

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 65

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Photo: Span Engineering

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Cover photo: Inspection work being carried out on the Oykel Viaduct (1867), Culrain, where the FNL crosses the River Shin.

Photo courtesy of Span Engineering - <https://spanengineering.com>

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.fofni.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!

Convener

When I stepped down from being your Convener in 2009 I did not envisage returning to carry out a further term after John Brandon's retirement a year ago. No-one was prepared to assume the position at the 2014 AGM, but despite this FoFNL has been kept on the road, largely by Richard Ardern. He is unable to devote the necessary time to being Convener, hence my reappearance before your very eyes. The Committee co-opted me as a Member and elected me Convener: it is of course up to those of you who will be at the AGM to put this on a more solid footing. If you do, then I must make it clear – as I did to the Committee – that I am happy to look at being in post for 2 years. By then I shall be, astonishing as it must seem to some of you, 75. And at 75 I hang up my boots. FoFNL therefore has around 24 months to find the next Convener. That work starts now.

Performance

So does the enormous amount of work needed on the FNL itself. Performance has been – let's use a technical term – lousy since train sets were moved south to cater for the extra traffic surrounding the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow. The weather has been less severe than in many recent winters, yet the problems – often wind-blown trees – have led to substantial cancellations and delays (not just up here, but throughout the network). While safety is paramount the concept of running trains for the benefit of passengers even in difficult conditions seems to have been lost. There has to be an alternative. This may

involve cutting down huge numbers of trees – so be it, provided that a somewhat larger number (preferably not all deciduous) are planted well away from the railway.

Hopes

With three new franchises operating trains from Inverness FoFNL will seek meetings at a senior level in order to be able to articulate our hopes for the next four years (the remaining part of Control Period 5). The planning for CP6 (which doesn't start until April 2019) will start later this year, and Network Rail will be reminded of our agenda (published in FNE 63 and 64).

Drums

While preparing this Headcode I have re-read most of the issues of FNE since 2005. While there have been some major improvements – an extra train each way, better interiors in the 158s, controlled-emission toilets – it's depressing to note that the service has gone nowhere (or even backwards) in so many areas. Journey times are now nearly half an hour longer than they were 15 years ago. On what other stretch of the Trans-European Strategic Network (yes, we are) would this be tolerated? Forget Europe – where else in Scotland (since that's where the spending decisions are made) would this be tolerated? Now that a few tens of thousands of passengers in the Borders have been connected (at considerable expense) the few tens of thousands of passengers north of Inverness expect money - considerably less - to be spent on them. We've waited long enough. The drums are beating.

Mike Lunan

FoFNL AGM 2015

The FoFNL 2015 AGM is to be held in the Glenmhor Hotel on Ness Bank from 11:00am on Friday 19th June. A separate notice is included with this newsletter. Please note too that FoFNL member Frank Faulkner will be bringing a few copies of his book, *Trust me, I'm your tour manager!*, which was reviewed in the January newsletter.

Putting this newsletter together has really brought home the seriousness of the state of the Far North Line. This issue is full of articles and letters which should give Abellio and Network Rail (not to mention Transport Scotland) much food for thought. These are not only penned by members of FoFNL, there have been many items in the press, some of which are in the newsletter. There are also letters from members of the public and a couple of articles by former railwaymen - men with huge experience of running railways.

Shocking

One of the most shocking pieces of information in these pages is contained in Transform Scotland's News Release on page 16. It is not about the Far North Line but simply states that it was possible to travel by train from Perth to Edinburgh and from Dundee to Edinburgh in 1895 6 and 7 minutes respectively quicker than can be achieved now. These are both inter-city routes and 120 years have elapsed!

Ten years

It is just over ten years since First took over the ScotRail franchise and the advent of Abellio has sent us scurrying through back issues of the newsletter to see what was being said then.

Déjà vu - some quotes:

FoFNL Newsletter 32, September 2004 "Headcode" by Richard Ardern

"We say good bye to National Express and welcome to First Group..."

Recently the poor timekeeping on the FNL has been causing havoc with passengers' journey plans and delaying connecting services. This is something that National Express and First must address as a matter of urgency. We would not like to see passengers drifting away before the Invernet services are established..."

FoFNL Newsletter 35, September 2005 "Opportunities From The New Timetable" by Richard Ardern

The 20 minute deceleration of services between Wick and Inverness is much to be regretted and we must hope that the previous timings can be restored before too long. Recent injunctions from the Scottish Executive and from the Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) should have left Network Rail in no doubt that action is required from them.

When the June deceleration was explained at the Rail Passengers Committee's public meeting in Dingwall in May, we were told that the Scottish Transport Minister had instructed Network Rail to seek to restore the previous line speed in early course. Since then, the Office of Rail Regulation wrote to Network Rail (NR) on 8 July setting out that company's obligations. In particular: "Network Rail must maintain routes to the published capability level at April 2001" and "If operators want to run more trains of the same type on a route, NR is responsible for any increase in maintenance needed. NR must not charge operators extra for this". To my mind, the "published capability level" would include, not just the number of trains, but the end to end timings. Let us hope that ScotRail will request a return to the "capability" of Wick to Inverness journeys taking less than four hours.

We are told that the timetable is now more "robust" in that the trains should be able to keep time.

Richard's comment to me recently:

"Several of those sentences ring so true today and the instructions then from ORR and the Scottish Government to Network Rail have certainly not been carried out! We are still in the same predicament."

Positive

However, to finish on a positive note I'll put on my musician's hat. First ScotRail sponsored the Royal Scottish National Orchestra for

several years. We were issued with individual rail passes for journeys between the main Scottish cities which were valid for our travel as required on concert days, and for travelling back to Glasgow the following day after staying overnight. This made our lives miles better by not being forced to travel on group tickets. It also helped to mitigate the

overcrowding that could occur when we were all trying to travel on the same train.

First ScotRail gained many marketing opportunities at our concerts and a very positive image as a company working in Scotland that cared about Scottish culture.

Ian Budd

LETTER FROM STEVE MONTGOMERY

Letter to ScotRail Stakeholders from Steve Montgomery

Tue, 31 Mar 2015

Good afternoon,

Operations at First ScotRail will transfer tomorrow to a new franchise run by Abellio, while the new Caledonian Sleeper franchise will be run by Serco from tonight.

First ScotRail has enjoyed a fantastic near-11 years successfully delivering Scotland's railways, and it is with a great sense of pride that FirstGroup leave Scotland's railways in good shape for the next leg of the journey.

Passenger numbers are at an all-time high, with nearly 90 million passenger journeys a year, and passenger satisfaction at record equalling levels.

To ensure a smooth transition, I will continue to lead at ScotRail until the 1st of May, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank all our stakeholders for your engagement and support over the years.

The transformation in rail travel in Scotland could not have been achieved without your input.

I also wish to place on record my thanks to all our employees at First ScotRail for their commitment and dedication in delivering the highest standards of service for passengers.

I can assure you that we have worked hard with the new franchisees to ensure a smooth transition for everyone as they prepare to take on the responsibility of running Scotland's railways.

I wish all our stakeholders – and Abellio - every success for the future.

Kind regards,

Steve Montgomery

Highland Railway Users Council

Was the HRUC a forerunner of FoFNL? Does anyone remember who were its members and what they did? It is known that they travelled to Wick on 2 August 1965 on service trains leaving Inverness at 10:30 and returning at 17:00.

Their itinerary document details station masters' names, sidings and closure dates for freight. A Sawmill siding is listed on one side of Beaully and Lovat's Sawmill siding on the other. Mr M Ayub was station master at Kinbrace and Mr D [Down?] Main at Invergordon.

SUBMISSIONS TO THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S INQUIRY INTO FREIGHT TRANSPORT

Friends of the Far North Line submission on “Freight Transport in Scotland” to Scottish Parliament Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee, January 2015.

1. FoFNL is a 150 member rail user group which seeks to support both passenger and freight services on the railways north, east and south from the Inverness hub.
2. These lines are all mostly single track with short passing loops and this seriously restricts their capacity for freight in particular.
3. FoFNL welcomes current moves to add more loops, longer loops, double track, modern signalling and electrification to the Perth-Inverness (HML) and Aberdeen-Inverness (InvAb) lines for the substantial improvement of both passenger and freight services. Progress has been much slower than expected.
4. FoFNL is currently pressing Network Rail to significantly improve line speed and capacity (with dynamic loops, faster points, improved signalling) on the Far North Line which is no longer able to cope with existing or potential traffic.
5. Track condition, gauge and weight restrictions affect all three lines which is a sure sign of past underinvestment. Oil tanks to Lairg can only travel 75% full because of restrictions on the Oykel viaduct. Using new lower platform wagons to take higher containers on the HML has recently been banned due to track concerns.
6. The passenger timetable on the FNL has recently been slowed down and now includes the totally unprecedented note “This train may run 15 minutes later on certain days due to the operation of a freight train in the Lairg area.” This is another sign of lack of passing loop track capacity.
7. The offshore pipe train concerned runs from Caithness to Tees-side. Apart from the oil tanks, the only other freight on the FNL now is nuclear waste traffic.
8. Freight on the HML includes groceries, cement, timber products and the three flows to the FNL. There is no longer any freight on the InvAb line and paths are difficult to find. Much timber used to be carried.
9. Many former flows such as timber, coal, aggregates, grain, seed potatoes, whisky and new ones such as offshore oilfield supplies, and domestic and industrial waste could be carried by rail in the Highlands. Ports such as Invergordon should be reconnected to the railway and gauge clearance extended there from Elgin.
10. HITRANS is trying to re-establish a timber flow from Georgemas and Kinbrace to Inverness for the Norbord wood factory, seven miles east of the city. The potential flow is huge, but the roads in Sutherland would need a lot of strengthening. At the moment rail is also handicapped because costly transshipment is required at Inverness.
11. Norbord has obtained planning permission to more than double its output, but although the factory is adjacent to the InvAb line and formerly had a rail siding it was not stipulated that this should be replaced. The former siding was built over the last time the factory was extended.
12. There appears to be a potential mismatch between local government planning procedures and the provision of new rail terminal sites and road access to these. Councils are not responsible

for rail services or rail infrastructure, and designations of land for rail expansion can easily be forgotten.

13. The A9 road is used to carry gas by road tanker to Caithness. North of Dornoch this road is hardly suitable for this dangerous cargo which would be more appropriately carried on the railway. The problem is how do you abstract a relatively small flow from a much bigger road contract in order to send it by rail?

14. Railfreight is recognised as a less polluting and more sustainable mode for transporting freight. One train load can replace many individual HGVs, and railfreight is much more fuel efficient reducing greenhouse gas emissions by some two thirds.

15. Fuel is a very volatile commodity both in price and supply. If there were to be a major upset in the Middle East and supply became difficult, the Highlands, being at the end of a long distribution chain, would be the first area to suffer. It would be essential to try to save fuel by trunk hauling supplies by rail or sea to nodes such as Inverness for onward transport by road.

16. Fuel price and supply can change very quickly but extra rail capacity takes time to install which is why we should be pressing ahead now to urgently double and electrify the badly restrictive rail routes in to the Highlands from Perth and Aberdeen.

17. Modal shift away from road to more sustainable means such as rail and sea is avowed Government policy. The results so far show that this needs to be much more vigorously pursued. Some level of direction is needed rather than laissez-faire. Good stewardship of the planet suggests we cannot afford the “luxury” of unbridled competition in this matter. Also, we should be finding ways to avoid carrying goods long distances when they could be produced locally. These are big questions, beyond FoFNL’s determining, but they are fundamental ones which we hope the ICI committee will consider.

Rail Freight Group Submission to Holyrood Inquiry

The Rail Freight Group’s recent submission to the Inquiry into Freight Transport being held by the Scottish Parliament’s Infrastructure & Capital Investment Committee emphasises that, while road hauliers benefit from the ubiquity of dual-lane trunk roads across Scotland, on the rail network north of the Central Belt there are significant infrastructure capacity pinch points. Key examples are insufficiently long overtaking loops on the largely double-track route from Coatbridge / Mossend / Grangemouth to Aberdeen, and inadequate quantum and length of crossing loops on largely single-track routes, the worst example being the Highland Main Line. And by contrast to the widespread provision of generous structure height clearances for trucks on the Scottish trunk road network, the rail system is a patchwork of varying capability to handle the modern generation of freight containers.

Of course, rail’s ability to compete for traffic depends on a number of factors, including not just the availability of suitable route and terminal infrastructure (partly determined by government investment), but also whether the terms of competition with other modes are fair, with regard to a variety of relevant government policies. It has been a longstanding objective of Scottish Government policy to encourage freight modal shift from road to more sustainable modes, including rail, and this aim is shared at the European, UK, regional and local levels of government – but government programmes do not consistently support this objective.

The RFG submission suggests that the Scottish Government needs to consider how it can restructure and more widely promote its Freight Facilities Grant and Mode Shift Revenue Support schemes – which are based on the *environmental* benefits of mode switch from road to rail – to reflect the trading realities of the current business environment and logistics supply chain trends.

In England, the Department of Business, Innovation & Skills administers the 'Regional Growth Fund', which has supported three rail freight terminal developments, on the basis of the *economic* benefits which these would generate. Scotland needs to keep up with such changes elsewhere if we are to remain competitive.

Grant aid could also assist the development of innovative methods for handling rail freight, not least on 'peripheral' routes where justifying expensive infrastructure and aggregating large trainload volumes can be difficult. The Non-Intrusive Crossover System (NICS) – which was first developed in Scotland 11 years ago – provides a novel lower-cost means of connecting an existing main line track and a planned freight siding. NICS has been successfully used for engineering 'blockades' on the Tyne & Wear Metro and elsewhere – and could be particularly useful in the timber transport sector – *but has still to secure full Network Rail approval.*

Rail's economics are optimised where at least one end of the through transit has direct rail connection, and this underscores the importance of strategic protection for rail-connectable sites. Consideration of rail access must be undertaken at a sufficiently early stage of industrial site development planning, since past experience shows that trying to retro-fit rail facilities when these have not been 'passively' planned within the overall development footprint can be expensive or indeed impossible – as rail access is more constrained, eg in terms of curvature, than is the case with road haulage. We drew the Committee's attention to the recent granting of planning consent by Highland Council for a major expansion of the Dalcross Norboard plant *without any requirement for passive provision for future rail access.*

Finally, we also alerted the Committee to our longstanding concern over the unequal treatment of rail and road on the Perth-Inverness corridor, symbolised by the planned £3bn expenditure on full dualling of the A9 but a maximum of just £600m earmarked for the still predominantly single-track Highland Main Line. The road and rail investment appraisal processes are being undertaken entirely separately, without consideration of how a balanced package of road and rail developments might best meet public policy objectives, as well as securing best value for money. Equally, there has been no analysis of the extent to which road improvements will lead to modal shift of freight *from rail to road* – the opposite of Government policy. A lengthy correspondence between RFG and Transport Scotland (including the Freedom of Information process and an appeal to the Scottish Information Commissioner) failed to produce any evidence that Transport Scotland had undertaken any 'cross-modal' analysis of the costs and benefits of a road/rail package, for example based on dualling only the busier sections of the A9 – from Aviemore to Inverness and Blair Atholl to Perth – while substantially extending double track on the railway and electrifying the route throughout.

The Committee's Freight Inquiry report is expected to be published in May.

David Spaven / Rail Freight Group / 14 April 2015

HML FREIGHT AND ELECTRIFICATION

This article appeared in the Herald on Wednesday 21 January 2015 and is reprinted with permission.

Inside Track: David Ross, Highland Correspondent: Taking freight off Highland roads and on to rail would lift more than Highland spirits

An important submission just lodged at Holyrood for the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee inquiry's into freight transport in Scotland underlines the scale of the challenge in achieving an important green goal; taking freight off Highland roads and putting it on to rail.

Many of the problems are historic, some dating back to the Victorian era. But the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership (Hitrans), the statutory regional transport partnership, elegantly

spells out the need for change across different modes of transport: "Weakness in infrastructure provision leads to: road closures with detours of a hundred miles, island supermarket shelves becoming empty due to adverse sea conditions, fresh fish failing to get to market, livestock suffering, timber remaining icebound in forests and bottling halls in Central Scotland idly awaiting the supply of whisky."

The ideal is for freight to travel overnight when there are few or no passenger trains. However the Hitrans section on rail warns: "A much-discussed, commercially viable early arrival in Inverness of a retail goods train is simply impossible."

The Highland Rail Network connecting Oban, Fort William, Mallaig, Kyle of Lochalsh, Inverness, Wick and Thurso to the Central Belt is virtually all single track and has a restricted "loading gauge". The ability to move a loaded train on a particular stretch of rail depends on the height and width profile, the loading gauge.

Hitrans continues: "Container clearance on the Highland Main Line is restricted, while on Inverness-Aberdeen improved gauge is available from Elgin east only. The restricted loading gauge on all Highland routes reduces the railway's ability to compete effectively against road."

Electrification of the line to Inverness would bring about a significant improvement in gauge, according to Hitrans but it appears this might not be until 2030.

The nature of the Far North and West Highland lines limits access by certain types of freight locomotives and reduces the speed of all.

Meanwhile, "Fort William has only dedicated terminals for oil and alumina, Inverness handles bulk cement and supermarket goods, Lairg has oil discharge facilities and Georgemas receives nuclear and pipe trains."

Hitrans reasonably observes: "While access is regulated by Office of Rail Regulation (ORR) it would be perhaps helpful if Network Rail took a more proactive role in terminal development and management, possibly for timber which may have an otherwise detrimental effect on fragile roads."

It points to the success of the "Lifting the Spirit" project. A Hitrans-led initiative in partnership with Scotch Whisky Association, HIE, Moray Council and others, it allowed distillers to move bulk spirit by rail to and from Elgin during autumn 2013. Crucially, it enjoyed European financial support.

However, EU help is restricted by the need for the Scottish partner to provide match funding. So Hitrans suggests: "If a fund was established to support Scottish public bodies in their participation in EU projects there would be a real opportunity for Scotland's return from EU funding to increase significantly."

A modest enough proposal, given the scale of investment needed in Highland rail.

Letter to Herald from Richard Ardern:

David Ross's Inside Track article ("*Taking freight off the roads would lift Highland spirits*", *The Herald*, January 21) is timely. It would be of huge benefit to the Highland economy to get retail goods trains in to Inverness at the time of day that commerce requires. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce have long been making the same request for earlier business train arrivals in Inverness, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

The Highland economy is being seriously held back because the Highland Main Line from Perth to Inverness is still largely single track and lacks the capacity for more trains. The benefits of doubling much of the line would be immense.

Cont.

continued

A 20 minute long section of single track permits only three trains in an hour, two in one direction and one in the other. Doubling this section and signalling trains with a five minute headway would allow 12 trains in each direction, a huge increase in capacity.

Electrifying the line too would bring big time savings because electric trains can gallop up the long gradients to Drumochter and Slochd at 100 miles an hour. Everyone can see this happening when driving up Beattock on the M74. Thus the biggest returns from future electrification would be gained from tackling Dunblane to Perth and on to Inverness after EGIP is completed in 2018.

Mark Carne CEO of Network Rail was in Aberdeen last week and made the usual comment about priority for enhancements benefiting the largest number of people. Moir Lochhead expressed the same view when First Group took over the ScotRail franchise ten years ago. Such understandably worthy sentiments seriously disadvantage the Highland railways which are also part of the integrated network, not a second class appendage.

The Scottish and Highland economies would both benefit from an Airdrie-Bathgate type refurbishment of the main lines between Perth and Inverness and between Inverness and Aberdeen. A special Crofter Counties scheme had to be used to upgrade single track roads in the Highlands. Maybe a similar special fund is now needed to finally connect all of Scotland's cities by modern railways? By 2025 perhaps?

FINNIE WINS SUPPORT FOR FAR NORTH LINE

Press release from John Finnie's parliamentary office:

John Finnie MSP, Independent Member for the Highlands and Islands, today [5th February 2015] secured support from Derek Mackay, the Minister for Transport and Islands, to put pressure on Network Rail to improve the Far North Line.

Mr Finnie questioned the Scottish Government on what it was doing to support the transfer of road haulage to rail, explaining that some of the freight trains travelling on the Far North Line have to travel significantly under capacity due to restrictions on the line.

Mr Mackay confirmed that while he was already working with Network Rail to improve conditions on the Far North Line, he would examine the situation on the Far North Line and would apply further pressure on Network Rail for conditions to improve if required.

Commenting on the Minister's answer Mr Finnie said:

"I very much welcome the answer the Minister gave today. I am convinced that upon further examination the Minister will put more pressure on Network Rail to improve the Far North Line.

"Those who frequently travel on the Far North Line know the difficulties posed by the condition of the line and know first-hand, often in great detail, where the greatest problems lie. I would encourage the Minister to reach out to those who use the line often, including Friends of the Far North Line, to get a first-hand experience of life using the line. I know that such testimony will help the Minister fully understand the pressures facing the Far North Line and cause him to press Network Rail into significant improvements."

1. Rob Gibson (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (SNP):

To ask the Scottish Government what carbon saving would be made by removing one supermarket lorry from the A9 between Edinburgh and Thurso and carrying the contents by rail. **(S4O-04274)**

The Minister for Transport and Islands (Derek Mackay):

Based on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Department of Energy and Climate Change carbon emission figures published in 2014 and the latest data published by the Rail Delivery Group, the Scottish Government estimates that, for each tonne transferred by rail freight rather than by road, CO₂ emissions would be reduced by up to 75 per cent. The actual carbon saving may depend on loading figures.

Rob Gibson:

The minister should perhaps understand that 90 per cent of the supermarkets in the Highlands are within 1 mile of the railway and that many supermarkets deliver provisions by van to the furthest-flung doors in the country. Will he explore the possibility of introducing a new means to deliver supermarket stock, which could be unloaded from containers and picked up from rail sidings en route to supermarkets, so that further reductions can be made in greenhouse gases?

Derek Mackay:

I will consider that. We are refreshing our rail freight strategy and will consult on it over the summer. It will include steps that the rail industry can take to encourage and support innovation and growth in the rail freight sector.

SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT WRITTEN ANSWER

16 February 2015

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Independent): To ask the Scottish Government how many major disruptions there have been on the Far North railway line in each (a) quarter of each of the last five years and (b) of the last six months; what the nature was of each disruption, and what impact each had on passenger numbers.

(S4W-24276)

Mr Derek Mackay MSP:

(a) The number of major disruptions on the Far North Railway line in each quarter of the last five years has been as follows:

Year	Quarter 1 (Jan-Mar)	Quarter 2 (Apr-Jun)	Quarter 3 (Jul-Sep)	Quarter 4 (Oct-Dec)	Total
2010	5	1	1	5	12
2011	1			3	4
2012	1		1	2	4
2013			4	4	5
2014	2	1	2	3	8

(b) The number of major disruptions in each of the last six months has been as follows:

By month, 2014 (last six months, including where an emergency timetable has been implemented):

Month in 2014	July	August	September	October	November	December
Number	3	5	6	13	3	3

(c) The nature of each disruption is listed as follows. The impact each had on passenger numbers is not recorded.

[Listing only 2014 incidents here to save space.]

Thursday 16th January

Broken rail at Ardgay (near Tain), 248 delay-minutes and 2 part-cancellations.

Friday 14th March

Emergency speed restriction between Dingwall and Invergordon, 245 delay-minutes and 3 part-cancellations.

Monday 19th May

Train fault at Inverness, 213 delay-minutes and 2 full-cancellations.

Tuesday 1st July

Tractor on the line at Brora, 8 full- or part-cancellations and 28 delay-minutes.

Tuesday 12th August

There was disruption to services on the Highland Main Line and Aberdeen-Inverness, because of weather conditions leading to significant flooding.

Wednesday 1st October

Far North Line: Driver lost time between Lairg and Tain resulting late arrival to Inverness and reactionary delays. 211 delay minutes.

Friday 3rd October

Far North Line: Radio communication lost between Ardlui and Tain, 234 delay minutes and 3 full or part cancellations.

Friday 31st October

Points failure at Inverness 250 delay-minutes and 2 full- or part-cancellations.

There seems to be a discrepancy between table (a) last two quarters of 2014 total 5 "major disruptions" and table (b)which shows 33 "major disruptions" from July to December 2014. It's not clear what the qualification "including where an emergency timetable has been implemented" is meant to convey. Perhaps just the new timetable for the last two weeks of the month?

In the penultimate entry for 3 October 2014 the "loss" of radio communication between ARDLUI and Tain is not surprising - unless they mean Ardgay!

Where do ghost trains stop?

At a Manifestation!

SCOTRAIL BREAKDOWNS TO BE HALVED BY ABELLIO

The Scottish Government's detailed franchise agreement contains a requirement that class 158s, whose operations will be extended to the Borders and Mallaig lines, must improve from suffering a "technical incident" every 5,540 miles to 8,234 miles by the end of the franchise.

Asked by The Scotsman, for an article published on 2nd April, Frank Roach (HITRANS) said: "We welcome this ambitious target to improve the performance of the class 158 fleet, which operates on Highland and Aberdeen routes, and will form the scenic train service to Wick, Kyle and the West Highlands. It is good to know significant engineering investment will be made to overcome the well-documented problems that have dogged services."

An industry figure commented "The class 158s are pretty scabby trains – they have never been great. They were made by British Rail when it was starved of cash. The improvements are going to require a lot of investment."

Abellio UK managing director Dominic Booth said some ScotRail trains are not "top of the league" compared to some in use south of the Border.

In the article Jeff Hoogesteger was reported as saying "As the new stewards of a vital part of Scotland's society and economy, we understand the responsibility given to us, and will work every day to earn the faith that has been shown in us."

Transport minister Derek Mackay said he "will be looking at the figures week to week and it will be for Abellio to manage their assets effectively."

WE LOVE OUR TRAINS

Well perhaps that is over-egging it a bit when talking of the class 158 units, but the refurbished Inverness ones are so much better than their Haymarket brothers or sisters.

FoFNL contributed a lot of input to the specification when Transport Scotland agreed that 25 of the the 44 ScotRail units should be refurbished with much more comfortable seats, seats aligned with the windows and more luggage and bicycle space to make them more nearly fit for purpose for the long 4 hours plus journey from Inverness to Wick. First class accommodation was provided for the Inverness to Aberdeen line services.

We do not yet know how they will be altered, if at all, to make them in to the Tourist Trains promised for the new franchise. Certainly the Edinburgh Haymarket units are long overdue for upgrading and refurbishment. Many of the Inverness units find employment on services within the Central Belt and we have no quibble with that.

What was a serious problem for a two year spell up to December 2014 was the number of Haymarket units which were finding their way to Inverness from Aberdeen and sometimes even being used on the Far North and Kyle lines to the discomfort of passengers. Seat reservations

were impossible and first class not available on the Aberdeen line. Something was going wrong at Perth or Haymarket early in the morning which seems to have caused this. We made several complaints to ScotRail without much success, but the situation seems to have improved this year, thankfully.

We have now learned that Haymarket depot has been instructed to use Inverness units on the new Borders Railway, when it opens in September, in order to create a good impression. We are delighted to see the Borders getting a rail service again after so long. We are also happy to see the Inverness units being used down there too, but with two provisos.

- 1) We would ask that Abellio diagram these units robustly so that the new situation does not lead to more Haymarket units invading the north again.

- 2) We would ask that the diagramming also makes sure that Inverness depot always has access to sufficient spare refurbished units to cover breakdowns and late running. This has also been a sore point in the past.

We look forward to hearing more details about the new Tourist Train proposals and the proposed reliability improvements to the 158s.

Richard Ardern

MAY TIMETABLE UPDATE

There are relatively few changes in the new timetable commencing 17 May. Sadly, once again the railway pursues its disappointing course of recent years extending schedules by a minute here and a couple of minutes there.

The 08.02 Wick to Inverness is allowed an extra two minutes between Alness and Dingwall arriving Inverness at 12.25 instead of 12.23. The train has thus been decelerated by 20 minutes since last year. The 07.02 Inverness to Wick and the 11.42 Inverness to Dingwall will both take one minute longer. The good news is the reintroduction of catering to all trains between Wick and Inverness and the removal of the freight train delay to the 18.28 northbound.

Tain will get one more Sunday afternoon service with, thanks to representations from FoFNL, a connection to a southbound service at Inverness.

On the Highland Main Line, the Caledonian Sleeper's arrival in Inverness is put back by 11 minutes to 08.47. This may be a bonus for commuters from Kingussie and Aviemore who will leave their home stations 18 and 9 minutes

later. The Carrbridge call is also 9 minutes later than at present.

ScotRail has had more minutes added on to trains between Haymarket and Edinburgh Waverley. The 17.02 connection from Perth with the 14.47 from Inverness has two minutes added to its schedule. The 09.41 from Inverness to Edinburgh has another minute added to arrive in Edinburgh at 13.24, an uncompetitive 3 hours 43 minutes journey for what is already our slowest train. On present diagramming that shortens the turnaround time to a mere ten minutes before it heads back to Inverness as the 13.34 service. Is that really time enough to refresh and water the train?

Where will all this end? With hoped for major track enhancements between Inverness and Edinburgh/Glasgow and between Inverness and Aberdeen there are likely to be further journey time extensions from time to time for the foreseeable future. In these cases there should be a clear benefit at the end of all the pain. On the Far North Line the planning process has only recently started.

Richard Ardern

ABELLIO AND NETWORK RAIL ALLIANCE

Abellio Press Release:

In building on the recent announcement of the Day One leadership team for ScotRail, Network Rail and Abellio are delighted to announce the appointment of Phil Verster as managing director for the planned Abellio ScotRail/Network Rail Alliance in Scotland.

Prior to joining Network Rail in 2012, Phil was deputy chief executive officer at Irish Rail and before that engineering director at a London-based train operating company.

Phil will work closely with Abellio's mobilisation and transition team, the ScotRail leadership team and Network Rail to plan and organise the alliance transition arrangements, as well as facilitating an orderly and effective hand over from Steve Montgomery who has agreed to lead the new ScotRail franchise during the initial period of operations. Steve's leadership will

ensure continuity in service quality for customers. We would like to take this opportunity to recognise Steve's tremendous contribution to ScotRail and wish him every success in the future.

The formation of a new alliance for Scotland's rail services offers major opportunities which require careful planning to deliver. The quick release of Phil Verster by Network Rail to work alongside Steve Montgomery and the Day One ScotRail team is a clear indication of the determination of both companies to set in place the formal alliance structure at the earliest opportunity.

Phil is currently route managing director of Network Rail's second largest route London North East (which includes the East Coast Main Line between London and Scotland) where he has led the implementation of continuous improvement, to drive cost benefits on the East

Coast route. That, and his record in safety improvement, made him the ideal candidate for the role.

Announcing the appointment, Phil Hufton, managing director of network operations for Network Rail, said: "Phil brings a wealth of valuable experience to what will be one of the highest profile roles in the industry. He has achieved great results during his time on the East Coast mainline and I look forward to him bringing that same positive approach to leading the railway in Scotland."

Dominic Booth, managing director of Abellio UK, said: "We are delighted to be able to announce the appointment of Phil so early in the transition process, and so soon after announcing the Day One team for ScotRail. We are confident that

Phil brings the requisite skills and experience to drive transformational change in order to deliver against our ambitious plans for the improvement of rail travel in Scotland."

Phil Verster, who will report into Dominic Booth and Phil Hufton and will take up his appointment shortly, added: "I am delighted to have been offered the opportunity to play this key role in Scotland's railway. The alliance between Abellio ScotRail and Network Rail gives us a unique opportunity to establish new ways of working and to improve what we deliver for the travelling public and our communities. This is a very exciting time for the railway in Scotland and my approach is all about listening to our communities and focusing on what is important to our customers."

TRAIN METAMORPHOSIS

An interesting story occurred on Thursday 16th April concerning the 16:00 Wick to Inverness train.

The train left Wick 15 mins late and therefore omitted the trip to Thurso. It still ran late, stopping more than 15 mins behind schedule at Helmsdale. ScotRail's mobile phone app gave the reason as "signalling" (either a fault or a problem, the person who saw this can't recall which) meanwhile on the train the passengers were being given announcements about preceding freight trains. It is known that a nuclear flask train was running ahead of the 16:00 and left Ardgay further down the line in the 16:00's path (allocated time slot).

Meanwhile the train which would have formed the 19:28 Ardgay-Inverness arrived in Ardgay from Inverness about a minute late at 18:40.

The 16:00 Wick-Inverness train left Ardgay at 19:28, passing the stock which had terminated at Ardgay at 18:40 in Ardgay.

Shortly after leaving Ardgay the train stopped and travelled back north to the station. The

empty stock from the Inverness-Ardgay service that had arrived earlier was attached to the rear of the 16:00 and locked out of use. It then left Ardgay again and stopped at the extra stations the 19:28 Ardgay-Inverness would have done, thereby metamorphosing into the 19:28 and causing the 16:00 train to be announced as cancelled and the passengers on board that service being offered a refund.

Meanwhile the ScotRail JourneyCheck website explained that the 16:00 Wick-Inverness was "cancelled between Ardgay and Tain due to a problem with safety equipment".

It is interesting, although perhaps not entirely surprising, that three different explanations were being given out that day!

This story also gives an insight into how FoFNL monitors events on the line informally. The information here is the result of combining the observations of a passenger on the 16:00, a local resident and a member who regularly looks at the ScotRail website to see how things are going.

Ian Budd

Far North Line Primacy - Question:

Which station on the FNL is head and shoulders above all others, having top ranking of all British railway stations?

answer later in the issue

Work is expected to get under way very soon on the phase 1 enhancements announced last March and confirmed in August. The de-vegetation and ground investigation works contract has now been let and a Community Liaison Manager appointed by Network Rail to smooth the passage of these works.

<http://www.transportscotland.gov.uk/project/aberdeens-inverness-rail-improvements>

Sadly, the promise in the GRIP 3 phase 1 enhancements summary to do further work to decide on a loop or double track sections between Inverness and Nairn is not going to be incorporated in to phase 1 as it seemed to be suggesting. It does make a lot of sense to have double track availability at each end (just as exists on the Highland Main Line) to avoid trains starting out on their journeys being delayed by late incoming services.

The financing of the whole scheme is not clear either. The first £170M will be spent on

- Reinstating former double track between Aberdeen and Inverurie

- Platform extensions at Inch and Elgin
- Signalling improvements between Elgin and Aberdeen
- Relocation of Forres station to co-locate with the passing loop
- Infrastructure to allow new stations at Kintore and Dalcross

The current financial ceiling of £240M is clearly not going to be adequate to make the line fit for purpose for the promised hourly service taking no more than 2 hours between Aberdeen and Inverness and the extra commuter trains at each end.

Capital for the new stations has to be found by Nestrans and HITANS from appropriate sources. Rolling stock for the extra commuter trains has to be safeguarded for their intended introduction in 2018. HITRANS is currently reapplying for planning permission for Inverness Airport Dalcross station. More details can be found in the report for item 8 of their 10 April board meeting. www.hitrans.org.uk

Richard Ardern

TRANSFORM SCOTLAND NEWS RELEASE

Scots want inter-city rail services at least as fast as roads

Published 24 February 2015 by Colin Howden

That was the finding from an opinion poll commissioned by Transform Scotland. Ninety-one per cent of those surveyed by ScotPulse wanted inter-city rail services at least as fast as the parallel roads.

We launched the opinion poll as part of the next phase of our Inter-City Express campaign. As part of the campaign, we have also published a new campaign brochure which sets out our aspirations for the Scottish inter-city network:

- Inverness to Perth: Double and Electrify
- Aberdeen to the Central Belt: Upgrade and Electrify
- Aberdeen to Inverness: Hourly service, under 2 hours

- Edinburgh-Perth Direct: Just 45 Minutes, Centre to Centre
- Perth: A New Inter-City Rail Hub

As part of the news release issued, our rail campaigner Paul Tetlaw said:

“This opinion poll result clearly demonstrates that the vast majority of the Scottish public wants faster trains between our cities. It is about time that the Scottish Government matched its policy commitments to Scotland’s inter-city rail network with some actual investment in the infrastructure.

“It is frankly embarrassing that some of our inter-city rail routes are slower than they were over a century ago. In 1895, it was possible to travel by steam train from Perth to Edinburgh in 65 minutes, but today the fastest journey takes 71 minutes. In 1895, you could get from Dundee to Edinburgh in 57 minutes but nowadays the fastest rail trip is 64 minutes.”

Points North. HITRANS FNL Punctuality Summit Dingwall 02/03/15

On Monday 2nd March 2015 HITRANS (The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership) hosted a summit meeting in Dingwall to discuss punctuality on the Far North Line. This is a digest of the proceedings.

Chair: Iain MacDonald, *broadcaster*

Top Table:

James Stockan, *Orkney Councillor, Chair of HITRANS*

Frank Roach *HITRANS*

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

Audrey Laidlaw, *Network Rail, Business Improvement Manager*

Anne-Marie Harmon, *Network Rail, Lead Strategic Planner*

Also present:

Iain Wilson, *First ScotRail Head of Public Affairs & Stakeholder Management*

Michelle McRae, *FSR Inverness*

Derek Mackintosh, *FSR Depot Manager Inverness*

Alastair Matheson, *Transport Scotland Services Timetable Planning Manager*

Frank Roach opened the meeting by listing the considerable improvements which have been made since 1996 including the 1998 forming of the Highland Rail Partnership and the Friends groups, the initiation of Dingwall commuter services and Invernet, reopening of Beaully and Conon Bridge stations, provision of some extra services and all-year Sunday working. He also mentioned the major slowdown to services in 2005 which resulted in 22 mins being added to the Wick-Inverness journey time.

John Kerr then spoke for First ScotRail stating that they knew the timetable hadn't been working in 2014 so a "resilient" timetable was introduced in December 2014 including average 3 min journey time increases and the skipping of the Fearn and Alness stops by the 16:00 ex-Wick. He said that the opening of Conon Bridge was the straw that broke the camel's back. The Public Performance Measure (PPM) dropped to 76% when Conon Bridge was

opened, having been at 90% after the massive slow-down of 2005, prior to which it had slid down to 65%. The PPM has risen from 58% to 79% in the first 10 weeks of the new timetable.

Anne-Marie Harmon (Network Rail) spoke in general terms about improvement opportunities which have been identified. There is a total of 23 which will be acted upon, 7 within the next 18 months, 10 during CP5 (i.e. by 2019) and 8 for completion after 2019. All improvements are subject to a business case being made.

Audrey Laidlaw (Network Rail) outlined the strategic work being undertaken at present:

1 The Scotland Route Strategy starting 2019/23 with horizon as far as 2043.

Consultation draft by end of 2015, final publication July 2016. This then informs the Initial Industry Plan September 2016.

2 Seeking funding in the Scottish Government's High Level Output Statement (HLOS) for control period CP6 to be delivered between 2019 and 2024.

There followed a Question & Answer session in which detailed explanations were sought by Mike Lunan (FoFNL Convener) and other FoFNL members concerning the greatly extended travel times from 2005 onwards. There were also specific questions about the timing of certain trains and their ability to allow passengers to make connections for onward journeys. Concerns were raised about the effect station-skipping and general unreliability might be having on passenger numbers. Rhoda Grant MSP said she had had many complaints from rail users.

There was some discussion about signalling with the question of replacing RETB on the busier Inverness-Dingwall section of the line with colour light signalling and conventional points to speed things up raised by Richard Arden of FoFNL. John Kerr from ScotRail said that this was his first choice but implied it has been knocked back. Audrey Laidlaw said the business case needed to be robust. Frank Roach said this was costed at £10m seven

years ago, but should cost less, now that fibre optic had been laid for the TPWS system.

Jean Urquhart MSP asked what is envisaged for 28 years' time in 2043?

Mike Lunan suggested significant investment of a magnitude comparable with the new Borders Railway in more doubling, more dynamic and more static loops, better signalling and better track to ensure the Inverness to Wick rail journey takes no more than 3 hours.

Caithness Punctuality Summit

A further meeting was held with ScotRail and Network Rail officials in Thurso on 11 March. This was attended by Richard Ardern and Bob Turner of FoFNL.

There was much concern about the unreliability of the passenger services during the 2nd half of 2014. With the lack of information displays at stations, locals had resorted to phoning up the local taxi firm as the most reliable way to find out what alternative transport was being provided.

The number of locals and visitors using the train has declined. The barriers at Inverness were criticised for causing congestion "like a cattle

station". An earlier Inverness arrival would be useful particularly for Councillors going to 10am meetings.

Concern was also raised about the lack of potential freight paths, not least for timber movements. Timber movements of a different unplanned kind blocking the tracks after bad weather were also discussed.

The Invitation to Tender for the franchise had stipulated that journey times on all rural lines were to be reduced but ScotRail responded that this was a complex matrix over the whole of the rural sector and did not mean that every rural line would benefit. Any increase in the number of trains on a long single track line was more likely to lead to journey time increases as there were more trains to pass on the way.

Work is ongoing to increase the entry speed at Georgemas Junction and to fund level crossing improvements, but we were advised it was extra difficult to make the business case for improvements on a line with the characteristics of the FNL.

The meeting was useful in making the views of users at the north end of the line personally known to SR and NR officials.

Richard Ardern

BRORA STATION BUILDING

Nick Lindsay, BaDAG (Brora and District Action Group) – Brora Railway Station Building Sub-group

nicklindsay@btinternet.com

Brora Railway Station is located in the East Sutherland Village of Brora on the Far North Line between Inverness and Thurso/Wick. The village itself has a population of around 1200, but is also a popular visitor destination, with attractions such as the golf, fishing, walking and the Clynesh Distillery.

The village has a rich industrial past, in which the station and the railway have played a significant part since it was linked to the national network in 1871. The local heritage group (Clyne Heritage Society) is active in

promoting the industrial heritage of the area and has developed, in partnership with the Brora Community Council and Highland Council, The Brora Village Heritage Trail and accompanying booklet, which features the station as one of the points of interest and importance.

The current Brora Railway Station building was built in 1895 to replace an original version of the building, dating to when the line was first opened. It has now has been unoccupied for over two decades and is in a deteriorating condition. It is a Category C Listed Building and has also been added recently to the Buildings at Risk Register for Scotland.

A Brora Railway Station Building working group was set up in 2004 to investigate a sustainable

use for the building at that early stage. A feasibility study was commissioned and a sustainable user was identified. However, over the following 18 months, the waters became muddied and proceedings were delayed, with the result that the identified user lost heart, pursued another option and, in the absence of another sustainable user, the working group ran out of steam!

That is the history and, in late 2013, the Brora and District Action Group (BaDAG) set up a Brora Railway Station Building Sub-group to re-investigate how this formerly beautiful building, now the subject of vandalism and neglect, could be brought back into vibrant life and be a focal point in the village once again.

Contact was initially made with John Yellowlees, External Relations Manager, ScotRail and Andy Savage, Executive Director, Railway Heritage Trust, with whom the sub-group met at Brora on October 14th, 2013. Also invited to attend was Deirdre MacKay, the local elected member of Highland Council.

The productive meeting established that:

- Brora Station was one of only 3 unused stations on the entire ScotRail network.
- It was high in the priority of ScotRail to establish a viable use for the Brora Station building.
- Attitudes of the railway authorities towards working with the community appear to have improved immeasurably since 2004/05.
- ScotRail and the Railway Heritage Trust, between them, would commit to invest 95% of the refurbishment costs, subject to an approved business use for the building being identified.

With this encouraging mandate from ScotRail and the Railway Heritage Trust, a public meeting was thought to be the way forward. The purpose of the meeting was to elicit ideas for a sustainable use for the building, which would, following refurbishment, be leased to BaDAG from Network Rail (owners of the building), through Scotrail (lessees of the building). Confusing? Yes!

Many interesting ideas, ranging from a boxing gymnasium to a backpackers' hostel, were proposed at the public meeting, but none were considered to be completely independently sustainable. BaDAG, a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation

(a SCIO), run entirely by willing volunteers, does not have the resources to operate any businesses itself. Any business proposal for the station building to be considered by BaDAG must be a separate entity, operating independently and sustainably, with a commitment to being

a tenant under the landlordship of BaDAG.

In the meantime, some other progress has recently been made in brightening up the station, thanks to the generosity of ScotRail in providing a 'wee train' planter, in which children from our local primary school planted a variety of flowers and shrubs. We hope further planting and tidying will be carried out during the Summer. For those of you with access to Facebook, further information can be found at both the BaDAG and Friends of Brora Station Facebook pages.

If you either have a once in a lifetime brilliant idea, or know of someone who could put the building to an innovative, sustainable and exciting use, then please get it touch. We would just love it!



Photo: Oliver Dixon -
via Wikimedia Commons

In April I received an email from a regular railway traveller.

Hi - I travel on tourist trains around the world. In January I made the trip from Bognor Regis to Wick and Thurso by train. The Scottish part of the journey rivals the best in the world for scenery, the staff are fantastic, but the windows on our train from Wick to Inverness were very dirty. Please put pressure on the operator to arrange for them to be cleaned before starting every journey. It is good that the train still runs, but tourists want, and will pay more for something better than a dirty class 158 DMU. Take a look at what Kiwi Rail has done with its Scenic Trains, because trains like those would attract tourists in their hoards to Scotland. They don't need to run every day, one train could probably cover all of Scotland's scenic routes in a week, people and tour companies will arrange their itineraries to suit when the train runs. Switzerland is another good example for tourist trains. Scotland's railways are a fantastic asset, that can be used to bring more visitors to Scotland. Class 158 DMUs are better than nothing, but they are not good enough for today's world travellers. Please lean on the new operator to provide a more suitable train for the tourist and tourist industry. I visit Scotland by train regularly, there have been occasions when I have not been able to get a seat on the Highland Main Line. Tourists talk to other potential tourists, if their experience of Scottish trains has been poor, that is what is going to be talked about. The best solution is to separate tourists from local travellers, providing each with the train and service that best suit their needs.

Best wishes, Tim Hitchcock.

I contacted Tim who went on to write:

"Great Rail Journeys" "Rail Discoveries" "Railway Touring Company" "Cosmos Tourama" are some of the holiday companies I have personally enjoyed railway touring holidays with. Scotland has the "Belmond Royal Scotsman", the "Jacobite" steam train and a few one-off charters. No train uses purpose built rolling stock. I believe one bright distinctive train is what is needed, such as New Zealand's TransAlpine or Switzerland's Glacier Express. Almost everyone knows these trains, Scotland needs to create its own version. To make the train pay it needs to work hard and I believe the Scottish government should play its part, after all it has shown itself to be both pro-rail and proactive in making things happen. Friends of railways do a good job and I look forward to the day when I can see Scotland from a purpose built tourist train with large clean windows, an open area for photographers, optional commentary and a good buffet car.

THE NESS VIADUCT COLLAPSE 1989

I read with interest the article by Richard Ardern in Issue 64 of The Far North Express. I too had attended the talk given by Adrian Boal at Millburn Academy Inverness on November 19th on behalf of the Inverness Field Club, but was somewhat disappointed that another possible factor was not mentioned in his presentation.

The only new facts I learned were that the steel re-inforcing rods put into the new supporting pillars were coated with a ceramic sheath, presumably to protect them and slow down any subsequent corrosion, and that a 5ft deep scour hole had developed downstream; but it was also of interest to see copies of Joseph Mitchell's original drawings of 1862, if only briefly. Joseph Mitchell from his own experience and that of his father, former Inspector of Roads and Bridges for the Highlands, knew the River Ness well and was acutely aware of the effects of scouring by the fast flowing river.

I had attended, also, a previous talk at the Inverness Museum on the collapse of the viaduct shortly after it had occurred, and after it was announced that a new viaduct would be built. I cannot remember the exact date of the talk or who gave it, possibly someone from Jamieson Mackay & Partners, Glasgow (the consultants) who designed the new replacement bridge. Whosoever it was, he paid tribute to Joseph Mitchell and his original design of 1862 and to Malcolm Rifkind for standing up to Margaret Thatcher and fulfilling his promise that a replacement viaduct would be built, otherwise there would have been no Far North Line. He claimed that if a profound change in the flow of the river had not occurred, Joseph Mitchell's viaduct would have survived to the present day! This may have been brought about by the Inverness Harbour Board's decision to dredge the harbour to accommodate larger docking vessels.

I have not been able to find any details of this operation and if any consultations were held with Network Rail on what possible effects this could cause on the river flow upstream and if any steps were taken to allow for this on upstream structures. In any event, after the dredging, there was a significant increase in the river flow and, possibly as a consequence of the increased scouring effects, the viaduct collapsed.

The above theory was not mentioned in the talk at Millburn Academy last November and unfortunately there was not time for me to raise the matter myself.

I trust that you will find this of interest and that it will help to set the record straight.

Thomas L. Coombs

Nairn

February 14th, 2015.

Frustrations of the Far North Line

Dear Sir,

After receiving issue 63 of the newsletter I decided that after thoroughly enjoying the wide mix of articles and the continuing good work of the FoFNL Committee I would write and congratulate the new team behind the newsletter. Well you can see where that got me after I found myself reacting in the same way on receiving issue 64 and this time being motivated to put pen to paper.

What follows is a very personal account of my observations of the work of the committee from the privileged position of having been a member in my capacity of Newsletter Editor.

Why "Frustrations"? Well, time and time again on reading newsletters it is evident that FoFNL are trying to influence people who should know an awful lot more about running a railway than we do but who appear to make inexplicably poor decisions. Two examples from issue 64 will make my point before I go further back into the past. Page 13 describes the timetabling of two trains to pass at a non-existent loop at Kinbrace and on page 25 where Les Turner in his paragraph headed "Bizarre" tells us of an improved lightly used level crossing having its speed limit reduced from 20mph to 10mph. The restraint exercised by our committee from not 'sounding off' to the powers-that-be is highly admirable.

I find myself smiling as I write this, in that it reminds me of an email exchange I had with John Brandon, our Convener at the time, when I had the temerity to suggest that it was possible that the work of FoFNL was now finished. Quite rightly he put me in my place by detailing all the measures that still needed to be pursued as has been amplified by successive newsletters.

Historically the frustrations that come to mind are quite varied: take for example our feeling that we had had success in getting the afternoon services to Kyle and Wick to leave Inverness as a four-car unit thereby making good use of the time and signalling constraints imposed by the single track to Muir of Ord. Imagine our horror when it was discovered that someone who should have known better had put the Kyle portion in front of the Wick portion thereby forcing the long-suffering Wick passengers into an unnecessary wait due to the constraints of the RETB signalling system.

A more personal frustration was the situation regarding a planning application by Highland Deephaven at Evanton to have a rail link provided into the pipe construction yard. Here we had an incredible situation where someone, when designing the A9 by-pass of Evanton, had had the foresight to design in, and have built, a rail-under-road bridge installed in anticipation of further developments at the pipe yard. To my limited knowledge of such things this seemed to be a perfect situation for achieving more freight on the line, but unfortunately in the years that had passed by the gradients and the locomotives were now deemed unsuitable for pursuing this development and now I am faced with this white elephant every time I drive that section of the A9.

I'll restrict myself to just two further examples of the frustrations we faced. The first was the Georgemas Chord. On paper it seemed a perfect solution as to how to improve the delivery of passengers to Thurso and Wick and reduce some of the travel time they experienced. We knew that it would cost money that was scarce and also that the RETB signalling system at the time was unlikely to be reprogrammed to cope with the extra complexity of the chord, but it was nevertheless disappointing that nothing ever came of it.

Which brings me to my last frustration. We went to a great deal of trouble to bring about the improvement in the design of the 158 units so that they are more suitable for our line: toilet retention tanks, better window/seat alignment, better cycle and wheelchair accommodation. So it is extremely disappointing that there are more and more reports of 'our' units being deployed in the Central Belt whilst passengers in the north have to put up with the inadequate unrefurbished ones.

Keep up the good work, and I would encourage members to offer what skills and interests they have to further the aims of FoFNL and help keep the various organisations we work with on their toes.

J.R.Piercy Member 14

MORE LETTERS

On 16th February 2015 Richard Arden of FoFNL sent the following letter to Mark Carne CEO of Network Rail.

Dear Mr Carne,

FoFNL is the rail user group for the lines converging on Inverness.

At our 2008 AGM, one of your predecessors said "We must find and exploit real opportunities to reduce journey times"

Iain Coucher was talking about the Far North Line to Wick and Thurso which, over the years, had suffered from road journey times being significantly shortened due to the new A9 bridges, and then a sudden 22 minute rail journey time extension in May 2005.

Since then, we have had more minutes added on to the timetable including the emergency measures in December 2014. It is now being reported that the state of the track has declined so much as to cause serious concern. This is a new, and worrying, development.

When you spoke at the SCDI dinner in Aberdeen last month you were reported as saying that "priority will be given to enhancements which benefit the largest number of people." Moir Lochhead said exactly the same when First Group took over the ScotRail franchise 10 years ago.

Such understandably worthy sentiments have disadvantaged the north of Scotland for many years now. We are also part of the integrated network that is Scotland's railway and we need to be attractive to both passengers (including visitors) and freight. We cannot be pushed aside for ever when it comes to enhancements or, as now seems to be the case, regular maintenance.

The past eight months have seen serious endemic delays on the FNL, some due to ScotRail shortcomings and some down to Network Rail. Passenger confidence has been badly eroded such that encouragingly increased passenger use every year has suddenly changed into decline. We hope that this will be only a temporary blip, and that the current working party will recommend robust solutions and have these accepted and funded by Network Rail during CP5. We trust that further substantial work will also be done in CP6.

With CP6 in mind, we submitted the two enclosed high level papers to Network Rail in Glasgow during the autumn. They were written by our member Mike Lunan, the last Convener of the Rail Passengers Committee for Scotland. We deliberately set out not to be too prescriptive in the hope that NR would accept the long overdue need for serious improvements and would come and talk to us about the detail. We hope you will find time to read them and we would welcome feedback from you and from Glasgow.

Yours sincerely,

Richard Arden (Committee Member)

On the same day there was a report in The Times entitled "Boris raps Network Rail for failing to boost Stansted line" to which Mr Carne responded with a letter to the paper:

Sir,

Further to your report "Boris raps Network Rail for failing to boost Stansted line" (Feb 16), there is already significant railway investment planned in the Lea Valley, supporting up to 19,000 new homes. The consultation on Stansted four-tracking will lead to an updated business case, which will be presented in the summer. It remains to be seen how this will stand up in the face of the competing demands for rail investment elsewhere, but our commitment is to get the most out of the funds made available to us, to invest wisely and direct it to where it will give the most benefit.

Mark Carne, Chief Executive, Network Rail.

This letter appeared in the Inverness Courier on 27th March. We are reproducing it here to show how at least one traveller is feeling at the moment about ScotRail's Highland and Far North services. At a time when in general railway development is being promoted, and is accepted as something we aspire to having, it shows that in parts of the country the reality on the ground can be felt very differently by the people who actually use the trains. Abellio is in the comfortable position of being able to fix the problems without anyone being able to ask them why they let it get so bad in the first place. This is of course a temporary effect, often known as the "Honeymoon Period".

FoFNL members and many others reading this will know that the rolling stock in question is far from being "pre-war", having been built between 1989 and 1992, and is likely to remain in service until 2030. However, the comment shows how it seems to an ordinary traveller.

Current rail service is appalling

Sir, I had the misfortune to travel on the 13:56 from Edinburgh Waverley to Inverness. The train comprised two obviously ancient carriages with at least 450 unlucky passengers on board.

There was no room to stack luggage, not enough seating, elderly ladies sitting on suitcases and some standing.

The air was disgustingly fetid and far too hot. Everyone was crushed together and shortly after we set off one of only two toilets broke down. The conductor and staff were aware of the general discomfort and were genuinely apologetic about this throughout our three-and-a-half-hour tortuous journey.

This was not the first time. The north line from Inverness to Wick is far worse: four-and-a-half-hours of hell. These carriages must be pre-war, the constant banging, lurching and screeching and uncertain heating make it very unpleasant, the windows are often filthy in spite of the awesome scenery. Once again the staff are excellent.

These journeys are totally unacceptable between two major tourist destinations, Edinburgh and Orkney. What visitors think must be unprintable. To me it is outrageous that ScotRail has got away with this abysmal service for so long.

Farm stock in transit are far better treated. Let us hope the new company will update rolling stock by spending more of the massive subsidies to give long-suffering passengers a half decent service.

Sandy Chalmers, Invershin

A COLD JOURNEY TO THE FAR NORTH

This article appeared in the April 2015 issue of Railwatch. Reprinted with permission from the author.

When I became Chair of Railfuture Scotland, I decided I would like to get out and about to visit our affiliated rail user groups. For many people in remoter parts of Scotland, it is easy to feel as far away from Edinburgh as from London, and I thought I would meet user groups at first hand, hear about their campaigns, and see if Railfuture could help in any way. Below is an account of my visit to Inverness-Thurso to see the North Line Action Group, a distance of well over 300 miles.

My journey started at 08.04 leaving Drem, my local station. Little did I realise that it would be more than 10 hours before I arrived at Thurso that night! Everything started well until I arrived at Perth, when the train I was on was suddenly cancelled. We passengers were directed to the next train which, however, would be too late to meet the Inverness-Thurso train at 14.00. Not to worry. We were assured that transport would be provided at Inverness. It duly was and the remaining passengers heading north piled into two taxis at Inverness station. Instead of taking us to Thurso though, we were unceremoniously

dumped at Golspie, to await the Inverness train which was some distance behind us by now.

Because the rail line does not have the advantage of a Dornoch Firth crossing, the train has to make a long detour, serving several small towns on the way. It consequently takes far longer than the road journey. No facilities were available at Golspie station other than a very inadequate bus shelter. For five people on a cold December afternoon, this was not an enjoyable experience as we had to take turn about in the bus shelter to keep warm. Eventually the train arrived an hour later, with a welcome trolley service for us to have a hot cup of tea.

We proceeded to Thurso, at one stage going backwards at Georgemas Junction, apparently normal procedure. It was now well after 18.00 and I was relieved to get to the warm and welcoming Station Hotel in Thurso. I found it hard to believe that after 10 hours travel I was still on the Scottish mainland. The unfortunate people going on to Wick still had a further half an hour journey to undertake.

Next day I met with Mark Norton, the North Line Action Group convenor, as well as local community councillors, a representative from

the Caithness Transport Forum, and group members campaigning for a better rail service. They described the service as being “totally run down” with 22 cancellations between June and September this year, cancellations which often did not have any rail replacement service. Reasons for cancellations differed, from weather to lack of staff or signalling problems. There seemed to be a significant lack of engagement from ScotRail in listening to local concerns and in attempting to rectify the problems on the line.

Members also recounted the difficulties that local people had using the bus service to Inverness where medical treatment for the north-east is now centred. A three-hour bus journey was difficult to say the least, compared to the freedom of being able to move about on the train. This was a particular problem for patients suffering from muscular injuries, cancer, neurological conditions or anyone with a walking aid. “Not a suitable journey for sick people” was a comment made, although too often it was a journey they had to make.

After a thorough discussion of the issues, and agreement on ways to take matters forward, I made my way back to Thurso station, only to find that all trains on the line were cancelled because of “bad weather”. In vain did I point out that there was no bad weather in Thurso. It was actually quite a fine sunny day but it had been decided elsewhere that the weather

necessitated cancellation of all services and that was that. Bad weather was expected on the west coast, so trains on the east coast were cancelled as well.

I was directed to the service bus, along with many others who paid an extra £19 for this privilege with no information given how to reclaim the unused portion of their return ticket. The three-hour bus journey encountered no bad weather, had a quick stop in Dornoch as it was ahead of time, and arrived in Inverness promptly. What a shame the train could not have done so as well.

The North Line Action Group is now gearing up to encourage more involvement from local politicians to highlight the inadequacies of the rail service. I felt that this could only be a good thing. This is a very picturesque line which could be promoted through tourism as a scenic highlight, yet the frequent cancellations and reports of poor infrastructure need to be addressed.

I was reminded of the descriptions of the Waverley route in the Borders in the years before closure, when services were cancelled and withdrawn in order to make the line unsustainable and more suitable for closure. I hope the same fate is not in store for the Far North Line as its beautiful scenery deserves more attention, as well as the essential service it provides to the small communities on its route.

Allison Cosgrove

HITRANS NEWS UPDATE

HITRANS has produced a Newsletter dated 15 April 2015 which features outcomes from their recent board meeting. It gives a useful overview of proposals for a £3M makeover for Inverness station and of progress on the proposed new station at Dalcross Station.

It and the papers from the HITRANS Board Meeting on 10 April can be found under "HITRANS documents" on the website www.hitrans.org.uk .

Relevant papers are:

item 8 Inverness Airport (Dalcross) Station - update.

item 10 Points North - Far North Line timekeeping summit. Also an appendix containing the slides used by speakers from Network Rail, ScotRail and HITRANS.

item 14 Inversparkie - on future electrification prospects for the Highland Main Line.

item 16 Inverness Station development - Platform 4 Change.

item 18 Lifting the Spirit is the final report on the whisky trials from Elgin [EL-GIN?]

As can be seen elsewhere in this issue, FoFNL has been talking to retired railwaymen with long experience in very senior positions. Clearly, the governance and operating environments have changed markedly on the railways in recent years.

Without breaking any confidences, FoFNL can distil some of the past wisdom in more general terms and build on this to apply it to the present situation. What follows is our constructive assessment of how some of the tried and tested methods of the past might have a relevance today as the new franchisees and Network Rail ponder developments and evolution in the modern mix of governance and operation.

At this early stage in the new franchises, and particularly of the proposed Deep Alliance (Abellio ScotRail and Network Rail), we seek to do no more than offer a few thoughts from observers which might serve to catalyse other thoughts in the current organisations. This of course we do in the hope of enriching the emerging new models towards the end game, which we all seek, of a railway excelling in being fit for purpose in the coming years for the carriage of both passengers and freight.

The current promises for better journeys for tourists are timely, but it must also be remembered that all the main lines in the Highlands are part of the strategic transport links of Scotland and are not just local services. These links are particularly important for business travellers and for freight. The Far North Line, for example, is used all year round to access Inverness, in particular, for employment, education and health services.

Against that background it has to be said that the Highlands are a difficult operating environment. It is over 100 miles from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness, another 80 on to Kyle and the extreme of 160 on to Wick. Rescue locomotives or trains for breakdowns are a long distance away when something goes wrong. Weather conditions challenge the lengthy miles of single track railway (often with very long sections between passing loops) with snow, floods and windblown trees all adding

occasional ingredients to the difficulty. Much is better than it was: with modern radio systems, the vulnerability of routes equipped only with telegraph wires strung from poles has been overcome, and multiple-unit trains can keep going if one motor fails.

Nevertheless, when things do go wrong the consequences come with added severity on such routes. Planning resilience means that motive power must be extra robust and well maintained, while track and telecommunications technicians have to be strategically located to reach trouble spots as quickly as possible and need to be provided with the tools to do the job. If this means a locomotive and crew to haul in the required materials and men, then extra provision for this may have to be made beyond what might be acceptable in more populated parts of the country. In particular, resources need to be available to assist stranded passengers, in this situation where the alternative transport and other facilities are not available just beyond the railway fence. Again, the railway radio system is a great aid, but it can reasonably be asked whether a railway controller based in Glasgow or Edinburgh can have adequate local knowledge to manage that human aspect of a difficult situation, involving as it might bus services or sustenance?

While writing this I have learned from BBC Radio Scotland (never noted for a sure grasp of geography or timetables) that there is a lorry off the road at Rhiconich “in Lairg”. Lairg must be a big city if it extends over 40 miles to Rhiconich!! We have had plenty of promises from ScotRail in Glasgow that the replacement bus will be “sent round from Altnabreac to Forsinard” and similar unlikely events. Geographical precision is important in such cases. Is it perhaps also important in terms of the location of railway management and decision-making themselves?

The franchise years have brought much centralisation both in the train operating companies and in Network Rail. Budget and operational control has been transferred south, even to England, leaving the north of Scotland

to make the best of it. During and since the Commonwealth Games the Far North Line has suffered greatly.

The idea of the Deep Alliance between Abellio and Network Rail presents an opportunity to project its logic to the situation we have been describing in our part of the network. The idea must surely be to combine the resources of the railway family in the north of Scotland to run a better service. Long and isolated single track lines need to have track and trains organised together, with a local management team in day-to-day charge, with a realistic budget and resources, including sufficient rolling stock of all kinds.

The new sleeper franchise has created a clear focus for its specialised product, and of course it is to be welcomed that Serco has chosen to set up a management team based in Inverness. This leads to recollections of the Area Management of BR days, whereby the local team of commercial, operations and engineering managers were specifically intended to work jointly to the same end. Not only did it bring knowledge and commitment to the local train service, it recognised opportunities to develop traffic and the product, which it duly did develop. Moreover, these managers were learning the trade of running a business, coping with risk, and thus fitting themselves for a career running a national concern.

Is it far-fetched to wonder if this approach to the product and developing business sense might spin off from the Serco policy? What possibilities might there be for innovation if the local on-train catering staff from Abellio and East Coast were empowered to work with Serco staff to create a centre of catering excellence at Inverness or Dingwall, truly tailored to the Highland market? What risks would there really be? And what

potential might it unlock in terms of service, enterprise and talent? Let us not forget that back in BR days the catering on the Edinburgh – Glasgow trains derived from a belief of the staff from the Aberdeen services that there would be a market if they were to take their trolleys, during their lie-over time, on a return trip on the Edinburgh – Glasgow line. And they did so, on their own initiative. Having tested the market, they could present the evidence to success to a grateful senior management, who had had other, higher preoccupations.

Where might such supportive, collegial working lead? Perhaps we could also aim for a revamped Inverness station, featuring Highland catering and hospitality, the Highland Tourist Information Office, and exceptionally knowledgeable and friendly staff. Might there be here the desirable centre for combined control of the combined railway operations, with informed staff, attuned to the needs of local travellers and offering a true Highland welcome and farewell to all our visitors?.

On the Network Rail future planning front, it would be good to see an effective Alliance speeding up the proposed greatly improved infrastructure provision for the operating efficiency of northern lines. Double track capacity is so urgently required on all three routes to and from the Inverness hub, even some on the Far North Line!

But these strategic, long-term, ‘big ticket’ aspirations have rightly to be dealt with at a national level, with corners being fought on a larger stage. This is the milieu where the new Alliance and Transport Scotland can shine, especially if stakeholders and empowered local management can supply from their own alliance the solidly based ideas and facts from experience.

Premier Station

Answer

Altnabreac comes top of the list as its code is **ABC**.

Elsewhere on the line, Dingwall (**DIN**) can be a noisy place especially with two class 37s.

Alness (**ASS**) is an ASSet to the town.

Brora (**BRA**) obviously needs some support.

Helmsdale (**HMS**) has royal maritime patronage.

Forsinard (**FRS**) has royal society patronage.

Muir of Ord (**MOO**) is proud of its agricultural heritage as a cattle tryst in droving days.

And Beaully (**BEL**) is the BELle of them all!

A VIEW FROM THE SIDELINES

I have enjoyed reading the latest issue of the Far North Express (more impact if Snail is substituted for Express?) courtesy of Richard Ardern. It struck me as both informative and interesting and demonstrated an amazing knowledge of the detail of operations on the far North Line. Congratulations to all concerned.

It is many years since I had a brief acquaintance with the railways radiating from Inverness so you will perhaps understand my reluctance to comment on the current detailed operation of the Far North Route and rather confine myself to general issues.

There is a mention in the "Express" that the timetable needs to be constructed using a blank sheet of paper, untrammelled by what has happened in the past. I agree. But why stop at the timetable? Some further aspects which could be usefully examined from first principles might, I suggest, include the following:

The franchise itself. If the Caledonian Sleeper, comprised of a handful of trains, is worth a separate franchise why not the services north of Inverness? Maybe include the Aberdeen and Perth lines as well?

Should not such a franchise be of the vertical variety and include track and signalling?

Irrespective of the above, make a careful examination of the management of the services north of Inverness. It would often appear, especially when something goes wrong, that there is no effective local management. Appoint an energetic manager to run the route and give him, or her, the appropriate powers to do the job. That is exactly what BR did with no little success when the Settle – Carlisle line was in a similar state. The highly centralised ScotRail management system clearly does not work well in the Highlands.

Have a critical look at the rolling stock. Is there anything more suitable available? Would it make sense to have dedicated stock confined to the route and maintained at Inverness?

What about the track and signalling? Can it be improved and managed better, so as to reduce

costs. Cost reduction is the most likely method of unlocking the investment necessary for improvement.

A warning. Beware the 'R' words such as resilience, reliability and realistic when applied to timetables. They are usually impressive euphemisms for slower journeys. If a service is having punctuality problems the easiest and time honoured solution is to extend the journey times. (Known to timetablers as 'Recovery' time. A similar principle to Sir Alex Ferguson's famed "Fergie time").

To turn now to the increasingly distant past. From April 1966 to January 1968, I spent a couple of the more pleasant years of my 40 year railway career in the Highland Lines Manager's office, located in the old Highland Railway's HQ at Station Square. This was very much an experimental organisation and, indeed, formed a template in some respects for the style of organisation adopted by BR in the 1980s. I have to confess, though, that my job was mainly concerned with tidying up the leftovers from the Beeching Reshaping proposals from which the Highlands escaped amazingly lightly. For this I make no apology as things could not have carried on as they were.

My first experience of the FNL was a visit to Alness to arrange the closure of the almost disused distillery private siding and being received in a splendid wood panelled office by Col •H A C Mackenzie, the managing director, seated behind a suitably imposing desk. He made his opinion of BR very clear and I took myself off with my tail between my legs. It was the only distillery I ever visited where I was not offered a dram. Mind you, the siding was duly closed.

Then there was the occasion when I accompanied my boss, Jim McCall, on a two day expedition to the far north. At the time, 1966/67, the passenger service on the FNL consisted of the 6.10am, 10.30am and 5.00pm trains from Inverness and the corresponding Up departures from Wick, with journey times in excess of 4 hours. There were two goods trains each way taking 6 to 8 hours for the full journey

and a couple of shorter trips to and from Invergordon and Lairg. In steam days one of the goods trains left Wick around the witching hour and took the rest of the night to reach Inverness. I think that was the train for which you could buy a first class ticket to travel in the discomfort of the brake van. In those days the line was operated pretty much in two sections south and north of Helmsdale with the shed there taking a major share of the workings.

But to my tale. We had an early start on the 6.10am from Inverness on which I seem to remember a buffet car. We certainly had a good breakfast from one source or another. The first visit was to Brora where we were welcomed by George Sim the stationmaster, who had been the last SM at Dornoch. He also had the great advantage of hailing from former Great North of Scotland territory so we discovered some mutual acquaintances. There was still evidence on the loading bank of the tramway from Brora colliery. Incidentally, coal was still being despatched by rail as late as 1966, and probably later, to the power station at Dundee.

We eventually reached Wick by the 10.30am ex-Inverness and after a discussion with the stationmaster and a look round the station, repaired to our accommodation in a modest B&B. BR expenses did not run to lavish living. The evening was spent in a local hall listening to the string section of the Scottish National Orchestra performing for the musical literati of Wick. Quite a contrast with the tales we had we had heard at Brora and Golspie of dinner jacketed gents from Dunrobin taking the Duke's engine out for a spin after a well lubricated dinner.

The next morning it was again up with the lark to get a lift on Permanent Way Inspector Morrison's trolley to Georgemas and Hoy. This contraption was a metal box mounted on two axles and powered by a Ford bus engine. The driver's position consisted of a seat and the usual gear lever, hand brake and foot pedals, but no steering wheel. Comfortable it was not, the suspension, if it existed, could not cope with the jolts at every rail joint, and the cold breezes of Caithness whistled through the holes in the floor which accommodated the controls.

On arrival at the Air Ministry private siding at Hoy we found an official entrance with a gate house surrounded by a neat garden and staffed by a security chap in a Ministry of Defence uniform. The siding served the fuel dump for RAF Wick, a World War 2 fighter base. The RAF had long since departed and there had been no traffic for years, but BR was still maintaining the connection, so we wanted rid of the siding. Keeping in mind BR's responsibilities for the defence of the realm we could not do that without the agreement of the appropriate Government department. After several months of letter writing agreement was eventually forthcoming, the siding duly closed and BR could stop wasting cash on maintaining the connection. My own feeling was that the place had been overlooked and forgotten, but it serves as a good illustration of the kind of thing the Beeching plan unearthed. It was not only the railways themselves on which taxpayers' money was being wasted.

The next port of call was Thurso to catch the 11.10am train for Altnabreac. The reason for the visit to Altnabreac was that the station was planned for conversion to an unstaffed halt, which proposal had been met by loud objections from the Hon. Robin Sinclair, the proprietor of the Loch Dhu Hotel. The Hon. Robin was trying to develop a sporting business at the hotel and we were meeting him to see if his objections could be overcome.

We were met at the station by the estate gamekeeper who took us to the hotel accompanied by the stationmaster, a chap from Glasgow who could not wait to be made redundant and return to his native streets. It seemed that his good lady had taken one look at the Caithness scenery and flatly refused to move to Altnabreac. He was left, therefore, camping on his lonesome in the station house.

At the Loch Dhu we were greeted by a young lady from, of all places, London, who introduced herself as the manager. A little later the Hon. Robin appeared accompanied by the sole teacher from the local school, together with two or three other people whose functions are lost in the mists of memory. It shortly became clear that what was worrying the Hon. Robin was the supply of shotgun cartridges for the gamekeeper

and hotel guests. The cartridges were ordered from an establishment in Thurso and transported to Altnabreac by passenger train. It was easy to assure the Hon. Robin that it would be simple for the supplier to advise the hotel by phone as to which train the package had been despatched and it could then be collected directly from the guard at Altnabreac. Into my brain flashed memories of the regulations for the carriage of explosives by rail. These were particularly stringent in the case of passenger trains. Deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, I bit my tongue, reflecting that such rules were really for the stuff which caused big bangs and a few puny cartridges being carried the short distance from Thurso to Altnabreac posed no real risk.

Business completed, the Hon. Robin, obviously interested in railways, started a discussion about how the passenger service between Inverness and the Far North could be improved. I have an abiding memory of him, attired in kilt and what would be described in Aberdeenshire as a pair of muckle tackety boots, on his hands and knees on the tartan carpet demonstrating how the line should be operated. The tartan check made a good substitute for rails. It should be explained that the somewhat gloomy interior of the Loch Dhu was furnished in the best Balmoral style made popular by Queen Victoria. The whole affair deserved the pen of a Compton McKenzie to do it justice.

Since writing the above I have discovered that Altnabreac was converted to an unstaffed halt on 25th September 1966 which would most probably place the above episode in the spring or early summer of that year.

A trip to Kyle to see the stationmaster, Sam Hart, who looked after the ferry service to Kyleakin (no bridge then) as well as the station, was memorable for a glorious day. Travelling in the brake van to get an idea of the parcels traffic produced the bonus of a running commentary on features of interest, to say nothing of local gossip, from the Kyle guard who had taken over the train at Achnasheen. It was fascinating to see him fasten up some individual newspapers with string and toss them expertly and accurately from the open door into the back gardens of a row of houses which backed onto

the line, near Plockton I think. The steamer to Stornoway, starting from Mallaig, had a lengthy lunch time call at Kyle. While having some lunch in the station refreshment room I observed a pair of officers from the ship arrive at the bar and dispose of what appeared to be most of a bottle of gin in an astonishingly short time. They were obviously regular customers.

The private sidings at Invergordon which served the defunct R N dockyard, the slaughterhouse and harbour area, provided a problem to which I was happy to turn a blind eye. My researches revealed that when the rail access was provided the Highland Railway Company had undertaken to maintain the sea wall on which the track was built "in perpetuity". What the outcome of that was I have no idea, but I am sure it will now be the province of the port authority.

The recently enacted Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act had, for the first time, brought railway premises and staff accommodation within the realm of HM Factories Inspectorate. Some enterprising railway staff, perhaps briefed by their trade unions, started reporting deficiencies in their places of work to their local Factory Inspectors. A signalman at Fearn had made a complaint about conditions there and the result was an enforcement order against BR with a time limit within which to comply. Conditions there were truly grim, especially the awful lavatories, and BR had no option but to get on with it.

My final memory, and in many respects my best, concerns Forsinard. There I met Mr Mohammed Ayub, the stationmaster. The station house was part of the station building and it was not unusual for passengers in trains to be jerked from their somnolence by the sight of Mrs Ayub in traditional dress. Mohammed was an immigrant from Pakistan and told me that the surroundings at Forsinard were just like his home village. He also assured me that he looked after the station just as if it were his own shop. I am sure he did just that.

I cannot now recall quite how, but I was able to assist Mohammed in some way and he would ring me up when he needed advice on railway matters, or just to have a chat. His wife did not share his liking for Forsinard; I believe she was

a native of Dundee which had a long standing Pakistani population attracted by the jute factories. Mohammed eventually got a job on the Southern region and when passing through Inverness on his way south very kindly presented me with a carefully wrapped haunch of venison. I presented it in turn to Mrs Scott, my landlady, who was delighted. My fellow railway lodger, Eric Winton, and I feasted on venison for several days.

My time at Inverness came to an end when it became clear that the managerial organisation

there had served its purpose, as indeed had I. My next step was to the Eastern Region HQ at York. This was located in the magnificent former North Eastern Railway Company's office building just inside the city walls and adjacent to the original George Hudson terminal station. A greater contrast with the homely atmosphere of Inverness would be hard to imagine, but that is another story altogether.

Douglas Flett - Nairn

Back to Banff

FoFNL's attention has been drawn to an interesting article in an unlikely place. Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth Rail Passenger Association's news section (<http://sarpa.info/news.html>) has a piece by their chairman, Angus Eickhoff, concerning the merits of reopening the former GNoSR route from near Elgin on the Inverness-Aberdeen line to Banff. It makes interesting reading and highlights the disappointment felt both in Scotland and Wales that the respective governments are prepared to spend huge sums on road schemes but balk at the far smaller amounts needed to make major improvements in the rail system.

FOFNL MEMBERS' VISIT TO ALTNABREAC

We are hoping there will be a visit to Altnabreac by train from Thurso led by our President, John Thurso, this summer.

The plan would be to travel on the 13.06 from Thurso and alight at Altnabreac at 13.35. On the train, John will tell us about living at Altnabreac when he was a boy and helping to signal the passing trains.

Our return train is at 13.55 and arrives at Thurso at 14.24. Those who wish to have much longer at Altnabreac could travel on the morning trains which arrive at 09.03 from the north and at 10.30 from the south, or they could stay on until the 17.01 southbound or 17.21 northbound.

This visit is likely to be in July or August, but as the date has not yet been fixed, would all those who would like to go please email Malcolm Wood, our Secretary and give him your contact details so that we can get back to you when the date is decided. Thank you.

Malcolm can be reached on secretary@fofnl.org.uk or, for those without email, his phone number is 01863 766350.

Altnabreac by Mountain Bike. [from *Active Outdoors* no 7 spring/summer 2015 p34. *Scottish Provincial Press*]:

"Take the train to this request stop for a 16 mile circuit on mostly flat estate tracks. The route is waymarked by faded arrows, with a map on the station platform. It leads past a series of lochs and past a farm - listen out for the barking dogs - before the ruined Dalnawillan Lodge, then heads back past an unusual building alongside Loch Dubh."

GOING DUTCH: A NEW RAIL CYCLE IN THE FAR NORTH

Utrecht (*which translates as “You’ll have had a long walk?”*)

Press Release: Woedensday 1 April 2015.

AbelLeo, the new partnership running ScotRail from today, is pleased to announce that we will be following in the footsteps of our ancestor Jan de Groot. (*pronounced gutturally as in “Throat” but without the first T*).

Managing Director, Jeff Helmsdaletaler, said “We are really excited to become heirs to the iconic and scenic railway line to the northern extremity of Scotland, our *Ultima Thule* since Jan first colonised the area”.

We are so inspired, we will revive the name of the famous prewar express train “*The John o’ Groat*” for our fastest ever principal mid-morning service from Inverness to Wick returning at afternoon tea time.

We are also very **Kean** to revive the name “*The Orcadian*” for the crack boat trains at 2:00pm from Inverness and 8:00 am from Wick which connect with the Orkney ferry at Thurso.

Orkney councillors have requested that we revive the idea of overnight connecting services with Glasgow. The connecting carriage formerly left Buchanan House at 10:45 pm or, as we now say, 22:45. We will certainly bear this in mind for when sleeper coaches become available in 2018.

What we will do straight away is to provide tourist coaches which will give passengers the opportunity to learn **Dutch** off our educational advertising posters. Dutch is quite a difficult language to learn but the length of journey will give all of you a sporting chance of success!

We will also provide our exciting catering offer on every service. Expect real strength coffee and deli-ghtful cheeses to be on the menu. A very healthy option, but enough of this waffle...

Bon Voyage!

(*Unfortunately, there is no equivalent phrase in Dutch to top that!*)

Abel and Leo.

DOUBLE DUTCH DICTIONARY

Definitions to help passengers feel at home with the new Abellio franchise.

Abellio

Scotland's railway

Dam Monument

In Amsterdam - not the one on the hill above Golspie!

Double Dutch

A return ticket

Duchess

An appropriate steam locomotive for the Far North Line as far north as Dunrobin

Dutch Auction

£5 single only tickets to Altnabreac

Dutch Barn

Our innovative open carriages

Dutch Bulbs

Lineside vegetation - a Network Rail responsibility

Dutch Cap

A form of protection for couplings

Dutch Cheese

Our uniquely mature press releases

Dutch Comfort

Class 158s

Dutch Courage

Essential for long journeys especially if Pacers are substituted for 158s

Dutch East Indies

Hot cuisine on the train

Dutch Elm Disease

A secret weapon in the Network Rail trackside armoury

Dutch Oven

Only found on our steam trains

Dutch Renaissance

We're still waiting

Fietspad

A cycle path. NOT the seat opposite you.

Flying Dutchman

Prefers Wick airport

Go Dutch

We are sorry but Abellio does not accept third party payments such as business expense accounts.

Het Loo *

There's one in each carriage where you may "sit on the throne"

Jointed Track

Dingwall Rogart Upto Golspie and Salzcraggie

NedRail

Our sister company running the Glasgow subway

Van Byke

Overflow transport for cycles

Your Dutch Uncle Jeff - Proost!

* Het Loo Palace (Dutch Royal Residence until 1962)

BOOK REVIEW

Waverley Steam Navigation Company

Deayton, A and Quinn, I (compilers), Amberley Publishing, 2014, 192pp, £20.00.

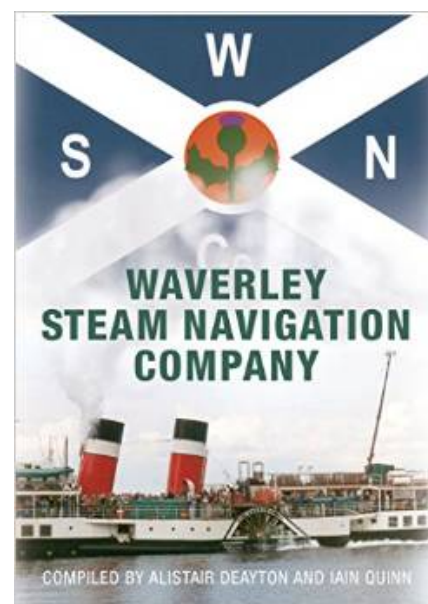
ISBN 978 1 4456 4155 3

Up Many a Creek With Scores of Paddles

A fascinating history of the early days (25 years) of the paddle steamer Waverley in preservation after she was sold to the Paddle Steamer Preservation Society for £1 in 1974 by Caledonian MacBrayne. Written largely by the major players, Terry Sylvester, Douglas McGowan and Captain David Neill.

Waverley will be sailing from Kyle of Lochalsh to Gairloch on Thursday 28 May and to Portree and round Raasay on Friday 29th.

Richard Ardern



TINA'S TEAROOM, DINGWALL STATION

How it all began

It was a sunny Sunday in August 2013 – as I left Church my arm was grabbed and a member of the congregation told me “The Station Tearoom is up for Sale!” “What does that have to do with me?” I asked in surprise. “You have to buy it – it has your name written all over it!” she declared. “Are you mad?” I spluttered – “I have a job I love and taking on a business would mean employing staff and working ridiculous hours and no no no, it's not for me!” A seed had been sown though, and after much discussion, deliberation and canvassing of friends and family it seemed I was the only person who thought it was a crazy idea! I decided better to regret the things we do in life than the things we don't! I regretfully resigned from my lovely job running Muir of Ord Library and said a very sad farewell to all my readers with a promise that their first cup of tea or coffee and slice of cake would be on me.

I had expected to take over at the beginning of November, however, the previous owner wanted out sooner than that so I found myself on Wednesday 23rd October as the proud owner of a Tearoom! Had you asked me the first day what that entailed I would have told you “driving” – I seemed to spend all day in the car fetching stock and supplies from various places. I inherited three members of staff so at least someone knew what they were doing.

I confess to being quietly terrified for the first few weeks as well as exhausted – the Tearoom was only open from 10am to 4pm in those days but my working day seemed to be never ending. Up early to get baking done and staying on into the evening doing cleaning and paperwork.

However, here we are 18 months on and while I can't say I am completely organised – the

mountain of paperwork needing to be “caught up with” seems to grow rather than diminish – I am certainly more in control of things than I was in those early days. I am much more organised with the baking and can get cakes and tray bakes made in an incredibly short time. I can also get scones and pancakes made and in the cabinet well before 10am each day for the “morning coffee” crowd.

I was careful not to change too much too soon as we had very good support from locals and I didn't want to scare them off. I had a log burner installed in October 2014 and that was a wonderful and very welcome addition.



My husband also put up a model railway – a hobby he is passionate about – and he changes the engine and rolling stock on a regular basis. The original idea was that the train would run continuously, but it is far too loud so it is only run when people ask to see it – which seems to make it much more special. Children of all ages are delighted when it is put on “just for them”!

We re-arranged the pictures which were on the walls – all done by local artists and for sale – and made the end near the platform the “Railway” end. The model railway is at this end and we have lots of railway related pictures on display – mostly from home! These often instigate conversations as people reminisce about the old trains and adverts – one of the pictures we could have sold at least a dozen times! We also stock, for sale, railway books and steam train pictures as well as some small prints of Dingwall Railway station from years ago – all very handy for that last minute birthday gift!

The opening hours have been increased so we are open from 8am Monday to Friday and from 10am on Saturday and we close at 4pm each

day. We are still closed on Sundays. In the summer we have many visitors from the local campsite who come in for a cooked breakfast but in the winter months I am normally left in peace to get the scones and pancakes made and the cakes decorated. We have tables and chairs on the platform when the weather is warm enough and not too windy – only problem being the seagulls who like to swoop down and help themselves to whatever they can carry.

Our customers are pretty varied – lots of locals who meet friends and family on a regular basis for coffee or lunch. Lots of visitors, particularly in the summer months, many of whom are heading north or west on the train for the day (on very sunny days I do confess to feeling a wee bit jealous of them as they buy a sandwich and a drink for the train as I would love to be clambering aboard myself!) commuters, football fans as we are so handy for Ross County, and of course lots of people heading home or away on holiday. There is also a very young regular who likes to come and see

the Royal Scotsman each week in season – and his granny often treats him to an ice lolly.



So did I do the right thing? I can't say it has all been plain sailing but there is nothing quite like someone telling you how much they enjoyed their scone with our homemade jam or a slice of cake – and that makes me feel very lucky indeed!

Tina Swanson

THE HIGHLAND RAILWAY COMPANY'S SESQUICENTENARY

On 1 February 1865 the Inverness and Aberdeen Junction and the Inverness and Perth Junction railways amalgamated to form The Highland Railway Company with its headquarters in Inverness. The Sutherland and Caithness Railway, opened in 1874, was worked by the Highland for ten years before being fully absorbed into the company. The Highland Railway itself was eventually absorbed into the London Midland and Scottish Railway at "the Grouping" on 1 January 1923.

The Highland Railway Society was formed in 1987 and its quarterly Journal has now reached issue no 112. A pdf index is available. Membership of

the society costs £15 and application should be made to John Fairlie, Membership Secretary, at memsec@hrsoc.org.uk or phone 01628 532926.

Much of the Society's considerable archive is housed in the Highland Archives in Inverness. The backlist of authoritative books includes the following which relate to the Far North Line.

The Black Isle Railway 2014.

Inverness and Ross-shire Railway 2012.

Lost Stations of the Far North Line 2010.

Pioneers of the Highland Tracks 2010.

These and others may be obtained from John Roake, treasurer@hrsoc.org.uk or phone 01963 370697.

A History of Helmsdale Station

Mike Willmot will give a talk about the history of Helmsdale Station from opening to the present restoration.

Saturday 13th June 2:00pm at Timespan, Dunrobin Street, Helmsdale KW8 6JA. This will be followed by a tour of the station house at 4:00pm.

Full details available online at www.fofnl.org.uk



Photo: Sandy Colley

Earlier this year 37685 was damaged when it struck a tree.

The damage to the loco is visible as it waited to begin its journey to Carnforth on 25 March.

Deltic 55022 (*Royal Scots Grey*) pretending to be 55003 (*Meld*) heads the stock of The Royal Scotsman from Invergordon into Dingwall on 28 April 2015.



Photo: Sandy Colley



Test train passing Dunrobin - April 2013.

This photo is by Peter Moore, a photographer based in Sutherland. His website is well worth a look:

www.pwmooreimages.com