

Rail & Bus for Herefordshire Spring 2022 Newsletter



*Colas Rail delivering timber to Pontrilas siding for
Pontrilas Sawmills (see article inside) (photo courtesy Colas Rail)*

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Words from Our Chairman

What difficult times we live in. On the very day that statutory Covid restrictions are finally lifted in England, Russia invades Ukraine. We are acutely aware of the scale of human suffering. Although our government is being careful not to engage directly, the conflict's impact on fuel costs and the cost of living generally is already significant here in the UK. The fight against climate change is being overshadowed by another crisis.

But thankfully there are positives to report locally. We are about to enter into a Community Stations Partnership for Ledbury and Colwall. The full Business Case for the Electric Zipper has been prepared. Free weekend bus travel will continue for some months yet, and the recent extension of Covid support measures for buses is good news.

Your Rail and Bus committee is very active at present. But we all have other interests and commitments and none of us can take on any more at present. We'd dearly like others to come forward to organise members' meetings and improve the website. You would not necessarily need to be on the committee to carry out these roles. Please consider whether you could do a bit more to help promote public transport. I would be pleased to discuss how any role could be tailored to suit your skills and availability at the forthcoming AGM on 26 April.

With best wishes to all readers

Will Frecknall

Chair

Rail and Bus for Herefordshire

Rail & Bus for Herefordshire

Notice of Annual General Meeting

This year's annual general meeting will take place as follows

Tuesday 26th April 2022

Quaker Meeting Room, King Street, Hereford

2:00 pm

Committee nominations to the Secretary Andrew Pearson by 12th April

Contact email: pearsondore@yahoo.com

4, Northam Field, Clehonger, Herefordshire HR2 9SR

We are pleased to announce that Councillor John Harrington, Cabinet Member for Transport & Infrastructure, will speak after the formalities.

In This Edition

The editor makes no apology for concentrating on buses at the beginning of this newsletter. The reason is that buses are moving towards a period of great crisis as I hope you will see from the articles. Railways in comparison are relatively stable, for the time being, although there news to report. The articles I hope you will find of interest and stimulating.

Words From Our Chairman

Notification of Annual General Meeting

Bus Back Better - Bus Back Worse

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Bus Service Changes

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Bus Back Better - Bus Back Worse

(The editor has been following the emerging and alarming news about the future of bus services, especially those in rural areas.)

The alarming news came with the headlines: ***Councils have warned that nearly a third of bus services will be axed unless emergency funding is extended beyond the end of March.***

Late in the day the government announced that an extra £150 million had been granted until the end of October so that operator/council partnerships can be put in place. A respite you might think for our bus services which are struggling as passenger revenue has not returned fully to pre-pandemic levels. Not surprising that bus operators are taking action in anticipation of a continuing shortfall in revenue after October when government support finishes.

In between now and October local transport authorities are charged with reaching agreement with operators on future bus networks. With little money in the local authority budgets and operators gearing up for considerable withdrawals it is no wonder the professional journal Transport Network states:

But looking further ahead, its hard to get beyond the Department for Transport's vision, not of new and increased services, but of a network that is financially sustainable in the context of significantly less revenue.

The Herefordshire core bus network, which forms part of the Council's Local Transport Plan, is nowhere financially sustainable and highly unlikely to be without additional support.

The recent withdrawal at the end of February by Stagecoach West of the daily 132 Ledbury-Newent-Gloucester and 32 Ross-on-Wye-Newent-Gloucester services is a demonstration of the future. In this instance the operator acted commercially and ruthlessly. Unless local authorities made up what was spuriously quoted as the financial loss the services were doomed. The local authorities did not have the money or even the willpower to support their retention or even consider a solution. There was no talk of a partnership to reach a solution. It was a hard case of us or them with the poor passenger caught in between.

For those who are left without a bus the prospect is bleak. It means a considerable readjustment to life, a reliance on other people for transport, a loss of independence, even the loss of a job, a loss of social interaction, difficulty in getting to the shops and medical appointments. Above all there is that feeling of being forgotten, cast aside into a world of rural isolation.

Recent public meetings about the 132/32 withdrawals demonstrated this. It also raised the fact that central and local government and bus operators can no longer be trusted or relied on to support public transport, especially in rural

areas. The message for the future comes over loud and clear. Communities will have to look after themselves when it comes to a range of services, including the local bus.



The 132 service for Newent and Gloucester loading at Ledbury Market House during the summer of 2021.

Stagecoach West claim the service was not used and was operating at an unacceptably high loss. The passenger numbers and cost of operation quoted are suspect. There is a close social tie between Ledbury, Dymock and Newent and people used the bus to shop and visit family in Ledbury. Dymock, a Gloucestershire village of 1,200 inhabitants with recent new housing is now isolated.

At the same time as the 132/32 services were withdrawn, the stagecoach depot at Ross-on-Wye was closed and most work transferred to Gloucester. This is symptomatic of the fact that Stagecoach have already started making economies and downscaling their networks to those services that make an acceptable company profit margin. Undoubtedly this is in line with the Department of Transport's vision of financially sustainable networks in the context of significantly less revenue.

Is Herefordshire Core Bus Network in Danger of Collapse

From the Editor: Living in Ledbury and being part of Rail & Bus for Herefordshire, I have been approached many times by people asking 'When are the bus services going to return to normal'. This is especially the case with the 476 Ledbury-Hereford service, the major Ledbury route. I have not been able to give any answer. The result I feel is a growing despair amongst the travelling public and a feeling that buses are now a waste of time and nobody cares much about their future. I detect a very sad case of despondency and a sense of being let down.

Herefordshire has a core bus network that links the market towns with the county capital of Hereford. Support for this core network is a fundamental part of the council's Local Transport Plan 2016-2031. Pre pandemic, the services from Hereford to Leominster, Ross-on-Wye, Ledbury and Bromyard were commercially operated by local and national bus companies. The service to Kington was fully subsidised by Herefordshire Council.

The pandemic and associated lockdowns changed all that. The services to Leominster, Ledbury and Bromyard were significantly reduced in frequency from hourly to two hourly. That to Ross-on-Wye remained relatively intact whilst Herefordshire Council continued to support the Kington service throughout.

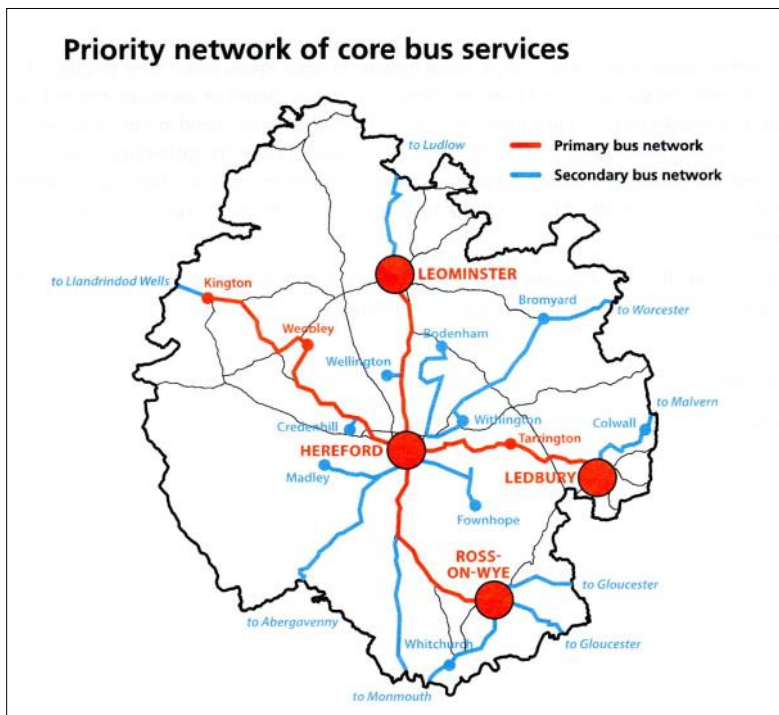
Post pandemic it was assumed that the services would return to their former frequencies. However this has not been the case. Commercially, the operators on the Leominster, Ledbury and Bromyard routes have stated it is unviable to return to hourly frequencies. Herefordshire Council appear to be unwilling to support a return to hourly frequencies which leaves an anomalous situation whereby Kington, the smallest of the market towns has a financially supported hourly service but those with larger populations have to make do with an inadequate two hourly service.

The impact of reduced frequencies on the Leominster, Ledbury and Bromyard services has been significant. In Ledbury and Leominster, people interviewed were expecting a return to the hourly frequency. When it did not happen they abandoned the service in favour of the car, car sharing and the train to get to and from Hereford. At the same time Herefordshire Council elected to transfer student travel to the train service on both corridors. It can thus be seen why operators are abandoning services with the feeling that the local authority is not interested.

At the same time the future viability of these bus services is now in serious doubt, especially when government support ceases in October 2022. Herefordshire Council has some serious thinking to do if it is to maintain a good core bus service as part of its county plan. A principal decision will be in respect of future budgets for bus service support, bearing in mind the amount available has been significantly reduced over the past decade and a half. But the

Council will also have to address the situation of inequality within the budget whereby one service gets a disproportion of the total pot. This of course will depend on negotiations with operators to reach that balance of public/private money that will be needed to keep the network intact. But has the council got the officers with an understanding of the industry to achieve this?

Failure to provide a sensible county bus strategy may well lead to Herefordshire becoming an oft quoted 'public transport desert'.



The Priority Network of Core Bus Services as it appears in the County's Local Transport Plan 2016-2031.

Can the network survive?

Bus Service Changes Since January 2022 - Secretary Andrew Person reports

Stagecoach West closed their Ross outstation on 27 February and most work transferred to Milkwall in Forest of Dean outstation and this entailed a number of changes as follows:

32 Ross – Newent- Gloucester. Ross to Newent reduced from 7/8 journeys per day to 2 school journeys each way. See separate article for more background.

33 Hereford – Ross – Gloucester now mainly operated by Gloucester so first Ross to Gloucester bus cancelled and first Ross to Hereford and last Hereford to Ross now extended to Gloucester. Hereford – Ross section the number of journeys unaltered but timing changes.

35 Ross – Ruardean – Monmouth first journey now starts from Ruardean not Ross.

132 Ledbury – Newent – Gloucester cancelled without replacement from Ledbury – Newent. See separate article for background.

746 Ross – Cinderford circular timetable changes and last journey curtailed at Ruardean instead of Ross.

Sargeants Bros expanded their Hereford City operations from 7th March as follows:

Service A Hereford City Bus Stn – Tupsley – Hampton Park frequency reduced to hourly following introduction of Service C

Service B Hereford City Bus Stn – Holmer – Bobblestock frequency reduced to hourly following introduction of Service D

Service C Hereford Shire Hall – Hampton Park new hourly service largely running in opposite direction to Service A but including Sudbury Avenue

Service D Hereford City Bus Stn – Bobblestock new hourly service largely running in opposite direction to Service B but covering Yazor Road which had been unserved since Yeomans withdrawal of 72.

Service E Hereford City Bus Stn – Westfaling St – Moor Farm new hourly service covering Cemetery and Green Lanes area which had been unserved since Yeomans withdrawal of 71A.

For further details of these timetables see Stagecoachbus.com/about/west or sargeantsbros.com

West Midlands Railway Train Service Performance

2021 was a bad year for West Midlands Railway (WMR). We, at the Herefordshire end of the line, have suffered an unprecedented volume of train cancellations on the Birmingham service. To be fair, WMR have been up front with passengers as to the causes of such cancellations. Deputy Managing Director, Lawrence Bowman is being straight when he comments:

The key issue which has caused performance to be lower than we'd like is the impact of the pandemic on our driver training programme. Social distancing constraints have caused significant delays in training our new recruits and for our existing teams to learn to drive our brand-new trains.

Over 120 new drivers across the company are now being trained and a considerable number of these will be joining depots in the West Midlands including Worcester, which covers most of the Hereford services.

Committee member and rail monitor Michael Sullivan has been to Hereford station and does report that the WMR service situation is improving with comments *that more drivers are coming on stream and Birmingham trains appeared to be running ok.*

New Trains

As a plus to the services returning to regular running, WMR announced that:

Final preparations are getting under way for the introduction of West Midlands Railway's new fleet of diesel trains - the Class 196. A total of 80 new carriages have been ordered in a mixture of two and four-carriage formations. The fleet will primarily serve the Birmingham-Shrewsbury and Birmingham-Hereford routes.

Among the benefits of the new fleet are: • More seats and tables • At least one accessible toilet on every train • New digital information screens • Plug and USB sockets at every seat • Intelligent air conditioning system • Free WiFi to stay connected on the go.



West Midlands Railway new Class 196 on trial at Henwick, near Worcester.

Transport for Wales Marches Timetable

The 2022 Winter timetable changes for the Marches Line seem to be causing a bit of a stir. The recasting of the timetable to provide better long distance services between South Wales, North Wales and Manchester it is claimed will disadvantage certain local stations in England. In this respect, user groups at Church Stretton and Craven Arms are most vociferous. The Church Stretton Rail Users Association claims:

The service provided at Marches stations by the draft timetables is inferior to that provided by the current timetable. The loco-hauled trains accelerate more slowly than the class 175 units and as a result stop at fewer stations in order to maintain the current paths. Both drafts provide an even less regular service pattern than current timetables.

The proposed level of service at Church Stretton and Craven Arms can only be described as sparse, with many instances of intervals well in excess of 60 minutes. Some of the stops removed are key services used by students travelling to and from Ludlow and Hereford. The service cuts at these stations are excessive and the draft timetables fail to provide the number of services to comply with the agency agreement between the Secretary of State for Transport and Welsh Ministers

The current service at Leominster is provided by Cardiff-Manchester trains supplemented by other services at peak periods. The proposed removal of stops in Cardiff-Manchester services does not meet user requirements and creates an even more irregular service pattern. At Craven Arms there has been no attempt to provide good connections between Heart of Wales services and the South. There are no passenger facilities at Craven Arms other than an open shelter and to expect users changing trains to wait over an hour is unreasonable and illustrates a lack of planning.

The Group also claim the timetable is an infringement of the Agency Agreement between the Department for Transport and the Welsh government for operating the train service in England. It is claimed the Agreement with the UK Government *that the train service could not be reduced to fewer services than that which operated prior to December 2019* has been broken in the proposed timetable.

However, that agreement is open to interpretation in that the level of service relates to the total number of trains throughout the day and not to individual stations. Correspondence in 2020 from the then Minister of State at the Department of Transport to Daniel Kawczynski MP, in response to a query from Chris Clarke (chairman MRUA), states: *The Secretary of State's consent is needed to change train service factors such as frequency of services and geographical scope.* Again, this does not clarify the situation.

It is now left to the likes of the Church Stretton people and the Marches Rail Users Association to seek that clarification and ask the pertinent question as to whether the Department for Transport and local members of parliament approve of the Transport for Wales timetable.

Transport for Wales New Trains

Jim Scott, Secretary of the Leominster Rail User Group and member of the Marches Rail Users Alliance visited Transport for Wales in December 2021 to view a mock up of their new Class 197 trains. The trains, by Spanish maker CAF are currently being assembled at a new factory near Newport. The TfW order is for fifty one 2-car units and twenty six 3-car units. Jim reported that the appearance of the new trains is acceptable enough, but there are certain features which make them somewhat less attractive.

Of particular concern as commented by Jim were:

It was considered the seats on the new trains will be less comfortable than those on existing trains.

The ratio of seats per toilet falls below that required by the Rail Delivery Group Standard. • If a toilet fails on a 2-car train, it means the train effectively has no working toilet at all.

The new trains will have bodyside doors placed at roughly one-third and two-thirds of the body length, rather than at the ends of the cars, and there is no door between the entrance vestibules and the saloon areas. This arrangement of doors is, in my opinion, a retrograde step.

TfW stated yet again that it is their intention to run trains of at least two 2-car units coupled together on the Marches Line, which augurs well for alleviating the overcrowding being experienced, especially at peak times. However, due to the platform length at Leominster, especially in the northbound direction, it might be difficult to accommodate a train composed of a 2-car and a 3-car unit coupled together, and allow passengers to board and alight safely. It was also confirmed, on this visit, that the trains formed of the new units would run in addition to the new fast Cardiff to Manchester trains of loco-hauled Mk IV carriages. However, the 3-car units with first-class accommodation are also

to be used on this service, and the timetable proposals for December 2022 seem to suggest that rather than provide additional trains for the Marches Line stations Leominster, along with the other stations, look likely to lose trains rather than benefit from any new ones. Current passenger accommodation is only standard-class, so if trains with first-class accommodation are to stop at Marches Line stations, TfW will need to make provision for the purchase of first-class fares from those stations.

Many thanks to Jim Scott for attending the meeting. The full notes and pictures I am sure are available from Jim Scott at pelerin.creuse@gmail.com

Timber by Train

At last a piece of positive good news. Major Herefordshire firm Pontrilas Sawmills has been engaged in a trial with Euroforset Ltd, a timber harvesting company, and Colas Rail to transport 400 tonnes of timber from Devon to Pontrilas by rail. If the trial is considered successful then it could well be extended to other timber sources and significantly reduce the number of heavy commercial timber lorries that use the roads through Herefordshire.

Colas Rail UK Freight Director commented: *This is a great opportunity to provide a sustainable alternative in operating on rail, especially as we lead the field in the transportation of timber by rail. We are acting to contribute to net zero targets, in line with the objectives of our group in promoting rail freight and in reducing the number of HGVs on the road, especially during the shortage of drivers. Working with the client and Network Rail, I'm convinced that we can move forward and build on the success of the trial.*

Euroforest's Director of Operations for England & Wales also commented: *Moving roundwood timber by rail is a great solution to this problem. Rail transport provides an efficient and environmentally friendly method of moving bulk loads to our customers.*

The siding at Pontrilas, part of the old station goods yard, was last used in 2004 when Pontrilas Sawmills last used rail. Since then it has greatly increased its heavy commercial vehicle fleet but transport costs are now significantly changing. Driver shortage and substantial increases in fuel costs are beginning to tip the balance in favour of rail for long haul of heavy bulk commodities such as timber. Timber trains already run through Hereford on their way to the wood processing plant of Kronospan at Chirk.

See photo on front cover.

The Minister for Transport Makes an Announcement



The Secretary of State for Transport has called for a *bonfire of banalities to bring down the number of announcements passengers are forced to sit through and make their journey that little bit more peaceful.*

The Department for Transport (DfT more commonly known as DaT) said the move was part of the Williams-Shapps plan to improve the rail industry for passengers. The review chairman also found that railways were bedevilled by government micromanagement.

At the same time as present announcements are being culled, it is thought some new announcements will be introduced as a result of the rail economies the Treasury is insisting on and which the DaT have to implement.

Choo Choo. I'm a Train may well be one

A Community Station Partnership for Ledbury/Colwall

RBfH is presently instrumental in setting up a Community Station Partnership for Ledbury Colwall in partnership with West Midlands Trains. **The objectives of Community Station Partnerships are:**

- ◇ To encourage people to connect with the railways and adopt local railway stations
- ◇ To work with neighbours, friends, local businesses and the Train Operating Company to develop their stations as community assets
- ◇ To help develop 'reasons to travel' and increase train usage with local promotions and publicity
- ◇ To bring people together to enhance their neighbourhoods and make new friends
- ◇ To enhance the passenger experience by making the station more welcoming with a sense of localism and community

A start has already been made in strengthening the links between station and community with the installation of a heritage art display cabinet at the station which gives information on the heritage buildings of the town, a map of the town and their location and tracing the history of the coming of the railways.

This new CSP will include Colwall Station where we are looking for volunteers to join our steering group.

A number of future community station projects are already in the planning stage. These include:

A Colwall Station Adopters Group and a display cabinet at Colwall Station with information about the village and the Hills together with a map of walks from Colwall station. This will be accompanied by a walks brochure available in the village, at Ledbury and up and down the line to Worcester and Birmingham

The possibilities of using the vacant ticket office cabin at Ledbury Station for a community gallery.

Liaison with the Big Apple Association to provide links from the station to their Autumn Harvest Cider Festival based around Putley, a short distance from Ledbury.

Provision for cycle hire from both Ledbury and Colwall stations.

A local bus and rail timetable booklet for Ledbury.

An art festival involving local schools and community groups to celebrate the coming of the railway and the history of Ledbury and Colwall stations.

Links with Ledbury in Bloom are already well established for tending the existing plant displays at the station. An extension of these displays is now a real possibility under the CSP.

The CSP is also instrumental in forging links with local businesses and retailers in the town and already has close contact with the Town Council and Civic Society.

We are sure many other community station based projects will emerge with time.

Gareth Calan Davies, RBfH lead for the CSP, says: *During these years of what appears to be continuous doom and gloom it is refreshing to be able to bring some positiveness into this lovely part of rural Herefordshire that involves local communities, our railways and a growing degree of localism. West Midlands Railway's active commitment to community rail both in the rural and urban environment is refreshing and welcome. It is definitely the way forward to increasing the use our railways as part of our economy, social fabric and the important need to move to sustainable transport. RBfH is pleased to be an integral part of this movement.*

Future Bus Service Provision

The Editor reports on an interesting development across the Border.

The news from West Wales is that Pembrokeshire County Council is considering a proposal to approve the purchase of a local bus operator to assure the continuation of services and schools contracts at a cost acceptable to the Council.

Like other local authorities Pembrokeshire is experiencing a demise in the number of operators available or who are prepared to bid for contracts. The 1985 Transport Act deregulated bus services, privatised the National Bus company and forced local authority bus undertakings to be hived off to separate companies. In effect this has been instrumental in the decline of operators over the last forty years as the large bus companies gained control of the majority of the bus companies and services through take overs and at times ruthless competition to drive the municipal companies and small private operators out of business.

Recently the pandemic has added to the woes of the small operator and there is taking place an accelerating decline in numbers. Pembrokeshire Council states:

The current market suggests that there are insufficient contractors and resources to fulfil delivery of the statutory obligations of the Authority. It is clear that the current market is not fit for purpose and that intervention is required to ensure the effective use of the Council's funding and to ensure there is an ability to deliver statutory obligations. Without intervention the potential increases in contract costs will be in the region of £300k per annum, providing alternative contractors can be found.

Section 66 of the 1985 Act prohibits county councils from running their own bus services which would require an operators licence which the government would not grant. However, Section 19 and 22 permits of the Act are exempt from the requirements of an O Licence. The government guidance states:

Section 22 permits are issued to bodies concerned for the social and welfare needs of one or more communities. They operate vehicles without a view to profit and use those vehicles to provide a community bus service. Unlike section 19 permit vehicles, community bus services are 'local bus services' and can carry the general public. Local bus services are defined as services using public service vehicles for the carriage of passengers by road at separate fares on which passengers may travel for less than 15 miles.

Vehicles adapted to carry 9 or more passengers (excluding the driver) may be used under a community bus permit. This includes large buses adapted to carry 17 or more passengers. The use of a large bus won't be authorised unless the traffic commissioner is satisfied that there are adequate facilities or arrangements in place to maintain the vehicle in a roadworthy condition.

It is the need to guarantee the future of services and the ability to use large buses that has prompted Pembrokeshire Council to consider a bus company purchase. This would meet the requirement to satisfy the Traffic Commissioner that adequate facilities are in place to maintain vehicles in a roadworthy condition.

Many rural local authorities are in a similar position to Pembrokeshire in respect of the future of local bus services and contracts. They would do well to take notice of this development. In Herefordshire it is noticeable that the Council has no experienced officer dedicated to examining the potential of using section 22 or of advising local communities of the possibilities for their own community transport. With the large bus companies such as Stagecoach showing signs of continued withdrawal from rural areas, then community and localism, in terms of arranging public transport, are set to take on a big importance.



Silcox Coaches of Pembroke Dock ceased trading on Monday (6 June 2016) after no buyer could be found for the business by administrators. It operated 65 vehicles. The company had been in operation for one hundred and thirty four years.

A Silcox Bedford bus is seen in Fishguard on the then town service in the 1970s

Clun Castle

Steam locomotives continue to arouse interest and nostalgia. Committee member Michael Sullivan was at Hereford station to see an impeccably turned out 7029 Clun Castle.

Although a GWR design by Charles Collett, the locomotive was built by British Railways in 1950 at Swindon Works. It was withdrawn in 1965 and sold for scrap. It was then bought for preservation and underwent a major overhaul in 1985. Its owners Vintage Trains gave it another major overhaul at a cost of £750,000 and it returned to service in 2019.



Preserved Castle class locomotives are not new to the Marches Line. Photographed in the late 1977 before it went to Australia, 4079 Pendennis Castle is seen climbing Llanvihangell bank out of Abergavenny towards Hereford. It was one of the first batch of Castles built at Swindon in 1924.



From the Archives



Perhaps all good buses hanker after a sedate retirement. Observed at Bishops Cleeve on service 000 from nowhere to nowhere.

Will bus services in Herefordshire end up like this?



No Sunshine for the future of bus services in Hereford at the present time!

Spread the Word

Join Rail & Bus for Herefordshire and help retain and develop a good public transport network for Herefordshire.

With motor fuel prices set to rise again (despite the fuel tax reduction), the urgent need to reduce emissions from transport and reduce dependence on the car, we need buses and trains more than ever.

Rail and Bus for Herefordshire

Application for Membership

Name

Address

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Phone

Email

Date

Membership is £10 pa for those receiving the newsletter electronically and £15 pa for those receiving the newsletter by post. Memberships run from 1 February each year. However first subscriptions paid after 1 October will cover up to sixteen months' membership to the following February.

This form may be printed off completed and posted to Andrew Pearson our Membership Secretary at 4 Northam Field Clehonger HR2 9SR. Alternatively it can be scanned and emailed to the Membership Secretary at pearsondore@yahoo.com. Applications for membership cannot currently be made through our website.

We encourage all members to pay subscriptions either electronically or by Standing Order. Our account details are: sort code 30-94-14 a/c no 2929075. Cheques may be posted to the Membership Secretary.

JWHF 30 December 2021

Your RBfH Committee

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