

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

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

Issue 12

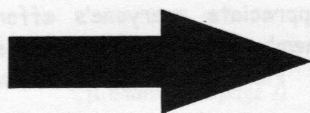
January 1999

THURSO IN OCTOBER



Courtesy of Chris Milner - The Railway Magazine

NOW FOR 1999



CONTENTS

125th Year
Membership Renewals
1998 Annual General Meeting
Facing Points
Thomas the Rhymer
Shin Viaduct Footbridge
Committee Matters
Steam In The North - 1998
Railway Cuttings
South and East Sutherland Local Plan
The Inverness Question
Letters to the Editor

OFFICE BEARERS

President:	Robert MacLennan MP
Chairman:	John Melling
Hon. Secretary:	Keith Tyler
Hon. Treasurer:	Keith Harman
Membership Secretary:	Frank Spaven
Newsletter Editor:	Roger Piercy
Committee Members:	
	Jim Fry
	John Moore
	Ron Stevenson

125th Year

1999 marks the 125th Anniversary of the completion of the Far North Line. 25 years ago this railway did well to survive the ravages of the Beeching cuts. Now the gradual decline in the condition of the stations and the cessation of freight traffic has been reversed. The future depends on building up the present loss leader regular freight train. The key to this is traffic into and out of the Caithness economy.

John Holwell of EWS has worked valiantly at getting freight back on our railway. Government policy increasingly encourages transfer of freight from road to rail. Further south, Eddie Stobart has developed his company train between Mossend and Daventry. Here in the Highlands Safeway are transferring 3000 lorry loads a year from road to rail between central Scotland and Inverness. The longer the haul the better the economies of the rail choice. Can shippers in the North respond?

In the 124th year we celebrated steam with a nostalgic weekend. It would be great if the long term viability of our railway was achieved through increasing freight flows, leading to improved track and greater passenger appeal.

John Melling, Chairman

Membership Renewals

Yes, it's coming up to that time of year when we invite you to renew your membership. Members will remember that we changed the system last year and your membership ran up to 31st March 1999. Those we have welcomed to our Society since the 1st October will know that your membership automatically extends to March 2000.

We have a membership of 195. We are always seeking ways to encourage lapsed members to re-join. We would appreciate everyone's efforts to encourage friends, members past and present to support us in efforts.

1998 Annual General Meeting

Held in the Mansfield House Hotel, Tain, Saturday 7th November.

Chairman of the Friends, John Melling, welcomed the two guest speakers, Nigel Wunsch, Railtrack Scotland and Frank Roach, North Highland Railway Development Officer.

Talk by Nigel Wunsch

Nigel Wunsch commenced by stating that Railtrack Scotland's remit is the stewardship of the rail infrastructure and they recognise the need to take what is best in our heritage and build on that to prepare for the next 100 years of rail. Railtrack Scotland is committed to the growth of rail in the Far North with the broad objectives of more and faster trains. It was seeking government partnership in investigating what improvements can be made to make this rail service increasingly relevant and useful to as many lineside communities as possible. With ScotRail reporting a 10% increase in passenger journey numbers in what is considered a poor year for tourism then he considered that there were many good years to come.

Nigel went on to report that they are prepared to investigate ways of funding schemes which offer enough social benefit. Together with ScotRail they are looking at signalling improvements that may give 5 - 6 minutes journey time improvement. They are committed to spending £200,000 on the upgrading of the current signalling at Georgemas Junction. Whilst the initial plans for the reopening of Beaulay Station looked too expensive they have approached the Health and Safety Executive with an idea that might provide a viable solution. The Radio Electronic Token Block signalling equipment is under review and improved maintenance of the existing infrastructure is providing benefits.

Nigel was very positive about the necessity for maintaining the partnership approach with everything to do with the Community. They were very encouraged by the positive responses to the recent consultation sessions discovering that by explaining the constraints behind some of their decisions meant that there was more consensus than criticism. The improvement in freight services formed the next part of the presentation with reference to the re-gauging of the Killiecrankie Tunnel allowing EWS to be very proactive in seeking freight opportunities. The increase of freight traffic of 16% had been one of Scotland's success stories compared with an average of 5% in the UK. Reference was made to the other freight opportunities that are gradually being developed. Finally reference was made to the Station Regeneration Programme with £1.7 million being allocated to northern stations, of which £0.5 million will be spent at Wick and Thurso to prepare them for their 125th birthday year. Inverness station is also to receive £1.7 million for a major regeneration. Measures to improve disabled access were being considered with Muir of Ord being currently investigated.

A brief question and answer session followed where the thorny subject of station shelters was brought up. Nigel's response referred to the problems of vandalism as the shelters often attracted the wrong sort of attention.

Talk by Frank Roach

With time at a premium attention focused on Frank Roach who had been invited to tell us about "His role and achievements in 1998"

On the subject of Passenger marketing it was becoming increasingly important to make the re-opening of Beaulay a success so that it provide a test case for many communities throughout the country. Muir of Ord has become the success story in the Dingwall Commuter train introduction with significant numbers of passengers using that station. Frank was very pleased with the success of the Travelling Classroom with the Transport Police reporting significant reductions in cases of vandalism. One interesting statistic that was emerging was that 80% of the children had never been on a train and were probably the first members of their immediate family to have been on a train.

Frank reminded us of his achievements in the improvement in the freight situation and was extremely coy on one particular development that he is currently working on! A siding at Invergordon was at the planning stage and tonnage was now going into Fearn as well as out. On the downside he had to report

that developments at Georgemas were virtually non-existent and very disappointing. Of all his activities he felt that the Heritage remit was going to be the most difficult in which to achieve success. The Steam train excursions had financially broken even generating a lot of lineside interest but no income. He is formulating plans for the celebrations of the 125th Anniversary of the opening of the Wick and Thurso branches, it being hoped to have a Class 66 locomotive take part with the naming of a unit. A photographic exhibition is also planned.

There then followed a question and answer session with Nigel Wunsch assisting with the answers. The subject of moving rubbish by rail was discussed the idea being to locate mini-compactors at railhead locations for movement to the new Highland-wide rubbish incinerator that is planned for Inverness. Frank Roach was able to confirm that he would be meeting with the Highland Council's Director of Protective Services to discuss the possibilities of moving rubbish by rail. The movement of rubbish was then followed by a discussion of moving livestock by rail. Sales are still held throughout our area at places like Forsinard, Lairg and Dingwall which owe their existence to being originally at suitable railheads. It was felt that this was a consideration for the future but one that could gain momentum given the driving restriction faced by the long distance hauliers.

Business at the Annual General Meeting

Our President, Robert MacLennan had tendered his apologies as Parliamentary business had forced him, late in the day, to remain in London.

In his Report the Chairman, John Melling, said 1998 had been marked by two events, the appointment of the founder secretary, Frank Roach, as North Highland Railway Development Officer, and the introduction of the morning Dingwall - Inverness commuter train.

He said that Keith Tyler had ably taken over the role of Secretary. The committee had met on five occasions and was working coherently. A watch had been kept on passenger and freight development. The lifting of the speed restriction at Fearn Crossings, the proposal for a station at Beauuly and the Georgemas Plunger were positive signs. Individual committee members had encouraged the hire of cycles, criticised the Inverness Cross Rail Link proposal, developed a dialogue with Railtrack over line improvement with reduced journey times, and represented the Society on the Highland Rail Network Partnership. Roger Piercy had developed the newsletter. Improvements were being made to the membership system.

He saw three challenges in the year ahead - improved end to end passenger timings but compatible with service developments at the Inverness end of the line, the provision of a Freight Terminal in Caithness and the implementation of integrated bus to rail transport links. He concluded by thanking the committee for their hard work over the year.

The Treasurer presented his report for the year ending 31st March 1998, a summary of which is shown here. Frank Spaven, in his capacity as Vice President then took the chair for the election of Office Bearers, which proceeded very smoothly with the re-election of the existing holders. In the ballot for two committee members John More and Roger Piercy were elected to continue for a further year.

Financial Statement - year ended 31st March 1999		
Assets		
	1998	1997
	£	£
Computer	623	831
Current Account	2295	2278
	2918	3109
Surplus/(Deficit)	(191)	487
Income/Expenditure		
Income		
Subscriptions	805	1216
Donations	144	126
Interest	68	48
Other	-	40
	1017	1430
Expenditure		
Highland Rail Partnership	300	-
Administration	460	625
Meeting Expenses	158	65
Other	82	253
Depreciation	208	-
	1208	943
Surplus/(Deficit)	(191)	487

Facing Points

Our railways were built as speculative ventures - no public funding or EEC development grants in those days - but they were built to last. For the most part local materials were used, in the manner of the day, and skilled craftsmanship was everywhere apparent.

On the first section of our Far North line the engineer, Mitchell, built two splendid masonry viaducts, one across the Ness and the other over the Conon river. The first was of course very sadly swept away by a severe flood a few years ago, to be replaced with commendable speed by a fine modern reinforced concrete structure; the other is still very much with us. Later came the superb viaduct at Invershin, with its deep lattice span and flanking masonry arches.

The line was built in stages, and the stations on each were often built to standard designs, variety showing in the use of the local stone and some of the detailing. You can easily pick out the sites of long-closed stations, mostly now private houses, from their distinctive designs. (Why some have been left unsold and unoccupied for so long, inevitably deteriorating internally in the process, is a mystery locked in the old BR Property Division files.) But there are other incidental features worth more than a passing glance: the little overbridges which abound on the line, as on the Highland mainline north from Stanley junction, may seem just simple arched masonry affairs, but look at the workmanship - they would cost an absolute fortune if built that way today.

It should surprise no one if our interest in the Far North Line extends beyond the running services to the structures it embodies. They are part of the legacy of the original owners, shareholders and builders, handed down to our and succeeding generations; we, as well as Railtrack and ScotRail, have a concern for their welfare. To take one example, the station footbridges are of a pattern, and we greatly welcome the fact these are being overhauled as part of station refurbishments and retained, preserving the 'family' look of these, rather than being replaced with a modern utilitarian design. To take another, the overall roofs at Wick and Thurso, once a common feature of rural termini, are now relatively rare, and are likely to be repaired and retained.

Sometimes of course the need for facilities deemed essential these days can involve fairly extensive conversion and even extension. Inverness has a very pleasant station - small enough to find everything and with visible staffing, pretty unusual in Scotland now, and with a cheerfully spacious concourse. An attractive feature is the arched openings between sections of the trainshed, echoing in highland scale the similar openings in London Kings Cross. It is in the right place, has much going for it, and will presently need to be capable of handling steadily increasing traffic. It needs to be ready, and it should be a highlight.

In the course of remodelling in 1966-68 the main front was rebuilt, encroaching somewhat onto Station Square. Built in the manner of its day to a design by Inverness architects, it looked very smart when new, but 30 years of weathering and changing perceptions have done it few favours. There is much to be said for reticence, but in such a sturdy, thriving centre ScotRail and Railtrack have a good deal to be honestly proud of, and if they wish to project this 'Gateway to The Railway' - Edinburgh / Glasgow / Aberdeen / London (even Paris, Vienna and Rome), to say nothing of Perth and Orkney - with a degree of panache, this facade might benefit from renewed upgrading - nothing structural, but a modest and effective 'lift'.

Yes, I do know all too well how very easy it is to comment airily from the sidelines - and do nothing. One's views are rather more persuasive if accompanied by serious practical input, a willingness to do something, and go on doing it. A six figure enabling cheque now and again can be even more persuasive, but this is obviously, to say the very least, utterly beyond our slender resources! But, that said and coming swiftly down to earth, is there anything we might try to do in support of our ideas? Ought we to be seeking ways of building up some FOENL resources, so that we can at least make some sort of positive gesture when a scheme deserves it?

Have we reached the point where we should be looking into means of raising funds? I would be glad to know what members think about this. It would need new people. The Friends is run, like so many voluntary bodies, by a very few devotees; we value all our members (their numbers alone and remaining

with us is a great source of encouragement), yet we cannot but think that amongst them there will surely be a few who would welcome some way of becoming rather more closely involved in our activities, indirectly furthering our aims in whatever way best suits them. Your ideas are welcome.

For a start we have the 125th Anniversary this year - FNL125 . . Spring will soon be here, as good a time as any to plant this sort of seed. Mind you - members of your Committee may be just a shade surprised, as I haven't put this item on their Agenda yet!! So at least we all start out on a level footing.

Your Secretary

Thomas the Rhymer

The light has been seen by Land and Marine

For Frank's efforts have not been in vain.

They're switching the pipes from off of the road

And sending the vast things by train.

Shin Viaduct Footbridge

Agreement to construct a footbridge alongside the 131 year old viaduct linking Culrain to Invershin is nearer.

Railtrack and the North of Scotland Water Authority are part funding the project. Both the Highland Council and Caithness and Sutherland Enterprise are expected to contribute. The scheme attracts European Community Objective 1 funding also.

So another FoFNL objective looks like coming to fruition, and illicit walking along the rail tracks can fade into the past.

Committee Matters

Three committee meetings have taken place since the last report appeared. In June we met in Fortrose, in September we were at Kinbrace and in November in Inverness. The following is a synopsis of those 3 meetings.

Each meeting was given an update on membership. The list is now held on computer to assist the monitoring of lapsed members, and the production of labels. The membership list has been divided into geographical areas and each area is the responsibility of some committee members. A membership card is ready for 1999 - 2000. The committee aims to encourage the support of Community Councils adjacent to the line.

The updating of the Constitution of the Society is under consideration and members will be kept informed of progress.

Matters relating to ScotRail, freight and Railtrack are amongst a wide variety of topics that have been considered. An incident of trespassing on the railway highlighted the importance of safety. We hope that the Travelling Classroom will go a long way towards improving this situation. The proposed Inverness Cross Rail Link Road is causing the committee concern. The possibility of re-opening a station at Beauly has been reviewed as are the plans for the footpath on the Shin Viaduct. Dingwall Commuter train loadings are holding steady with Muir of Ord providing the larger numbers of passengers.

Wagon load freight continues to cause the committee concern, but some improvements are in sight. Further improvements to the Newsletter are being considered. A Publicity leaflet was produced for the Highland Railway Heritage steam runs.

Little progress has been made with the Cycle Campaign. Approaches have been, and are still being made with a view of making this a marketable area of the line to encourage more passenger traffic.

Reports are given on matters relating to Highland Railway Heritage and Highland Rail Partnership. The planning and execution of the Steam Excursion created a great deal of work for those closely involved. It is to their credit that the excursion over the main section of the Far North Line was so successful and so well received by the supporters at the lineside. Conversely, the cancellation of the Thurso - Wick shuttles was a disappointment.

Steam In The North - 1998

Highland Railway Heritage got off to a promising start last year. Running a series of steam trips in October was an ambitious first venture, but costs were (just) covered and meanwhile a good crowd of travellers went home content and more than happy, which is what counts at the end of the day.

The first train, from Edinburgh to Inverness, was less well filled than hoped, but it was an experience to steam across the Forth Bridge and take the Dunfermline route to Perth, and energetic climbs were made over Drumochter and Slochd. On this, as indeed on all the trips, we were accompanied by a cavalcade of photographers in their cars: the 'old A9' was quite busy in places. It is a pity one sees so few of their results in print.

There were a good deal of spare seats too on the next day's return trip to Kyle of Lochalsh. Maybe this was thought to be too soon after the two trips last year, particularly as the advertised BR standard locomotive was the same as then, as it happened, and maybe took many onlookers by surprise, this had been failed just prior to the trips and Stanier 8F 2-8-0 48151 took its place. Very grandly too, a type of engine that thrives on hard work, for which there is a good deal of call this side of Perth. A fine drizzle made the climb past Raven Crag very tricky on the outward run, and great skill was exercised in controlling the slipping. Running tender first the constantly winding section along Loch Carron was taken with some caution. At Kyle the weather improved, and we had a very stimulating return run.

Predictably the train to Wick and Thurso booked up very rapidly - it was the first steam hauled passenger train to reach there for more than 30 years (one steam train did venture north several years earlier, but only as far as Helmsdale), and people booked from all over the kingdom. There was some delay at Muir of Ord to deal with a clack valve problem, and watering at Forsinard occupied far longer than expected (to pass a service train south and forbidden to reverse a passenger train, a very long hose had to be used which caused a severe drop in pressure), which irredeemably lost us our path, so arrival in Wick was very late, and in Thurso even later. But at both the pipers had gallantly stood their ground, and gave us a ringing welcome.

Developing valve trouble had added to our delays that evening, and in the morning this had to be overcome. This ruled out our intended shuttle service between Wick and Thurso. Alternative arrangements were rapidly made, however, and we managed to give the crowds of local parents and children as good a steam run as possible. Thurso passengers returned by bus from Wick or Georgemas, and those from Wick were returned by bus from Helmsdale. At times that morning the train was crowded enough to remind one of the London Underground in the rush hour but, seeing our problems, passengers entered into the spirit of the thing and took it all in surprisingly good part. That day Scotland lived up to its trick of offering all four seasons in one day, but much of the excellent run south to Inverness was in good weather and greatly enjoyed. At least, being a Sunday, we ran no risk that day of fouling up the normal services!

The final trip from Inverness to Polmont - for Edinburgh by service train - was also poorly filled. (With hindsight, it might have booked better had it been run on the Monday after the Far North weekend, so those not going south on the Sunday evening could have come with us. One of our lessons.) The climb to Culloden was brisk, but thereafter speed fell off to a crawl - believed to have been due to a locomotive on the incoming sleeper leaking oil earlier that morning. Arrival at Aviemore was thus too late to permit passengers a return run on the Speyside Railway, as intended, while we took water. A good sustained ascent of Drumochter, was followed by some very laboured work just south of Killiecrankie tunnel and again on the ascent from Dunkeld to Kingswood tunnel, both because of damp rail conditions and leaf fall. The stop at Perth was very protracted and there was signalling trouble at Hilton junction, so arrival in Stirling was badly down. From there, however, we enjoyed a splendid run to Polmont. Good clear track and, one suspects, a change of driver!

On the Kyle and Far North runs it was particularly good to see so many folk at the stations to watch us pass and wish us well. Also we thank all those who let us take them, in the nicest possible way, for a ride. Both forms of support made the whole exercise well worthwhile.

Keith Tyler

Railway Cuttings

Extract from *Inverness Courier* 24 May 1898

Highland Railway Guidebooks

The annual publications of the Highland Railway Company are of so useful a kind that one should not think of spending a holiday in the Highlands without first consulting them. The Tourist Programme for 1898 contains the completest possible information of the many circular tours that are placed at the disposal of the visitor. A holiday in the Highlands of Scotland is a pleasure which does not need to be enlarged upon, but it may be remarked, in passing, that the foreign sightseer may sojourn in this part of the world without any fear of being disturbed by blockades or bombardments or any real of imaginary risks of that sort. The Tourist programme contains a readable account of the varied attractions of the many places that are touched by the railway, and whether one may be in search of mountain, of valley, of loch, of town, or - last but not least - of golf course, he will find just what he wants; and, now that the Highland hotels, generally speaking, are placed on a satisfactory basis, we do not know what else your holiday-seeker should desire.

Extract from *Press and Journal* 24 November 1998

Food chain switches to let train take the strain.

A move by supermarket giant Safeway which will axe more than 3,000 lorry journeys a year on the busy A9 Perth - Inverness road was last night hailed as a major breakthrough. Scottish Transport Minister Calum Macdonald yesterday announced a £680,000 grant to help Safeway supply its stores in Inverness, Nairn, Elgin and Buckie by rail.

From early next year, containers from Safeway's Bellshill depot will travel by rail daily from Mossend, Glasgow to Inverness. From there they will be moved by road to Safeway stores in Inverness and Moray which currently receive daily deliveries of fresh produce and other stock in 10 lorries from Bellshill.

Mr. MacDonald said, "The environmental benefits of transporting freight by rail rather than by road have long been recognised, but in the past rail has often failed to meet the demands of customers. However, the restructuring of the rail freight industry has injected vigour into the sector, and the Government is committed to seeing more freight transported by rail." The Scottish Office grant will allow Safeway to buy custom-built containers and refrigerated units, plus lorries for short hauls.

The company has completed a year-long trial on routes between Glasgow and Gravesend, Kent with railway freight company EWS which is involved in the Highland initiative. The venture is also supported by Railtrack, which has committed itself to enlarging the Killiecrankie tunnel to allow Safeway's new containers access, and to provide freight handling equipment.

Daily Telegraph Travel Supplement 28 November 1998

Branching out.

As part of a two page spread on the Huddersfield to Sheffield and Hastings to Ashford branch lines the following piece appeared:

While steam lines and preserved routes attract the bulk of holidaymakers, some of the scheduled services on working lines offer equally scenic outings. Here are six of the best:

- Par - Newquay 21 miles; 45 - 55 minutes; four trains daily, no service on Sunday.
- Oxford - Worcester 58 miles; 70 - 90 minutes; 14 trains daily, four trains on Sunday.
- Dovey Junction - Pwllheli 57 miles; 110 - 119 minutes, six trains daily, one on Sunday.
- Derby - Matlock 17 miles; 31 minutes; 13 trains daily, six on Sunday.
- Middlesbrough - Whitby 35 miles; 97 minutes; 4 trains daily, no service on Sunday.

Dingwall - Thurso 143 miles; 196 minutes; three trains daily, no service on Sunday.

A qualifying statement about the fact that the frequencies related to the winter timetable appeared at the foot of the article.

Each line had a short description and I include 'our' one to show the perception people have of the line. "This line first follows the lengths of the Firths of Cromarty and Dornoch, before embarking on the stunning loop inland from Helmsdale, climbing up Strath Ullie. Once in the wilds of Caithness, the train passes through a vast expanse of moorland, almost empty apart from the odd historic fishing lodge, before pulling into the most northerly town in mainland Britain."

South and East Sutherland Local Plan

The Highland Council have prepared a final Draft of this Local Plan and have invited comments. Under the title "Roads, Traffic and Transport" it contains the following statement on "Rail Network":

1.50 The Inverness -Wick/Thurso or Far North railway line is important for the economic and social development of the area. Passenger trains bring back-packing tourists in the summer months and freight use is increasing. The development of a Dornoch Rail Link could reduce passenger train journey times between Inverness and Caithness, and so potentially increase use of services. However, the potential loss of the Lairg Loop, with related implications for the affected communities, as well as the environmental impact upon internationally important nature conservation interests and scenic qualities in both Firths are important considerations. The implementation of the project will be for the railway companies to consider for future investment. In the meantime other less costly incentives are to be pursued to improve journey times and greater use of the line by passengers and freight.

1.51 Scope exists to use vacant station buildings for tourist related purposes and to transport more timber and mineral products from the area to distant markets. The safeguarding of redundant or underused sidings/station yards at Ardgay, Brora, Golspie, Helmsdale and Kinbrace will be important with regard to the latter. The Council is encouraging Railtrack to invest in its existing infrastructure for freight purposes, including the provision of loading banks to assist timber extraction. The forestry industry is also being encouraged to use narrow gauge lines to allow for the removal of timber to the mainline from more distant forests.

Contributed by Frank Spaven



Rogart Station, July 1984

The Inverness Question

A major bibliography now comprising three thick volumes owes its genesis to a question about Inverness which could not be answered in the British Museum Library. This is revealed in the preface to the second supplement to the Bibliography of British railway history written by the founder compiler, George Ottley FLA. (Fellow of the Library Association)

He writes:

"In July 1952 an enquiry desk was set up in the British Museum Library's Reading Room and three reference librarians were appointed to run it. It usually fell to me to deal with transport related enquiries and one of the earliest of these was for drawings or diagrams of the two locomotives of the Inverness and Nairn Railway, a 15½ mile line opened in 1855 and amalgamated into the Inverness and Aberdeen Junction Railway three years later.

This enquiry was not resolved but in the process of trying to find possible fruitful sources it became clear that there was a need for a single reference work for railway history research. I saw this as a challenge which I could tackle with enthusiasm and so began a twelve year long venture resulting in the publication of the first volume of A bibliography of British railway history in 1965".

The original publishers were Allen & Unwin and the [first] supplement was published by the Stationery Office in 1988. The S O had also published a new edition of the original in 1983. The new second supplement was published in 1998 by the National Railway Museum in York priced £49.50 (ISBN 1 872826 10 5) and lists publications up to the end of 1995. There is now a total of 19,600 entries in the three volumes.

The original enquiry which started the whole project could probably now be answered by item 18037 Highland Railway locomotives by J R H Cormack and J L Stevenson or by the vast resources now available in the National Railway Museum Library in York. We have come a long way since 1952.

Richard Ardern



A busy Thurso goods yard sometime in the early 1960s

Letters to the Editor

12 November 1998

Dear Roger,

Keith Tyler puts forward some excellent ideas for promoting business on the North line (issue 11, page 8) but I winced at his ideas for encouraging motorists to opt for the train. "What", asks Keith, "do they do with the relatively short time they save by driving anyway?" The answer is - an awful lot, because they save an awful lot of time. Indeed the time savings can be measured not in hours, but days.

Days? - yes, because it is impossible to make a day return trip from Caithness to Edinburgh or Glasgow by train, and pointless to make one to Aberdeen, as shown below, whereas you can drive to these destinations, spend several hours there for business or other purposes, and still get home no later than when the last train from Inverness arrives.

	Edinburgh	Glasgow	Aberdeen
Earliest arrival from Wick at	13:59	14:09	12:56
Last departure for same-day arrival at Wick	13:40	13:25	13:10
(Source: ScotRail Winter 1998 timetable)			

No, if we are to convince motorists that they should take the train our No.1 campaigning priority has to be - to misquote the Prime Minister - acceleration, acceleration, acceleration. And while it may be difficult to persuade some people or agencies that this should be done for social, environmental and natural-justice (compensating for roads spending) reasons rather than narrow "business case" accounting criteria, it will be a lot easier than trying to convince any thinking person that Highland train services are, or soon will be, a serious competitor to the car.

Yours Sincerely,

Andrew McCracken - Grantown-on-Spey

8th October 1998

Dear Sirs,

News of your special to Thurso and Wick has been reaching me since the end of last month. Regretfully I cannot participate, I wish you well and a commercial success.

I was with HR 103 when she came north on the SLS/RCTS special so long ago, but have a very special memory of what was almost certainly the last passenger working north.

The following is extracted from my notes, but they were not properly written up till some time afterwards. I hope that I have it all right, can anyone improve on the facts therein?

December (Saturday) [1961] Salzcraggie We had gone south on the 09.00 train from Thurso and had been walking on Ben Griam Mhor in bad weather and had not heard the afternoon north-bound train pass and had commented on that. The weather was so poor that we moved the airbeds and sleeping bags into the shelter on the platform itself. There was no easy access across the river and we expected to be undisturbed and disturb no-one. Later, while almost asleep, in the still of an evening with clear skies and little wind we heard the sound of train barking out of Helmsdale and up the Strath. We got out of the sleeping bags and on to the platform to see it storm through into the night. A sight and sound not to be forgotten. We understand that the 11.25 ex Inverness left steam hauled 4.25 hours late. It spent an hour at Rogart detaching the dining car and arrived in Wick some 9.25 hours late, Sabbath breaking.

Which was it? 44785 or 45117 seems likely.

Yours sincerely

Richard A.Bowen - Pfungstadt-Eschollbrucken, Germany