Just Another Train Journey – Durham to Bangor, December 2016

I'm travelling from Durham to Bangor by train to visit friends on Anglesey for a few days over Christmas. I've chosen days when the trains should not be too busy – travelling out on Thursday 22nd December and returning on Wednesday 28th. Like many cross-country journeys it is complex, involving four train companies and three changes of train, but I've travelled the route before and the National Rail Enquiries journey planner provides a series of options which look practicable. A recently acquired senior citizen's railcard means that the discounted standard class fare is not too outrageous at £74.60 return. I prefer flexibility so I haven't made reservations nor booked advance fares – there isn't an advance fare that covers the whole journey, so that would be a complicated exercise in itself. I know there will be many travellers at the Christmas period who travel by train rarely, and it interests me to assess what the experience would be like for them, so I take along my notebook.

Outward

My first train – a Virgin East Coast service from Edinburgh to London is running 10 minutes late due to signalling problems at Edinburgh, so for the first leg of my journey from Durham to York I catch the first southbound train, a Cross Country Voyager. It has only four coaches (on a service from Newcastle to Southampton) and it is busy, but I know where to stand on the platform to be next to a door and an area of unreserved seats, so at least I'm sitting. Had I a reserved seat on the London train, or an advance ticket covering this part of the journey, I would have missed my connection at York. On the plus side Virgin East Coast seem to have extra staff on their platforms to help those less used to travelling with train, the elderly and those with luggage – in addition to Durham and York I've noticed this at Edinburgh Waverley and Newcastle during December.

There is only five minutes to change at York for a Trans-Pennine service to Manchester Piccadilly but I make it, and it is on time. Between Leeds and Manchester it is full and standing, though this is routine throughout the daytime.

The usual onward route to North Wales is via the Arriva Trains Wales Manchester – Llandudno service. However these trains are only running between Warrington and Llandudno due to engineering work over Christmas (presumably related to the new Ordsall Chord linking the Piccadilly and Victoria routes in Manchester). The journey planner has directed people on to the (slower) Northern service from Manchester to Chester via Stockport, Knutsford and Northwich. There doesn't seem to be any information or help around to inform passengers who may not be aware of this, though I'm in hurry to reach the correct platform. The train is sitting in the platform, but the doors are not opened until two minutes after it is due to depart and people are becoming anxious. Despite being directed via this route (most of the passengers on the train are for Chester and beyond) it is a standard two coach Pacer. On the platform I stand by a door and am able to grab a seat and enjoy the journey, as it is many years since I've been along this line. It is not so comfortable for many other people – it turns out that the only toilet on the train is out of order, and as we get closer to Chester there are more and more people standing.

I know that most of the journey is on trains with no buffet or trolley facilities and I've built in a break at Chester to get something to eat and drink before heading for the 1525 train to Bangor. It is a Birmingham – Holyhead train which runs via Shrewsbury and Wrexham, arrives in Chester and reverses. The train has four coaches and the departure screen shows the front two coaches are for

Llandudno Junction and the rear two for Holyhead. It seems odd to me that the coaches going further are at the rear of the train on departure from Chester, but everyone obeys the screen and traipses on. Once we are underway it transpires that the screen is wrong – it may have been correct when departing Birmingham or Wrexham, but either the system or the person who programmed it cannot cope with the reversal. Locals confirm to me that this is a routine occurrence and regular travellers know to ignore the departure screen. The guard spends much of his time sorting out the confusion and persuading people to move into the front two coaches for Bangor and Holyhead. As this is where all the reservations are, the coaches are already busy. I change coaches at Colwyn Bay and manage to find one of the few seats.

At Llandudno Junction the guard announces that the train will be calling at the next three stops - Conwy, Penmaenmawr and Llanfairfechan, which are request stops. Unfortunately, the on-board information screen and recorded announcements cannot cope with this. The first stop at Conwy is announced as being Bangor - the guard manages to make it clear that we are at Conwy. At the second stop, Penmaenmawr, the screen and recorded announcement states that we have arrived at Holyhead and the train will terminate here. Once more, the guard manages to announce that this is not the case, though a few people are looking confused. We have to stop one person from getting off the train – presumably he was dozing. It is dark outside by now and not easy to see where we are so his confusion is understandable. The screen and announcements are now silent but I and the other Bangor passengers manage to alight at the correct station, thanks to the guard. I'm on time, I've managed to get seats throughout, and I've had a food and drink break. It may not have been comfortable, but I'm reasonably relaxed, though I hate to think of the state my mother, for example, would have been in had she tried to do the journey.

Return

Six days later, on my return journey, the 1200 from Bangor to Chester arrives in Bangor from Holyhead already busy. It becomes clear that a ferry from Ireland has arrived and most of the passengers (and their luggage) are from the ferry. Arriva Trains Wales has only been able to find a two-coach train to take us along the North Wales coast. The train becomes busier with each station and by the time we reach Rhyl and Prestatyn intending passengers are having difficulty boarding the train. The train is for Birmingham via Wrexham and Shrewsbury, or rather it was until the guard announces that it will be taken out of service at Chester. No platform is announced and neither is any information for connecting passengers. What in fact happens, for whatever unknown reason, is that our train will return to Holyhead and an incoming train from Birmingham terminates then returns to Birmingham, from the adjacent platform. This means there are passengers (heading for Holyhead) waiting to board our terminating train, being advised by passengers leaving that it is out of service. General chaos ensues and there are very few staff around to help. From across the tracks it looks like everything is and both trains depart, hopefully with passengers on board the correct one. It doesn't help that the connecting Virgin train to London is cancelled due to overrunning engineering work at Rugby, and these passengers have to wait another thirty minutes for a local train to Crewe.

The engineering work at Manchester continues, and the routing suggested by the journey planner was to catch a train to Warrington Bank Quay, walk 15 minutes to Warrington Central, where I would catch a Trans-Pennine train for York. Alternatively I could wait 45minutes for a slow train to Manchester via Northwich and arrive York an hour later. I have luggage and I barely know Warrington, so I have worked out that I can travel to Liverpool Lime St and (provided I arrive on time) catch the same train to York. I cross the footbridge towards the Liverpool platform. The lift on

the far side of the bridge is out of order, an elderly woman is struggling with her luggage on the stairs and there are no staff around and The screens state that my train (and all the following arrivals from Liverpool) is an arriving train from Chester. This is technically true – Merseyrail trains start from Chester, go round the loop in the centre of Liverpool and back to Chester without terminating – but it is not exactly helpful, particularly when the same screens are able to describe the departing services as being for Liverpool Central.

The journey to Liverpool is uneventful - though it is two or three minutes late there is still time to catch the 1422 departure to York, via Warrington Central and Manchester Piccadilly. However, it is cancelled due to signalling problems, as is the next fast train to Manchester Piccadilly. The trains via the Chat Moss route to Manchester Victoria are not running due to the engineering work on the approaches to Manchester. The only option for anyone travelling between Liverpool and Manchester is the Northern stopping service via Warrington to Manchester Oxford Road. Although it is a Pacer at least there are four coaches and it isn't overcrowded.

The train arrives at Manchester Oxford Road about ten minutes late and passengers are told to catch the following service for Manchester Piccadilly. Normally, this would be in a few minutes, but, due to the engineering work, the only trains running between the two stations are the Liverpool – Manchester fast trains, and the next one (the 1522 from Liverpool to York and Scarborough) is not due for 25 minutes. There are no replacement buses and passengers without luggage are being given directions on how to walk to Piccadilly.

The train dispatcher on the platform announces to the guard and driver of my train, within hearing of many of the passengers alighting, that they are to take the train out of service to Manchester Piccadilly and reverse there. And that is what they did - leave a crowd of people on the platform and travel fully staffed to Piccadilly, from where the train, driver and guard return a few minutes later (also empty) to form a train back to Liverpool. The next train is meant to be the 1607 to Scarborough, but it is running late and the next arrival is the next slow train from Liverpool. The pantomime is repeated and it heads off to Piccadilly, empty. I watch most of this from the station buffet with a cup of tea and a sandwich, the only opportunity on the entire journey to have some food and drink. Throughout this period the departure screens are giving out the wrong information.

When the Scarborough train eventually arrives it is packed but I manage to squeeze on. Fortunately, many people leave the train at Manchester Piccadilly and everyone has seats from there. We spend much of the journey travelling slowly in a queue of trains and arrive in York thirty minutes late. A Trans-Pennine train for Newcastle has been following us from Leeds and I am able to march from platform 5 to platform 10 in time to catch it….though I doubt people without an app or knowledge of York station will have made it. I eventually arrive at Durham 94 minutes late and utterly exhausted.

In conclusion, it was a tiring and difficult journey for someone familiar with rail travel – it would have been worse for someone less familiar. This isn't the place where I wish to make wider points about the structure of the industry, except to say that fragmentation between companies is a hindrance rather than a support in this situation. The trains are too short and uncomfortable for the number of passengers using them, and for any passenger making an expensive long distance journey. The information technology is poor. Most of the staff are doing a difficult job well, coping with poor technology and trains and taking the brunt of criticism for problems which are not their fault. Quite where Network Rail fits in is unclear, though most importantly there appeared to be a lack of management on the ground and of overall control. It is now back to my more frequent Durham to Glasgow journeys where the fairly straightforward journey usually means fewer problems….but we'll see.