

Issue 80 Spring 2026

Rail Wales

Newsletter of Railfuture in Wales



A class 150 train vanishes into the night from Pantyffynnon station on the Heart of Wales line. A low-cost signalling addition is being trialled on the line to reduce waits at level crossings – see pages 7-10.

Photo: Green Signals

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WELCOME

Welcome to the latest issue of “Rail Wales”, the magazine for members of Railfuture Wales. This issue aims to bring you news and thought-provoking comment on the ever-evolving rail scene in Wales as well as Railfuture’s activities to achieve its core goal of bigger and better rail services.

As we move towards the election for the Wales Senedd in May 2026, the Railfuture Wales focus has been on informing candidates about the need for the next Welsh Government to continue to invest in the rail system. This is needed to help ensure that this means of transport can fulfil its full potential to provide an excellent way of moving people and goods around Britain, so as to minimise environmental harm.

However, this year’s election presents a new challenge in that the future role and ability of the Welsh government to shape the railways of Wales is unclear. This is a result of the fact that a final decision on the structure of management and funding for the country’s rail system following the arrival of Great British Railways (GBR) is still unknown. It is now 20 months since the 2024 general election, which brought into power a UK Government that pledged to ‘renationalise’ the country’s railways and create GBR to reunite track and train. When the country’s rail system was last in public hands (remember British Rail) in 1995, devolution to Wales and Scotland had yet to happen so Welsh rail was simply the responsibility of the Department for Transport in London. Now, with the exception of the Cardiff Valley lines, both London (infrastructure) and Cardiff Bay (trains and stations) are involved with running the railways. How responsibility is shared with the new set up and track and train ‘reunited’ remains to be seen.

The Welsh Government announced in November 2025 that a clause will be included in the UK Government’s Railways Bill to provide for the creation of a ‘Memorandum of Understanding’ between the two governments, which is to be published in spring 2026. The statement set out the topics to be covered by the memorandum (Heads of Terms) which include creating a *GBR Wales and Borders Business Unit – To provide Wales and Borders area with a dedicated, empowered Business Unit within GBR that will deliver against the shared objectives set by both governments.*

This challenge must be keeping many senior civil servants busy at present but until a final announcement is made we must keep fingers crossed that the eventual solution does not harm the prospects for continued investment in the Welsh rail system.

Peter Kingsbury

RAILFUTURE WALES ANNUAL MEETING and SIGNAL BOX VISIT SATURDAY 11 APRIL, SHREWSBURY at 14.00 hrs

Members and friends are very welcome to attend our annual get together, held once again in Shrewsbury station on a Saturday afternoon in April.

There will be a chance to review the activities of Railfuture Wales over the past 12 months, discuss any issues and make suggestions for the future direction of the organisation and its parent body, Railfuture GB. The committee for the next 12 months will be decided.

This year, we are hoping to visit the large semaphore signal box located outside Shrewsbury station before the meeting. This is known as Severn Bridge Junction and claims to be the largest semaphore box still operating anywhere in the world. If you wish to take part in the visit which is likely to start at 13.00 hrs, please email peterkingsbury08@gmail.com.

To attend the Annual General Meeting, please assemble outside the British Transport Police door on the station forecourt shortly before 14.00 hrs.

Members are invited to consider joining the Railfuture Wales committee. This provides you with the opportunity to get involved with making the case for better Welsh rail services and to meet senior TfW staff and politicians. The committee currently meets four times a year, with three of the meetings held on Zoom on weekdays evenings. You have the chance to take part in discussions, and which (if any) other tasks you carry out between meetings is up to you.

If you wish to find out more or discuss this opportunity, please contact Richard Wilcock before the AGM (email sowerby01@yahoo.co.uk). It is not necessary to attend the AGM to join the committee if the date is not convenient for you.

CHAIR'S COLUMN

With the publication of TfW's rail plan *Today, Tomorrow, Together*, one can be forgiven for thinking there is an election in May. Railfuture Wales/Cymru has also published a Manifesto for the next Senedd term (see page 5). This has recently been sent to all the parties and media outlets, at the time of writing to little response. Perhaps we have not reached the zeitgeist; still there is time, the next stage being to e-mail copies to individual candidates. The manifesto has been our major effort this year and needs to be followed through with more detailed plans for the decade ahead. We have also held meetings with Plaid Cymru, Welsh Conservatives and Welsh Labour. The Liberal Democrats responded but never come back to us, whilst Reform has never responded. I will be attending an online meeting with the Welsh Government's Cross Party Group on Public Transport soon.

The forthcoming AGM gives you, our members, an opportunity to review and set out our future plans. With Northern Powerhouse Rail, the plans for Wales and the Borders in *Today, Tomorrow, Together*, there are plenty of ideas, but is there the cash? It is an easy shorthand to talk about railways in Wales but unlike Scotland, railways in Wales are not self-contained. This is a point we need to ram home. Also, the geography of the country means the population is in two belts: north and south. To link the rest of the country to the railways we need to look at integrating a rail and bus network. This poses many questions: e.g. how will connections be held, ticketing systems, carrying disabled passengers?

The good news is that passenger numbers are rising, and it will be interesting to see if the tightening of driving requirements for older people with medical conditions, together with more young people being saddled with debt making a car an expensive option, plus the above inflation cost of cars could mean more rail passengers in the future.

Lastly, we need to carefully think through our approach to battery and hydrogen rail vehicles, and discontinuous electrification. All promise a quick fix, but are they?

I look forward to meeting you at the AGM.

Richard Wilcock

SENEDD ELECTION 2026 : RAILFUTURE WALES MAKES ITS VOICE HEARD

The next Welsh Senedd election will take place on May 7th 2026 and although the precise role of the Welsh Government in funding and setting the strategic direction of rail in Wales is not yet known, Railfuture Wales has been busy making its voice heard.

A manifesto has been prepared outlining key asks for Welsh railways. The topics covered include rolling stock, timetables, stations and overall reliability. The limitations of the class 197 units are highlighted and improvements outlined. It is suggested that the class 230 units operating between Wrexham and Bidston are replaced.

Timetable improvements include reducing the gap between Sunday services and those on other days as leisure traffic is likely to continue to be of increasing importance. On ticketing, a simpler system is called for to make it wiser for potential new users to find the best value fares.

The manifesto covers many other topics including services to airports, special events and links to bus services. It can be read here: <https://www.railfuturewales.org.uk/docs/Railfuture-Cymru-Wales-Rail-Manifesto-2026.pdf>

If you are canvassed or attend any political event, please use the manifesto to help make the case for rail to candidates.

Copies have been sent to political parties and candidates in the election.

THE BUSIEST STATIONS IN WALES: PASSENGER NUMBERS GROW AND THE CARDIFF VALLEYS REGAIN LOST TRAFFIC

The latest statistics for station usage in Wales are set out in the table below, which is sorted in descending patronage. To help understand the trends since the arrival of Covid in March 2020 devastated the rail industry, the usage for the year April 2024 to March 2025 is compared with usage in the 12 months immediately before the start of the pandemic lockdowns. Data is also provided for 2023/24 to show trends over the past 12 months.

Station	2019/20	2023/24	2024/25	Change
Cardiff Central [CDF]	13,141,000	11,499,000	12,513,000	95.2%
Newport [NWP]	2,814,000	2,718,000	2,817,000	100.1%
Swansea [SWA]	2,134,000	2,186,000	2,304,000	108.0%
Cardiff Queen St [CDQ]	2,784,000	1,826,000	2,010,000	72.2%
Bridgend [BGN]	1,557,000	1,278,000	1,380,000	88.6%
Cathays [CYS]	1,002,000	823,000	934,000	93.2%
Neath [NTH]	832,000	778,000	839,000	100.8%
Pontypridd [PPD]	841,000	596,000	780,000	92.7%
Cardiff Bay [CDB]	1,522,000	546,000	756,000	49.6%
Bangor [BAN]	652,000	697,000	720,000	110.4%
Treforest [TRF]	679,000	650,000	712,000	104.9%
Wrexham General [WXM]	521,000	630,000	685,000	131.5%
Caerphilly [CPH]	739,000	569,000	623,000	85.4%
Rhyl [RHL]	519,000	567,000	612,000	117.9%
Port Talbot Parkway [PTA]	561,000	539,000	612,000	109.1%
Barry [BRY]	537,000	528,000	600,000	111.7%
Penarth [PEN]	643,000	459,000	508,000	79.0%
Llandudno [LLD]	279,000	397,000	456,000	163.4%
Barry Island [BYI]	787,000	382,000	446,000	56.7%
Carmarthen [CMN]	362,000	374,000	440,000	121.5%
Cwmbran [CWM]	413,000	385,000	432,000	104.6%
Abergavenny [AGV]	415,000	402,000	423,000	101.9%

Source: Office of Rail and Road (ORR) published 4 December 2025
<https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/estimates-of-station-usage>.

This year we have added the three-letter Computer Reservation System (CRS) station codes, as many people use them to save typing.

The headline news is that passenger numbers have grown significantly over the past 12 months, with the majority of stations in the table exceeding their pre-Covid usage for the first time since 2020. North Wales stations have made the strongest recovery, with Llandudno up by over 60% on its numbers in the pre-Covid year.

However, the rise in numbers at the stations on the S Wales metro (Cardiff valleys) network is particularly welcome given that this has occurred prior to the introduction of electric services. These stations had been slower to recover from the impact of Covid as their use is more dependent on commuter traffic, which has been reduced with the 'working from home' revolution. Some of the 'Valleys' stations have now exceeded their pre-Covid usage with others catching up fast. Only Cardiff Bay and Barry Island remain far adrift of their pre-pandemic figures, although with the

opening of a large entertainment venue near the former in 2028, this is likely to change. It will be interesting to see what impact the start of electric services and introduction of tram trains have on these routes.



In April 2025, a class 197 train heading to Manchester travels along the coast near Penmaenmawr, with the Great Orme visible across the sea. The timetable of the North Wales main line service changes significantly in May – see page 14. Photo: skimpler @flickr

SIGNALLING IN DAYS, NOT DECADES

The Heart of Wales line is playing host to a trial aiming to help show that signalling doesn't necessarily have to be hugely expensive and time-consuming. Normally, design work, possessions, testing and retesting – for safety is paramount – take huge resources. And that's not including the capital cost of equipment. So, it is usually difficult to justify signalling investment on lightly used rural lines like this.

Most of the line is single track, and signalling is basic, with block sections (essentially the stretch of line between adjacent signals) taking up to 40 minutes to traverse at line speed. This can be a problem at user-controlled level crossings, where users must phone the signaller to obtain permission to cross. Three minutes is considered a safe crossing time, but while the signalling system might know there is a train in a block, it doesn't know where in the block it is. In the worst-case scenario, a user wishing to cross the line at one end of the block may have to wait nearly 40 minutes when the train is actually at the other end. Many users are farmers, for whom time is money, and they can little afford to wait so long for a train to pass. There are 126 such crossings on a 96-mile stretch of the line.

Now, Universal Signalling is trialling a system called U-Cross on an 11-mile section of the line between Llandovery and Llandeilo. The system was first demonstrated at the Global Centre of Rail Excellence in Onllwyn, South Wales in 2024. It enables the signaller to know the precise location of a train and estimate the time to a given crossing to within a few seconds. So users should rarely have to wait more than three minutes for a train to pass.

U-Cross works by using beacons, installed between the rails ('four foot') approximately 30 sleepers apart. After installation (simply hammering the beacon onto a sleeper), a trolley carrying a beacon reader coupled with a high-grade GPS locator is used to map the position of the beacon to within 20mm. Data from this is then uploaded into a secure database containing the locations of all the beacons on the route. This completes installation; after checking, the system is ready for use.

In service, a reader on the train reads the beacon's identity and transmits it to the signalling centre (in this case the signal box at Pantyffynnon). Here, the software looks up the beacon's location from its database and displays the train's location, including the estimated time to reach crossings in the section. The display is colour-coded:

- green – the train has passed and crossing is completely safe
- red – the train is expected within three minutes: do not cross
- amber – the train is expected to take more than three minutes and crossing is permitted.

To be safe, the system assumes the train will be travelling at line speed – if the train is travelling slower, more time than shown is available.

The beauty of the system is that it is extremely cheap to install. No design work is needed in advance, and the beacons only cost £30 each (including installation, which was completed over the 11-mile trial stretch in only 2.5-night possessions). The beacon reader, which uses high grade mobile communications, fits on the train's headlamp bracket; it is taken on and off as required, and no modification to the train is necessary. Even the GPS locator, used to map the beacons' positions on installation, is protected from the weather by a modified bird bath – £10 online!

The cost of beacons fully installed is about £2,100 per single track mile. Clearly there are other costs, but the whole idea is to keep these down. By comparison, the cost of installing a single Signalling Equivalent Unit (a signal or point end), as estimated by Railfuture Vice President Roger Ford in 2023, is about £270,000 at 2018/19 prices.

U-Cross was installed on this trial section thanks to collaboration between Universal Signalling, Network Rail and Transport for Wales. Network Rail's Wales and Borders route director Nick Millington MBE said: "... It's been a real, real joy to bring something different to our railway. Why here, why this particular route then? So, [in] Wales and Borders, we've got a lot of rural routes.

"There's not a great deal of money around, so we need to use something different. We need to innovate our way to a safer space. So, on this particular route we're not going to spend an awful lot of money resignalling it."

So, what of the future? It is hoped the trial will give confidence in U-Cross, as well as demonstrating component reliability, which will be clearer in a few months. Beacons will fail, but losing a few will not markedly degrade the system.

The next phase is to apply U-Cross to the full 96-mile stretch of the Heart of Wales line.

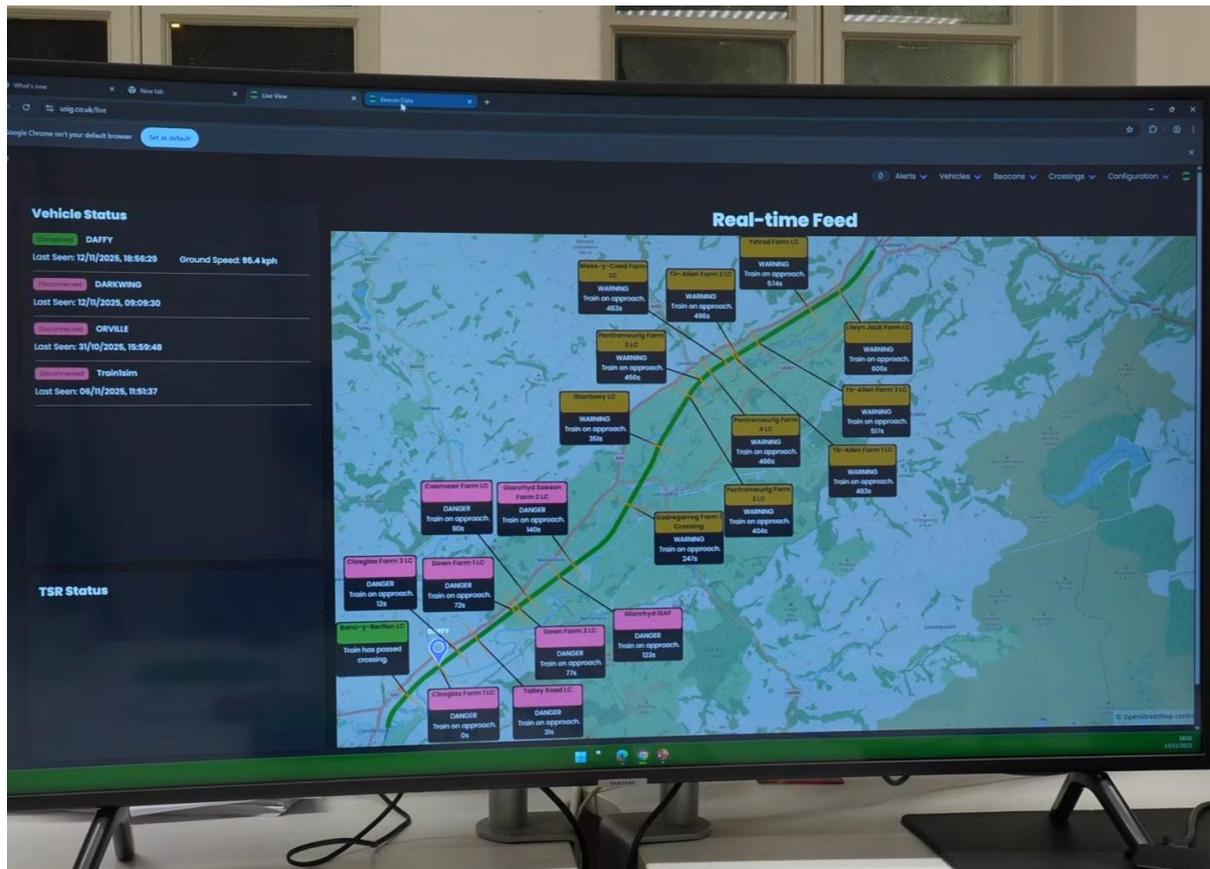
Ultimately, Universal Signalling wants to apply this and other low-cost signalling systems it is developing to branch lines across the UK.

U-Cross is not a signalling system; rather it is an enhancement best used with the basic signalling found on many lightly used lines. It is clearly not suitable for busier routes, which are hopefully better signalled.

If it works as intended, Universal Signalling's vision of installing this and other systems in days, not decades, will indeed improve the useability and affordability of many rural railways.

Rail Wales is grateful to Green Signals for permission to use some of the material in this article, including the picture shown. For more information, see their podcast at <https://www.greensignals.org/podcast/railway-signalling-in-days-not-decades/> or view it directly on YouTube at <youtube.com/watch?v=NQ9DwblEHWl>.

Julian Langston



What the signaller sees: the real-time display of the train's position (shown by a locator mark shaped like an inverted blue tear drop) on the line (marked in green). In this view the train is heading up the screen and has recently entered the block. Each crossing is colour coded to show its status. One crossing, behind the train, is green: the train has passed and it is safe to cross. The train is expected at the next eight red within three minutes, and these crossings are not safe to use. The remaining 11 crossings are shown in amber: they are far enough away to be safely crossed at this time

Universal Signalling is a Derby-based railway signalling company, founded in 2022. Their goal is to bring revolution to the stagnant worldwide railway signalling market through a unique blend of technology, operating model and open interface specification. See: www.universalsignalling.com/.

FREIGHT REPORT

In North Wales, both the Penmaenmawr aggregate traffic and the slate waste from Llandudno Junction continue to operate (see photo back page). In Mid Wales, the timber trains from Aberystwyth to Chirk are regular, hauled by Class 37/97s, which I believe is the only such regular haulage in the UK by these types of locomotives.

The Robeston (Milford Haven) petroleum trains have reduced to only three days a week (from six), normally on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. They run to Westerleigh (near Bristol) and Theale (Reading).

Trostre (Llanelli) receives two trains a day of steel coil from either Port Talbot, or from abroad via Cardiff Tidal sidings, reversing at Newport Alexandra Dock Junction (ADJ). Port Talbot receives imported steel slab via Newport Docks three or four loads a day also reversing at ADJ. There was for a time another once a day flow from Portbury Docks (Bristol) to Port Talbot, operated by GBRf, but this ceased running a few months ago.

A new daily steel scrap train of long box wagons leaves Port Talbot in the late afternoon for Scunthorpe, and coils also run from Port Talbot to Hartlepool and Corby, as well as Llanwern, and covered wagons travel to Round Oak (Dudley), although not every day currently. Flows of coils to Dee Marsh seem less regular too. So, although no longer making raw steel, Port Talbot works still generate plenty of freight traffic for rail.

There are scrap trains from Cardiff Tidal Sidings (Celsa) to Sunderland.

Turning away from ferrous products, there are two daily return Tesco flows from Daventry to Wentloog, one of which uses Class 68 haulage, and a daily return service from Wentloog to London Gateway or Felixstowe, and another to Southampton.

Finally, the Machen branch near Newport is busy with at least one weekday train of aggregates bound for several destinations, often on a Saturday too.

Rhodri Evans

TfW's VISION FOR RAIL: WILL IT HAPPEN?

On 18th February, Transport for Wales (TfW) published *TODAY, TOMORROW, TOGETHER: A vision for rail across Wales and Borders*. This document recognises that rail can “transform” Wales, describing Rail reform as a “golden opportunity”. It talks about work carried out so far, but importantly it sets out future projects costed at up to £14 billion. Moreover, Prime Minister, Keir Starmer, publicly endorsed TfW’s aspirations, committing, along with Wales First Minister, Eluned Morgan, to financing TfW’s vision.

This article is not a detailed look at all the proposed projects; these can be found at <https://tfw.wales/about-us/transparency/publications/today-tomorrow-together>. Rather it is an assessment of how these aspirations may be financed, which leads onto the question, will they actually happen. The various source documents for this information are vague and, in some cases, opaque. So, the figures quoted below may not be entirely accurate.

The vision sets out projects in three tranches, which could take up to 20 years to deliver in full. These range from already (partly) funded projects, such as the proposed stations on the South Wales main line, to future aspirations, such as electrifying the Marches line. What’s not to like?

The problem is that of the £14 billion total, only £445 million is actually committed: in Rachel Reeves’ spending review in June 2025. This makes up the first tranche, and it will partially fund:

- Five new stations between Cardiff Central and Severn Tunnel Junction (£90 million)
- Upgrading the relief lines to support services at these stations (£40 million)
- “Transforming” Cardiff Central station, especially the southern entrance (£59.8 million)
- Cardiff West junction upgrade to increase frequencies on the City line (£30 million)
- Further work on the Core Valleys Lines (£48 million)
- Upgrading rail access to Padeswood Sidings on the Wrexham-Bidston line (not quoted)
- Pedestrian crossing upgrades on the North Wales main line to allow for more trains (£30 million).

However, as the vision document recognises, this doesn’t represent total funding for all these schemes, and more money will need to be found for at least some of them. For instance, the five stations on the South Wales

main line are estimated to cost upwards of £150 million, so at least £60 million would need to be found elsewhere. From where the document doesn't say.

Beyond this, no money has been committed; any allocation will depend on further spending reviews. A General Election will take place in little more than three years at the most, and a new government may have very different views on funding priorities. Indeed, the existing Westminster government may have different priorities a year or two down the line.

The second tranche comprises of 43 schemes (including those already part funded as above) for which development is most advanced. Estimated to cost roughly £4 billion, these include:

- Electrification of various lines, including the North Wales main line, Cardiff – Burry Port and partial electrification between Cardiff and Cogan
- Additional new stations, including Deeside, Shotton Interchange, St Clears and several on the Cardiff Core Valleys Lines
- South Wales Metro extensions (to Hirwaun and to Abertillery)
- Extensions to Cardiff Crossrail
- Network North Wales, and the Swansea Bay and West Wales Metro
- Various line speed and capacity improvements
- Various new services and upgrades to existing services.

The above list is not exhaustive.

Costs are estimated for each of the 43 schemes, but only very broadly: under £50 million, £50 million – £150 million and over £150 million. This is too vague to be useful. For example, North Wales electrification will certainly cost over £150 million (as stated). The Sunak government had spoken about £1 billion for the scheme and even that may not be enough.

It is disappointing that reopening Bangor – Caernarfon doesn't appear in this list of schemes.

The final tranche is for less developed schemes with a total estimated cost of £10 billion or more, to be delivered in 15 – 20 years. This does include Bangor – Caernarfon, but only in the context of a line extending to Afon Wen on the Cambrian Coast line, “potentially using an innovative light rail solution to deliver new connectivity at a lower cost and with less disruption”. TfW seems to be wedded to light rail for this route, ignoring the fact that through trains beyond Bangor wouldn't be possible. As Caernarfon is potentially a much more desirable destination for

passengers from cities in Northwest England than Bangor, this lack of vision is regrettable.

Other projects included in the long-term plan are:

- Reopening Aberystwyth-Carmarthen (which, along with Bangor-Afon Wen, would create a north-south rail link wholly in Wales)
- Further new stations
- Extensions to the South Wales, and Swansea Bay and West Wales Metros
- Electrification (at least partially) of the Marches line

There is much to like in *TODAY, TOMORROW, TOGETHER: A vision for rail across Wales and Borders*, although there are flaws. Chief among these is that, despite Keir Starmer's fine words of support, 97% of it is not funded. A cynic may wonder if it is merely coincidence that the announcement of support was made less than three months before the Welsh government elections. Will it make a difference in May? We shall see.

Julian Langston

NEWSLINES

TfW News

In early March, TfW announced that its services on the North Wales main line would significantly change with the start of the new timetable in mid-May.

The long-anticipated timetable recast sees the introduction of a through service from Liverpool Lime Street to North Wales by extending the current Lime Street to Chester service to Llandudno. The existing service is itself a relatively new link between Merseyside and Chester which followed reopening of the Halton curve.

The Birmingham to Holyhead two-hourly service now terminates at Llandudno Junction whilst the hourly Manchester Airport to Llandudno service runs to Holyhead. The two-hourly Cardiff-Holyhead trains are unchanged.

The changes will result in 50% more TfW trains running on the North Wales main line which is very welcome, but Bangor will still not receive a consistent two trains per hour service (a Railfuture ask) unless the Avanti

West Coast trains are timed to fill the gap created by the removal of the Birmingham trains. The Sunday service is still markedly less frequent than that of the other six days of the week throughout North Wales, a disappointment as Railfuture Wales has been seeking to close the 'gap' between Sunday timetables and those of the remainder of the week.

Pay As You Go (PAYG), tapping in and out at stations, is also being introduced on the Wrexham to Bidston route following its successful trial in South East Wales. This will result in lower fares for local journeys for those not holding railcards.

In West Wales, service frequencies are being increased to Tenby for the summer season including on Sundays in August and September.

MEMBERS' GET TOGETHER

There will be another opportunity for Railfuture Wales members to meet for a chat and discuss the Welsh rail scene on Monday 20th April. The venue is again the Great Western pub adjacent to Cardiff Central station. On this occasion we are holding an afternoon meeting. Committee members will be there between 14.00 and 17.00 hrs so if you have some spare time, please call in and join us. Everything (rail related) is up for discussion.

The venue is about 100m from the city centre exit of the station- turn right as you enter the paved square. Once inside, look for the table with *Railwatch* and *Rail Wales* on display. We may be upstairs.

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 22 August 2026 for the autumn 2026 issue. The editor may edit letters for publication.

Railfuture is a voluntary body that campaigns across Great Britain for rail users. It receives no funding from political parties or rail companies. Annual subscription is £20 (£14 for under 26) and there is now a 'paperless' membership for just £10 per year.

Website: www.railfuturewales.org.uk. X/Twitter: [@RailfutureWales](https://twitter.com/RailfutureWales)

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On 25/04/2025 at Dwygyfylchi, DC Railways 60046 "William Wilberforce" is leading the company's first loaded train from Penmaenmawr Quarry to Wembley Receptions 1-7. It is seen with the hill of Penmaenmawr behind and is coming out from the arch of the "Darbishire" bridge with its decorative stone-work, named after the family that used to run the Quarry at Penmaenmawr from the mid 19th century until modern times. The locomotive has a headboard saying "Y Chwarelwr Penmaenmawr" (The Penmaenmawr Quarryman).

Photo: skimpler@flickr

Website: www.railfuturewales.org.uk

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