

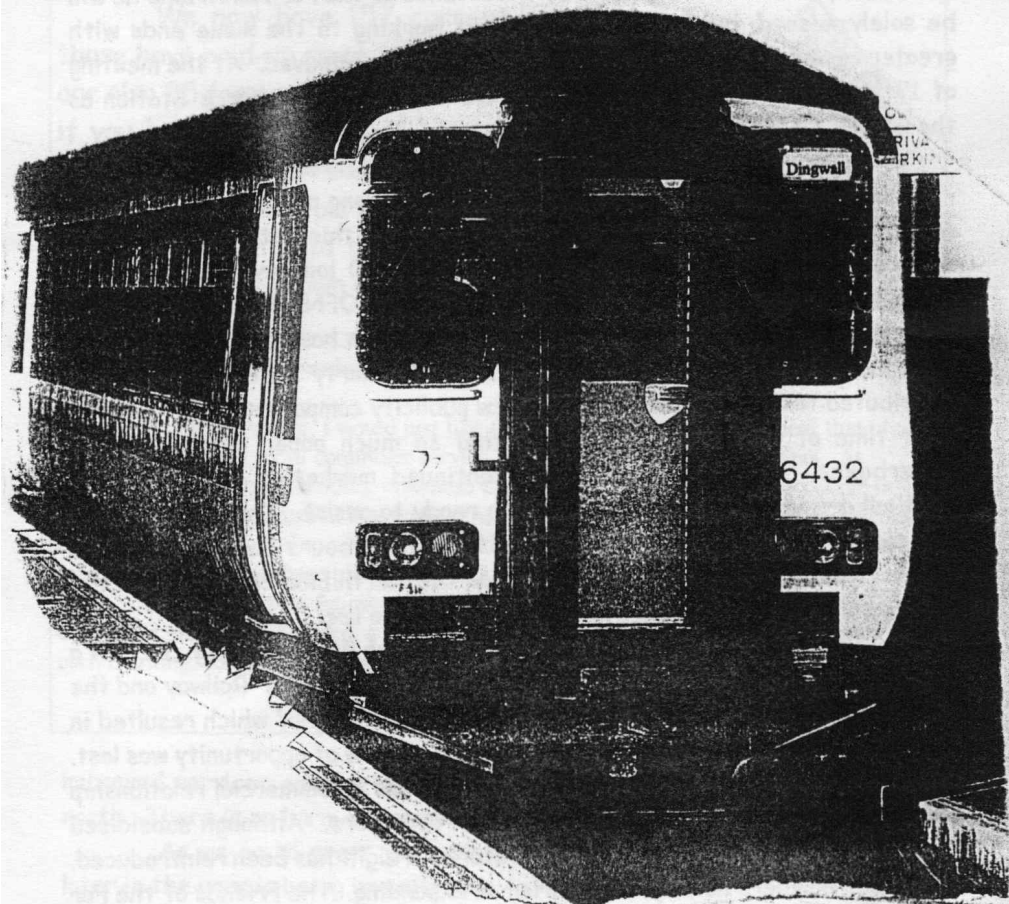
Newsletter of
**THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH
LINE**

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

Issue 9

February 1998

The campaign group for rail, north of Inverness, lobbying for improved services for the local user, tourist and freight operator



Let us hope this becomes a familiar sight to Dingwall - Inverness commuters!

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A View From The Signalbox

It's difficult to know where to start with this, my first effort at producing this newsletter for the Friends. You will be reading elsewhere all the changes that have been taking place and all the news that has been happening and that is one reason that we have delayed this long before publishing. Newsletters become quite personal to the Editor and so perhaps this is an opportune moment to give you a little background of myself, your Editor.

I've lived on the Black Isle for 25 years having moved up to Scotland to fulfil an ambition established in my last year at school to live in the Highlands. I was a trainspotter in the early 50's, cycling around the South of England visiting as many termini, engine sheds etc. as possible. Seeing such wonderful sights as Schools Class and Merchant Navy locomotives, and riding in the double decker on the Dartford Loop line (well to be honest it was more a 1¼) which at least livened up what were quite bland 3 rail electric trains. Interest in trains/railways waned rather when I went into the aircraft industry and it wasn't until I started travelling around the North of Scotland that my interest in railways was re-awakened, as I kept coming across abandoned railway lines. I kept the interest going with plenty of reading and browsing through photographs until one day I met Frank Roach in the Staff Room at Dingwall Academy, where I teach Computing Studies. Frank's enthusiasm about Railways and the Far North Line spurred me to take more interest in the railway on my doorstep.

Knowing my interest in Desktop Publishing he eventually persuaded me to get involved with the Newsletter. But, before I finish, I have an admission to make; my journey, the other Saturday, to a committee meeting in Kinbrace Station was my first journey on the Far North Line! I was extremely impressed and can even better understand the enthusiasm and affection people have for the Line, but what astonished me was some of the strange things that are forced on the operation of the Line. For example the occasions when the train is forced to travel at 10mph, or even stop, just because of unattended crossings. In hindsight it is a pity that the landowner, in the days of the line being built, didn't insist on bridges being built as happened at Dingwall.

I've introduced an issue number to this edition, but I could only go by those in my possession; I'm working on getting an accurate figure. You'll find my home address etc. elsewhere in this issue, my e-mail address is roger.piercy at tesco.net and I would welcome any contributions to future issues of the newsletter.

Roger Piercy - Newsletter Editor

A lot is happening!

Welcome to the first newsletter of 1998.

The Annual General Meeting at Tain in November saw a big turn round in your committee. Both Harry Miller, founder Chairman and Ian Jamieson, founder Treasurer, retired - we owe a debt of gratitude to each of them. Newcomers to the committee are Ron Stevenson and Roger Piercy - Roger is our new Newsletter Editor, whilst John Moore returns. Frank Spaven continues as Membership Secretary and Jim Fry represents Caithness. Frank Roach was re-elected Hon. Secretary and I became Chairman in succession to Harry.

Within weeks Frank Roach was appointed Rail Development Officer for the lines radiating from Inverness by the Highland Rail Network Partnership. As the driving force of the Friends of the Far North Line he will be sorely missed, but we take heart that working to the same ends with greater resources at his command yet more can be achieved. At the meeting of 17th January the committee appointed Keith Tyler, Kinbrace Station as the new Secretary.

Monday 2nd March sees the inauguration of an experimental Dingwall - Inverness commuter train. Although FoFNL has long pressed for a morning service from Tain we are grateful to ScotRail for this initiative. The new service is backed by Highland Council and offers 10 journeys for £10. The run-in time for marketing is short. The advice of FoFNL on pricing and on a departure time from Dingwall no earlier than 8.00am has been accepted. An introductory leaflet supported by Ross and Cromarty Enterprise is being distributed to 5000 homes. However few publicity campaigns succeed at the first time of asking, especially now that so much paper comes through letterboxes. FOFNL believes that continued marketing is essential if ScotRail is to optimise traffic - we are ready to assist. Those in mid-Ross can play a special part in encouraging their neighbours to use the train. Further passenger service development on the North Line could hang on the success of the 8.00am from Dingwall. It's there to use!

Controversy has long surrounded a Dornoch Firth crossing. In 1991 a £12 million scheme (£20 million at today's prices) backed by Railway and the Council fell because the Scottish Office would not 'chip-in' which resulted in the loss of matching funds from Europe. That window of opportunity was lost. Today's climate is different - the government has a commercial relationship with Railtrack, and Railtrack with the train operators. Although subsidised, the Far North Line is on track for the future - freight has been reintroduced, passenger numbers hold up, and tourism is expanding. The Friends of the Far North Line aims to stimulate more growth. More traffic helps us argue for improvements - for increased speed at crossings, for a Georgemas chord, for improved services and for a rail freight reception/distribution hub in the north. There is no harm in dreaming: better to move forward step by step.

As we go to press the possibility of steam on the Far North Line later in the year is being investigated.

Watch out for further news.

John Melling

Chairman

Railway Centenaries

Several of our Highland Lines have been or soon will be celebrating their centenaries.

The opening of the last stretch of the Kyle Line, from Strome Ferry to Kyle of Lochalsh, was well marked last year by the successful excursions organised by the Friends of the Kyle Line, the West Coast Railway Company, Railtrack and ScotRail. This year there will be a display commemorating that Centenary, by the National Railway Museum and ScotRail, in the Highland Council's Museum in Bridge Street, Inverness from 20th June to 22nd July.

In the gallery of the same Museum, from 7th to 27th September, there is to be an exhibition to mark the Centenary of the opening of the Direct Line from Inverness to Aviemore via Carr Bridge in 1898. This is being organised by a local group (including Frank Spaven of FOFNL), with the ready help of the Museum Curator, the Highland Council Archivist, the National Railway Museum, the Scottish Record Office and Railtrack. It is hoped to show some early and recent photographs of traffic on landmarks of the Line such as viaducts, and contributions are invited.

A central feature will be an operating model of the Highland Railway in Gauge 1, part of the unique collection constructed by the late James Kennedy of Inverness.

To commemorate the same Centenary, there is to be a steam shuttle service between Inverness and Aviemore on Saturday 17th October, of which there will be more news later.

As some members will recall, the Far North Line celebrated its Centenary in 1974; maybe we shall mark the 125th Anniversary next year! It is hoped to stage a National Railway Museum Photographic Exhibition locally, the naming of a diesel locomotive, and possibly a special train. But, guess what? There doesn't appear to be a spare 125 anywhere in the country to use on the Far North line!

Contributed by Frank Spaven

Railway Cuttings

FARES RISE BUT FREEDOM OF SCOTLAND IS CHEAPER

More transport for less money goes on offer to tourists and overseas visitors from Sunday 4th January when the revamped 'Freedom of Scotland' Travelpass for 1998 goes on sale.

ScotRail and Scottish Citylink have joined forces to include a substantial road transport element in this popular travel package.

The price of an 8 day out of 15 Travelpass reduces to £93 from the £110 cost of the 1997 ticket which did not include bus travel.

The pass offers unlimited travel on all trains using the ScotRail system, the Glasgow Underground, CalMac and Strathclyde PTE scheduled ferries, plus discounts on P&O ferries.

In addition the following CityLink routes are covered:

Kyle of Lochalsh to Uig; Inverness to Ullapool; Oban to Campbeltown; Wick to John O'Groats and Oban and Fort William to Inverness.

Travelpasses with a validity for 4 days out of eight and 12 out of fifteen are priced at £64 and £122 respectively.

(ScotRail Press Release)

TAXPAYERS GIVE A BONUS OF £5M FOR SCOTRAIL PUNCTUALITY

The handout from the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising (OPRAF) to ScotRail was bigger than the total of £4.2 million performance payments to all other passenger train operators and was in recognition of running most of its trains on time. The bonus had been reduced by a penalty of £15,000 for changing details of ScotRail's timetable at short notice.

MOTORAIL - MOTOCAR

Auto Shuttle Express is a new company exploiting the gap left by the demise of Motorail. ADVANTAGE - You get to travel in comfort by train whilst they transport your car by road. DISADVANTAGE - £475!

(With apologies to The Independent.)

BIKE CHARGES TO BE SCRAPPED

ScotRail Managing Director Alastair MacPherson announced at a press briefing recently that as from the start of the summer timetable on May 24 the £3 charge for accompanied bicycles is to be scrapped. However, it will be necessary to make advance reservations on Express and rural route trains. At the same press briefing Henry McLeish, Transport Minister, announced that ScotRail is to receive £150,000 of funding to put more bikes onto trains, under the Scottish Cycle Challenge Initiative. Equivalent amounts of investment will be made by ScotRail and Porterbrook, the rolling stock leasing company, and the money will be used to increase the cycle carrying capacity on more than 70 trains.

The accommodation will be doubled on the 46 Class 158 ScotRail Express trains and in addition 30 Super Sprinter Class 156 will have secure cycle racks installed to increase capacity to a minimum of 5 bikes per two car unit.

It would be nice to think that representations made by our members to Alastair McPherson when he addressed the AGM had some bearing on the decision to scrap the charge.

A multi-agency initiative involving the Highland Council and the Health Promotion Unit has resulted in the appointment of a Cycle Promotion Officer for the Moray Firth Area. What we need now are ideas to stimulate more bicycles being transported up the Line.

(ScotRail Press Release)

Get steaming!

Article first appeared in *Ross-Shire Journal*, 28.11.97.

Once again methodically checking over the non-fiction section of Tain library; believe it or not, in my time I have got through quite a large number of the books there, my eyes alighted on a title that I hadn't noticed before. *A Brush With Steam* by David Shepherd the well-known elephant and lions artist. (Remember him? Prints of his oil paintings were hugely popular during the seventies.) Should I give the book a spin or not? Hmm, I pondered, and then took it up to the desk to be stamped. I am really glad that I made that decision. Early in the morning, late at night, even after tea, before I head out for some meeting or another, I have been totally, but totally, absorbed. Not since *The Jewel and the Crown* burst into my life has a book so gripped me. And it's all to do with something that I had nearly forgotten about myself, I was and still remain a unreconstructed lover of steam engines.

All about how Shepherd bought a huge Standard Class 9F from British Rail in the late sixties, and how he restored it, and all the different adventures he had with it. Yes of course, that's what I would do with all the lottery money, buy myself a ruddy great steam engine and spend the rest of my days driving it up and down my private length of track. A Highland estate? A penthouse in New York? No no, give me an old BR black engine any day.

I have said before in this column how I find it hard to pass the window of any shop selling model trains, all to do with being brought up in a farmhouse that had a railway line at the bottom of the field in front of it. What I had forgotten, until this wonderful book came along, was the memory of what it was actually like in the cabs of these old engines. Going up to Beauly, or is it 'down' from Tain, with my grandfather to visit Campbell's excellent emporium where he was having a new suit made, my earliest memory is of him taking me up to talk to the engine driver and fireman before the train pulled out of Tain. What a heat, kind hands had pulled me up onto the foot-plate, that bright yellow and orange fire, I marvelled that people could work in such conditions. 'Puff puff', or perhaps I should say 'roar roar', such was the explosion of smoke and steam as the engine took the strain and slowly cajoled the heavy-laden carriages out of the station. I remember leaning out of the front carriage window and watching enthralled as the train slowly speeded up and slipped past the old signal box and engine shed (sadly all gone now).

And the engine coming back from Beauly was different, quite different. Smaller with a taller chimney (or do I mean funnel?) and not quite such a hot cab. Yes, we talked to the driver of that one too. I suspect that secretly grandfather was also a bit of a train-lover.

Certainly as I sat on the end of his bed while he drank his early morning tea, had to be Ceylon and blisteringly hot, we talked trains. Imaginary trains in point of fact. His was called the "Ho Har Hi!" while mine was called the "Fee Fo Fum" and we used to tell each other stories in which, invariably, the other's engine would 'fall in the water'. Oh, we had great crack, the old man (in his mid-nineties) and I. As soon as I heard him rattling his cup first thing, I would hop out of bed and nip through.

Sadly there was only one other time I actually got onto the footplate of a steam engine. This was a few years later in Waverley Station in Edinburgh; it must have been during the very last days of steam. My mother and I were going somewhere, can't remember where, and while we were waiting for our train I suddenly noticed a large 2-6-4 passenger tank engine far up the platform reversing towards us. Please, please, could we go and see it! (A tank engine was a real treat because you never saw one on

the north line out of Inverness.) I ran ahead up the platform and gazed in ecstasy. Back she came slowly, the driver's cheerful face looking backwards towards me. "Aye, you like engines do you?" Next thing I knew, I was up beside him and this time we were actually moving. To my mother's feigned disapproval, off we went for a wee trip. Down the platform and under the footbridge to the first set of points, and then we stopped and reversed again to where we had started. Perhaps only three or four minutes, but it remains the most vivid and thrilling memory. Such power, and the way the engine glided forward under its canopy of dark smoke. I expect that all he was doing was a bit of shunting, but as far as I was concerned it was the Flying Scotsman itself.

Goodness me such a long time ago, thirty years or more. And this book has brought it all back to me. Only three times in the cab, it's time I went back to my childhood and did it again. To this end I know what I'll be saying to James Shuttleworth, the man who runs the Fort William to Mallaig steam trains, the next time he comes to one of our Highland Council railways meetings. After all he provided the train for the steam run to mark the Kyle Line centenary. Perhaps next year he'd like to turn right at Dingwall and come on up our way. It would gladden my heart to see smoke at the bottom of the gasworks field, now Tain's industrial estate.

Who knows, enough silver tongued Glenmorangie boosted persuasion and I might persuade him to let me drive it for a minute or two. The length of Tain platform would be enough. If it were ever to happen I know one old man who will be smiling down on me.

Jamie Stone

Correspondence

Extract from a letter written to Frank Roach, by Brian Patten, Berwickshire

"I am writing primarily to enquire if the Friends have taken any collective view about the transport provisions of the Scotland Bill. Although I have not read the Bill myself, as yet, I fear from the summaries in the press that control of the rail system is to remain in England and I am afraid that that will make much more difficult the establishment of any co-ordinated transport policy in Scotland. I have written to The Scotsman on the matter, though more with respect to East Lothian than the Far North Line; so far the letter has not been published, but there is time yet. I have also written to Archy Kirkwood, our local MP and he replied saying that he had taken up the point with the Minister, presumably Gavin Strang. If we don't get this right now, I can foresee all manner of problems for transport in the future."

Extract from a letter forwarded to us from ScotRail from Mr. Niall Gordon, Muir of Ord.

"Writing as an individual, I would just like to say how delighted I am to hear that plans are afoot to provide a rail commuter service between Dingwall and Inverness. At present I am a student attending Inverness College, and I will complete my course in June. However, I am certain that many other students would welcome the introduction of a regular service, and so perhaps it would be appropriate and beneficial if you were to inform the College of these plans and publicise them there. Also, perhaps a future consideration would be that Beauly Station be utilised once more - as in Muir of Ord, a great number of students and individuals board the bus each morning, some going to work, others to college, hospital, etc."

Top Rail Personnel Address Friends Meeting in Tain

Prior to the AGM in the Mansfield Hotel on November 15th members were addressed by Alastair MacPherson, Managing Director, ScotRail and John Holwell, English, Welsh and Scottish.

Alastair McPherson is employed by **National Express Group** (NEG) and claimed not to be a railman but a businessman with an extensive transport knowledge who is in control of a team of experienced people. NEG is a plc from the public sector background and is a multi-modal transport operator - coaching, buses, airports and rail, which is the biggest division. He reassured us of the importance of the rural railways and he is obligated to run the network and maintain rail mileage. He hopes to blend private enterprise with public services concepts to create innovation and freedom.

For the Highlands he hopes to build on existing network and offer stability to prevent people worrying about money being diverted elsewhere. He plans to fill gaps by integrating rail with road by linking Oban, Fort William and Inverness with through ticketing enabling further linking to Ullapool. He recognises the importance of tourism.

He wasn't going to make promises that he couldn't keep because he has to negotiate with Railtrack which can sometimes be very difficult. He indicated that he is always open to ideas, some of which have already come from the Friends. He is unable to deliver the Tain commuter train because he considers the risk is far too great at present. He promised that he would experiment next year with a Dingwall commuter service Monday to Friday even though projections indicate that a loss will be made. He announced the 50% discount for Highland Rail Card holders from 15 -20th December and promised that there will be some new initiatives in the Spring. He also promised to look carefully at the Inverness - Edinburgh/Glasgow services.

A Question and Answer session followed during which he was asked on what basis was it decided that the income from Tain service would be so low. He replied that the previous offer to look at the service had been made in good faith but he was constrained by the BR board and the new ScotRail board had found the proposal unacceptable. He has ordered a new look and invited discussions with local Councillors. He hopes the Dingwall experiment will prove the figures to be pessimistic and acknowledged that the Marketing of his services will need to be looked at. He was doubtful about the re-opening stations such as Evanton, Conon Bridge and Beaully because he considered it would be detrimental to journey times. Comment was made about the poor marketing of the £9 tickets of which so few people had been made aware of, and it was suggested that the 50% discount be extended forward a week. He recognised that ScotRail has been historically a high price operator and that they will have to look at deep and prolonged discounting.

Further discussion took place on the opening hours of toilets in Inverness Station and the transport of bikes. Alastair MacPherson said that they were aware of the frustrations of cyclists and hoped to make improvements.

Our Chairman, Robert MacLennan MP in summing up stressed the importance of marketing. Alastair MacPherson responded that he hoped for positive developments with the appointment of the new Rail Development Officers acting as a catalyst.

John Holwell was then introduced and invited to talk about Freight.

English, Welsh and Scottish (EWS) is an American owned Company and he announced their plans for the purchase of new locos and wagons. EWS recognises the need for an immediate improvement in

rolling stock and their plan is to double freight business in 5 years and treble it in 10 years. He summarised developments over the line; such as pipes, aviation fuel, agricultural lime, steel/freezers, lineside loading of timber, potatoes from Inverness but soon to be from Tain. He realised that the Safeway initiative in the South could not be matched in the North due to lack of equipment. Freight is increasing South from Inverness with the major influence on any future developments being the Killcrankie tunnel and the gauge that can be achieved by track modifications.

A wide ranging discussion took place which included the consideration that Highland water be taken by train to the South of England to relieve the drought conditions. A quotation had already been prepared for water to be taken south from Edinburgh.

ScotRail's £1 Train Trip for Dingwall Denizens

So runs the headline for the latest press release issued by ScotRail on 5th February, but so far the issues of the Ross-shire Journal for 6th and 13th February haven't covered the story!

The details were announced by Alastair McPherson at the meeting of the Highland Rail Network Development Partnership in Inverness.

The plan is to run the service from Dingwall at 08.00am, calling at Muir of Ord at 08.05 and reaching Inverness at 08.25. Commuters will be able to return on existing trains at 17.15 and 18.00.

An introductory £10 flexipass, valid, for a month, for ten single journeys in either direction on any service between Dingwall or Muir of Ord and Inverness, will be in place for the launch of the new service on March 2nd for a four month trial period.

"This is the first of a number of new services ScotRail plan to introduce. It is our response to a specific request from Highland Council who in recent years have become increasingly concerned about road congestion in Inverness, particularly in the morning peak. It demonstrates the very positive working relationship that we have with them and with other members of the Partnership." Then Mr. McPherson gave a warning - 'use it or lose it'.

The Friends of the Far North Line has been pressing for a commuter train from Tain for four

years and we welcome this as a start. The Highland Rail Network Development Partnership was founded following a FOFNL initiative holding a Railway Conference in October 1995. Our representative had taken forward this initiative in the Partnership and the Steering Group.

At a recent Partnership meeting our Chairman, John Melling, offered the help of members to distribute flyer leaflets publicising the new service. FOFNL believes that only repeated marketing will secure the future of this commuter train. If you live in Ross-shire then please encourage your friends to use the service.

Senior Railcard

Whilst in Inverness Station I was checking on the advertising leaflets that were available and my attention was drawn to the leaflet for the Senior Railcard. What attracted my attention and amused me was the 'blurb' on the front cover.

To emphasise the extent of travel for passengers throughout the 'whole of the country' the text started "*From Glencoe to Great Yarmouth*" Now Glencoe was my introduction to Scotland 41 years ago but what made the author choose such a place, as if it was ever possible to reach Glencoe by train. However, I suppose Ballachulish wasn't too far away and there was always Rannoch Station!