

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

The campaign group for rail, north of Inverness,
Lobbying for improved services for the local users, tourists and freight customers.

NEWSLETTER

Issue 63

October 2014



Photo: Sandy Colley

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CONTENTS

Headcode	3
Editorial - View From Afar	4
Secretary's Introduction	5
New ScotRail Franchisee	6
Letters From First Scotrail	7
Network Rail CP6 FoFNL Policy Document	8
FoFNL Conference Report	10
Months of Misery	11
Inverness Ticket Barriers	14
Highland Main Line Update	16
Inverness - Aberdeen Line Progress	17
Ness Viaduct Lecture	17
The Highland Railway Survey	18
David St. John Thomas - Appreciation	19
Iain Shand	19
Helmsdale Station House Opening	20
Steaming to Dunrobin and Wick	21
Ardgay 150	21
MyFirst Far North Line Journey	22
Book Review	23

Articles in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of the committee.

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Cover photo: 10:37 Inverness - Wick after arrival at Ardgay station. The train had brought Richard Ardern and Sandy Colley north to attend the 150th anniversary celebrations at Ardgay (formerly Bonar Bridge) on 1st October 2014.

Sandy Colley

CLUB 55

First ScotRail is again offering unlimited rail travel anywhere in Scotland for those aged 55 and over at a fixed price of £19.00 from 1st October to 30th November. This could be a golden opportunity to visit the Far North Line if it is outwith your normal travelling area.

Club 55 Premier offers first class travel for £35.00 from Inverness to Aberdeen and from Inverness or Aberdeen to Edinburgh or Glasgow.

HEADCODE

FoFNL extends a warm welcome to Abellio as the new franchise holder from 1 April 2014. We look forward to working with the new company. The urgent need on the Far North Line is for a noticeable reduction in journey times and an improvement in punctuality.

The Far North is an all year lifeline railway which is not as dependent as other rural lines on a huge increase in passengers during the summer holidays. Nevertheless it is a very scenic line and worthy to be included in the "Great Scenic Railway of Scotland." Two of our members wrote the line guide chapters for the FNL and the HML published in Scotland by Rail and FoFNL will be delighted to help Abellio improve passengers' enjoyment of the line.

Barriers to travel

The new ticket barriers at Inverness station seem to be more of a hindrance than a help. They have greatly reduced the queuing space on the cold concourse and required the removal of some of the concourse seating. There is only a small waiting room as an alternative. Queues are more common now that departure platforms are not being advised until close to departure. They are more likely to be out of the front door of the station in future. For arriving passengers the barriers are an impediment, and really frustrating when the train is late and the bus connection is about to go. Recent observations have shown that it is still taking five minutes for 100 people off a north arrival to clear the barriers. While we welcome the extra jobs, we wonder if enough additional revenue will be collected to pay for the wages of the seven new staff?

Peak problems

We would ask Abellio not to copy Northern Rail's recent extension of the afternoon peak for ticket restrictions. In our last issue we wrote at length about the difficulties of getting

back from the south in the late afternoon and connecting on to the Far North Line with anything other than a full price ticket. We asked that passengers travelling north of Perth should be allowed to board the 17:41 services from Edinburgh and Glasgow. We also asked that East Coast (which enjoys two of the prime paths on the Highland Main Line) should reconsider their new ban on ScotRail's Club 55 tickets. A traveller from Inverness to Stonehaven recently faced a 90 minute wait at Aberdeen because they could not use this ticket on an East Coast train which provided an ideal connection for the last leg. Good advice was given saying "Just get the bus!" Ticket restrictions are deterring travel by rail. This is not a desirable consequence.

Chronic unreliability

The last three months have been a really frustrating time for Far North and Kyle passengers. We are grateful to Steve Montgomery MD of ScotRail for providing an explanation of what has been happening and we urge that the problems should be resolved very, very soon. The situation has highlighted the need to provide more flexible infrastructure to improve the robustness of the timetable and, as you will see on another page, we are asking Network Rail to schedule this as soon as possible.

Coda

We are profoundly grateful to retired committee members John Brandon and Gavin Sinclair for all the hard work they did for FoFNL over the years. We are pleased to welcome Malcolm Wood as our new Secretary and we are very grateful to Ian Budd, our webmaster, who has edited this issue of the newsletter. We do still require someone - one of you reading this - to step forward as our new Convener! With a new franchise, these should be exciting times to lead the society in supporting the FNL in a new era.

Richard Ardern

EDITORIAL - VIEW FROM AFAR

Welcome to the October 2014 FoFNL newsletter.

I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself. I have agreed to be Newsletter Editor on a trial basis, initially for this issue only. I have run the website since its inception which I think might have been in 1998.

One advantage of editing the newsletter and the website is the co-ordinating of material for both. Space for photographs is limited in the printed version but not the online one so if any contributors have extra photos that can be used on the website I would love to receive them.

I have been a member of FoFNL since about 1995. I joined completely by chance; I was on a working visit to Inverness and happened to book in to the Bed & Breakfast establishment of Mr Ian Jamieson in Ardross Street. At breakfast I noticed, and commented upon, the railway pictures in the dining room. Mr Jamieson said straightaway that if I was interested in railways I should join FoFNL. He explained what it was, I explained that I lived in Glasgow and he rightly said that FoFNL needed all the members it could get.

I was astonished when I saw what was being done and have been full of admiration ever since. FoFNL is an extremely effective organisation and something of which the active members should be very proud.

I have always been interested in railways, from all angles (except perhaps trainspotting which I tried at the age of about seven and soon lost interest in!). I

used to just watch the trains passing from the comfort of the fence made from galvanised wire strung between wooden posts. You had to descend to the grass regularly to give your feet a rest. The singing sound from the rails as a train approached soon got you back up, peering along the line. It was a stretch which had been GWR and Great Central Joint and by the fifties was in London Midland Region, between West Ruislip and Denham. There was a water trough there and watching Kings and Castles etc picking up as they sped by was exciting.

My real interest, though, has always been in how railways develop so joining FoFNL was what is now known as a “no-brainer”.

Although born near London I have been working in Scotland since 1976 as a musician in the Royal Scottish National Orchestra so am pretty familiar with the Highland Main Line to Inverness but unfortunately have only travelled on the Far North Line once with the orchestra when we played in Tain and Thurso in 1991.

Taking on this job has made me very aware of the crisis that FoFNL is going through at present. I do feel that every member should try and do what Ian Jamieson did with me all those years ago - just suggest to anyone you know that joining FoFNL is a good investment in the future of the railway. We need a Convener now, but it would be good to think that the one after next might not have even heard of FoFNL yet.

Ian Budd

SECRETARY'S INTRODUCTION

I've been asked to write a bit about myself. I've tried to condense it. Honestly!

I was born and brought up in Gateshead, County Durham, grandson of an engine driver! I trainspotted a bit in my teens - mostly locally, at Low Fell Station and trips to Heaton Sheds. I really was more of a bus geek privately, but as there was no internet and I had never met anyone else in the world who was the least bit interested in buses, I decided that this was best kept to myself.

I graduated from the Royal Manchester College of Music as a Singer and Pianist and began teaching in Lancashire. I had not been your typical Music student. I threw myself into the life of the University Chaplaincy Centre and also became very involved with the British Council, organising activities for the astonishingly high percentage of overseas students in the Manchester area.

From the age of 12, I had been introduced to the Scottish Schoolboys' Club and attended my first annual summer camp at Bruar in 1962. I do remember that my (cardboard) railway ticket said "Newcastle-upon-Tyne Central to Struan via Glenfarg." Well, by 1973 I was still going to Bruar and many other activities too as a voluntary Officer in the SSC, which employed one full-time person as National Organiser. This position became vacant and I applied and got the job, based in Edinburgh. Music teaching was "on hold". The next five years were probably the best in my life.

There were a lot of "unsocial hours" but as well as doing the youth development, the massive amount of admin and the mechanical engineering which goes with keeping 350 people fed and watered for 4 weeks in a field without electricity, I found time to sing in St Giles' Cathedral Choir, Scottish Opera Professional Chorus and do quite a bit of solo work, mainly with amateur operatics but also some with the BBC.

However, I knew that I had no paper qualifications in Youth Work or admin so after 5 years I got back into teaching and landed a job at Inverness Royal Academy which then had a huge academic 5th and 6th form as there were so many remote parts of the mainland (and also several islands which were part of

Invernessshire) where the Secondary Schools only taught up to 4th year. If you were bright and you lived in one of these places, you transferred to Inverness and stayed in the Hostel. The pupils from Barra only got home once per term.

As well as all the extra-curricular Music activities at IRA, I was recruited to help Charlie Bannerman with athletics and cross-country. Two nights a week after school I donned my singlet and shorts and led all the mobility warm-ups and then took all the distance runners out into the hills while the two other staff dealt with the sprinters and hurdlers. Cross-country fixtures were dawn till dusk affairs on Saturdays, often involving three hours in a coach to somewhere like Thurso or Fort William or Banff and then standing around on a bleak headland for hours, marshalling the race with nothing between the fillings in your teeth and the North Pole. We all loved it!

The quality of life in Inverness was excellent, but promoted posts scarce, so after 3 years I reluctantly returned to Edinburgh where I spent the next 10 years as Head of Music at Tynecastle High School. You name it, I did it. Oh yes - including the Cross Country teams, who won some prestigious silverware.

Then, being me, I worried about getting stale, so I resigned and bought the Co-op Stores and Post Office at Kinloch Rannoch! So for most of the 90's I was an Independent Licensed Grocer and Subpostmaster, bringing my own brand of entrepreneurial skills and an unequalled selection of chocolate biscuits to Highland Perthshire.

After selling up the shop, I became expert at making a living out of supply teaching and eventually moved back to Edinburgh. After several years I was drawn back in to a permanent post - at Dunblane High School, and then in St Andrew's High School, Kirkcaldy. Because I had had a break from teaching and because I wasn't in a promoted post, with all the politics that that entails, I really enjoyed teaching right up to my retirement.

I've absolutely no regrets about any of the bizarre twists and turns I've allowed my life to take. Things are much less hectic nowadays and I've much enjoyed the welcome extended to me by FoFNL

Malcolm George Wood

ABELLIO

ALNESS, BRORA, 'ELMSDALE, LAIRG LOOP, INVERNESS TO ORKNEY

Abellio Scotland, a subsidiary of Netherlands Railways, has won the franchise to run ScotRail for the next ten years commencing on 1 April 2015. The Far North Line is part of the EU's Trans Europe Network (TEN) and our branch presumably now runs from Amsterdam to Caithness!

The main "win" for the FNL may be our inclusion in the "Great Scenic Railway of Scotland" project which is to include "refurbished trains with improved seating layouts giving unobstructed panoramic views." Enhanced provision for bicycles will be welcomed not least by End to Enders who use our line to access John o' Groats. However, it is not clear whether the last refurbishment of the Inverness class 158s is seen to have already achieved all this? Free wi-fi is to be provided on all trains.

Inverness station is to be improved and be given a staffed information desk. (A warm waiting room with soft furnishings would be our top priority). There is no word of an enhanced hourly frequency of trains between Inverness and Tain.

South and East of Inverness it is proposed to employ the popular High Speed Trains when these are superseded elsewhere, perhaps in 2018. A £5 advance purchase ticket between any two of Scotland's seven cities and improved catering are other proposals. As they say, "the proof will be in the pudding!"

Glasgow's underground is affectionately known as the Clockwork Orange. While we do not expect our trains to be painted orange, it would be great if they ran like clockwork and a good bit faster. Watch this space.

Richard Arden

FIRST SCOTRAIL LETTER

The following letter was sent to FoFNL on 8th October, the morning of the announcement that the franchise had been awarded to Abellio:

Good morning,

It was announced today that Abellio will be the new operator of the ScotRail rail franchise with effect from 1 April 2015. I am deeply disappointed that the bid by Aberdeen-based FirstGroup, our parent company, was not successful. However, I am immensely proud of what we have achieved since First ScotRail started operating the franchise in 2004.

Our 10-year journey - in which we have transformed rail travel in Scotland - could not have been achieved without your engagement, support, and input. What we have done, together, over the last decade speaks for itself - from increasing passenger numbers by 34% to more than 86 million a year to achieving both record high customer satisfaction ratings and punctuality and reliability performance. Looking back to our early days in 2004, I'm amazed to see how much has changed. It truly has been a renaissance. Our employees have been the key to delivering these successes for Scotland's Railway over the last decade.

ScotRail has become a top performing UK train operating company and I can assure you that we will deliver a smooth transition for the thousands of employees affected by the change – and support Abellio through the process. We will continue to operate ScotRail services on a 'business as usual' basis until 1 April next year, and I have no doubt that

everyone transferring to the new franchise will contribute hugely to the next phase of development. ScotRail is an integral part of Scottish life – and, for a flavour of our impact, I have attached a link to a graphic:

(www.fofnl.org.uk/images/First_ScotRail_infographic.jpg) which highlights the story of our achievements.

Finally, we could not have made our 10- year journey - which has transformed rail travel in Scotland – without your engagement, support and input. I thank you for being on board with all at First ScotRail.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Kind Regards,
Steve Montgomery,
Managing Director, ScotRail

SCOTRAIL RESPONSE TO FOFNL COMPLAINTS

Steve Montgomery, Managing Director, ScotRail was invited to provide an article for this newsletter explaining the reasons behind recent poor performance as described in Richard Ardern's article on P11.

Working hard to enhance performance on Far North Line

By John Kerr, Head of Timetable Compliance and Resilience, ScotRail

Our stated aims across Scotland include connecting people and communities, encouraging more people to use the train, and improving and extending passenger rail services.

Recent performance on the Far North Line has been disappointing and below the high standards we strive to deliver at all times.

I can assure you that we are working closely with Network Rail and Transport Scotland to improve the performance of services on the line.

We are very pleased with the popularity of the Conon Bridge services since their introduction, but it is also acknowledged that they have had an impact on timekeeping.

Due to the nature of the infrastructure on the Far North – single line with passing loops, small delays to one service can result in knock-on delays to other services.

This is clearly seen in recent trends, with performance worse in the evening as any delays throughout the day build up.

The position was recently exacerbated by driver illness resulting in cancellations.

Service provision is high on our agenda – across Scotland.

A comprehensive review of the Far North timetable is well underway to improve its overall resilience. I expect action to follow in the near future to enhance performance.

Watch this space for an update soon...

NETWORK RAIL CONTROL PERIOD 6 FoFNL POLICY DOCUMENT

A policy document setting out FoFNL's aspirations for Network Rail to include in its plans for work to be carried out in CP6.

We make three Recommendations:

- 1. A detailed study, with input from relevant bodies, should be carried out by Network Rail on each of the six routes unlikely to be electrified of the ideal timetable, and then (and only then) a study of what doubling, and associated signalling, would be needed to deliver it.**
- 2. Immediately the rolling stock details ("tourist train" and others which may also be announced) are known a long-term cascading plan should be drawn up. It is understood that the Department for Transport is set against such thinking in England – all the more reason why Transport Scotland and the new franchisee should show DfT the way.**
- 3. FoFNL will produce a separate paper outlining its views of the infrastructure enhancements needed on the FNL and Kyle Lines as an input to the process described in Recommendation 1. It is expected that this will follow within 2 months of the franchise announcement.**

Friends of the Far North Line is a Rail User Group representing the interests of passengers and freight users of the Far North Line from Inverness to Thurso and Wick.

Mike Lunan: 28th August 2014

FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE – WHAT WE WISH TO SEE IN CP6

"We must find and exploit real opportunities to reduce journey times"

Iain Coucher, CEO of Network Rail at the FoFNL AGM in Inverness, 30 June 2008

Network Rail (NR) will begin a fresh Route Study (RS) for Scotland shortly after the announcement of the new daytime franchise, expected to be "in the autumn". This paper suggests what it ought to incorporate. It is clear from the experience of how projects are taken forward (or not) that anything absent from NR's RS will not happen. Thus getting projects into the RS, at least as far as being mentioned, is vital. We regard ourselves as a serious contributor to this process and our Recommendations are based on a thoughtful insight and analysis of the present position on the Scottish railway. We return to Iain Coucher's words, taken from his speech over 6 years ago, since when journey times on the FNL have not reduced.

FoFNL will confine its thoughts to matters affecting rural railways in Scotland, and services connecting them to centres of population. It leaves the inter-city railway to others to comment upon.

Transport Scotland (TS) has a public policy commitment to financing the electrification of 100 single-track kilometres (stk) a year once the Edinburgh-Glasgow Improvements Programme (EGIP) is complete, probably by 2019. We expect the routes to be included in this rolling programme to be (in no particular order) Dunblane to Inverness; Perth to Dundee; Edinburgh to Aberdeen; the Fife Circle; the old GSWR route to Carlisle. For operational reasons we expect Aberdeen to Inverness to be electrified also, although we acknowledge that a business case may be hard to make on its own. Our reasoning is that the extended figure-of-eight of the main cities would then be on a single electrified system. We also expect minor electrification infills within the Greater Glasgow area.

If our analysis is correct the only Scottish routes still powered by diesel after about 2030 will be:

Inverness to Thurso (for Scrabster and Orkney) and Wick (for Gills Bay and Orkney);
Dingwall to Kyle of Lochalsh (for Skye, Harris and North Uist via Uig);
Glasgow to Fort William and Mallaig (for Skye, Small Isles, Knoydart and South Uist);
Crianlarich to Oban (for Mull, Colonsay, Coll, Tiree, South Uist and Barra);
Glasgow to Stranraer (for Cairnryan, Larne and Belfast);
Newcraighall to Tweedbank.

The last of these will serve a large hinterland with no other access to rail services. Four of the other five all serve important towns which serve as ferry terminals for lifeline island services; the fifth (Stranraer) serves – or could serve – a ferry link to a major city.

We welcome the TS electrification policy, and expect it to start post-EGIP around the start of CP6 and to be concluded early in CP8 at the latest. We accept that diesel-powered trains will serve the six routes above at least until around 2030 and probably well beyond.

Thus it is right to give serious thought now to how services on these lines should be improved in the medium term – ie. in CP6. Improvements should be considered both to infrastructure and to Train Operating Company (TOC) matters – rolling stock and timetables. However it is impossible to separate timetable matters from infrastructure enhancements. There is a hidden danger in asking the question “what does NR need to do to make the current timetable better?”. That would tend to cement the current timetable in place for ever: what needs to be asked is the question “what enhancements does NR need to make, perhaps over several years, to deliver the ideal timetable?”.

We don’t have all the answers, but we can shed some light on how a practical answer may be approached by considering outcomes, and noting existing things which seem to prevent these from happening.

What passengers want most from a rail service is reliability at reasonable cost. Cost is politically-influenced and is outwith the scope of this paper. Passengers wish to board a train when it is advertised and get off when they expect to, either because they have reached their destination or because they have onward travel arrangements. Delivering this reliability is particularly difficult on a single-line railway – there is no need to provide evidence as it is clear that a train which misses its path early in the day can cause disruption, often of increasing severity, throughout the day. The cost to the TOC of compensation, and – worse because it is invisible – to the delayed passengers (because consequential loss is not recoverable) is very large, and in some cases will undoubtedly lead to considerable distress. Preventing such knock-on delays lies at the root of the necessary enhancements.

It is impractical to seek to have the entire length of the six routes doubled, even where the solum still permits this. What is needed is a detailed study on each route of the ideal timetable, and then (and only then) a study of what doubling, and associated signalling, would be needed to deliver it. (FoFNL believes it can suggest the answers on the Far North Line, but we are not experts, and may well overlook important engineering factors: hence the need for this work to be carried out by NR. We are aware that such studies have been carried out in the past – most importantly the Room for Growth study by Scott Wilson of 24 March 2006, now on the TS website at <http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/report/highland-rail-room-growth-study-6001>; these should be used as a foundation for more thorough work now.) Once this is done and rough costs known it will be possible for funders and passenger groups to argue their case to Government. Very large sums are being committed in Central Scotland to rail enhancements (and vastly larger sums south of the Border); rural and island communities have been left behind in many cases. Caledonian MacBrayne has acquired new vessels, but once the vessel has docked the on-land public transport connection is, in some cases, much as it was 30 years ago – except that it is often much slower, and more expensive.

We acknowledge that more trains run on the six routes than was the case 30 – or even 10 – years ago, but the journeys themselves are less comfortable. We do not expect to see a return to locomotive haulage of Mark 3 stock but nor do we expect to see the present ex-BR Class 15X units in service up to 2030 and beyond unless considerable internal and engineering improvements are carried out. EGIP will release a large fleet of Class 170 units and a sensible refurbishment of these for use on scenic rural routes may be possible. (The new franchise requires the provision of a “tourist train” for some – but curiously not all – of the six routes. It is hoped that details of what this means, and how it will be provided, will accompany the new franchise announcement.) TS in collaboration with Highland Rail Partnership carried out an excellent refurbishment of the Inverness Class 158 fleet some years ago, with input specifically aimed at better provision for tourists, as well as for local long-distance passengers. This model should be adopted for the six routes in the new franchise.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1. A detailed study, with input from relevant bodies, should be carried out by Network Rail on each of the six routes of the ideal timetable, and then (and only then) a study of what doubling, and associated signalling, would be needed to deliver it.**
- 2. Immediately the rolling stock details (“tourist train” and others which may also be announced) are known a long-term cascading plan should be drawn up. It is understood that the Department for Transport is set against such thinking in England – all the more reason why Transport Scotland and the new franchisee should show DfT the way.**
- 3. FoFNL will produce a separate paper outlining its views of the infrastructure enhancements needed on the FNL and Kyle Lines as an input to the process described in Recommendation 1. It is expected that this will follow within 2 months of the franchise announcement.**

FOFNL CONFERENCE REPORT

Conon Bridge Hotel, Saturday 31 May 2014

The Convener, John Brandon, opened the conference at the Conon Bridge Hotel and welcomed Members and guests to the 2014 Friends of the Far North Line Conference.

Our President, John Thurso MP was away and was unable to address the Conference, for which he sent his apologies.

In a short address, John Melling, Vice President, congratulated the committee on their role and for all the behind the scenes work. John Melling thanked both the Convener and Secretary John Brandon and Gavin Sinclair for their work over the years. John Melling stressed that it is important that the new Committee be formed of people from different backgrounds and with a wide range of skills and not just from the railway.

John Melling reminded the Membership of the origins of FoFNL and how it was formed 20 years ago in 1994 and it is good news to see new members joining the society.

John Melling talked about a visit he made to India and his experiences of travelling by rail. India has a population of some 1.2 billion people. The railway network is extensive, although the rolling stock is of poor quality. Not unlike the Far North Line whilst passenger trains lose money it is freight traffic that is the real lifeline of the railway.

Zoe Hands, who is the Head of Safety, Health and Environment at Network Scotland, addressed the conference. Ms Hands joined Network Rail from the aviation industry. She started by acknowledging that journey times of the Far North Line have been going in the wrong direction, partly to do with speed restrictions at level crossings.

It is recognised by the railway industry that automatic open crossings (AOCL) are a higher risk than level crossings with barriers. Temporary Speed Restrictions imposed after 2009 have been subject to relaxation following a review by Network Rail and the Office of Rail Regulation. Adding barriers at level crossings AOCL+B does not eliminate the risk at a rail/road interface. Another way to remove this risk is to close level crossings but this requires engagement with local communities. There has, however, been misuse of crossings in some parts of the Highlands.

Level crossing risk has been reduced by 25% since 2009 and must be reduced by a further 25% in the next 5 years. £3m has been allocated to achieve this.

Ms Hands also reported that improvements will be made to the RETB signalling, to be completed in

2015. The signalling system will be enhanced allowing for faster token exchange with the Far North Line divided in two (possibly at Invergordon) removing the delay whilst trains wait to avoid simultaneous token exchange.

John Yellowlees, External Relations Manager at ScotRail then spoke, telling the conference some facts about the First ScotRail franchise. ScotRail operates 95% of services in Scotland, operating over 2,800km of railway track, 25% of which is electrified. ScotRail employs over 4,900 staff. Mr Yellowlees reminded the meeting on the improvements on the Far North Line, which include:

- 1998 – introduction of a morning commuter service between Dingwall and Inverness;
- 1999 – 125th Anniversary celebrations;
- 2000 – introduction of class 158 rolling stock and reduced journey times;
- 2001 – commuter service commences from Tain;
- 2001 – all year Sunday services introduced;
- 2002 – Beaulieu station opens
- 2005 – additional trains between Lairg, Dingwall and Inverness;
- 2006 – introduction of a fourth train from Wick to Inverness;
- 2008 – additional commuter services and four trains per day to and from both Wick and Kyle of Lochalsh to Inverness; and
- 2008 – rolling stock refurbished with lower density seating, seats aligned with windows and more luggage and cycle space.

Frank Roach, from HITRANS, updated the conference on his work, starting with the success of the re-opening of Conon Bridge station. Improvement work is also planned to take place at Inverness station to improve the station entrances and the station facade on Academy Street. Away from the Far North Line, it is hoped that Dalraddy station will open although not all trains between Inverness and Aberdeen will call here. On the West Highland Line, the train service to Oban has doubled to six trains per day.

Gavin Sinclair

MONTHS OF MISERY

Timekeeping on the Far North Line in July, August and September has left a lot to be desired. It wasn't just the Commonwealth Games, (although we certainly noticed the effects of that) or the Ryder Cup. It has been endemic throughout the period as the accompanying tables from Recent Train Times (www.recenttraintimes.co.uk) show. Passengers have had a miserable time, none more so than the regular valued commuters on the 17:13 to Ardgay which only achieved a right time arrival at Dingwall on 14% of occasions.

As the figures cover a whole three months, many of the peaks and troughs are smoothed out. For example, the 12:17 from Inverness to Dingwall and 12:54 return were cancelled 32% of the time, but if you look at one of the worst weeks from Monday 11th August they were cancelled for 67% of the time. In other words these services ran on only 2 of the 6 days that week.

The three month's data also includes Sundays which tend to have better results than weekdays as there are fewer trains occupying the line. It is claimed to be nearly 100% complete. It gives a far better picture of the true situation as it affected passengers than ScotRail's own four weekly punctuality and reliability charts which are displayed at stations. These count any train which arrives up to ten minutes late as being "on time".

Seven of the northbound services have suffered cancellation and, (outwith the period), the 23:30 from Inverness to Tain was cancelled on 3 October. Thus 8 out of 16 services, or 8 out of 12 weekday services have been affected. Southbound, 12 out of 14 weekday services have suffered cancellation! Fortunately there has not been a weekday when all 20 of the 26 weekday services were cancelled, but the misery has been shared around.

The worst hit trains for long delays have been the long distance 06:20 and 16:00 Wick to Inverness services and the 10:37 northbound. The latter does not show up on our data because the long delays occur further north. On 1 October it was announced (on leaving Invergordon) that Glasgow Control had decided to hold the 15 minute late train at Helmsdale to

allow the 12:35 Wick to Inverness train to come through the 35 minute long single track section between Forsinard and Helmsdale on time. This meant that the northbound service would become at least 66 minutes late. By missing out Thurso, and using taxis thence from Georgemas, some time could be made up to give a Wick arrival some 40 minutes late.

This scenario happens even more frequently to the 06:20 which, if it is more than 15 minutes late by Dingwall, is held at Muir of Ord to let outbound trains to Wick and Kyle through the 20 minute long section from Inverness. The 06:20 does not then reach Inverness until 11:40, some 65 minutes late.

There is not one single reason for this serious spate of daily delays this summer. There have been train faults, signalling problems, crewing issues and "temporary" speed restrictions. It is clear that the 20 to 25 minute deceleration imposed in 2005 has left this long single track route with insufficient resilience in its timetable for when problems occur. As Iain Coucher, the CEO of Network Rail said at our 2008 AGM "We must find and exploit real opportunities to reduce journey times on the Far North Line". Very little has happened since then and, as can be seen elsewhere in this issue, FoFNL is asking Network Rail to scope some major infrastructure improvements during Control Period 6 which covers 2019 to 2025. Reinstating the loops at Lentrane and Kildonan would greatly reduce the 60 minute delays being endured by the 06:20 and 10:37 trains, but there are other issues such as the painfully slow speeds over the points at each loop which could also be addressed.

The passenger experience this summer has been bad. The industry is now used to calculating delay minutes to trains and invoicing the guilty parties. It would be equally appropriate to calculate the cost to passengers of the delay minutes that they suffer with lost connections, appointments etc. Far better to make sure the delays don't happen in the first place. The industry surely has some remedial work it needs to do to make the FNL trains run on time again and then to go forward by speeding up the services on this multi-user life-line.

EXTRACTS FROM RECENT TRAIN TIMES WEBSITE

<http://recenttraintimes.co.uk>

TOC	Scheduled Times d INV	a DIN	Dur	Count All	Count Ran	Count CANC/NR	% Svc Ran	% Svc CANC/NR	First Ran	Last Ran	% Arrivals On Time	Actual Arrival Time in DIN Average Spread
SR	07:04	07:40	36m	80	80	0	100%	0%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	89%	07:40 RT - 07:43 3L
SR	08:58	09:31	33m	79	79	0	100%	0%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	80%	09:31 RT - 09:43 12L
SR	10:00	10:32	32m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	85%	10:32 RT - 10:37 5L
SR	10:37	11:08	31m	79	78	1	99%	1%	Wed 02/07	Tue 30/09	29%	11:07 RT - 11:35 27L / CANC/NR
SR	10:58	11:30	32m	79	79	0	100%	0%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	23%	11:30 RT - 12:13 43L
SR	11:00	11:32	32m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	77%	11:32 RT - 11:39 7L
SR	12:17	12:49	32m	78	53	25	68%	32%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	23%	12:48 RT - 13:02 13L / CANC/NR
SR	13:02	13:32	30m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	38%	13:32 RT - 13:38 6L
SR	13:33	14:04	31m	79	78	1	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	56%	14:03 RT - 14:19 15L / CANC/NR
SR	14:00	14:32	32m	79	76	3	96%	4%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	44%	14:31 RT - 15:22 50L / CANC/NR
SR	14:42	15:13	31m	79	74	5	94%	6%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	38%	15:13 RT - 15:28 15L / CANC/NR
SR	15:23	15:53	30m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	31%	15:53 RT - 16:03 10L
SR	17:13	17:47	34m	79	77	2	97%	3%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	14%	17:46 RT - 18:09 22L / CANC/NR
SR	17:54	18:25	31m	171	169	2	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	43%	18:24 RT - 19:17 52L / CANC/NR
SR	21:08	21:40	32m	92	89	3	97%	3%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	45%	21:38 RT - 22:05 25L / CANC/NR
SR	23:30	23:59	29m	26	26	0	100%	0%	Fri 04/07	Sat 27/09	4%	23:59 RT - 00:20 21L

ScotRail Far North train times northbound at Inverness and Dingwall
timekeeping and cancellation data July to September 2014

d	DIN	a	INV	Dur	All	Ran	CANC/NR	Ran	CANC/NR	Ran	On Time	Average	Spread
SR	07:13	07:46	33m	79	76	3	96%	4%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	68%	07:47 1½L	07:44 RT - 08:14 28L / CANC/NR
SR	07:41	08:15	34m	79	79	0	100%	0%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	81%	08:16 1L	08:13 RT - 08:42 27L
SR	08:16	08:50	34m	79	78	1	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	80%	08:51 1L	08:49 RT - 09:50 60L / CANC/NR
SR	10:03	10:35	32m	81	80	1	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	35%	10:42 7L	10:34 RT - 12:46 131L / CANC/NR
SR	11:47	12:15	28m	79	73	6	92%	8%	Wed 02/07	Sat 27/09	8%	12:26 11L	12:15 RT - 13:09 54L / CANC/NR
SR	11:48	12:20	32m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	46%	12:21 1½L	12:19 RT - 12:25 5L
SR	12:16	12:49	33m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	92%	12:49 RT	12:47 RT - 12:55 6L
SR	12:54	13:27	33m	78	53	25	68%	32%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	45%	13:32 5½L	13:24 RT - 13:35 8L / CANC/NR
SR	14:05	14:40	35m	79	77	2	97%	3%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	46%	14:43 3L	14:37 RT - 15:33 53L / CANC/NR
SR	14:47	15:17	30m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	62%	15:18 1½L	15:16 RT - 15:25 8L
SR	15:29	16:04	35m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	38%	16:10 6½L	16:03 RT - 16:48 44L
SR	15:56	16:29	33m	77	73	4	95%	5%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	75%	16:30 1½L	16:27 RT - 16:39 10L / CANC/NR
SR	16:15	16:48	33m	81	73	8	90%	10%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	10%	16:58 10L	16:46 RT - 17:50 62L / CANC/NR
SR	16:38	17:08	30m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	92%	17:08 RT	17:07 RT - 17:10 2L
SR	16:34	17:09	35m	79	79	0	100%	0%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	3%	17:20 11½L	17:09 RT - 18:05 56L
SR	17:16	17:49	33m	13	13	0	100%	0%	Sun 06/07	Sun 28/09	54%	17:51 2½L	17:48 RT - 18:03 14L
SR	19:16	19:57	41m	79	78	1	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	73%	19:59 2½L	19:47 RT - 21:04 67L / CANC/NR
SR	19:39	20:10	31m	81	79	2	98%	2%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	11%	20:21 11½L	20:09 RT - 21:58 108L / CANC/NR
SR	20:16	20:48	32m	78	77	1	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	35%	20:53 5L	20:46 RT - 21:10 22L / CANC/NR
SR	22:55	23:27	32m	92	91	1	99%	1%	Tue 01/07	Tue 30/09	42%	23:31 4L	23:26 RT - 23:55 28L / CANC/NR

ScotRail Far North train times southbound at Dingwall and Inverness
timekeeping and cancellation data July to September 2014

INVERNESS TICKET BARRIERS

I visited Station Manager Michelle MacRae on 16 July while the new gateline was being installed. Here is a summary of the points we covered then.

Seven new staff are being recruited at Inverness (and eight at Perth) who will be responsible for manning the gates. There will always be two at any time and gates are expected to be manned throughout the day. These staff will be trained and gating is planned to be operational from late August. Michelle and her staff are aware of the likely tricky times and will use the six weeks before the gates are in use to observe and learn.



There are two suites of gates: one for P3 to P6 (3 normal and 3 wide gates) and one for P1 and P2 (3 normal and 2 wide). There is no access between these two gated areas. They are multi-directional and can be switched to accommodate varying traffic flows. P7 will not be gated (too difficult and very few trains use it).



Moveable station furniture (i.e. everything apart from the centrally-mounted ticket machine) has been moved further away from the gate-line: the intention is to keep passengers as far from this as is reasonably possible. Trains will not be announced on the screen until they are ready for boarding. I

asked what would happen if, for example, a Highland Main Line (HML) train were announced ready for boarding at P3 and a Far North Line (FNL)/Kyle train were not announced at P6. How would the gates know that a valid Perth ticket should open the gates but a valid Dingwall one should not? They wouldn't of course (my conclusion) but the plan is to have a flexible extending tape barrier (as now) separating the P3 area within the gates from the P6 area within the gates. I think this is unworkable in practice but First ScotRail (FSR) doesn't. The view is that passengers will not know where the FNL train will go from and will all wait patiently to be told that they may now board. For most of the year the passengers on those trains are seasoned, perhaps daily, users and know perfectly well what is happening. I think they will board with their valid tickets as they are accustomed to doing now, but FSR plan it otherwise. We shall see.

I raised the two contraflow times with which I am familiar (there may be others, of course): the incoming FNL at 10:35 and the HML connection at 10:45. Usually the HML is P4 so double use of the gates won't be needed, but if the FNL is late and the HML train is P1 or P2 there will be a need to exit and re-enter the gates. The other is the 17:54 HML to which access is often quite delayed. I believe folk will seek to use the gates and get onto P5. I asked whether staff would - as they do now - require passengers to wait at the barrier. No, they want the area inside the gates to be as empty of people as possible - folk will enter and proceed to the platform. Again, we shall see.

The gates will be able to cope with all valid tickets, including flexipasses. There will be on-train ticket inspections exactly as now so the marking-off should not be affected. But as I understand it the requirement is that marking-off must be done before boarding the train; as some passengers will end their journeys - pretty well all flexipass holders are commuters, usually therefore making fairly short journeys - before their ticket is

inspected. A rich source of revenue loss, I'd have thought.

All gates will be locked open if there are no staff and all gates have an emergency switch (standard kit). Network Rail are doing the installation and they are satisfied (as is Transport Scotland) that the necessary safety implications have been complied with (and I have no reason to doubt this). When FSR first saw the plans an objection was raised about the sharply-projecting right angle in the new glass walls at the corner by Smiths. This was modified before installation and the angle has been removed allowing a wider passage at that pinch point. Smiths have been told not to encroach outwith the shop frontage.



The walkway through the station is acknowledged and will not be interfered with. However the double gate by P1 (to the access road) will be within the gated area and will be sealed out of use - not even the Sleeper will be accessible this way. (However access to The Royal Scotsman has been observed) The smaller gate will remain. Michelle pointed out that the practice of closing this gate in wet weather ceased some time ago when a safer matted footing was installed. (The reason for closure was to make it necessary for passengers to walk 50m or so on platform surface, drying their soles, before they reached the more slippery concourse.)

I think FSR are doing their best to comply with a daft franchise requirement over which the Inverness staff have no control (although, as indicated, they have had a degree of influence). I can see justification for gate-lines at places like Waverley, but gating Inverness and Perth looks awfully like box-ticking,

especially when one considers that no fewer than fifteen extra staff will have to be paid for.

When I used the station on Tuesday 16 September arriving off the Sleeper on P1 there was one staff member on duty at that suite of gates. One of the wider gates was locked open while he examined tickets. When I walked straight through (as you do when the gate is locked open) I was called back to show my ticket. They haven't yet worked out the system. At the other suite of gates a 170 had arrived (probably from Aberdeen) with large numbers of passengers being herded through just 2 wide gates, leaving 4 gates for passengers entering, of whom there was the merest trickle. Again the steepness of the learning curve was demonstrated. Perhaps it's unfair to cavil after only a few weeks, but if clearly inappropriate use of the system like this continues we will have good grounds for serious complaint. Anyone who uses the station should spend a minute or two observing, and should let FoFNL know if things should be better handled.

Mike Lunan



Richard Arden comments that he observed on a recent occasion that it took more than five minutes for most of 100 passengers from a north service to pass through the barriers, the others went for a south train on platform four.

Also the memorial bench for Frank Spaven, past FoFNL Membership Secretary and Vice President has now been marooned by the new barriers.

HIGHLAND MAIN LINE UPDATE

Details of the "GRIP 3" report setting out a costed option for new and improved infrastructure are still awaited. According to Network Rail's December 2013 update to their CP5 Enhancements Delivery Plan this work was due to be completed by June 2014. It may be that this has been delayed by the ScotRail franchising process, so that it can be based on the capabilities of the replacement rolling stock being specified by the successful bidder.

The objective of this next phase for completion by 2019 is to deliver "more efficient freight operations", and "an hourly passenger service frequency with a full average 10 minute reduction in journey times."

In oral questions in Parliament on 25 September, Liz Smith MSP asked the Deputy First Minister "What action is being taken to reduce rail journey times between Perth and other Scottish cities?" She commented that "analysis of journey times between Inverness and Glasgow has shown that trains are taking ten minutes longer than they were in 2000. Even the so-called express services are three minutes slower." Nicola Sturgeon replied that there will be substantial improvements to the Highland Main Line and commented "We are committed to a rolling programme of electrification which includes routes to Dundee, Aberdeen and Inverness".

The "average" ten minute reduction by 2019 obviously depends on the baseline year selected. It looks as though this will be 2014 rather than the 2000 base mentioned by Liz Smith. Even worse, Network Rail are hinting that Transport Scotland could decide on only seven

minutes if this avoids "significant infrastructure costs"

All this is a far cry from the visionary progress urged on ministers by Transform Scotland's Inter-City Express Programme published in March as being necessary to ensure that, in the First Minister's words, "Railways must at least compete with roads". The TfS programme calls for doubling and electrification of the Highland Main Line by 2025 at the latest to mirror the target date for dualling the A9.

This is all far removed from the First Minister's Inverness promise in 2008 to achieve an hourly service with the fastest trains taking only 2 hours 45 minutes to Edinburgh by 2012. It is now being claimed that this perceived promise was "a simple misunderstanding in a single newspaper article 6 years ago." However, over 100 people were present and the 2012 target completion date was reported in both the Herald and the Press and Journal on 6 August 2008.

There is a need for more urgency to get this single track railway with Victorian infrastructure brought up to 21st century standards. A standard at least as good as the new Airdrie to Bathgate line is the model to aim for. It does not make sense to see the A9 improved first and able to abstract traffic from rail on to lorries and buses. Government carbon reduction targets, increased congestion in our cities, public safety, finite and precarious oil resources, are just some of the reasons why the more sustainable rail option should be pursued vigorously.

FoFNL members will hope we can get the Thurso to Edinburgh journey time down to well below 6 hours!

Richard Ardern

INVERNESS - ABERDEEN LINE PROGRESS

The plans for the start of the major upgrade to the Inverness-Aberdeen line were recently published in summary form on the Transport Scotland website under the title Aberdeen to Inverness rail improvements project GRIP 3 –phase 1 enhancements. Summary. August 2014. See

www.transportscotland.gov.uk/project/aberd-deen-inverness-rail-improvements.

Readers will note that the whole scheme, which was hoped to have been delivered in full by 2016, has now been divided into more than one phase. "The scope of the first phase to be taken forward by 2015 for completion by (the end of financial Control Period 5 in) March 2019 includes:

Aberdeen to Inverurie redoubling (subject to a caveat regarding the tunnels) Inverurie and Elgin platform extensions Elgin signalling enhancements Forres station relocation, loop extension and token exchange removal."

This is estimated to cost £170m and the additional costs of constructing Dalcross and Kintore stations have to be found by Hitrans and Nestrans.

"Further development work will take place on the optimisation of the loop/double track

strategy at Nairn/Dalcross; line speed improvements; and level crossing closures during CP5."

"Further timetable development work began in February 2014 to establish the optimum timetable between Aberdeen and Inverurie and to develop a timetable and to finalise the infrastructure scope between Inverness and Elgin. It will include work to evaluate the benefits of extending the double track from Dalcross to Nairn as has recently been proposed by Transport Scotland. The work carried out to date has identified paths for additional train services from Inverness and Elgin."

I hope that the benefit of installing/reinstalling double track for most of the way between Inverness and Nairn to ensure timetable robustness will be recognised. We do not, as yet, have any indication that there will eventually be a loop to split the longest single line section which is the 18 miles from Elgin to Keith. Meanwhile, the public are already being consulted on the details of dualling the A96 all the way from Inverness to Nairn and Auldearn.

Richard Ardern

NESS VIADUCT LECTURE

As part of their 2014-15 lecture series Inverness Field Club is hosting a lecture entitled 'The Collapse and Reconstruction of the Ness Railway Viaduct' given by Adrian Boal who was Assistant Resident Engineer on the project. The Ness Viaduct, just north of Inverness station, collapsed on the 7th February 1989 leaving the railways North of Inverness cut off from the rest of the network.

The lecture will take place on Wednesday 19th November at 7:30 p.m. at New Millburn Academy Assembly Hall, Diriebught Road, Inverness (doors open at 7:00 p.m.). There will be a brief introductory history by Norman Newton.

THE HIGHLAND RAILWAY SURVEY

by David St John Thomas 1994

Twenty years on, it is interesting to look back on this 40 page report commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 1993. Some of David's suggestions have come to pass, such as the desirability of having "friends" organisations for the Highland routes! Others, such as a once a week tourist train on an Inverness-Perth-Aberdeen-Inverness circuit, have not.

Passenger censuses were taken on different days in August 1993. On Friday 6th August 2,515 passengers arrived at Inverness including 145 off the London Euston sleeper. 198 came off the Highland Chieftain daytime service from Kings Cross, 280 off the 10:32 arrival from Glasgow. Three other afternoon arrivals from Glasgow and Edinburgh each had over 200 passengers aboard.

On the Far North Line, the Thurso train arrival figures were:

	Passengers
09:52	114
15:13	223
19:35	65
23:55	15
Total	413

Another 384 came in on the four trains from Kyle of Lochalsh.

Departures saw 2,684 passengers leaving, 204 on the 07:55 to Kings Cross, 318 on the 10:15 to Edinburgh and an estimated 120 on the London Euston sleeper. Trains to Thurso had:

	Passengers
07:12	20
11:00	130
15:48	140
18:00	103
Total	393

Another 315 passengers left on the four trains to Kyle of Lochalsh.

On Monday 4 August a census was done for intermediate stations on the FNL. These showed 341 passengers joining and 283 leaving FNL trains at Inverness, Monday being a quieter day of the week than the Friday above. Totals at Thurso were 135 leaving and 129 joining and at Wick, 105 leaving and 89 joining.

Culrain just pipped Dingwall as the busiest of the intermediate stations with 46 joining trains and 41 leaving in both directions. Other figures were:

	Joining	Leaving
Dingwall	25	58
Lairg	41	23
Tain	24	31
Helmsdale	27	27

13 passengers left trains at Dunrobin Castle but only 3 boarded there. On that particular day there were no passengers at all at Invershin, Kildonan, Altnabreac and Scotsclader. What a pity that the recent enforced closure of Carbisdale Castle as a youth hostel has now taken away much of the potential traffic at Culrain!

Richard Ardern

DAVID ST JOHN THOMAS - AN APPRECIATION

David St John Thomas 1929-2014, railway author, prolific publisher and committed Liberal died whilst cruising on Cunard's Queen Victoria on 19th August, shortly before his 85th birthday.



David spent most of his life in Devon, moving to Nairn at a stage when others would think only of retirement. His first interest, railways, was stimulated as a boy living adjacent to the now closed Great Western Tiverton to Barnstaple line, where he enjoyed unauthorised access to the local signal box. His early book, *"The Country Railway"*, recently reprinted, recalls the milk churns, cattle loading and daily arrival and dispatch of sacks of Post Office mail at the village stations across the land.

In the 1960s David entered into partnership with Charles Hadfield to form David & Charles publishers, based at Newton Abbot, Devon. Charles had written *"British Canals. An Illustrated History"* in 1950. David engaged railway writers in growing the business. At its height the company employed 300 staff. An ever increasing range of books poured out covering railways and other transport as well as geographically related topics. David's own writing often combined the two. As General Editor of the fifteen volume *"A Regional History of the Railways of Great Britain"* he commissioned railway authors for each region, while writing volume 1 *"The West Country"* himself. Highland readers may well recall the series published on the offshore islands. Railways apart, David had a love of music and his garden.

In Nairn David and his wife Sheila regularly opened their house to a group of railway enthusiasts. David was a member of FoFNL. In the background, the David St John Thomas Charitable Trust encouraged new writers, and in its Newsletter provided space for supporters of little known charities to write, for which a donation in kind was made to the charity concerned. At Christmas they hosted full Christmas Dinner to several groups. Those who worked for them were treated as if part of the family. In later life David gravitated from the Quakers to the Episcopalians, supporting Sheila in her church responsibilities. He is survived by Sheila, his daughter Alyss Clare and son Gareth.

IAIN SHAND - FOFNL MEMBER

Committee members were sorry to learn that our member Iain Shand died at Raigmore Hospital in June after a long battle against illness. Iain had volunteered to take over as Newsletter Editor in 2012 but his illness prevented this. We offer our condolences to his partner, Michael.

HELMSDALE STATION HOUSE - OFFICIAL OPENING

As reported in Issues 60-62 Helmsdale Station House, which had been unused for over twenty years, has been fully refurbished and adapted as self-catering accommodation. An interesting and innovative feature of the booking arrangements is the offer of a 10% discount if a group arrives by train, and a further 10% off if they agree to spend half a day during their week maintaining the grounds, garden and waiting room.

The official opening took place on Saturday July 19th 2014. The ceremony was performed by John Thurso M.P., FoFNL President and attended by three members of the Committee. The building was open to the public that afternoon, there was live music and a display of artwork by children of Helmsdale Primary school on the subject of 'Train Travel'.

The event was also used to celebrate the 140th anniversary of the opening of the Helmsdale to Wick and Thurso line (completed 28 July 1874 by the Sutherland and Caithness Railway Company).



After presenting the Primary School art prize John Yellowlees, External Relations Manager, ScotRail hands the microphone to John Thurso, FoFNL President who performed the opening ceremony.

Photo: Richard Ardern

CULRAIN FOR CARBISDALE CASTLE

The Scottish Youth Hostels Association has had to admit defeat and has put Carbisdale Castle on the market. Repairs due to water ingress have cost over a million pounds with no end in sight. The hostel has been closed since 2010 and nearby Culrain station has seen its annual footfall drop from over 1700 passengers in both 2009/10 and 2010/11 to 526 in 2011/12 and 474 in 2012/13. This is a most unfortunate loss to the FNL.

STEAMING TO DUNROBIN AND WICK

LMS Black Five no 44871 hauled 7 coaches from Inverness to Dunrobin on Monday 12 May this year. Single line capacity limits led to an extended stop at Tain at 10:46 to cross the 08:12 from Wick to Inverness, with the train then being shunted out of the north end and back in to the up platform to allow the 10:37 from Inverness to Wick to overtake, whereupon it was shunted southwards and back in to the down platform for our departure northwards at 12:03 once the service train had cleared the section to Ardgay. Passengers thus had plenty of time to stretch their legs in the sunshine and Iain MacDonald did a great job handing out FoFNL membership leaflets. Some passengers even joined at Tain as the train had been advertised locally.

The locomotive made a very creditable ascent of the 1 in 70 bank from Invershin towards Lairg and on to Dunrobin for 13:35 where FoFNL member, Daniel Brittain-Catlin, who leases the picturesque mock half-timbered 1902 station, had organised many special activities. There were stalls of railway memorabilia, tours of the station and the station museum, and viewing of the narrow gauge locomotive "Brora". It was all

very pleasant in the sunshine. The train had gone on to Brora so that the locomotive could run round and come back for us to reboard via the two sets of steps, three steps high because of the very low platform.

We departed tender first on time at 15:25 but were held for 25 minutes in the loop at Rogart because the northbound 14:00 from Inverness to Wick was 8 minutes late. The 7 mile 1 in 80 climb to Lairg summit took us 17 minutes 45 seconds and after stopping for water at Tain we arrived at Invergordon 9 minutes early. Yet again the northbound service train was late, by a full 15 minutes. We had regained this by Inverness, but the plan was changed and, instead of going straight in to platform 6, we took the Rose Street curve and, in time honoured tradition, the locomotive propelled the train backwards in to platform 2 arriving five minutes late at 19:19.

Next year, it is proposed that the Great Britain land cruise from London will go to Wick with steam haulage on Monday 4 May probably with LNER locomotives 61994 and 61264.

Richard Ardern

Details of *The Great Britain III* steam railtour which will run from 26th April to 6th May are available online at

<http://www.railwaytouring.net/train-tours/great-britain-viii>

ARDGAY STATION 150TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

On Wednesday 1st October 2014 a celebration was held to mark the 150th anniversary of Bonar Bridge Station on 1st October 1864. The station was renamed Ardgay on 2nd May 1977.

Valerie Mackenzie Harris, Mary Stobo and Hilary Gardner, members of Kyle of Sutherland Heritage Society, dressed in period costumes, welcomed FoFNL committee members Richard Ardern (who is also a member of the Highland Railway Society), Malcolm Wood (secretary) and Sandy Colley when they arrived on the 10:37 train from Inverness.

Travellers on the train continuing North were handed commemorative bookmarks.

See the photographs by Sandy Colley on the front and back pages.

MY FIRST FAR NORTH LINE JOURNEY

By **Rodney T. Hughes** (Member 521)

This took place on the 1st of April 1960, back in the days when steam reigned supreme on the Far North Line! It was one way only - Thurso to Inverness - since I had travelled north the previous day by road. My father's job took him all over Scotland, so as a family we often accompanied him at holiday time. This was a university vacation, and I guessed that a trip on the "Thirty~Nine Stops" would be a pleasant antidote to the onset of Finals.

Fortunately I kept a record of what was seen en-route, so for the possible interest of those who remember the wonderful fleet of locomotives that operated north of Inverness, here are the details.

My adventure began at 8:35am at Thurso, arriving exactly six hours later at Inverness. This was followed by three happy hours train-watching at Inverness to allow the road party to catch up.

The 8:35 from Thurso consisted of two very well-filled coaches (all six seats in my compartment were occupied), hauled by a Stanier 2-6-2T 40150, sporting a small snow plough. This took us in a leisurely fashion as far as Georgemas Junction.

At Georgemas we waited for the arrival of the Wick portion (8:40am from Wick) with Stanier "Black Five" 45479 in charge. This train also had two coaches, but with the addition of a bogie parcels van of pre-war origin, teak bodied and built by Gresley for the LNER. This is evident in the photograph I took from the Georgemas station footbridge, having nipped out to record the scene. The fellow passengers in the Thurso portion apparently got really concerned when the train began to move, but I was safely in the Wick portion by then!

The Thurso portion had been attached to the back of the train and we were off into that wonderful empty landscape of Scotsclader, Altnabreac and Forsinard, with its vistas of distant mountains to the South. And so down the strath below Kinbrace, with a sudden stop to pick up a passenger at Borrobol Platform - a gentleman wearing a kilt. But the other request stop in those parts, Salzcraggie Platform, was passed at speed.

In those days there were just two daily passenger services from Inverness to Wick and Thurso, although a third went as far as Helmsdale. It was here that our train met the first northbound one, the 6:40am from Inverness, which was in the care of another "Black Five" 44785. Both engines took water, which gave me plenty of time to cross the footbridge and get another photograph.

I must just mention in passing that the previous day I had visited Helmsdale station while my father visited the local Postmaster (his job was with the Post Office - or the GPO as we all called it). In the station, gently punctuating the still atmosphere with its Westinghouse Pump, was a Pickersgill 4-4-0 of the old Caledonian Railway, 54495. It had a short goods train containing what looked like a couple of gas cylinders. I took a photograph, and had the honour of being invited onto the footplate by the crew. The driver was a Mr. Sutherland.



Photo: David Stewart

Back to the journey south! The next crossing place was, as it still is, at Brora, and here we met two northbound freight trains, both tucked neatly into the loop with the second engine buffer to buffer with the guard's van of the first train. Once again Stanier "Black Fives" had charge of both, their numbers being 44799 and 44788 respectively.

In 1960 Dunrobin Platform was included in the timetable, but described as Dunrobin (Private) and designated a request stop. Then, after Golspie came The Mound Junction where the Dornoch engine, Great Western pannier tank 1646, had left its single coach in the branch platform and was waiting to add a Restaurant Car to the back of our train. This had come north on the 6:40am from Inverness, serving breakfasts, and would now return serving lunch.

About six minutes were allowed for the Restaurant Car to be attached.

Here I must digress again, because on the road journey the previous day it just so happened that the car was passing Cambusavie Platform a few minutes before the arrival of the 1:00pm from Dornoch, and it was agreed that I could take the train the short distance over the causeway to the junction. It was quite difficult getting onto the platform, weeds having grown up around the gate, but what a sight for sore eyes - the guard opening and closing the gates over the minor road leading to Skelbo, and the panting little "invader" from Croes Newydd shed drawing its coach into the station. The guard gave me a great welcome, there being nobody else on the train, and wrote out a ticket for 7d which I still have as a memento.

To return to the journey south! The next recorded entry in my notes is a slight mystery. At Edderton we should have passed the second northbound train (and the last to Wick and Thurso), the 10:40am from Inverness. However I have no record of seeing it, and the only train mentioned is a southbound freight in the care of 45461. Perhaps the 10:40 was running late and met us at Tain - but again no mention.

Caledonian 4-4-0 54480 was on shed at Tain, and would later haul the 3:50pm local to Inverness, due there at 5:40pm. And thereafter, on this southbound journey, the old Caledonian Railway's engines held sway. At Evanton 54488 was waiting with a northbound freight, tank engine 55199 was shunting around the yard at Dingwall, immaculate as ever, and at Inverness 54493 was on the two coach 3:10pm local to Tain. Incidentally, it was this latter engine that first brought a Caledonian flavour to Stranraer, in about 1930.

Thus ended my first Far North journey, but the only one in the steam era. The next was to Wick and back in 1987, when Type 37 diesel 37419 broke down rather inconveniently at Forsinard on the return journey.

A final footnote: it was interesting to see the photograph of the small Standard 2 78052 on the back cover of our magazine (number 62). At that time only one of the Great Western engines had arrived in the North - 1646. So perhaps it was out of action needing some attention, with the Standard drafted in to fill the gap. 1649 followed in July 1958. It is a pity we lack the Dornoch branch today, but at least we have the Far North line, and long may it flourish!

BOOK REVIEW

The Kyle of Lochalsh Line by Ewan Crawford

Amberley Publishing, 2014. 96 pp £14.99. ISBN 978 1 4456 1411 3

This book is a collection of colour and black and white photographs arranged in east to west geographical order from Inverness to Kyle. Pages 10 to 22 cover the Inverness to Dingwall section shared by both Kyle and Far North Lines.

Station Square, Inverness is shown with a couple of horse drawn carriages awaiting custom. The four-signal gantry west of Rose Street is passed by a class 26 diesel hauled train, a class 37 and a class 158 sprinter are shown at Clachnaharry, and perhaps the most interesting picture clearly shows the track bed for the former double track near Bunchrew. A picture of the Safeway train near Clunes in 2004 is followed by one of a Small Ben at Beauly in 1938 showing lots of pallets in the yard. There are pictures of the Ness viaduct collapse and rebuilding and of the temporary locomotive shed at Muir of Ord in 1989. Several views of Dingwall in both steam and diesel days show just how much that station has altered, including former parcels traffic, semaphore signalling and the bay platform at the north end in use.

The reproduction of the photographs (which are mostly two or three to a page) is not brilliant, but the selection does give a good representation of the line throughout its history though majoring on the last forty years. Two highlights are an early photograph of Lochluichart station with the nine staff all lined up, and a postcard of the formidable, but now demolished, Loch Rosque Castle near Achnasheen. The captions are helpful and almost all the photographs are dated. As this is principally a photographic work there is only a short six page account of the history of the line and readers are referred to other works for more detail. FoFNL Vice President Frank Spaven's work on helping to save the line from closure is outlined. Friends of the Kyle Line is mentioned in the links section, but FoFNL is not.

Richard Ardern

Ardgay Station (*Bonar Bridge* until 2nd May 1977) on 1st October 2014 when ladies of the Kyle of Sutherland Heritage Society were at the station in period dress to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the opening of the station.

All photos on this page by Sandy Colley



On 12th May 2014 LMS 'Black 5' 44871 went to Dunrobin Castle and Brora with "*The Highlands and Islands Explorer*". The train is pictured at Rogart

The newly named IC125 power-car 43308 *HIGHLAND CHIEFTAIN* at Feabuaie shortly after leaving Inverness for London on 30th September 2014.

