

# WIRRAL TRANSPORT USERS ASSOCIATION

## Notes of WTUA Annual General Meeting at Merebrook Public House on Wednesday afternoon 20.10.2023

The public talk preceding the AGM was given by Gerard Rhodes, CWAC HS2 Programme Manager, who spoke on ***Chester Region Transport Developments***. He finished his talk with a comment on how much he appreciated getting feedback from the region's local transport user groups about the public transport performance around Chester.

*The number of members attending this AGM was low (just 14 with the committee) because the weather was atrocious and public transport was badly affected (with flooding at Hooton Station).*

### **Chairman's Report for 2022-23 (and additional comments)**

#### **1) Committee Meetings**

The committee meets monthly and most of the participants stay to enjoy a meal as a social occasion. Representatives from the committee attend many external transport meetings and have also been on site visits.

#### **2) External Meetings and Visits**

- a) Just before the previous AGM, one of our committee members, Nigel Bird, was asked by TfW (*Transport for Wales*) for a meeting 'very soon' to give a user-perspective view of the rail problems in North Wales. Nigel asked TfW if it was acceptable to them for him to organise a small action committee of local rail user groups, to which they agreed. So on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2022, the inaugural meeting of the 'Mersey/Dee RUG Consortium' was held, hosted by TfW in their new offices near Chester station. The RUG representatives met TfW's *Community and Stakeholder Engagement* team and found that the information supplied by TfW was very useful (in explaining the problems they had had) and prompted them to make some suggestions that TfW might try. The consortium participants backed up the *Wrexham-Bidston Rail User Group* in its protests about the poor service on the Wrexham-Bidston Line. It was rewarding to have the problems, as seen by the users, reported face-to-face instead of just to an anonymous corporation. Both sides judged that the discussion had been rewarding and it was agreed to hold more meetings at 6-monthly intervals.

We received a surprise invitation from TfW to visit their new maintenance and stabling depot at Taff's Well (near Cardiff) on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022. Three of us went, by train, on a cold but sunny day to see mock-ups of two of their new trains: in particular to compare the Tram/train class 398 units with our own new class 777 units.

We also had a site visit in March to Chester Station jointly with *TravelWatch NW* to view the proposals by TfW to modernise the facilities at the station, including, unfortunately, the closure of the ticket office

(which we object to).

The continuing poor performance of the Bidston-Wrexham line prompted the WBRUA, with WTUA support, to circulate an open letter detailing the problems on this line, to MPs and MSs of the areas bordering the line. As a consequence, RUG representatives met James Price, Chief Executive Officer of TfW, and his senior leadership team in the Queen Hotel, Chester on 8<sup>th</sup> August, to further discuss the WBRUA's concerns.

Not all the meetings with TfW are face-to-face: some are conducted over Zoom (conferencing over a computer link).

- b) All-in-all, we estimate the following meetings/visits attended after the previous AGM:

LCRRUG - <i>Liverpool City Region Rail User Group</i> - a consortium of representatives from the rail user groups in the city region (which includes areas bordering the <i>Merseytravel</i> area) to meet <i>Merseytravel</i> spokesmen	3
NCRUG - <i>North Cheshire Rail User Group</i>	2
CWAC - <i>Cheshire West and Chester Council</i>	4
TfW - <i>Transport for Wales</i>	7
TWNW - <i>TravelWatch North West</i>	4
SCRUA - <i>Shrewsbury-Chester Rail User Association</i>	1
Others	1

- a) In a non-executive role, John Ryan and Dennis Harrison have once again visited and judged six stations for the *Cheshire Best-kept Stations* award. (This covers the 'old' county of Cheshire. The 2022 over-all winner was Altrincham Interchange with the Wirral award winner being Hoylake.)

### **3) Other Local Rail Issues Monitored**

- a) Chester/Ellesmere Port lines, *Merseyrail Electrics*: skip-stopping at Bromborough Rake and Green Lane. Apart from the long-established skip-stopping of alternate trains at Capenhurst, additional skip-stopping was introduced at Bromborough Rake and Green Lane in August 2022, with little warning, to try to improve timekeeping on that line. (Timekeeping has been poor on the Chester/Ellesmere Port lines with Chester trains frequently running non-stop from Birkenhead Central to Hooton in order to make up time). Both stations lost stopping by all timetabled trains to Chester (only Ellesmere Port trains stopped at the two stations) except during the early morning, evening and Sundays. At a LCRRUG (*Liverpool City Region Rail User Group*) meeting in February, it was agreed by all the RUGs present to itemise a protest at the next meeting with *Merseytravel*: that a timetable improvement was required. Matters were also accelerated by the intervention of three Bromborough councillors and the Wirral South MP, Alison McGovern. The MP pointed out that of the three stations serving the Bromborough area, i.e. Bromborough Rake, Bromborough and Spital, only Bromborough Rake

was fully passenger-accessible (i.e. step-free). As a result, the Chester trains were subject to less skip-stopping and subsequently all skip-stopping at the two stations has been withdrawn (see 4(b) below).

- b) New stations required. We call for a new station at Ledsham. The area surrounding the station has had a large estate built near it. The developer has promised to improve its public transport links when the estate reaches a critical size. However, this size has nearly been reached and nothing has happened so far (although the developer has provided some money to CWAC (*Cheshire West and Chester Council*) for improved bus services but believes building a station would be too expensive). No formal evaluation on building the station has yet been done and we are not aware of the CWAC position on the proposal.

We back WBRUA in their call for a station at Deeside (to serve the industrial estate near the Dee crossing). The long-term proposal to build a station at Town Meadow (between Moreton and Meols) is still no more than a twinkle.

- c) We back NCRUG (*North Cheshire Rail User Group*) in their call for an improvement in the Ellesmere Port to Helsby link- this would probably be most easily done by extending the new class 777 units to go beyond Ellesmere Port using their traction batteries (so no need to extend the live 3<sup>rd</sup> rail).
- d) There are still 5 stations in the *Wirral Metropolitan Borough* which have at least one platform which is not easily accessible (i.e. not step-free).
- e) We are opposed to ticket-office closures. NOTE- although this threat has currently been rescinded for most of the stations in England, but those controlled by TfW (*Transport for Wales*), e.g. Chester, are not.
- f) We have engaged in the official public consultation on *Merseyside Area Bus Franchising*. This seeks to copy the bus franchising scheme currently being introduced in the Greater Manchester city-region, which gives more control of bus running by the city-region authorities (of which we approve).

#### **4) Some Notable Recent Events**

- a) Headbolt Lane station on the Kirkby line opened on 5<sup>th</sup> October. This station is between Kirkby and Rainford and extends the range of the *Merseyrail* network. The new station is on a section of non-electrified track, for which seven of the new class 777s have been fitted with traction batteries.
- b) A changed *Merseyrail* autumn timetable was introduced for the Chester and Ellesmere Port lines and will start on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2023. This is to cope with 'leaves on the line' wheel slippage causing longer travel times but also reinstates a FULL service for Bromborough Rake and Green Lane- so no more skip-stopping at these stations.

- c) A fair number of the new class 777s are now running (interspersed with the old class 507/508s) on all *Merseyrail* lines except for the Southport line. Introduction on this line is awaiting platforms to be lengthened at Southport station, in order to be able to accommodate peak-hour double-unit trains.
- d) We object to the cancellation of HS2 North as do many other commentators. [At a LCRRUG meeting (after the AGM) in November, the consensus of the views of the participants was that HS2 should at least reach Crewe. Wherever the northern end is situated, a traffic bottleneck will be caused to the north of it where the trains slow to join the normal railway. A termination at Crewe will cause much less of a bottleneck than the proposed termination at Handsacre Junction (just north of Birmingham). However, there are members of RUG committees who do support the cancellation because they believe the arguments put forward in favour of cancellation are valid, and the amount of money involved for HS2 was excessive. But not if much of the money saved is spent on road schemes.] We will continue to monitor and advise on the progress of one of the 'released money' alternatives - the proposal to electrify the Crewe/Warrington to Chester route.

#### **5) The 2023 trip on the East Lancashire Railway**

- a) A coach took the party from the Wirral to Heywood (near Bury) from where we proceeded to take a return trip on a steam-hauled train to/from Rawtenstall. The coach then took us in to Bury for a couple of hours, which enabled us to visit its famous market and see over the town, after which it returned us home. All the arrangements worked without a problem and we were lucky to have a beautiful day. We could have done with a few more participants to balance the books- a small loss was made. However, the trip has hopefully raised our profile to the public (we got 3 new members) and your committee see the loss as the cost of marketing ourselves. We are hoping to organise another trip in April/May next year. Do you have any ideas/preferences for a destination?- if so let us know!

#### **6) An appeal- recruitment**

- a) We are obviously looking to at least maintain the size of our membership. If this continues to fall we will eventually get to the point where we cannot fund our existence. We are a forward-thinking group. If you are not already a member and are interested in local transport and/or trips and might be interested in joining, or if you know of anyone who might be interested, please talk to us.
- b) We also need to have more committee members. Even with a healthy association membership, we need a committee which can support the monitoring of the transport situation and put the work in to produce a newsletter, keep the website up to date and organise the trips. We are sociable team. If you are recently retired and want something interesting to do, please come along to a committee meeting and see what we do (no obligation). We would also like committee members who are interested

in:

- (i) Wirral bus routes and service changes (to assist a committee member who has other obligations to pursue).
  - (ii) Air transportation and to attend liaison meetings at Liverpool John Lennon Airport.
- c) We particularly need a SECRETARY, male or female. They do not need any knowledge of transport matters. Their duties (helped if need be by the other committee members) are:
- (i) Compile the agenda for the 12 monthly committee meetings and the AGM. Circulate same to committee.
  - (ii) Take minutes at the 12 monthly committee meetings and the AGM. Circulate same to committee.
  - (iii) Communicate with the Chairman and his deputy, passing on any WTUA emails and letters received.
  - (iv) NOTE- their duties do NOT include any financial ones- we have a treasurer.
- d) If any WTUA member wishes to attend a committee meeting to see what goes on, please ring the Chairman on 0151-334-7723.

**7) An appeal-- articles/photos for our newsletter/website**

- a) Contribute to our Newsletter and/or Website. As well as sending our newsletter to our members, we send it to local MPs, councillors, and nearby rail user groups. Send us articles about transport matters and/or good photos of transport in action. If you are not a member, we can send you an old newsletter for you to see what we need.