

# Rail & Bus for Herefordshire

## Summer 2024 Newsletter



*First Worcestershire's 417 service at Ledbury Market Place*

[www.rbfh.org.uk](http://www.rbfh.org.uk)

# In This Issue

Transport after the election	Page 3
Colwall	Page 6
Inspirational Address at the AGM	Page 6
Merseyrail Battery Train	Page 9
A Day Out on the Heart of Wales Line	Page 13
Norwich	Page 15
Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP+)	Page 28
Transport Hub	Page 29

Rail & Bus for Herefordshire would like to thank Ali Frecknall for compiling this newsletter

# Transport after the election: manage your expectations

**In this issue's leader column Nick Kingsley, editor at Railway Gazette International, looks ahead to the forthcoming General Election.**

*Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* as they say in France. Should the forthcoming general election prompt a change in government, how far might transport policy evolve? And how far is transport likely to play a role in the current campaign?

We must be realistic here: transport rarely figures among the priorities of voters. If it does register 'on the stump' in 2024, it is likely to be either in the context of the current cost of living crisis, or – for better or worse – as a factor in whether or not voters back efforts to deliver the UK's Net Zero climate ambitions.

So what can we glean at this stage? With Keir Starmer's party still well ahead in the polls at the time of writing, we must realistically address the likelihood of a Labour victory. From my own perspective as a rail specialist, some indicators of the potential stance of a Starmer-led administration can already be discerned. Firstly, when Shadow Transport Secretary Louise Haigh set out her rail policy at the end of April, she did so from the offices of private ticket retailer Trainline. She followed this up at the start of June with a visit to the driver training academy newly launched by Hull Trains, the private 'open access' operator which is part of bus and rail holding FirstGroup.

That Haigh has felt able to make highly public visits to arguably the most entrepreneurial wings of the rail industry is surely no coincidence. For all the fuzzy warm headlines about Labour's plans to 'renationalise' the railways, it is absolutely clear there will be no turning back the clock to British Rail days. Nostalgia ain't what it used to be, you could say. Indeed, several high profile train operators including LNER and Northern Rail have already been folded into the state-run management company, DfT OLR Operated Holdings Ltd. Labour's plans centre mainly on expanding DOHL to include the remaining 'private' operators contracted by DfT as their current National Rail Contracts expire.

Secondly, Haigh and Starmer have both been pushed by the mainstream press to give some kind of pledge that rail fares – often perceived as very expensive – will come down under Labour's plans. Tellingly, neither has budged from the party line: passengers will get 'the best deal' for their journey. Whether 'the best deal' is deemed affordable in the eyes of the public is not, it seems, the key issue.

It is clear that in a raft of policy areas Starmer is keen to put clear blue water between his policies and those sought by the most left-wing factions of the Labour movement. Rail policy is no exception. Guided no doubt by Shadow Chancellor Rachel Reeves' ban on any talk of unfunded spending commitments, Haigh and her team have focused their energy on making structural reform to the rail sector as it stands today. At the centre will be the creation of a central strategic rail management body, known as Great British Railways.

Many readers will be aware that creation of GBR has been Conservative Party policy since Boris Johnson's premiership. The reality is that – while there are differences in language and emphasis between the Tories and Labour – GBR and the desire to 'bring track and train together' in a more integrated manner is a policy goal both main parties share.

Absent from Labour's public pronouncements so far is much talk of growth or capital investment. Long-standing hopes among rail advocates for a rolling programme of electrification, for example, are unlikely to be realised in Labour's first term. Both main parties appear frustrated – probably justifiably – by the rail industry's mixed delivery record over the past decade, which means major projects to boost passenger and freight usage and network capacity are a long way down the agenda, whichever party wins.

However, the next government must still urgently address some looming crises, including the futures of East-West Rail and the truncated High Speed 2. Meanwhile, a rolling stock order famine is threatening the viability of almost every train assembly plant in the country.

The bus industry is not my personal area of expertise. However, from the outside looking in, two key questions emerge: should the next government maintain the Department for Transport's discounted £2 bus offer, and how far will public pressure to 'take back control' of bus services drive further franchising of the sector? Both questions are loaded with risk for bus operators, which are already struggling to drive revenues in the post-pandemic world. Council-supported routes meanwhile are in retrenchment in many areas, because of the ongoing pressure on municipal budgets.

Yet if we are dealing in *Realpolitik*, it is hard to see the situation changing whoever wins the election. In theory, a politically bold government could mirror the work done by serial mayoral election winner Sadiq Khan in London and implement policies that start to address the true cost of our car-dependent culture. But the controversy over his ULEZ expansion into outer London – modest as it is in comparison to measures being taken in much of continental Europe for example – has spooked Starmer. Sensing an opportunity, right-wing Conservatives have doubled down on the pernicious myth of 'the war on the motorist'.

Indeed, in the post-Brexit era, many on the political right are determined that climate policies will be the next 'culture war' target. It would be no surprise to see a Nigel Farage-led Reform UK party start to take aim at any measures perceived as restricting the near-untrammelled freedom of the private car user. In much of Europe, transport advocates can rely on the environmentally focused parties to counter these narratives, but in England and Wales, the Green Party's technically illiterate claims on rail capacity issues, and HS2 in particular, have done much damage. Fortunately, a flourishing grassroots campaign within the Green Party of England & Wales to restate the case for modal shift to rail and building the infrastructure to deliver sustainable mobility may slowly be restoring credibility.

Local government, devolved administrations and individual community leaders will surely all have a greater role to play in the transport sector in the years ahead. Central governments are facing increasing geopolitical volatility globally, and this is likely to trigger more spending on defence over other areas. Expect DfT's budget to be further squeezed in the next Spending Review.

Fortunately, there are plenty of examples across Britain of community campaigning yielding positive results. Town centres are being revived through walkable streets, cycling and active travel is on the rise, and lobbying to restore lost transport links has led to some notable wins. What better example could one find than Herefordshire's very own *Daffodil Line* bus service linking Ross with Ledbury?

Nevertheless, whatever the outcome on July 4, we should not expect a revolution in transport policy. Be prepared to manage your expectations.

# Colwall

We're pleased to report that a second high-quality cabinet was installed at Colwall station at the end of March. This attractive and prominently located display tells those arriving by train of Colwall's interesting history, including the arrival of the railway. RBfH is obliged to Colwall Parish Council for managing the later stages of this project.



We are keen that West Midlands Railway should continue to support our Community Rail projects and to that end we hope that a small group of local members can be formed to take on this role. Please contact me or the Secretary if you could contribute to this socially rewarding activity.

*Will Frecknall*



# Inspirational Address at the AGM

The first Gareth Davies Memorial Lecture was well attended by about 50 people. The lecture was given by Clare Stone, a founder member of Buses4Us, who played a leading role in establishing the 232, Ledbury to Ross-on-Wye, bus service.

Gareth Calan Davies, who died in November 2023, followed Les Lumsdon as Chair of Rail and Bus for Herefordshire. Gareth was a charismatic, local figure and member of Beyond the Hills, Ledbury and Colwall Community Station Partnership, which organised and set up the notice board at Ledbury Railway Station. This community project was designed to bring the station and town together to promote Ledbury as a jewel of a heritage town on the West Midlands Railway network. Encouraging people to travel by train will assist in reducing traffic in the town centre and maintaining Ledbury's attractive heritage.

In her tribute to Gareth, Clare said, "I very much doubt we would have a Daffodil Line bus service without his input". Clare remembered when Gareth addressed Ledbury Town Council, "he was eloquent and visionary in promoting the proposed new service". Clare's lecture focused on the big picture and long term vision for bus services in the county. The key points are as follows.

When our bus services were axed in 2022, it quickly became clear that no public transport authority would fix our problem. It took a combination of energy fuelled by anger, tremendous public support, the combination of the skills and experience of a unique group of people, lots of hard work and lots of luck.

But in one of the most wealthy countries in the world, in the 21st century, should anyone really have to go to this much effort just to have a bus service?

Clare noted that: we are constantly being asked, "How's the bus doing? Can it pay its way?" The questions are all about money - they're the wrong questions.

What about the impact on the local economy? Suddenly people can't get to work. The bus that has taken you to and from work for the past 25 years stopped running on Sunday. You don't have a car. You've asked around for a lift share but there is no one going your way at the right time of day. You've even considered cycling, but you know the 20 mile round trip to Upton Bishop and back will be too much for you, on top of a full day of physical work.

You are not the only member of staff your employer loses through the bus cuts. First, lack of staff means they have to close the farm shop, where you worked. People in the village can no longer buy local produce directly from the farm. And the farm is forced to

sell its produce at lower prices to the supermarkets. At supermarket prices they just can't make ends meet with growing the fruits they have specialised in for generations. They grub up their fruit trees and bushes and plant less labour intensive arable crops instead. More jobs are lost and local people are forced to eat fruit that has travelled thousands of miles to sit on refrigerated supermarket shelves in plastic wrappers.

You know you are going to struggle to get another job. You loved your work but you've never done a job interview and the thought terrifies you.

Lives are being devastated by the simple lack of a bus. So we saw how the bus services cuts are affecting families and businesses, undermining sustainability and our ability to feed ourselves, here in the heart of the countryside.

We consider a public Fire and Rescue Service, Health Service, Police, Education as essential parts of our society. Whatever happened to public transport? Why do we expect and accept so little of our buses?

At a recent meeting with Transport Secretary, Mark Harper, he told us that when people talk about public transport in Westminster, they're talking trains - never buses - even though buses carry far more passengers each day.

When I recently - ever so gently - reprimanded my local green party for constantly organising meetings that were inaccessible by public transport, they looked at me slightly confused and hurt. It was obvious the issue hadn't even crossed their minds.

People who would curl up and die before admitting they didn't recycle will happily admit to not using a bus for years.

A third of all emissions in the UK are generated by transport. Most experts recognise that shifting people away from private car travel is an essential part of decarbonisation. But no one is really pushing the power of that simple act of leaving the car at home once a week or once a month and getting the bus instead.

If we want better bus services it's not just a modal shift we need - it's a massive, national mental shift too. We need to win hearts and minds. We need to reinvent the idea of the bus.

My belief is that private cars should have the same place in our society as private healthcare - an optional extra there for those who choose them, a luxury or an emergency fall back for the rest of us - not essential to enable everyday life.

I would much rather be on a bus than in a car if I can. Part of this is that it's what I'm used to. But I also just find the bus a much nicer experience.

I enjoy the ever changing views of the countryside from my elevated seat by the big windows. The ability to get on and off where I want. The reassurance of being driven by a trained professional, the lack of worry about where we're going or where we're going



to find a parking space. The chance to chat with fellow passengers, or just sit quietly and enjoy the little soap operas being played out around me. In recent years I can also ride the bus with a warm, self-righteous glow, knowing that my journey on a half empty, diesel bus is better for the planet than a journey in even an electric car.

I'm happy on the bus. I just want a decent bus service. And what would that look like? Well, regular, reliable, convenient, affordable and connected to other transport routes.

Can you imagine how transformational that would be for our country? Our rural economy? For people's lives in the countryside?

A recent study has shown that an average motorist will spend £200,000 on running a car in their lifetime. Is it any wonder that the countryside is becoming a middle class ghetto, a commuter-land where no one who actually wants to work that land can afford to live? That our rural youth are forced to leave for towns and cities.

A legally enshrined right to public transport could deliver such a range of social, environmental and economic goods that once we have, we will all marvel that we ever quibbled about the cost. It needs to be a priority for our society, we ALL need to dream the same dream, want the same thing.

I think that in order to get the fast, convenient, reliable, regular bus services we deserve, we need to first win hearts and minds. We need people to understand the social, environmental and economic good they do every time they choose to use the bus. We need people to fall back in love with buses. Like they are with the NHS, with Firefighters, and with their cars. If the Daffodil Line is to stand as a model for anything, let it be this: falling in love with the bus again.

*Janette Ward*

## Merseyrail Battery Train

On 24 April, I had an opportunity to visit the Merseyrail network and see the new extension from Kirkby to Headbolt Lane, which has no DC electric third rail.

Despite living on the eastern boundary of Herefordshire, my preferred route to Liverpool (and Manchester) is via Leominster to Chester. This gives the opportunity to get a Merseytravel Saveaway pass from the ticket office to any stations and buses on the Merseyrail Network. It costs £6.30 from the Chester booking office. This is cheaper overall than a rail-only ticket from Leominster to Liverpool.

Changing at Moorfields, the next train was to Southport, so I took that to Sandhills. Good view of the new Everton stadium being built alongside the Mersey in the distance. The Headbolt Lane train was about 10 minutes after and before I knew it, I was there. The transition to battery power was unnoticeable.



*The new Everton station rises in the distance, alongside the Mersey*



*Outgoing class 701 in retro BR livery*

Eight of the new class 777 EMUs have batteries and it is expected that more will follow, as Merseyrail extends further from the DC third rail. The possibility is there to run through Headbolt Lane to Skelmersdale, on a new line. Today, you can change at Headbolt Lane on to an hourly diesel service to Blackburn, via Wigan. Maybe the 777s could make it to the bay platform at Wigan, with rapid charging there from a short third rail.



*Incoming class 777*

This method is being trialled by GWR at West Ealing on the Greenford branch, using class 230, re-built LUL District Line trains.

Another possibility for Merseyrail extensions could be Ormskirk, to replace the shuttle from there to Preston. And possibly south from Bidston to a proposed new housing area on the line to Wrexham.

Headbolt Lane station is at the heart of a significant housing development. Of course, there are connecting bus services, covered by the same ticket you buy at Chester. The station is substantial, with a range of facilities. Platforms 1 and 2 are on independent, bi-directional single lines from Kirkby. The 15-minute frequency has outgoing and incoming trains passing on this section, alternating between the platforms. Platform 3 is the separate single line to Wigan.

Merseytravel policy is to have manned station ticket offices, some of which are also



small shops. The new 777 trains offer level boarding, which has required a lot of platform works. The investment in, and ongoing funding commitment to, public transport is impressive.

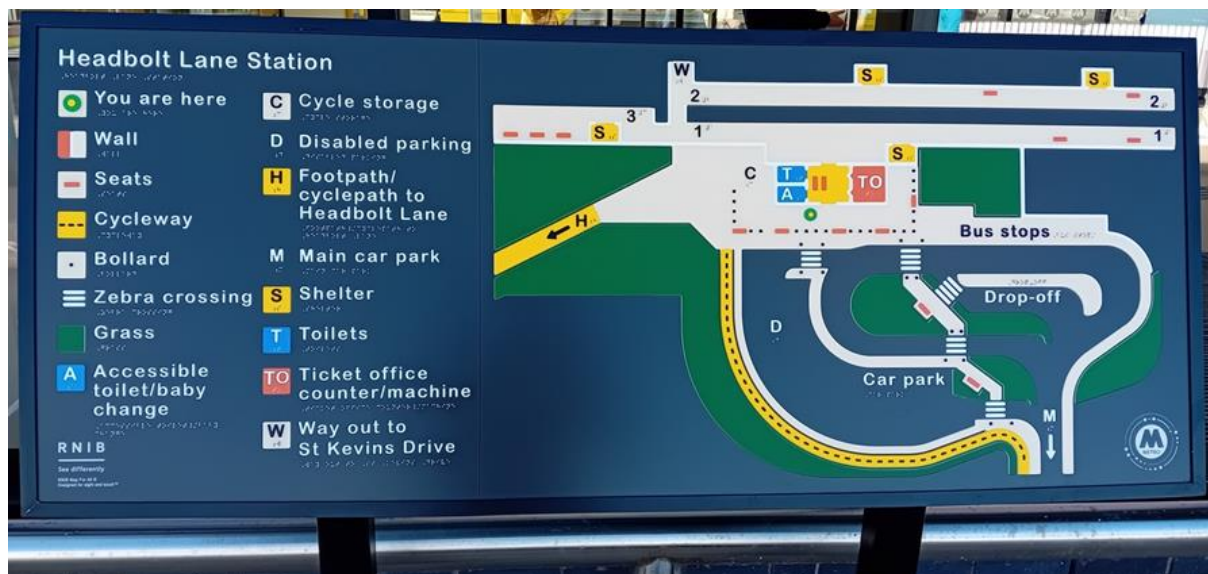
Whilst I could never envisage such investment in Herefordshire, a proportionate approach ought to see an hourly bus network between key towns, Hereford and the adjoining counties. Combined bus & rail ticketing would be welcome – ideally on a tap-in, tap-out multimodal basis, with daily and weekly capping. No harm in dreaming....

On a weekend visit in January, my partner and I used Merseytravel trains, buses and the ferry, to visit New Brighton (beach/cafes), Liverpool FC & Everton FC, before returning to Chester and the train back to Leominster. We stayed in the Holiday Inn express at Royal Albert Dock, which is a renovated warehouse – lovely interior brick walls and other features. A short walk from James Street station.

Andy Scott, [rail@oaklands.me](mailto:rail@oaklands.me)



Headbolt Lane Station



# Day out on the Heart of Wales Line

Friday May 16th 2014

As Friday dawned extremely warm, I decided to make a trip on this Line as I usually do 2 or 3 times each year. This line remains as one of the most scenic rail journeys in the UK, and the closest we have to the traditional rural railway of the Edwardian era. It runs from Shrewsbury to Swansea – a distance of 121 miles. It branches off the main line at Craven Arms and travels on a single line through the old counties of Shropshire, Radnorshire and Brecknock, then to Carmarthenshire. There are just 4 trains a day in each direction.

I drove to *Knighton*, some 28 miles from Hereford, and joined the train there. It is possible to start ones journey at Hereford by train but it is something of a fiddle. I was intending to go to *Llandeilo*, the former county town of Carmarthenshire, and some 2 hrs distant from Knighton, where the Cawdor hotel provides an excellent lunch; one has to be careful where one bales out on this line otherwise no decent Luncheon will be forthcoming. On arrival at the station to take the 0950 train, there were a few people waiting. 2 ladies had suitcases and were obviously going on holiday so I enquired where, expecting to be told the Gower coast, and nearly passed out in amazement when I was told Ibiza. From Knighton? They were to take the train to Llandrindod Wells, abbreviated to Llandod, where they would take a bus to Cardiff, and thence to the airport nearby.

As from this year the train continues on to Cardiff. I was trying to estimate how many days it would take to get there on this route; it is nearly 4.5 hrs from Knighton. A 2 car train duly trundled into the station and off we set, climbing steadily through the Radnorshire hills. The first station we arrive at is *Knucklas* dominated by its great viaduct taking the line on 13 stone arches 75ft above the Heyope valley. We had few passengers on board, with one or two alighting at the various wayside halts, until finally we had only 7. The conductor decided to come to talk to me and he was telling me about his hobby, that of helping the poor people, initially in south Africa until it got too dangerous, and later on in war torn Sudan, much to the displeasure of his wife and grown up sons. It was highly interesting, of how he acted as a Dispenser to an American doctor and travelled around the various tribes in the Sudan. Then he was assisting in building a school; as there were no bricks, bags of sand and cement were mixed with water and these acted as the bricks when they hardened. Most interesting.

The principal station on the line and the only one that is staffed is *Llandrindod Wells*. This is a former Spa town that has seen better days, but one of the 4 Spa towns along the line that brought visitors in their thousands during Victorian and Edwardian days seeking cures for various ailments. I knew a lady who was very proud of the fact that she came

from Llandrindod and worked in the bank there in her early years, I could only reply “Llandod is a wonderful place to come FROM”, to which of course there is no reply. The other Spa towns are *Builth Wells*, but the station is called Builth Road some 2 miles from the town. *Llangammarch Wells*, and *Llanwrtyd Wells*, where the trains cross – hopefully. The wayside halt prior to Llangammarch is *Cilmeri* where close by is the commemorative stone for Llewelyn ap Gruffydd, the last native Prince of Wales, killed in battle there in 1282.

We are now climbing heavily to the summit of the line, and the train tunnels beneath the Sugar Loaf, then descends past the Brecon beacons through *Llandovery* and along the Towy valley to *Llandeilo* where I bale out at 1150. Llandovery is a bustling market town but one can see it all in 15 mins and I didn’t wish to be marooned there for 3 hours, but it has the advantage of being on the flat. At Llandeilo one has to climb up to the town, about 10/12 mins or so.

As I disembark and the train clatters away there is complete silence, no traffic noise, just country sounds, birds tweeting and sheep baa ing. I then make a (brisk) walk up some steps to a residential street then to the main road and the town. I make a bee line for the *Cawdor* hotel, where the Reception divests me of my bag and panama, and after a quick wash, to the Dining Room, but first quenching my thirst with a campari and soda. The head waiter even remembered me from last year, much to my surprise, and recalled that I arrive by train. I remain impressed by the staff and the Chef and his team are equally impressive with everything cooked to order, so one must allow about 1 hr 10 mins for Lunch. Lunch is £ 14.95 for 2 courses and £ 19.95 for 3.

I chose - *Smoked duck, orange and pomegranate salad with a balsamic and Port reduction*

*Pan fried fish of the day (salmon) with sauté spinach and a smoked haddock, chorizo and corn chowder accompanied by a dish of potato Dauphinoise.*

The whole washed down by just 1 glass of Chardonnay

To complete: *Honey, yogurt and vanilla panacotta with a fruit compote.*

Then a brisk walk back to the station, just a wayside halt, and shortly thereafter my train arrived for the return journey. Depart on time at 1413. Understandably I did not wish to miss this train as the next one entailed a 5 hour wait.

Arrived Knighton on time at 1618 where I repaired to the excellent Tower House Gallery, by the town clock tower, for Tea. Here they serve many varieties, all loose leaf.

It was reported in the Hereford Times a few weeks ago, that some new people had bought a house nearby and promptly wanted the clock silenced at night. The owner of this café also looks after this striking clock, and he was able to fill me in on the sequel. Now this clock does strike the quarters throughout the day and night but as it has been so doing for 130 years why should it not continue. Some people are totally bereft of common

sense. It is exactly the same as moving to the country from the town and complaining about the mooing of the cows, the quacking of the ducks, and the baa ing of the sheep. Naturally there was a mammoth outcry from the good townsfolk who even put banners around the clock saying Save our Clock.

Fortunately these “cretins” eventually withdrew their complaint, otherwise they might well have been run out of town, so I was told. Quite right.

Anyway a happy ending for all concerned.

Then a nice return drive through NW Herefordshire and eventually home, arriving back around 1815.

A highly enjoyable Day Out.

*Michael Sullivan*

## Norwich

In an age when so many British cities and towns seem to be losing buses hand over foot, it is a real breath of fresh air to find a place where things are getting better - and Norwich is one of them.

Norwich is a surprisingly large city, having an urban population of 213,000, many of whom are students at the University of East Anglia or creatives working in one of the city’s many arts establishments – it has one of the youngest populations in the UK, with an average age of just 34, and this (anecdotally) appears to be a large source of ridership.

However, one of the most remarkable things about Norwich is how quickly gains have been made. A complex bundle of Government funding totalling around £16.7 million, on top of £21 million from operator First Group , has enabled a transformation of the city’s network at breakneck speed – the first drops of funding were awarded in March 2022 and, already, “Network Norwich” is run by a fleet of gleaming new electric buses, with a growing list of bus priority schemes, increased frequencies, and smart branding. Not surprisingly, passenger numbers have risen too – before the electric buses had even been built, new routes and increased service saw 16% passenger growth over 2023, and – most impressively – passenger numbers are 7% higher than before the pandemic, across Norfolk. Considering how rural much of the county is, this is highly commendable.

The natural conclusion to draw from this is that pumping money into buses encourages more usage – and it does. But to get the best value, a lot of effort needs to go into how that money is spent, effort Norwich clearly displays.





*A pair of Pink Line electrics pass by the Cathedral*

## Bus services and branding

Network Norwich, to use its brand name, is almost entirely operated by First Eastern Counties, a relatively innovative operator by the standards of large bus companies, and this cohesiveness is extremely useful when planning an integrated network, not least because private operators are prone to complaining when they perceive another as having received unfair subsidy or privilege. Free from haggling between multiple, uncooperative operators, Norwich has been able to organise its network sensibly and with few compromises – in stark contrast to a familiar green project at home.

There are surprisingly few buses into Norwich from surrounding Norfolk, which is partly a reflection of the area's rural nature, but also how Norfolk's remaining rural railways still retain their small village stations. The local independent Sanders Coaches does operate some services to North Norfolk, however, and First's premium "Excel" and "Coastlink" run from surrounding towns with high specification buses.

First's Network Norwich, meanwhile, is largely confined to the city, though a few routes do extend into neighbouring villages. Routes are grouped together roughly according to their direction out of the city centre, and each group is given a line colour. For example, routes 25 and 26 – services heading West out of the centre towards the University of East Anglia – are labelled the "Blue Line". This makes the network quite quick and easy to understand for visitors or new travellers, especially with the well-designed maps (courtesy of Best Impressions), which are displayed online, at key bus stops and in the travel centre in central Norwich – though they are nowhere to be found on buses.



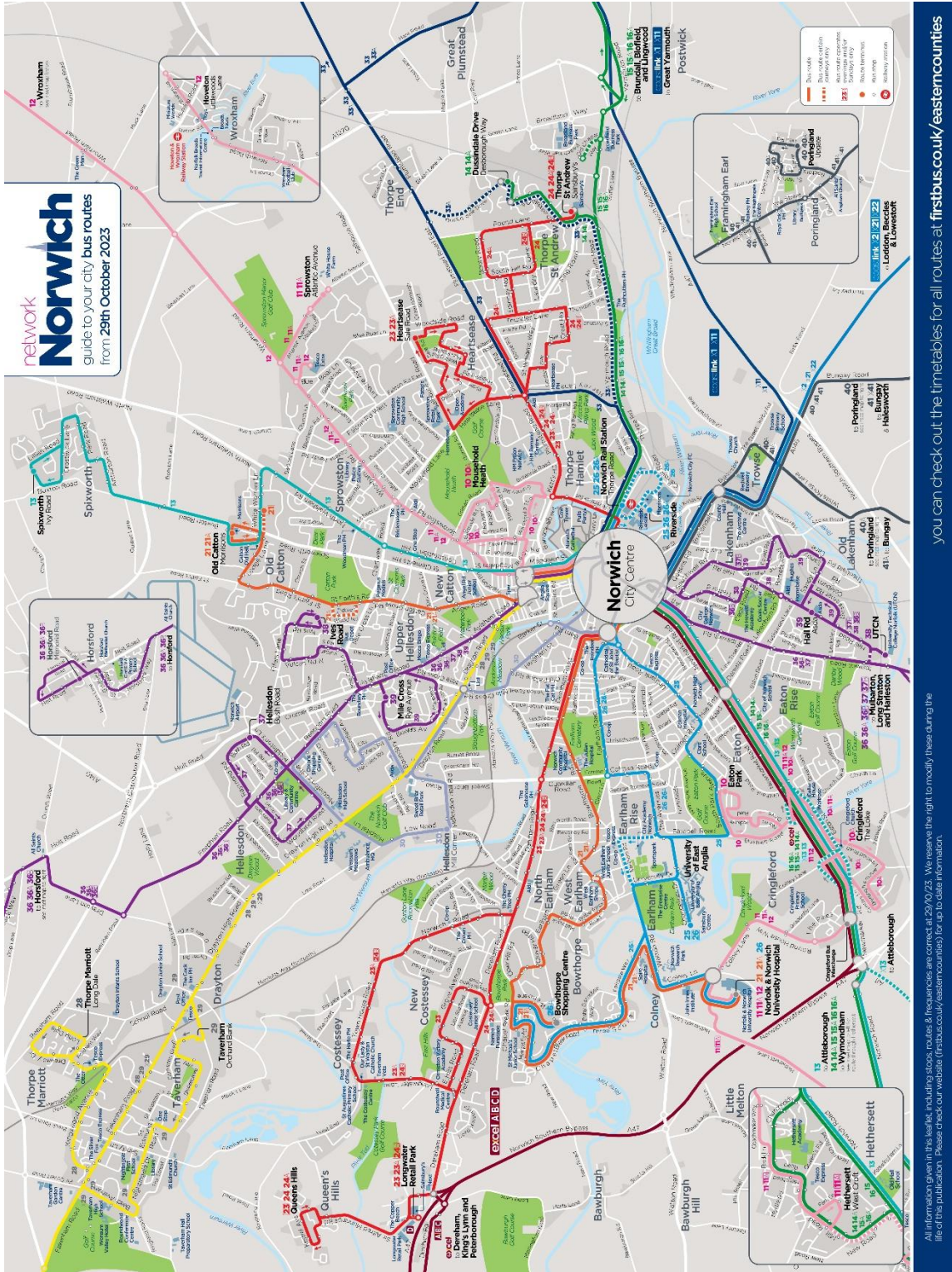
*A Sanders Coaches bus stands out from the purple First vehicles in the city centre*

The grouped line idea isn't exclusive to Norwich, but it is perhaps the best example of how to do it right. Older, diesel, buses carry standard First Olympia livery, but have their line colours layered on top at the front. The new electric buses, on the other hand, are all painted in a very fetching "Norwich Electric" livery of purple and silver, with lines being indicated via coloured destination screens (more on them later). Unfortunately, whilst intuitive on their own, having two parallel brand identities does serve to undermine the idea of a fully integrated network.

Of course, there is no point branding a poor service, and Norwich generally suffices in this regard. The network of radial routes is extensive and frequent, with the various routes of a line (and sometimes multiple lines themselves) merging together towards the city centre, providing several corridors of extremely high frequency operation along major roads. Each line generally operates every 7-15 minutes Monday to Saturday, with Sunday service varying between every 10 and every 60. Despite a distinct lack of orbital routes – and some less than desirable frequencies on Sundays – the network is more than adequate for most potential trips, with routes generally making sense.

Irritatingly, however, Norfolk County Council stubbornly refuses to adopt any of First's promotional strategy or brands, insisting on giving all services equal (monotone) treatment and ignoring the line colours. This can be an active detriment to bus usage for some – an intending passenger who looks up their route online and learns that they need to catch the Orange Line is left completely in the dark as to where and when to find





Network Norwich route map (First Eastern Counties)

their bus unless they also memorised the route numbers – which, if First’s promotional material is anything to go by, is not necessary. Even then, the huge number of stops throughout Norwich city centre (of which each route only stops at one or two) are decidedly uniform, and it takes considerable searching to find the desired stand, by which time a bus has probably been missed.



*Interior of the single deck Wright GB Kite, similar to the double deck Electroliners (First Leicester)*

This is one of those infuriatingly trivial issues that could so easily be resolved, and indeed has been elsewhere, in Leeds, for example. I did actually raise this with Norfolk County Council and they seemed interested in my comments. Whilst this was most likely out of politeness, if it had genuinely not occurred to anyone in the council that a consistent approach to route branding might be a positive innovation, more bus users working in the authority might be in order...

However, despite this apparent detachment from mundane “quality of life” measures, Norfolk County Council does appear to appreciate the need for bus priority. Buses rarely get stuck in traffic, thanks to a relatively expansive network of bus lanes, bus only roads and bus gates. Several new lanes are due to be added this year, paid for by the Department for Transport funding.

All in all, Norwich has a very competent bus network for a city of its size, with all services feeling appropriate and well thought through.

## A new type of Bus?

Of course, a large part of a bus service is the buses themselves, and Norwich has recently been the beneficiary of a large new fleet of battery electrics, courtesy of the Government's ZEBRA fund (Zero Emission Bus Regional Areas... nothing beats a government acronym) and a hefty contribution from First Group. As mentioned previously, they carry a striking purple and silver colour scheme, which First appears to have adopted for all their new electric buses across the country. Rumour has it that this is a new corporate livery.

But lying behind the smart colours is a (possibly subconscious) debate ongoing amongst designers and bus operators about whether or not electric buses should be marketed almost as a separate mode of transport to traditional diesel buses. Though this may initially seem an odd concept, there may be some merit in the idea that clean, quiet and stylish EVs can help "reboot" the reputation of the bus, breaking the sadly common stigma surrounding bus usage and attracting new passengers in the process.

First do seem to be embracing this approach with their new vehicles. Gone are the pink grab poles and slippery faux-leather seats of their diesels, replaced instead by sober creams and high quality patterned moquette. The new single deckers in particular benefit from the lack of engines (their batteries are stored on the roof) allowing a low-floor throughout, creating a spacious, airy ambience that feels more akin to a tram than a bus.

Technologically, the electric buses are impressive as well. A 200-mile range means they only need to charge at the depot, and their performance is also admirable – but of course the general benefits of electric buses are familiar to Herefordians! Norwich's electrics also shine in the field of passenger information, literally. They are equipped with audio-visual announcements (though the system has not yet been activated), and, most interestingly, their external destination screens are RGB (Red Green Blue, i.e., they can display different colours). This enables line colours to remain prominent, whilst also allowing a standardisation of the electrics' livery – the best of both worlds, so to speak.

## Railways

Little reference to railways has been made so far, mainly as Norfolk's rail network is so fundamentally different from Herefordshire's as to be effectively incomparable, but trains nonetheless play a vital role in Norwich's transport system.

Norwich is served by the Great Eastern Mainline (with two trains per hour to London), various branches to surrounding towns like Great Yarmouth, Lowestoft and Sheringham, and the line West to Ely, which is served both by local trains and East Midlands Railway's mammoth Liverpool Lime Street to Norwich service, a route run by small DMUs which are often overcrowded and always inadequate. All other services, however, are operated by Greater Anglia's modern fleet of Stadler FLIRTs (Fast Light Intercity/Regional Train, an acronym so sophisticated that it works in German too!),





*A class 755 FLIRT arrives at Brundall*

either the electric only Class 745s, with first class, a buffet and a staggering twelve coaches, or the bi-mode Class 755s, which have a more modest three or four coaches, and an additional “power pack” to house diesel engines.

These trains are superb, being comfortable and incredibly nifty both on diesel and electric. But their main selling point is their level boarding – the “power pack” frees up space underneath coaches, allowing the floor to be lowered to platform height. When stopped at a station, sensors detect how far away the platform is, and a ramp extends to fill the gap, creating a level surface to board. This not only massively improves access for people with disabilities (especially those in wheelchairs, who no longer need to request a ramp and can thus travel spontaneously), it also helps to reduce dwell times, as stepping up and down from the dizzying heights of more familiar trains takes a surprising amount of time, which adds up. Admittedly, in the case of Greater Anglia’s FLIRTs, these benefits are effectively negated by each coach only having one door per side.

As good as they are, the FLIRTs have somewhat been a victim of their own success, and overcrowding on many of the Norfolk branches has surged since the introduction of the new trains. I made a short journey on a four car Great Yarmouth train at about half past one on a Saturday afternoon, and it was crush-loaded leaving Norwich – remarks made by some of my (very close) fellow passengers included “That’s it, I’m not taking the train anymore” and “I’m so glad I’m learning to drive!”

Service frequencies on the branch lines are also quite unusual, with trains to Great

Yarmouth and Lowestoft (which share the line East until Brundall) departing from Norwich in quick succession but leaving almost two hours until the next train East. What makes Norfolk's railways really stand out, though, is their charming stations. Unlike in most of the country, tiny stations serving small villages (often not even villages, Berney Arms serves nothing but an abandoned pub) have remained, slowing down regional train journeys on the one hand, but also keeping rural communities connected and reducing the need for buses on the other. They are evidently much appreciated, as many of these stations are well maintained by dedicated members of the community. Brundall Gardens, for example, one of the village of Brundall's two stations, is lovingly cared for by a team led by the eminent resident Greg Chandler.



*Palm trees at Brundall Gardens (note the level boarding)*

All this may be more helpful to Herefordshire than we may think. Clearest among the lessons is the (obvious) evidence that if a network is enhanced competently and with adequate funding, the public will use it.

A future where we can consider such enhancements may not be entirely theoretical. As we have seen in Norwich, drastic improvements can be made for considerably less money than Herefordshire's recent £102 million Local Transport Fund award, and if we can prise even a fraction of that away from bypass preparation, Herefordshire's public transport could be transformed beyond our wildest dreams.

*Jago Frost*



# Bus Service Improvement Plan (BSIP+)

Your Chairman and Secretary met Dr David Land of Herefordshire Council on 20 May to press the need to start spending the £1.9M the council is holding to improve bus services. David joined the council earlier this year as Head of Transportation and Parking.

We were told that the problem is a lack of staff. The council is advertising two posts in the public transport department: a BSIP manager to oversee the delivery of the improvements identified, and an experienced officer to replace the excellent Paul Williamson, who retired recently.

Some of the BSIP improvements will have to be tendered and this process will be managed by a former senior transport officer returning on a self-employed basis. We did receive an assurance that DRM's 476 Ledbury-Hereford service was one of three routes which would return to an hourly frequency, but as this change requires the blessing of the Traffic Commissioners this will take some time to implement.

## Transport Hub

The idea of a Transport Hub for Hereford first came up in 2006 and since that time Herefordshire Council (HC) have built the City Link Road, the medical centre and student flats. However in the view of RBfH that still left sufficient space for a bus/rail interchange capable of accommodating all the country buses currently terminating at both the Railway Station and the Country Bus Station.

However in November 2022 when HC had spent £800,000 on a design by ARUP we found out that the HC Conservation Officer had insisted that there be no buildings in front of the Railway Station as it was a listed building. There had been minimal prior consultation with stakeholders such as ourselves and the Civic Society, which is why RBfH made the following objections after the only public consultation on 10 November 2022:

- 1) The 4 bays were sufficient to cope with existing services at the Railway station but not able to cope with additional services terminating at the Country Bus Station particularly as we transition to a carbon neutral world.
- 2) The reliance on services stopping in a layby is not consistent with good practice and creates unnecessary risks for bus users, pedestrians and cyclists.
- 3) No provision has been made for rail replacement or Hay Festival services.

4) The waiting room is too small and requires some form of refreshment facility/information services/oversight of toilets to be included.

5) Vehicles leaving the National Rail car park will be tempted to exit via the DIRO (drive in reverse out) area. The NR car park should only be accessed from the service road running behind the medical centre.

6) Overall RBfH believes these proposals demonstrate a remarkable lack of vision and if implemented will be regarded as a lifetime opportunity wasted.

None of RBfH comments were adopted by the designers ARUP except to say that it did not mean all country services would terminate at the interchange.

In further meetings I had with HC they were adamant that they would not increase the number of bus bays or alter the design of the interchange in any way.

HC are aware of the dangers of Network Rail cars exiting behind the DIRO bays but are yet to come up with a solution.

Similarly they accept that the layover bays on the proposed canal basin will simply become a car park for the medical centre/pharmacy unless they can come up with a system of prevention.

HC bus usage figures are based on current timetables and on the assumption that the buses will keep to time. In view of Hereford's traffic, I think this is extremely optimistic particularly when you factor in the differences between school day and school holiday traffic.

HC refused to improve the design of the canopy which the ward councillor described as a wind tunnel.

No decision has been made on the country bus station but it is expected to close within four years to become student apartments (if the can get more students to apply for the new university) or more likely a multi storey car park. Buses currently dropping off at the country bus station would decant passengers at the Old Market, Franklin Barnes or St Peters Square and pick up at Maylord Orchards or St Peters Square.

No thought has been given to National Express coaches.

Nor has any consideration been given to where buses would layover while waiting for their passengers except to say that drivers would not have the facilities they currently enjoy at the country bus station ie toilets and café.

For this reason RBfH objected to the planning application on the following grounds:

- 1) Insufficient bus bays.
- 2) The waiting room is too small and should be manned with refreshment facility.
- 3) Network Rail cars will be tempted to exit behind the DIRO bays.

4) The bus layover is remote from the stands and buses using it would have to negotiate two Station Approach junctions in order to do so.

5) No provision has been made for Rail Replacement or Hay Festival buses.

The Civic Society also objected with comprehensive plans showing a better design.

On 1 May 2024 the Planning Enquiry was held and Will Frecknall represented RBfH and Karen Davis for Hereford City Council. Both objected and were given 3 minutes each to state their case.

A number of councillors criticised the design of the scheme, but none seemed to grasp the limitations of just 4 bays. Many thought the Civic Society designs were better but having spent £800,000 on the current design I felt that they were swayed by the money already spent and the desire to improve the abysmal scene greeting visitors arriving by rail.

The motion was carried with no votes against and 2 abstentions.

For RBfH it was a bitter but not unexpected blow and we must now try to protect the country bus station which with some tlc could be a proper Bus Hub with the facilities, café and toilets already in place. For those services unable to access the bus/rail interchange passengers would be able to connect using the Zipper.

*Andrew Pearson*