

Issue 71 Autumn 2021

Rail Wales

Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales



The first morning of the new three times daily Holyhead to South Wales first and standard class loco hauled dining service sees the 11.23 hrs departure waiting at Cardiff Central on 13th September 2021. A new bus station will be sited underneath the high building seen behind the locomotive.

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WELCOME

Welcome to a new issue of Rail Wales. There is much to report and reflect on in the rail scene in Wales as we move through the second half of 2021.

Inevitably rail operation and development is still responding to the unprecedented impact of the global pandemic which has turned everyone's lives upside down. I am pleased to observe the railways in Wales mounting a significant recovery from the low point of spring 2020 when passenger numbers dropped to less than one fifth of usual.

It appears that numbers have recovered in Wales faster than some other parts of Britain as a result of the country's trains being less dependent on commuter and business travel and serving the leisure market more than some parts of England. The significant rise in people taking their main summer holiday in Wales this year has also helped boost numbers on Welsh railways.

The return of passengers has helped Transport for Wales Rail, the main passenger train operator, restore services withdrawn during the pandemic. Following the September 2021 timetable change, over 90 per cent of the pre-pandemic services will be operated.

There will even be an uplift on the pre-2020 service on the key north to south link: the through Holyhead to Cardiff service, with three trains each way on weekdays operating as a locomotive hauled service with first class seating and full menu dining available (see front cover).

However, a shock to the system as great as Covid-19 will inevitably result in some long-term impacts on the health of Welsh railways, and Railfuture needs to remain alert to be ready to campaign against potential changes which we consider are not in the interests of the future operation of the rail system. Railfuture's core mission is to seek 'bigger and better railways'. Overall, change in the past two decades has been for the better with the quantity and quality of rail services in Wales being much improved from the that at the beginning of the century, and even more so if you look back a further 20 years.

To date, the promised further improvements which were part of the 2018 franchise agreement, such as electrification of the core Cardiff Valley lines and renewal of almost the entire rolling stock fleet, are still programmed to be delivered; but with the huge financial pressures on government resulting from Covid, these gains could easily be lost. Railfuture Wales needs to remain vigilant.

Peter Kingsbury

RAILFUTURE WALES IN ACTION

The past few months have seen Railfuture Wales undertaking a variety of activities in pursuit of its aim of ensuring the Welsh rail system plays an important role in meeting the country's transport needs. Amongst the action we have:

- Written to new Welsh Government climate change cabinet member Julie James about the role of rail in meeting its climate change targets and as a result met senior Welsh Government civil servants who are responsible for rail policy and development to set our vision and ask how the government will deliver its programme to improve rail (see below).
- Submitted evidence to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs committee inquiry into Welsh rail infrastructure which reported in July 2021. The highlights of the report can be read on page 5.
- Contributed to the work of multi organisation campaign group Transform Cymru by providing information on the Welsh rail scene to help ensure its work properly takes rail into account - read more on page 12.
- Held a meeting for its members in conjunction with Traws Link Cymru to discuss opportunities for restoring direct rail links between north and south Wales. A report of the event appears on page 10.
- Submitted a response to the Welsh Government consultation on the South West Wales metro – see page 14.

WELSH GOVERNMENT VISION FOR RAIL

In mid-August 2021 three Railfuture Wales committee members met James Hooker, Rail Programme Director and James Arden, Rail Project Manager, of the Welsh Government to discuss a range of issues that will affect the ability of Welsh railways to help meet the challenges posed by the climate change crisis.

The following key points emerged from the meeting:

Electrification: The two civil servants wish Railfuture Wales to continue to put the arguments to the UK government to reinstate the cancelled scheme for electrifying Cardiff to Swansea and to extend the overhead wires from Crewe along the North Wales main line to Holyhead. A key point to make is that a 'follow on' from completion of the Core Valleys lines (CVL) electrification, expected to be in 2024, is required to help ensure

the skills and people working on the CVL are not lost to Wales, by having another electrification project underway by then. Electrification from Patchway to Bristol Temple Meads is also important to South Wales.

Public transport integration/smart ticketing: it was stated that the recent inability to market public transport use as a result of Covid-19 had led to a delay in the potential roll-out date for smart cards in the Cardiff and neighbouring Valleys area (NB Smart cards refer to plastic cards which would allow payment of fares on all types of public transport with daily payments being capped). Transport for Wales was promoting flexi buses to encourage greater public transport use in Newport which would improve access to rail. The introduction of cross mode integrated ticketing across all of Wales would require the passing of legislation by the Senedd to provide additional powers over bus operations and this would not occur until 2024 as a result of the amount of legislation awaiting discussion. A trial of the use of smart cards/debit cards for payment on public transport in NW Wales is proposed.

Two-hour minimum frequency on all routes: there are currently three lines which do not have this frequency (Heart of Wales, Fishguard and Blaenau Ffestiniog) and it is a long-standing aim of Railfuture Wales to achieve this. The two James (Hooker and Arden) advised that an additional service is programmed to start on the Heart of Wales line in 2022 but this will still not provide a two-hour frequency throughout the day. The Fishguard branch may receive additional services as a result of development of the South West Wales metro (see page 14) and developing the Conwy valley branch to Blaenau Ffestiniog was challenging because of the threat of flooding.

Prospects for development of Swansea/SW Wales and North Wales metros: it was explained that both projects are being assessed using the government's WELTAG process which will help determine their scope and feasibility. Once this is complete, the funding available at that time will help determine the extent of improvements to public transport that can be delivered by the projects. It was confirmed that in SW Wales, the new station at St Clears is not dependent on the region's metro appraisal as this is funded from a different source and is programmed to open in 2024.

Active Travel / Promoting the integration of rail and cycling: Railfuture Wales considers that making it easier for cyclists to use rail is an important issue in promoting sustainable travel for journeys where the 'last mile' challenge results in car use for the entire journey. The two James noted that all the new rolling stock being delivered to Welsh rail over the next

four years provides additional cycle capacity. Cycle parking at stations is being improved but as Network Rail own the stations in Wales apart from the Core valley lines, progress can sometimes be slower than desired. There is a wish to greatly improve cycle facilities at Cardiff Central, to match those found in countries with high cycle usage such as Belgium. This might include, for example, shower facilities.

RAIL INFRASTRUCTURE IN WALES

The House of Commons Welsh Affairs committee held an inquiry earlier this year into the important question of the funding and control of the infrastructure on which the railways of Wales operate. Evidence was provided by a number of important players in the Welsh scene, including Railfuture Wales (see PDF at <https://www.railfuture.org.uk/display2561>). However, the findings of the committee received relatively little publicity when published in July so for the benefit of Rail Wales readers, here are some highlights taken from the Summary:

- *Our (Railfuture's) report concludes that there is a strong environmental and economic case for substantially enhancing the rail infrastructure that serves Wales, and the passenger experience of slow services and inadequate stations only underlines the need for an upgraded network.*
- *Our report also notes the powerful case made by both the South East Wales Transport Commission and the Williams-Shapps White Paper for the role rail and, in particular, electrification can play in the decarbonisation agenda. We conclude that this underlines how short-sighted and regrettable the decision to cancel the electrification of the Great Western mainline from Cardiff to Swansea was.*
- *Our report calls on the UK Government to bring forward, before the end of 2021, new proposals for greater connectivity between Swansea-Cardiff-Bristol, which would include completing electrification on the mainline between Cardiff and Swansea. We believe that such a set of proposals would be an important sign of the UK Government's commitment to its green agenda and to improving connectivity across the UK.*
- *Our report recommends that the UK Government should establish, by autumn 2021, a Wales Rail Board, consisting of itself, the Welsh Government, Network Rail, the rail operators providing services in Wales, and Transport for Wales. The Board would be tasked with identifying and developing a prioritised set of proposals for rail infrastructure improvement and investment in Wales.*
- *We found that Network Rail's revised structure has helped it to respond more effectively to incidents in Wales, build stronger relationships with Transport for Wales (TfW) and sharpen its focus on Wales and borders services. However, our report warns Network Rail should be alive to concerns that its regional structure will lessen*

its focus on supporting an all-Wales approach to integrated transport. On further devolution our report suggests that if clear benefits for both passengers and freight users could be delivered by devolving rail infrastructure to the Welsh Government then the case for further devolution would be compelling. However, we conclude that few benefits to rail users have been identified and that the benefits of the existing management arrangements are considerable. We also warn that the liabilities associated with rail infrastructure are significant.

- *We recommend that the evaluation process for rail infrastructure proposals in Wales factors in the UK Government's strategic ambitions to strengthen connections between all parts of the UK.*
- *On HS2, we note that, as rail infrastructure is not devolved to the Welsh Government, beyond the core valleys lines, Wales will not benefit in the same way as Scotland and Northern Ireland from Barnett consequentials arising from the project spend. However, we note that the UK Government's own analysis has concluded that HS2 will produce an economic disbenefit for Wales. We recommend that HS2 should be reclassified as an England only project. Using the Barnett formula, Wales' funding settlement should be recalculated to apply an additional allocation based on the funding for HS2 in England. We suggest that such a reclassification would help to ensure that Welsh rail passengers receive the same advantage from investment in HS2 as those in Scotland and Northern Ireland. However, we also acknowledge that HS2 could yield direct benefits to Welsh rail passengers. We suggest that such benefits could be realised if the HS2 programme in England is accompanied by enhancements to the North Wales mainline. We recommend that the UK Government, working in partnership with the Welsh Government, should prepare a full strategic case for the upgrade and electrification of the North Wales mainline. We believe that consolidating the benefits of HS2 for Wales by reducing journey times within North Wales, increasing freight capacity and connections from Holyhead to the West Coast main line would be consistent with the UK Government's economic and environmental objectives and with the objectives of the Union Connectivity Review.*

Editor's comment: the majority of the Railfuture Wales 'asks' have been supported by the committee, including the electrification of the Cardiff to Swansea and the North Wales main lines. Where we differ from the committee is the issue of giving full devolution of powers over rail infrastructure to the Welsh Government. The committee recommends the establishment of a Wales Rail Board to provide an improved process for strategic management of infrastructure improvement and investment. It is not clear how this would dovetail with the structure recommended by the Williams Shapps review for the better forward planning of Welsh rail services and infrastructure by the proposed Wales and Western region of Great British Railways which would bring together Network Rail, train operators and the Welsh Government/Transport for Wales. Something for the powers that be to ponder.

FREIGHT UPDATE

Rhodri Evans provides his regular update:

Starting West to East, the Robeston to Westerleigh and Theale oil trains continue, but appear to be less frequent recently, whilst the coil trains continue twice a day from Margam to Trostre, including weekends. There is normally a Trostre to Tilbury weekly, and scrap trains from Trostre.

The Neath valley branch is now heavily overgrown, and there is no sign of traffic returning to this line. However, there have been a few coal trains recently from Onllwyn to clear stocks there, and the branch should have a secure future when the Global Rail Centre opens in 2023.

One positive development has been the Colas hauled log trains from Briton Ferry. Class 56s have recently been used, and two loaded flows leave Mondays and Wednesdays, with the empties returning Tuesdays and Thursdays. The loco is then stabled at Network Rail's yard just east of Port Talbot Parkway.

The Barry containers continue to run Monday to Thursday afternoons, and sometimes are fully loaded, as witnessed by me on a Monday recently. However, quite often less than 50% of the wagons are loaded!

Cwmbargoed coal trains run twice a day to Margam on weekdays, but I believe not Saturdays, and some trains also travel to other destinations.

Machen aggregate trains had restarted earlier this year, initially weekdays, but also Saturdays. This traffic then paused for a while in late summer but began again in September.

The Daventry to Wentloog Tesco trains continue seven days a week as do the Freightliner workings. Finally steel workings to and from Margam to Dee Marsh, Round Oak, and other destinations continue, although many flows are only operating 2/3 days on as required basis, not daily.

An entirely new freight flow from South Wales is under consideration which would reintroduce freight to the Ebbw Vale branch. GB Railfreight is in discussions with Blaenau Gwent council and landowners about establishing a new quarry and a freight terminal near Cwm, three miles south of Ebbw Vale. The aggregates quarried would be transported by rail to England and possibly Newport docks for export. Two trains a day may operate.



A Cardiff-Ebbw Vale class 170 passes Park Junction, Newport. The single track on the far right would be used by the proposed new aggregate trains and passenger service from Cross Keys to Newport due to begin in Dec 2021 (see page 12). Note the semaphore signals and box still in use at this location.

MEMBER'S COMMENT: PREPARING CREWE FOR HS2

Crewe is seen by many people travelling from the Midlands and south of England as the gateway to North Wales. Railfuture Wales member Richard Wilcock sets out his thoughts on proposals to radically improve the station.

“April 2021’s edition of *Modern Railways*’ had a piece entitled ‘Preparing Crewe for HS2’: this is a response.

Crewe will be needed to be redeveloped for HS2 and the local council, Cheshire East, see this as a spur for much needed urban regeneration of the surrounding area. Previously Network Rail wanted to move the station south; this has been abandoned; now they are working together to make HS2 work and replace the old signalling from the 1985 remodelling.

Crewe is an important railway junction linking Scotland, the North West (Preston/Blackpool), Liverpool, Manchester, Shrewsbury/Cardiff, Wolverhampton/Birmingham and London. To avoid conflicts a number of avoiding lines for freight were built. Plans have been proposed in the past to use these for passenger services to avoid conflicts with the busy fast south-north West Coast Mainline services. Nothing has come of this, and HS2/Network Rail proposes to use the main station with conventional services using the west side of the station. Exactly what building work will be undertaken is not known at this stage.

I must say I am underwhelmed by the above proposals. I have two major reservations:

1. Though the scheme addresses the station’s dire state, I would describe it as one of the worst intercity stations in the UK, and that is being polite. It has poor inter-platform connections, narrow and steep stairs and long walks between platforms. Facilities such as newsagents, bar and ticket office are spread out. The station is almost too wide; it would be better thinner and longer. Parts of the station are just underused making it look as if it is heading towards dereliction. Depressing in summer, cold and miserable in winter.
2. The station has always been a barrier to east-west travel as the frequency of fast services limits the slots to cross the throat. Manchester - Shrewsbury services and others do, but there is no Stoke-on-Trent (and beyond) to North Wales or Liverpool. Just because there has not been a service does not mean there is no

demand. North Wales relies on holiday makers; to expect people to change at Crewe and carry all their luggage across the station is unrealistic. Connecting Stoke and points eastwards to Liverpool and North Wales would be a boon. Redevelopment is an opportunity to improve connectivity.

The article makes great play that the scheme so far does not need to put platforms on the avoiding lines, suggesting saving money rather than improving services is a priority. I did think making more use of the avoiding lines would help but I wonder if the following would also assist: moving the station slightly south, moving all shops and facilities to an upper transfer deck, allowing platform 1 to be longer, wider steps to platforms, escalators installation and above all keeping passengers in the warm. A dive-under starting south of the station emerging before the avoiding lines north of the station would allow fast trains to speed through. Trains from the Stoke direction could then cross over on the level to travel to North Wales and Liverpool and give more slots for Manchester - Shrewsbury service to do the same. The rest of the layout could be simplified as a result.

It remains to be seen what the final proposal will be, but redeveloping Crewe is a great opportunity to improve connectivity not only in the North West but for services to other regions.”

Richard Wilcock

NORTH-SOUTH WALES LINK: MEMBERS' MEETING

The meeting was held on the 11th September 2021 using presentations from Traws Link Cymru (TLC) and Bob Saxby and looked at the potential reopening of lines to provide a direct rail connection between North and South Wales via Aberystwyth.

The two projects to reopen routes between Aberystwyth - Carmarthen and Bangor - Afon Wen were featured in issue 70 of Rail Wales and Railwatch issue 168 (July 2021). The meeting gave members an update on the two campaigns. We learnt that Traws Link Cymru now envisage construction of a tunnel of around one mile length towards the Carmarthen end of the line where a series of sharp curves on the historic route, as it follows a narrow river valley, greatly restrict speed. As a result, an end to journey time is now envisaged of 70 to 80 minutes, compared for the current 125

minutes by the bus route T1. This would also help avoid potential conflict with the Gwili Railway which operates on several miles of the historical route, and help attract people to travel by rail who currently will not consider using the bus.

It was pointed out that the estimated total cost of reopening the line would be around £26 million per mile compared to £285/mile for HS2.

Bob Saxby outlined the challenges of restoring the rail route between Bangor (N Wales) and Afon Wen which is located on the Cambrian Coast railway near Pwllheli. The line passes through the sizeable town of Caernarvon. A detailed feasibility study has not been carried out of this route but Bob was able to outline some of the challenges from his local knowledge. These include finding a new site for Caernarvon station as the original one is now occupied by an Asda store. A more central site near the historic town centre was suggested. The short tunnel under part of the town centre is fortunately retained and could be readily reused.

From Caernarvon to Afon Wen was single track but built to double track width so although the Welsh Highland Railway operates over the first few miles of the route, this need not be displaced. Towards the Afon Wen end of the line, it was suggested that a new route might be found for several miles to provide a more direct and shorter distance to Porthmadog which would save time for people wishing to travel south on the Cambrian coast line towards Machynlleth and Aberystwyth.

It was agreed by many of those attending the webinar that the demand for through journeys from the North Wales coast to Swansea and Pembrokeshire would never be great as the journey times along the existing Cambrian Coast line are slow with a change of train required at Dovey Junction. One member recalled how when the route was still open in the early 1960s it was not possible to travel from Pembrokeshire to Llandudno in a day: setting off from Milford Haven on the early morning train meant arrival in Llandudno Junction was after the last train to the resort town had departed.

Nevertheless, the meeting concluded with attendees having obtained an insight into the two schemes which are examples of the longer-term vision rail campaigners hold. At least some elements of the vision need to be realised if rail is to play an important role in attracting people away from private car use.

TRANSFORM CYMRU

Transform Cymru (TC) was established in 2018 and Railfuture Wales has been an active member from the outset.



It is a coalition of campaign groups and charities which share the aim of creating a sustainable, affordable, inclusive and safe transport network for Wales, meeting the needs of all passengers regardless of background or ability. TC was formed in recognition that many campaign organisations in the transport field have overlapping interests and goals and in carrying out their work often duplicate effort in responding to consultations from bodies such as Welsh Government and local authorities.

The coalition has over 20 members which apart from Railfuture Wales include the Community Rail Network, Bus Users, Traveline Cymru, Older People's Commissioner, Asthma UK and the Confederation of Passenger Transport. Meetings are held several times a year and Sustrans Cymru supply the Chair of TC and the admin support.

As TC represents a cross section of organisations it is more readily recognised by Welsh Government and is invited, for example, to submit evidence to Senedd committees. TC's Chair, Christine Boston, has recently given evidence to the Senedd's Climate Change committee which is scrutinising Climate Change Minister Julie James's and deputy minister Lee Waters's priorities over the next 12-18 months.

Railfuture Wales believes that in joining with other groups which share similar aims, it is likely to be more effective in its campaign work.

Further information on Transform Cymru can be read at:

<https://transformcymru.org/about/> .

NEWSLINES

Improved services are in the pipeline for two branches of the Welsh rail network from December 2021 and May 2022:

- Ebbw Vale branch: an hourly service is scheduled to run between Cross Keys and Newport providing a direct link from the branch to the city closest to the southern end of the branch. Since the line reopened over 10 years ago, all trains have run to within two miles of Newport station

but have turned west along the mainline to terminate in Cardiff. The new service from Dec 2021 will use the single track line between Park and Gaer Junctions. Extending the service to Ebbw Vale will require doubling of the northern half of the branch (see photo on page 8).

- The Borders Line (Wrexham to Bidston) should see its frequency doubled in May 2022 with a second train each hour once the snags with the new rolling stock (class 230 units converted from former London Underground District line trains) have been resolved.

An ambitious station improvement programme, which sees 47 out of TfW Rail's 183 stations uplifted over the next four years, is about to start. North Wales stations will be the focus for the first stage of the work as overall they are considered to be in poorer condition. Improvements will include new car parking (500 spaces spread over 15 locations), cycle parking and the installation of 200 defibrillators.

Chester station has been recognised by TfW Rail as in need of attention. It is the busiest station the company manages in England. The operator appreciates the significant challenge involved with updating the station which has capacity issues at busy times. The initial focus will be looking at the position of the gate-line and work to the footbridge.

TfW Rail has reviewed its rolling stock plans for the Heart of Wales line and has concluded that class 153 units, with adaptations to carry more cycles as trialled on the West Highland line in Scotland, would be the most suitable type of train for this route. These would replace the previously planned use of class 170 units which were stated to be the future of the route in the 2018 franchise bid.

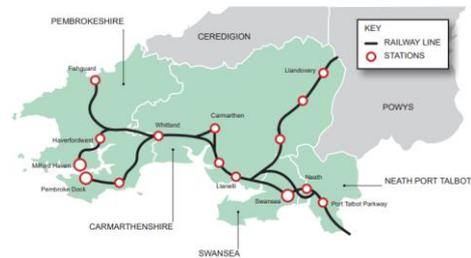
Thanks to the people who presented at the Transport for Wales Liaison meeting in June 2021 for providing the above information.

Onllwyn Rail Test Centre: Powys and Neath Port Talbot councils have recently granted planning permission for the ambitious proposal which is also supported by the Welsh Government and is formally titled 'Global Centre of Rail Excellence'.

The focus is on electric trains and both infrastructure and rolling stock will be tested. Facilities will include a high speed 25 kv electric test track where speeds of up to 110 mph will be possible. A circular track of 6.1 km is planned for the high speed tests which tells you that the site area is extensive. The land was formerly used for open cast coal workings (Nant Helen mine) and the associated washery. The target is to have phase 1 operational by 2023 with the full site functioning in 2025.

Railfuture Wales is very pleased that this world class facility, which has the potential to be at the cutting edge of rail R&D, is coming to South Wales.

SWANSEA BAY AND WEST WALES METRO CONSULTATION



The Welsh Government (WG) consulted on its priorities for improving public transport in South West Wales in spring 2021. Railfuture Wales carefully considered the options provided by WG for new and improved rail services in the area extending from Swansea Bay to Pembrokeshire.

<https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2021-03/information.pdf>

The following priorities were agreed as measures having the greatest impact on rail usage:

West Wales (services in Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire)

- 1st – direct services West Wales to Cardiff/Bristol via Swansea District Line
- 2nd – direct services West Wales to Cardiff/Bristol via Swansea
- 3rd – increased frequencies West Wales/Swansea
- 4th – Carmarthen/Paddington daily service to run to/from Haverfordwest or Milford Haven
- 5th – new local stations e.g. St Clears
- 6th – improved station facilities

For the Swansea Bay area, the priority order was:

- 1st – 30 min interval metro services to new and existing stations
- 2nd – increased frequency of local services into Swansea from existing local stations
- 3rd – direct services from Swansea to longer-distance destinations such as Bristol TM
- 4th – better bus/rail interchange at existing stations
- 5th – improved facilities at existing stations

Another section of the consultation provided 28 options and asked consultees to choose their top five which need not be based on potential for increased rail use. The Railfuture Wales response was:

- 1st – extend Manchester service to run hourly to Milford Haven
- 2nd – new two-hourly service Milford Haven to Bristol Parkway or TM
- 3rd – additional Heart of Wales Line (HWL) services to give a total of seven per day Llandoverly/Swansea
- 4th – Pembroke Dock service to become hourly
- 5th – new metro route (tram train) Neath/Llandarcy > University Bay Campus > city centre (every 30 minutes).

Finally, there was an ‘any other comment’ section to which Railfuture Wales responded with another list:

- Tram/tram train routes giving more extensive coverage of the Swansea area than is proposed by the consultants, as in our Development Plan
- The proposals relating to the HWL are not clear, so we should emphasise that we think a two-hourly Swansea/Crewe service is needed, including on Sundays
- Reinstatement of the bus service between Llandoverly and Brecon as in the Development Plan, giving interchanges at Llandoverly and Brecon for connections to Carmarthen and Abergavenny.
- The need for higher operational/information standards in West Wales and on the HWL than have been evident so far under TfW – without this, the prospects for increasing rail use will be severely undermined
- The need for far better publicity for whatever public transport services are provided, as experience suggests that most people have very little idea of what is available.

Thanks are extended to all who contributed to this issue. In all cases, any opinions expressed are those of the contributors, and do not necessarily represent *Railfuture* policy. Material for the next issue – articles, letters, photos or comments – should be sent to the editor, Peter Kingsbury at peter.kingsbury@railfuturewales.org.uk or by post to 22 Winchester Avenue, Penylan, Cardiff CF23 9BT, by 28th February 2022 for the spring 2022 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

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The 12.50 hrs Fishguard Harbour to Cardiff Central train, comprising two class 153 units in contrasting liveries, makes its way along the Loughor Estuary near Pembrey and Burry Port in mid-September 2021. At this time, Fishguard had still not had most of its pre Covid services restored.

Photo: Lindon Stone

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