

THE 8D ASSOCIATION

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**The Journal of the 8D Association
Volume 2 Number 4
December 2012**



Warrington Bank Quay Low Level

A Ditton Junction to Manchester Oxford Road train takes on Water at Warrington Bank Quay (low level) in the summer of 1961.

Photo from the Les Fifoot collection.

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Editor



*Halton Junction in
the 1950s.*

**Photo by Roy
Gough**

**From this edition forward the
journal will be 20 pages.**

This edition of the 8D Journal is the eighth such edition and it has been just over two years since the 8D Association was started. It is safe to say that we are well and truly established having a membership of 41. By the time you read this we will already have held our first two winter events and plans are afoot for the AGM. This year we are having our AGM at the Halton Stadium and more time has been allowed for members to chat and socialise at the end of the formal programme. The feedback that I have had is that members really enjoy having time to chat and share stories and information. I hope to see as many of you as possible at the AGM.

It has been a fantastic year for the association and one which I have enjoyed immensely. I have made lots of new friends and I have seen others do the same. It has been fantastic to see old friends and colleagues brought back together again often after nearly half a century.

All of this started following a talk I gave at Widnes Library when Phil Williams (ex-Signalman) suggested that we form a railway history group dedicated to the study of an area within a ten mile radius of the 8D shed (but we are not pedantic on that point). Who would have thought then that in October 2012 I would be sat on a train travelling over the Widnes Deviation listening to it salute with its horn significant parts of our railway history. And sounding that horn would be an 8D Association member. Happy Christmas to you all and here's looking to a great New Year,

Paul Wright

Working the Marsh.



*An up goods service heads away from the Marsh sidings in the early 1960s. The train would shortly cross over Widnes Dock Junction before heading towards St Helens. **Photo by Bill Twist***

Reading about your planned visit to Spike Island started me thinking about my time on the footplate when I spent a considerable amount of time on shunting in the Marsh sidings. Although it's hard to remember exactly from this distance, I think there were only about 10 'roads' in the sidings but most of them were capable of holding a large number (40+) wagons. Originally, there used to be a lagoon (connected to the river?) in the centre of the sidings, so half of the roads followed the contour of the river bank whilst the others followed the profile of the canal. As a result, there was an 'empty' space in the middle of the yard.

There was a small hut on the Dock Junction side of the canal bridge which, in earlier times, used to be manned by a person responsible for stopping rail traffic and opening the canal bridge to allow waterborne traffic to pass. This unfortunately had no modern aids so he had to crank a huge handle which operated the bridge mechanism. Nor did he have the convenience of a telegraphic signaling device to communicate with Dock Junction. Communication was achieved by pulling a lever similar to that in a signal box which operated a large gong at Dock Junction. There was evidently a code to indicate whether he wanted clearance for outward or inward traffic and, of course to tell his more fortunate

counterpart at Dock Junction whether the bridge was open or closed. Dock Junction had a similar lever which operated a gong (about the size of a car wheel) mounted on the wall of the small hut. I often thought how intrusive it must have been for him to suddenly be roused by the (very noisy) clanging of the gong.

Spike Island was frequented by local ne'er - do - well's who played Pitch and Toss down there. This was an illegal form of gambling which involved betting on the orientation of two coins tossed into the air and allowed to land. The police knew of the existence of the gambling club and made periodic raids on the group. However, because the 'island' was rather exposed, the punters were usually able to see the approaching lawmen and pretend to be taking in the view when they arrived. Not to be outdone, the cops sometimes borrowed railway caps and mackintoshes from British Rail and managed to bag a few lawbreakers this way. They also used to conceal themselves in a Guards' Van and have us shunt this down to the 'block' at the end of the road. The gamblers must have had an awful shock when a posse of cops emerged from a seemingly empty van.

I had a few bad experiences whilst working the Marsh Sidings. The first of these was when a Shunter friend of mine Eddie (Robinson, I think) was killed there one night. He wasn't working with our loco that night, but it seems that his head was crushed between the buffers of two wagons. The locomotive crew, realising that they'd had no instructions from him for some time, discovered the grisly accident when they investigated. It's really surprising that there weren't more such incidents as the sidings were as black as hell and only boasted 2 or 3 gas lamps!

My second Marsh incident was a derailment on a set of incorrectly closed points. I had several such experiences during my career, but this was the first and the most alarming. When the loco left the rails, it bumped up and down as it rode over the individual sleepers. The sensation of such a huge machine jumping up and down was alarming, to say the least. **Barry Nolan**



The entrance to Widnes Dock in the 1920s.

Test Train runs through Runcorn & Widnes



Photo by Paul Wright



Photo by John Wilson



Photo by Paul Wright

Our local area had a visit from the Network Rail test train at the end of October 2012. The test train visited the Halton curve on Wednesday 24 October on a run from Chester to Runcorn station. It then visited the 'Low Level' line on Friday 26 October passing along that line in both directions. It ran from Liverpool Lime Street to Latchford and then returned to Liverpool.

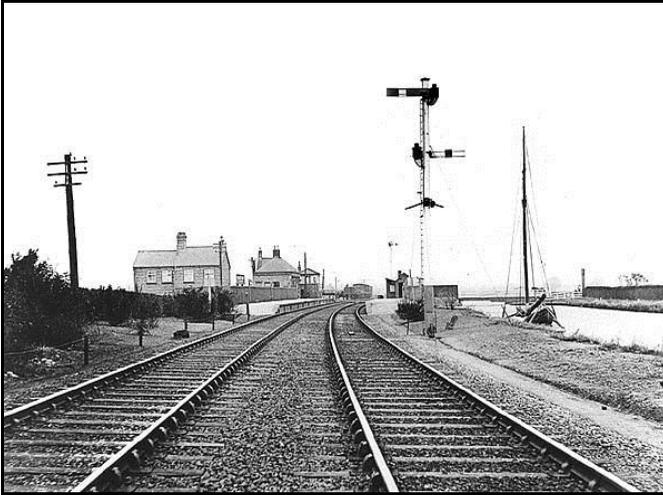
The Network Rail test train is a two coach DMU based on a class 150. It was purpose built for British Rail in 1987 and carries the number 950 001. The test train carries sophisticated equipment that can analyse the track over which the train is travelling providing vital information to engineers as to its condition.

The picture top left shows the test train on the Halton Curve heading towards Runcorn. The curve can only be used in one direction (between Frodsham Junction and Halton Junction). At Runcorn station it was stabled on the Folly Lane branch before it returned to Crewe.

The middle picture shows the inside of the test train with its monitoring equipment.

The 'Low Level' line saw its fair share of interesting traffic in October having had the Ferry go Round rail tour pass along it. The picture bottom left shows the test train on the Widnes Deviation section of the line on route to Latchford. How interesting it would be if we saw trains similar to this on this line all the time. **Paul Wright**

Fidlers Ferry & Penketh Station



Fidlers Ferry Station in 1901 looking towards the east. Both platforms can clearly be seen as can the booking office on the eastbound platform. Also of note is the St Helens Canal which can be seen to the right of the station. The Canal opened as the Sankey Brook Navigation Canal in 1757.

Fidler's Ferry station was located adjacent to the Sankey Canal, which had been extended from Sankey Bridges to Fiddlers Ferry in 1781. It was further extended to Widnes in 1833. Locks gave access to the River Mersey across which the ferry that gave its name to the area plied its trade. As a result of the canal activity and the ferry a small settlement had grown up and so it was an obvious place to provide a station. Since 21 July 1845 the St Helens Canal & Railway Company had owned the canal.

The station opened as Fiddler's Ferry at the same time as the line on 1 February 1853 but in April 1881 it was renamed Fiddlers Ferry & Penketh. The line being a double track resulted in the station being provided with two platforms which were located on the west side of a level crossing. The canal was very close to the railway tracks on the south side so there was little room for any facilities on that side. Therefore only a small waiting shelter was provided on the westbound platform. The stations main booking office, a single storey brick built structure was located on the north side of the line at the east end of the eastbound platform. A signalbox was also provided at the east end of the eastbound platform adjacent to the level crossing. To the north of the booking office and signalbox there was a stationmasters house. On the west side of the crossing, on the north side of the line goods facilities were provided. They consisted of a siding, a crane and a small yard.

On 3 May 1920 the LNWR altered the spelling of the station to Fidlers Ferry & Penketh. As the 20th century progressed and canal traffic declined Fidlers Ferry & Penketh Station lost much of its business to road transport. Many of the local services no longer called at Fidlers Ferry & Penketh leaving it with only a handful of services on weekdays. The station became part of the nationalised British Railways (London Midland Region) on 1 January 1948 but the new owners did not keep it open to passengers for very long closing it on 2 January 1950. It remained open for goods services until 2nd December 1963 and a coal yard operated out of the goods siding.

Fiddlers Ferry Power Station



The 8D Association at Fiddlers Ferry Power station on 4 August 2012.

On Saturday 4 August 2012 the 8D Association was privileged to be invited to the Scottish and Southern Energy Fiddlers Ferry Power Station to view up close the coal unloading plant and to see a train pass through. In these security conscious days invites of this nature are few and far between. The impression that we made on the staff at Fiddlers Ferry was such that we were invited back in October to view the Ferry go round rail tour. Twelve members took the tour and we were escorted by Gemma Davis and Merril Cummerson employees of the power station. As well as visiting the rail facilities at Fiddlers Ferry those on the tour also got to visit the control room and the boiler house.

Fiddlers Ferry Power Station is a major feature of the 8D area and is significant with regards to the railway history of the area and further afield. The Central Electricity Generating Board (CEGB) began work on the construction of Fiddlers Ferry in 1964 using the contractor Cleveland Bridge Company. Its location was chosen because there was a ready supply of water, the River Mersey, and a railway that provided an excellent link to the coalfields of Lancashire and Yorkshire. At that time the line between Ditton Junction and Skelton Junction had lost its passenger services and was a key freight artery directly linked to the electrified Woodhead route via Godley.

The power station was designed for automatic unloading of coal trains. To achieve this a loop line was built on the western side of the plant that would allow trains to pass through without having to reverse. An unloading facility was built on the east side of the loop. It was enclosed and allowed coal to empty from the bottom of specially built wagons and drop through a gap between the running rails. The concept was called the Merry-go-

Round system. It was used at all of the new generation of power stations. Connection with the main line at Fiddlers Ferry was made at a point half-a-mile west of the former Fidders Ferry station. An east facing junction was created and a timber BR LMR type 15 signal box called Fiddlers Ferry Power Station was built to control it. An interesting fact is that the London & North Western Railway had spelled their station name as Fidders Ferry but the CEGB used Fiddlers Ferry. The Fiddlers Ferry Power Station signal box opened on Sunday 30 July 1967.

Fiddlers Ferry Power Station had a direct impact on saving the former Midland Railway Hope Valley line between Chinley and Sheffield from closure. The Re-shaping of British Railways Report of 1963 (The Beeching Report) made much of the fact that in Great Britain there were many duplicated routes and it cited the Woodhead and the Hope Valley routes as one such example. Both connected Manchester to Sheffield and the report suggested that one should close. The report suggested the Hope Valley route should close. The Woodhead route had been electrified in 1954 and a new tunnel provided. It was considered to be the better route and more worthy of saving. British Railways knowing that they would be supplying coal to Fiddlers Ferry from Yorkshire in huge tonnages wanted to route passenger trains away from the Woodhead line so that it could become a conveyor belt of coal and other freight. To allow this to happen the passenger trains had to go another way and the only solution was to send them via the Hope Valley. It was saved and went on to become a very busy line. Ironically the Woodhead route is now closed but we will come to that later.

Trains would have run into Fiddlers Ferry Power Station from the opening of the signal box in 1967 but full production at the site did not commence until 1973. Throughout the 1970s



A loaded coal train hauled by two class 20 locomotives waits to be given a signal to proceed to the unloading hopper on 21 April 1991. Photo by John Wilson



*A class 56 locomotive heads towards the unloading plant at Fiddlers Ferry on 11 June 1992. The train is typical of Merry-go-Round services in the period from the late 1960s to the late 20th century although the class 56 locomotives are a product of the 1970s. **Photo by John Wilson***

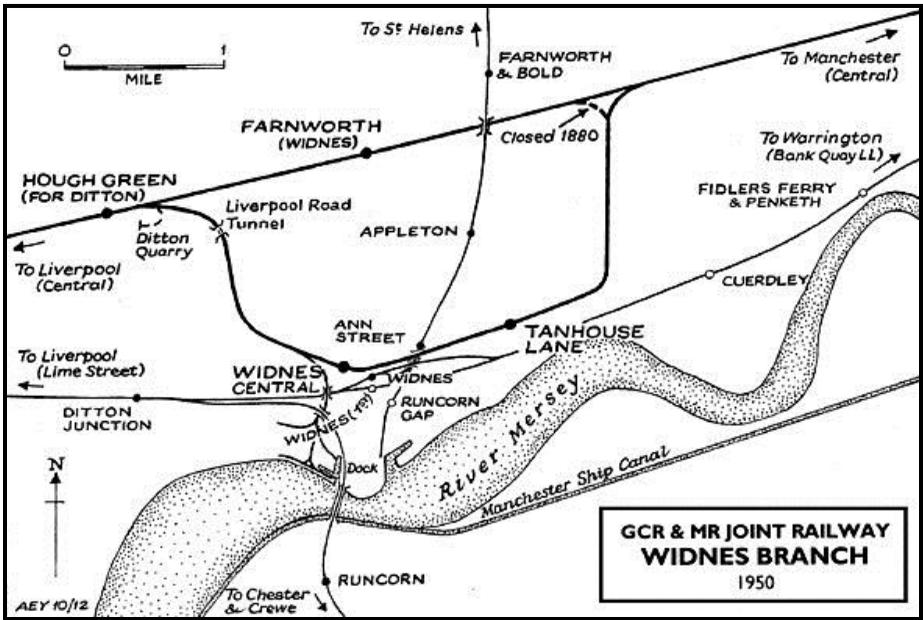
the pattern of train services remained fairly constant. Loaded coal trains ran from Yorkshire via the Woodhead route to Godley. From Wath to Godley the trains were hauled by 1500v DC electrics that were built to an LNER design. By the 1970s they were given the designation class 76. At Godley the electrics were taken off and a Brush class 47 would take over. In the 1970s the norm was a class 47 3xx. The 47 3xx machines could operate at slow speeds through the coal unloading plant. Trains also ran from the Lancashire coalfield and reached Fiddlers Ferry via Warrington.

On 17 July 1981 British Rail controversially closed the Woodhead route. Although only electrified in 1954 the DC system had been used and from the 1960s it was the AC system that was rolled out on routes such as the West Coast Main Line. British Rail argued that the Woodhead route needed upgrading and the expense was not worth it as they could divert traffic along other routes. The closure of the Woodhead route meant that Yorkshire coal had to travel along other often more lengthy routes.

The catalyst for the biggest change to the train services to Fiddlers Ferry came in 1984/5 with the Miners' strike. The CEBG had stockpiled coal at Fiddlers Ferry so there was no issue at first with regards supply. Very quickly though the Government looked at supplies from abroad and coal was brought in from Birkenhead Docks. After the strike was over imported coal became the norm as pit after pit was closed until eventually there were none. In August 1985 British Rail closed the line between Latchford and Skelton Junction because expensive repairs were required to the Latchford bridge over the Manchester Ship canal. By the 1990s Fiddlers Ferry was using mostly imported coal and much of it was coming in via Liverpool. Locomotive types during this era included class 20, 47 and 56. The east facing loop now faced the wrong way as most trains came from the west. Much reversing had to be carried out.

Fiddlers Ferry Power station transferred to Power Gen PLC in 1990, passing to Edison Mission Energy in 1999, to AEP Energy Services Ltd in 2001 and then in July 2004 to its present owners Scottish and Southern Energy. The present rail scene at Fiddlers Ferry is just as interesting as the past but that is for future journal.

The GC & MR Joint Railway – Widnes Branch



By the 1870s the LNWR had a monopoly of the town of Widnes as it owned the west-to-east Garston to Manchester via Warrington and Lymm line, and the north-to-south St Helens to Widnes (formerly Runcorn Gap) line.

The Cheshire Lines Committee (CLC) was granted powers to build a new railway from Garston to Manchester (opened 1 August 1873) which passed to the north of the town. Industrialists in Widnes lobbied for a line to branch off this new route to the east of Widnes, veer south, and then run through the town before turning north and re-joining the CLC main line. The CLC was a joint company comprising three partners: the Great Northern Railway (GNR) Manchester Sheffield & Lincolnshire Railway (MSLR) and the Midland Railway (MR). Whereas the GNR had no interest in the Widnes proposal, the other two CLC partners did.

The factory owners, or the 'landowners' as they became known, pressed their case and persuaded the MS&LR and the MR to build a line: thus the MS&LR & MR Joint Railway Company was born.

The first section of the line, however, was promoted by local industrialists. They received an Act for 'The Widnes Railway' on 7 July 1873 to build a line of three miles which would make a junction with the CLC east of Barrows Green and run south before turning west and terminating at Tanhouse Lane in Moss Bank, which at that time was a small settlement to the east of Widnes. The independence of the line was short-lived as, by 1874 - well before it opened - it was vested with the MS&LR, and a year later with the MS&LR and the MR, creating the Sheffield & Midland Joint Railway Company.

At Barrows Green a junction was laid out in the form of a triangle so that trains could travel either west towards Liverpool or east towards Manchester. The west-facing junction was Widnes West Junction and the other was Widnes East, whilst the southern point of the triangle was Widnes South Junction. Signal boxes were located at all three junctions. The line was opened to goods services only on 3 April 1877.

A substantial goods station was provided at Tanhouse Lane, which could be reached easily by many of the factories. The goods station was provided with both a large goods shed and an engine shed. New factories developed along the route of the line.

In 1874 an Act was obtained to build the 'Widnes West Railway' from the goods depot at Tanhouse Lane to Hough Green. Construction began that year. It passed through the centre of Widnes and many properties, most of them very poor structures, had to be demolished. The line opened to goods services on 1 July 1879 and effectively created a loop from the CLC main line to pass through Widnes. On 29 February 1880 the western curve of the triangle to the east of Widnes was closed and taken out. It no longer served a purpose as trains could head west from all points along the joint line via Hough Green; equally they could reach the line from the west by the same route.

On 1 August 1879 Widnes Central passenger station opened. Just over eleven years later a further passenger station opened at Tanhouse Lane. On 1 August 1897 the MSLR changed its name to the Great Central Railway (GCR). The joint line became the GC & MR Joint Railway Widnes Branch. At the grouping of 1923 the GCR became part of the London & North Eastern Railway (LNER) and the MR became



*With the infamous Ditton Alps in the background a former LMS Class 5MT (Black 5) rounds the curve that was to the west of Moor Lane Junction and heads towards Dundalk Road on a Liverpool Central passenger service. No trace of this section of the line survived in 2012 as it had been lost under the St Michaels Golf Course. **Photo by Neville Conroy***



During the last weeks of passenger services on the GC & MR line a class 108 DMU heads towards the Liverpool Road tunnel on route to Warrington Central. Photo by Neville Conroy

part of the London Midland & Scottish Railway (LMS). The CLC remained independent, but with two-thirds of the shares being held by the LNER and one-third by the LMS.

On 1 January 1948 the majority of the railways of Great Britain were nationalised as part of British Railways. The Widnes Joint line became part of British Railways' London Midland Region: for the first time it was under the control of just one organisation. It remained busy for freight services throughout the 1950s.

In 1961 British Railways laid a new spur line from Widnes No. 1 signal box (which was located on the Widnes to St Helens line just south of Lugsdale Road Bridge) to Tanhouse Lane yard. This enabled locomotives to transfer between the former LNWR Widnes engine shed and the former GCR/MR joint line. It also allowed goods trains to reach Tanhouse Lane yard from the north via the Widnes - St Helens line, which had previously been impossible. One such train that was able to use this new chord was the United UU Anhydrite Train each weekday from Long Meg.

The Reshaping of British Railways ('Beeching') report of 1963 recommended the closure of the former joint line as a through route; only the yard at Tanhouse Lane would be retained, but served from the former LNWR Widnes – St Helens line. The last passenger services ran on 3 October 1964 and the last through goods trains on 6 December 1964.

The following year all tracks were lifted except for sidings at Tanhouse Lane. Metal bridges were also removed in the centre of Widnes. Tanhouse yard remained in use



Dundalk Road seen from an eastbound train in September 1964. Photo by Neville Conroy

until 2000 (but from 21 April 1982 reached from the former LNWR Widnes Deviation line). The track at the yard was lifted in 2008 and the area landscaped as Moss Bank Park. A short section of track was retained as a feature of interest.

After closure most sections of the line were obliterated by building developments. The only sections that still survived in 2012 (other than at Moss Bank) were at Sunny Bank (the former triangle to the east of Widnes) and at Liverpool Road on the west side of the town. **Paul Wright**



A BR Standard class 9F at Tanhouse Yard in 1966. The yard was a shadow of its former self by this time the main line having been lifted. It still saw plenty of rail traffic though in the form of Anhydrite trains from Long Meg and Cement trains for the Blue Circle works.,

Photo by Richard Mercer

The Ferry Go Round Rail Tour Picture Special

On the 20th October 2012 the Ferry Go Round rail tour a charter run by UK Rail Tours passed through the local area. Originating at St Albans the train consisted of twelve coaches that were top and tailed by class 66 locomotives numbers 66 197 and 66 095. The tour had a scheduled pick up stop at Crewe where 8D Association member and DBS driver John Wilson took the controls.

Departing from Crewe at 10.19 the train travelled to Ditton. From Ditton the train headed to Latchford. As the train passed the site Widnes South station and Widnes Locomotive Depot (8D Shed) it made a salute by way of sounding its horn repeatedly. From Latchford the train ran back along the low level line to Fiddlers Ferry power station. It travelled around the loop there and through the coal unloading bunker. It then returned to Latchford. From Latchford it ran through Arpley and up to Walton where it joined the West Coast Main Line running down to Hartford where it took the chord to Northwich. The tour then continued on via Skelton Junction, Northenden Junction and Hazel Grove to Sheffield and onwards to another power station Ferrybridge.

I was on the train from Crewe and what was amazing was the turn out from 8D members all along the line, including a group who were inside the power station as guests. The weather was excellent on the day of the tour and as a result some great pictures were taken. The following are a selection of the pictures taken by members at various points along the low level line. **Paul Wright**



*The Ferry go Round train rounds the northern section of the Fiddlers Ferry loop on route to the coal discharge plant. Passengers on the train were required to remain seated during the passage through the power station and all windows had to remain shut. Perhaps more importantly the toilets were not allowed to be used. **Photo by Tony Foster***



The Ferry go Round prepares to go through the coal discharge point at Fiddlers Ferry power station. DBS driver and 8D Association member John Wilson receives instructions from one of the power station personnel. The train was given authorisation to pass through the unloading plant at 3mph over three times the usual speed limit. Photo by Tony Foster



Having travelled around the loop at Fiddlers Ferry Power Station the tour waits for a signal so that it could make its second trip of the day to Latchford. Photo by John Wilson



Looking west from the automatic level crossing at Fiddlers Ferry Marina as the Ferry-go-Round heads towards Warrington. Photo by Spencer Webster



Latchford looking east. The Ferry-go-Round visited this site twice. On the original 1853 line an Ellesmere Port – Fiddlers Ferry coal train was waiting to depart. Photo by Terry Callaghan



The Ferry-go-Round approaches the site of Widnes West Deviation having departed from Ditton a few minutes earlier. Photo by Les Fifoot



8D Association treasurer Lee Woods takes a picture of 8D member Terry Callaghan at Carterhouse Junction as the Ferry-go-Round heads for Latchford. Photo by Terry Callaghan



Ferry go Round driver and 8D Association member John Wilson walks from one end of the train to the other at Ditton. Photo by Paul Wright



8D Association members inside Fiddlers Ferry watch the Ferry-go-Round approach the coal unloading plant. Photo by Tony Foster

Helsby – Ellesmere Port Trip

On Saturday 25th August, five of our members met at Helsby Station to take a return trip to Ellesmere Port on another of Cheshire's Parliamentary Trains. The current rail service is operated from Monday to Saturday, departing Helsby at 06:03, 06:33, 15:17, and 15:48. On arrival at Ellesmere Port the driver changes cabs, and the return service departs approximately 5 minutes later for Helsby. The second and final return trains from Ellesmere Port terminate at Warrington Bank Quay. The journey between Helsby and Ellesmere Port takes approximately 12 minutes including stops at 2 intermediate stations.

We caught the 15:17 train consisting of Northern Rail unit 156440, which had travelled empty stock from Liverpool to Helsby. The two intermediate stations on the route are Ince and Elton, and Stanlow and Thornton, the latter is in the middle of the Essar Stanlow oil refinery complex. Like other Parliamentary train services the limited schedule is of no use to most potential travellers, and we were the only passengers in both directions. We also watched the 15:48 leave, and that was empty.

Apart from the limited passenger service, there is little freight over the line, however Quinn Glass of Elton are in the process of installing freight facilities to bring in raw materials for their glass manufacturing process. So it's possible that the line could see a significant increase in traffic in the near future. **Les Fifoot**



The Helsby train is seen to the left and Merseyrail Electrics service to the right at Ellesmere Port.
Photo by Les Fifoot

Events Programme

10.00 – Saturday 26th January 2013 – The 8D Association AGM – The annual general meeting of the society will be held at the Halton Stadium this year. As well as the official business of the society there will be guest speakers and a buffet lunch giving members the chance to chat informally – **Halton Stadium, Lowerhouse Lane, Widnes.**

10.00 – Saturday 2nd February 2013 – Gordon Howarth Films Part 1 – Gordon Howarth a Widnes resident took thousands of photographs of the local area but he also made films of both railways and industrial scenes. Richard Mercer has had the collection digitised. There is so much footage that will be of interest to members that the showing of the films will be over two sessions – **Widnes Library, Kingsway, Widnes.**

10.00 – Saturday 23rd February 2013 – Gordon Howarth Films Part 2 – More archive footage from the Gordon Howarth collection - **Widnes Library, Kingsway, Widnes.**

10.00 – Saturday 16th March 2013 – Cab View Films of Rod Dixon – Rod Dixon started his railway career at Sutton Oak and went on to work at Garston and Warrington Arpley. He shot films from the cabs of locomotives and in this meeting will show some of his footage including lines of local interest. **Widnes Library, Kingsway, Widnes.**



'Where is this' competition? (Answers to pwright964@btinternet.com)

- The September competition was not guessed. It was the Widnes Deviation near Hutchinson Street.