

PASSENGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF MANCHESTER'S STATIONS



Oxford Road Station

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The primary role of TravelWatch NorthWest (along with its allied organisations across the county) is to promote public transport of all forms. A significant provider of medium and long distance public transport in the Manchester area is its rail system. For historical reasons the rail network feeding the city and within the city itself has grown haphazardly, with the result that the system is becoming more and more congested, with passengers being thwarted in the potential journeys they could make. For many years rail users have had to put up with a continuation of the original historic network which, with the exception of the addition of the useful Windsor Link and other minor works, has hardly changed for 100 years. In fact, over that time there has been a reduction rather than an expansion of the network.

1.2 Together with the static network provision, passengers have also seen rather limited change in the provision of stations and the services they provide. With the notable exception of Piccadilly Station, which is now a showpiece mainly 'fit for purpose' facility, there has been little significant improvement to Manchester's inner-city stations, at least as far as their users' perceptions of them go. In contrast to the high class facilities now provided at Piccadilly it is generally accepted that the others each in some way fall well short of satisfying the basic needs of the full range of passengers in the 21st Century.

1.3 What follows are observations by members of TravelWatch NorthWest of the state of Manchester's stations, as typically viewed by their users.

1.4 The stations under the spotlight are: Oxford Road, Piccadilly, Victoria, Deansgate, Salford Central and Salford Crescent. The numbers in brackets after each station name denote the footfall (entry & exit) for 2006-07 (ORR data). Piccadilly is owned and operated by Network Rail, whilst the other stations, although owned by Network Rail, are operated by Northern Rail.

2. OXFORD ROAD STATION (4,330800)

2.1 The station has four through platforms and one west facing bay. Each of the main platforms is signalled bi-directionally but cannot accommodate trains longer than six coaches. In view of the pathing difficulties when releasing trains from the bay platform it is used sparingly. The platforms are illogically numbered, with Platform 1 being furthest from the main building.

2.2 Passenger facilities include a ticket office, refreshment/waiting rooms and male and female (but no disabled) toilets. Electronic entrance/exit gates have recently been installed. The level entrance area permits level access only to Platform 5 (the bay) and Platform 4. All other platforms are reached via an enclosed stepped footbridge. There is rudimentary covered waiting accommodation on Platforms 2 and 3, with only a 'bus shelter' on Platform 1.

2.3 The following passenger observations are made:

- a) Access to the main building from the city is reasonable, although the pavement is narrow and frequently obstructed by parked vehicles.
- b) There are stands for taxis and one bus (normally the MetroShuttle No. 2) but other parking is minimal. There is no connection to Metrolink.
- c) From Oxford Road itself there is a cobbled approach to a steep flight of steps to Platform 1. The steps are often slippery in wet weather and littered with rubbish which is rarely cleaned. The area is frequented by beggars.
- d) The waiting area in the area adjacent to the ticket office becomes congested at busy periods, to the extent that ease of access via the ticket gates is difficult.
- e) At very busy times the new ticket gates are insufficient in number and therefore impede the flow of passengers.
- f) The gents toilets are cramped, dirty and smelly. The ladies toilets were not inspected.
- g) There is no provision of disabled toilets.
- h) The only access to Platforms 3/2 and 1 is by means of the stepped footbridge which proves to be a real obstacle to passengers with heavy luggage, young families or those who are mobility impaired. There are lifts at the eastern end of the station but these seem to permanently out of use. In any case there is no lift access to Platform 1. For a station of this size and importance the lack of disabled access is unacceptable.



The regularly used outer platforms can only be accessed by the overbridge.

- i) The relatively narrow footbridge becomes crowded at peak times, with no indication of flow control.
- j) The significant difficulty in reaching the outlying platforms is unacceptable for a heavily used station in a forward looking city.
- k) Passenger information screens are acceptable but, once a passenger has reached Platforms 3/2 or 1, it is not possible to find out about the general train running situation as the platform based CIS only refers to the train about to leave that platform. In the case of late running it is always useful to be able to have an overview to permit the planning of alternative journey(s).
- l) For operating reasons trains are sometimes turned back at Oxford Road instead of proceeding to Piccadilly and/or Manchester Airport. It has been noted that passengers are often left to their own devices to arrange continuation of their journey, with staff seeming to be disinterested in their plight. The mêlée of uninformed passengers adds to the existing congestion on the footbridge.

(When media advertising stresses the ease of reaching the airport by train, passengers do not take kindly to being evicted from the train short of their destination. Operating convenience can appear to take unreasonable precedence over the needs of the fare paying passengers in such cases.)

3. PICCADILLY STATION (14,513,500)

3.1 As previously noted the reconstructed Piccadilly Station is fit for purpose in most respects. However the following concerns are noted:

- a) The main source of train/platform information situated above the main concourse causes much head scratching as passengers try to work out what the display is trying to say. The principle of listing each calling point in an A-Z manner may be logical but it does not seem so to the non-regular passenger. The need for the display to switch from page 1 to 2 and then back again prevents the eye from 'latching on' to the required information. It is clear, by observing baffled passengers, that simply determining the time of the next train to one's destination can be a mentally stressful process.
- b) Although the display noted above switches to the next departure time for each given station once the train has departed it does not make allowance for the time taken to walk from the concourse to the outlying platforms, 13 and 14. It would make sense for those departures 'disappear' five minutes prior to their actual departure time. Even then, for those with heavy luggage it will be a close call.
- c) The provision of the waiting area above Platforms 13 and 14 is a valiant attempt to prevent overcrowding on the platforms themselves, but it does not seem to work. A significant number of passengers seem to prefer to go straight onto the platform and stand there, often in cold draughty conditions, to await their train. They prefer the confidence in seeing what is happening.
- d) Platforms 13 and 14 can therefore become very crowded at certain times. Although the platforms are very long and could each hold two trains, the practicality of determining which end of each platform will be used previously caused more delay (by passengers often being in the wrong place) than allowing one train onto each platform. Thus potentially important platform faces remain unused.



Although empty in the early afternoon, these platforms can become seriously crowded.

4. VICTORIA STATION (5,060,000)

4.1 Apart from the major reconstruction carried out in the early 1990s there has been little improvement in passenger facilities since. Over the intervening years there have been mutterings of major changes but, to date, nothing significant is evident. At least the porous roof has been fixed. However, in total contrast to Piccadilly, Victoria Station does not provide a welcoming environment to the passenger.

4.2 The following specific comments are noted as being relevant to the current situation:

- a) The most commonly used entrance, alongside the Metrolink entry point, is unwelcoming as it passes signs of decay and/or misuse.
- b) The gents toilet within the entrance area is a disgrace and has been for many years. It is acknowledged that there are drug related and other issues but that does not absolve the operator from providing a facility which is fit for use by law-abiding passengers in this heavily used station.
- c) Although there is no longer major leakage through the roof, the tiled flooring becomes very slippery in damp weather.
- d) The final version of the composite information screens listing departures chronologically is a big improvement. They are readable in all lighting conditions although the interruption of departure listings by security messages can be an irritant.
- e) It is pleasing to see that a customer information office has now been opened on the main concourse.
- f) Access to Platforms 3 – 6 is towards a maze of staircases whose presence prevent the new user with a clear view of how to reach the outlying platforms. More than one passenger has climbed the stairs leading to the MEN Arena rather than the correct ones to the platforms.
- g) As a result of the placing of 'temporary' barriers (to aid ticket checking) the large sign indicating the direction to Platforms 4 – 6 is now incorrectly sited. This again can lead to uncertainty among non-regular users.



**The misleading access signs
for the outlying platforms.**

- h) The temporary appearance of the ticket checking area, with its flimsy barriers, has been evident for some time. The method of visually checking tickets calls into question its efficiency, given that at times tickets can be given the most cursory glance.

- i) It would make good sense to have a directional flow on the stairs, as is the case at York, to prevent conflicting movement at busy times.
- j) The areas surrounding the stairs leading to Platforms 4/5 and 6 are very dark and potentially dangerous. It is surprising that a risk assessment has not highlighted the need for a marked improvement in lighting level in these areas.



The dark route from the platforms to the overbridge.

- k) The overall level of lighting on the platforms themselves is generally poor, giving the whole environment a gloomy, unwelcoming appearance. Many lighting units are dirty and some are not working.
- l) Other than ticket barrier staff, platform staff appear to be thin on the ground, mainly attending to train dispatch duties only. There does not seem to be a customer care function within their job description. It is often difficult to find a member of staff to obtain advice when there are train running problems.
- m) There is minimal provision of enclosed waiting space on Platforms 4, 5 and 6 and none on Platforms 1, 2 and 3. Likewise, there is little provision of seating on most platforms. This could be corrected easily. Although the platforms are all covered they are decidedly draughty, given the 'tunnel' nature of the station's construction.
- n) It sometimes appears to the layman that trains are not always platformed with the passenger in mind. For example some services from the east arrive at Platforms 4, 5 or 6 rather than Platforms 1, 2 or 3. Operational constraints obviously have an effect on this but there should be a policy which makes maximum use of Platforms 1, 2 and 3 as they are the most passenger convenient.
- o) Apart from a cabin housing WH Smith's shop and the originally sited café/bar, there are no other retail outlets, despite the size of the station.

5. DEANSGATE (97,800)

5.1 This two-platform station is becoming the poor relation to Oxford Road despite it having better onward connectional opportunities by tram and bus. The number of calling services has been reduced over recent years, yet this station is ideal for visiting Bridgewater Hall, museums, hotels and Deansgate itself. Access is good, with mobility impaired passengers being able to reach the platforms by either the ramps or lifts, together with level access via the high level link to trams services (eastbound only). Such passengers will find that this station is in principle a better access option than Oxford Road, except for the limited range of trains calling there.

5.2 Although each platform is covered there is no enclosed waiting space to escape from strong winds, especially on Platform 2. Many passengers will be wary of using the station at night, given that there is no sense of real or apparent supervision of platforms and circulating areas.

6. SALFORD CENTRAL (118,800)

6.1 This one-time peak-only station has experienced a new lease of life as a result of the surrounding office development. It has received a worthwhile make-over in recent months and is now much more welcoming. It is unfortunate that even after this major re-build the underpass still floods after heavy rain. The platforms are now fully accessible via either ramps or lifts but they are very low, requiring a high step onto trains. Conductors on trains calling at the station are required to advise alighting passengers of the very low platforms.



1



2

3



- 1 The newly constructed entrance.
- 2 Very low platform.
- 3 The cordoned-off flooded underpass.

7. SALFORD CRESCENT (701,500)

7.1 This station provides a connectional facility between trains off the Bolton/Atherton routes and those going to/from Piccadilly/Victoria. It is also used by staff and students from the nearby Salford University. Most passengers walk to/from the station as the nearest bus interchange is about 300 metres away. Station facilities comprise a ticket office, waiting room and a supervisor's office. Whilst once deemed to be acceptable the platforms are far too narrow for large numbers of passengers. This narrowness is particularly evident in the

area adjacent to the station building. There are no general use toilets, only a disabled facility which can be accessed after requesting a key from the ticket clerk.

7.2 The two bi-directional platforms are accessed by a long stepped ramp leading from the footbridge which spans all the tracks. Access by wheelchair passengers down this ramp would be difficult unless there is additional assistance. It is however not possible for such passengers to board the majority of trains via a mobile ramp as the gap between the waiting room and the platform edge is too narrow. Only those trains which extend beyond the building line are thus accessible.

7.3 This station has been the victim of its own success and cannot safely cope with ever increasing levels of use. There are plans to either extend the present station or re-locate it to an alternative nearby site.

8. CONCLUSION

8.1 Manchester's main stations vary widely in their design, provision of services to passengers and overall 'fitness for purpose'. It is obvious that the station most in need of radical improvement is Oxford Road. Although a Grade 2 listed building and referred to by English heritage as 'one of the most dramatic stations in England' it falls well short of the modern expectation of customer provision, especially with regard to the means of access to the outlying platforms. There were plans for improvements to facilities for passengers at Piccadilly, Oxford Road, Victoria Salford Central and Salford Crescent stations within the framework of the TIF bid, and it is unfortunate that these funds are no longer available.

8.2 The main platforms, within the original trainshed, at Piccadilly present no problem; the real challenge lies with the outlying 'add-on' Platforms 13 and 14 which experience a throughput of trains far beyond what would have been envisaged when they were first constructed. The facilities on these platforms are significantly second-rate when compared to those within the main station area.

8.3 TravelWatch NorthWest hopes that the various potential funding agencies, the Government, Network Rail, GMPTE, will give urgent attention to finding an alternative to TIF financing to enable much needed improvements to these important Manchester stations as quickly as possible.

9. FOOTNOTE

9.1 This document does not address the additional pressing issue of Manchester's urban rail network, with its many outstanding aspects of through journey problems and route capacity. That is a topic for further analysis.