams and speed warning devices. New electrical substations are being added along parts of the Bury line, providing additional power so that more double trams can run in future. Metrolink is also replacing much of the communications network critical to the operation of its signalling and control systems. TfGM is also looking into the replacement of overhead lines on some of the older parts of the network such as the Bury line, which caused several prolonged disruptions in 2023. The work will mean some short-term disruption. Metrolink passenger numbers are back to pre-pandemic levels during the weekday peak times and even busier at weekends. With 130,000 journeys on an average weekday, TfGM say that work on the network is being planned carefully to keep disruption to a minimum. A supervised trial to test whether bikes and non-standard cycles can be taken on Metrolink trams started on 29th February for four to six weeks on off-peak services on different lines at different times of day and on different days of the week. The trial is being carried out by invited participants only. It remains to be seen if the carriage of bikes proves to be workable. It would be useful for those starting their journey on Metrolink who wished to go to Delamere Forest, for example.

LOCAL RAIL NEWS by Andrew Macfarlane

The electric wires between Manchester Victoria and Stalybridge went live on 1st January and the wires between Guide Bridge and Stalybridge went live on 3rd March. A new footbridge was provided at Ardwick station over the Christmas period. As Mike mentioned above, two of the Rochdale-Manchester Victoria-Clitheroe services each way are to be extended to and from Ribbleshead on Saturdays only from Saturday 8th June. Special cheaper fares are available on the new service (as opposed to the normal fares routed via Leeds). The new Golborne station south of Wigan will be served by an hourly Wigan to Stalybridge service via Manchester Victoria when it opens. 17 stations in Greater Manchester will have tap in and tap out (as on Metrolink) from 2025. Mossley station is to be moved towards Leeds as part of the Transpennine Route Upgrade. The existing Mossley station site will have historical elements retained, including the station building.

RETRO RAILTOURS TO ANNOUNCE NEW TRIPS

Retro Railtours are shortly to announce new day trips by train from the North West and West Yorkshire. Their website is at www.retrorailtours.co.uk. They can be reached by email at info@retrorailtours.co.uk or by phone on 0161 330 9055.

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 AERPS website is at www.altrinchamelectric.org.uk. The forthcoming programme is:

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:

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 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".

Tuesday 10th September John Hooley "Boat Trains and Channel Packets".

Tuesday 8th October Graham Nicholas "The P2 Prince of Wales. Building Britain's most powerful steam locomotive".

Tuesday 12th November Ted Buckley "Navigation Road and All That".

Tuesday 10th December Ian Pilkington "Steam in North Wales and the Borders since 2010".

IN MEMORIAM

Long-time MCRUA member Brian Arnold from Timperley died on 13th February aged 93. Andrew Macfarlane attended his funeral at Altrincham Crematorium on Friday 8th March. Brian was a well-known local railway enthusiast. He commuted daily to Manchester on the Altrincham line during his working life and he was an expert on the hopper trains, which run between the Peak District and the Northwich area. This traffic, which began in the 1870s, continues to run to this day.

CHRISTMAS NEWSLETTER

We apologise that we didn't publish a newsletter at Christmas. There were technical problems with sending the October newsletter to those who receive the newsletter electronically and these were only resolved in December. So electronic members received the October newsletter in December but postal only members have not heard from us since October. We hope that you will renew your subscription and a renewal form is enclosed or attached for those who have not yet renewed.

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.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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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.**