

CYMRITHAS DEFNYDDWYR RHEILFFORDD



President: The Rt Hon Lord Jones P.C .

Members' Newsletter - Summer 2009

Annual General Meetings

At our Annual General Meeting in Upton last Autumn, it was agreed that in future, if possible, our AGMs would always be held on the second Saturday in October. This year it will be on October 10th in the Wynnstay Arms Hotel, Wrexham at 2.45 pm with, we hope, a guest speaker rounding off proceedings between 4pm and 5.30.

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Performance Improves Dramatically (Part One)

At the beginning of this year we had just about had enough.

We had been monitoring the performance of the Wrexham-Bidston trains almost hourly for months and the daily summaries looked terrible. ([Click here for that full week's summary in colour.](#)) The summaries had been circulated to our large Liaison mailing list in the hope that recipients would put pressure on Arriva Trains Wales to improve the passenger experience on our line. We had heard indirectly that this was happening, but had little evidence of it in reality,

One problem had been that the performance statistics were being manipulated to look good. All train operating companies do this: they can get away with outrageous cons because the amateurish wording of the 1990s' rail privatisation legislation positively encourages them to so - while making it all perfectly legal. Arriva, however, had raised it to a fine art. The most breathtaking example of this occurred around 2005 when ATW had a working of one class 153 railcar that combined three of their local services into a single journey. These were the Heart Of Wales Line, Shrewsbury to Crewe, and an all-stations North Wales

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Borderlands Line Performance
Saturday, 10th January 2009

Daily Summary

Comments refer to departures from the originating station: see the bottom of the table for footnotes
 Missed Liverpool connections at Bidston are shown in red

<i>First Train Unit</i>			<i>Second Train Unit</i>		
Starting from	at	Comments	Starting from	at	Comments
Wrexham General*	0633	++	Wrexham General	0710	++
Bidston*	0731	On time	Wrexham Central*	0730	(a) / Cancelled(ST)
Wrexham Central	0832	7 mins late	Bidston*	0831	Cancelled (ST) / ++
Bidston	0932	++	Wrexham Central	0932	++
Wrexham Central	1032	12 mins late	Bidston	1032	On time
Bidston	1132	13 mins late (b)	Wrexham Central	1132	2 mins late
Wrexham Central	1232	17 mins late	Bidston	1232	On time
Bidston	1332	16 mins late (c)	Wrexham Central	1332	2 mins late (d)
Wrexham Central	1432	(e) / Cancelled (ST)	Bidston	1432	On time
Bidston	1532	Cancelled (ST) / ++	Wrexham Central	1532	On time (f)
Wrexham Central*	1632	2 mins late (g)	Bidston*	1631	On time (h)
Bidston	1745	4 mins late (j)	Wrexham Central	1745	On time (k)
			Bidston	1846	++
			Wrexham Central	1946	2 mins late
			Bidston	2045	2 mins late
			Wrexham Central	2145	3 mins late
			Bidston	2245	++

Bidston Live Arrivals

Wrexham Live Arrivals

Comment footnotes:

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| (a) 45 minutes late "due to an earlier train fault". | (f) 2 minutes late at Penyffordd. |
| (b) 15 minutes late at Penyffordd. | (g) 7 minutes late at Penyffordd. |
| (c) 18 minutes late at Penyffordd. | (h) 3 minutes late at Penyffordd. |
| (d) 5 minutes late at Penyffordd. | (j) 8 minutes late at Dee Marsh. |
| (e) 19 minutes late from Wrexham, 23 at Penyffordd. | (k) 4 minutes late at Penyffordd. |

For general notes and colour code, see page 1.

Note: the e-mail version from which this is copied has embedded links to the internet live running information.

(continued from Page 1)

Coast service to Bangor, all joined together and including over fifty intermediate stops.

Parliament in its wisdom, however, had legislated for a train to be counted as "punctual" if it arrived *at its destination* on time - with a fairly loose definition of "on time" at that. Late running at intermediate stations counts for nothing in these statistics. It is absolutely universal, therefore, that train operating companies - even the excellent Merseyrail - add a few minutes to the scheduled journey between the final two stations in order to massage the performance figures. Few TOCs however, ever attempted anything quite as cheeky as Arriva who, because there were no other trains due behind it, scheduled their meandering railcar's arrival in Bangor to be 39 minutes after it was supposed to leave Llanfairfechan, which was normally just eight minutes away:

(From the June 2005 ATW Timetable)

Conwy	d	—	—	2356x	—
Penmaenmawr	d	—	—	0003x	—
Llanfairfechan	d	—	—	0007x	—
Bangor	d	—	—	0046a	—

Consequently, this train could run up to half an hour late for six-and-a-half hours at more than fifty stations and still, officially, end up classed as 'punctual'.

Because it was a rare long-distance train that *did* call at Shotton, we did observe this happening many a time as we monitored the performance of our own line on the internet. We will touch on the subject of destination arrival times again, later in this newsletter.

Something called the Public Performance Measure (PPM) is used now to monitor both punctuality and cancellations in a single statistic. It includes another aspect that has driven us to fury in recent years: the fact that for local services in the PPM, a cancellation counts as no worse than a six-minute delay at the destination.

It is precisely this that led Arriva to opt for Shotton Turnarounds as a means of getting a late-running train back on time. The PPM figure would then appear to be better as a result, but the passenger experience was most definitely not. Therefore, because such havoc was being wreaked on our travellers' plans, we finally laid down a challenge to all those who funded some aspect of the Borderlands Line - either the franchise itself, the evening/Sunday service or the Borderlands Line Community Rail Partnership (BLCRP) - in the form of a letter that was actually composed jointly by the Committee. See it overleaf.

19th March 2009

**To all funding stakeholders of the Borderlands Line
and its Community - Rail Partnership**

Dear Stakeholder,

The Borderlands Line - Wrexham to Bidston

Arriva Trains Wales has held the franchise for the Wrexham to Bidston line in excess of five years now. We understand that a five year review of their performance was conducted some time ago and we can only assume that they were informed that all was well and that ATW will continue as franchisee until the next review.

As a user group representing the passengers on this line and possessing considerable knowledge and expertise we are completely dissatisfied and dismayed, not only with the performance on this line of Arriva but also with Arriva's attitude to this user group and its implied attitude to the remaining passengers on the line

Arriva is receiving a considerable amount of taxpayers' money to provide a public service from Wrexham to Bidston which, by definition, must include all stations on the route. In practice the company has created two separate railways: one from Wrexham to Shotton and the other from Shotton to Bidston.

Wrexham to Shotton

This part of the line represents a self contained, local service from the outlying areas of Wrexham and North East Wales. Arriva manage to maintain a reasonably reliable and punctual service over this section of the line because, if the train is running just a few minutes late, they operate a policy of routinely terminating services at Shotton, throwing off passengers destined for the Wirral/Birkenhead and Liverpool, then returning the unit to Wrexham on time. Probably, it can be said that passenger numbers on this section are buoyant.

Shotton to Bidston

The franchise is for Wrexham to Bidston, but it is our informed opinion that Arriva is fundamentally failing to provide the advertised service. On

an hourly service it is completely unacceptable to plan turnrounds at Shotton and even more so to plan consecutive ones.

Having been dumped, unannounced, at Shotton it is sheer contempt for the passenger then to turn around the next one also. This is a total of a two-hour wait left in a cold and uninviting environment. What about the important plans of those passengers? What about the important plans of those passengers further up the line standing on unmanned station platforms with not a clue as to what is happening?

These are not rare events. A regular passenger stands a substantial chance of this happening to them quite frequently. As a result word spreads like wildfire and the potential patronage on this section has been decimated. This is despite great improvements in recent years in the line's commercial attributes within Merseyside, such as its catchment population and destination enhancements.

The other unacceptable practice is at Bidston where, regularly, the connecting electric train from Liverpool will be held outside the station on a red signal whilst intending passengers for the Wrexham line are able to watch their connection depart. Who in their right mind would use this service?

The Welsh Assembly Government put in additional funds so that more powerful units would have a better chance of maintaining an hourly service with just two units. There has been some improvement, but not enough. Having received the significant upgrade to the service with the allocation of the class 150 units, which are more powerful and more comfortable, then it is bitterly disappointing for Arriva to regularly downgrade the service from Shotton to Bidston to the point where passengers have to be very desperate to risk using the service.

On any line delays are inevitable but ours is unique in having, firstly, no recovery time at the termini and secondly, nearly all the intermediate stations as request stops that, by their very nature, require a lack of popularity in order to afford any recovery from delays.

*Because of this, it is our opinion that the service cannot be operated with two units. An additional unit is required. If a third unit is not employed then we have the permanent situation whereby the turnrounds continue or the service runs late. It is very obvious that Arriva use the turnaround tactic to deflect your criticism by **artificially** boosting their Public Performance Measure.*

Enclosed with this letter is the latest edition of Train Times, the magazine of the Association of Community – Rail Partnerships (ACoRP). As

always, it includes a Partnership Profile to boost a particular local railway. In this case the featured rail line is that from Wrexham to Bidston and the article follows its usual purpose of positivity for more than two pages until, third paragraph from the end on Page 20, the reporter writes in her account of her exploration of the line:

“From Shotton I had intended to travel on to Bidston, but was left stranded by the cancellation of two full services.”

It is our view that all stakeholders are paying for a contracted service from Arriva and that the latter are fundamentally failing to provide that service. Arriva are providing an unacceptable travel product and, as Stakeholders, we think that all of you should be taking Arriva to task regarding their performance of this Franchise.

Please acknowledge safe receipt of this letter and let us know:

- 1. if you share our concerns at Arriva's stewardship of the line,*
- 2. if so, what can be done to improve the situation, and*
- 3. what the organisation that you represent is doing about it.*

Yours faithfully

Peter Lamkin (Secretary)

*On behalf of the full committee of the
Wrexham - Birkenhead Rail Users' Association*

* * * * *

So far, we have received just a single reply, albeit one that represented all the local authority members of the Borderlands Line Community Rail Partnership. This basically confirmed that they shared our concerns and had conveyed them to Arriva Trains Wales.

As for the principal funder, the Welsh Assembly Government, a reminder that we had yet to receive a reply elicited an email asking for a further copy of the letter, as the original could not be traced. Despite a copy being immediately emailed back, there has still been no word from them in response.

But...

Performance Improves Dramatically (Part Two)

Touch wood...!!

Over the last five years or so, we have grown accustomed to a significant improvement in punctuality in the middle of January that lasts, usually, through the whole of February. It is quite easy to explain this phenomenon: there are fewer passengers around and our trains can pass through more request stations without stopping.

The Christmas rush and the subsequent sales abate to cause a dramatic drop in the number of shoppers, while university students are too busy with their mid-year exams. The winter weather, too, has a significant deterrent effect on the patronage of our inhospitable, unstaffed, exposed station platforms. It was often very noticeable during our constant monitoring of the service that when bad weather was causing problems to a newsworthy degree on other parts of the network, our trains were positively triumphing over the prevailing conditions.

The request stops on our line can make a dramatic difference to the overall time that it takes for one of our units to complete its progress from origin to destination. The 1632 from Wrexham on weekdays and the 1032 from Bidston on Saturdays often struggle to complete their journeys in an hour, simply because of their popularity. Yet we have observed some trains recovering, at slack times, as much as eleven minutes from a serious delay. For example, a train could leave Wrexham fifteen minutes 'down', but then be only four late from Bidston on its subsequent working.

But then comes Easter each year, with days out, school and university holidays, shopping for the summer, group expeditions to Deeside that are inspired by another series of *Dancing On Ice* and another raft of delays punctuated by Shotton Turnarounds

Except that it didn't happen this year.

We really cannot understand how Arriva have managed to do it, but we certainly congratulate them on their Borderlands performance since February. Until August, there appeared not to be a sustained period where we had anything about which to complain as far as punctuality was concerned. Even when there was a blip, due to one unit having mechanical problems, it was not perpetuated in the manner that was commonplace just seven months previously. Arriva do seem to be doing well at present when it comes to keeping the ageing members of its fleet on the rails. We are told that units are now heading down to Cardiff more regularly for thorough servicing and it certainly appears to be paying off.

External issues like bridges being struck by lorries have also lessened significantly this year. That particular problem, however, had two causes that were always likely to be remedied fairly soon.

The first was satellite navigation that sent truck drivers by the shortest routes, even if they contained points of limited headroom.

The second was the large influx of HGV drivers from eastern Europe - who were generally good-hearted, hard-working, enterprising, intelligent and nice to know, but being new to the area, they would tend to be more reliant on their vehicles' sat-navs. Some had yet to learn the height of their vehicles in feet, but this would be a mistake that each of them would make only once. Meanwhile, the programming of sat-navs with information about restricted headroom is being improved all the time, so the reduction in bridge strikes was to be expected.

All-in-all, despite the apparently desperate start to this newsletter, we have at least one reason to be very pleased with how things are going right now. We like to think that our tiresome email summaries had a part to play in this after all - although we are probably tempting fate by saying so.

* * * * *

Becoming Better Friends

1: Arriva Trains Wales

Relations with ATW have also taken a real turn for the better since their Franchise Manager, Michael Vaughan, took the initiative last Autumn to interact with us directly by inviting our Chairman to visit their head Office and Control Room in Cardiff. This took place just before Christmas and provided an excellent opportunity to convey our concerns in great depth.

One of these - which had been a festering sore since 2005 - related to the Saturday evening departures from Bidston. These left five minutes before the arrival of half-hourly trains from Liverpool and one minute before those from West Kirby. We had been told repeatedly that this had to happen because the 'Rules Of The Route' between Wrexham and Chester dictated that the line would be handed to Network Rail for maintenance on Saturday and Sunday nights. This applied whether or not engineering works were actually planned.

Insult to injury, the 'Rules' for our route had it 'open continuously' so that our service was being rendered unusable for evenings out in Liverpool by something that didn't even apply to our line. We had suggested stabling at Birkenhead North instead of Chester at weekends, but this was treated with scorn at our Liaison Meetings - even after ATW opted for this solution themselves when they wanted to provide an early morning train from Wrexham to Bidston on the final Sunday of the British Open golf at Hoylake.

We then found information on the internet, last year, that seemed to show that the relevant 'Rules Of The Route' had changed at the very time that the poor connections had first been imposed. The Wrexham - Chester line was now also

'open continuously', so the problem should not have occurred in the first place. We conveyed this not just to Arriva but our entire email circulation list and received our biggest direct response from MPs and AMs (Assembly Members), stating their intention to pursue the matter.

Sadly, the disjointed journeys remained as features of the December 2008 timetable.

After our Chairman's time with Mr Vaughan and a senior planning manager in Cardiff, however, changes were made. To our surprise, when the summer timetable came out, evening trains from Bidston were standardised from Mondays to Saturdays, providing the slickest connections of the day. So we have sent our thanks to all those who supported us on this matter, including the Bidston station staff who had complained after the previous non-connections had led to them being threatened with violence.

In July, Mr Vaughan then spent a whole day with our Chairman exploring our territory by car meeting members of your committee and the Steering Group of the BLCRP. This included viewing some of the unexploited potential of our line's former branches, particularly the one to Chester. The most significant meeting, however, took place at Birkenhead North with two senior people from Merseyrail, including their excellent Concession Development Manager, Rudi Boersma.

Mr Boersma recognised our line's potential as soon as he arrived from Holland and had said so while addressing community groups and public meetings. He conducted a short tour of the station and showed Mr Vaughan just what would be needed to get Wrexham trains back to Birkenhead North in the short term now that third rail electrification has been ruled out on grounds of cost.

The quartet then visited James Street Station. This was mainly to demonstrate how convenient this station now is for the massive Liverpool One shopping development, which is not an American-style 'mall' but a new city centre next to the old one. The waterfront museum now being built was also looked at as a visitor attraction to add to many others just across The Strand from James Street. But there was an incredible extra reason for inspecting this station...

2: Merseytravel

The disappointment of the failed electrification has really spurred the authorities into exploring every avenue for getting trains from our line right into Liverpool.

It has always been possible occasionally to encounter diesel trains at James Street. Not passenger units admittedly, but diesel nonetheless. The last time our Chairman did so, he braced himself against an unpleasant cloud of fumes as one of Network Rail's de-icing trains left the station. To his surprise the effect was barely discernible.

He later related this experience while on the phone to our most sympathetic contact at Merseytravel and pointed out that, if we got our vital third unit allocated to the Wrexham - Bidston line, then all the trains would have plenty of time to reach James Street. It was just a throwaway comment, however. We would not have expected either Merseyrail or Merseytravel to take this seriously as a hard suggestion, yet we have recently learned that Network Rail has been asked to investigate the possibility.

The terribly-designed Liverpool Loop tunnel will always be forbidden territory for diesel trains during passenger hours for fairly obvious reasons regarding fire safety. Such a tight tunnel would not even be allowed for electric trains if it were being built today, but James Street, with a spare platform that was originally constructed for steam trains may be another matter. Unfortunately, the ventilation shaft that was uncovered during clearance of the museum construction site was covered over again after being explored by archaeologists.

On the other hand, while the Liverpool Loop may be really bad for the trains that run through it (and vice versa), their similarity to giant pistons in a cylinder result in a near-perfect extraction system for unpleasant emissions at James Street. Haven't we all quickened our step on a Wirral Line escalator sometimes as an upward rush of air signals the imminent arrival of our train?

The only real obstacle to our trains extending under the river is the equally constricted burrowing junction at Hamilton Square that was built at the same time as the Liverpool Loop for trains to West Kirby and New Brighton. South-west of the station, track would have to be reinstated to its pre-1970s form so that our southbound trains could leave from what is now the platform for Hooton and beyond. We do not think that anybody really expects this to happen, but having a Merseyrail manager show an Arriva one the spare platform at Liverpool James Street where diesels may be able to terminate is not something we would have expected either. However, the very fact that Network Rail is being asked the question shows how much better our relations with Merseytravel have become in recent years. There was a time when it seemed that some of their personnel would take any suggestion of potential improvement as a personal insult,

The most expensive example from the authority's point of view was at Conway Park in central Birkenhead. They proposed an underground facility and we immediately pointed out that it would be more achievable financially as an open-cut station. The sums failed to add up for many years but, such had been the disdain repeatedly displayed for our open-cut idea, we gave up on it. Then came privatisation, an overnight 50% increase in the cost as estimated by Railtrack - and an unavoidably open-cut was station built for many millions of pounds more than it would have cost in the first place.

This sort of hostility doesn't happen any more, though, and this is really down to the individual officers who form the present regime.

"Replacement" Bus Nightmares

We do have still have some unresolved issues with ATW, it has to be said.

One of them is the fact that we are still witnessing Wrexham trains at Bidston blocking the paths of, and leaving one minute before, the arrival of their late-running connections from Liverpool. This was an issue even in British Rail days, but Michael Vaughan is looking at greater co-operation with Merseyrail and Network Rail to prevent this happening, so we will leave it at that for now.

His road tour with our Chairman included a deliberate non-stop drive from Wrexham Central to Birkenhead North that took precisely half an hour. The purpose of this was, firstly, to demonstrate the tough competition that our line would face if ever the regional bus and coach companies became enterprising enough to compete and, secondly, to show how unsatisfactory a replacement bus is if it takes nearly two hours to get from Wrexham to Bidston.

If this were not bad enough, ATW have done some outrageous things on certain Sundays when engineering has taken place. Providing buses that depart from the end stations at the same times that the trains would requires the use of two vehicles. Rounding the timings slightly, the 0845 from Wrexham would reach Bidston at 1045 and then have to wait until 1230 before starting its next journey south. Even when the line is open to trains south of Hawarden Bridge, replicating the train departures from the originating stations would still require two buses, with even more wasteful standing time.

So in this latter situation, ATW started changing the timetable - without anybody's permission. Trains would leave Wrexham at the normal time, terminate at Shotton, cross over at Dee Marsh and immediately head back south again about an hour earlier than usual. The bus from the Wirral would also turn around at Shotton at about the same time as the train did, but in order to do so, it left Bidston about 90 minutes before the normal train times. Bearing in mind that engineering notices are only displayed at one Merseyrail Station - Bidston itself - you can imagine how many unwitting passengers turned up from Liverpool to find their bus long gone.

Including the LAST ONE!!!!

Despite our furious emails, the only concession from Arriva's man in North Wales was that, in future, the last southbound bus would leave Bidston at the normal time with the train held for it at Shotton. So they pretty much got away with it.

Not long after this, the whole line was to be closed one Sunday and Arriva tried once again to offer a road "replacement" provided by a single vehicle. "Who on earth makes these decisions?" we ask ourselves, especially in this case, because the solitary bus would only be able to make four round trips in the day, compared to the normal six by train.

**Train Service Alterations between Wrexham and Bidston
Sunday 10 February 2008**

		BUS	BUS	BUS	BUS
Chester	Dep	0808			
Wrexham Central	Dep		1227	1641	2045
Wrexham General	Dep	0833	1235	1649	2053
Gwersyllt	Dep	0841	1243	1657	2101
Cefn-y-Bedd	Dep	0849	1251	1705	2109
Caergwrle	Dep	0854	1256	1710	2114
Hope (Clwyd)	Dep	0859	1301	1715	2119
Penyffordd	Dep	0904	1306	1720	2124
Buckley	Dep	0912	1314	1728	2132
Hawarden	Dep	0922	1324	1738	2142
Shotton High Level	Dep	0932	1334	1748	2152
Neston	Dep	0952	1354	1808	2212
Heswall	Dep	1002	1404	1818	2222
Upton	Dep	1017	1419	1833	2237
Bidston	Arr	1022	1424	1838	2242

		BUS	BUS	BUS	BUS
Bidston	Dep	1027	1429	1843	2247
Upton	Dep	1032	1434	1848	2252
Heswall	Dep	1047	1449	1903	2307
Neston	Dep	1057	1459	1913	2317
Shotton High Level	Dep	1117	1529	1933	2327
Hawarden	Dep	1127	1539	1943	2337
Buckley	Dep	1135	1549	1953	2347
Penyffordd	Dep	1140	1557	2001	2355
Hope (Clwyd)	Dep	1145	1602	2006	0001
Caergwrle	Dep	1150	1607	2011	0006
Cefn-y-Bedd	Dep	1158	1612	2016	0011
Gwersyllt	Dep	1206	1620	2024	0019
Wrexham General	Arr	1214	1628	2032	0027
Wrexham Central	Arr	1222	1636	2040	
Chester	Arr				0052

Well, you can imagine the reaction to our email circular in this instance, especially from Merseytravel, who part-finance the Sunday service. The result was that Arriva had to provide three buses that time - two to replicate the train departures from Wrexham and Bidston, and one for the original four round trips that they had advertised.

Instead of seeing how few resources they can devote to the service when the trains have to be replaced, we would like to see timetables where the most use is made of the two vehicles that have to be provided. This would not only be the stopping service from end to end. Instead of standing for so long, each vehicle could zip via the motorway and expressways non-stop in the other direction. This round trip would take 2½ hours, with the fast journey being completed just in time for the bus to start another all-stations run.

Passengers from Bidston to Caergwrle, for example, could travel either on the stopping bus, taking about an hour and a half, or they could take the motorway version, stay on at Wrexham and reach Caergwrle in about an hour.

There is another aspect of replacement buses that we have covered before - the last ones north that fail to reach Bidston before the departure of the last Merseyrail train to Liverpool. This can happen any day of the week, because Network Rail have often taken possession of the line before midnight midweek in order to undertake minor works. It has affected hundreds of passengers since the *Dancing On Ice* factor kicked in, because the last train, if it runs, is very conveniently timed for the end of the evening session at Deeside Leisure Centre.

Once again, this is partly a Merseytravel service, but the most that even they have managed to coerce ATW to do is, if there are any passengers still on the

replacement coach when it arrives at Bidston, to extend it to Birkenhead Bus Station. From here there are tunnel buses, the first of which arrives in Liverpool at about 0120 at weekends. This is three hours and twenty-five minutes after the ATW replacement vehicle would have left Wrexham - for a journey that would take about forty minutes by car!

Even then, ATW's aforementioned 'man in North Wales' refused to advertise this concession that took him years to concede.

We, of course, believe that the very least that should happen is an advertised extension of the replacement bus to Liverpool. Even better, the other coach that forms the last replacement from Bidston on these nights should do a fast run from Shotton beforehand. It could also stop at the Deeside Leisure Centre, which it would have to pass in any case. But who would pay for this and the better bus option on Sundays?

Well, the coaches and their drivers would be there in any case. The extras would involve the additional mileage and drivers to cover statutory breaks. One thing that too many companies fail to realise these days is that goodwill has a commercial value. Extra fares on the day may not directly cover the extra costs, but nobody can calculate how many future journeys a passenger may have made if he or she had not been so let down by ATW's version of a rail replacement bus service.

Do Arriva really need to be paid to do it better?

* * * * *

Train or Time Machine?

We have already mentioned how "cheeky" ATW can be when it comes to milking the rules regarding punctuality statistics and arrival times at a train's destination. This applies to the latest Borderlands Line timetable as well, because it actually shows trains leaving Wrexham Central two minutes before they arrive!

All northbound departure times are shown as two minutes earlier than they were, although in practice the trains usually run "two minutes late" at the same time as before. The same applies southbound to all intermediate stations, but not Bidston, which implies that our train zooms down to Upton at an average speed of 60 mph, which, of course, cannot (yet) happen in reality. In contrast, according to the timetable allows a full 12 minutes for the last two miles from Gwersyllt, an average of 10 mph.

We really ought to get on our high horse about this - it clearly borders on the fraudulent - but we are not going to complain as long as it somehow seems to be helping to reduce the incidence of real delays.

Other Timetable News

Now that southbound trains are said to arrive at Shotton two minutes earlier at five to the hour on most journeys, ATW have taken to showing the departures from Shotton to Llandudno nine minutes later as advertised connections. There is no numbered little black box against the Shotton station name, which in the case of many other stations signifies the number of minutes that should be allowed for a connection to be made. The usual time available really being seven minutes, not nine, we would caution that this connection remains risky.

This is especially true now that the barrow crossing that most people used to change platforms at Shotton High Level has now been removed. Therefore, making this connection now involves walking down to the high street and along the side road next to the derelict Central Hotel. This is quite achievable for the sprightly, but could be difficult for others - and everybody else if the train from Bidston is slightly delayed.

The hourly connection to the coast from south Flintshire stations, is still shown as involving over an hour's wait. Coming back, the hourly connections allow 20-25 minutes between trains at Shotton, until the pattern changes in mid-afternoon so that trains in all four directions leave within the space of a few minutes. Interchange from the coast becomes impossible for all but Usain Bolt.

The only exception occurs at just the right time thanks to the evening peak trains on our line running fifteen minutes later than at other hours. This means that the 1707sx from Llandudno that reaches Shotton at 1758 provides a very comfortable connection into the 1809 and 1813 departures to Wrexham and Bidston respectively. Of course, it doesn't run on Saturdays, the day on which we could best sell day-trips to North Wales,,,

We will never stop pressing for all ATW trains through Shotton Low Level to stop there. We have been joined in this by Connah's Quay Town Council, who name-checked us in the press for raising the matter. The absurdity of the present situation is emphasised if you use the Traveline internet journey planner, but forget to untick 'bus' as one of the required modes of transport. Results for Bidston to North Wales destinations don't suggest changing TRAINS at Shotton, but will happily tell you to take a bus from Shotton to Flint and to catch an onward train from the latter.

We do encourage combined bus and rail travel in some instances, of course, most notably the Clwydian Ranger and Snowdon Sherpa leisure services. Sadly, we can no longer recommend them, because most of the services that we used to specify here and on our *Great Days Out* web pages have been withdrawn. The Clwydian Ranger from Chester to Loggerheads no longer calls at Shotton Station, but slips across the line between Penyffordd and Buckley. The Snowdon Sherpa network no longer includes a direct link from Porthmadog to Betws-y-Coed, ruining one option for a circular tour via the Cambrian Coast and Conwy Valley Lines.

North Wales Rover...

... is the new name for the *Taith Rover*, the zoned bus and train ticket range for Chester and North Wales, Its Chester zone has been scrapped, but the city is now included, for cross-border services, in the Wrexham and Flintshire zones. Stations to Bidston remain in the latter for journeys by rail.

It was always an excellent idea poorly implemented, particularly in its original name, *Tocyn Taith*. It meant nothing to non-Welsh speakers and not much more in the language itself. It simply translated as 'Journey Ticket', conveying nothing of its versatility and value.

Added to a price structure where a four-zone ticket cost more than twice the price of a two-zone one, we found it extremely difficult to promote. However, the four-zone ticket has simply been scrapped. Who would buy it anyway, instead of a pair of the cheaper versions?

We made all these comments years ago, seemingly to no avail, so we are very pleased that these changes have been made. We do not take any credit for this though - we suspect new blood is present!

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News In Brief

Looking Better

If you haven't seen Shotton Low Level and Heswall Stations recently, you are in for a pleasant surprise. Both were once epitomes of awfulness, but we are very happy with the appearances of many of our stations these days.

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Tram-Train Developments

As we advocated a couple of newsletters ago, Merseytravel have recently publicised their aspirations for tram trains to run from Liverpool South Parkway to John Lennon Airport - including mention of through services from the Northern Line. As we also suggested, their wish list includes City Line tram-train services through the Wapping Tunnel. This leads from Edge Hill to the site of Park Lane Goods Station, now called King's Dock Road and housing light industrial units The tram-trains could certainly use this road to get to a variety of waterfront attractions and Liverpool One.

What's the betting that tram-trains will be operating the Wrexham branch of Merseyrail's Wirral Line in the not-too-distant future?

Rail bosses reassure Hawarden bridge is safe

From the Wrexham Evening Leader

Aug 17 2009 by Eva Ketley

TRANSPORT bosses have urged that cracks which have appeared on a rail bridge over the River Dee are nothing to worry about. Councillors have been alarmed by cracks which have appeared in the supporting brickwork of the 120-year-old Hawarden Bridge, which carries the Wrexham to Bidston rail line over the River Dee. But Network Rail bosses said the structure has been inspected and is safe.

A spokesman said: " Our structures department are aware of this issue. The Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) contacted us and we have met them on site with rail engineers and as a result the ORR has no concerns. It is not going to collapse. " He said the cracks would be pointed to improve the aesthetic appearance of the bridge.

Disc monitors had been placed over cracks to ensure they did not deteriorate further. But Shotton councillor Elwyn Jones added: " It seems to want a bit more than pointing. " He said he'd been shown a large lump of rust which had fallen from the bridge and almost hit a cyclist. The bridge opened to traffic in August 1889.

Wrexham - Birkenhead Rail Users' Association

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