

2024 SPRING

WIRRAL TRANSPORT USER

The Newsletter of the Wirral Transport Users Association

web: www.wirraltua.org.uk

email: wirraltua@gmail.com

Train Developments

The new class 777 units

A) Roll-out of the new units on all *Merseyrail* lines gathers pace



'Eurovision Song Contest'- liveried Class 777 at New Brighton in August '23 a day before the new units started carrying passengers on the NB line

Merseyrail started introducing the new Class 777 electric multiple units in January 2023, with the first train running on the Kirkby line in one of the three diagrams (allocation of trains to the timetable) during daytime on weekdays. Over the next few weeks, use was progressively extended to the other two Kirkby line diagrams and across the whole week. Next, conversion of the Ormskirk line followed in a similar diagram-by-diagram fashion. These two lines were chosen for the initial roll-out as the services go past the main depot

at Kirkdale, so assistance would be close at hand in the event of any problems.

Following Kirkby and Ormskirk, the plan was for Wirral North, i.e. the New Brighton and West Kirby lines, to come next and indeed there were some Class 777s on services for the *Open Golf Tournament* at Hoylake in July. However, after that, roll-out was prioritised on Wirral South – the Chester and Ellesmere Port lines (probably to try and improve timetable reliability). More recently, West Kirby line services are now also diagrammed for Class 777s.

B) Reliability Issues

Introduction of the Class 777 trains has by no means been plain sailing with various problems being encountered, including with the doors and the sliding steps. *Stadler*, the Swiss-based manufacturer of the trains, provides trains for railways all over Europe, so it is not clear why there are door problems on Merseyside. With the sliding steps, the issue is one of failures to retract after door closure, when there are crush loading conditions in the vestibules. This could be due to deformation of the floor under the weight of people or some problem with the door safety sensors. There are also issues with the on-board passenger information system and with two Class 777s working in pairs.

On Headbolt Lane services, there have also been problems with the third rail changeover to battery power (near Fazakerley), causing a reduced frequency timetable to be implemented. Indeed, as a "gesture of goodwill", *Stadler* has now offered money to pay for refunds over the "teething issues", applicable to weekly, monthly, term-time and annual tickets held by last year's Kirkby-line users.

Teething problems with new trains seem to be inevitable and, despite the above, many services across *Merseyrail* are now operated successfully by Class 777s, with passengers benefiting from state-of-the-art modern trains.

C) 8-car Trains



Southport station- Posts (grey) being erected for a barrier to separate off the end of platform 1

From December, Class 777s have been entering service on the Southport line and are progressively replacing the Class 507/508s. A single 4-car Class 777 has 60% greater capacity overall (including standing passengers) than a Class 507/508, and is currently sufficient for all Southport services. However, there is a potential problem with platform lengths at Southport station for 8-car trains (2 x Class 777s) which may be needed should peak-time demand

increase significantly (as explained in the previous newsletter). A pair of Class 777s is 8.3 metres (27 ft 2 in) longer than a pair of Class 507/508s. Whilst a train of two Class 777s can physically fit in the existing platforms, its greater length means there is an inadequate safety margin at one end with the buffers and at the other for signalling requirements.

Accordingly, work has recently started on extending the *Merseyrail* platforms 2 and 3 which will cut into the concourse so that the tracks can be extended a short distance for these platforms.

Two other routes are being equipped so that they can handle 8-car trains when necessary – these are the Ormskirk and Chester lines. 8-car trains on the former will be essential for the *Grand National* at Aintree in April and similarly for the *Chester Races* later in the year.

NPB

Chester line - Skip-Stop Services

At quite short notice, in 2022, *Merseyrail* modified the Chester service such that it

omitted the stops at Green Lane and Bromborough Rake, in order to improve

timekeeping. Bromborough Rake was picked because of relatively low usage, whilst Green Lane has good parallel bus services. Calls at the two stations continued to be provided by the half-hourly Ellesmere Port trains.

Prior to these changes, if trains outbound to Chester were running late, Control was requiring trains to run non-stop from Birkenhead Central to Hooton, to make up lost time, on a fairly regular basis. It is not entirely clear why Chester line timekeeping had deteriorated post-Covid, but it may have been due to needing longer station dwell times.

Local politicians pressed for reinstatement, particularly at Bromborough Rake, which is the only fully passenger-accessible station of the three serving the Bromborough area. Stops by two of the four trains per hour to Chester were reinstated in March, followed a few weeks later by the opposite pair of Chester trains resuming calls at Green Lane. Full reinstatement of the calls in late autumn, (except for the long-established alternate skip-stopping at Capenhurst), was facilitated by the introduction of the Class 777s on the Chester line. Their superior acceleration reduces the risk of late running.

NPB

Headbolt Lane Station



Merseyrail's newest station, Headbolt Lane, opened on 5th October last year (2023). The station is located on the Kirkby to Wigan section of line, about one mile north-east of the previous terminus of the *Merseyrail* line at Kirkby station, and is now the Kirkby line terminus. In addition to serving the Northwood and Tower Hill areas, plus Kirkby Business Park, the station has become the new point of interchange between *Merseyrail's* Kirkby line and the *Northern* services to Wigan. The new station also provides a bus interchange, providing connections to Skelmersdale and other destinations.

Shortly beyond Kirkby station, the track splits into two parallel single tracks all the way to Headbolt Lane. The new station has two terminal platforms for

Merseyrail services and, beyond them towards Wigan, a single terminal platform for the *Northern* trains. The two *Merseyrail* platforms are connected by a short length of platform which cuts their tracks off from the *Northern* platform's track. To allow for the possibility of future through-running, the *Northern* track is directly aligned with one of the *Merseyrail* tracks. However, through-running seems a very distant possibility at present.

To avoid the need to extend the electrified third rail, seven of *Merseyrail's* new Class 777 trains have been equipped with traction battery packs. Trains change from third rail to battery power on the double track section near Fazakerley (before it becomes single track for the rest of the way to Kirkby).

Initially, only one *Merseyrail* train an hour ran through to Headbolt Lane, with a second train terminating at Kirkby. That gave good connections to the hourly Wigan service but very poor connections from Wigan (very tight timing to change to the *Merseyrail* Liverpool-bound train). The reduced

service frequency (previously every 15 minutes during the day) for stations to Kirkby led to overcrowding on some trains. Headbolt Lane now has three *Merseyrail* services per hour, and the plan is to increase that to four trains, once the new Class 777 trains have fully bedded in.

NPB

Class 507s and 508s

As the Class 777s come into service, so the old trains are being progressively retired and sent to Newport in South Wales for scrapping. The Class 508s were withdrawn first, with all now gone, following a final farewell rail-tour at the end of October. Unlike the 508s, the Class 507s have small traction batteries to enable self-powered movement around maintenance depots. This feature

makes it worth keeping the 507s for longer.

Until the platform extension work at Southport (described above) is complete, several pairs of class 507s will be retained in case there is need to provide double-length trains for extra rush hour capacity on the Southport line.

NPB

Liverpool Baltic Station

Opening of the next new *Merseyrail* station, called *Liverpool Baltic*, to be sited near Parliament Street and the

Anglican cathedral, was initially given as 2025, but this has now been postponed until 2028.

NPB

HS2 NORTH Cancellation

Last October, the Government cancelled the northern part of HS2, the plan for a new high-speed rail line between London, Birmingham, and Manchester, due to a combination of increasing costs and reduced post-Covid demands for business travel. So, the new line will now be constructed between London and Birmingham, plus a link to join the existing WCML (West Coast Main Line) at Handsacre, near Lichfield. This link will allow trains from/to Glasgow, Liverpool, and Manchester to access *HS2 South*.

The *HS2 South* line, currently being constructed, is designed with large-radius curves for a maximum speed of 400 km/hour, with the trains on order specified accordingly. Today, the main inter-city services on the WCML are

provided by the *Pendolino* trains equipped with tilting, which enables higher speeds around curves. Currently, it is not possible to build tilting trains that can travel at 400 km/hour, so new trains on order for HS2 will not tilt. For through services from London to cities on the WCML beyond *HS2 South*, when the new trains are traversing the tighter curves of the WCML they will not be able to reach the higher speeds currently attained by the *Pendolino* trains. For Liverpool and Manchester services, the absence of tilt doesn't matter too much for overall journey times to London via *HS2 South*. However, it will be a big deal for services to Glasgow and Edinburgh, where tilt provides significant time savings.

In addition, the capacity of the WCML north of Handsacre to take extra trains off *HS2 South* is constrained by pinch points further north, particularly the double track section through Shugborough Tunnel south of Stafford. *HS2 North* would have provided a bypass for this section.

Whilst cancellation of *HS2 North* is undoubtedly a huge disappointment for the rail industry, the overall economic impact on the North of England is more limited as economic analysis showed that almost half the economic benefit would have gone to London and the South East.

NPB

NETWORK NORTH

Instead of constructing *HS2 North*, the Government has decided to reinvest all the planned £36 billion spend in other transport projects. Whilst the alternative spend is all under the *Network North* banner, the money will be divided by Region according to the planned HS2 spend, with the North of England to receive £19.8 billion and the Midlands £9.6 billion, in addition to existing transport budgets for the Regions. However, only about 30% of the spend will be on rail schemes, with the rest to be spent on road schemes.

In particular, the Government considers that the economic potential of cities in the North and Midlands is being held back by inadequate public transport, and that investment here will bring bigger economic benefits to the Regions. For instance, more than 4 million people across the North of England are unable to reach their nearest city centre in 30 minutes by public transport. Generally, the more investment made to the transport infrastructure of a city and the surrounding region, then the larger the area/population within 30 mins travel-time to the centre.

Of relevance to Wirral and Chester, the alternative plans include:

- Additional £0.6 billion to *Liverpool City Region*, on top of £1 billion already allocated under the *City Region Sustainable Transport*

Settlement 2 budget – up to LCR to decide how to spend

- £1 billion to fund electrification of the North Wales Main Line – this appears to include both of the lines from Warrington and Crewe to Chester
- Doubling of the current hourly bus service from Chester to Northwich

Further afield, commitments include:

- Electrification of the Hope Valley line between Sheffield and Manchester
- Reopening the railway line from Gobowen to Oswestry
- Reopening the railway line from Stoke to Leek

To make the most of the new infrastructure, it is to be hoped the North Wales electrification scheme will include both Llandudno and the Halton Curve, thereby enabling electric operation of the planned Liverpool to Llandudno service.

Separately, there will be an additional £12 billion to improve connectivity between Liverpool and Manchester, provisionally allocated to *Northern Powerhouse Rail*.

All the above are contingent on satisfactory business cases being developed. For at least some of the stand-alone projects, the Government has indicated it will fund the cost of developing the full business cases.



New Network North projects- [from assets.publishing.service.gov.uk website- Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0]

NPB

Beeston Castle & Tarporley Station

Another new station further back in the planning pipeline is Beeston Castle & Tarporley, on the line between Chester and Crewe. The original Beeston Castle & Tarporley station closed in 1966, one of the victims of the Beeching Axe. A

proposal to reopen the station, submitted to the *Restoring Your Railway Fund* in 2020, was successful in securing funding to develop an outline business case. That outline business case has now been accepted by the *Department for*

Transport, thereby securing funding for further development of the proposal.

Provided the full business case is equally positive, the scheme should progress through to delivery of a new station. However, that prospect is some years away, as there is much further work to do before the go ahead to start construction can be secured.

The proposed station will be located near the site of the previous station, at Tiverton on the A49, between Tarporley and Beeston. Whilst there is clearly sufficient population in the surrounding villages to make a good business case, the new station will presumably need substantial park & ride facilities to be provided, given the distances involved for most potential passengers. Station usage would also be bolstered by visitors to Beeston Castle and walkers accessing

the Sandstone Trail between Frodsham and Whitchurch, which passes nearby.

There is also a question about the train service that would be provided. Currently, TfW (*Transport for Wales*) provides an hourly Chester-Crewe shuttle, with a journey time of 22 or 23 minutes, operated by a single DMU. An additional Beeston Castle & Tarporley stop would add around an extra 3 minutes in each direction. Maybe, the Class 197s with their higher maximum speed could save a minute or so, but the turnarounds still look very tight if the current timetable pattern is retained. A better option could be to interwork with other services, eg the proposed North Wales Metro service between Chester and Rhyl or Llandudno Junction, thereby restoring a regular through TfW service between North Wales and Crewe.

NPB and DH

Borderlands Line – Wrexham-Bidston

A) The service provision performance

2023 has been a torrid year for services on the Wrexham-Bidston line, although things are now starting to look up with the December timetable change.

As reported in the article on the Class 197s, the need to withdraw almost the entire TfW Class 175 fleet, due to inadequate maintenance, led to the Class 150s used on the Wrexham Bidston line being taken for use elsewhere. In consequence, the rail service was suspended, with rail-replacement buses providing a highly unsatisfactory alternative. The buses were much slower and passenger confusion was caused by the absence of suitable signage or notification of the locations of the bus pick-up points at those stations where the buses did not access the station forecourts.

The appalling service prompted the *Wrexham-Bidston Rail Users*

Association, with the full support of other local Rail User Groups, to send an open letter highly critical of TfW's failings, to MSs* and MPs representing constituencies in the surrounding area and to local councillors. (* Members of the Welsh Parliament, the Senedd). In particular, the open letter suggested that the interests of passengers would be better served if the Wrexham-Bidston service were transferred to a different (English) train-operating company.

Intentionally, the open letter created a political storm. Lee Waters, Deputy Minister for Climate Change in the Welsh Government, with responsibility for Transport, came up from Cardiff to meet WBRUA members, during a trip on the line, and local council leaders. He subsequently tasked TfW with developing a service improvement plan for the line.

In response, TfW published a 5-step improvement plan on the 30 July, with the following pledges:

1. We will be appointing a dedicated route officer to delve deep into the issues on the line and develop a long-term focus on performance and reliability.
2. We commit to delivering the maximum level of reliability to our Class 230 fleet and optimising the current provision.
3. We commit to keep all rail replacement to a minimum.
4. We will continually review our timetable with customers at the forefront.
5. We commit to review our fares and ticketing across north Wales to make buying tickets and traveling as easy as possible.

The plan also includes a commitment to improving customer service and information available during disruption.

To be fair, TfW has been very badly let down by the manufacturer of the new Class 230 trains (see below) and is still struggling to achieve acceptable reliability from these trains.

Train services on the line were restored as TfW's availability of working train units improved.

One of the outcomes of the plan has been the introduction of an increased service frequency from the December 2023 timetable change. Trains now run at 45-minute intervals, with the journey time extended from 56 to 61 minutes northbound and 62 minutes southbound. Most station stops have been extended from 30 to 45 seconds and there are longer turnaround times

at Wrexham, although some trains now terminate short at Wrexham General, rather than running through to Wrexham Central. This new service requires three train sets, currently one Class 230 and two Class 197s. However, the Class 197s are not ideal, as they are designed for inter-urban services. So, the aim is to move to an all Class 230 service during the first half of 2024, as Class 230 availability permits.

To maintain an acceptable level of public safety for the higher frequency of the new service, *Network Rail* has imposed a temporary speed restriction at Buckley and is currently providing crossing keepers to protect the barrow crossing used by passengers to cross between platforms.

It now appears that the political furore (related above) has made TfW raise the status of the line because there has been a notable performance advance. Despite the current shortage of Class 197 units due to wheel problems, reported elsewhere in the newsletter, Wrexham-Bidston has kept its two Class 197s. Instead, Class 150s, drafted in from elsewhere, have been covering some long-distance duties, such as Cardiff to Holyhead.

Longer term, TfW is examining the feasibility of further timetable improvement, both reducing journey times and increasing to a two train per hour service, as previously proposed. That involves a re-assessment of the line speed limits, some of which had originally been set for iron-ore trains which no longer run. Such a re-appraisal would also highlight any track/infrastructure improvements needing to be made by Network Rail.

B) New trains for the line



Two class 230s for the price of one - the left hand train is just leaving Bidston for Wrexham as the Bidston-bound train arrives (about to go on to the Birkenhead depot)

TfW has purchased five Class 230 hybrid battery-diesel trains, based on ex-London Underground D78 stock, for use on the Wrexham-Bidston line. On paper, these trains seem an ideal lower-cost solution for the line, with their rapid acceleration and multiple doors to facilitate speedy loading and unloading at the closely spaced stations on the line. Being unique to the line, they are less likely to be taken for use on other lines at times of peak demand. However, their introduction has been beset by multiple problems.

Maintenance had been contracted to the manufacturer, *Vivarail*, but that company went into administration in November 2022. Accordingly, TfW decided to take the maintenance in-house, including hiring several ex-*Vivarail* staff. In addition, TfW has invested in new maintenance facilities at Birkenhead North depot to maintain the Class 230s, so the trains no longer need to travel to Chester for maintenance and servicing.

Once the maintenance set up was in place, TfW was able to bring the first Class 230 into passenger service on 3 April 2023. However, despite their rapid acceleration capability, the Class 230s were unable to keep time, apparently

due to the drivers being unwilling to change their driving technique to that required for the new trains, plus the slow door cycle at stations.

It soon became clear the Class 230s had a more fundamental problem, with their intake filters becoming clogged with pollen after ~ 4 hours in service. Another train then had to be substituted whilst the filters were cleaned, which took ~ 2 hours. Thus, 2 x Class 230s were required to operate a single train service diagram, with the second diagram being covered by a Class 150.

Even though the pollen season is long since over, a similar arrangement, with 2 x Class 230s, has continued up to the time of writing, due to the risk of the batteries overheating. During the autumn leaf-fall season, performance of the Class 230s has also been affected by poor wheel adhesion - more than occurred on the Class 150s.

Whilst reliability is now starting to improve, with often three trains available for service each day, there is still a considerable list of modifications required to achieve acceptable reliability.

Transport for Wales – Other Rail Developments

A) Introduction of class 197s

TfW is progressively introducing a new fleet of 77 Class 197 diesel multiple units (DMUs), both to replace their Class 175 and Class 158 DMUs and to provide some additional units to expand services. The new Class 197s are now being used on all services radiating from Chester. Their introduction has however been beset by problems and is running behind schedule.



Class 197 at Bidston

Maintenance of the Class 197s has been contracted to the train builder CAF, who accordingly took over the operation of Chester depot from Alstom, the builders of the Class 175s. This arrangement meant that, during the interim period, both the Class 175s and Class 197s were being maintained at Chester depot, even though CAF had previously no experience of maintaining the Class 175s. As built, the depot was just the right size for the 175 fleet, so inevitably maintenance of the Class 175 fleet suffered.

In the first few months of 2023, there were three underfloor thermal incidents affecting the engines of the Class 175s, i.e. the engines would have caught fire, but the fire suppression system worked.

In consequence, almost the entire Class 175 fleet was withdrawn for checks and, where necessary, repairs. The Office of Rail and Road subsequently served an enforcement notice on TfW, for failing to take adequate steps to ensure the safety of passengers and staff.

Two problems with Class 175s were identified, cracks in the charge air coolers (heat exchangers) and inadequate cleaning of the engine compartment allowing the build-up of leaves, etc. A third contributing factor was that the stabling sidings alongside Chester station were so congested overnight that it was not always possible to get trains that needed servicing into the depot.

With almost all the Class 175s out of service and only a few 197s available, TfW was left desperately short of rolling stock. In consequence, the Class 150s used on the Wrexham Bidston line were taken for use elsewhere and that rail service suspended.

The position slowly improved over the next few months, as Class 175s were repaired and further Class 197s were accepted and train crew trained to drive them. First priority was to replace the class 175s, to free-up depot capacity at Chester. These units have now all been withdrawn and are being returned to the leasing company. The modern design of Class 197s means each unit requires less maintenance than a Class 175, so Chester depot has sufficient capacity to maintain their part of the bigger 197 fleet.

B) Chester-Runcorn-Liverpool Service

Things were really starting to look up over the summer and early autumn, leading TfW confidently to announce the reintroduction of certain suspended services from the December timetable change, including reinstatement of the full Chester-Runcorn-Liverpool service. However, come the leaf-fall season, the Class 197 fleet suffered multiple wheel flats. This problem is probably a consequence of the units having disc

rather than tread brakes, as the latter help remove accumulated leaf gunk on the wheels.

In consequence, the return of the full Chester-Runcorn-Liverpool service had to be postponed until more wheel sets were repaired, as TfW were again short of trains. TfW has just restarted the largely hourly service as from 12 February.

C) Proposed Liverpool-Llandudno service

One proposed timetable revision that didn't occur in December 2023 was the extension of the Liverpool-Runcorn-Chester service to Llandudno, along with diversion of the Manchester-Llandudno trains from Llandudno Junction to Bangor. Apart from Wrexham to Bidston, the proposed timetable was abandoned and the previous timetable retained, and a major review of TfW Rail service plans is currently underway.

crossings on the route to an unacceptable level. Network Rail plans construction of two ramped footbridges to replace the three crossings, but full funding is not yet available and so no date for completion has been given. NR is also considering whether daytime level crossing attendants, more temporary speed restrictions or temporary footbridges would be acceptable on an interim basis.

A new problem has also emerged over the proposed extra trains on the North Wales Coast Line, in that these would worsen the accident risk at three

Meanwhile, introduction of the through Liverpool-Llandudno service is delayed indefinitely.

NPB

Chester City Gateway project

Cheshire West & Cheshire Council (CWAC) has been developing plans for the *Chester City Gateway* project, a major regeneration programme for the area around the railway station. The main aims of the vision are:

- To make the approach to the station a world-class experience
- To provide a high-quality public realm
- To deliver 600 new homes

The plan would support greater accessibility to the station area by providing improved walking and cycling

routes, thereby increasing footfall and creating an integrated transport hub.

In the plan is a long overdue replacement for Hoole Bridge (which crosses the tracks just by the station), carrying one of the busiest routes into Chester. Apparently, Hoole Bridge was first identified as a problem in 1890! Cyclists have long had to share this narrow winding bridge with heavy traffic and the pavement is narrow as well. A new pedestrian and cycle bridge would be introduced, with an access ramp directly onto the station forecourt. Replacing Hoole Bridge also offers the opportunity to provide clearance for

overhead electrification of the railway below.

There would in addition be landscaping near the station, tree lining of City Road as a boulevard and other improvements to the surrounding area. Car parking

would be consolidated to better meet the needs of station users.

The Gateway concept has now been signed off by CWAC, so the next step is to recruit commercial partners for delivery. It is likely to be a further 3-5 years before construction starts.

NPB and DH

Chester Station

A) Refurbishment

TfW (*Transport for Wales*) is currently undertaking a programme of station improvement works at Chester station. Most noticeably, the barrier line has been extended, with additional gates to improve the flow of passengers. There will be a new CCTV system and new customer information screens. The short missing sections of tactile paving, close to the platform edge, are also being installed, so presumably removing the need for the regular announcements about no tactile paving.

More controversially, the booking office/travel centre will be closed and replaced by a new customer service desk area closer to the station

entrance, together with additional ticket vending machines (TVMs). TfW is keen to stress that there will be no reduction in staff numbers. Rather, the booking office staff will be redeployed by the TVMs to provide assistance to passengers there.

With the UK Government being forced to backtrack on plans for ticket office closures in England, it is ironic that a Welsh Government agency is pressing ahead with closure of the ticket office at a major station in England. There are no current plans for TfW to close any other booking offices in Wales or England.

B) Future Plans

Separately, *Transport for Wales* is working with CWAC council on developing a capacity enhancement plan for the operational side of the station (ie enabling more trains to use the station). An island platform on the north side of the station has long been mooted, so extra train services from North Wales and Shrewsbury can be accommodated. However, addition of a platform and its servicing tracks will need the space currently occupied by sidings, so the alterations need to be done in a way that ensures sufficient overnight stabling capacity is retained around the Chester station area for the Chester depot to function effectively.



Looking west - Sidings, with platforms 7A/B on the extreme left under the canopy

At the time of the last re-signalling around the station, the eastern approach was reduced from four to three tracks. If the approach were restored to four tracks this should, in addition to increasing capacity, allow less restrictive speed restrictions to be applied. That

could help the business case for the proposed Beeston Castle & Tarporley station if an increase in speed enabled a single DMU to continue to work the Chester-Crewe service despite the time penalty of the extra stop.

Consultants are currently undertaking scenario modelling of various options.



Looking east – access by three main line tracks only

NPB and DH

December 2023 timetable changes

For service enhancements on the Wrexham-Bidston line, from the December timetable change, see separate article.

Trans Pennine

The problems of *Trans Pennine Express* with its shortage of drivers are very well known and led to *First Group* being stripped of its TPE contract by the Government in May 2023. To tackle a backlog in driver training, TPE has temporarily withdrawn services on some routes.

Before the December change, TPE had three scheduled hourly services from Liverpool: - to Newcastle and to Hull via Manchester Victoria and Leeds, and to Cleethorpes via Manchester Piccadilly and Sheffield. Since the change, the Hull service has been cut back and now starts from Manchester Piccadilly, leaving Liverpool with the hourly Newcastle and Cleethorpes services.

With these and other cutbacks, some trains are likely to be overloaded, particularly between Manchester and Leeds.

Liverpool-Birmingham Service

Post Covid, *London Northwestern Railway* has provided an hourly service of 8-car trains on weekdays and Saturdays. From December, the pattern changed to half hourly all day on Saturdays. On weekdays the service is half hourly in the peak, hourly off-peak. Now, trains are mostly 4-cars, which reduces the number of units required on weekdays.

This pattern reflects changed rail travel habits post-Covid, with weekend leisure travel growing strongly, whilst weekday business and commuting revenue is still well down.

NPB

Class 507 Preservation Project

With the introduction of the new class 777 units, the venerable fleet of Class 507 and 508 units is progressively being withdrawn and sent for scrap. All will be gone in the next 12 months. The *Class 507 Preservation Society* has been established with the aim of preserving a Class 507 unit, most preferably 507001.

Built by *British Rail Engineering Limited* at York Works, 507001 was the first of class introduced in 1978. This unit carried HM Queen Elizabeth II from Moorfields to Kirkby on 25th October 1978.

The campaign to save a Class 507 is led by Robert Hampton, who was a founder

member of the *Friends of the 502 Group*, which successfully rescued the ex-LMS class 502 Liverpool/Southport/Ormskirk EMU when it was under threat of scrapping.

Starting in 2023, the project has signed up 170 people and has set up the *Class 507 Preservation Society*. The Society has agreement in principle from *Angel Trains*, the owner of the Class 507 fleet, on securing 507001 for preservation. Work is currently in progress to identify a suitable secure storage location for the unit, as it will not be able to remain on the *Merseyrail* network, ideally in Merseyside or the North West. After that,

the Society would then seek to raise funds for the transport of the unit.

If everything goes to plan, the unit will be cosmetically restored and painted in a heritage livery (either BR blue/grey or *Merseytravel* yellow/white/grey). The interior would remain in as-withdrawn condition, albeit cleaned and repaired. Longer term, there may be opportunities to operate the unit on a heritage railway, either with a diesel locomotive, or using battery technology.

Further information on the project can be found at the website of the *Class 507 Preservation Society*:

www.class507.org.uk

NPB

Passengers and the local rail network

***Merseyrail* Customer Service Ranked Amongst the Best in the UK**

The Institute of Customer Service's January 2023 *UK Customer Satisfaction Index* survey found that *Merseyrail* had the best customer service levels within the UK rail network, placing it in the overall top 50 companies alongside brands such as *John Lewis*, *Marks & Spencer* and *Apple*. It was also ranked as the second-best transport company in the UK, behind the airline *Jet2*, with *London & North Eastern Railway* in third place.

2022-2023 Passenger Numbers on *Merseyrail*

The *Office of Rail and Road* publishes estimates of passenger numbers by station on an annual basis and figures for the year to 31 March 2023 are now out. Unsurprisingly, the top station on *Merseyrail* was Liverpool Central with 11.4 million entries and exits, but this is still well down on the pre-Covid number of 16.5 million in 2019-2020.

On Wirral, the top five stations were, with 2019/2020 figures in brackets:

Hamilton Square	1.3 m (1.8m)
West Kirby	960,000 (1.4m)
New Brighton	930,000 (1.4 m)
Birkenhead North	880,000 (1.1m)
Bebington	750,000 (1.0 m)

Usage at all the above stations is substantially below the pre-Covid level, mainly due to a reduction in commuting, with Liverpool Central, West Kirby and New Brighton all down by a little over 30%. That means a lot more subsidy!

A new feature in the compilation this year is the most popular destination stations. No surprise that Liverpool Central ranks top for nearly all Wirral Line stations, including Chester. However, for Liverpool Central, the most common destination or starting point is Kirkby.

Away from *Merseyrail*, the most popular destination from Liverpool Lime Street was London Euston.

Best and Worst Stations – Cancellations and Delays

On Time Trains publishes data on delays, cancellations, and disruptions for all 2616 stations across the UK. For the first nine months of 2023, New Brighton came in at 90 out of the 2616 stations, ie only 89 stations had a better record, a very creditable performance. At the

other end of the scale, Neston languished close to bottom at position 2593 (see separate Wrexham – Bidston line article). Even worse was Ince & Elton, on the Ellesmere Port-Helsby line, which for the 12 weeks to 8 September was bottom of all at 2616 out of 2616, attributed to high levels of staff sickness at Allerton depot.

NPB

New ticketing capabilities at Merseyrail stations

If you buy tickets online, you can now collect printed tickets at the ticket office of any manned *Merseyrail* station. When you order the ticket, you must specify the delivery method as 'Ticket on Departure'. When you arrive at the ticket office, you must quote the booking reference and show a credit/debit card. This facility does not apply to ticket

vending machines other than those at Chester, Liverpool South Parkway and Liverpool Lime St stations.

You can buy tickets at *Merseyrail* stations for any start/destination in the UK, not just those on the *Merseyrail* network.

See- <https://www.merseyrail.org/tickets-passes/ticket-information/ticket-on-departure/>

Bus Developments

First hydrogen-powered buses now in service

The first hydrogen buses in *Liverpool City Region* entered service on 15 May 2023 on the 10A route between St Helens and Liverpool via Knowsley. They are jointly operated by Arriva and Stagecoach but are wholly owned by *Liverpool City Region*. There are 20 of the zero-emission buses, in a new yellow livery. Being zero-emission helps improve air quality on congested routes. Features of the new buses include more space for wheelchair users and prams, audio visual announcements with real-time information, USB phone charging and free Wi-Fi.



Recently, running of the new buses has had to be curtailed because of a supply shortage of hydrogen.

NPB

Tunnel night buses

From 8 December, the night bus service has been reintroduced between Liverpool and Birkenhead through the Kingsway

(Wallasey) tunnel, on a trial basis. It had previously been discontinued during the Covid pandemic, but its continuance had

been in question before Covid because of the low level of usage.

The *Stagecoach* N1 service operates hourly between midnight and 5am every Thursday night/Friday morning through to Saturday night/Sunday morning,

running from Birkenhead to Allerton via Liverpool city centre, Toxteth, Wavertree and Mossley Hill. By providing a low-cost way to cross the river in the small hours, it is hoped the new service will boost the night-time economy and be useful to shift workers.

NPB

Bus Franchising

Following the granting of powers in the *Bus Services Act 2017*, on 24 September last year, Greater Manchester became the first local authority outside London to introduce bus franchising. On that date, franchising came into effect in the north-western part of Greater Manchester. The area is split into two large franchises, covering Bolton and Wigan, and nine smaller ones. Following that, the north-eastern part is due to transition in March 2024 and the southern part in January 2025.

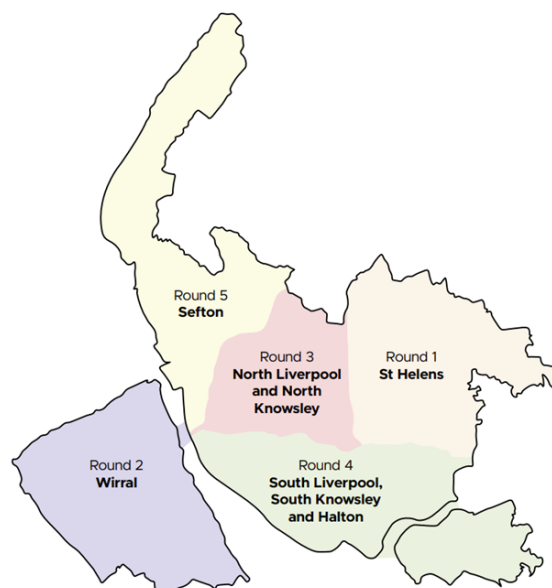
The bus network is transitioning as is, with no significant changes to services. There will however be 100 new zero-emission, battery-electric buses for the first two areas, with 170 more due to follow. Other buses and the depots will transfer from previous operators, via *Transport for Greater Manchester*, to ensure previous operators receive fair value for their assets. After transition, buses operate as part of the *Bee Network*, in a new yellow livery, with some local rail services to be integrated at a later date.

Liverpool City Region will be second off the blocks with bus franchising but is some way behind Manchester. A major public consultation exercise conducted last summer found nearly 70% of the 6000 people who responded in support of the franchising model. With that level of public support, in October, Metro Mayor Steve Rotherham announced franchising would now go ahead.

On current plans, franchising in the Region will be introduced in 5 rounds,

with the first services commencing in financial year 2026/2027. The intended order for introduction is:

- Round 1 - St Helens
- Round 2 - Wirral
- Round 3 - North Liverpool and North Knowsley
- Round 4 - South Liverpool, South Knowsley, and Halton
- Round 5 - Sefton



Map from Liverpool City Region Bus Franchising Consultation document, summer 2023.

[Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0]

It is not known how many contracts will be put out to tender in each round. At present, Wirral has two major operators, Arriva and Stagecoach. It is likely that several other major bus operators will also bid, and it is entirely possible neither Arriva nor Stagecoach will win a contract for Wirral bus services.

Franchising means bus services – including routes, frequencies, fares, and standards – will be brought under local control. The *Liverpool City Region Combined Authority* will coordinate the bus network based on what passengers need, with bus operators commissioned by the Combined Authority running the services.

Under the plans, buses would be better integrated with other modes of transport, particularly rail, and ticketing would be

made simpler and more convenient with the introduction of a tap-and-go system. Daily fare caps would ensure passengers would always pay the cheapest fare across the whole network.

A three-year transition period will allow network improvement measures – such as bus prioritisation infrastructure and the reintroduction of bus lanes in Liverpool – to be put in place before the first franchised services begin in 2026.

NPB

Bus Snippets

Selwyns - Following their loss of all school contracts on the Wirral, *Selwyns* has now closed its Prenton depot. Their four remaining vehicles (three for the 811 industrial service) now operate from adjacent premises shared with *A2B Travel*.

Cross River services- Services 432, 433 and 437: Some weekend services now

no longer serve Cook Street but finish at Whitechapel and return from Sir Thomas Street.

Bus service 5 running between Ellesmere Port and Mold has had its running time increased and its frequency reduced to every 75 mins because of the imposition of a 20mph limit on parts of its route.

ALC

itravel Rural minibus service

itravel is an on-demand rural bus service provided by CWAC (*Cheshire West and Chester*) Council serving towns, villages and railway stations within a designated area incorporating Frodsham, Sutton Weaver, Acton Bridge, Cuddington, Delamere, Elton and Helsby. The service was introduced from 31 July last year and operates Monday to Friday 7am to 7pm. Residents can book by phone call or online by using an app, to request a bus for a specific journey. There is no fixed route or timetable. Cost per journey is the national £2 flat bus fare.

A good number of on-demand rural bus services have been trialled in other parts of the country, offering door-to-door services, as replacements for rural bus services. Almost all these services have been unsuccessful in that many previous bus passengers have been unwilling or unable to use them and the services

have lost money. It has been the older, less tech savvy passengers who have not taken to the new services, with the lack of a defined route also apparently a hindrance.

itravel differs in that it operates from and to set pick-up/set-down points, rather than door-to-door, and it provides an additional public transport service rather than replacing existing bus services. Operating from set pick-up points allows the service to cater for more passengers on each journey, without long detours to pick-up at homes. The appeal of *itravel* to the tech savvy without their own wheels is not in doubt, but it remains to be seen how many older people will take advantage of the service. The *itravel* service is operated by two minibuses, based in Frodsham, with a third in reserve. Provision is funded by the Department

for Transport's *Rural Mobility Fund*, which has granted £1.075m for the

three-year pilot.

NPB

Mersey Ferry Developments

Contract signed for new Mersey Ferry

On 13 December last year, the Metro Mayor of Liverpool City Region, Steve Rotherham, met with the Chief Executive of *Cammell Laird* to sign a contract for the first new Mersey Ferry for 60 years to be built entirely at the *Cammell Laird* shipyard in Birkenhead.

The state-of-the-art vessel will be designed to harness green technology, with a cutting-edge *Azi-pull* propeller system for reduced fuel usage, along with a diesel-electric hybrid-ready propulsion system – with potential for future conversion to full electric propulsion as technology evolves.

As previously announced, the new ferry will be designed to provide passengers with greater comfort, accessibility, and an improved experience. There are also plans for upgrade works on one of the existing vessels to improve its performance and reliability.

Building ferries for the Mersey is nothing new for *Cammell Laird*, as the yard has built 15 of the vessels going back to 1836. It also helps in maintaining and servicing the current ferries.

The *Combined Authority* and *Cammell Laird* are now working closely on finalising the design and build programme.

NPB

***Friends of the Ferries* will be running a Dock and River Cruise on Saturday 22nd June, 2024. Ring Gordon on 0151 334 2685 for more details.**

Shipping

Irish Sea Ferries

P&O Ferries has announced that it will have to withdraw its ferry service between Liverpool and Dublin. *Peel Ports* has refused to renew the lease on the berth P&O currently use in Liverpool Docks and P&O considers none of the alternatives currently offered acceptable. Apparently, the existing berth is to be leased to another user.

Stena Line, which already operates a ferry service between *Birkenhead Twelve Quays* terminal and Belfast, has announced plans to commence a new freight service between Birkenhead and Dublin from mid-February 2024.

NPB

Air

Liverpool John Lennon Airport- JET2.COM

From 28 March 2024, low-cost airline *Jet2.com* will commence services from Liverpool Airport, offering flights to 20 different destinations. A fleet of four

aircraft will be flying to holiday destinations across mainland Spain, the Canary Islands, the Balearic Islands, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, Portugal, and

Cyprus, significantly expanding on the destinations currently available from the airport. It is expected that these extra flights will lead to a sizeable increase in demand for transport services to and

from the airport, including the rail links accessible at Liverpool South Parkway station (the nearest station to the airport).

NPB

WTUA

WTUA Excursion Sept 2023

The WTUA ran a train excursion on the East Lancashire Railway on Sat 9th Sept 2023. A coach took us from various Wirral pickup points to the ELR terminus at Heywood (near Bury). We then caught the 11:30am steam-hauled train to the Rawtenstall terminus and returned back on the train to Heywood arriving just after 2pm. After allowing time for

photos, etc, the coach took us into Bury town centre to look around, which gave us a chance to see its famous market. The coach set off for home at 5pm. We were particularly lucky to have beautiful weather and everyone enjoyed the experience.



About to enter Bury station



Taking on water at Rawtenstall

JKA

WTUA AGM 2023

Our latest WTUA AGM was held on Friday 20th October at *The Merebrook* in Bromborough, next to the railway station. The meeting started with a very informative illustrated talk given by Gerard Rhodes, *CWAC HS2 Programme Manager*, who spoke on *Chester Region Transport Developments*. This was followed by the AGM.

All the previous members of the Committee were re-elected. After which,

the Chairman in his report provided a review of transport matters in the region.

An edited version of the Chairman's Report is available on the WTUA website, as is a copy of the slideshow which accompanied Gerard's talk. Any member requiring a hard-copy of the Chairman's Report can request it from John or Brian. (For contact details, see panel below.)

Have you enjoyed reading our Newsletter? If you are not already a member, why not join us?

We believe in modern public transport systems for the Wirral, Merseyside and West Cheshire area. The WTUA has a watching brief over the public transport operations in the Wirral and their connections to the rest of the country and it represents the interests of transport users in the local area. It is affiliated with *Railfuture* and actively supports *TravelWatch NorthWest*. It is a member of *Liverpool City Region Rail User Group*, *Mersey Dee Rail User Groups Consortium*, and *CWAC Rail User Group*.

We publish our newsletter once or twice a year. The AGM includes a talk from an expert on some facet of the transport world. We aim to run coach excursions to heritage railways and other places of transport activity or interest once or twice a year.

For more info, see website- www.wirraltua.org.uk, or ring Brian Grey.

Annual membership- Individual: £8, Couple at same address: £10. Send for an application form to: Brian Grey, 56 Coombe Road, Irby, Wirral CH61 4US.

COMMITTEE DETAILS	
Chairman & Rail Matters:	
Deputy Chairman & Chester Area Sec:	
Secretary:	VACANT— volunteer required!
Membership Sec:	
Treasurer:	
Friends of the Ferries:	
General Members:	
Editorial Team:	

The **WTUA's website** gives information about the WTUA and it contains photos and videos of previous trips and copies of previous *Wirral Transport Users* newsletters.

[3/3/24