

# FAR NORTH EXPRESS

THE 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 users, tourists and freight customers.

**Issue 64**

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*Photo: Sandy Colley*

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## OFFICE BEARERS

### President:

Rt. Hon. John Thurso M.P.

### Vice-President:

John Melling, Inverness

### Convener:

Vacant

### Hon. Secretary:

Malcolm George Wood  
secretary@fofnl.org.uk

### Hon. Treasurer:

David Start, Worthing

### Membership Secretary:

Angus Stewart, St Andrews

### Newsletter Editor:

Ian Budd, Glasgow

### Committee Members:

Bob Barnes-Watts, Inverness  
Iain Macdonald, Alness  
Richard Arden, Inverness  
Stewart Campbell, Alness  
Sandy Colley, Culloden

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

**FoFNL Website:** [www.fofnl.org.uk](http://www.fofnl.org.uk)

Addresses for contributions:

E-mail: [editor@fofnl.org.uk](mailto:editor@fofnl.org.uk)

Post: 3 Villafield Loan,  
Bishopbriggs,  
Glasgow, G64 3NZ

*Cover photo:* Class 66, 66114 in the new livery at Dingwall on a misty 28 November 2014 with the "Lairg Tanks" (6H03 for the technically minded).

**Sandy Colley**

## FOFNL MEMBERSHIP FORM

For an organisation such as ours, membership is vital both in terms of numbers, therefore influence, and to finance lobbying activities. If you would like to join The Friends of The Far North Line please download, print out and complete the application form from our website: [www.fofnl.org.uk/membership/memform.pdf](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/membership/memform.pdf)

If you can think of anyone else who might be interested please mention FoFNL to them and encourage them to join!

# HEADCODE

Sometimes adversity can lead to the considered reassessment of a situation and the opening up of a beneficial opportunity. For the Far North Line, the many timekeeping problems of the last six months have led to the formation of a working party currently looking at the infrastructure improvements needed to make the line operate more reliably for the benefit of both passengers and freight. That this group includes one of the train drivers who are key to the process is particularly welcome.

## Opportunities

In this issue we publish the second of FoFNL's broad brush suggestions to Network Rail based on the question "What enhancements does NR need to make to deliver the ideal timetable?" The answers should also implement their CEO Iain Coucher's challenge of seven years ago to "find and exploit real opportunities to reduce journey times." Let it be that this process is now well under way.

## Inverness

Abellio, the incoming ScotRail franchise holder, has plans for a million pound retail development at Inverness station and Highland Council is planning to improve Inverness City Centre, particularly Academy Street and Station Square. It makes sense that the two schemes dovetail with, and complement, each other for the benefit of travellers and shoppers alike.

We have already seen how the Eastgate development was allowed to encroach too close to the station such that the free flow of vehicles collecting and delivering

railway passengers is unduly restricted, especially the turning of rail replacement buses. On the other side of the station, commercial pressures have hitherto prevented easier access to and from the bus station for onward journeys.

We now have another chance to make the Hub of the Highlands much more passenger friendly for both residents and tourists alike. Abellio might like to introduce the sensible Dutch "Train Taxi" system in conjunction with the existing taxis. Retailing has its place in (or above) the railway station, but a priority should be much enhanced provision of warm, comfortable waiting areas for passengers. Queuing on the concourse can be a cold and miserable experience which should be avoidable if proper provision is made for passengers.

## New era

The time is right for the Highlands to have an imaginatively designed 21<sup>st</sup> century station upgrade and a new mostly double track electrified railway from the south, both as ambitious and successful as the new Haymarket Station and the reopened Airdrie to Bathgate railway. The time is right for the Far North Line to get high speed points and a signalling system as modern as the new Borders Railway. The current RETB signalling was pioneered in the Far North, but everywhere in England and Wales which adopted it too has now moved on to something better. The time is right for Highland railways to take a big step forward into a new modern era. The time is now!

**Richard Ardern**

## EDITORIAL

A Happy New Year to all. This could be an encouraging year for the Far North Line. Perhaps when things have become so bad the timing of the arrival of Abellio couldn't have been better. No one will expect instant transformation but it would be surprising if Abellio didn't make the Far North Line a priority. There could be no better time in the franchise cycle for the new franchisee to really show what they can do (except perhaps the run-up to the next round of bidding!), they will of course need the co-operation of Network Rail and the Scottish Government (Transport Scotland).

The irony of trains running through the newly reopened Conon Bridge station (and Beaulieu, reopened some years ago) without stopping, in order to keep to the timetable and suggesting that intending travellers take a taxi is almost beyond belief. It is not surprising that MSP Rhoda Grant, who has been campaigning for improvements, was quoted in the Press & Journal on 18th December: "The service is not fit for purpose, the regular delays and cancellations make it too unreliable for many potential business users to rely on travel along the line, and tourists are more likely to use the road as a faster route north." It is clear that good service must be restored quickly to win back passengers.

Having enjoyed the process of editing the newsletter in October I have agreed to continue as editor and so have removed "acting" from my page two listing. I have made some small changes as you will see, including trying to maintain larger font sizes than those in the October issue. I would very much appreciate any comments you may have on any aspect of the layout. Complimentary comments are very nice but it is useful to hear of any problems or suggestions which I can use to improve the production. The newsletter has always had an enjoyable mix of items about the current situation on the line, opinions and general interest and I would love to receive more articles for possible inclusion.

I have been struck by the amazing breadth of knowledge of Far North Line matters that your committee has and the amount of work that goes on behind the scenes. Living in Glasgow and having a full-time job prevents me from attending many meetings but I was lucky enough to be invited to a session of Transform Scotland in Edinburgh at which there was a presentation by Rail Freight Group's Scottish representative David Spaven. This gave me an inspiring insight into the real discussions which are going on all the time behind the scenes, involving many specialist organisations and pressure groups. I found it reassuring that there are real experts feeding ideas and opinions into the system to help politicians who, almost by definition, are rarely experts themselves.

Transform Scotland was heavily involved in the franchise consultation and bidding process. Paul Tetlaw from TS welcomes the new franchise holder but makes the point that "The new franchise promises to deliver significant improvements in many of the areas that we highlighted and we have good reason to be pleased with the outcome. Indeed we have written to the Minister and senior civil servants at Transport Scotland expressing these views. However the franchise alone cannot deliver in the key areas of integration and infrastructure upgrades and we now look to government at all levels to bring forward schemes to ensure that we have a railway that integrates well with other modes and offers a real alternative to the car."

Ian Budd

## AGM 2015 - ADVANCE NOTICE

The 2015 AGM will be held in Inverness on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> June starting at 11:00a.m. **There will be a speaker from Abellio**, the new ScotRail franchise holder.

Full details will be published in the April newsletter.

# NO MORE CANCELLATIONS!

## ***ScotRail apologises for the cancellation of the train to Wick ...***

This announcement (or its UP equivalent) has been heard a great deal more often in the last few months. Occasionally it's the train which is faulty, but much more often it seems to be because of "staff difficulties". I understand that one of the Wick drivers has retired (but was this sudden?) and another has been suffering from a long-term illness. Neither of course is to blame - people retire, sometimes early and without several months' notice, and people can become ill. It is management's job, however, to manage, and tolerating a position where there are too few employees to deliver the contracted services is - read my lips - not acceptable.

We are told that it can take 12 months for a driver to acquire route knowledge. If this is so then the argument for having additional drivers at each depot is surely strengthened. ScotRail has a workforce of a few thousand - having a dozen or so more employed at the out-depots like Wick, Kyle, Mallaig, Oban and so forth is not going to make much of a dent in their profits.

A TOC has to be made very clearly aware that cancelling a train because management has failed so to structure their employee bank that an essential crew member cannot be found will bear severe reputational damage and severe

costs. It might be reasonable for Transport Scotland, when writing its franchise requirements, to state that a fine, big enough to exceed the annual cost of a staff member, should automatically be levied for a cancellation for this reason. I do not suggest that a cancellation for mechanical failure should be in this category - merely the staff shortage excuse. £100,000 would seem to be about right as this will be usefully more than a driver's salary plus other costs. The idea is to make such a cancellation so expensive, and so damaging reputationally, that every possible way of avoiding it - principally maintaining sufficient drivers at each depot to cover holidays, rostered days off, unexpected sickness and so forth - would be implemented.

As well as drivers and conductors there are other essential staff members, principally signallers. However these are likely to be employed at fewer, larger and more central locations, so the effect of one person unexpectedly being absent is less likely to lead to cancellations. However the principle remains - if a service is cancelled because of a "staff difficulty" then a whopping fine, and news about it in the news media, should automatically follow.

**Mike Lunan**

## BRANCHLINER TIMBER FROM CAITHNESS AND SUTHERLAND

HITRANS is working with the Highland Timber Transport Group on a project to deliver a managed trial of timber haulage by rail between Caithness and the Flow Country of Sutherland through to Inverness in the summer of 2015.

This would deliver a substantial volume of timber from the sidings at Georgemas Junction and from the existing railside loading facilities at Kinbrace avoiding the need for big timber lorries to travel long distances on the fragile roads of the area.

The intended recipient would be the Norbord plant near Dalcross on the Inverness to Aberdeen railway line. Highland Council recently gave planning permission for a new oriented strandboard mill more than double the size of the existing plant. It is hoped that Norbord will once again lay down a rail siding to take timber directly into their premises.

More details may be found on the HITRANS website at <http://www.hitrans.org.uk> in their "recently uploaded documents" section. This also includes the latest on the proposals for the new station at Dalcross and an update on the new rail franchises.

**Richard Ardern**

# NETWORK RAIL CONTROL PERIOD 6

## FOFNL POLICY DOCUMENT PART 2

### 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*

A very senior person at the Regulator asked me on 14 October 2014 “How are things up where you are?” and I replied that the journey times were 20 minutes or more longer than they were 10, or even 20, years ago. • “That’s all the TSRs (*temporary speed restrictions*)” he replied immediately. I was at that time unaware of the substantial journey-time extensions that were planned for the December 2014 timetable, which render the argument below much stronger.

It seems incredible that some 6 years after the CEO of Network Rail made his explicit pledge to reduce end-to-end journey times on the FNL “*we must find and exploit...*” (emphasis added) there are still *temporary* speed restrictions in operation. Journey time reductions can be made by actions solely in the hands of the TOC (*Train Operating Company*), and separate steps will be taken with the new franchise-holder to “find and exploit real opportunities” which the TOC can deliver. However the main reason for extended journey times is the state and condition of the infrastructure – track and signalling.

Rather than produce an endless shopping list of things it would be nice to have, we have limited ourselves to four areas of activity which we expect to see carried out by Network Rail by the end of CP6. We accept that it is probably too late to initiate any major work during CP5, but there are many minor works which should be carried out swiftly. In addition some of the preliminary scoping work for larger projects should start without delay.

**Area 1. Network Rail should, as a matter of urgency, list (and make available to us) all the TSRs between Inverness and Wick, together with dates on which they were instigated and plans for removal. Where the nature of the TSR is such that its removal depends on the co-operation of another party this should be made clear so that FoFNL may make appropriate representations outwith the industry.**

**Area 2. Network Rail should draw up plans for allowing line-speed increases on plain line, whether by laying CWR or otherwise, with a view to such installation being carried out during CP5 and CP6 as part of an improved maintenance plan.**

**Area 3. Network Rail, in collaboration with the TOC and others, should devise a “clean sheet” timetable for the FNL, not one based on the current track infrastructure. Some constraints will naturally remain – Clachnaharry bridge and other bridges – but the present location of passing loops should not drive the timetable; rather the plan is to discover the ideal timetable and then to see what affordable infrastructure enhancements are needed to deliver it, starting the building process in CP6. With longer stretches of double track, mainly dynamic loops, this will greatly reduce the excessive speed reductions now required at loop entries and departures. Equally with much improved signalling (see Area 4 below) the need physically to stop in order to gain permission to proceed will be eliminated.**

**Area 4. The FNL and the West Highland Line will soon be the only places where RETB (*Radio Electronic Token Block*) signalling is still used. We hope that the improvements already promised will mean that there will no longer be delays while permission to proceed is granted. In the longer term, however, RETB must be replaced by something more efficient. The ERTMS (*European Rail Traffic Management System*) trial on the Cambrian Line has proved successful, as has the Hertford Loop trial. Network Rail plans to install ERTMS on the East Coast Main Line, and we applaud this. We hope that, mindful of the success on the Cambrian Line, ERTMS, or an appropriate variant of it, will be developed for use on lightly-used lines like the FNL. This work should proceed in tandem with larger-scale projects on major high-speed lines.**

It is no longer acceptable to state that infrastructure enhancements are unaffordable on the FNL. Spending on rail elsewhere in Scotland has been, and continues to be, at a pleasingly high level. However those areas not so fortunate cannot be ignored for ever, pushed aside by the argument that more benefit will be gained by spending south of Inverness. With the current rolling stock in use on the FNL capable of reaching 90 mph it should be possible, given the terrain and the number of stops, to achieve an overall end-to-end average speed including stops of around 55 mph, thus reducing the Inverness to Wick timing to around 3 hours. While still slow this would be acceptable.

**Mike Lunan: 30 October 2014**

## NEW TIMETABLE CREATING A MORE RELIABLE SERVICE

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

I wrote in October that a comprehensive review of the Far North timetable was well underway to improve its overall performance. Since then we have introduced a new winter timetable which is specifically designed to improve Far North Line resilience and to address the overall reliability of journey times for our customers.

Performance has been affected mainly by the nature of the infrastructure - single line with passing loops. Small delays to one service can result in knock-on delays to other trains which can build up throughout the day. The opening of Canon Bridge station - restoring services for local people after decades with no rail connections - also made it more difficult for trains to keep to the timetable.

Working closely with Network Rail and Transport Scotland, we have painstakingly created the new timetable aimed at giving local people and visitors a timetable they can rely on in the short to medium term. There are clear signs that the new timetable is creating a more reliable, predictable service while making best use of the infrastructure and resources available.

Introduced in mid-December, the winter timetable also introduced enhancements - such as a new 18:28 Inverness-Wick service which gives a connection to stations all the way to Wick from Glasgow and Edinburgh in the middle of the afternoon. We are committed to further improvement. The new timetable is an interim solution - and we will continue efforts to improve journey times on these routes.

Network Rail, for example, is assessing, as a matter of priority, options for reducing journey times on the Far North line. It is reviewing where train speeds on the line can be increased and how changes in infrastructure, such as enhanced level crossings, create opportunities for trains to travel at faster speeds.

## December 2014 Timetable

The December 2014 timetable is the first major timetable change north of Inverness since 2008. Performance has been poor throughout the second half of 2014 for a number of reasons. The timetable was incapable of recovering from small delays and trains often ran late, missing connections at Inverness. Coupled with poor time keeping were other operational and infrastructure issues that made the train service, at times, very unreliable with much negative comment reported in the local press and on social media.

This review focusses on the timetable change alone and not on the other operational issues that are still to be resolved.

## Background

The basic timetable structure of three trains per day in each direction between Inverness, Kyle of Lochalsh and Wick is well established although has been modified over the years. The present timetable structure dates back to June 2005 which was a significant change adopting new class 158 Sectional Running Times (SRTs) – the timetable that had been in operation since May 2000 was, by the summer of 2004, undeliverable.

Prior to the introduction of class 158 DMUs in May 2000, an experimental commuter service was introduced from Dingwall to Inverness in March 1998. At the September 2000 timetable change, this train was extended to start back from Tain, departing at 07:20 with a 55 minute journey time to Inverness (the same train today departs 19 mins earlier and has a journey time of 72 mins, with two additional stops).

Schedules were revised slightly at the May 2001 timetable change to allow for the additional time required to call at Beaulieu – this station opened in April 2002.

In December 2005 the timetable was overlaid with an additional 10 services each weekday operating between Inverness, Invergordon, Tain and Ardgay, with the first train from Tain extended to start back from Lairg. These services were known as 'Invernet', improving frequencies and journey opportunities.

At the December 2006 timetable change an additional mid-morning service was introduced

from Wick to Inverness, operating a 'limited-stop' service with a headline journey time of 4 hrs.

December 2008 was, however, the main timetable change introducing a new fourth train between Inverness and Wick, an additional early morning commuter service from Ardgay and additional late evening services on Fridays and Saturdays as well as an enhanced Sunday service. The timetable also included an allowance for Canon Bridge station which opened in February 2013 with most trains calling.

## Improvements

The new timetable aims to deliver a more reliable service. All schedules have been revised with new SRTs although the timetable broadly has the same structure as introduced in December 2008 – the location of train crew and passing loops very much defines the train service north and west of Inverness.

The last train from Inverness to Wick now leaves Inverness 34 mins later at 18:28. Previously this operated as a portion with the 17:54 Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh service but these now operate separately. This provides three evening peak departures from Inverness to Dingwall at 17:12, 17:54 and at 18:28 which is a welcome improvement. It also provides a later connection from Edinburgh and Glasgow into the last train to Wick and Thurso – passengers can depart Edinburgh an hour later at 14:35 and Glasgow Queen Street at 15:07 (previously 13:41) with the overall journey time from Edinburgh to Wick reduced by 20 mins and from Glasgow by 46 mins. Retiming the last train to Wick later, however, was required for operational rather than commercial reasons. The inward train crew now arrive at Inverness at 17:01 (previously 16:48) and need a total turnaround time of 60 mins for operational duties and their allocated break from duty. One major delay prior to the December 2014 timetable was the late departure of the 17:54 departure from Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh and Wick as it had to wait for the train crew who had arrived late from Wick.

Another improvement is the removal of Scotsalder, Altnabreac, Kinbrace, Kildonan, Invershin and Culrain calls in the first train from Wick – these calls being transferred to the second Wick departure which now calls at all

stations to Inverness, including Conon Bridge and Beaulieu which is a welcome addition.

## Weaknesses

The 16:00 from Wick no longer calls at Fearn, Alness, Conon Bridge and Beaulieu. Departing Wick at the same time in the new timetable, this train gets later throughout the journey south and crosses the 18:28 Inverness to Wick service at Invergordon. Missing out Alness, Conon Bridge and Beaulieu is required to get this train to Inverness at 20:10 to connect into the 20:15 to Glasgow Queen Street. This means that passengers from Fearn and, more importantly, Alness no longer have a connection into the 20:15 to Glasgow Queen Street nor the Caledonian Sleeper. The 16:00 from Wick must call again at Alness – there is ½ minute pathing time in the schedule between Invergordon and Dingwall and 1 minute between Dingwall and Muir of Ord which will absorb the time required to call at Alness. Passengers from Conon Bridge and Beaulieu can use the 17:13 from Kyle of Lochalsh which arrives at Inverness at 20:00.

The 18:28 Inverness to Wick has a note in the timetable advising that “This train may run approximately 15 mins later on certain days between Ardgay and Wick due to the operation of a freight train in the Lairg area.” This is something that has not been used in any timetable before. The days in question are Wednesdays and Fridays and the 18:28 actually is retimed 17 mins later throughout after Ardgay, although this is not reflected in the public timetable (for example when making a booking online). Effectively this means that journey time from Inverness to Wick is 4 hrs 40 mins, something that is quite unacceptable. A passenger train is not allowed to cross an Up freight train at Lairg but this should be reviewed urgently, particularly if the freight train is short enough not to foul the level crossing.

The 14:37 Kyle of Lochalsh to Inverness now departs 51 mins earlier at 13:46. This is 1 hr 38 mins after the second Kyle of Lochalsh departure of the day at 12:08 and these trains are probably too close together to provide a useful mid-afternoon service. However, this is an operational change, as one of the main problems has been congestion between Dingwall and Inverness. When, in the previous timetable, the 12:35 from Wick was running late this impacted directly on the 14:37 from Kyle of Lochalsh. These trains

were timed 19 mins apart at Dingwall. The 14:37 from Kyle of Lochalsh was scheduled to arrive at Inverness at 17:09 – a delay here meant that the 17:13 to Ardgay couldn't depart until the Kyle of Lochalsh train had arrived.

## Journey Times

The average journey time between Inverness and Wick has increased by 6 mins to 4 hrs 20 mins (based on the Monday to Saturday timetable – it having been 4 hrs 14 mins since December 2008). The slowest train of the day (07:02 Inverness to Wick) has a journey time of 4 hrs 28 mins. This train does, however, cross four southbound trains (at Muir of Ord, Dingwall, Lairg and Helmsdale) and has a crew change at Lairg. The 12:34 Wick to Inverness is 14 mins slower than previously with a journey time of 4 hrs 27 mins – 4 mins is required as pathing time following the 15:50 Invergordon to Inverness. The 08:02 from Wick now calls at all stations to Inverness. The previous journey time of 4 hrs 3 mins is increased to 4 hrs 21 mins.

Between Inverness and Tain the average journey time is now 5 mins longer than it was in December 2008. Presentation of trains on this busy section between Inverness and Dingwall is key to delivering a reliable timetable, so it is no surprise that the journey time has been adjusted to allow for this, particularly with trains operating at slower speeds at level crossings.

Additional time has been included in the schedules at both Georgemas Junction and at Thurso. The previous 3 mins has been increased to 4 mins to allow for a reversal and for token exchange (and to operate the points at Georgemas Junction).

## Sundays

The 13:02 Inverness to Tain is retimed to depart Inverness 13 mins later and terminates at Invergordon with the 14:12 from Tain starting from Invergordon at 14:11.

The Sunday service from Wick departs 7 mins later at 11:58 and so there is an overall reduced journey time for passengers travelling to Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow.

**Gavin Sinclair**

*It is very much hoped that Abellio will reintroduce the published ScotRail all-lines timetable at some point soon.*

## PRESS COVERAGE

**The *Press & Journal* has been reporting on Rhoda Grant MSP's campaigning for better service on the Far North Line and some of her experiences in pursuit of her aims.**

### **Far North MSP Rhoda Grant Fighting for Far North Line *December 11, 2014***

Highland MSP, Rhoda Grant will be travelling to Thurso this Friday (12th December) to meet with members of Caithness Transport Forum at Naver House, to discuss the continuing transport issues that have disrupted over 190 services between Caithness and Inverness over the past 12 months.

Mrs Grant will be travelling to the meeting on the First ScotRail Service from Inverness to Thurso (Departing Inverness at 07:04) to experience the service first hand and also to speak to other passengers using the service, seeking people's thoughts and ideas on what they would like to see done to improve the journey and quality of service across the far north.

Mrs Grant said, "There are now just over 3 months until the current First ScotRail franchise expires on the 31st March 2015 and the franchise is handed over to the new operator, Abellio. This means that we now need to make people's voice heard more than ever along the length of the Far North Line and to make clear the demands for an improved, reliable, comfortable service that provides value for money to customers along the entire route."

"We have had a great response to the on-line petition calling for improvements and I want to give people who don't have internet access the opportunity to express their support and I'll be seeking signatures from local supporters at Thurso station when I step off the train this Friday."

"First ScotRail and the Scottish Government seem to think minor changes to the timetable will improve the service; however I can't see how a change in timetable will address issues such as staff failing to show up. The Scottish Government are failing to address this and constantly forget the far north, delivering a second class service."

"I am also disappointed that only Wick Station and not Thurso has been earmarked for station WiFi. How can the far north attract the tourists and business it needs when the train and its stations offer such poor service."

### **MSP Experiences Far North Failings First Hand *December 17, 2014***

Highland MSP, Rhoda Grant, who has been campaigning for improvements on the Far North Line experienced the problems facing the service first hand last Friday (12th December) when travelling from Inverness to Thurso on the railway to attend a meeting with members of Caithness Transport Forum to discuss the on-going problems facing the troubled line ahead of the franchise handover to Abellio in April next year.

Mrs Grant was booked to depart Inverness station at 07:02 and arrive into Thurso at 10:59am.

However she arrived around 1 hour late after passengers travelling to Thurso were asked to finish the final leg of the journey from Georgemas Junction by bus, while the train continued on to Wick.

The service was running around 10 minutes late upon arrival into Dingwall last Friday, where passengers were asked to disembark and change platforms to continue the journey north on an alternative train due to radio signalling problems on the original carriages.

Following on from this delay, the train was held before Lairg for around 20 minutes while waiting for the late running southbound service to pass, bringing the total delay to around 40 minutes before leaving Sutherland.

This was followed by another delay in Brora which resulted in an hour delay in reaching Caithness where passengers for Thurso were asked to complete the Journey by bus while the train continued on to Wick.

Mrs Grant said : “I have had a lot of constituents complain to me about the quality of service on the Far North Line and the lack of reliability in their service. This has prompted me to take the journey myself and travel on the service between Inverness and Thurso to meet with transport representatives and to experience some of the issues first hand.”

“The service is not fit for purpose, the regular delays and cancellations make it too unreliable for many potential business users to rely on travel along the line, and tourists are more likely to use the road as a faster route north.”

“This is why I want to see a guaranteed level of service on the Far North Line that will make it a more appealing and attractive method of transport.”

“I believe the service at the moment is detrimental to the far north economy and improvements would bring and economic boost to Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.”

Mrs Grant also spoke to fellow passenger Craig Grieg of Wick, a Type 2 Diabetic who said he “fully supported the campaign and improvement was needed on the line”.

He went on to comment on the lack of catering provision on the journey north last Friday, despite an on-board trolley service being advertised saying, “As a diabetic, I was disappointed to see there was no trolley service available, given the distance of the journey.”

“There should be a catering service on board and in particular one that has healthy options available for passengers.”

The four point action plan by Rhoda Grant MSP consists of:

- A guaranteed level of service on the Far North Line
- Free Wifi guaranteed on all Far North Line trains and at stations
- Improved facilities in Wick and Thurso stations
- Reduced journey times through infrastructure improvements

**The *John O’Groat Journal* has also been following events on the Far North Line**

An article in the John O’Groat Journal on 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2014 stated that 190 services were cancelled in the twelve month period up to September 2014. 130 scheduled journeys between Inverness and Wick did not start; 60 services did start but were unable to complete the scheduled route.

The article said that ScotRail had come under heavy criticism for the number of cancellations due to a shortage of drivers.

## PUNCTUALITY PLEASES PASSENGERS

This article is a briefer update of the Months of Misery feature in the last issue. Because of Christmas, New Year and then weather interruptions, only the first full week of the new timetable can be directly compared with the old.

### Improvement

October and November continued to be beset with delays and cancellations though there were fewer of the latter. December seemed to bring an improvement and on the first Monday after the timetable change (Monday 15 December) everything in both directions between Inverness and Dingwall ran on time. The only flaw was the cancellation of the 06:16 Ardgay to Inverness. Services ran well again on the Wednesday.

### Bypassed

Tuesday and Thursday saw cancellations of middle of the day Invernet services, so that problem has not been solved. The 06:18 from Wick arrived in Inverness 72 minutes late on Tuesday 16th due partly to congestion on the Muir of Ord to Inverness section where we badly need some dynamic loop reinstatement. At Thurso only 25% of arrivals were on time and the newly timed 18:28 departure from Inverness was 42 minutes late arriving on Friday 19th at 23:01. Since then we have seen a good few occasions when Thurso has been bypassed to make up time including one when the Wick

arrival was not until 23:59, but some of this has been bad weather related.

### Reduction

Undoubtedly the new timetable with extended journey times (which we are assured are temporary) has improved punctuality. It was finalised very late in the day and communities such as Alness, which have suffered a reduction in service, complain they were not consulted. FoFNL would agree with Gavin Sinclair's statement elsewhere that the stop at Alness by the 16:00 from Wick should be reinstated by request. There were passengers regularly alighting at Alness and others used it in order to catch the London sleeper.

### Temporary speed restrictions

Extra time for the new Conon Bridge stop was incorporated into the timetable six years ago. This been used up over several years now by the long standing "temporary" speed restriction north of Muir of Ord. Now that Conon is open, the effect of this TSR is showing as late running. It is not Conon's fault. Network Rail says that this TSR will definitely be lifted in February. This good news together with the 1½ minutes pathing allowance should make it possible to stop at Alness. FOFNL asks First and Abellio to co-operate please and reinstate the Alness call by the 16:00 with effect from the May timetable change.

**Richard Ardern**

## FASTER FROM FIFE

Network Rail announced on 7 January a £16M signalling enhancement to "improve reliability and create additional capacity on the lines serving key commuter routes into Fife and beyond."

The existing 3-aspect signalling on the Fife lines between Haymarket and Dalmeny will be replaced by continuous 4-aspect signalling - decreasing signalling headways and increasing train speeds on this section of the route. Six new signals are also to be installed on the Forth Bridge by this summer.

While this improvement is most welcome, Inverness trains need to be disentangled from having to follow a stopping train in to Edinburgh as this costs an extra ten minutes running time. The 06:50 business train from Inverness had a further two minutes added to its schedule last month. Six years ago it left Kirkcaldy at 09:25 and got to Waverley at 09:59. Now, it still leaves Kirkcaldy at the same time but reaches Waverley at 10:06. This despite the strong messages from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce asking for an earlier arrival of the first train.

**Richard Ardern**

# COLLISION COURSE AVERTED

The past six months have been difficult for Far North Line passengers due to persistent poor timekeeping and a high number of cancellations. It is difficult to understand that there was anything wrong with the old timetable, but it was decreed that it had to be changed and this occurred very late in the pipeline for these things.

Each new timetable is supposed to be finalised and made publicly available for passengers to book their journeys up to twelve weeks in advance. The final version of the North Highland timetable (which includes the Kyle line also) was not approved until about four weeks beforehand.

An earlier iteration was put on to the websites and this is illustrated here. Somebody forgot, or was unaware, that there is no longer a crossing loop at Kildonan and they timetabled two trains to cross there at 13:25 each day. Oops!

That this should happen and be passed for publication is extremely worrying. FoFNL

understands that timetabling expertise has been withdrawn from Scotland and is all now centralised with Network Rail in Milton Keynes. It is yet another example of the fact that the Far North is beyond the ken of many rail operators further south and it further supports the case that a Railway Control should be re-established in the Highlands.

It is also further proof that a loop does need to be reinstated at Kinbrace to allow for a robust timetable to be created and avoid the long waits at Helmsdale when another train is occupying the 35 minute-long over-long section from Forsinard. Area 3 of our CP6 report in this issue makes this point and hopefully the Action Committee currently looking at all aspects of the FNL will also support this conclusion. Some enhancement money does need to be urgently spent on the line to restore passenger confidence and provide scope for more freight and charter traffic. The unprecedented notice saying "This train may run later due to the operation of a freight train" could then be confined to history.

Richard Ardern



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Tue 16 Dec 2014

**Out**

prev day

next day

**Fares**

£18.20  
single

£20.90  
Return

£31.90  
Return

£32.90  
Return

Please choose from Fares above

Origin: Inverness  
Destination: Kildonan  
Date: Tue 16 Dec 2014

Please choose from Services below

**Services** (Showing all 4 services)

| Dep   | Arr   | Ch | Duration | Price |  |
|-------|-------|----|----------|-------|--|
| 07:02 | 09:57 | 0  | 2:55hrs  |       |  |
| 10:38 | 13:24 | 0  | 2:46hrs  |       |  |
| 14:00 | 16:48 | 0  | 2:48hrs  |       |  |
| 18:28 | 21:19 | 0  | 2:51hrs  |       |  |

Wed 17 Dec 2014

**Return**

prev day

next day

**Fares**

£18.20  
single

Please choose from Fares above

Origin: Kildonan  
Destination: Inverness  
Date: Wed 17 Dec 2014

Please choose from Services below

**Services** (Showing all 3 services)

| Dep   | Arr   | Ch | Duration | Price |  |
|-------|-------|----|----------|-------|--|
| 09:33 | 12:23 | 0  | 2:50hrs  |       |  |
| 13:28 | 16:16 | 0  | 2:48hrs  |       |  |
| 17:30 | 20:10 | 0  | 2:40hrs  |       |  |

# HIGHLAND MAIN LINE UPDATE

## High Speed Trains

The GRIP3 report on improved infrastructure proposals for the HML will now be able to take account of Abellio's proposed use of short formation High Speed Trains (HSTs) as a stop gap until electrification.

## Electrification

The Scottish Government has a stated aspiration to continue with rail electrification post EGIP and to try to complete all major routes by 2030. The biggest gains from electrification come from the way electric trains can charge up the hills at 100mph as you can observe when driving up to Beattock summit on the M74.

Thus continuing electrification post 2018 from Dunblane to Perth - two long hills up to Blackford and all the way down to Perth - and then continuing from Perth to Inverness over the major gradients either side of Druimuachdar and Slochd would bring big journey time gains. Given priority, this might even be completed before 2025 and many of the single line stretches could be doubled at the same time to greatly increase capacity particularly for freight.

Electric passenger trains could then run to both Glasgow and Edinburgh via Stirling, avoiding

the slow line to Edinburgh through Fife where the Inverness trains currently lose 10 minutes by following a slow stopping train all the way in to Edinburgh from Kirkcaldy.

If we think of this objectively in terms of completing Scotland's strategic railway system between all the cities, in terms of the tourist boost and the boost to the Highland economy, we have a strong case and the benefit-cost ratio in terms of journey time minutes saved will be greatest for the Highland route.

Another factor to consider is that at Pitlochry and through Atholl there are hydro electric power supplies alongside the route. Indeed, the North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board proposed electrifying this railway as an early scheme way back in the 1950s. Perhaps we have waited long enough now?

## Fast paths

More immediately, we have to ensure that fast paths are available between Perth and Edinburgh/Glasgow for the Inverness trains in the new EGIP timetable and I am told this is now Abellio's responsibility.

**Richard Ardern**

# CALEDONIAN SLEEPER FRANCHISE

The sleepers have been separated from the ScotRail franchise and will be operated by Serco Caledonian Sleepers Ltd for fifteen years from 1<sup>st</sup> April. The MD will be Peter Strachan, an Aberdonian, and catering will be masterminded by Inverlochry Castle Management International in partnership with Michelin-starred chef Albert Roux.

The schedules will not change much, but there will now be a connection to and from Oban. New rolling stock will be built by CAF in Spain for introduction in 2018 at a cost of nearly £200M shared between the UK and Scottish governments and a Japanese bank. There will

be some cabins with en suite showers and toilets, some conventional bed cabins and some areas with convertible flat bed seating as now seen on some aeroplanes.

Inverness Depot seems set to lose its heavy maintenance role. When the new coaches arrive the current eight day rotation through Inverness will cease. An administrative HQ will be set up in Inverness co-located with a passenger lounge at 3, Union Street just across Academy Street from the main station entrance. The new booking website opened in January at <http://caledoniansleeper.info/>. Details of the proposed new interiors can also be seen there.

The good news is that work has now started on the ground. In Forres, for example, the ground on the northern side of the existing loop has been cleared as a first step towards reinstating the straight through lines as an extension from the existing signal box westwards and building the new station at this locus.

In Elgin, there is an hiatus concerning the proposed new relief road which would bridge the line and permit closure of the level crossing at The Wards. This proposed development was refused planning permission by one vote and then resubmitted to the full council for further consideration. The absence, or continued presence, of this level crossing might make quite a difference to the proposed resignalling scheme at Elgin.

Further confusion seems to have been caused at the SNP conference where the start of work was applauded by the adoption of the following motion:

*"Conference fully supports the rail investment that the Scottish Government is putting into upgrades of infrastructure for the Aberdeen-Elgin-Inverness main line - £177 million between 2014 and 2019 - that will allow for an hourly service end to end and a half hourly service between Elgin and Inverness on weekdays. Conference further supports efforts to ensure that Elgin station and railway yard become a hub for freight - including whisky container traffic - following on from the successful "Lifting the Spirit" pilot project, as well as becoming a depot for overnight passenger train stabling and crewing location in order to save the cost of unnecessary dead mileage from the bigger hubs at Aberdeen and Inverness".*

This seems to suggest that the hourly end to end frequency will be in place by 2019. Disappointingly, two parliamentary answers would suggest otherwise:

**Question S4W-23239: David Stewart, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour**

**Date Lodged: 18/11/2014**

To ask the Scottish Government whether the cost of introducing hourly train journeys between Inverness and Aberdeen is included in its £177 million rail infrastructure investment plan.

**Answered by Derek Mackay (26/11/2014):**

*The £170 million package of phase one improvements to be delivered by 2019, announced on 28 March 2014, includes: redoubling of track between Aberdeen and Inverurie; signalling enhancements; platform extensions at Inverurie and Elgin; Forres station relocation; and, track improvements and infrastructure to support two new stations at Dalraddy and Kintore. This is the first step of the long term aim of the Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Improvements project to facilitate the delivery of an hourly service, journey time reductions of up to 20 minutes and enhanced peak-time services and connectivity at either end of the route by 2030.*

**Question S4W-23238: David Stewart, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour**

**Date Lodged: 18/11/2014**

To ask the Scottish Government whether it expects hourly train journeys between Inverness and Aberdeen to be introduced by 2019.

**Answered by Derek Mackay (26/11/2014):**

*The £170 million package of phase one improvements, announced on 28 March 2014, is the first stage to facilitate the introduction of the hourly service, a half hourly service from Elgin to Inverness and Aberdeen to Inverurie, as well as journey time reductions of up to 20 minutes and extra commuter services by 2030. However as individual infrastructure enhancements are completed, a review of timetables will analyse opportunities for possible service improvements and identify opportunities for offering incremental benefits to passengers.*

Thankfully, we are on the way at last, but it is still unclear how much double track will eventually be provided and when the hourly service frequency averaging two hours, or less, between Inverness and Aberdeen will be introduced.

Reducing the bottleneck between Aberdeen and Inverurie, introducing modern signalling in the Elgin and Forres areas, and a brand new station with operating improvements at Forres are milestones to which all passengers can eagerly look forward. Railfreight should be assisted also.

**Richard Arden**

# THE NEW EAST COAST FRANCHISE

The new East Coast franchise differs from those for ScotRail and for the Caledonian Sleepers in that it starts on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March. It was announced on the 27<sup>th</sup> November that it was won by a 90% Stagecoach and 10% Virgin Trains consortium to be known as Inter City Railways Ltd.

In view of the fact that Virgin and Stagecoach already run the West Coast Main Line services, an inquiry has been opened by the Competition and Markets Authority and its initial findings are due by 6<sup>th</sup> February.

The new MD is to be David Horne and I believe he is already on the case to improve the catering, not least on the Highland Chieftain, a train which serves Stagecoach's HQ city of Perth. There has been some uncertainty over what catering infrastructure would be built in to the new IEP trains, but fears that standard class would no longer have a buffet car were quashed in a statement by ICR on 7<sup>th</sup> January.

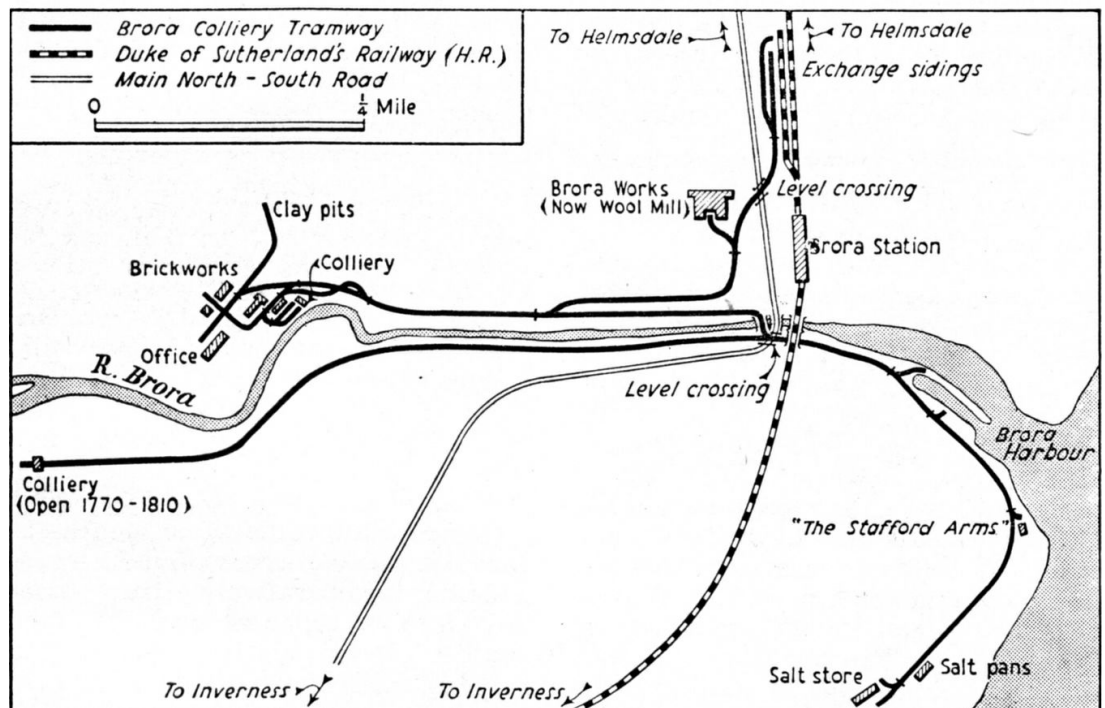
## BEFORE OUR TIME:

### WHAT WERE THE EARLIEST RAILWAYS IN THE NORTH?

In the 1770s a 1'8" gauge wooden railway was built in Brora, downstream from the new colliery shaft at Castle Hill to the harbour and the salt pans where coal was in use to speed evaporation in salt making. It was re-laid with cast iron fishbelly rails in 1800. A replacement line was opened in the 1810s linking a new shaft at Fascally with a brick and tile works, salt pans and a brewery and pub (the Stafford Arms set up in 1817 by Lady Stafford). It is said that Lady Stafford wanted her tenants to drink beer in preference to whisky.

The Brora colliery was never very successful being plagued throughout its existence by technical problems and suffering from its remote location in the British Isles.

There is an article on the Brora Colliery Tramway in the January 1960 *Railway Magazine* and a map of the line in *Early Railways* 5 Six Martlets Publishing, 2014 p 177.



A Wick Society photograph of 1868 shows a contractor's locomotive and wagons on Wick breakwater on p327 of the above volume. Roland Paxton has written an intriguingly titled article *The sea versus Wick breakwater 1863-77 - an instructive disaster* in *Coasts: 9th international conference Institution of Civil Engineers*, 2010.

[Map originally printed in *The Railway Magazine*, January 1960]

# STATION USAGE FIGURES

These figures are provided annually by the Office of Rail Regulation. They are the first figures to show a full year's usage of Conon Bridge station which reopened in February 2013 having been closed in 1960. The station was reopened in time to relieve pressure on the Kessock Bridge during resurfacing works. Houses are still being built nearby. There were estimates that 25,000 passengers p.a. would use the new station eventually. It is interesting to compare the combined passenger figures for Muir of Ord and Dingwall prior to the reopening and the combined numbers for all three stations in the first full year, 2013/14. 2013/14 shows a 5.66% increase over 2012/13 which is well above the line average (excluding Inverness) of 2.95%.

|                             | 2013/14 | 2012/13 | % Change | Position 2013/14 | Position 2012/13 |
|-----------------------------|---------|---------|----------|------------------|------------------|
| Wick                        | 21884   | 22788   | -3.97%   | 8                | 8                |
| Thurso                      | 43802   | 46024   | -4.83%   | 4                | 4                |
| Georgemas Junction          | 1652    | 1906    | -13.33%  | 18               | 16               |
| Scotsalder                  | 376     | 460     | -18.26%  | 23               | 22               |
| Altnabreac                  | 138     | 296     | -53.38%  | 25               | 23               |
| Forsinard                   | 1718    | 2088    | -17.72%  | 16               | 15               |
| Kinbrace                    | 1092    | 1090    | 0.18%    | 19               | 18               |
| Kildonan                    | 144     | 62      | 132.26%  | 24               | 24               |
| Helmsdale                   | 5778    | 5828    | -0.86%   | 15               | 13               |
| Brora                       | 6380    | 5556    | 14.83%   | 14               | 14               |
| Dunrobin Castle             | 916     | 628     | 45.86%   | 20               | 20               |
| Golspie                     | 7788    | 7550    | 3.15%    | 11               | 10               |
| Rogart                      | 1662    | 1662    | 0.00%    | 17               | 17               |
| Lairg                       | 7440    | 6176    | 20.47%   | 12               | 12               |
| Invershin                   | 790     | 690     | 14.49%   | 21               | 19               |
| Culrain                     | 628     | 474     | 32.49%   | 22               | 21               |
| Ardgay                      | 8806    | 8108    | 8.61%    | 10               | 9                |
| Tain                        | 34578   | 34016   | 1.65%    | 6                | 6                |
| Fearn                       | 6606    | 7226    | -8.58%   | 13               | 11               |
| Invergordon                 | 36355   | 34974   | 3.95%    | 5                | 5                |
| Alness                      | 27796   | 28384   | -2.07%   | 7                | 7                |
| Dingwall                    | 101996  | 104746  | -2.63%   | 1                | 1                |
| Conon Bridge                | 18114   | 3788    | 378.19%  | 9                |                  |
| Muir of Ord                 | 72832   | 74064   | -1.66%   | 2                | 2                |
| Beaulay                     | 57946   | 55236   | 4.91%    | 3                | 3                |
| Inverness                   | 1282445 | 1213382 | 5.69%    |                  |                  |
| Total (Excluding Inverness) | 467217  | 453820  | 2.95%    |                  |                  |

An article appeared in the North Star newspaper of 27<sup>th</sup> September 2014 expressing concern and anger that trains were frequently passing through Conon Bridge and Beaulay stations without stopping, in order to make up time. Frank Roach (HITRANS) said "This is happening because trains are running late and in order to get into Inverness on time, and to allow another train out on the single-track line, they are sometimes skipping Conon Bridge and Beaulay...the best solution would be to increase capacity on the line by creating more places where trains could pass each other"

# FAR NORTH MAIN LINE ELECTRIFICATION

The Scottish Government has aspirations to complete the electrification of most railways in Scotland by 2030. This article uses the East Coast line as a template to see what we might expect when the wires extend to the wind, wave and tidal energy hub of Caithness (...or not).

Two trains in the current timetable are compared. The 07:02 from Inverness to Wick with the 06:55 Edinburgh to London Kings Cross. The mileages suggest that Wick could be reached direct in just 2 hours 2 minutes from Inverness with commensurate track improvements and electrification.

If there were also a Selby Coalfield style track diversion via Dornoch (perhaps paid for not by the National Coal Board, but by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority) this could be reduced to 1 hour 43 minutes!



The diagram and table show that passengers leaving Edinburgh at roughly the same time can be at York in the time it takes the 07:02 to reach Brora from Inverness and a passenger alighting at Thurso could have been as far south as Peterborough.

I was really warming to my thesis of the prospect of significantly faster trains to all stations along the route between Inverness and Caithness when somebody spoilt it by whispering to me that the trains on the FNL have just got even slower. Eh? How could this be in modern energy-rich Scotland?

**Richard Ardern**

| INVERNESS |       |       |     | EDINBURGH |                 |
|-----------|-------|-------|-----|-----------|-----------------|
| Dep 07:02 | Arr   | Miles |     | Arr       | Dep 06:55       |
| Dingwall  | 07:39 | 18.5  | 57  | [07:37]   | Berwick         |
| Ardgay    | 08:33 | 57.5  | 124 | 08:25     | Newcastle       |
| Lairg     | 08:53 | 67    | 138 | 08:38     | Durham          |
| Rogart    | 09:07 | 76.5  | 160 | 08:57     | Darlington      |
| Brora     | 09:29 | 90    | 204 | 09:28     | York            |
| Kildonan  | 10:00 | 111   | 237 | 09:55     | Doncaster       |
| Forsinard | 10:21 | 125.5 | 273 | 10:19     | Newark          |
| Thurso    | 10:59 | 154   | 317 | 10:51     | Peterborough    |
| Wick      | 11:30 | 174.5 | 375 | [11:25]   | Welwyn/Hatfield |
|           |       |       |     | 11:42     | KING'S CROSS    |

# FAR NORTH LINE SIGNALLING

In 1978 a large section of the overhead signalling wire route on the Far North Line collapsed, due to the weight of snow and the age/condition of the wires, particularly the wires north of Tain. An alternative type of signalling, called "Working by Pilotman", was then used, which involved a Pilot-Man going into the cab of the train instead of a token. This system remained in place for an extended period, as the cost of repairing or replacing the wire route was deemed excessive at the time. The R&D Dept at Derby was tasked with finding a solution to the problem and the solution they came up with was a radio system that allowed the token instruments at each end of a section to be operated without a wire route, a bit like Bluetooth.

A further development came along later, which became known as Radio Electric Token Block (RETB) and which allowed an extended length of railway to be operated by only one signaller at a centre, in Dingwall for example. An instrument in the driver's cab, known as a Cab Display Unit (CDU), connected to the radio and meant that the driver acted as the second signaller. A token was displayed on the CDU and when the driver confirmed it was on display, the signaller who issued it then authorised the driver to proceed. The perceived advantage of this was a huge saving in employing signalling staff at the stations along the line.

After a shaky start that perceived saving was not all it had promised to be. This was because the system was designed for low density use, but the P'way (or maintenance) Dept got mobile units and so, instead of requiring lookout staff

etc, they took an engineers' token, which protected them at work and blocked the line to prevent trains entering the section. As the train service got busier, the demand on the Network increased and so the signalling centre was working incessantly, with demands for token exchanges being prioritised.

The question of savings is dubious, because of the high cost of radio network licensing, the difficulty of accessing hilltop sites to do repairs in winter, shared sites which require agreement to access, the use of bespoke parts not common throughout the railway industry and padlocks often being found frozen when a driver needs access to equipment. The public lost a lot of the services to which they had previously had access at the stations, such as being able to purchase tickets, get train information and use waiting rooms and toilets.

The ideal solution would be an update of the system, this would go a long way to solving some of the issues. From Inverness to Tain, "Track Circuit Block" signalling could be used, which would not require drivers' participation in signalling. With this system, trains could follow each other much more closely and the signaller would have control of operating the points, giving greater flexibility, rather than hydraulic control points which are very time-consuming if the driver has to clamp or reverse them. This would free up the RETB to operate the remainder of the network and create a more manageable system for the Far North Line.

**Anonymous I**

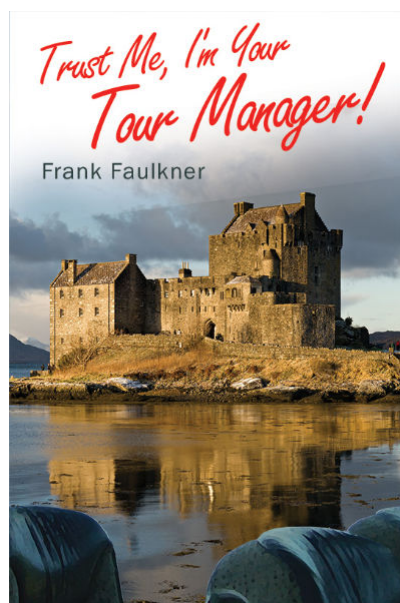
## CLUB 55

First ScotRail is again offering unlimited rail travel anywhere in Scotland and down to Carlisle or Berwick-on-Tweed for those aged 55 and over at a fixed price of £19.00 from 12<sup>th</sup> January to 31<sup>st</sup> March This could be a golden opportunity to visit the Far North Line if it is outwith your normal travelling area. Senior and Disabled Railcard holders also receive a further £2.00 discount.

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

You can buy your Club 55 ticket from any staffed ScotRail station, or by calling 0330 303 0111, or online at [www.scotrail.co.uk/club-55](http://www.scotrail.co.uk/club-55).

### Trust Me, I'm Your Tour Manager! by Frank Faulkner



#### *Inverness to Kyle via the Carriage Washer*

FoFNL member Frank Faulkner has written an entertaining short book about his experiences as a tour manager on trains and buses in Scotland and elsewhere over more than 20 years.

One incident relevant to single track railways was while waiting for the first train of the day from Rosslare Town when a railwayman ran all the way from the signal box to tell the party that the train was delayed due to a "communication failure." Running back to the box, he pulled off to admit another train. It had to get out of the way first because their train had been parked BEHIND it, it being the second train due out of a single track siding!

And the carriage washer? We are led to understand that this was incorporated into the scenic route from Inverness to Kyle to clean up a train which was totally plastered with some of the finer contents of a recently ploughed field. I mustn't reveal any more. Read and enjoy!

**Richard Ardern**

**London: Austin Macauley Publishers, 2014. 113pp. £5.99. ISBN 978 14963 617 9.**

## RADIO EXTENDS TIMES AT BRORA (RETB\*)

The bad weather on Wednesday 10 December 2014 was popularly known as a "weather bomb" caused by an unusually deep low pressure which deepened explosively and coincided with high tides and a storm surge. Network Rail, in consultation with ScotRail, closed both lines north of Inverness for the day although a service between Inverness and Dingwall did start running again from late afternoon.

The closure prevented two of your committee (and others) from travelling to Thurso where ironically a meeting had been arranged to discuss the poor timekeeping issues over the past few months. Two meetings are now being planned for the new year, one in Caithness and a wider one perhaps in Dingwall.

With hindsight it is easy to wonder whether the total closure was necessary and all FoFNL would say on that point is that it would have been useful to try to keep, as a minimum, the commuter services going between Tain and Inverness as these are used by the greatest traffic flows on the line. Most passengers have endured months of delays, but for the commuters this has been a daily occurrence.

Possibly the problem lies with lack of resources to "prove" or snowplough our long straggly lines? There are four lines out from Inverness and generally only one or two locomotives are available to do this. If a loco has been sent to Kyle and a recently cleared line to, say, Aviemore fills in again, it takes a long time to get the Kyle crew back again. Trains have been damaged by fallen trees in recent years so caution in response to unprecedented weather forecasts is understandable.

The weather bomb was responsible for a large number of lightning strikes over the Highlands. One of these is thought to have melted the RETB (\*Radio Electronic Token Block) aerial at Brora and caused serious delays in obtaining the radio electric token block signal for trains to proceed at that locus. The antenna was changed and positioned two feet higher. We understand it was a seriously cold and uncomfortable job for the NR staff in heavy snow. Passengers have cause to be grateful to all the staff who turn out to fix the lines and the trains even in the worst of weather.

**Richard Ardern**

## INVERNESS - THURSO: AN AUSTRALIAN TRAVELLER'S PERSPECTIVE

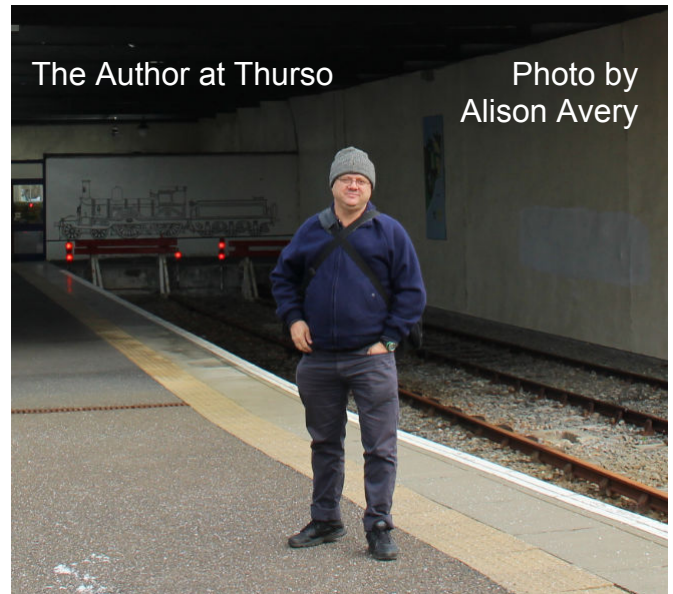
I fulfilled my long ambition of completing the Inverness-Thurso journey in March 2014, when my wife and I were honeymooning in the UK. It was a journey I had to complete both because of its 'fame' of being the UK's northernmost operational railway and my love of the bleak Scottish countryside, to which the journey provides ample witness. With its laden grey clouds and dark gloom, the weather was bad, which to me was good!

There are things about the journey you Scots up Inverness way probably take for granted, but which I noticed and admired distinctly. Instead of heat there was a beautiful biting cold. In place of dry there was rain, sleet and even a touch of snow. The station signs were bilingual. Salt on the station platforms: that initially fooled me as ice. Such things you did not see in my Australian home, and it was this that helped make the journey special.

Inverness-Thurso, which we did as a return day journey was one my wife and I loved. Spellbound as I was at the bleak beauty of northern Scotland along journey's way and the experience of my ancestral homeland another impression came to mind. Unlike other regular rail services, Inverness-

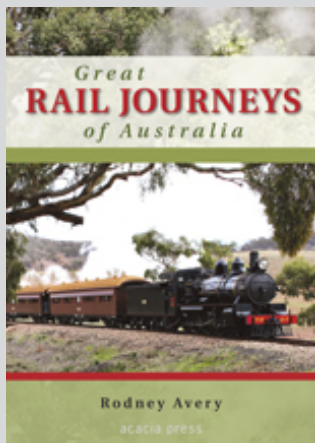
Thurso/Wick is a friendly journey, a service that is yours. While the franchise owns the train, you the local people own the journey.

As someone who has experienced the far northern Scottish railway as an outsider and thus probably differently to you, I say this: embrace and relish the Inverness-Thurso/Wick train. It is a special railway you are fortunate to have. Enjoy the journey each time you step on board and, as you



look out of the window on the journey's way, try to notice those special things you usually take for granted but which outsiders like me view with awe.

**Rod Avery**



***Rodney Avery is from the Australian state of Victoria, but now lives in the national capital, Canberra. He is author of the book 'Great Rail Journeys of Australia' (2013)***

# AN AFTERNOON IN ALTNABREAC

On Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> July I fulfilled a long-standing ambition to visit Altnabreac.

Since the first time I saw Altnabreac on an Ordnance Survey map in my local library in, I think, 1977 I have been determined to visit this strange isolated place. This year spending two weeks of summer holiday in Watten seemed to present the ideal opportunity to make this long planned visit.

I have travelled the length of the Far North Line a couple of times over the past few years but had never yet alighted at Altnabreac or indeed ever been on a train that actually stopped there.

On the big day my wife and my three children (ranging from 13 to 20 years in age) assembled in Wick station car park and changed into our walking boots. We also made sure that we had waterproofs and plenty to eat and drink.

I was so excited to walk into the ticket office at Wick station and request my five day returns to Altnabreac. I was somewhat disappointed when the lady at the ticket window barely raised an eyebrow when I mentioned my intended destination! Anyway soon we were pulling out of Wick station on the 12:35 to Inverness. Before long the conductor came along to do her ticket inspection and I eagerly informed her of our requirement for the train to stop at Altnabreac. Again I was somewhat disappointed by her lack of reaction. I was expecting her to at least show some surprise that anyone wanted to alight at that remote location. I was beginning to wonder whether perhaps more people visit this place than the statistics show.

The journey from Wick to Altnabreac is little over an hour so before we knew it we were getting ready to disembark. I must confess that at this stage I was beginning to worry that the train would not stop and that the lack of any reaction from the Guard was because she had misheard me. Thankfully my fears proved unfounded and we were soon slowing down for the stop. Amazingly there was a lone cyclist waiting on the platform ready to board the train so with five

of us alighting as well it must have been as busy at it gets at this lonely outpost.

We watched the train disappear into the distance and then prepared to explore the area. I knew that the old station house had recently been on the market (it must now have been sold as you will see later) so I had a quick nose through the windows. I must say that it looks as if it will need a fair amount of work on the interior to make it a comfortable place to live. But what a great location if you want solitude.

We soon set off down the footpath past the other house, which sits, immediately behind the station. This has a plaque with the legend "Altnabreac twinned with Washington DC" attached to the side! We exchanged a wave with the owner who was in his garden and carried on down the path towards Loch Dhu. After about a quarter of a mile there is a derelict two storey cottage on the left and then after about another quarter of a mile we got our first sight of the imposing and, it has to be said, somewhat sinister looking Loch Dhu lodge. The first thing we noticed, as we got nearer, was the sound of two massive wind turbines in the grounds, presumably to provide power for the house and various outbuildings. I understand that until the 1970s this was a hotel and it is certainly more than big enough to have fulfilled that purpose. It seems to take forever to walk past the house as it is so vast, and in some ways entirely out of place, for such a remote location. We did spot a young boy playing on a climbing frame who we exchanged a wave with. If you want to read more about this house and its inhabitants I can recommend the final chapter of Dixie Willis's book 'Tiny Stations'. Once you have read that you will understand why we didn't call in on the owner!

We walked on for a further half a mile or so to the point where the forestry plantation ends and the land opens up into a vast expanse of moorland. At this point we decided that we would retrace our steps and then walk over to the other side of the railway. I should point out that despite it being quite windy, it was remarkably warm,

with intermittent sunshine, although in these parts you always have to be prepared for a dramatic change in the weather. Sure enough as we walked back the wind increased and the heavens opened. Fortunately within five minutes the sun was out again.

We soon reached the junction in the forest tracks where we turned left towards the foot crossing over the railway. Once we had safely crossed the line, we turned right and headed up the slope which goes in the general direction of the station but bears slightly to the left. I managed to get some good photos of the station from an angle that I had not seen before.

After about half a mile of walking up this track it was time to turn back. If we missed the 17:16 back to Wick we would have had a 4-hour wait for the next train and I think we would have struggled to amuse ourselves for that long! As it was we arrived back at the station much more quickly than we expected and whilst wandering around the platform inadvertently caused the 16:55 to Inverness to stop! The guard didn't seem to mind and I expect that this often happens when people are waiting for the 17:16 going the other way.

The other interesting thing we noticed whilst waiting at the station was a couple arriving in an estate car who let themselves into the station house. I can only assume that they were the new

owners. I hope that whatever plans they have come to fruition and that the building is soon occupied again.

While we were waiting the heavens opened again and we were glad of the shelter on the station platform.

Before long we spotted our train in the distance and we were soon on board and heading back towards civilisation.

Reflecting on our trip I am glad that we did it and I am sure we will visit again. I love the desolate feeling of this part of Scotland, it really does feel like another world. As to the station, whilst it may be surprising that it has survived so long, it is even more of a mystery as to why it was built in the first place, there really is nothing there!

**Note:** If this inspires you to follow in our footsteps, do make sure that you go suitably prepared. The forest tracks are very good but I would recommend walking boots. It is also worth taking waterproofs even if the sun is shining when you set out, the weather can change very quickly. I did get an intermittent signal on my O2 mobile phone. In an emergency there are only one or two inhabited places that you could go to for help, although there is a help point in the station waiting shelter.

**Robert James (FoFNL Member)**



Altnabreac Station - Robert James

## Background

Some 40 years ago, the then chairman of British Rail, Peter Parker talked about the "crumbling edge of quality". On the railway; this was a time when received political wisdom, based on what was happening in North America was of the managed decline of railways as an obsolete mode of travel. In the Beeching and subsequent era promotion on the railway was related as is usual, to adherence of this party line. I recall a story regarding a slave to this doctrine pushing through the singling of the line from Keith to Aberdeen. His next objective was the singling of the line from Aberdeen to Dundee. Fortunately he moved on to higher things before this happened!

In Scotland the rail investment starvation regime of the last 50 plus years is most evident in the rural lines to the north of Inverness and the line from Ayr to Stranraer. The present situation on the North line of cancelled trains, late running and extended journey times is a disgraceful consequence of these years of neglect. Caithness is suffering from the run down of Dounreay nuclear establishment due to the policy changes of government but little consideration seems to be given as to the future of those 30,000 people who live there.

Connectivity is one of recent buzz words but rail journeys to Wick are two hours longer than corresponding ones by road. "Without vision the people perish". Where are the politicians like Tom Johnston the post war secretary of state who championed the rural electrification of the nation at nominal cost to the beneficiaries. Now electrical connections can be tens of thousands of pounds. We now seem to know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. In parallel, decisions are now made by command and control not by common sense of those who have served a proper apprenticeship on the ground. Presently we seem have a new toy to beat up the workforce; GPS.(Global Positioning System) Drivers it appears are currently being suspended awaiting disciplinary proceedings for minor infringements of speed limits and so trains are being cancelled.

Let's look at some of the economies made over the years in detail.

## Sleepers and Rails

Much of the track to the north of Tain was last relaid in the winter of 1943 to cope with wartime traffic. Now it is life-expired but no doubt safe if treated kindly. The Friends have I understand, been encouraged in the past to believe a rolling programme of track relaying was underway. This was carried out on a three mile stretch on the Caithness/Sutherland border during one year (2008) and the line speed increased to 90mph. Class 47 locomotives have recently been banned from the Kyle line. The rail bridge at Culrain has a weight restriction causing the Lairg oil tanks to have to run less than 75% full

## Passing Places

The passing loops now remaining are insufficient to handle the present and any increase in traffic. The list of passing loops removed since the 1960s is as follows: Inverness (Clachnaharry) to Kirkhill (Clunes), six miles singled in the 1960s, leaving a loop at Lentrane which was then removed after the closure of the aluminium smelter at Invergordon; Beaulieu, Canon Bridge, Foulis, Novar (Evanton) Alness, Kildary, Fearn Edderton, Culrain Acheilidh (east of Lairg) The Mound, Golspie, Kildonan, Kinbrace, Altnabreac, Scotscalder, Watten and Georgemas Junction (19 in total) leaving 10 extant namely Muir of Ord, Dingwall, Invergordon, Tain, Ardgay, Lairg, Rogart, Brora, Helmsdale and Forsinard. The removal at Georgemas necessary for the new lift facility for nuclear waste, means there is nowhere north of Forsinard to pass trains. With only single platforms at Thurso and Wick there is an understandable reluctance to allow excursions to run north of Dingwall. We urgently need additional loops at Lentrane, Beaulieu, Evanton, Kildary, Kinbrace and Halkirk. to provide a viable and reliable service

## Points, Signals and Level Crossings

As most readers will know, Victorian mechanical signalling was removed after a serious storm

in 1978, to be replaced by electronic tokenless block and self acting hydraulic points. The signalling system which is 25 years old, gives trouble and is to be replaced by a digital equivalent. Trains will still have to come to a complete halt to pick up a token, wasting time and fuel. This system was not thought suitable for the new Waverley route which has full optical fibre data transmission and electrically powered points. Following a "mishap" some years ago a speed restriction of 15m.p.h. was imposed on all passing loops which has added up to 20 mins to journey times. We need a system appropriate for a strategic route not something far more suitable for the third world.

### **Bizarre**

Although grateful for the new investment in level crossing gates we should remember that this was brought about not to assist rail travellers, but because of the present "blame culture", to protect reckless or inattentive road users. There are still numerous issues concerning crossings which require resolution. The most bizarre relates to that at Rovie where the ungated crossing, with lights, had a speed limit of 20mph. Following the introduction of gates the inspector from the ORR (Office of Rail Regulation) reduced the speed limit to 10mph despite this crossing being very lightly used.

### **Dornoch Rail Link**

It is clear in my mind that in any other West European country a project to reduce rail journey times by more than one hour to a community such as Caithness would have been completed long ago. This project would, along with those mentioned and others not detailed, reduce rail journey times from Inverness to

Thurso to about 2hrs 45 mins, comparable with the time it takes to drive. How can we afford this at a time of financial stringency? This is an infrastructure investment which would pay off over 50 years. East Sutherland and Caithness would be better integrated into the Moray Firth economy. In the dash for decarbonisation the focus is on power supply with consumers paying an additional 20% on their fuel bills for the dubious pleasure of having windfarms in their community. Unsurprisingly politicians are reluctant to take any decisive action on road fuel consumption although this amounts to 30% of all national energy use. Despite hydrocarbons being a depleting and finite resource decision makers seem to be focussed on "bread and circuses" rather than taking a measured view of the future.

We live in a unitary state. Taxpayers surely are entitled to a broadly similar standard of public service wherever they live. This seems to be true for health and education but not for public transport.

**Les Turner**

***FoFNL member, Les Turner, has spent the last two years travelling widely by rail throughout Europe and between Inverness and Caithness roughly monthly, sometimes using the bus for comparison.***

***These resulting opinions on the current state of the Far North Line are his own but may give all of us food for thought.***

## **YESTERYEAR AT DINGWALL NORTH**

This box was commonly called "The Henhouse" by the signalmen. It was a replacement for the box burned down in a mysterious fire. In reality it was just a permanent-way hut of the type used in that era, I remember it as cold and draughty.

**Iain Macdonald**



Tablet exchange and box at Dingwall North  
(RCTS Photographic Archive)

# NESS VIADUCT COLLAPSE 1989

**A talk entitled '*The Collapse and Reconstruction of the Ness Railway Viaduct*' was given by Adrian Boal at Inverness Field Club on November 19<sup>th</sup> 2014.**

## **THE RAILWAY BRIDGE TO THE FAR NORTH LINES**

One of the triumphs of British Rail in its later years was the immediate commitment to replace the Ness Viaduct when it was swept away in unprecedented floods on Tuesday 7 February 1989. This commitment was fully honoured and a new viaduct was built ready

speaker was Adrian Boal who had been Assistant Resident Engineer for British Rail on the reconstruction project and possibly the only job in his career where he didn't have running trains to deal with!

Before its collapse, the viaduct had been carrying 50,000 tons of freight annually. Two passenger and one freight train had crossed that morning before the collapse at



for the start of the summer timetable on Monday 14 May 1990.

FoFNL members enjoyed a lecture on this event courtesy of Inverness Field Club. Norman Newton set the scene with some newspaper accounts of the building of Joseph Mitchell's original five-span masonry arch viaduct in the years up to 1862. Our main

approximately 08:20. The signalling cables were still intact and functioning. The bridge collapsed in stages: two spans at 08:20, another at 5pm and another at 8pm. The cause of the collapse was local scouring of the pier foundations - a five metre deep scour hole had developed upstream.

Mitchell's original drawings from 1862 (available on microfilm) showed that he was acutely aware of the dangers of scouring at the piers due to the very steep 1 in 30 gradient of the river bed at that point. The Ness is also known to be the second fastest river in Scotland and has a rain catchment area of some 700 square miles. The modern solution in the reconstruction of the new viaduct was to build a weir in order to control the level of the river bed upstream of the new bridge.

Jamieson Mackay and Partners (JMP) were the Glasgow based consultants who designed the new viaduct consisting of a steel girder superstructure with a composite concrete deck resting on two central piers. The main crossing incorporated the existing masonry abutments with an overall span of 130m (two 38 metre spans and a central one of 52 metres). An in situ 250mm deep reinforced concrete deck was constructed on top of the main girders carrying the reinstated railway track. British Rail acting as the Client had ordered all necessary steelwork in advance of the main works saving months on the reconstruction programme. After all tenders had been evaluated the contract was awarded to the main contractor Fairclough, to start on site in early August 1989. The piling works were subcontracted to Weldex who had to drive piles 38 metres down into the gravel river bed and construct cofferdams to enable the new pier foundations to be built. Once the new foundations and weir

were in place lots of protective armour stone was strategically placed in the river.

There was major flooding again over the harsh winter of 1989/90 which hampered working conditions on site and caused difficulties in meeting the construction programme. The new bridge spans were lifted in place by water borne barge, the MCM Shetlander with a 120 tonne onboard crane. This had to be helped into position by two harbour tugs and needed five anchor points set in the river bank for stability.

ScotRail incurred significant extra cost to keep operating the 270 track miles of railway north of the river. Rolling stock and locomotives had to be transported across the breach by road, and a temporary maintenance depot built at Muir of Ord. The new class 156 trains were introduced in May 1989 as planned. Passengers for each train and Red Star parcels (remember them?) had to be taken by bus between Inverness and Dingwall with train services resuming from there.

The impressive new bridge was opened on time and within budget by Malcolm Rifkind, Secretary of State for Scotland, on 9 May 1990. It cost £3.4M to build and Mr Boal is certain it should last for another 125 years. May it continue to carry both passengers and freight a long way in to the future!

**Richard Ardern**

## SHADOW MINISTERIAL APPOINTMENT

David Stewart MSP, regional Scottish Labour member for the Highlands and Islands was appointed as Scottish Labour Shadow Transport Minister as part of the Shadow Cabinet reshuffle last month.

He is also now a member of the Parliament's Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee.

Mr Stewart said "I am delighted to have been given the post of Shadow Transport Minister as throughout my political career I have always had a keen interest in transport issues from road safety to aviation and of course to rail.

"In recent times I have campaigned strongly to see more freight moved by rail and I am keen to continue working to improve the rail network as a whole.

"I will be seeking a meeting with Friends of the Far North Line in my new role as I appreciate the number of issues affecting the line over the past year in terms of cancellations and delays and want to ensure we see improvements made to the service along the length of the line."

### **Motion S4M-11887: Murdo Fraser, Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, Date Lodged: 15/12/2014**

#### *Supporting RMT's No Sewage on the Tracks Campaign*

That the Parliament notes calls from the RMT union to end by April 2016 the practice of dumping raw sewage directly onto rail lines from rolling stock; understands that rail workers are often sprayed with raw sewage as a result of this practice; notes that retention tanks are due to be fitted on all ScotRail trains by December 2017; recognises that the RMT's No Sewage on the Tracks campaign is calling on Abellio to make the retrofitting of retention tanks a priority when the Dutch company takes over the franchise in April 2015; considers that the dumping of raw sewage so close to where people live and work would not be tolerated by any other industry, and supports the RMT in its campaign.

Supported by: Liz Smith, Jamie McGrigor, Nanette Milne, Alex Johnstone, Hugh Henry, Jean Urquhart, Drew Smith, Patricia Ferguson, Richard Lyle, Neil Findlay, Mary Scanlon, Cameron Buchanan, Jackie Baillie, John Wilson, Cara Hilton, Annabel Goldie, Kenneth Gibson, Ken Macintosh, Margaret Mitchell, Elaine Smith, Anne McTaggart, Linda Fabiani, Michael McMahon, Colin Beattie, John Finnie

***The following questions received some positive responses from the Scottish Government. Let's hope the DfT and Stagecoach/Virgin play ball.***

### **Question S4W-23610: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, Date Lodged: 11/12/2014**

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the UK Government to ensure that the new franchise for the East Coast rail route will provide a higher level of hot food availability for passengers north of Edinburgh on the Highland Chieftain service between King's Cross and Inverness.

#### **Answered by Derek Mackay (23/12/2014):**

In December 2012 the Scottish Government provided a letter of advice to the UK Government on its requirements of the InterCity East Coast franchise. This included advice on the need for continued and improved catering provision for passengers travelling north of Edinburgh.

The advice notes 'the particular requirements of the long distance market in terms of catering and passenger comfort and amenity', and that 'services to Scotland (particularly to Aberdeen and Inverness) are amongst the longest passenger rail services in the UK, and notes the need for enhanced luggage space and catering over these routes'.

In summary, the advice argues that 'it is important that a full catering offer is retained on services to Scotland, and that offer recognises that some services extend more than three hours beyond Edinburgh'.

However, the Scottish Government does not have the powers to direct the franchisee. The InterCity East Coast franchise is specified and let by the UK Government.

**Question S4W-23611: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, Date Lodged: 11/12/2014**

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will raise with the new East Coast franchisee the need for all InterCity Express trains to be used between King's Cross and Inverness to be built with the galley option to service hot food to all passengers.

**Answered by Derek Mackay (23/12/2014):**

As noted in my response to the answer to question S4W-23610 on 23 December 2014, we have provided comprehensive advice to the Department for Transport on this issue. Officials have also discussed this requirement with all bidders for the InterCity East Coast franchise in advance of their bids.

Information received from the Department for Transport indicates that InterCity Express trains will be built with a galley to provide hot food to all passengers, although we have not seen the full detail of the winning bid for InterCity East Coast, and await confirmation of this point.

We will pursue this issue directly in discussions with the new franchisee.

**Question S4W-23612: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, Date Lodged: 11/12/2014**

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will seek assurances from the new rail franchisee that the new InterCity Express trains will be sufficiently powerful to climb the gradients between Perth and Inverness at the same speed as the current models on this route.

**Answered by Derek Mackay (23/12/2014):**

We do not currently have information on the sectional running times of the InterCity Express trains over the Perth to Inverness route. We are aware of concerns about the performance of these trains, as you have highlighted, and have sought clarification from the Department for Transport.

We will raise the performance of these trains in discussion with the new franchisee.

**Question S4W-23613: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, Date Lodged: 11/12/2014**

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will demand that the Highland Chieftain Inverness to King's Cross service will be allocated a nine coach set throughout the year once the new InterCity Express trains are introduced and not limited to a five coach set in winter.

**Answered by Derek Mackay (23/12/2014):**

Yes. We have had broad assurance from the Department for Transport (DfT) that the current levels of service provision will be maintained in the new InterCity East Coast franchise.

Specific advice from DfT, however, is that there is no specific obligation on the new East Coast franchisee to deploy specific set formations on any given route; the new franchise agreement will place an obligation on the franchise operator to utilise the Intercity Express Programme fleet in a way that best meets demand.

We will reiterate our view that current levels of provision must be fully maintained in our discussions with the new franchisee.

# RESTORING RAILWAY CLOCKS

***Some notes by Chris Edwards***

## **Inverness-Aberdeen Line**

At the end of 1995 I was approached by ScotRail in Glasgow in partnership with Gordon District Council (the forerunner of the present Aberdeenshire Council). Between them they had plans to refurbish the redundant station building at Inch by converting part of the one-time Stationmaster's office to a local museum. One of the features they had wished to reinstate was the clock. At the time there was an outside dial which would have given the time on the platform and would have been driven by a mechanical clock movement situated inside the room adjacent to the clock.

The external dial onto the platform retained the original bezel surround, hands and dial with the associated gearing behind the dial (the motion-works) but lacking the movement to drive the dial. The name on the outside dial read *P. Wilson, Keith* who obviously were contracted to supply clocks to some stations along this line when it was first constructed. Peter Wilson was known to have been in business from approximately the middle of the 19th century.

I was given no brief or guidance as to what was required other than that the movement had to drive the outside dial as it formed one of the "heritage clocks" to which ScotRail had ownership.

The outside dial was completely refurbished with the dial sheet taken down to the metal, painted and re-lettered exactly as per the original. As to what movement to drive it with, I had in my possession two clocks which had been part of the original station fittings from a) Kintore station and b) Old Meldrum Station. These were virtually identical to each other and both bore the name of Hunter and Craighead, Inverury (sic) who were in business at about the time of the construction of the GNoSR.

Without any other instructions I effectively copied the overall layout of the movement and the style of the case in these clocks and put a few touches of my own into the dial and hands. The key was the only part of the clock I did not manufacture.

The clock was subsequently installed in the station building, part of which is now known as the Inch Connection (the local museum which also houses a model railway layout of Inch Station as it would have looked in the 19th century).

Following the successful completion of that project I was again approached by ScotRail and asked to examine a number of other railway heritage clocks. The Inverurie clock, made by Alexander Gill and Son and installed around 1900 when the station was remodelled was restored but has now been replaced by a quartz clock as Health and Safety dictated that the ticket clerk was not allowed to wind the clock as it would have meant standing on a step ladder or chair to reach the winding square. This necessitated a "trained" person coming from Aberdeen every week to wind the clock.

The Art Deco clock in the booking hall in Forres has suffered the same fate as the one at Inch in that there is nothing to drive the external hands. This was reported back to Glasgow.

At Nairn the external dial (also signed P. Wilson, Keith) was being driven by a relatively modern electric synchronous movement, but was very noisy and required restoration which I did. The dial was also improved, and the external bezel painted.

## **West Highland Line**

Further afield (for me based in Aberdeenshire) I was asked to look at Rannoch station. Here the external dial and cheap American or German movement was replaced with a synchronous electric

movement as there was a convenient power supply adjacent to the dial. The original hands were retained, refurbished and reused.

## Inverness-Wick/Thurso Line

Finally I was asked to examine the clock at Scotscalder. I must confess I had never heard of this location but discovered it to be south of Thurso. Several hours driving from Aberdeenshire with a multitude of tools and ladders ready for any eventuality brought me to a windswept platform on the edge of the great expanse of the Flow Country of Caithness. The long low station building is now privately owned but the residents had been alerted to my attendance. At the time the station traffic records suggested that only 8 passengers per year used the platform - it is one of the several request stops on the Inverness - Wick/Thurso line.

The external dial was signed Geo. Morrison, Golspie which could be seen indistinctly through the rust. A number of reference books of clock makers list George Morrison as having been born at Roskeen in Ross-shire in March 1815. He also had his son working for him as a journeyman watchmaker in 1881. He is known to have supplied clocks to the Highland Railway although this information may have come from the Scotscalder dial alone.

As with the Inch dial the only parts of the original clock installation here were the outside bezel, dial, hands and motion-work gearing immediately behind the dial, which converts the minute information coming from the clock to minutes and hours. The heavy cast iron bezel and glass were removed from the wooden frame, the dial and the hands were removed revealing a large hole through the stone wall of the cottage. This tunnel would have accommodated the lead-off rod from the movement inside the station building to the external dial. Since passing into private hands the hole had been blocked off at its inboard end with a layer of plasterboard. The original clock movement was no doubt removed prior to the sale of the station building.



Scotscalder station clock before restoration, September 2006



Scotscalder Station clock after restoration, October 2006

Simply to have a working clock at this location would involve including a synchronous movement connected to a 240V mains supply. However, the only electrical supply owned by ScotRail was a timed system, which operates the platform lighting, and that supply was some distance from the clock. The expense was considered too much, and instead only restoration of the historic dial, hands, bezel and wooden surround was accepted. These parts were returned to the site in due course and reinstalled as a static heritage piece. Indeed, one of the banner pictures on the FoFNL website shows the restored clock dial in position.

Imagine my disappointment when, on a recent foray to Wick, I noted that all my work was lost as the original clock has now been replaced by an acrylic pastiche of a Victorian skeletonised dial with an opal acrylic backing, and with "Scotscalder 1874" across the dial. Admittedly the new clock is running, so the decision has been taken to install an uninterrupted electrical supply to drive the electric movement, but the history is gone. Mr George Morrison of Golspie will be turning unhappily in his grave! I feel it would have been more satisfactory to have substituted an electric movement for the motion-work gearing and still utilised the existing hands and dial thereby preserving the appearance of the original installation.



Scotscalder Station Clock with new dial etc. October 2014

***The Clock Shop - Chapel of Garioch, Aberdeenshire AB51 5HE***



Another view of the  
“Lairg Tanks”.

66113 approaches  
Invergordon on 17<sup>th</sup>  
October 2014

An unidentified Class 158  
just short of Ardgay on  
the 10.37 Inverness -Wick  
on 17 October 2014



A fine view of the old  
Inverness viaduct, the  
replacement of which,  
after its collapse, is  
described in this issue.

37261 “Caithness”  
crossing the old bridge  
on 16 October 1985  
with the 12.05 from  
Wick.