

The proud winners at Cheshire's Best Kept Stations Awards



ACTION STATIONS

Jade Wright talks to the railway friends who make travelling by train from Cheshire a pleasure

From art displays to flower beds, Cheshire's railway stations are shining examples of community groups working together. This year's Cheshire Best Kept Stations awards saw volunteer groups across the county rewarded for their efforts. Mayors from seven of the boroughs that constitute the former County of Cheshire, and four town mayors, celebrated

with 'friends of' station groups at the Grange Theatre, Hartford, Northwich. Cheshire is the only county to have its own volunteer-run Best Kept Stations Awards. Mark Barker, chair of Cheshire Best Kept Stations group, said: 'It was a celebration and a thank you for all the volunteers and community groups who do so much to brighten up our stations in Cheshire.'

THE WINNING STATIONS

CHESHIRE BEST KEPT STATION
Winner: Altrincham

This busy interchange, home to rail, metro link and bus stations, won praise for its active group, which provides planting, artwork and poetry, and its work with community groups. 'Our winning station blends Victorian and modern architecture in a busy multi-modal transport interchange that is clean and well maintained, with friendly and welcoming staff and good information provision,' said the judges. Friends of Altrincham Interchange chair, Ian Stuart, says: 'We were optimistic we might, in some way, be lucky, but to come away with the top award was fantastic. It goes to show what can be achieved with a good bit of teamwork and imagination. The award will have pride of place for all to see that our effort has been recognised as the best in Cheshire. The group's aim is to enhance the passenger



experience at this busy interchange, which is also a right of way. 'We have introduced poetry boards, platform planters, including a large one full of herbs, a library and a community poster board for use by local schools and community groups. A mosaic artwork by a local school is soon to be installed. We decorate the platforms whenever there's an occasion, such as the coronation to be celebrated.

'We are eagerly awaiting the handover of our new waiting room, which will once again house our platform library: Bring a book, Take a book, Enjoy the read! 'Next year we'll be celebrating 175 years of the Altrincham to Manchester line. We ensure date information about fares and travel is posted and continually campaign for better facilities and services. Enthusiastic volunteers are always very welcome.'

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK AWARD FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Winner: Rose Hill

The Friends of Rose Hill Station, working since 2009, has created an attractive and welcoming area for the benefit of the community, as well as increasing passenger numbers.

The group has built raised beds, planted and cared for a community orchard and planted flowering shrubs and perennials – and roses. The platform is enhanced by planters and by posters created by Stockport artist Eamonn Murphy, displaying sites of interest in the area. The waiting room has a book swap, railway memorabilia and paintings by local school children.

GREENBANK – A SPECIAL MENTION

This small, unassuming station situated between Northwich and Hartford is a favourite with commuters and rail fans. It is tended with love by a small group of volunteers, the Friends of Greenbank, coordinated by a care support worker who supports a small team of individuals with learning difficulties.

Coordinator Graham Hallett says: ‘The members of the team visit at least once every week to carry out maintenance duties. These range from litter picking to the painting of murals – anything of which the group is capable will be attempted.’

‘The station relies on community support and has links with the likes of Mid-Cheshire Community Shed in Hartford and Grozone in Northwich. Over the years we have received kind donations of plants and materials from individuals and owners nurseries.’

Greenbank was Highly Commended for the Cheshire West & Chester Award in 2021 and won that award in 2019.



IN BLOOM AWARD

Winner: Meols

Highly Commended: West Kirby

The smell of roses drifts across the platform at Meols in spring and summer. It was praised by judges as ‘a suburban station that has been much improved with recent provision of lifts to provide full accessibility. The friends group has complemented this with attractive and skilfully planted beds and planters.’

Jan Foster, chair of Friends of Hoylake & Meols Stations, says: ‘We were thrilled to receive awards for the two stations we look after. It’s been very hard at times to restore the old flower beds and create new ones. We’re especially proud we have revived the very old roses on Meols Station with some hard pruning and tender loving care’

‘It’s a labour of love, and Merseyrail is very supportive.’

‘All our team thoroughly enjoy creating something beautiful and from the comments and support we get, we know everyone appreciates it.’



THE RISING STAR AWARD

Winner: Alderley Edge

The judges said: ‘The Friends Group have worked tirelessly to transform the image of the station. This included innovative planting, including a herb garden in a pallet, upcycling a sandbox and high-quality artwork showing the attractive natural environment of the village and the history of the Manchester-Crewe line, showing this is a station that the community cares for.’

Kelvin Briggs of Alderley Edge Station Volunteer Group says: ‘Receiving the Rising Star award means a lot. We have had great support from the Crewe to Manchester Community Rail Partnership who have encouraged our passion to make our station a more welcoming place. The award reflects our volunteers’ hard work and creativity with inspiring artwork and themed garden projects. We are motivated to further improve our little bit of Cheshire railway.’

NORTHERN PROMOTING RAIL AWARD

Winner: Holmes Chapel

The Volunteers and Friends of Holmes Chapel Railway & Viaduct were praised for their work promoting rail travel, and in particular for shouting about their beautiful station.

Judges praised their links with village groups, ranging from nursery schools to care homes, estate agents to horticultural nurseries, the parish council and library. They write a feature in the monthly village newsletter and have been part of a project to create a Harry Styles Trail to help fans arriving from all over the world to explore the village and the iconic viaduct that carries the railway over the River Dane.

Mark says: ‘Quality artwork gives a flavour of the local community, there’s poetry displays in the waiting shelter and a train bug hotel on a wooden viaduct nods to Stockport viaduct.’

THE QUEEN’S PLATINUM JUBILEE AWARD

Winner: Romiley Station

Highly commended: Wilmslow

The Friends of Romiley Station wanted to create something that would not only mark the platinum jubilee of Queen Elizabeth in 2022 but would also provide a lasting legacy and improve the station environment. The scheme brought back into use a steep sloping plot of derelict railway, which is visible from the village centre, creating a garden dedicated to Her Majesty. The wider community was involved in the design, construction and celebrations surrounding its opening. Railway contractors donated materials.

Angie Clark, secretary of Friends of Romiley Station, says: ‘Thank you to all the people who worked hard to create our platinum jubilee garden. The royal purple totem is going to be sited by the garden so passers-by can enjoy it.’

WIRRAL AWARD

Winner: Hoylake

Mark describes this seaside spot in Wirral as ‘an attractive art deco suburban station that is the gateway to the British Open Golf. The planting is managed by Hoylake in Bloom, which also created attractive gardens at nearby Meols Station.’

Jan Foster, chair of the group, says: ‘We are a self-funding voluntary group, and our aim is to make Hoylake and Meols a lovely place to work, rest and play. We do this by making people smile with flowers.’

‘Our stations are a huge part of this as it is often the first impression and lasting memory of our towns for visitors. We hope we cheer people up on their way to work and welcome them home after a long day. We have lots of plans for 2023, especially Hoylake, as this station will receive the majority of visitors to the Open Golf in July.’





BEST KEPT GARDEN
Winner: Nantwich
Highly Commended: Hale

‘The judge who visited Nantwich Station described the station succinctly as “an ongoing horticultural triumph”, which I think sums it up very nicely,’ says Mark.

‘We are blessed with more than a few stations in Cheshire with excellent gardening achievements but I would always use Nantwich as an exemplar of the best in station gardening.’

Now an unmanned station, it was opened in 1858, and for a time was part of the Gingerbread Line, which linked the town to Market Drayton and then the Great Western Railway.

CHESHIRE EAST AWARD
Winner: Handforth

When Friends of Handforth Station was founded in 1996 – as the first friends of a station group in the UK – it couldn’t have been more needed, as current secretary Hugh Everett explains: ‘Handforth station was a vandalised eyesore, and the outlook for the station seemed bleak. Since then it has seen a remarkable turnaround in fortunes.’

Over the years, the friends group has worked with the community and businesses to put up a collection of signs badged by various railway operators, while also exhibiting local artwork and installing vintage station boards, as well as a garden cared for by the Rotary Club.

‘Co-operation with the rail industry has led to the installation of electronic passenger information display boards, a ticket machine and an undertaking to provide step-free access to the platforms,’ says Hugh. ‘FoHS continue to maintain Handforth as one of the highest-regarded stations in the area.’



CHESHIRE WEST & CHESTER AWARD
Winner: Winsford
Highly commended: Neston and Mouldsworth

The judges described Winsford as ‘a clean and well-equipped station with a lot of interesting artwork that tells of the town’s heritage and showcases the work of several local schools together with a useful local map. An arriving visitor could feel that they know the town before leaving the station.’

BEST STAFFED STATION
Winner: Sandbach

‘This is another station that has seen the benefit of much hard work by the friends, with well-tended, varied and colourful planting in well-constructed planters,’ said the judges. ‘Local artists have provided interesting and effective artwork. Heritage displays include the town’s name sign featuring the world-famous Foden’s Band and a classic British Railways running in board. A lot of effort has clearly gone into brightening the station.’

John Scarrott, chair of Friends of Sandbach Station, says: ‘We’re proud to have won yet another award – our third in four years. Our team works hard to enhance the environs of Sandbach Station throughout the year and make the station a pleasant place to travel to and from.’

THE AVANTI SUSTAINABILITY AWARD
Winner: Disley

Last year, Disley won the Best Garden award, and this time, the judges again praised the ‘perennial pollinator-friendly plants and shrubs complementing the wildflower garden. Birds have not been forgotten with bird feeders and a bath provided and Bingham Palace is home to many insect species.’

Jean Windsor of Friends of Disley Station says: ‘We are delighted. This is due to the hard work of our lovely volunteers and a great result for the whole community. We will really have to pull out all the stops over the rest of this year if we are to make it a hat trick.’

HALTON & WARRINGTON AWARD
Winner: Runcorn

Runcorn is a favourite with travellers looking to join services to London, Birmingham, Chester and Liverpool, with friendly staff, a shop and snack bar, plus a designated first-class lounge, standard waiting shelters and a staffed ticket office.

‘The 1960s era station buildings have been well refurbished and were clean, bright and well maintained,’ said the judges. ‘Staff were helpful and welcoming. The new forecourt and approach area were particularly impressive.’

BEST UNSTAFFED STATION
Winner: Goostrey

When Goostrey Station opened in 1891 there were sidings, two buildings and six employees. When the Friends of Goostrey Station started work in 2012, the remaining building, one of the last of its kind, was unmanned and dilapidated.

Volunteers have improved the site, and in 2019, negotiations with rail authorities resulted in the restoration of the beautiful wooden building.

Mark Barker praised this idyllic country station, saying: ‘The group’s crowning achievement is, over a number of years, to persuade the rail industry to repair and renovate a derelict 19th-century wooden station building, built by the London

North Western Railway. This is now home to a thriving community art studio. Children’s art displays are displayed in the waiting room, and other groups do gardening under supervision.’

Christina Burgess, of Friends of Goostrey Station, says: ‘We are thrilled their work has been rewarded again. We know it’s important to promote sustainable travel by rail, so as well as a creative hub run by professional artist Debbie Goldsmith in the restored wooden building on platform one, we have displays of flowering plants, railway memorabilia and artwork by primary school pupils for passengers to enjoy.’



top: FOGS members relax near railway memorabilia and tubs of flowering plants on Goostrey Station

above left: Holmes Chapel Rainbows enjoy a workshop at Goostrey Art Studio

above right: Tracey Cartlege and Debbie Goldsmith with Goostrey’s platinum jubilee plaque

The Winners of the 2022 Cheshire Best Kept Stations:

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Winner: Altrincham Interchange

CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER AWARD: Winsford
Highly Commended: Neston
Highly Commended: Mouldsworth

CHESHIRE EAST AWARD: Handforth

TFGM AWARD: Heaton Chapel

WIRRAL AWARD: Hoylake

HALTON AND WARRINGTON AWARD: Runcorn

JOHN HOBBS AWARD:
 Reddish South

CHRIS DALE TRAVELWATCH AWARD FOR LARGE STATIONS: Stalybridge
Highly Commended: Macclesfield

BEST STAFFED STATION AWARD: Sandbach

BEST UNSTAFFED STATION: Goostrey

BEST KEPT GARDENS AWARD: Nantwich
Highly Commended: Hale

IN BLOOM AWARD: Meols
Highly Commended: West Kirby

AVANTI SUSTAINABILITY AWARD: Disley
Highly Commended: Stockport

NORTHERN PROMOTING RAIL AWARD: Holmes Chapel

COMMUNITY RAIL NETWORK AWARD FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: Rose Hill

ART PROJECT AWARD:
 Woodsmoor

QUEEN’S PLATINUM JUBILEE AWARD: Romiley
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RISING STAR AWARD:
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