

ARE FARES FAIR ON NORTH WEST'S TRAINS ? v2

This brief analysis was prompted by an article in The Guardian on 22nd October 2022 written by Andy Burnham (Mayor of Greater Manchester) and Steve Rotherham (Mayor of the Liverpool City Region). [Web link below] The subject of the piece was a serious critique of the state of the railway system in the North West of England. They commented *'But for far too long, towns and cities across the north have been held back by a second-class service, forced to overpay for a network that is too complex, fragmented, mismanaged and underfunded by government'*. They highlighted *'Delays. Cancellations. Overcrowding'* and *'If this was happening in London or the south east it would be a national scandal and action would be swift'*.

As with many articles in The Guardian, readers were invited to add their comments and, as a result 424 comments, some of significant length and complexity, were submitted. One such comment, submitted by *mitsterful* highlighted the high cost of local train travel. He wrote:

Thank you for writing this, I'm glad that someone in power is aware of this issue. For me to get a train from Wigan to Burscough each day to work and back, it costs around £150 a month with a monthly pass, for what is a 17 minute journey. In addition, multiple trains on the Manchester - Southport route are cancelled every day (usually at least 2 to 3). And then the trains themselves are nothing to shout about, certainly not deserving of £150 a month. Ridiculous. Thank God for the train crews who keep the services from completely collapsing.

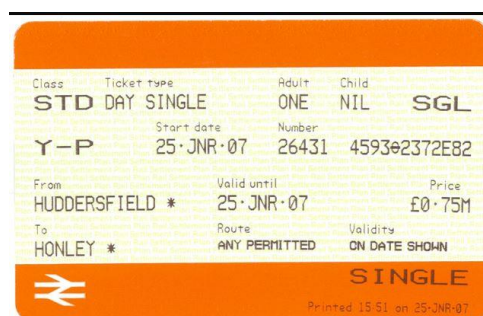
This prompted me to a) check that the commentator was telling the truth (which he was) and b) carry out a survey into the costs of train travel across the North West region.

Using data from the web – National Rail Enquiries and Northern – I selected 20 typical commuter-type return journeys on local trains, each lasting between 14 and 18 minutes in each direction. For each route segment I was able to determine the unit cost of four types of ticket; a peak time return, an off-peak return, a one month season ticket and the recently introduced Flexi Season ticket. It was the cost of the monthly season ticket which *mitsterful* was highlighting. I ascertained the length of each route segment by reference to *Rail Miles* website (and doubled it for the calculation).

Additionally, for comparison's sake, I chose four express limited stop routes which can commonly be used by long-distance commuters.

The tabulated results of the survey are displayed on the next page.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/22/north-rail-system-franchises-london>

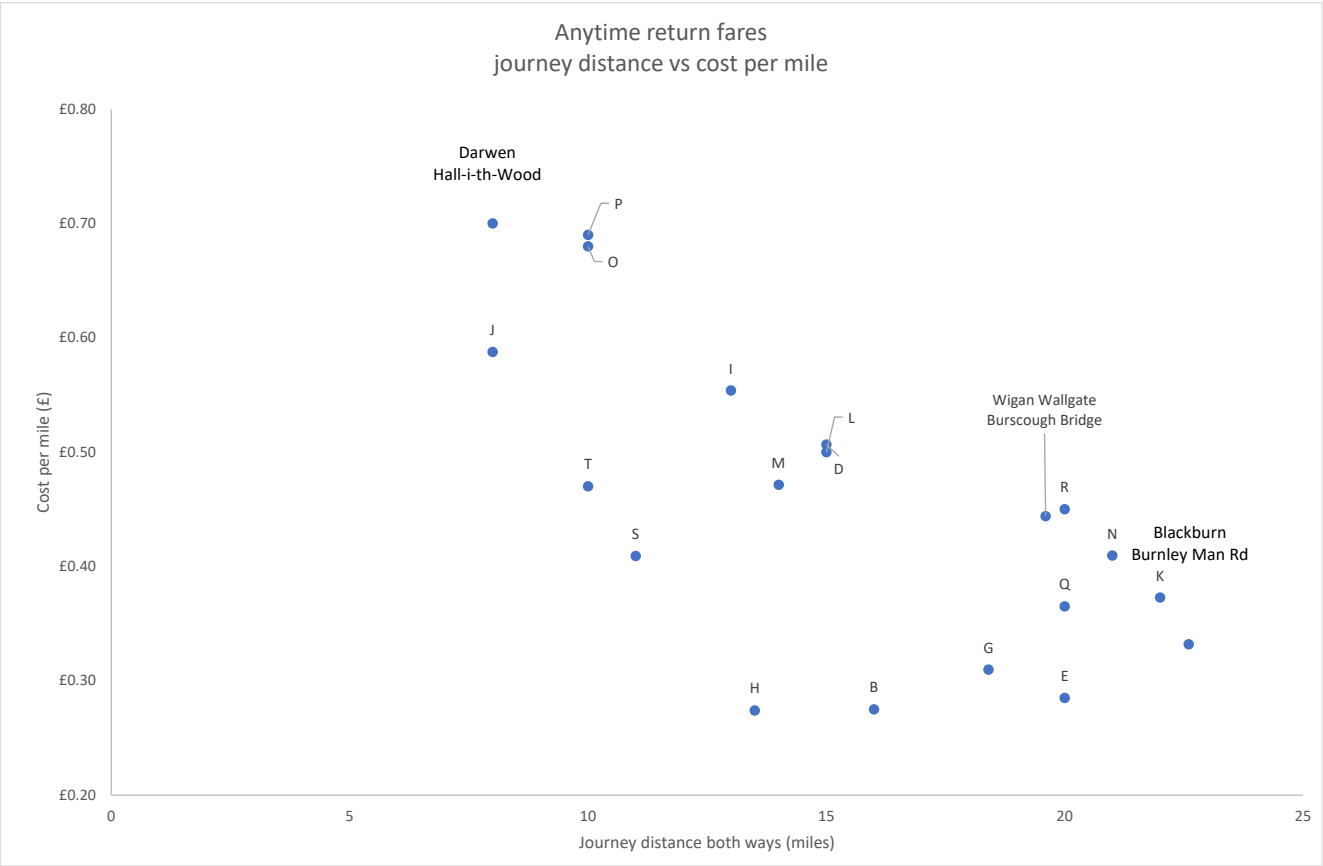


		Journey time (min) (one way)	Journey distance (miles) (return journey)	Anytime Return	Cost per mile	Off Peak Day Return	Cost per mile	Monthly Season	Daily cost (assume 20 work days)	Cost per mile per work day	Percent difference over Anytime (daily)	Flexi Season (8 days/month)	Cost per day	Cost per mile per work day	Percent difference over Anytime (miles/day)	Percent difference over Monthly (miles/day)	
FROM	TO																
STOPPING TRAINS:																	
A	Wigan Wallgate	Burscough Bridge	17	20	£8.70	£0.44	£7.30	£0.37	£150.60	£7.53	£0.38	-13%	£39.20	£4.90	£0.25	-44%	-35%
B	Clitheroe	Ramsgreave & Wilpshire	15	16	£4.40	£0.28	£3.70	£0.23	£59.20	£2.96	£0.19	-33%	£30.80	£3.85	£0.24	-13%	30%
C	Blackburn	Burnley Manchester Rd	16	23	£7.50	£0.33	£6.30	£0.28	£113.70	£5.69	£0.25	-24%	£53.70	£6.71	£0.30	-11%	18%
D	Croston	Preston	17	15	£7.60	£0.51	£6.40	£0.43	£115.20	£5.76	£0.38	-24%	£54.40	£6.80	£0.45	-11%	18%
E	Hellifield	Skipton	17	20	£5.70	£0.29	£4.80	£0.24	£92.20	£4.61	£0.23	-19%	£42.00	£5.25	£0.26	-8%	14%
F	Darwen	Hall-i-th-Wood	16	8	£5.60	£0.70	£4.70	£0.59	£94.90	£4.75	£0.59	-15%	£42.20	£5.28	£0.66	-6%	11%
G	Grange over Sands	Carnforth	17	18	£5.70	£0.31	£4.80	£0.26	£94.50	£4.73	£0.26	-17%	£42.50	£5.31	£0.29	-7%	12%
H	Whitehaven	Workington	17	14	£3.70	£0.27	£3.10	£0.23	£48.00	£2.40	£0.18	-35%	£25.90	£3.24	£0.24	-13%	35%
I	Altrincham	Knutsford	15	13	£7.20	£0.55	£6.10	£0.47	£123.70	£6.19	£0.48	-14%	£54.60	£6.83	£0.53	-5%	10%
J	Carlisle	Wetheral	15	8	£4.70	£0.59	£3.90	£0.49	£66.50	£3.33	£0.42	-29%	£32.90	£4.11	£0.51	-13%	24%
K	Moss Side	Preston	18	22	£8.20	£0.37	£6.90	£0.31	£126.40	£6.32	£0.29	-23%	£59.10	£7.39	£0.34	-10%	17%
L	Adlington (Cheshire)	Stockport	15	15	£7.50	£0.50	£6.20	£0.41	£126.00	£6.30	£0.42	-16%	£56.20	£7.03	£0.47	-6%	12%
M	Rainford	Wigan Wallgate	17	14	£6.60	£0.47	£5.60	£0.40	£106.80	£5.34	£0.38	-19%	£48.60	£6.08	£0.43	-8%	14%
N	Rochdale	Manchester Victoria	15	21	£8.60	£0.41	£6.40	£0.30	£120.00	£6.00	£0.29	-30%	£60.20	£7.53	£0.36	-13%	25%
O	Guide Bridge	Manchester Piccadilly	15	10	£6.80	£0.68	£5.70	£0.57	£95.00	£4.75	£0.48	-30%	£47.60	£5.95	£0.60	-13%	25%
P	Urmston	Manchester Oxford Road	16	10	£6.90	£0.69	£5.80	£0.58	£96.40	£4.82	£0.48	-30%	£48.30	£6.04	£0.60	-13%	25%
Q	Kirkham & Wesham	Blackpool North	16	20	£7.30	£0.37	£6.20	£0.31	£110.60	£5.53	£0.28	-24%	£52.20	£6.53	£0.33	-11%	18%
R	Delamere	Chester	17	20	£9.00	£0.45	£7.60	£0.38	£157.50	£7.88	£0.39	-13%	N/A				
S	Colne	Burnley Central	14	11	£4.50	£0.41	£3.80	£0.35	£61.00	£3.05	£0.28	-32%	£31.50	£3.94	£0.36	-13%	29%
T	Roby	Liverpool Lime Street	15	10	£4.70	£0.47	£4.70	£0.47	£54.20	£2.71	£0.27	-42%	N/A				
				Mean =	£0.45	Mean =	£0.38		Mean =	£0.35	-24%	Mean =	£5.71	£0.40			
				Minimum =	£0.27	Minimum =	£0.23		Minimum =	£0.18	-13%	Minimum =	£3.24	£0.24			
				Maximum =	£0.70	Maximum =	£0.59		Maximum =	£0.59	-42%	Maximum =	£7.53	£0.66			
EXPRESS TRAINS: Monthly and Flexi season tickets are any operator. Single operator offers may be available.																	
	Sheffield	Manchester Piccadilly	56	85	£35.20	£0.41	£25.20	£0.30	£323.40	£16.17	£0.19	-54%	£246.40	£30.80	£0.36	-13%	90%
	Preston	Manchester Piccadilly	37	63	£22.10	£0.35	£14.10	£0.22	£306.10	£15.31	£0.24	-31%	£154.70	£19.34	£0.31	-13%	26%
	Huddersfield	Manchester Victoria	30	51	£23.70	£0.46	£16.50	£0.32	£279.20	£13.96	£0.27	-41%	£165.90	£20.74	£0.41	-13%	49%
	Preston	Lancaster	15	42	£8.40	£0.20	£4.80	£0.11	£172.50	£8.63	£0.21	3%	£76.30	£9.54	£0.23	14%	11%
				Mean =	£0.36	Mean =	£0.24		Mean =	£0.23	-31%						

Fares etc correct at 31/10/2022

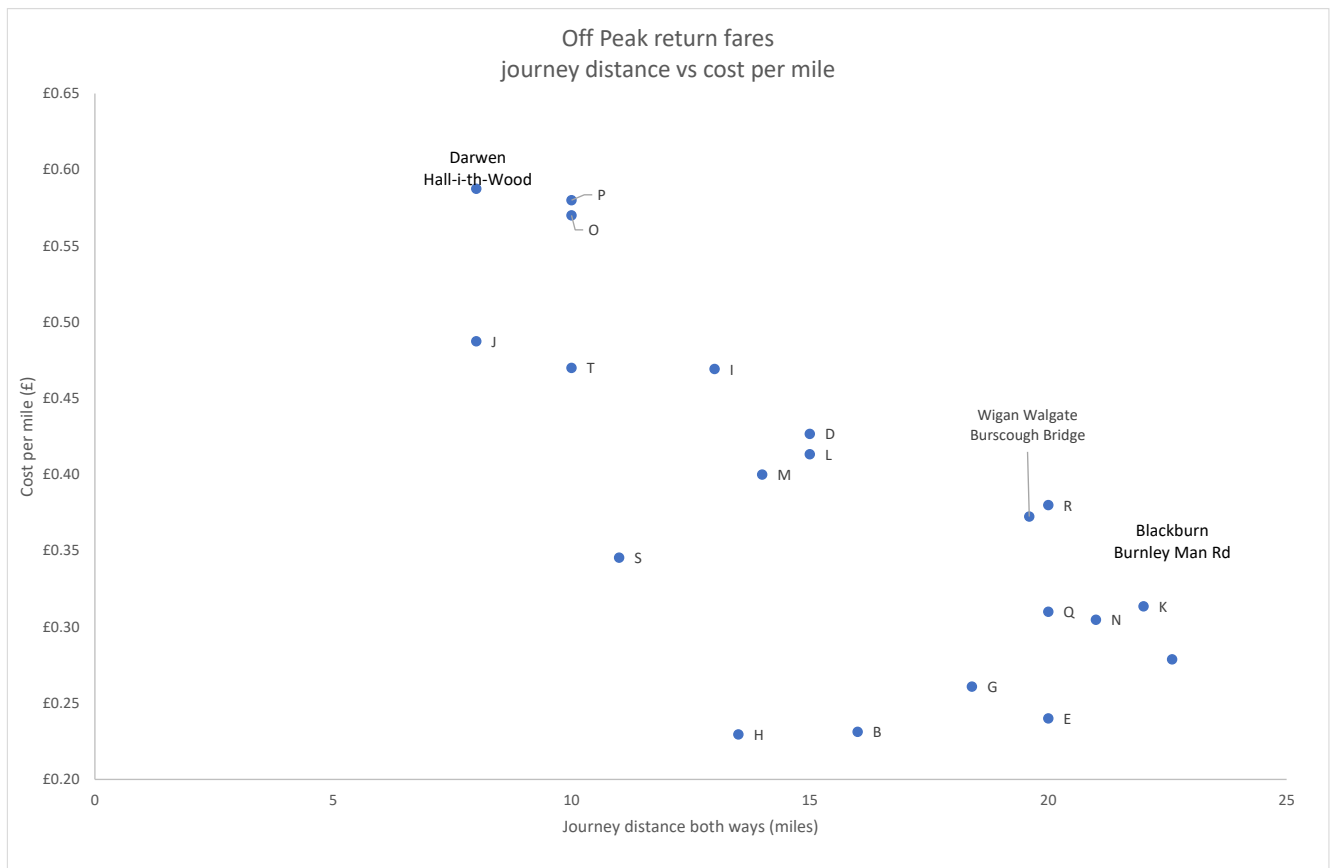
Each of the ticket types for the selected route segments is displayed as a scattergram:

- 1. Anytime fares These are required for peak time travel.



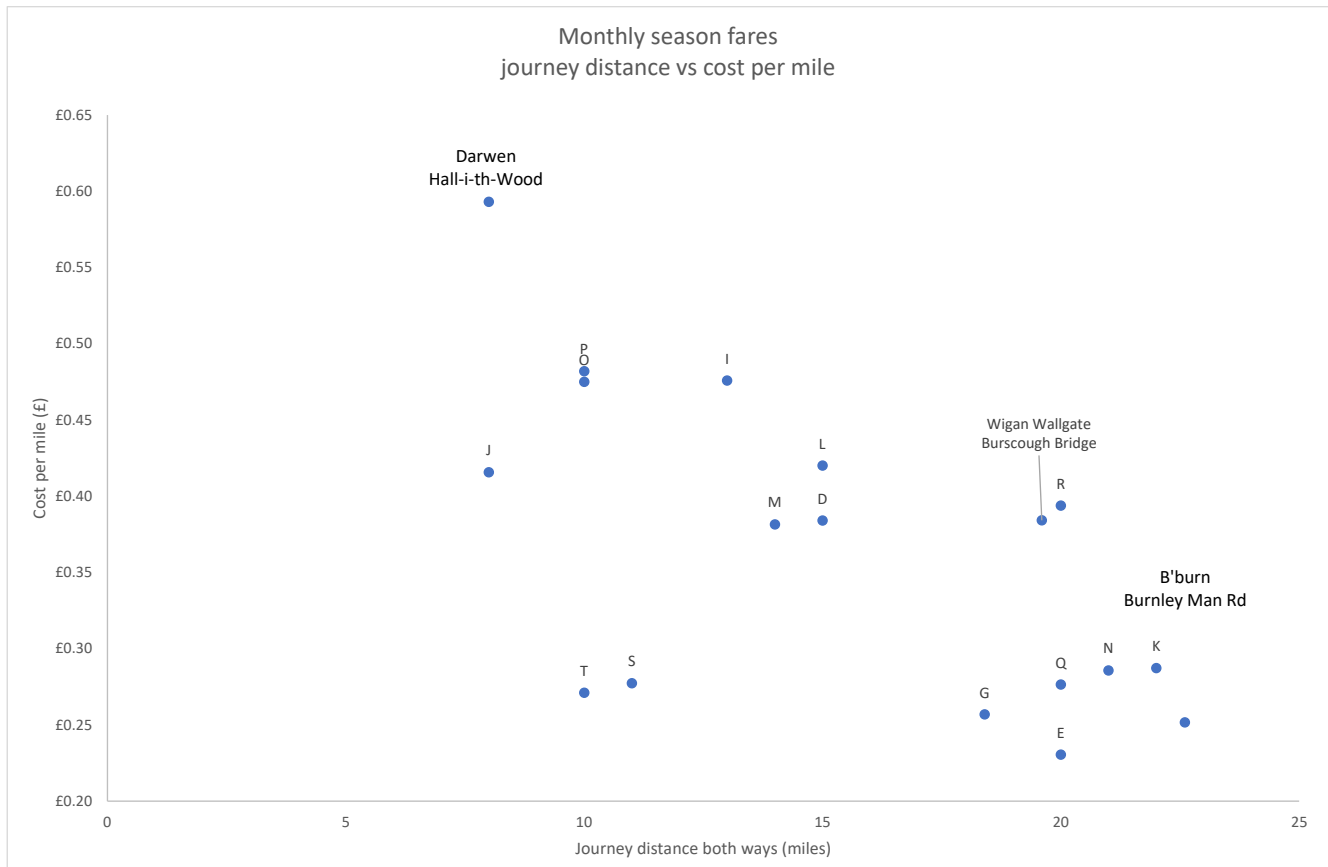
The Darwen to Hall I’ Th’ Wood journey is short (only 8 miles each way) but it carries the highest charge per mile travelled (70p). In contrast, the other 8 mile route segment (Carlisle-Wetheral) costs 59p per mile. The Wigan to Burscough journey highlighted by *mitsterful* (at 40p per mile) appears to be quite cheap in comparison. In terms of journey length the Blackburn to Burnley Manchester Road trip is good value at only 30p per mile.

2. Off-peak return fares (normally only available after 09.30 and sometimes restricted in the early evening).



This display mimics the one for Anytime journeys except that the cost per mile is slightly less. Whilst popular for shoppers and those taking discretionary journeys it is unlikely that Off Peak tickets will be purchased by commuters travelling to or from work, although there may be exceptions.

3. Monthly season tickets. These will only be purchased if the user plans to make five return journeys on the route per week. Additional journeys, perhaps at weekends, will be 'free'. Post-Covid work practices have affected the usefulness of 'Seasons'.



4. Observations:

- a. Inspection of the tabulated fares listings shows that there is a very wide variation in the 'cost per mile' for the selected journeys. Whether a passenger is using Anytime, Off Peak or a monthly season ticket the rate per mile for the chosen journey appears to have been plucked out of thin air. For the randomly selected journeys (but all linked by journey time) there is an unreasonably wide range of costs per mile, with no clear understanding of why this should be the case. The West Cumbria travellers enjoy 27p per mile for any journey between Whitehaven and Workington, whilst those enjoying the delights of Sough Tunnel (between Darwen and Hall I' Th' Wood) are required to pay 70p per mile for the privilege.
- b. Taking a different approach, the cost per minute travelled (over the full return journey) varies significantly from 11p per minute (Whitehaven - Workington) to 29p per minute (Rochdale – Manchester Victoria). The mean cost per minute for the selected return journeys is 20p.
- c. Whilst investigating the fares for each chosen route segment it became obvious that it is sometimes no easy task finding the right fare for the selected journey. It became clear that the particular data source used to find the fare may affect the actual fare chosen. For the Wigan Wallgate to Burscough Bridge journey the Northern website lists single fares for each possible journey time (£6.40) and then shows the Off Peak Day Return (£7.30) in a highlighted box even though the required journey starts prior to 09.30. The Anytime Day Return fare (£8.70)

required for the chosen journey was listed in a non-highlighted box. This presentation could be misleading to some enquirers and result in the incorrect fare being purchased.

- d. Some journey enquiries produced simple fare listings where there was no doubt as to what must be paid. For others this was not the case. For a straightforward example the Huddersfield to Manchester Victoria return journey will cost £23.70 at peak times and £16.50 off-peak. No uncertainty there. However, for the Preston to Lancaster journey the peak time fare may be £8.50 or it could be £8.40 – depending on the colour of the train perhaps! During the off-peak period the fare can vary between £6.70 and £8.50 all in the space of 35 minutes. As far as the passenger is concerned there is no logic to this fare structure. Picture this – a passenger/customer arrives at the Preston ticket office and asks for a day return to Lancaster, intending to travel shortly after 10.30. He/she is charged £7.40, the listed price for the Avanti train at 10.41. The passenger however decides to have a Costa Coffee, misses the 10.41 and instead joins the Northern train at 10.45 (for which the listed fare is £8.50 – surprising but true)

Departs at 10:41	16m 0 change(s) view details	Arrives 10:57		£7.40	Select
Preston (Lancs) [PRE]		Lancaster [LAN]		<u>Off-Peak</u>	Other tickets ▾
Departs at 10:45	17m 0 change(s) view details	Arrives 11:02		£8.50	Select
Preston (Lancs) [PRE]		Lancaster [LAN]		<u>Off-Peak</u>	Other tickets ▾

(!) The exclamation mark indicates that the Northern train may be busy.

If the conductor on the Northern train decides to check ticket prior to Lancaster will the passenger be challenged for having paid the 'wrong' fare?

- e. On some journey enquiries the ticket type shown was not Off Peak or Anytime but Advanced. It is not stated that this ticket must be purchased literally 'in advance' and not at the ticket office, where additional fares only visible on clicking the box show Anytime, i.e. peak hours at £5.70 (single). Thus a walk up, ticket office sale appears to cost £11.40 (shown in a summary box) whilst the advance purchase of the tickets, via mobile, etc., will cost only £6.60. What a wide variation. To the non-expert the National Rail website is not helpful in this matter. Attempting to confirm this on the Northern website shows an Anytime Return at £8.60 which, despite close checking, is not listed on the National Rail site.

5. The plot thickens

Consider this possible scenario: A lady enquires at Preston Station's Ticket Office (still open at the time of writing) and has a conversation with the ticket clerk –

Customer: Can you please tell me the single fare between here and Lancaster?

Clerk: Well, it depends on which train you travel on.

Customer: I just want to travel on a train when I'm ready.

Clerk: The cost varies according to who runs the train. If you want a blue and grey train (*TPE*) it will cost you £6.70, but if you like darker blue with an orange triangle (*Avanti*) it will cost you £7.40. However, if that's too pricey there's also another blue and mainly white train (*Northern @ 15.46*) at £6.60 but you must take care because if you are on the platform early (*15.32*) that one will cost you £8.50.

Customer: So there isn't a single single?

Clerk: No. Sorry, madam

6. An on-line travel search can also leave one somewhat baffled, as in this example from the National Rail Journey Planner:

Departs at 08:48 Blackburn [BBN]	0h 30m 0 change(s) view details	Arrives 09:18 Bolton [BON]	 cancelled Alternative trains	No fares available for this journey Off-Peak Other services you can travel on
Departs at 09:11 Blackburn [BBN] Platform 4	1h 34m 2 change(s) view details	Arrives 10:45 Bolton [BON] Platform 3	 6 mins late	£10.80 Buy now Off-Peak Other tickets  Other services you can travel on
Departs at 09:11 Blackburn [BBN] Platform 4	1h 46m 1 change(s) view details	Arrives 10:57 Bolton [BON] Platform 3	 on time	£10.80 Buy now Off-Peak Other tickets  Other services you can travel on
Departs at 09:12 Blackburn [BBN] Platform 2	1h 54m 1 change(s) view details	Arrives 11:06 Bolton [BON]	 cancelled Alternative trains	No fares available for this journey Anytime Ticket valid for this service only
Departs at 10:48 Blackburn [BBN] Platform 3	0h 29m 0 change(s) view details	Arrives 11:17 Bolton [BON] Platform 1	 on time	£6.80 Buy now Off-Peak Other tickets  Other services you can travel on
Departs at 11:48 Blackburn [BBN]	0h 29m 0 change(s) view details	Arrives 12:17 Bolton [BON]	 cancelled Alternative trains	No fares available for this journey Off-Peak Other services you can travel on
Departs at 12:22 Blackburn [BBN] Platform 4	0h 43m 1 change(s) view details	Arrives 13:05 Bolton [BON] Platform 3	 on time	No fares available for this journey Off-Peak Other services you can travel on

A naïve enquirer could assume that each proposed train has its own booking agent. In reality the 'Buy from' box shows just one of 22 available operators plus three third-party retailers. The example above was made on a day when cancellations were rife and alternative routes sometimes had to be used instead of the direct train. To be fair, under normal circumstances *Northern* is the single selected booking agent for this route.

7. Conclusion:

It was the chance reading of the comment by *mitsterful*, after reading Burnham and Rotheram's unsurprising article that led me to a few hours of delving into the complex matter of train fares. For the sake of this project I initially limited the consideration of fares to a mere 20 journeys, all of similar journey times (plus four longer trips). Additionally some other examples show further absence of logical reasoning. A wholesale analysis would, I'm sure, confirm that the present British Rail fares basket is not fit for purpose and, in many respects, creates a barrier to travel among those who cannot find the most affordable fares.

Many other countries link the fare charged to the distance travelled, wherever the journey may be in the country. It is hoped that the long awaited Great British Railways project will quickly rationalise the charging system, to the advantage of all concerned. To integrate that with bus/tram travel would be a worthwhile bonus – but that's for another day.

David J Butterworth, Chairman, TravelWatch NorthWest

Version 2, November 2022



TravelWatch NorthWest (TWNW) is an independent Community Interest Company representing all users of public transport in the North West.

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