

Newsletter of
THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE
Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

Issue 10

June 1998

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

Hopefully Beaully Station
will be the next success story.



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A View From The Signalbox

Little did I realise when I choose the name for my own personal piece of the Newsletter that I would be getting the chance to visit the Inverness Control Centre. Alan Macarthy, Railtrack Manager, Signalling welcomed the group I was with and gave us an introductory talk on the principles of signalling outlining its development from the earliest of days when men were given the responsibility of using a pole to move the signalling apparatus; hence giving the derivative for policeman, right up to the most modern of signalling methods in the electronic age.

With one's mental image of a signal box being a room with a view of the track and a frame of brass levers, today's equivalent is a bit of a disappointment. However, we were taken through the workings of the electric equivalent of the old signal boxes with its electric display of all the points, lines, train positions, and closed circuit television to view the level crossings. It was pleasant to realise that there are still codes of bell rings and the manual logging of all the decisions made whilst controlling the movement of trains south and east of Inverness. Train movements to the North and West of Inverness are controlled by the Radio Electronic Token Block (RETB) system and at the time of my visit we were only able to observe the movement of a train from Thurso to Wick. However the controller was kept busy issuing tokens to the various maintenance squads wanting possession of parts of the line.



The following description of the RETB system has been taken from the handout that is issued to visitors:

"RETB was invented by The Railway Technical Centre in Derby in the early 80's as a low cost solution to conventional signalling on lightly trafficked rural lines. The world's first RETB controlled line was from Dingwall to Kyle of Lochalsh, which was commissioned in October 1984. Four signalboxes were closed as a result of its introduction.

Following the RETB's success on the 'West' line to Kyle, the system was extended to the 'North' line to Wick and Thurso from Dingwall in December 1985, with a consequent closing of some nine signalboxes. Full RETB commissioning was made in August 1988 when the line from Inverness to Dingwall was brought under control of Inverness Control Centre. The RETB signalbox in Inverness controls about 238 route miles with 14 crossing loops on the lines to Wick/Thurso and Kyle. In addition, it monitors a considerable number of Automatic Open Crossings; Automatic Half Barriers and user worked private

crossings. The box is manned by one signalman on each shift continuously from 0001 Monday to 0015 Sunday.

The 'electric token' issued by the signalbox to trains takes the place of the old fashioned 'Electric Token' formerly handed to each driver as his authority to be in a single line section. Each driving cab is fitted with a Cab Display Unit (CDU) with a unique four-digit number. The train driver requests the appropriate token for the journey to be undertaken, the RETB signalman keys up the driver's request on the console and, provided the route is proved available by the Solid State Interlocking (SSI), a 'handshake' between the CDU and RETB box takes place over the radio and the appropriate token is displayed to the train driver. (e.g. Dingwall - Muir of Ord). The radio is not discrete in that radio messages may be heard by all users of the system, this in effect, acts as a safeguard in the event of erroneous information being given to a driver by mistake.

The crossing loop points are of Hydraulic Spring design which restore to the normal position (left hand side) following the passage of a train in the trailing direction over them. A yellow lamp gives the correct indication that the points are set. Conversely, a plunger operated by the driver to select the appropriate route north or west controls the junction points in Dingwall.

Should radio communication fail there are backup emergency 'phones at each token exchange point and dictated 'card' system of working would be introduced over the affected portion of line. There are a voice recorder and printer backups of keyboard entries, which may be used following an incident should the need arise."

Roger Piercy - Newsletter Editor

Steam Through the Highlands

Steam trains will be returning to the Highland lines this autumn. A new company, Highland Rail Heritage, has been formed from the various Friends groups and the Keith and Dufftown Railway with the object of developing interest in the area's rich railway past.

The company plans to become involved in the preservation of artefacts, the marketing of railway attractions and educating the public about the history of the lines and their present day rôle. One of its first tasks is to promote steam journeys to Kyle, Wick/Thurso and Aviemore from Inverness on the first three weekends in October, building on the successful Kyle Centenary trains last year.

Highland Railway Heritage Chairman, John Melling said, "This is a new initiative which will attract visitors to the Highlands in the autumn and also enable local people to ride on steam. The Highlands has beautiful railway scenery and many original railway features remain."

Supported by Highland Rail Development Railway partnership - a consortium of Highland Council, the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Network and railway companies - the new company is putting together a marketing package and is in discussion with funding agencies.

Highland Rail Development Consultant Frank Roach said, "We hope to sign a contract with West Coast Railways, operator of the Fort William - Mallaig Jacobite service, in the very near future."

The proposed dates are:

Saturday 26.9.98 Fort William - Edinburgh

Saturday 3.10.98 Edinburgh - Inverness

Sunday 4.10.98 Inverness - Kyle - Inverness

Saturday 10.10.98 Inverness - Wick/Thurso

Sunday 11.10.98 Wick - Thurso shuttle; Thurso - Inverness

Saturday 17.10.98 Inverness - Aviemore shuttle

Sunday 18.10.98 Inverness - Edinburgh

Highland Festival 1998

Whilst for some of you the following is purely academic I include it to show the wealth of interest there is in Railway matters.

As part of the Highland Festival, Eden Court Theatre in Inverness provided the following films:

Friday 22nd May	Oh Mr. Porter!
Saturday 23rd May	Steam on the Screen
Monday 25th May	Brief Encounter
Wednesday 27th May	Europa
Saturday 30th May	The Railway Children
Tuesday 2nd June	The Titfield Thunderbolt
Thursday 4th June	North West Frontier
Saturday 6th June	The Train

In addition other atTRACKtions included various entertainments on the **Strathspey Steam Railway** and Highland poets performing on trains throughout the West Highland Line, the Kyle Line, the Far North Line and the mainline south of Inverness.

Summer Timetable Review

No Change On Far North

Despite reductions of 1 - 3 minutes on Inverness - Kyle timings the opportunity to reduce Far North Line timings has been passed over. The published weekday timetable remains unchanged. Seasonal Request Stops at Dunrobin are re-introduced. Sunday trains will again run for only three months, from 28th June to 19th September.

ScotRail are to be congratulated on their decision to continue the Monday to Friday Dingwall to Inverness morning commuter train for a further full year. The success of this service, now loading to over 40 passengers daily, owes much to FoFNL, the Enterprise bodies and the Highland Council as well as ScotRail itself. Unfortunately the decision came too late for inclusion within the 1,944 pages of the Great Britain Passenger Railway Summer Timetable. However there seems no good reason for the omission of these trains from the supplement which accompanies that publication.

Regular travellers on the Far North Line know that the timetable contains time usually passed standing at stations. The long planned and now achieved lifting of the severe speed restriction at the Mid Fearn farm crossings between Tain and Ardgay could have been accompanied by an advanced plan to effect a one minute reduction in timings between these two stations. In their Scotland Network Management Statement for 1998 Railtrack envisage no improvement to the already best Inverness - Thurso timing of 3 hours 39 minutes. Given the limited halting of trains at some request stops, is there not a place for a Risk Assessment over the probability of arrival at or before booked time? Why can we not have a 3 hour 30 minute Inverness - Thurso timing with commensurate saving to/from Wick?

Elsewhere it is good to see the morning HST from Inverness booked to Perth in under 2 hours and Kings Cross under 8. ScotRail need to compete more effectively on the Inverness - Edinburgh corridor. In particular a limited stop service from Inverness at around 9 a.m. could connect off the Dingwall commuter train.

John Melling, Chairman

We will always welcome contributions from any source and for this issue we are pleased to include an article prepared by a pupil of Dingwall Primary School.

Steam Train To Kyle of Lochalsh October 1997

The special train for the 100th anniversary of the Inverness to Kyle line was hauled by ex BR Standard Class 4 Steam Locomotive 75014.

The magnificent steam engine which usually runs between Fort William and Mallaig, arrived at Inverness Station during the afternoon of 5th October 1997, it had come from Edinburgh and Perth.

My Mum took my brother and me to see the train pull into the station. The fireman asked if my brother and I would like to come on the footplate. On the footplate the fireman blew the whistle for us. My brother Fionnlagh who is only 5 was frightened of the loudness of the whistle as he had never heard a working steam train whistle. There were older men at Inverness waiting for the steam train with their cameras and video cameras.

The following day at 9 a.m., my Dad and I were waiting on the railway bridge at Dingwall Station for the steam train. You could hear it a mile away before seeing it from the bridge.

People boarded the train for the trip to Kyle, the train was made up of six coaches one of them was a dining car everyone wanted to get on board the steam train.

My brother and I were saving up for a Standard Class 4 steam locomotive for our train set and its number happened to be 75014.

**By Alasdair Lavery
Aged 11**

I was pleased to receive the following contribution from Mr. Richard Ardern, Inverness in response to Jamie Stone's article in the last issue.

T(r)ain Locomotives

I very much enjoyed Jamie Stone's article in the Newsletter. Others will probably have pointed out that tank engines were seen occasionally on the North Line when the Dornoch Branch engines went to the works in Inverness. In the late Fifties, these were GWR 0-6-0Ts and before that HR 0-4-4Ts.

My holiday records from Tain show 54470 and 45098 on shed each night on 29 and 30 July 1959. The Pickersgill 4-4-0 would have worked the 3pm all stations from Inverness and it would likely have been this train and this class of engine that Jamie remembers travelling home behind. These locomotives were indeed "smaller with a taller chimney" than the ubiquitous Black Fives.

Notes for foreign readers or others not familiar with British locomotives:

- GWR = Great Western Railway
- HR = Highland Railway
- Pickersgill was a Caledonian Railway Chief Mechanical Engineer.
- Black Five = London Midland & Scottish (LMS) Class 5 mixed traffic locomotive.

Facing Points

A contribution from our Secretary.

As an 'incomer' - though a regular visitor for longer, I have only lived at Kinbrace for barely 3 years - and one for whom the railway is a lifeline against the encroachments of bad weather and a senior age bracket, I was quickly impressed by FoFNL's record over a relatively short period in building sound relationships and thereby securing improvements in the service.

And it is only fair, before going any further, to add a few words of appreciation for the excellence of Far North Line operation, not only in punctual and reliable running and trolley service, plus the maintenance and cleaning input and the work by Railtrack that makes all this possible, but also, and above all, the unfailing courtesy, resilience and helpfulness of on-board staff. Within the context of ScotRail's reputation for enriching today's travel experience, our line is as good as any. FoFNL would of course like to see such improvements as reduced travel time by upgrading level crossings and even modest realignments to ease the incidence and/or severity of some speed restrictions. We would be glad to get a few more stations reopened; so perhaps this is essential if any overall gain is to be achieved over the status quo. We must be practical. Anyone with a few million pounds they are unsure how to invest might

find Railtrack not wholly unappreciative - even, who knows, willing to consider rescheduling the priority of such matters!

As Secretary, I thought it might be instructive to take a look at our membership base. No surprises here, but pointers to note. It shows what you might expect: nearly 60% of members are local - of which about a quarter are 'off-line'; of the 'on-line' ones a quarter live in Inverness, while nearly a fifth presently have no immediate access to a station. Checking those with stations proved interesting: in particular, we have no current members in Fearn, Culrain, Invershin, Kildonan, Forsinard or Georgemas (none of those too surprising), only one each in Helmsdale, Brora and Golspie, and none in Invergordon. To my mind we should aim to have at least 12 members in all appreciable towns - we have 6 in Tain which heads the list (excluding Inverness) - and 3 or 4 everywhere else.

Of the other members some 8% live in adjoining parts of north-east Scotland, another 8% in other regions of Scotland, while as many as 24% are drawn from all parts of the United Kingdom, and we have a few from overseas. This wider basis of support seems to me very healthy and valuable. I would particularly encourage such members to maintain their interest, and not to feel they are too far away to play a useful rôle. If at some time we are seeking to make a point that is, say, not too welcome or appears over-ambitious, it is not surprising to be asked "Well what sort of a group are you? Who do you represent? Why should we listen to you?" It strengthens our credibility to be able to prove that we are a broadly based Society and by no means a pressure group with an obsessive and limited outlook. We should be setting out now to increase our membership substantially. And in this of course every member can help. If you are not already doing it - I know some of you are - make your membership well known, and by your good will and enthusiasm encourage others to join us. It could just be - the signs are there - that the tide is beginning to turn in favour of railway development, so let's see if we can help it to come in with a will.

Keith Tyler

Cycling Matters

Rolf Schmidt, one of our members, has sent to the Editor a copy of Highland Cycle Campaign Newsletter, Number 8 January 1998. In it he wrote a very interesting article "TAKING BICYCLES ON TRAINS - A HARD COMPROMISE." This suggested ways by which the transport of bicycles could be made easier with compromises being made by the train operators and the cyclists themselves.

In the introduction the following passage caught my attention: "A modern, high-tech bicycle can be thought of as a combination of metal mesh and protruding barbed spikes; a kind of giant scale velcro. Train crews complain about delays caused by separating these things, also referred to as 'mating hedgehogs', before they can be unloaded."

Rolf also sent in a copy of a letter sent to Mr. Alan Chapman, Head of Engineering ScotRail, giving detailed drawings of all the various options available to ScotRail to accommodate bicycles on the various classes of trains we have in the North. One hopes that this very constructive advice is taken in the way it is meant and that everyone can be accommodated to best advantage. The Friends are certainly keen to encourage cyclists onto the trains, perhaps not necessarily with their bikes but attracted to take advantage of the superb cycling facilities in and around Thurso on bicycles provided by local outlets.

More Cycling Matters

Connex South Eastern have introduced a scheme to encourage travellers to combine rail travel with hiring a cycle. The 'all-in-one ticket to ride' is based on Canterbury and Tonbridge stations. An adult can travel from London to Canterbury for a return fare of £21.80, reserving a modern, multi-speed bike which will be ready for collection. Also included are free helmets for any children in the group, a comprehensive information pack, suggested routes, cycle lock and special discounted admission to local places of interest.

Committee Matters

It has been decided to experiment with publishing a semi-official version of your Committee's minutes, in an attempt to give you some insight into the workings of FoFNL.

The new committee has now met twice, in January at Kinbrace Station, when we were joined by Frank Roach. Then in April Committee member, Jim Fry, accommodated us in Thurso College where we had a full house except for our Treasurer. Over lunch we were joined by Neal Money, Chief Executive of Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise. The following is a summary of the April meeting:

Frank Spaven, Membership Secretary, reported a membership of 158, with 85 lapsed members. The change in the membership renewal system had caused slight confusion. We have written to all lapsed members. Corporate Membership was discussed as there was potential for extra members. The committee is considering the introduction of a membership card. A financial statement was made and we will be renewing our affiliations to Community Rail Partnership and Railway Development Society but not to the Strathspey Railway Association, there being adequate links through individual members. The bank account is to be transferred to Muir of Ord. The next item dealt with was the Dingwall Commuter Train. This experiment has been recognised by ScotRail as 'quietly encouraging' and dates have been fixed for reviews of fares and the continuation of the service. The re-opening of Beaully Station is being investigated. The subject of free car parking in towns associated with the Line was discussed and raised the question as to how damaging would it be to the Line if towns, such as Dingwall, had car parking charges imposed. So long as rail users receive Free Parking on production of a ticket there should be no problem. Dissatisfaction was voiced about the incomplete distribution of advertising leaflets, we included a leaflet in the last issue of our Newsletter. It had been a worry that the marketing of the service was going to suffer because of the tight schedule that ScotRail had decided on at its introduction. There are still a lot of leaflets available and possibility of distributing these was to be considered. ScotRail, with the support of HIE had produced an A4 poster but again few were to be seen. Committee members had been able to gain useful publicity on radio and television with the announcement of the £3.5 million Government funding for Rural Transport Initiative.

A report was given on the February meeting of the Highland Rail Partnership. Alastair McPherson, Managing Director, ScotRail, had referred to the commuter train and to forthcoming orders for new rolling stock for central Scotland. Nigel Wunsch, Railtrack, gave details of the work being carried out in the Killiecrankie tunnel to allow 8'6" containers. Professor Thompson, English, Welsh and Scottish reported on a feasibility study on narrow gauge railborne timber extraction in otherwise inaccessible plantations in the Highlands. Jim Fry reported on the Cycle Hire facilities in Thurso, although not in the immediate vicinity of the station. John Moore agreed to investigate opportunities elsewhere. Roger Piercy mentioned the articles he had received for the Newsletter on cycle racks on trains. On freight it was understood that Rockwater were making some major pipe train movements in the near future and there was a possibility of timber extraction at Kildonan.

Next was the previously proposed rail crossing of the Dornoch Firth. It was felt that FoFNL should make it quite clear that they supported the development of the present route. The fact that the need for 7 miles of new track and the crossing of the River Fleet was rarely mentioned in discussions meant that in the real world the spending of at least £20 million was wishful thinking. Some interested parties were beginning to change their stance and therefore it was important that people knew what advice we would give.

The Highland Railway Heritage, a group initiated by Frank Roach, has been considering a draft Memorandum and Articles of Association. FoFNL as a founder member will continue to support this venture whose aims include education about the railway and promoting events including steam excursions.

Various Newsletter details were covered. The issue had appeared on the Internet, courtesy of member Ian Budd. It was agreed to include in the Newsletter a summary of the minutes to allow members to know about the workings of the committee. Advertising would be carried out in a limited way where an appropriate donation was made.

It was decided that a start should be made at attracting more publicity to FoFNL's existence. Various suggestions will be considered with a small folding leaflet to be prepared for the next meeting.

Copies of Railtrack's Strategic Proposals for Scotland were still awaited...

The next meeting will take place at the Royal Hotel, Fortrose, on Saturday 6th June. The Chairman has invited Roy Pederson to attend a future committee meeting at his convenience.

The Chairman thanked our host Jim Fry and declared the meeting closed in time to catch the train home - unlike the previous meeting where various items on the agenda had to be dealt with on the train, in the absence of the Secretary!

Railway Cuttings

Ross-shire Journal 27.3.98

"News Digest"

"Good news for Far North Line"

Friends of The Far North Line chairman John Melling has welcomed the Government's rural transport initiative. Mr. Melling said rural train services should also benefit and called for an improved rail service between Inverness and Tain with bus connections to and from Dornoch.

He said, "The Dingwall to Inverness commuter train is already proving a success and should be extended further north. Greater use should be made of the railway between Wick and Thurso and active consideration be given to re-introducing a fourth train on the Far North Line." He added that a co-ordinated public transport system in the Highlands was essential.

Daily Telegraph 2.5.98

A puncture? Phone the train.

Cyclists who travel on Anglia Railways, paying £1 per bike, will benefit from a rescue-and-repair service introduced this week. In association with the Environmental Transport Association, Anglia has set up a telephone hotline that will arrange puncture repairs on the spot or transport to the nearest railway station or repair shop. All the cyclist has to do is produce a valid ticket."And I suppose if people get just a bit worn out, they could hitch a lift in the van," said a spokesman.

Are you paying attention, ScotRail?

The Ross-shire Journal dated 6.3.98 contained several articles relating to the new commuter service. There was a very positive Editorial highlighting highlighting the importance of the service. Regular contributor Roddy Maclean in his "My Point of View" gave his opinion as did reporter Jackie Mackenzie in her piece "New Dingwall train - use it or lose it", picking up the catch phrase used by ScotRail Managing Director.

ScotRail Press Release - 16.5.98

The Freedom of Scotland Travelpass has come down in price from £110 to £93 for eight days out of fifteen, and now includes several Scottish CityLink coach routes such as Oban - Campbeltown and Oban - Fort William - Inverness. which complement the rail network. Inclusion of the Oban - Fort William - Inverness route has enabled ScotRail to combine the previously separate West and North Highland Rover tickets at the virtually unaltered price of £42 for four days out of eight.

Highland Days out fares are valid in both directions, and also include routes out of Inverness to Aviemore

(£15), Kyle of Lochalsh (£30), Invershin (£15), Helmsdale (£20), Thurso and Wick (both £35).

ScotRail's Table Topping Performance. 11.5.98

The following are extracts from a ScotRail Press Release.

ScotRail train services are the most punctual in Britain - that's official.

The facts are revealed among the latest rail performance statistics issued today by the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising (OPRAF). They put ScotRail atop the punctuality 'league table'.

They also confirm that, by showing a performance improvement up on both 1996/97 and 1995/96 when OPRAF records began, ScotRail is bucking a national trend OPRAF's Director John O'Brien describes as 'disappointing'. The OPRAF bulletin measures performance of the 25 Train Operating Companies during the quarter and also offers comparison for the whole of 1997/8 with 1996/7. Of 53 UK train service groups assessed, 35 had got worse, one had stayed the same and only 17 had shown improvement. All five of ScotRail's main service groupings were among that 17.

During the twelve months ended March 31st 96.4% of ScotRail Highland services arrived within 10 minutes of schedule - 0.6% up on 96/97 and 4.4% above Charter Standard target revised upwards in September.

ScotRail has also taken steps to improve compensation when things go wrong. In January, the one hour qualification threshold of redress for delay was lowered. Now passengers can expect payment vouchers if their train is more than 30 minutes late. The level of compensation has also been increased from 20% to 50%.

Executive, April 1998.

Extracts from "Making tracks in the Highlands", Frank Roach, Highland rail consultant.

Frank Roach and fellow rail consultant, Dan McGrory have three key objectives, freight, passenger and heritage. "Undoubtedly the greatest scope for rail potential lies in freight. Each day two freight trains depart from Inverness one via Aberdeen and one via Aviemore. The days of British Rail turning away loads that could not form a whole train are way behind us. With the delivery of 250 locomotives and 2000 new wagons starting soon, reliability and availability will be second to none. Why the success in the north? We are fortunate in having a lot of the infrastructure from the old railway still in place: sidings, loading banks and the like, which have all but disappeared in other parts of the UK; and a road network that has yet to be fully upgraded, if ever. We shall soon see the completion of a new siding at Kyle, paid for by Highland Council and EWS." (Editor's note - opening will be in June.)

"... two areas of concern; the journey time to Edinburgh and the departure time as it is impossible to arrive in the capital before 10.13am. A study is underway in Fife which, if implemented, may ease the speed restrictions beyond Perth. If the journey time can be cut to three hours, it might beat the queues at the Forth Road Bridge. How nice it would be for passengers arriving off an Austrian charter flight to pick up the train at a new Dalcross halt for travel to Inverness or towards Aberdeen."

Grampian Television news; 25.3.98

Frank Spaven was interviewed about his views on the announcement of extra funding for the railways and how he felt it would effect the Far North.

Aberdeen Press and Journal article, by Willie Morrison.

The success of the new morning commuter train between Dingwall and Inverness has encouraged ScotRail to consider reopening a halt at Beauly, after a gap of nearly 40 years. The company confirmed yesterday that it has asked Railtrack to assess the costs of bringing the stop into use.

There is no prospect of the old station building being brought back into operation, however. The Victorian building, which includes a former private waiting room of the Lords Lovat, was closed in June 1960, even before Dr. Beeching wielded his axe, has long since been converted into two flats. The favoured option is to set up a halt on the still extant former northbound platform, opposite the old station building.

This proposal is the brainchild of Frank Roach, development officer for Highland Rail Developments, who argues that the commuter train would transport passengers from Beauly to Inverness in 13 minutes, compared with a bus journey of 30 minutes. He said, "I've submitted the proposal to ScotRail and they seem very pleased and are to look at it in greater detail. The success of the Dingwall commuter train was beyond their expectations."

Beauly Highland Councillor, Garry Coutts, who coincidentally lives in part of the old station building, said, "I would be absolutely delighted to see a halt at Beauly. It would be good for the village and for the area, but I'd want to see the plans."

ScotRail managing director Alastair McPherson announced the latest initiative at a meeting of the Highland Rail Network Development Partnership in Inverness, where he also confirmed that the Dingwall - Inverness commuter service would keep running for at least a year. The service which leaves Dingwall at 8am, was introduced on March 2 for a four month trial and carries an average of 50 commuters daily. Mr. McPherson said "These loadings are successful enough for us to extend the trial period to May next year." He said ScotRail would follow up the initial fares promotion of a 10-journey pass for £10 with a permanent 10-journey flexipass for £15 - "a price we believe is excellent value for money". Mr. McPherson also announced a series of fares initiatives and a two-year sponsorship deal with Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC. ScotRail's logo will appear on the team's home colours, on replica strip sold at retail outlets and on trackside adv

The fares initiatives include flexipasses offering 10 train journeys to Inverness from Elgin, Forres and Nairn at £45, £33 and £21 respectively, and a Highland Days Out fare of £30 return from Inverness to Kyle for two adults and two children.

A further initiative is the reinstatement of seating on the Edinburgh - Fort William sleeper trains.