



# Bidston to the Borderlands

*Paul Salvesson looks at one of the least-known links in Britain.*

**150 281 rolls into Shotton High Level, having just crossed the North Wales Coast line, with an afternoon Bidston–Wrexham Central train on 5 October 2007. Borderlands Line CRP**

The “Borderlands Line” between Wrexham and Bidston is one of the less well-known community rail lines, but it packs in an amazing variety of landscape and history along its 27 miles. It’s an international community railway, linking North Wales, Cheshire and Merseyside with a dramatic crossing of the Dee Estuary. A strong industrial heritage includes evidence of coal mining, brick-making and steel production along the route. It has a growing popularity amongst walkers, and attractive villages such as Hawarden and Caergwrle have long been popular with daytrippers from Merseyside.

The line is operated by Arriva Trains Wales, using 2-car Class 150 Sprinters based at Cardiff Canton. The line links Wrexham (becoming recognised as the “capital” of North Wales) with Merseyrail electric services at the rather tiny settlement of Bidston, whose main claim to fame was that it once housed a fleet of mighty 9F 2-10-0 steam locos for the Shotton steelworks traffic. This is probably of little interest to most present-day passengers, who are deposited at what is in effect an urban equivalent of Dovey Junction, with not much else to do other than wait for the frequent electric trains from West Kirby to Birkenhead and Liverpool.

The north end of the line falls within the area of the Merseyside Passenger Transport Executive (Merseytravel) as far as Heswall, with brief incursions into Cheshire West and Chester Council’s territories. The line actually enters Wales (Flintshire) before crossing the Dee near Shotton, and it ends within Wrexham Council’s domain. A positive feature of the route and its partnership is the strong support from all of

the local authorities along the line, reflected in continuing investment in passenger facilities such as real-time information and station improvements.

The railway grew piecemeal, with the Buckley Railway opening in 1862 to transport coal and bricks to the Dee. The Wrexham Mold & Connah’s Quay Railway opened in 1866, connecting with the Buckley Railway. For several years it was something of a ramshackle affair worked by decrepit locos hauling trains so overcrowded that passengers often overflowed onto the tender and footplate. The WM&CQ obtained powers in 1882 to extend to Shotton, and at the same time the railway was extended at the Wrexham end into what became Wrexham Central, opening in 1887. Meanwhile the Wirral Railway obtained powers in 1885 to build an extension from its line at Bidston to Hawarden Bridge, though this didn’t open in full until 1896, as the North Wales & Liverpool Railway.

With the exception of the Wirral Railway (running across the north of the Wirral peninsula), this jumble of local railways was steadily acquired by the Manchester Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway. Led by the dynamic Sir Edward Watkin, its principal goal was to gain access to the North Wales collieries. Crossing the Dee was the biggest obstacle and the MSL won parliamentary powers to build the great bridge required in 1884, the final part of the jigsaw. Work started in 1887 and a certain William Ewart Gladstone (a local resident with time on his hands through temporarily not being prime minister) was invited to lower the first of

the cylinder piers, a ceremony followed by a lunch with 500 guests. A local poet read a specially-composed piece which began with the immortal line “All hail Edward Watkin”.

The bridge opened in 1889, and Gladstone was invited back for the celebrations, which led off with renditions of “Men of Harlech”. Hydraulically powered, at the time it was the largest swing bridge in the world. The following year the link between Buckley and Shotton, known as the Hawarden loop, was completed.

The Manchester Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway (which was to become the Great Central) bullied the WM&CQ into surrender, and absorbed the company in 1897. It was a unique Celtic outpost of the GC empire. In that same year the company took over the North Wales & Liverpool Railway to Bidston, making its hegemony complete.

The traditional service pattern from the early 1900s was Wrexham–Chester Northgate, over the line diverging towards Chester at Dee Marsh Junction, on the north side of the Dee. Some other services continued to Seacombe Ferry, until the steam-hauled service ceased in 1960. A new service of DMUs was introduced running from Wrexham to Bidston, and on to New Brighton. When Chester Northgate closed in 1968 the Wrexham service was completely revamped, with all trains running to Bidston (connecting with the Wirral & Mersey electric trains), and on to New Brighton. More changes came in 1971, when Wrexham trains were diverted to run from Bidston into Birkenhead North instead of New Brighton, although some continued to New Brighton

on Sundays. The service was finally cut back to its present terminus, the swamplands of Bidston Moss, in the late 1970s.

## The route

The line begins at Wrexham Central, a new station opened on the edge of the Island Green Shopping centre in 1998. The original station covered a large site with several platforms, and an end-on junction to the Cambrian Railway Ellesmere line. By the 1970s it had dwindled to a very sad-looking single platform with a basic shelter. The shopping centre development was both a threat and an opportunity – the original scheme was for the station to be pushed well away from the town centre. A compromise ensured it was close to the new development with improved facilities, but sadly no staffed booking office or retail facilities.

Trains have a famously-quick turn-round time here, and I had to hurry to make sure I got a photo as a large crowd of shoppers, commuters and schoolchildren piled onto the 16.30 rush-hour departure. The line curves under the former Great Western Chester–Shrewsbury route just south of Wrexham General, and soon arrives at what is now Platform 4 of Wrexham General. In years gone by, this was Wrexham Exchange, separate from General station and rather the poor relation. Links have been improved since then, and a lift is on its way to give easier passage between the two parts of the station. A new shelter is also being provided.

The article on the Chester–Shrewsbury line in **TR UK 115** outlined the substantial improvements that have been made to General station in recent years, thanks to co-operation between ATW, Wrexham Council and the Welsh Assembly Government. The icing on the cake, literally, is the recently-expanded “Dot2Dot” café on Platform 1 – the cakes are delicious!

Just north of the station there is a connection between the two lines, allowing freight and empty stock movements to reach the Bidston route from the Great Western

line. Somehow the two railways do still feel quite different, though traces of the former Great Central are few. Wrexham General, however, is pure Great Western circa 1912, built in the French pavilion style.

The Bidston line curves away from the GW route and passes the site of Rhosddu loco shed, which provided motive power for the GC operations around Wrexham. It closed in 1960 and was used to store withdrawn locos for some years before the site was finally cleared. A branch to Plas and Brymbo curved away at a triangular junction before the former North Wales Mineral Railway from Brymbo to local pits crosses our line just before Gwersyllt. This village suburb generates plenty of business for the line – a good number of the shoppers and schoolchildren got off here. It’s also close to the Alyn Water Park.

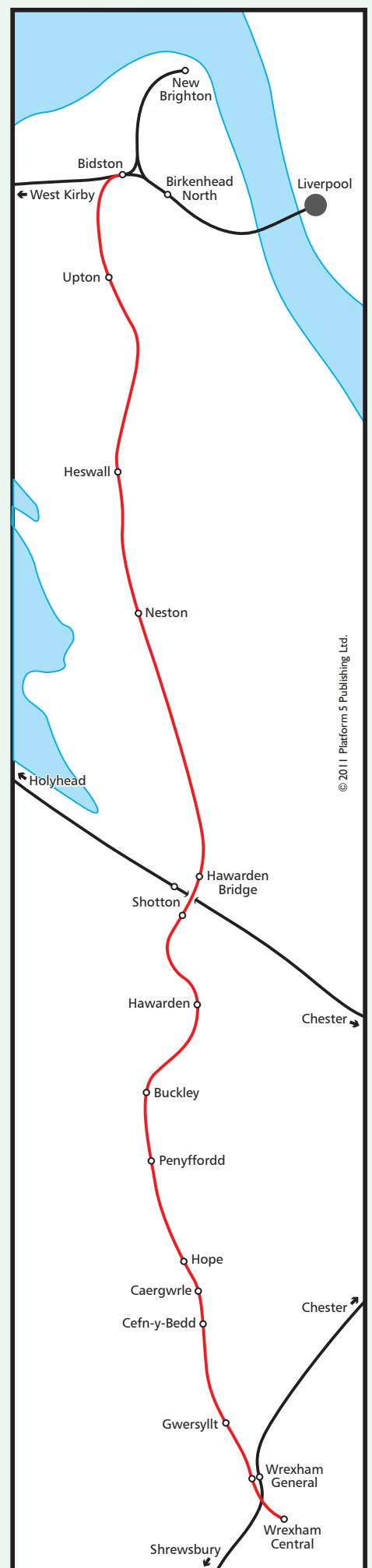
From here the line climbs quite stiffly and emerges into open countryside. The summit is close to the former Ffrwd Junction, where a branch diverged to several local collieries and brickworks. The railway crosses the River Cegidog on an impressive viaduct near the village of Sydallt, before reaching Cefn-y-Bedd. A branch once served yet more local collieries including Llay Main pit. Most of the coal production ceased by the 1960s, with Gresford and Bersham (see **TR UK 115**) being the last survivors in the Wrexham area.

Caergwrlle is only a mile further on. This village is famous for its 13th century castle, and enjoyed a period of popularity in Edwardian days as a small spa. The railway brought in trippers from Birkenhead and the Wirral, and the village still makes for an interesting wander round. The original stone waiting shelter is still in use on the Wrexham-bound platform, nicely restored with LNER motifs – it seems a long way from Kings Cross!

Hope station is a basic structure with another of the characteristic GC waiting rooms. The village of Hope has a mixed feel to it, with modern inner-urban housing located close to some fine countryside. The local school has adopted the station.



Class 150s work all Borderlands Line services – 150 256 stands at Wrexham Central with the 16.30 to Bidston on 12 May. **Paul Salvesson**



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The line descends towards Penyffordd, which has one of two operational signal boxes on the line, the other being at Dee Marsh Junction. Buckley (formerly Buckley Junction) once served a highly industrialised area, with collieries, ironworks and brickworks. There is evidence of tramways operating in the area as early as the 1790s. The station buildings have survived in private ownership, and the place is well cared-for. The station is some distance from the actual town, but there is a dedicated bus link – the Buckley Rail Link. It connects with most trains and is a well-used service funded by Flintshire Council.

The most famous personality connected with the area is undoubtedly Mr Gladstone, the great reforming Liberal prime minister of Victorian Britain. He retired to Hawarden Castle, and bequeathed his library, now the prestigious St Deiniols Library, for use by the nation. Like Caergwrle, this was a popular destination for day trippers from the Merseyside towns and there are some attractive walks from the station promoted by the Community Rail Partnership. The remains of the ancient Rigby's Tramway, which took coal down to the Dee, is included on one of the walks. The village has some magnificent 16th century houses.

### Shotton

The gradient stiffens as the line falls towards the Dee at Shotton. The former steel town has recovered from the devastating blow when much of the steel works closed in 1980 with the loss of thousands of jobs. "Local people still talk about 'Black Friday' in 1980 when British Steel laid off 4000 out of 6000 workers," says Community Rail Officer Jamie Sant. Some fascinating photographs of the steel works and its employees are displayed in the Wetherspoon's pub next to the station.

Shotton has been developed as a transport interchange by the local authority, Flintshire. The station is on two levels, with the North Wales main line on the low level and the Borderlands Line on the high level. There is a wide range of bus services linking into the station, which now boasts a good quality booking office funded by the council and Welsh Assembly Government.

The bridge over the Dee is a remarkable structure, some 180 yards long. When it was operational as a swing bridge, a 140 ft channel was provided for waterborne-traffic. It was fixed in the closed position in 1971, and the control tower was demolished in 1980.

The steelworks, reputedly once the biggest in Europe, was sited on the far side of the estuary, connected by the railway swing bridge which also carries a footpath and cycleway. Opened by John Summers & Co in 1924 the works was served by Hawarden Bridge station, but this sees little traffic these days and only a few trains stop (by request). Dee Marsh Junction was the focus of one of the busiest steel operations on Britain's railways, with Birkenhead shed's 9Fs and Stanier 8Fs kept busy with heavy loads. Part of the former Shotton Sidings is occupied by Deeside Business Park, a major development which could bring some new opportunities for the railway.

Neston is the first station in England, serving an attractive small town on the Wirral peninsula, with the highly-regarded Ness Gardens nearby. A station at Burton Point, south of Neston, closed in 1955 but the buildings have survived in private use. A short distance west of the town centre is Parkgate, a fascinating Georgian sea port which was once an important terminal for sailings to Ireland. It now has the feel of being partly abandoned, and it has certainly been abandoned by the sea, with an expanse of grass extending well out into the estuary. Nelson's mistress, Emma Hamilton, lived locally and used to bathe in the waters of the Dee, whilst (on a different plane) George Frederick Handel stayed here in 1742 before sailing to Dublin for the first performance of "Messiah". Culture aside, Parkgate is noted for its excellent ice cream shop, and also for its cockles.

Heswall (formerly Heswall Hills) is a small suburban station just within the Merseytravel area. Upton station is located next to a supermarket and is very convenient for local shoppers. It has good bus links into Liverpool city centre. Little trace remains of Storeton station, which closed in 1951.

### Bidston

It has to be said that there is more to Bidston than its swamp. I'm biased because I can remember getting lost in it, sometime around 1965, trying to find the small loco shed (my equivalent of the Holy Grail, see below) which still housed a few 9Fs. Today it is staffed (like all Merseytravel stations) and has a busy feel to it during the day. Yet its main purpose is as an interchange from the Wrexham line onto Merseyrail West Kirby–Liverpool trains. Nevertheless there are things to do here (other than getting lost in swamps). Bidston Hill is just half a mile away from the station. An excellent vantage point over the Mersey, it is one of the highest points on the Wirral, and also features Bidston windmill and the Bidston Observatory, within 100 acres of

woodland where ancient rock carvings can be found. According to local legend it is also the resting place of the Holy Grail. Be that as it may, the woodland is an excellent place for bird watching and offers an enjoyable day out.

### The Community Rail Partnership

The partnership was formed in 1997, and Jamie Sant has been the officer for over five years. He is a local lad, born and bred in Buckley, with a passion for his railway and the communities it serves, and this has clearly rubbed off on his partners. He is based in the Flintshire Council offices in Mold and is well placed to see the potential of linking up with local bus services – before his current job he marketed local bus services for the Council and worked in the operations office on the award-winning demand-responsive Deeside Shuttle transport service.

"Operators Merseyrail and Arriva Trains Wales are a key part of the Partnership, and extremely supportive of what we are doing," Jamie told **TR UK**. "The fact that people can use the Borderlands Line to travel straight into the heart of Liverpool, and Merseyside residents can access the country villages and towns of North Wales offers real potential for us to increase the number of passengers".

The work of the partnership has helped deter vandalism, which was a problem at some of the more urban stations on the line. "This was before we raised the profile of the railway station by organising the local community to adopt their station," said Jamie. "Castell Alun High School has adopted Hope station and made improvements to the station gardens and environment. Neston High School students have designed and painted a mural of the Liverpool skyline for the underpass at Neston station". Hawarden station is part of a community-focused schools project involving both Hawarden Infants and High School. The pupils' artwork for the interior of the passenger waiting shelters has brightened up the area considerably, the work being



150 250 arrives at Caergwrle with the 12.32 Bidston–Wrexham Central on 22 December 2006. **Steve Taylor**



**150 285 crosses the impressive bridge over the Dee between Hawarden Bridge and Shotton stations on 16 February 2008 with the 16.31 Bidston–Wrexham Central. Robert Pritchard**

sponsored by local businesses such as Moneysupermarket and Airbus. Smaller local companies including Sign World and Poplars Forge have sponsored a display case which will shortly be installed on the platform, and also funded several planters for the station.

A partnership between Flintshire County Council, the Welsh Assembly Government and ATW recently secured major investment at Shotton station. The old brick buildings have been replaced by a modern glass and metal ticket office, with matching passenger shelters. The platforms have been resurfaced and fencing screens have been taken back to open up the station platform waiting areas. The area has in recent years successfully emerged from a position of unenviable decline caused by the closure of the Shotton steelworks in the 1980s.

Shotton is the only station within Wales to participate in the ATOC-led station travel plans initiative. This is about encouraging sustainable access to stations, including bus, cycling and walking. Alex Veitch, former Integrated Transport Manager at ATOC, attended the Shotton opening ceremony in November 2010 and praised the scheme which included improvements “normally seen at larger city centre stations”.

A push by the Community Rail Partnership to have real time information installed at all stations failed some years ago, despite the backing of ATW and Flintshire County Council. It was turned down by Network Rail on technical grounds, but a new scheme has been approved and is currently being installed, funded by a grant from the Taith joint transport committee which will give all the Welsh stations information screens. Jamie adds, “Unfortunately the costings obtained for the English stations were not affordable by our English partners who don’t currently have the required funding available”.

The CRP is raising its profile beyond the actual route. On 21 June this year, together with other CRPs in the area, it held a promotional day at Chester station, giving information on the line to potential visitors.

### Operating the line

The route has seen a variety of rolling stock during the diesel era. For many years Derby-built Class 108 DMUs were used. These

were replaced by Class 142 Pacers when the route became part of the North Western Trains franchise. However these lightweight units struggled on the hilly route (the ruling gradient is 1 in 70 and there is plenty of it), so they were replaced by older but more robust Class 101 Metro-Cammell sets, which proved popular with passengers. These were replaced by single-car 153s, which lasted until 2006. Not only did these have limited capacity, they were under-powered for the steeply-graded line. The timetable is demanding, with short turn-round times at both Wrexham and Bidston. Recovery time added at the end of the journey means that the public timetable actually shows several trains arriving at Wrexham Central at xx.32, then departing at xx.30! At the Bidston end the public timetable shows a typical turn-round time of 3 minutes.

The introduction of the Class 150 Sprinters was a major boost for the service, giving more seats and greater “oomph” to keep time. ATW’s Ben Davies is happy with their performance. “The 150s are liked by both passengers and train crew,” he says. “Their introduction has helped to grow business along the line and trains are well filled”.

The train crews and units are outbased at Chester, involving considerable dead mileage for units and train crews having to spend a lot of time travelling as passengers. Some campaigners would like to see a small depot at Wrexham, which could bring better focus to the line and improve operations.

“Many passengers ring me up to say they have not been able to pay a fare as the conductor’s ticket machine battery is flat, and they can’t recharge them at Wrexham,” says Jamie. “Local people appreciate this service so much and actually want to pay their fare – it’s important to them to be counted as passengers. I am so delighted the latest footfall figures again prove passenger numbers are continuing to grow year-on-year from 2008 to the present day but we’re still losing some revenue because of these problems with ticket machines”.

The line still sees freight traffic. Two daily steel trains operated by DB Schenker run from Llanwern to Dee Marsh via Shrewsbury and Wrexham.

The line itself is entirely double track apart from the final section from Wrexham General to Central. It is controlled by Wrexham’s Croes



**150 237 at Bidston as the 17.45 to Wrexham Central on 14 November 2009 and (inset) the Bidston station sign showing Bidston Observatory. Robert Pritchard/Borderlands CRP**



**Steel trains from South Wales regularly use the line as far as Dee Marsh (near Shotton). On 16 February 2008 66100 passes Hawarden Bridge with the southbound empties. Robert Pritchard**

Newydd North Fork box at the southern end, with a long section to Penyffordd and on to Dee Marsh Junction. The entire Merseyrail network is covered by the IECC signalling centre at Sandhills, which controls the Borderlands Line as far as Upton, from where Dee Marsh Junction takes over responsibility.

### Integration, fares, ticketing and information

The increasingly popular North Wales Rover tickets are valid on the Borderlands Line, as well as all connecting rail and most bus services throughout North Wales. For example a journey from Bidston to Rhyl can be made (by changing trains at Shotton) for only £8 adult or £4 child. It's excellent value which could not be done any cheaper by car. Even better if you're a pensioner on the Welsh section of the line: rail travel is free. This concession has encouraged many elderly people to use the train, mostly for journeys into Wrexham.

At Shotton information screens have been installed on the High Street, by the station entrance, displaying connecting bus services. Better pedestrian and cycle access has been matched by extra cycle lockers. Introduction of a Shotton Plusbus ticket has been promoted in a marketing leaflet "Travel to Shotton" containing information on all modes of travel to the station. Hawarden station has bus stops by the station entrance, with frequent buses to Chester and Mold.

The Borderlands Line serves attractive country, ideal for walking and cycling. At Shotton it meets national cycle network route 89, which runs alongside the River Dee through to Chester. There are also many quiet lanes along the Borderlands Line which make for good, if demanding, cycling. The CRP promotes three walking routes along the line, from Buckley, Caergwle and Hawarden – all are available on the partnership's website ([www.borderlandsline.co.uk](http://www.borderlandsline.co.uk)).

### The User Group

The Borderlands Line has an active support group, the Wrexham–Birkenhead Rail Users Group. It is vocal in supporting the case for more frequent and more reliable trains, and has lobbied for services to be extended from Bidston back to Birkenhead North, which offers better passenger facilities and is a destination in its own right.

### Future development

Many rail campaigners have argued that the line should be electrified as an extension of the Merseyrail system, avoiding the need to change at Bidston. Merseytravel would like to see the line electrified to link with its own third-rail service. The PTE is willing to split the costs of electrifying the whole line with the Welsh Assembly Government, as 40% of the line lies within Wales. Network Rail estimates of the cost at £207 million have put the scheme beyond current budgets, but the possibility of electrifying the Cardiff Valleys has produced growing political pressure for electrification schemes in North Wales – the Borderlands Line is clearly the prime candidate.

Jamie stressed the strong strategic economic case for a matching investment in services in North Wales, with the Deeside Business Park being of great economic importance to both Wales and North West England, and supporting the case for an improved diesel service. In turn the success of an improved diesel service will strengthen the business case for electrification of the Borderlands Line.

The "Borderlands Rail Study", produced by Faber Maunsell in October 2008, concluded that doubling the frequency of services was viable. A direct link to Liverpool would also raise patronage by 65%, although capital costs would be high. Jamie Sant agrees that a half-hourly rather than the current hourly timetable would better meet the needs of

commuters. "The service is busy and an increased frequency would enable us to better serve the large business park at Deeside, just north of Hawarden Bridge station".

Jamie explains: "In recent years two major transport events involving the Highways Agency and member authorities of the Mersey-Dee Alliance have been held at Deeside Industrial Park to put forward the case for rail. Attendance was high and showed the demand for improved rail services is high among large employers such as Convatec, Iceland and Toyota. There are currently 162 businesses on the park and the nearest station is Hawarden Bridge which is just a 14–20 minute walk away".

Over the last ten years or so several suggestions have been made for new stations along the Wirral section of the line to serve new housing and retail development. A new station at Beechwood (not far from the long-closed Storeton) has been considered which would serve a large housing estate nearby. Another option has been for a station at Woodchurch, again serving a large residential area and business park – part of the scheme included electrifying the line from Bidston as far as Woodchurch, with improved interchange facilities. Unfortunately neither scheme appears to be moving forward at present.

David Blainey is a senior Merseytravel planner who uses the line every day for commuting into Liverpool. "The Borderlands Line has been referred to as the line that even Beeching forgot," he told **TR UK**. "However, it has enormous potential to connect North East Wales and Merseyside which traditionally have close links; provide sustainable access to employment opportunities and tourist attractions; take pressure off a congested road network; and reduce carbon emissions. The challenge for those involved is to realise this potential at a time of limited funding with a line which has a very fragile timetable".

The line is fortunate to have an energetic partnership with an officer passionate about the railway. The Welsh Assembly Government, Merseytravel and the local authorities along the route are strongly committed to rail, and share Jamie's desire to make major changes in the service offered. The steady growth in passenger numbers suggests that a more frequent service would be a worthwhile investment: electrification and removal of the need to change trains would be the ultimate triumph. I'm sure that Sir Edward Watkin would have approved.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Jamie Sant of Borderlands Line CRP and Flintshire County Council, Rudi Boersma of Merseyrail, and Ben Davies of Arriva Trains Wales for their kind assistance in preparing this article.

### Erratum

The photograph of 150 236 at Betws-y-Coed in **TR UK 114** was taken by Garry Stroud.