

2021 AUTUMN

WIRRAL TRANSPORT USER

The Newsletter of the Wirral Transport Users Association

A time of transition for Merseyside!



[Two of the new class 777 trains to the left of a currently in-service class 508]

This is an exciting time for anyone in Merseyside who uses public transport. Despite delays caused by Covid-19, new class 777 trains are being tested on the *Merseyrail* lines, new class 230 trains are

being tested on the BorderLines line (between Wrexham and Bidston), two Mersey ferries are about to undergo refurbishment and upgrade of the Seacombe landing stage is in progress.

NEW CLASS 777 TRAINS FOR MERSEYRAIL



New Train Fleet

At a cost of almost £500m, *Merseytravel* has a fleet of 53 new trains in the process of delivery from the Swiss company *Stadler*, which are to replace the current life-expired trains on the Wirral and Northern lines. These class 777 units are not 'off the peg' but have been designed in the light of requirements identified by *Merseytravel* who have also consulted with their



passengers to ensure the best possible mix of operational handling and passenger serviceability. As covered in the last WTUA Newsletter, these trains will come with several new features including level boarding, wider walk-through connections between carriages and free passenger Wi-Fi on board.

The new trains have a top speed of 75mph. Each 4-car unit has three motorised bogies and two trailer end bogies, adjacent cars sharing a bogie with their neighbour. Compared with the old class 507/508 units, the new units have larger windows and more space for luggage, cycles and buggies. Each new unit has 182 ordinary seats and 28 perch seats, as against 192 seats in the present trains, which with the wider



gangways allows 50% more passengers (seated and standing) to be carried. The new units weigh less than the old ones and incorporate improved efficiency features (like regenerative braking), so use 20% less energy which makes them one of the most climate-friendly trains in Britain.

Considerable thought has been given to the interiors and to providing a bright, open and airy saloon layout. Seating is mainly aircraft style face-to-back but retaining some 'sociable' facing seats. Each unit has separate dedicated wheelchair and cycle spaces, there being two of each. There are no overhead luggage racks; space for luggage and buggies instead being provided by inclusion of some tip-up seats. The trains are liberally provided with grab poles for standing passengers.



As third rail is now considered the least safe of electricity-supply systems, any future extensions to the *Merseyrail* network, beyond the third rail, are likely to use battery power or overhead wires. All the class 777 units have power

pickup from the third rail but also are capable of being fitted either with pantographs, to access an overhead supply, or with batteries. Possible future extensions include destinations such as Helsby, Preston, Skelmersdale, Warrington, Wigan and Wrexham.

One bespoke touch is the incorporation of a stylised letter 'M' in LED lights on



the ends of the train, showing yellow at the front and red at the rear.

Infrastructure

Some modifications to the infrastructure have been made, most noticeably adjustment of platform heights at many stations so that the train floor and platform heights are aligned to provide level boarding. The carriages are equipped with intelligent horizontally sliding steps that work out exactly how far to extend at each station stop, in order to close the gap between train and



platform. The steps and the door aperture edges incorporate sensors to detect any obstruction in or near the door zone.

Whilst the new electric units will have better acceleration, enabling reduced journey times, this has required an extensive upgrade to the third rail power supply system, including three new substations and upgrades to nine others. On the Chester and Ellesmere Port lines, new electrical supply equipment has been installed at Port Sunlight, Hooton and Capenhurst, the latter in place of Mollington, whilst the Bromborough substation has been upgraded. Even the existing trains now have better acceleration on the Chester line.

The new trains are a little longer than the current ones, with each train having four shorter coaches compared with three of standard length at present. At curved platforms, shorter coaches can reduce the gap between the train and the platform. Again, two units can be coupled together, but now making an 8-car train, to cope with peak demands on busy lines. Platforms at some stations have had to be lengthened for the 8-car trains, and some signalling modifications have been necessary. The changes required at Southport station are more complicated and may delay the introduction of 8-car trains on the Southport to Hunts Cross line.

You may also have noticed new telecommunication masts at various places along the route, for example just north of Rock Ferry station. Their purpose is to provide continuous connection between all trains and the Sandhills control centre, along with free Wi-Fi for passengers on the new trains.

In one respect, the new train fleet will be unusual in that as they will be publicly owned by *Merseytravel*. Almost all other passenger rolling stock on the National Rail network is owned by private sector rolling stock leasing companies.

Delivery of New Trains

Introduction of a new fleet of modern trains is a complex process. The first of the new units arrived on Merseyside in January 2020 and was used initially for the instruction of maintenance staff at the main depot at Kirkdale (which is beside the Ormskirk/Kirkby line).

Investment has also been undertaken to modernise the Kirkdale and Birkenhead North maintenance depots, including the installation of a train-simulator for driver training at Kirkdale. Maintenance of the new trains, once in service, will also be undertaken by *Stadler*.

As more trains arrived, operational testing started overnight – so that any problems which occurred wouldn't disrupt passenger services – including visits to the Wirral line. By the end of June, over 17,000 hours of overnight test operation had been completed.

With much fanfare, daylight testing of the class 777s began, in between passenger services, on the Ormskirk line on July 1st. It was made very clear that, even though the new trains would be opening their doors at each station, intending passengers must not board. Trial running was extended to the Southport line shortly afterwards.

All units in the fleet must achieve at least 500 miles of fault-free running, with 1500 miles for the first four units and 1000 miles for the next four, before they can be accepted by *Merseytravel*. So, lots of empty running will be required.

Two major milestones were passed during the summer. Firstly, on 15 July, the *Office of Road and Rail* granted authorisation for the class 777s to carry passengers. The *Office of Road and Rail* is the government-appointed regulator that oversees the rail network. Then, on August 26th, the handover was announced of the first of the class 777s from manufacturer *Stadler* to *Merseytravel* on behalf of *Liverpool City*



Region, with that train having successfully completed all its acceptance trials.



[Driver's cab- controls on left, emergency exit door on right with collapsible detrain ladder stored vertically on left of door]

Currently around ten of the class 777s are in the UK, with some in store until approval running can start. When the order was placed back in December 2016, the plan was for some of the new trains to enter service during 2020. However, the Covid-19 pandemic intervened and, at the time of writing, first entry into passenger service is now set for an as yet unspecified date in 2022, mostly likely on the Kirkby line.

Battery Hybrid Trains

As mentioned above, another important change with the new class 777 trains is that they can be fitted with battery packs, to work away from the third rail supply. Under battery power, trains can operate on non-electrified lines for distances of up to about 20 miles, being recharged once they return to the third rail-equipped network. Seven of the trains will be fitted with the battery packs, initially to provide services to the new Headbolt Lane extension of the

Kirkby line – see separate article. The initial order for 52 trains has since been increased by one for the Headbolt Lane extension.

Two potential uses of the battery hybrid trains have been suggested on the Wirral:

- Bidston to Woodchurch. And beyond to Neston and Wrexham?
- Ellesmere Port to Helsby

[Nigel Bird]

NEW MERSEYRAIL STATION AT HEADBOLT LANE, KIRKBY

Merseytravel are working on plans to extend the Kirkby line services about a mile towards Wigan, to a new station at Headbolt Lane on the northern side of Kirkby. In consequence, trains from Wigan Wallgate would also terminate at Headbolt Lane, with a similar head-to-head arrangement as at Kirkby today.

Proposals for the new station include two platforms, one for *Merseyrail* trains to Liverpool and one for Wigan services on the north side of the line, with an additional track on the south side for freight services to access the terminal at Knowsley. There would be a new booking hall, bus interchange, cycle parking with 100 spaces and a 300-space car park for park & ride passengers, all with level access to the platforms.

Trials of one of the new class 777 trains with additional battery power have been successful, so it will not be necessary to extend the third rail from Kirkby to Headbolt Lane. Seven of the class 777s will be fitted with battery packs, for use in conjunction with the third rail power supply, for the Headbolt Lane service.

Government funding of £66M is already in place so, subject to the necessary approvals, work on the station should commence before the end of 2021. In which case, the new station should be ready to open by the end of spring in 2023.

Provision will be made in the station design for a possible future extension of *Merseyrail* services to Skelmersdale, but any reopening of the line to Skelmersdale is still a long way off.

[Nigel Bird]

OTHER NEW MERSEYRAIL STATIONS IN THE PIPELINE

Liverpool City Region is already funding design work for a new station between Liverpool Central and Brunswick on the Hunts Cross line, to serve Liverpool's Baltic Triangle area near the former *Cains* brewery. If construction goes ahead, the new station would be on the

site of the previous St James station, which closed in 1917. A potential opening date has not been given publicly. Let's hope *Merseytravel* don't retain the name St James, as there would be serious risk of confusion with

the current James Street station not far away.

In his manifesto for the *Liverpool City Region* mayoral elections, Steve Rotherham, the successful Labour candidate, announced proposals for new stations that 'could' be added to the

Merseyrail system at Widnes, Woodchurch (Birkenhead), and St Helens Carr Mill, under his *Merseyrail for All* plan. Whilst welcome, these proposals are only at the ideas stage and, if approved, construction of any of the stations is several years away.

BORDERLANDS LINE – WREXHAM TO BIDSTON



[New class 230 train outside Birkenhead North depot]

After many years as a railway backwater, some new developments are now in progress for the Wrexham to Bidston route.

Current Position

As with almost all other routes, the *Borderlands Line* service was cut back during most of the pandemic, with the service reduced from hourly to 2-hourly. At the Wrexham end, trains have been terminating short at Wrexham General, rather than running through to Wrexham Central station, even though the latter is more convenient for the town centre.

As of mid-May, most of the missing trains have been restored, such that 95% of pre-pandemic trains are now running, albeit still missing out Wrexham Central in all but a couple of cases. Terminating short at Wrexham General is necessary to allow sufficient time for cab cleaning and disinfection when the crew changes. This requirement could be in place for some time to come. One

lunchtime return service, the 12.34 from Wrexham General and 13.34 back from Bidston, is still missing Mondays to Fridays, to enable crew training on the new trains, see below. The withdrawn services are being covered by express and all-stations buses, with this arrangement due to continue until 10th September.

New Trains

As mentioned above, 'new' trains for the Wrexham to Bidston service will be coming soon, with Transport for Wales having ordered a new fleet of five trains specifically for the route. These new 3-car class 230 trains will be based at the Birkenhead North *Merseyrail* depot, but will also need to visit Chester depot for refuelling. Some driver training on the new units has been in progress over the summer, with the last of the five trains due to be delivered shortly at the time of writing.

Actually, these 'new' trains are second hand from *London Transport's* District Line, but have been totally revamped. Each of the trains has three coaches, compared to the two of the current trains. Inside, all the interior fittings are new and give the impression of a brand-new train. Underneath, power is now provided by battery packs, in conjunction with diesel generator sets to charge the batteries, for better fuel economy and reduced emissions.

Before introduction into service, each of the trains needs to achieve a specified number of miles of fault-free running. Originally, the new trains were due to enter service in the autumn working the existing timetable, but this has been delayed due to some technical problems – a common occurrence with modern trains due to their technical complexity – with a revised date not yet available.

The new units are too long for the current platform at Wrexham Central which will require significant work to extend it. This work is due to be carried out in the autumn, whilst trains are still terminating at Wrexham General.

Increased Service

Transport for Wales are planning to raise the service frequency on the *Borderlands Line* from one to two trains per hour. Previously, the increase was predicated on the introduction of the new trains and intended to start from December, subject to completion of some minor works at certain level crossings. However, both the new trains and the level crossing works have been delayed. Now, the plan is to introduce the extra services, with the existing trains if necessary, in the first half of 2022.

The existing hourly service will continue as now calling at all stations. In order to provide adequate turn-around time and so improve reliability, the new additions will operate a 'skip-stop' pattern, with a journey time reduction of around 11 minutes. The service interval will be half-

hourly at Bidston, so will be 11 minutes away from half-hourly at the Wrexham end. This pattern is necessary to fit in with the freight services on the line. No information is available yet on which intermediate stations will be served.

For the longer term, the Welsh Government is looking at improving speeds at places along the route, using the time saved to enable extra station calls. However, this move would require closure of certain level crossings and provision of alternatives such as accessible (ramped) footbridges.

Further Planned Developments

The Welsh Government is providing £1.5 million to improve access and interchange at Shotton, where the Wrexham to Bidston line crosses over the North Wales coast main line. As interchange users will know, current walking routes between platform lines are somewhat indirect and there is no step-free access to platform 1, used by trains to Chester.

Not far away, the *Wrexham-Bidston Rail Users' Association* has long made the case for a new station on the route to serve Deeside Industrial Park, close to the A548. Things are finally starting to happen, with both the UK Government and the Welsh Government providing funding to develop proposals for such a station. *Network Rail*, which manages the railway infrastructure, has already taken the opportunity of the pandemic to improve the track in the area, with a complete closure of the line for 9 days in February. Final go-ahead for construction of the station has yet to be given, but all the signs are positive so far.

[Nigel Bird

LIME STREET STATION

Liverpool's Lime Street station has recently lost one of its claims to fame. It was the only station in the UK having two platforms numbered "1". Lime Street mainline station has had a platform 1 since way back in the 19th century. In the 1970s, when the Wirral Line underground loop was built, the solitary Lime Street low level platform was also identified as platform 1 – but no longer!

With the reopening of the Halton curve in 2018 and the introduction of a regular Liverpool-Runcorn-Chester service, passengers could access services to Chester from either the mainline or low level station. However, people looking at the departure indicator on the Lime Street mainline station concourse, but who were not in the know, may well have concluded that there was only an hourly service to Chester, i.e. that via Runcorn.

Not anymore, as two small departure boards for Wirral services have been added to the mainline departure



indicator at Lime Street, one each in the top left and top right corners. So intending passengers can see the full service to Chester plus the other Wirral Line routes. Clearly, with this improvement, it would become incredibly confusing to have trains from two different platform "1"s displayed on the same departure indicator. The solution has been to redesignate the low level platform as platform "A".

How many regular passengers have noticed the change?

MERSEYRAIL PERFORMANCE

Merseyrail was recently awarded the title of Best Performing Regional Rail Operator for the third time in the rail industry 2021 *Golden Whistle Awards*. The train company also broke a national performance record earlier this year

when, over a 28-day period, 99% of its trains arrived on time or within 5 minutes of the scheduled arrival time. (However, reliability has improved across almost the entire National Rail network during the Covid-19 pandemic, with fewer trains and fewer passengers out and about.)

BROMBOROUGH AND SPITAL STATIONS

In 2020, Bromborough station received a £1M upgrade. Major work was undertaken on the station footbridge which involved structural repairs, a new roof, installation of new windows,

lighting, flooring and repainting. The car park was also extended from 87 to 137 places. Earlier in the year, Spital station car park was similarly expanded by 71 spaces, making 141 in total.

BIRKENHEAD DOCKS RAILWAY ROUTE

Wirral Council plans to create a green travel corridor and linear park on part of the old Mersey Docks & Harbour Co railway track-bed through Birkenhead. Running from Argyle Street to Rendell Street, it will be 800m long and involves partially filling in a cutting which is overgrown and covered in dumped rubbish, creating undulating levels, connecting severed streets and

delivering a linear park with adjoining 'pocket parks'. A pedestrian pathway, a 4m wide cycleway and a bus only lane with bus priority junctions are intended. Opening is proposed for Jul 2023. Potential future extensions are south to Rock Ferry (presumably also utilising the railway track-bed) and west to Hoylake via the Birket Corridor.

[Nigel Bird]

NORTH-WESTERN RAILWAY DEVELOPMENTS

Normally I write about Chester news but most of that is planned for inclusion in the next WTUA newsletter.

Seaforth Container Dock and Liverpool 2

Liverpool 2 is the new riverside terminal that takes Post Panamax large container ships (of a size that can pass through the enlarged Panama Canal). It is built next to the original container terminal at Seaforth. Liverpool 2 does not have rail access direct to the berth so the containers have to be taken across to the Seaforth terminal to be loaded on to trains.

I remember that for many years no container trains ran from Seaforth Container Dock, despite efforts by the dock and Local Authorities to resume goods services on the disused Seaforth rail link. The container terminal lay unconnected until Peel Ports started a service to Mossend (Glasgow) three times a week in summer 2018. This was so successful that by the following spring over half a million road haulage miles had been removed from Liverpool's roads.

This year *GB Railfreight* have been running a daily service to the new distribution depot at *East Midlands Gateway* near Derby. This train often includes a portion for another new

distribution depot, *Doncaster iPort*, and also some trains to *Hams Hall* distribution depot in the West Midlands. So seemingly another success no doubt helped by the new Liverpool 2 Post Panamax container terminal.

This leaves two major areas not served by rail container trains from Liverpool: the Humber and Teeside/Teesport. The reason given is that the main transpennine route via Huddersfield, or the alternative via Calder Valley and Hope Valley, are not cleared for large containers and any other cleared route is a big detour.

Upgrade/electrification of the transpennine via Huddersfield route was postponed some years ago. The proposal has since been partially revived but freight was not considered a high priority. The bit missing was the most important bit, Stalybridge to Huddersfield, which has steep inclines which need more power.

However a new study by the *Liverpool Humber Optimisation of Freight Transport* (LHOFT), a consortium of major freight customers, port, shipping lines, freight train operators and the University of Hull's Logistics Unit, shows the route can be cleared for large containers. They have even done a trial run over part of the route to *Kraft/Heinz*

near Wigan with unloading at night. *Kraft/Heinz* is considering investing in proper unloading facilities. They could use smaller containers for heavy foodstuffs like beans. The cost savings obtained by using the new link are likely to more than offset the cost of making special smaller containers.

For heavy freight moving between Stalybridge and Huddersfield, only the shorter of the two main tunnels is a serious problem but electrification may be able to provide the power to solve it. Hopes are rising that a solution will be found and that at long last it will happen. Full electrification is an option submitted by *Network Rail* to the Department of Transport. The upgrade work will, of course, involve some inconvenience and diversions and a bit of patience. It's just a shame we've been made to wait so long to get this far.

Additional use of rail transport would reduce the need to transport containers across Liverpool by lorry, thus cutting down on diesel fumes (Nox) and road congestion. This would complement another method currently being employed to decrease road haulage

volumes by using a ship to carry some containers up the Manchester Ship Canal from Seaforth dock to Irlam.

Chester – Leeds via Calder Valley Services

Firstly, the one train a day travelling from Ellesmere Port to Leeds was withdrawn and replaced by a missing peak time departure from Chester. Obviously this had more potential. It replaced an additional Chester – Manchester Piccadilly departure.

Secondly the Chester-Leeds service ceased running altogether during the Summer Holidays necessitating two changes in Manchester to access the Calder Valley. This was sad as the service was useful to get to stations such as Manchester Victoria, Rochdale, Hebden Bridge and Bradford and was becoming more popular before the pandemic. However, it is resuming on September 6th as Northern is promoting a return to their trains.

Missing also at the moment are some London trains from Chester, since the service is no longer hourly.

[Dennis Harrison

MERSEY FERRIES



This photo taken in August 2021 shows the landing stage without its linkspan bridges

Even during the Covid-19 pandemic, *Mersey Ferries* has been able to run an hourly ferry service between the Pier

Head and Woodside. However, from December 2020, the service has excluded landing at Seacombe because

of the need to close the terminal to allow extensive repair work to be carried out. The two 130-years old linkspan bridges are in the process of being replaced by new bridges. The opportunity has been taken to implement a major refurbishment of the whole terminal which includes upgrading the mooring bollards and installing powered gangways (as already in use at the Pier Head landing stage). The terminal will reopen in spring of next year.

The building of a new vessel(s) to replace the two vessels currently in use, the *Snowdrop* and the *Royal Iris*, has had to be abandoned owing to cost issues. Even though the two vessels are sixty years old, it is now intended to invest in an extensive renovation of them. Unfortunately, with there now being only two, any work on one leaves no spare if the other breaks down unexpectedly.

- If you would like to join the *Friends of the Ferries* which produces two newsletters a year, please send your details and sub of £2 (for a year) to Gordon Ditchfield, 7 Foxcovers Road, Bebington, Wirral CH63 3EQ

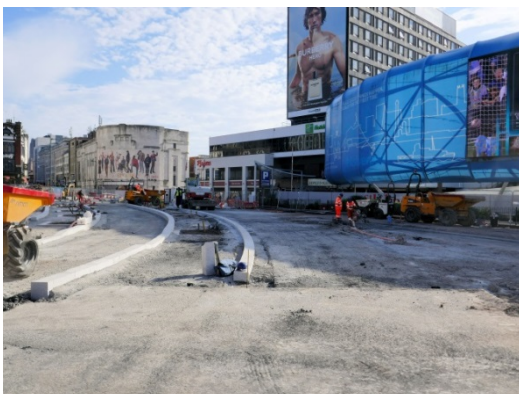
If and when the Manchester Ship Canal cruises are resumed, it is likely that they will no longer be able to reach Salford Quays because of silting up of the canal at Mode Wheel. Unless expensive remedial work is carried out, they will have to turn round at Latchford. In this case, it is likely that the cruise will become a two-way boat return, which no longer requires the one-way bus link operated in the past.

Cruise ships have resumed their visits of Liverpool. They usually berth for about eight hours. The largest vessel to visit recently was the *Anthem of the Seas* which carries 6000 passengers.

It is now apparent that neither the *Waverley*, the last sea-going paddle steamer in the world, nor the *Balmoral* will be visiting Liverpool this year.

[Gordon Ditchfield

BUS NOTES



Few timetable changes have been made during the year to the buses in the Wirral. However in Liverpool, due to the extensive remodeling of Lime Street which is still currently ongoing, some changes to routes and timetables have



been necessary, although most bus stops will remain the same. Apparently the aim of the changes is to reduce congestion and air pollution. A section of Lime Street will be blocked (except for hotel access) between St. George's Place

(which runs up the gyratory side of St.George's Hall) and Elliot Street (the road which is almost opposite Skelhorne Street). So all traffic coming from the London Road end of Lime Street passes the front of St.George's Hall but has to turn right to the gyratory. All traffic passing *Wetherspoons* and the back of *Boots* must turn right twice to join Lime Street and pass the *Adelphi* hotel.

Service 22 from West Kirby to Chester which had been operated by *Stagecoach* on behalf of Chester West and Chester council has, since April, been contracted out to *Al's Coaches*.

The *Stagecoach* "North-West 1 Day Explorer" ticket allowing travel throughout Merseyside, Lancashire, Cheshire and Cumbria, extending with fingers to Dumfries and Newcastle, for £11.50 is an outstanding bargain. The

equivalent coverage for 7 days by its "North West Gold 7 Day MegaRider" is £30.

The *Merseytravel* Solo ticket (buses only) which is available for a week, month or year is now also available as a daily ticket. One day adult is £4.90. If a 3-day or 5-day 'bundle' of this ticket is bought (which doesn't have to be used on consecutive days), the cost per each is reduced.

Maybe they'll run it again next year:

- The *Stagecoach* X10 service from Kirkby to Rhyl via Liverpool and Birkenhead (taking 2hours 20 minutes) which ran on Sundays in July and August.
- Anywhere on Arriva after 7pm for £1 during July and August was another great bargain.

[Robert Anderson

23/9/21

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The **WTUA's website** is at www.wirraltua.org.uk As well as giving information about the WTUA, it contains photos and movies of previous trips and copies of previous *Wirral Transport Users*.