

Issue 75 Autumn 2023

# Rail Wales

*Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales*



*A recently delivered class 398 tram train sits outside the new depot at Taffs Well, which will maintain the units, in May 2023. No date has been given for when they will enter service. Photo: Jessika Venn*

**railfuture**

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## **WELCOME**

Another year has quickly passed and the issues facing the railways of Britain, including Wales, seem as challenging as ever. Whilst Wales has, to a large extent, been protected from the industrial action that has affected rail in England, the users of the Wales and Borders rail system have regrettably frequently experienced very poor service quality.

This makes it difficult for those who support rail to make their case to those who do not share this passion to argue for more rail investment, with the range of alternative views varying from the opinion that public transport investment should focus more on bus to those who believe that public transport should simply provide a basic means of mobility for people unfortunate enough to not to own a car.

Transport for Wales Rail, which oversees the operation of passenger services on the Wales and Borders network, has admitted that its performance has been poor. The Marches route (Newport to Shrewsbury) has been particularly badly served as a result of the sudden withdrawal of the class 175 trains following the engine fires and delays in the introduction of the replacement class 197s. For how long we should wait until matters improve is a matter of debate; but it makes it challenging to campaign for rail and increased investment when the recent track record (pun intended) of the main Welsh rail operator has been inadequate.

Then, to add another ingredient to the mix, Wales was recently thrown the rather unexpected gift of the promised electrification of the North Wales main line. This, of course, resulted from the UK government decision to cancel Phase 2 of HS2.

As electrification of Crewe to Holyhead is something Railfuture Wales has campaigned for many years, this is very welcome in principle. However, as previously announced electrification in Wales has not always materialised (remember Cardiff-Swansea), we need to stay alert and try to ensure that:

1. Adequate funding is provided to complete the entire route (some have said the announced £1bn will be insufficient).
2. The scheme includes Chester to Warrington and Runcorn to allow through electric running from Manchester and Liverpool, and the Llandudno branch, a key holiday destination.

Turning to the near future, I am pleased that Railfuture Wales has been able to arrange two activities for our members in the next few weeks:

1. Another members' online meeting on the 16<sup>th</sup> November 2023
2. A visit to the largest rail signalling centre in Wales, the Wales Rail Operating Centre (WROC) in Cardiff on the 25<sup>th</sup> November.

Further information is provided below.

I will close by thanking you for continuing to be a Railfuture member and hope you enjoy reading this issue of Rail Wales.

*Peter Kingsbury*

## **MEMBERS' ONLINE MEETING: 16 NOVEMBER 2023**

Following the success of the online meeting held in June 2023, another event will be held on the evening of Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> November, starting at 1900 hrs. The Zoom link for the meeting will be available on the Railfuture Wales website prior to the event.

Members will be invited to suggest topics for discussion at the start of the meeting. However, the committee suggest that the following items may feature:

- North Wales mainline electrification: how do we ensure that this happens, and the best possible scheme is delivered for N Wales. What service pattern would we wish to see in the context of HS2 not reaching Crewe?
- Cardiff Metro: ideas for new stations and extensions to the network taking advantage of the lower cost infrastructure tram-trains provide.

## **WALES RAIL OPERATING CENTRE VISIT: SATURDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2023**

The committee has agreed with Network Rail that a party can spend two hours touring the above strategic signalling facility on a Saturday afternoon at the end of November. The Wales Rail Operating Centre, located in Cardiff about one mile west of Cardiff Central, controls a significant section of the South Wales Main line as well as some of the North Wales Main line. It uses state of the art digital technology. There will be an opportunity to view the staff operating the signals and points over this extensive area.

The visit will begin at 13.00 and last about two hours. If you are interested, please email Peter Kingsbury: [peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk](mailto:peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk). If the numbers interested exceed the limit placed on the event, it is hoped to repeat the visit next spring.

## **TICKET SALES: DOES CHESTER SHOW THE WAY FORWARD?**

Railfuture Wales members will be aware that there has been an ongoing 'debate' over the summer on the future role of station ticket offices after most of the English train companies announced that ticket offices at the vast majority of their stations would close. This would leave passengers to purchase tickets at vending machines (TVMs) or online. The announcement has led to much criticism including from the Railfuture board.

At the time of the original announcement Transport for Wales stated that it had no plans to significantly change ticket office provision at stations operated by TfW Rail. However, subsequently as part of news of major improvement work at Chester, it has been confirmed that the ticket office there would close and replaced by a 'customer information point'. This facility would offer ticket sales. The work at Chester has commenced.

The issue of station ticket offices was discussed by the Railfuture Wales committee at its early October meeting and it was agreed that it was appropriate for rail operators to review ticket sales facilities at stations in light of the move to online purchases amongst the wider population and the reduced use of ticket offices and increase in use of TVMs.

Chester station is the second busiest of those managed by TfW Rail (after Cardiff Central) so provides an appropriate location in which to trial any changes. The new 'customer information point' would be positioned close to the gate-line and so more conveniently located for passengers than the existing ticket office.

Assuming it will sell tickets as well as provide information, the critical issue is the hours that the desk will be staffed. Railfuture Wales would wish to see the information point open for the majority of station operating hours and not just for a few hours each day. If this occurs passengers would be provided with a service which was not inferior to the previous provision and the station operating costs might fall. The makeover of Chester station might then provide a model which sets the standard by which ticket office reform at busier stations elsewhere in England could be judged.

## **RAILFUTURE WALES IN ACTION**

### **Reaching out to young people**

Railfuture Wales was invited to take part in an event for secondary schools arranged by the Welsh Youth Parliament in May which took place at the Transport for Wales HQ in Pontypridd. We attended with a display stand and talked to young people about the opportunities for a better rail service in Wales and explained the significant improvements which will be seen over the next few years as the electrification of the Cardiff valleys routes is completed and new rolling stock introduced. Hopefully, a few more young people, many of whom were aware of the challenges around transport and climate change, will view rail as part of the solution to this issue.

### **Marches line must do better**

Following a request from the West Midlands branch of Railfuture, a joint Wales/W Midlands letter was sent in June 2023 to the managing director of TfW Rail about the poor quality of service on the route between Shrewsbury and Newport.

The letter stated:

Railfuture is aware that many of the recent problems on the Marches line result from the withdrawal of the class 175 trains for repairs following a number of engine fires. However, we would ask:

1. Why replacement stock could not be sourced on a short-term lease from the ROSCOs or other operators (TOCs)?
2. Why the problem should occur on a type of train which has been operating on the route for about 20 years without the issue previously arising?

In addition, to responding to the above points, it would help us respond to our members if you were also able to clarify:

1. When you expect the service level to return to acceptable standard both in terms of rolling stock quality and capacity, punctuality, and cancellation levels?
2. When TFW Rail plans to introduce the new service From Cardiff to Liverpool, thereby providing a half hourly frequency on the route with the potential to ensure all the intermediate stations receive a frequency of at least one train per hour?

To date, no reply has been received.

## **Old Oak Common closure**

The last issue of Rail Wales carried an item about the impact of the construction of the HS2 station at Old Oak Common in west London would potentially have on services between S Wales and Paddington. The Wales branch had expressed concern about the impact on the speed of services into the London terminus from this additional station call which would be of little value to passengers from S Wales.

It has now come to light that not only will the project result in several minutes being added to the journey times to and from Paddington for all services as a result of an additional station stop, but during construction of the new station all lines into the terminus will be closed around the Christmas period for up to 18 days from 2024 to 2029 and occasional weekends. During these closures Great Western has been informed it will be able to operate a limited number of services (2 per hour) into either Euston or Waterloo. One will be a joint Bristol/S Wales service. Great Western's preference is Euston as this will add 15 mins to journey times compared to 45 mins to Waterloo. Railfuture Wales has supported the Euston option. A decision on this will be made by the Dept for Transport in December 2023. On some other dates, only two of the four lines through Old Oak Common will be available reducing the number of services Great Western will be able to run into Paddington.

## **Transport for Wales Accreditation Process**

Railfuture Wales has been requested by Transport for Wales (TfW) to support a new accreditation process it is planning to introduce for groups who wish to participate in its consultations and take part in meetings including that of the Transport Liaison Group.

The latter meetings take place two or more times a year and provide an opportunity for TfW to update transport user groups on its news and seek feedback. Several rail user groups are Railfuture members. Since the Covid pandemic, the meetings have been predominately online.

The accreditation process aims to ensure that there are clear and concise guidelines for all parties involved and to maximise the productivity of the valuable discussions and relationships between TfW and groups.

Accredited members will receive:

- a point of contact, advised by the Stakeholder and Community Team, to liaise with
- an informed response to queries received within 20 working days
- invitations to relevant in-person events and previews
- Transport Liaison Group (TLG) Meetings (to be hosted both virtually and in-person) with a minimum of 2 sessions per year; led by senior personnel in TfW
- engagement on key items, including upcoming timetable proposals
- an annual survey to monitor engagement arrangements and to seek areas for further development.

In return to achieve accreditation groups will be required to adhere to guidelines regarding matters such as identifying a point of contact, sending a representative to all meetings, and seeking to express the genuine voice of the user.

The Railfuture Wales committee decided at its October committee meeting to potentially support this initiative subject to several reservations it had about the ability of some user groups to deliver all the requirements being addressed.

## **NEWSLINES**

### **Farewell High-Speed Trains**

Great Western Railway has confirmed that its remaining High-Speed Trains (Castle units) will be withdrawn from the Cardiff to Penzance route at the December 2023 timetable change. However, in a change of heart, this will not mark the end of these historic units: GWR has stated that three sets will be retained for use between Plymouth and Penzance whilst the Cardiff to Plymouth part of their existing journey will be covered by the class 80x IET bi-modes. The Castle units date back to the mid-1970s when they were introduced between Paddington and South Wales and gave British travellers the first opportunity to travel at speeds of over 100 mph. It is perhaps appropriate that they are being replaced by one of the newest long distance fast trains operating in Britain (see photo back page).

## Cardiff Bay branch work progresses

Work is progressing on the upgrade of the one-mile-long single-track branch from Cardiff Queen Street to Cardiff Bay. This is part of the South Wales metro project and comprises the laying of double track, construction of a second platform at the branch terminus and the provision of a new station about half way along the branch. The line will no longer be operated as a shuttle from Queen Street but will have through tram trains from Pontypridd and potentially Treherbert, Merthyr and Aberdare.



*A view of the terminus of the Cardiff Bay branch in April 2023 with the track laid for the new second platform. The existing single-track station is hidden behind the wooden fence. Photo: Julian Langston*





*Cardiff Bay looking towards the city centre/Queen Street. The existing single track can be seen on the left in the distance. Photo: J Langston*

### **Ebbw Vale branch reaches its full potential (finally)**

The December 10<sup>th</sup> timetable change will see the Ebbw Vale branch finally reach its full potential. This date marks the commencement of an all-day hourly service between Ebbw Vale and Newport to supplement the hourly service to Cardiff Central which has operated since the line reopened in 2008.

The project results from investment of £70 million by the Welsh Government, Blaenau Gwent Council, Transport for Wales and Network Rail. Much of this money has been invested in doubling the track on the central part of the branch between Cross Keys and Aberbeeg. Signalling has also been modernised at the southern end of the branch near Newport.

The role of Railfuture in securing the original reopening of the branch in 2008 was described in Railwatch (October 2023). The original reopening

scheme included the Cross Keys to Aberbeeg doubling but this was omitted as the scheme budget was exceeded (parallels with HS2?). Railfuture argued at that time to carry out this work at a later date would cost considerably more, as has proven to be the case.

Nevertheless, the branch remains a shining example of what can be achieved by the return of passenger rail services 50 years after they ended, and a tribute to those who campaigned in the 1990s for the return of rail to Ebbw Vale.

## **Station designs revealed for Cardiff -Severn Tunnel Junction transformation**

As this issue of Rail Wales was being completed, Transport for Wales unveiled the design of the proposed new stations to serve the new 'Burns Commission' service between Cardiff and Severn Tunnel Junction. These are Magor & Undy, Llanwern, Somerton, Newport West and Cardiff East. In addition, a further new station is proposed on the Newport/Cardiff boundary called Cardiff Parkway but this is not included in the above announcement as it is being designed and developed by the private company who wish to build an adjacent new business park.

All the new stations comprise two platforms and are located on the existing slower speed lines currently used by freight services.

Funding for the recent work has been obtained from the UK Government as part of the Union Connectivity Review and the announcement explains that the new stations would be served by additional services which will operate between Cardiff and Cheltenham/Bristol Temple Meads rather than terminating at Severn Tunnel Junction. However, the announcement confirms that funding to construct the stations has yet to be found.

Communities in the areas to be served by the new stations are being consulted on the designs until early January. Railfuture Wales will be responding to the consultation including a consideration on how the new stopping services might affect the timetable for existing services running on this busy section of railway.

The consultation can be viewed here:

<https://haveyoursay.tfw.wales/sew-new-stations-and-services>

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The writer of the following letter is a long established Railfuture Wales member based in South Wales.

Dear Sir

The article 'Wales needs world class railway' (Railwatch 177, October 2023) raises concerns about the suitability and deployment of new trains for services around Cardiff and throughout Wales, not least as regards comfort and the provision of toilets. Thankfully, it appears that at least Swansea-Manchester services will use BR Mk IV stock. That there will be no toilets on Valleys services with journey times of up to an hour would appear to be a shortcoming of the new so-called 'tram-trains'. Should these trains prove unsuitable, one might ask if it is possible for conventional stock to access the new depot, with its sharp U-bend entrance from the north. It is not apparent why this has been constructed when, apparently, land exists for an essentially 'straight' entrance from the south. Might it be wise to protect this land?

The cost of the South Wales Metro project is apparently heading for £1,000M yet it provides not an inch more railway. Cost comparisons are never easy, but it is perhaps notable that the 30-mile Borders railway was reopened, albeit without electrification and, it has been argued, without sufficient 'future-proofing', for around £300M.

To return to the comfort of rail travel in Wales, TfW appears willing to run some loco-hauled services e.g. Swansea-Manchester with BR Mk IV carriages, and of course the Cardiff-Holyhead dining service. Might it consider others, to increase the quality of rail travel in Wales? Is it wise therefore, to be sending so many BR Mk III carriages for scrap? Might they find use here?

Yours faithfully

(Name and address supplied.)

Editor's note: Railfuture Wales and several other parties raised concern about the lack of toilets on the new tram trains when their design was first unveiled. No opportunity had been provided for users to comment on their design before the order was placed with Stadler. In response, TfW has stated that toilet provision at stations would be increased.

## **FREIGHT NEWS**

Beginning in the South West of Wales, oil trains continue from Robeston (Milford Haven) to Westerleigh (Bristol) and Theale (Reading), although fewer operate during the daytime, so mainly evenings and overnight. Apparently, the Waterston branch is to be brought back into use, but it is not clear when, or for what traffic yet.

Trostre (Llanelli) continues to receive steel coil from Port Talbot normally twice a day, and scrap trains operate in the reverse direction. Margam also sends coil to Tilbury once or twice a week. More generally, steel traffic has been rather erratic lately, with very few daytime workings compared with a few years ago, but most are from Margam to Llanwern, with some to Dee Marsh (Shotton), Round Oak (Dudley) and elsewhere. Celsa Steel at Cardiff also generate some traffic.

The timber trains, operated usually by Colas Class 56s run erratically, although have not recently run for several weeks, having previously operated up to four times a week. However, there is a large stockpile of logs ready for transporting when traffic resumes at Baglan sidings.

As for coal traffic, the Fros y Fran opencast site at Merthyr will be closing at the end of November, and so the Cwmbargoed flows to Port Talbot will be ending at that time, unless some surface stock needs to be cleared.

The Machen branch sees aggregate traffic, although this is sporadic, sometimes with gaps of several months with no trains at all, then several a week.

The Barry container traffic operates Monday to Thursdays, and the Daventry to Wentloog Tesco flows now operate two each way per day, so I am told. There are also Freightliner workings to and from Wentloog from London Gateway.

In Mid Wales, the timber traffic from Aberystwyth operates once a week, and the stone traffic from Penmaenmawr and slate from Llandudno Junction area also generate traffic.

There have recently been ballast trains operating in the Cardiff Valleys, notably the Treherbert branch, in connection with the Metro renewal of tracks/switches.

*Rhodri Evans*

The following article appeared in Rail North West, the newsletter of the North West England Railfuture branch, in July 2023. It is reproduced below with slight editing:

## **WELSH GOVERNMENT RESPONDS TO WBRUA AFTER PUBLIC STATEMENT**

Following the Wrexham-Bidston Rail Users' Association (WBRUA) issuing a public statement which said that the Transport for Wales (TfW) service on the Wrexham–Bidston (Borderlands) line was unacceptable in many ways (detailed further below), the Welsh Government has committed TfW to a series of improvements on the line. These are:

- resolving outstanding technical issues with the new Class 230 trains
- dedicating the Class 230 fleet to the Borderlands Line
- working with drivers, guards and maintenance staff to operate the new Class 230 stock to their full capability
- improving information services for passengers
- the availability of ticket purchase options
- the management of Rail Replacement Bus Services, which they pledge to keep to a minimum, as they do not suit the line and the local road network.

Once the hourly service is running to time, they will introduce the promised second hourly limited stop service which, with the existing hourly service, will offer half-hourly services and accommodate freight services on the Line.

WBRUA has in the last six months seen the poorest delivery of a rail service on its line in the memory of its Chairman & Secretary, both of whom are very well-acquainted with the line. The level of service, including communications, has been so bad that the WBRUA wrote a statement to politicians and transport business leaders in the Spring, setting out a wide range of concerns, supported by objective evidence. More recently, the statement was adopted and expanded to cover the concerns of all Rail User Groups in North-West England and North Wales affected by Transport for Wales' train services. Circulation has gone wider and has received cross-party support. The open letter can be found on the WBRUA website. Railfuture offered their full support.

The group explained why they have decided to, metaphorically, ask for "the book to be thrown" at TfW. The background to the Letter has been a succession of broken promises and failures to deliver a reasonable train service, even allowing for the obstacle of Covid. WBRUA's view is that no

other operator, save possibly TransPennine Express, has fallen so far short of its promises and responsibilities. Passengers on the Wrexham-Bidston line have seen delays and cancellations become the norm except on Sundays where the schedule has been eased by not running an hourly frequency. Communications around these issues have been woeful. Trains that have lost time progressively during the day are operated as “skip-stop” without notice, leading to passengers waiting at intermediate stations watching the “cancelled” train cruising through their station carrying passengers.

Much of this can be read in the open letter but looking at the Class 230 battery/diesel hybrid units dedicated to the Wrexham-Bidston line in particular, the first unit, 230006, arrived at Wrexham nearly 3 years ago. These units were to have been the bright future of the Wrexham-Bidston line up to the time when through-running from Liverpool becomes possible. They were to enable a half-hourly frequency to be implemented. Even allowing for Covid, their introduction into passenger service has been painfully slow, the first fare-paying passengers boarding 230010 on 3rd April. But they had finally arrived, raising our very reasonable expectations with a power/weight ratio far better than the incumbent Class 150s, more powered axles with which to tackle the gradients and slippery rails south of Shotton and regenerative braking.

The units have won praise for their roomy interiors and quietness. Furthermore, on Day-1 leaving Shotton the unit accelerated from 0-40mph (the line speed at that point) in just 47secs, up a 1:53 incline, fully justifying the claims made about the units’ performance. Yet, months on from their introduction there has been no day when a Class 230 has completed its daily diagram within 5 minutes of booked time. On the occasions when all the booked services during the day were operated, the units have completed their last journeys well outside PPM, in many cases having been turned short at Wrexham General to avoid being later still. On several occasions the trains became so late that decisions were made to skip a significant number of stops to restore some of the lost time, effectively cancelling those trains for several passengers without the cancellation being officially reported. The trains’ inability to keep time has been compounded by frequent mechanical failures in service, these failures continuing after the WBRUA was assured by TfW that they were confident they had dealt with the causes of the failures (the majority of them electrical). Radiators have been blocked by pollen, and we now wait to see whether reliability improves as the pollen season ends. However,

it should be noted there have already been four unit failures of the Class 230s this month up to 12th July.

A blame culture prevailed between TfW and Vivarail, with the WBRUA striving to establish the truth behind this dreadful service. Just as worrying has been the response from the operator that the units require a different driving technique than the Class 150s and drivers are still getting used to the power and braking characteristics. Early in the training regime, that would have been fair comment, but after months in service WBRUA thinks it is no longer acceptable. On 20th April TfW delivered a presentation to the local Rail User Groups, and in response to a question from the WBRUA admitted that “initiatives such as amended acceleration instructions were yet to be implemented”. WBRUA finds that explanation for such dire timekeeping baffling – it might well explain why a new and more powerful train is initially only marginally faster from point to point than its aged predecessor, but it surely cannot be justification for the train operating more slowly! Over two months on from that meeting, the schedule is still not being met.

For their part, leaders within the WBRUA are carefully monitoring punctuality and reliability. They are pushing for the introduction of Class 197 units to facilitate the promised 30-minute frequency and for far better communications to the public. The diary is well filled at the Association, but regrettably for the wrong reasons.

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Thanks are extended to all who contributed to this issue. In all cases, any opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent *Railfuture* policy. Material for the next issue – articles, letters, photos or comments – should be sent to the editor, Peter Kingsbury at [peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk](mailto:peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk) or by post to 22 Winchester Avenue, Penylan, Cardiff CF23 9BT, by 29<sup>th</sup> February 2024 for the spring 2024 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

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*The end of an era: a 'Castle' HST arrives at Cardiff Central after completing its 240-mile journey from Penzance on the 25<sup>th</sup> October. These pioneering trains provided the first British high speed rail service between London and South Wales in 1976 and operated this route for over 40 years, but will soon be a distant memory. Photo: Peter Kingsbury*

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