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CELEBRATING

175

175 YEARS *of*

RAILWAYS

ACROSS **CHESHIRE**

**On Track – 175 years of railways across
Cheshire – Crewe to Chester and Chester to Birkenhead**



175 years - a Celebration of CHESTER to BIRKENHEAD and CREWE Railways

Chester in 1840 - a place about to become 'connected'. We are where we are and what we are, as a country today, very much on account of the invention and development of the railway. The railway changed the way people travelled, the things that people ate and opened up employment opportunities.

In 1800, in Britain, as in many other countries, the horse was king. It brought some speed and independence. If you owned one it hauled your goods over very indifferent roads and could also take passengers - mainly on account of the mail coaches. However, it was far from smooth and limited to barely 20 mph. Also the horses got tired needing a rest, food and water leading to the rise of coaching inns.

If you were lucky enough to be by a river or better still by a canal a horse could do much more. So, in looking at Chester, ever so briefly, it had by 1840, both the River Dee for seaborne traffic and a canal to Wolverhampton and beyond for inland use. Needless to say heavy and lighter horses were much in demand in 1800 in agriculture as well as transport.

However - a new beast with its own motion was being developed principally at collieries in the north east - which grew to seriously challenge the supremacy of the horse.

Almost seven years before the start of Queen Victoria's reign, the steam locomotive stirred an amazed world at the opening of the world's first 'inter-city' main line, 'The Liverpool and Manchester Railway' in September 1830 !

Britain would now never be the same. Much has rightly been written about this brilliant engineering - a transportation and social revolution - a fever gripped nation - in such a manner that many of the UK's main lines were built by the end of the decade. So London - Birmingham - Liverpool - Manchester and beyond was a reality and at an average max. speed of 40 mph by 1840 - double that of a horse and many more tons could be carried!

In all this a fundamental factor emerged - that any proposed railway was there to meet a demand for goods and passenger transport. In a diverse manner each of these needed better transport as, throughout the Victorian era, the UK economy was transformed from an agricultural one to an industrial dynamo which challenged the world.

In the 1830's railways matured but problems over signalling, or lack of it, strength of the rails and ever growing traffic saw a step change in the nature of trains and locos (compare 'Rocket' of 1829 with 'Lion' of 1838 [Museum of Liverpool]).

Into this ferment of change Chester came into the railway age very rapidly indeed.

Two principal factors were at work in aiding proposals for the two railways:-

1. Birkenhead's rapid growth as virtually a new town and a port in a grand manner.
2. The importance of the port of Liverpool complete with now famous ferry connections to the Birkenhead side made it a must connect town to Chester and beyond.

Earlier canal schemes had failed, the canal getting no further than Whitby - to become eventually Ellesmere Port (the port for Ellesmere).

The Crewe and Chester line was developed more with an eye on the Irish traffic, especially the mail, just as Telford's A5 Holyhead Road had done in earlier times. Aspirations of Inter-Rail connectivity were beginning to grow and with the later Chester-Holyhead Railway becoming a reality by 1850, this otherwise very rural main line - rather than just a branch to Chester - became paramount to railway growth.

Nevertheless a plethora of independent railway companies were developing the network in the first half of the 1840's which grew, on paper, exponentially. It was not to last and the 'Railway Mania' was largely over by 1852. Many schemes failed (and probably deserved to) and people lost money.

These two lines developed successfully despite conflict of interests between them. The Chester to Crewe line was taken over by the Grand Junction Railway before it was opened. Later it became part of the London and North Western Railway company (LNWR). The Chester to Birkenhead Railway became part of the Birkenhead, Lancashire and Cheshire Junction Railway Company, simplified to the Birkenhead Railway. By 1861 there was an agreement between the London and North Western Railway and the Great Western Railway to operate the Birkenhead line jointly despite an uneasy working relationship.

In such a manner the LNWR was formed in 1846 and concurrently set up its own loco works in the parish of Monks Coppenhall. This name being a mouthful it promptly named this flourishing railway town Crewe - probably the world's most famous railway junction and Chester was connected to it.



LMS 3F 0-6-0T 47658 shunts within Crewe Works on the 27th September 1964, on the original alignment of the Chester & Crewe Railway; the railway being diverted away from this route as the Works developed on both sides of the railway and caused congestion on it. Consequently a diversion was built on the current alignment; this piece of line is now Dunwoody Way (© John Hobbs)

1. Chester & Birkenhead Railway (14.5 miles)

Act - 12.7.1837

Construction commenced - 1838

Opening Ceremony - 23.9.1840

Public Opening - 23.12.1840

(Merged with Birkenhead, Lancashire & Cheshire Joint Railway but became Birkenhead Railway on 1.8.1859 to shorten the title.

Subsequently became LNWR/GWR Joint on 1.1.1860 and ratified by Act on 11.7.1861

Very much a well-aligned railway the main engineering feature was the viaduct over the canal at Moston (near Mollington). North of Hooton there was a fairly undulating section through attractive countryside leading to a rock cutting near Rock Ferry. Various tunnels were required in Birkenhead as the termini were changed (see the stations list).

It was double tracked from 1847, the same year as the opening of the Birkenhead Docks Branch and traffic grew steadily once other railways brought coal traffic into Chester, mainly from North Wales. Birkenhead became an important coal export port. The docks branch closed in 1992 but is still largely intact.

Undoubtedly the railway aided the growth of Birkenhead's shipbuilding industry and certainly assisted Lever's soap industry at the delightful works village of Port Sunlight. He had his own railway there, even with a workers' passenger service from his own station at Port Sunlight (see stations list).

In building the Chester - Birkenhead Railway, Wirral's 'first railway' was encountered, the standard gauge horse - worked Storeton Tramway, opened 1839 and 2.5 miles long. It was crossed north of Spital at what became Port Sunlight 48 or so years later. It carried sandstone from quarries at Storeton to a tidal inlet off the Mersey near where Lever was to set up his works. It closed along with the quarries in c.1905.

Other railways came about to Helsby in 1863 and later to Neston followed by West Kirby (so coal from Neston colliery could be shipped out) providing additional traffic on the northern part of the railway. Therefore it was decided to quadruple the railway from Rock Ferry to Ledsham (ending here due to cost of widening Moston viaduct) which opened c.1908.

Passenger traffic grew and became far more than the local traffic of today. From Birkenhead Woodside you could travel in through carriages to London Paddington, Euston, Birmingham Snow Hill, Oxford and Bournemouth (in holiday season). Additionally stations like Bromborough and Hooton had fast services as well local stopping services. Paddington - Liverpool was bookable by ferry across the Mersey. Chester was one of less than a handful of unique stations on the network from where one could leave in opposite directions on a through main line train to different London termini.

However all was to change after the virtual completion of electrification of the Liverpool - London Euston line in 1967. The Joint Railway suddenly became a local railway and in British Rail's period of contraction and rationalisation Rock Ferry became the terminus. All other local stations on the line were earmarked for closure except Bromborough.

Local historian and railway activist, Angus Tilston, was requested, by the local authority to help fight this case and he quickly formed Bebington Rail Action Group. Public opinion was sought and activated to alert Merseyside Passenger Transport Executive to such an extent that station closures were halted and later the line was electrified in stages from Rock Ferry to Bromborough and Hooton (1985), Chester (1993) and Ellesmere Port (1994).

Bache replaced the badly located Upton-by-Chester and new stations were provided at Bromborough Rake and Eastham Rake (see the station list for details).

Although saved for passenger traffic, freight gradually declined in the 1970's and 80's but then there was a brief revival by reopening the Lever's own railway for hot edible oil from May 1986 to November 1992. Relocating production to the Essex works saw that line close again.

The centenary of Lever's Soap works was celebrated on the May Day Weekend of 1988 by running a series of Steam Shuttles on the reopened sections of Lever's Railway. Excellently organised by Angus Tilston and the Wirral Transport users Association thousands had a wonderful time. It is now a pleasant woodland walk. Coal to Birkenhead Coal Terminal stopped about the same time and saw the Docks branch fall out of use. Similarly bulk oil trains eventually ceased running to and from Stanlow which considerably reduced the amount of traffic which used to reverse at Hooton.

Having been a strategic main line to Merseyside it is now a busy metro style service but 'Plus ca change' - the railway lives on. Even now reduced to just two tracks to Rock Ferry and Liverpool via the underground loop, modern signalling allows many more trains (electric) to run than ever before.

Up to 1974 the Chester - Birkenhead line was wholly in Cheshire but that beyond Hooton moved to Wirral from Cheshire after this date reflecting its urban nature.

2. Chester and Crewe Railway (20.5 miles)

Act of Parliament - 30.6.1837

Absorbed by Grand Junction Railway - 1.7.1840 and opened - 1.10.1840

Amalgamated with other lines into the London and North Western Railway - 16.7.1846

(Largest pre-group UK company)

This longer railway, in rural Cheshire, could hardly be more different to Chester - Birkenhead as there were only minimal centres of population on this route and no industry. Its primary purpose was to link Chester to the rapidly growing network in the hinterland - the Irish strategy soon followed however.

Famous engineer and contractor Thomas Brassey, born in Bruerton near Chester, was responsible for over half the length. Principal works included a viaduct near Crewe, a rock cutting and canal crossing south of Beeston Castle and a tunnel under the canal at Christleton.

In general the railway followed the canal as far as Beeston locks. Nearness to that waterway allowed interchange at Calveley - an early example of 'modal interchange', now such a feature of modern life.

There were wayside stations from the start but lacking sufficient population and more car use caused their closure unlike on the Birkenhead line. There was only one branch line, the later Tattenhall Junction to Whitchurch line, which was used in the 1960s as a regular Sunday diversionary route for Crewe and London Euston trains with a reversal at Whitchurch.

The line now mostly enjoys a two trains per hour service one being from Chester or beyond to London. London services are reduced at weekends, particularly on Sunday when there is a late start. The Line is being considered for possible electrification.



'Hawksworth' 0-6-0PT of GWR origin scuttles past the diesel multiple unit depot, formerly the GWR steam locomotive shed, and under the impressive signal gantry en route to the sidings alongside the station at Chester on 4th July 1966. Unfortunately by this time most ex-GWR engines had had their cabside number plates removed and replaced with painted numerals (©John Cashen)

Present and Past Railway Stations along Crewe to Birkenhead railway lines:

1. Crewe - Chester line

If we travel from Crewe to Chester today by train there is just a short ride lasting approximately 20 minutes and just two stations Crewe and Chester but if we look back in time this line had five extra stations.

Original stations:

Crewe - Opened on 4.7.1837 and the last 175 years has seen the station grow.

Worleston - Opened June 1842 and called Nantwich station but renamed Worleston 1.9.1858. Spelling changed to Worleston in 1862 and the station finally closed on 1.9.1952 upon the opening of Nantwich Station-Crewe-Shrewsbury line.

Calveley - Shown in timetables by 1842 as Highwayside but called Calveley by end of 1845. This early name changing was typical for many years in Victorian period and after! The station was finally closed on 7.3.1960.

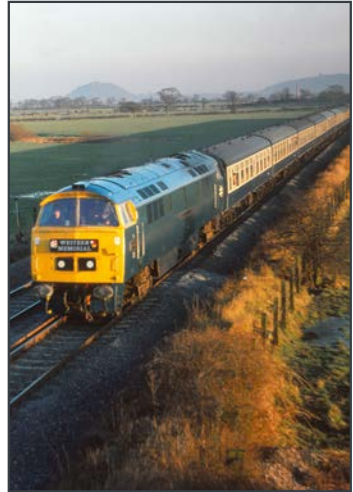
Beeston Castle & Tarporley - In timetable of June 1842 this station was called Beeston Castle and on 1.10.1868 Tarporley was added to the name. Closed on 18.4.1966.

Tattenhall Road (originally called Tattenhall) - Opened circa August 1841, became Tattenhall Road on 1.8.1872 and closed 18.4.1966.

Waverton - First mentioned in the timetable in November 1846 the station was re-sited 41 chains (0.5 mile) further west opening on 6.6.1898. Closed on 15.6.1959.

Chester - Opened 1.10.1840 and closed 1.8.1848

Chester Joint (for Birkenhead) - Opened on 1.8.1848 replacing the separate Chester - Birkenhead Company's station. Became known as Chester General in 1890 but the word 'General' was dropped in 1970 after the closure of Northgate station in 1969.



"Western" Class C-C Diesel 1023 Western Fusilier approaches Tattenhall Junction on 29th January 1977 on a tour Commemorating the end of the use of these locomotives on the national network. (© John Hobbs)



57315 (Arriva Trains Wales livery) with 57313 at the rear pass the old station building at Waverton on 12th March 2011 with the 08.08 Holyhead-Cardiff Central rugby special. (© John Cashen)

2. Chester – Birkenhead Line

Ride the Chester to Birkenhead Line today and many stations are more than 100 years old.

Chester - Opened in Brook Street on 23.9.1840 and closed on 1.8.1848 upon the opening of the Chester Joint station. The station is situated between two sets of fork junctions – at the east end lines to Crewe (ex-LNWR) and also to Helsby (ex-LNWR) and Northwich (ex-CLC, the Cheshire Lines Committee) as far as Mickle Trafford since the closure of Northgate, whilst to the west end are the lines to Birkenhead (ex-GWR & LNWR Joint) and also to Holyhead (ex LNWR) and Wrexham (ex-GWR) as far as Saltney Junction. The approach from the west end is via the once GWR locomotive depot (which became a diesel multiple unit depot and since rebuilt for use by Arriva Trains Wales' class 175 units for maintenance) and formerly under a most impressive signal gantry.



Preserved 'Britannia' 4-6-2 70000 "Britannia", itself, is seen southbound at Waverton with 'The Cathedrals Express' 1Z92 16.11 Chester to London Euston on 14th April 2012. (© John Cashen)

Bache - Opened on 9.1.1984 replacing Upton-by-Chester.

Upton-by-Chester - Opened 17.7.1939 and closed 9.1.1984.

Capenhurst - Opened 1.8.1870

Ledsham - Opened on 23.9.1840 as Sutton. Renamed Ledsham on 1.7.1863 on the opening of Little Sutton station. Closed on 20.7.1959 when it had four platforms.

Hooton - Appeared in timetable dated 15.12.1840. Much expanded on opening of the branches to Helsby and Parkgate.

Eastham Rake - Opened 3.4.1995

Bromborough - First in the timetable June 1846. The station was enlarged after four tracks were added.

Bromborough Rake - Opened on 30.9.1985

Spital - First in the timetable June 1846 and named Spittle for the first month. Much enlarged after four tracking took place.



LMS Class 5 4-6-0 44897 passes Christleton with the 11.00 Windermere to London (Euston) which, on this occasion, had been diverted from the West Coast Main Line to run via Chester on the 16th September 1967. This would have been one of the last steam powered passenger trains to run from Chester to Crewe. (© John Hobbs)

Port Sunlight – Originally opened as a ‘private’ station. First used for the Royal Visit on 25.3.1914. Opened for Lever Brothers employees as Port Sunlight Platform on 4.5.1914 with platforms on the down slow and up fast lines only. Opened to the public on 9.5.1927 but the station buildings remained in Lever Brothers ownership. The platforms were altered in British Rail days after the number of tracks was reduced from four to two.

Bebington - Opened on 23.9.1840 - became known as Bebington & New Ferry on 1.5.1895 but in 6.5.1974 went back to its original name. The station name was often spelt as Bebbington in early Bradshaw guides. Much altered for four tracking and later track reduction.

Rock Lane - Opened on 30.5.1846 and closed 1.11.1862 when it was replaced by the first Rock Ferry station which was in turn replaced by the second Rock Ferry station on 15.6.1891 situated a little further south. According to Bradshaw’s Railway Guide it was known as Rock Ferry Junction from this date and incorporated the Mersey Railway extension from Green Lane.



BR class 9F 2-10-0 92124 passes through Chester station on 4th July 1966 with a freight for Birkenhead. These were the largest locomotives to work on the network, apart from the relatively small number of Beyer Garratts and, towards the end of steam the class was synonymous with Birkenhead locomotive depot, it having in the region of fifty allocated there. (©John Cashen)



LMS 2-6-4T 42613 approaches Upton-by-Chester (now Bache) at 75 mph with the 15.25 Sundays Birkenhead (Woodside) to London Paddington on 26th February 1967, shortly before through trains on this route ceased. (© John Hobbs)

Lime Kiln Lane - Opened on 30.5.1846 it was renamed Tranmere in 1853.

Birkenhead / Grange Lane - Opened on 23.9.1840 - Bradshaw’s timetable had it listed as Birkenhead but it was called Grange Lane in notes. Omnibuses worked to Monks Ferry for boats to Pier Head (St. Georges). It closed 23.10.1844.

Monks Ferry - opened on 23.10.1844 replacing Grange Lane. Closed on 31.3.1878.

Birkenhead Town - Opened on 1.12.1889 and closed 7.5.1945.

Birkenhead Woodside - Opened on 31.3.1878 replacing Monks Ferry station. Closed on 5.11.1967.

Merseyrail unit near Bebington (© Mark Cleave)



Important to note - The closing dates are the first effective date of closure. In some cases stations opened earlier than in the timetable and may have been announced in local newspapers. With the advent of the Railway Clearing House (RCH) in 1842 and many stations opening at the time some things were still not announced, even the RCH itself!



'Stanier' class 5 4-6-0, 45294, near Bebington on Sunday 11th June 1967 with the 18.40 Birkenhead-York cattle train. This was a regular working around this period, although not always to the same destination, for the transporting of cattle from Ireland which had arrived at the docks. (© John Cashen)



'Fairburn' 2-6-4T, 42086, nears journey's end as it leaves Rock Ferry in April 1966 with a Paddington to Woodside train. One of the 1956 built class 503 electric units, prior to the introduction of the class 507/508 units, waits in the bay with a train for Liverpool Central. (© John Cashen)



LMS 2-6-4T 42647 stands in Birkenhead's Woodside Station with the 12.00 departure for London Paddington on 26th February 1967, only two weeks before the final through service to London from this side of the Mersey. (© John Hobbs)

Major Fire at Chester Station

On the evening of 8th May 1972 a fire occurred at the station following a major collision between a class 24 diesel, number 5028, and a diesel multiple unit. An Ellesmere Port to Mold Junction freight, which had reversed at Helsby, ran out of control and collided with the diesel unit, fortunately an empty one, at the east end of the station. The front of the train contained some kerosene tanks, on which the vacuum brakes had not been connected to the locomotive, thereby considerably reducing the train's braking efficiency. This resulted in the class 24 not being able to stop the freight and, as a result, a fireball occurred which caused damage to the station roof; hence the reason why the bay platforms at that end of the station no longer have any roof covering them.

Crewe to Chester and Chester to Birkenhead railway lines in 2015

175 years later the railway is still having a significant effect on growth and tourism and continues to help power the Northern Power House. Passenger numbers continue to increase along these lines and further investment is being planned. Chester station has seen investment and change over recent years and Merseyrail continues to enable investment to its network while Crewe is lobbying for an important role in the HS2 planned network.

Visitors still take the 'Sand Train' through Chester in to North Wales, passengers still enjoy days out on the Wirral and in Liverpool travelling by train and ferry. Commuters and business people travel to work and beyond with London Euston just over two hours away.



Fairburn 2-6-4T 42283 prepares to leave Hooton with the 09.10 Paddington - Birkenhead (Woodside) train on the 6th August 1965; a tea trolley can be seen waiting to cross once the train is clear. (© John Hobbs)



A Virgin Trains Pendolino class 390 calls at Crewe station.
(© Sam Dixon)

An Arriva Trains Wales class 158 diesel multiple unit having just arrived at Chester station.
(© LSTF Team, CWAC)



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