

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.

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*Cover photo: Peppercorn A1 Pacific Tornado brings 'The Seaforth Highlander' into Dunrobin Castle station on 21st June 2015 on its way from Inverness to Brora. Photo by **Peter Jolly***

Reproduced courtesy of the Dunrobin Castle Station website - www.britishrailholidays.co.uk/dunrobin/index.htm

FOFNL MEMBERSHIP FORM

For an organisation such as ours, membership is vital both in terms of numbers, therefore influence, and to finance lobbying activities. If you would like to join The Friends of The Far North Line please download, print out and complete the application form from our website:

www.fofnl.org.uk/membership/memform.pdf

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

Improvements

Several months after three new franchises started operations out of Inverness it's time to see how well they've started. Virgin Trains East Coast (VTEC) operate the *Highland Chieftain* to and from Kings Cross each day. I have used it (and other VTEC services) several times and was greatly impressed by the small, but noticeable, improvements from Day One. The food offering to 1st Class passengers has a greater choice, and seems to be available for more of the journey. The Buffet also has a greater choice. The staff, although the same people, seem more cheerful and motivated, doubtless in part because the uncertainty over jobs has gone.

Good News

The Sleeper, now operated as a separate franchise by Serco, also showed an immediate improvement, again most obviously in the catering. The Lounge Car has a much wider range of food, mostly sourced from Highland (or at least Scottish) suppliers. There's even porridge as a breakfast option. Both VTEC and Serco have hit the ground running and delivered a 'good news' feeling straight away. Each of them will introduce new rolling stock in a few years - these things take time nowadays - but already there is delivery of something better.

Own Goal

How different is the Abellio ScotRail experience. Yes, there are ambitious plans for electrification and there will be new rolling stock on the electrified routes. There will be 'new' trains elsewhere - for an explanation of

'new' see another article in FNE - in 2019 or so. However there has been a notable absence of anything exciting on Day One. Indeed, if anything, Abellio's first major innovation has been a spectacular, and wholly unacknowledged, own goal. Club 55, whereby oldies could travel throughout Scotland at certain times of year for £19 return, has been abolished. It will be replaced by Club 50. Looks good, doesn't it? You get it when you aren't quite as ancient, and it works all year round. Gosh! But there are huge - unacknowledged - snags. You have to pay an annual membership; the ticket prices will be a lot higher for most journeys than the flat £19; you have to book on-line in advance. The it's-a-nice-day-let's-go-somewhere market, anecdotally quite considerable, will vanish. I have no doubt that in a year or two someone in Abellio will quietly reinvent Club 55, but the damage has been done. Large numbers of passengers making impulse-buy journeys won't come back.

Cancellations

Meanwhile cancellations continue on the FNL and partial journeys (Thurso omitted, trains starting from Lairg) remain a common occurrence. Haymarket units (158726 to 158741) continue to be diagrammed to work to Wick and Kyle (to the annoyance of ScotRail in Inverness, who are justly proud of their - our - sets with their extra bike spaces and tourist (and local)-friendly seating paid for in part by HITRANS and therefore Caithness Council Tax payers ...).

Mike Lunan - FoFNL Convener

Minor Details

WHAT constitutes "minor disruption"? Being held up in traffic for five minutes? Or possibly a train running 20 minutes late? At least that is what Shennachie would have thought. Someone may therefore need to explain ScotRail's slightly off-kilter definition, because it is clearly something of a head-scratcher.

Several entire rail journeys on the Far North Line between Inverness and Wick have been cancelled in the past week and every time ScotRail has filed them under "minor disruption" on its web page. Anyone who uses the route is well aware of the Far North Line's slightly chequered record for disruptions. But even with bus replacement services operating, Shennachie cannot imagine any of the line's put upon passengers referring to the cancellation of entire four and a half hour train journeys as minor. Maybe someone at the Oxford English Dictionary should give ScotRail a call.

That is the question asked in the *Shennachie* column in the *Inverness Courier* on 7th August.

Reopening

Imagine we are the campaign group for the reopening of the long closed Far North Line. We've seen with the Borders Railway Project how a case can be made for a railway: economic growth, safety, energy efficiency, speed, comfort, tourism.

Vital Link

This railway would be a major link between Scotland's northernmost city, many towns and villages in Caithness and Sutherland, and Orkney. Besides business traffic, commuter services and tourism the railway would be able to provide vital access to education, health and professional services as well as a safe and economic way of transporting hazardous and bulky freight, thus making the roads safer for local residents and visitors.

Desirable

We've seen how it's possible to motivate planners and encourage government investment in a very desirable public project. Our route is more than five times as long, there are some large projects required en route - bridging the Kyle of Sutherland at Invershin for example. There are 21 stations to reopen, we will need several trains, and then we will need staff to run the trains and maintain the railway. This is turning into a very expensive project. No, wait! - we already have almost all of this - the rails are there, the bridges built, the trains are running.

Affordable

Suddenly this is very affordable indeed. A few million would buy the necessary doubling of the six miles of track between Clachnaharry and Clunes, the installation of dynamic passing loops, the replacement of worn-out track and the employment of enough staff to run the trains. While we're at it some trains of a high enough standard would be very welcome too. For a fraction of the cost of providing the people of the Borders with the modern railway they so badly needed the

same could be done for the people of the Far North of Scotland.

Worthwhile

Whilst applauding the Scottish Government for its foresight in recognising the essential nature of the railway to the Borders community it would be good to think that it isn't only excited by new and impressive projects but also by the idea of being able to provide something equally worthwhile in other parts of Scotland.

Unreliable

In the meantime part of FoFNL's work is to encourage people to use the line. We can only promote something that's working properly, no amount of persuasion from FoFNL members will encourage people to use the FNL if it continues to be so unreliable.

Imagine

There have been many instances in recent months of services being cancelled and replaced by various forms of road transport. Often 25% of a day's trains have not run. Perhaps ScotRail should imagine the following scenario:

A couple have booked an all-inclusive weekend away only to find on arrival that they have been allocated to a dormitory and will be served beans on toast for dinner - no refund offered. Their protests are met with a puzzled reply suggesting that they were given somewhere to sleep and didn't starve so 'what was the problem?'

Guide

Abellio intends to develop the image of the FNL as a scenic railway so with this in mind we have produced a sample Window Gazer's Guide as a four-page pull-out in the centre of this issue. There is much to see, let's hope that we never revert to rolling stock where the view is obscured by window pillars.

Ian Budd

NEWSLETTER No.40 REVISITED

WHAT HAPPENS NOW...?

Any member who still has a copy of *Newsletter 40* (March 2007) might have a few moments of fun re-reading it. It was a slim extra copy produced in the run-up to the Holyrood elections in May of that year. It started by listing the ten things in an even earlier Newsletter (25, in the run-up to the 2001 General Election, when railway matters in Scotland were still very much a Westminster responsibility) which had set out as *Questions To Ask Your Candidate*. The 2005 article reckoned that one out of the ten (Invernet) had been achieved which, while a good start, was hardly thrilling stuff. The article set out, in a leisurely way, what "The real rail way ahead: 2007 - 2035" should look like.

And in many ways it was gratifyingly accurate. The 12 things (there had been some inflation) listed were:

- 1 Do some work on redoubling and/or loops on the FNL and Kyle Line (**no**, but NR might be beginning to think about a loop at Lentrane);
- 2 RETB replacement and colour light signalling as far as Dingwall (**no**, but TS might be thinking about extending the planned HML installation of ERTMS beyond Inverness);
- 3 Controlled-emission toilets on 158s (**YES**);
- 4 Further extension of Invernet (**YES**);
- 5 Inverness-Aberdeen redoubling and/or loops (**no**, but some work is planned in CP5);
- 6 HML doubling (**no**, but this is clearly in NR planning);
- 7 Gauge clearance to allow 170s and 22Xs to run on inter-city routes (**no**, but an even better option of having HSTs on these routes by 2019, so scored as a **YES** since better rolling stock was the desired outcome);
- 8 Replacement rolling stock (partial, but the matter is very much on the table. The new electric sets for EGIP will certainly score a **YES** and the HSTs on the inter-city score a **YES**. Whether the much-vaunted "tourist train" - sexed up 158s - will strike FNL users as anything new is a matter still in the jury room);
- 9 E-G electrification (**YES**);
- 10 Waverley Phase II (**YES**, and very fine it is);
- 11 GSWR doubling (**no**);
- 12 Initial work on identifying a route for High Speed between Edinburgh and Glasgow (partial, as the idea of HSx is firmly in Scottish Ministers' minds, linking with HS2 and even perhaps (stripping out the pre-election guff) starting to build south from the Central Belt towards some English destination - Newcastle?).

That's 5½ **YES**, and 5 **no**. A lot better than 1 out of 10 last time. Pushing for items 1 and 2 are FoFNL's highest priority now as although there have been several successful predictions their benefits have not been felt up here. Caithness and Sutherland passengers, taxpayers and - occasionally - voters require the pendulum to swing their way. The Central Belt is swallowing up investment (albeit at nothing like the London rate); the Borders are now having their cake. Rail spending per head of population in London exceeds the spending per head in the north of England by a factor of several dozen; it probably exceeds the amount spent per head of population in the north of Scotland by a factor of several hundred. But in 2016 there's another Holyrood election, and this autumn there's the start of the CP6 planning process, so come on, chaps, time for delivery.

Mike Lunan

2015 AGM

Minutes of the AGM of Friends of the Far North Line, held in the Glen Mhor Hotel, Inverness on 19 June 2015 at 11:00.

MINUTES OF THE 2014 AGM (previously circulated) were accepted.

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

John Thurso spoke of two things: "Rail" - covering the highly competitive possibilities of high-speed rail and the continuing viability of freight hubs and palletisation, and "Friends" - who are the best critics and who should be tapping the shoulders of those who run the railways. FoFNL was well-positioned to offer help in both areas.

CONVENER'S REPORT

Mike Lunan explained why he had come back to the vacant Convener's post in advance of the AGM, and thanked Richard Ardern for holding the reins for most of last year. The important work of persuading Network Rail and its funder, Transport Scotland, to prioritise infrastructure enhancements on the FNL from 2019 has already started (see recent Far North Express articles) and would continue in the next couple of years. He was willing to remain Convener for that period, but would be demitting office in 2017.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY'S REPORT

The report was read out by the Convener in the absence of the Membership Secretary. Membership is 160, made up of 134 individuals, 22 household, 3 Community Councils and 1 corporate. John Melling asked that contact be made with Community Councils, and the Convener said that he intended to do this in the next few months.

TREASURER'S REPORT

The accounts for the year ended 31 December 2014 were presented to the AGM. There was a deficit of £478.75 mainly due to advance purchase of postage stamps for the newsletter. Committee expenses were lower than the previous year with a small increase in the cost of producing Far North Express. The legacy of £4925.32 with the balance added to make a figure of £9000.00 invested with the Scottish Building Society in a bond. The Oakley bequest, now confirmed at £6102.38 by the Halifax, is awaiting transfer to an investment product. Assets at the year end were £15421.90.

Adoption of the accounts was proposed by Bob Barnes-Watts, seconded by John Brandon and approved unanimously by the meeting.

ELECTION OF OFFICE BEARERS

Convener: Mike Lunan

Secretary: Malcolm Wood

Treasurer: David Start

Membership Secretary: Angus Stewart

Newsletter Editor and Webmaster: Ian Budd

Committee Members: Richard Ardern, Bob Barnes-Watts, Stewart Campbell

APPOINTMENT OF PRESIDENT AND VICE-PRESIDENT

Following the recent General Election when Dr Paul Monaghan was elected as the MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross it was agreed that he be appointed as President. John Thurso had fulfilled this rôle while he was MP, and Bob MacLennan before him. It was also agreed to appoint Rhoda Grant MSP (Highland) as one of the two Vice-Presidents. John Melling had been a stalwart Vice-President, and before that a long-term member of the Committee. In recognition of the service of both Johns it was agreed to create the posts of Honorary Past Presidents to include both of them. The Convener agreed, at John Melling's suggestion, to contact Bob MacLennan with a similar offer. The other Vice-President position was left vacant until after the Holyrood Election next May.

The Convener thanked Iain MacDonald who was retiring from the Committee. His invaluable knowledge of operational matters, particularly of signalling, will still be available however, and he will continue to be responsible for mailing copies of Far North Express.

The meeting closed at 1139 – still on time (just) in railway-speak.

On 26 August the 08:02 Wick (WCK) to Inverness (INV) train suffered gear box failure and was started from Brora (BRA). To that end an extra unit was coupled to the rear of the 07:02 INV-WCK to be detached at Brora. The message sent to Glasgow Control to confirm successful separation of the two trains was:

"Unhooked BRA"

(Apocryphal)

THURSO HERITAGE SOCIETY WEBSITE



Above:

Caledonian Railway McIntosh 0-4-4T No. 442 in L.M.S. Days as No. 55162 Waiting to depart from Thurso station.

Right:

Train negotiating floods between Wick and Watten.

Pictures from Alan McIvor Collection with permission from Thurso Heritage Society

A new website has been launched by the **Thurso Heritage Society** - www.thursointeractive.co.uk. It currently contains nearly 4000 items including photographs, videos and personal audio histories. It is a fascinating place to visit and includes six video histories by our recent President John Thurso.



NEW TRAINS IN SCOTLAND

Each of the three franchises has announced plans for the introduction of new rolling stock. In the nature of things nowadays (EU regulations not least) it takes a few years from issuing a tender for new trains to putting passengers in them, so we must be patient. While we're waiting, here's what is in store.

1 VTEC. New trains have been ordered from Japan and the first two sets are already in the UK undergoing testing. Trains will enter service in 2018 (introduced gradually as they are delivered) and will cover most services out of Kings Cross. Some sets will be "bi-mode" and will operate drawing power from the overhead line as far as Edinburgh, switching to diesel power thereafter. New trains will operate to Aberdeen and Inverness once the full timetable is introduced in December 2020, and may operate before then.

2 Sleeper. New trains have been ordered from Spain and should enter service in 2018. They will be a great improvement on what we have now, offering everything from cheap-and-cheerful seated accommodation to cabins with *en suite* toilet and shower. There will continue to be a Lounge Car supplying a range of catering.

3 Abellio. Once the Edinburgh/Glasgow Improvement Programme (EGIP) is completed by the end of 2016 new electric multiple units (EMUs) will replace the 170s now operating the route through Falkirk High. This will allow 170s to be deployed elsewhere, but it seems that they will not be retained in Scotland but returned to their owner (Porterbrook) for leasing. The rest of the Inter-City network in Scotland (ie. Edinburgh and Glasgow to Aberdeen and Inverness, as well as Aberdeen to Inverness) will be served by rebuilt Class 43 sets. This is where it gets interesting.

Network Rail is electrifying the Great Western route from Paddington to Bristol and South Wales – routes now operated by Class 43s. When these were introduced in 1975 they were called *High Speed Trains* and flew along at 125mph. As a Reading resident I commuted into London on these trains and recall being excited by their speed and comfort. I was in my 30s then. Fast forward a decade or four. These are the trains which, after they are displaced from the Great Western by electrification in 2018 (maybe), will be much improved and which will dash between Scotland's cities. And I, then nearer 80 than 70, will get excited all over again (maybe). To be fair the ride in, and view out of, a Mk3 carriage is better than anything else on Britain's railway. I have no doubt that the end result will be a great improvement on the 170s and 158s which provide the service now. But it will still be a train over 40 years old.

And on the FNL? The much-vaunted "tourist train". This turns out to be pretty much - OK, smartened up a bit - the 158 layout we have up here (when they're not trundling round the Fife Circle) as 158701 - 158725. As usual the tail of the donkey is overlooked. Any train-spotter wanting to be certain of copping an Inverness 158 should head for the Borders where we are "lending" them. Could we not have some of the redundant 170s?

... AND NETWORK RAIL?

Inevitably with new franchises this FNE has concerned itself with the immediate passenger experience with train operators. However we should not be blind to the fact that delivering a better experience (more reliable, faster journeys) for passengers on the FNL requires NR to do things.

Control Period 5 (CP5) – the 5-year period which started on 1 April 2014 – sets out the enhancements Scottish Ministers wish to see carried out by NR. Readers will be aware that CP5 has gone badly wrong south of the Border – so much so that Secretary of State Patrick McLoughlin "paused" much of the electrification work this summer. We believe that there is no such problem

in Scotland – EGIP will continue pretty much on time and budget. This demonstrates the wisdom of devolving NR’s Scottish responsibilities to Holyrood. So CP5 is OK up here.

But CP5 is silent on enhancements on the FNL. So were CP1, CP2, CP3 and CP4. The detailed planning for CP6 (April 2019, remember) starts this autumn. NR will consult (we hope that the undertaking to include FoFNL as a consultee has not been forgotten) and put together a long list of things they think possible and sensible. Eventually this will be honed and presented as a set of recommendations to Transport Scotland some time in 2016. Scottish Ministers (TS in practice) will select from the long list of those things which they wish to see NR provide – the High Level Output Specification (HLOS) – in summer 2017. This will be accompanied by a Statement of Funds Available (SOFA). Now you or I in our everyday lives can work out that our shopping list and the contents of our purse ought to bear some kind of relationship. The railway does it differently. What used to be the Office of the Rail Regulator (ORR), now called the Office of Rail and Road (ORR: at least they’ve saved on notepaper), will pore over the HLOSes (England & Wales have one too) and the SOFAs and will, some time in 2018, tell everyone what will happen in CP6. This makes merry work for dozens of people.

And where does FoFNL come in? Pretty early if we’re to have any influence. Experience has shown that a carefully thought-out plan will often be heeded if it’s presented at the opportune moment. We have worked up what we believe to be a convincing case for redoubling a stretch of line between Clachnaharry and Clunes – there are details elsewhere in FNE – and we shall seek to get that onto NR’s long list. If we fail to do this then there’s no opportunity again until 2020, so it’s vital that we engage professionally with NR this autumn. Readers will know that we suggested various ideas to NR (see FNE63 p6 and FNE64 p6) and now is the time to narrow our recommendations to One Big Thing. Bring on the Lentrán Loop!

Mike Lunan

Here's a thought from the Herald Diary, 19th August 2015:

...talking of trains, and how busy they are between Glasgow and Edinburgh just now. A reader phones to suggest: "If someone gets on, looks at the seat beside you, and asks, 'Is there anyone sitting there?', grab them by the arm, looking intensely in their eyes, and whisper, '*So you can see them too, can't you?*'"

DEFIBRILLATOR FOR INVERNESS STATION

Every week since 2009 staff at Inverness Station have run a Cake Club Friday to raise funds for various charities. The staff bring in cakes they have baked for their colleagues who pay with a donation. The club has raised £2,700 since it started.

The latest project funded by the club is the purchase of a defibrillator costing £1,100 to be kept available at Inverness Station.

The equipment can raise the chances of someone surviving a cardiac arrest from around 28% to 80%. The defibrillator has recorded, as well as written, instructions so can be used by anyone.



Far North Line

It is good that Abellio has restored the catering trolleys on the early morning trains at 06:18 from Wick and 07:02 from Inverness: vital in fact on freezing cold winter mornings. Network Rail is installing some more continuously welded rail on the Caithness section of the line south of Georgemas and new rail was also observed being delivered to Dingwall.

As you will read elsewhere the disruptive temporary speed restriction north of Muir of Ord has not yet been lifted having now been in force for around six years. You can also read FoFNL's two recent initiatives to get a long loop through Lentrane on to the enhancement agenda for CP6 (2019-2024), or before, as this is the key to running more trains and running them more punctually (robustly in railway parlance). It is needed urgently.

Two new drivers at Wick should complete training by December and this will hopefully put an end to the shortages which have caused cancellations over the past 18 months. Incidences of the use of unrefurbished class 158 units based at Haymarket (Edinburgh) on the Far North and Kyle lines continue.

Refurbished class 158 "Tourist Trains"

Transport Scotland's 29 June 2007 press release earmarked the 25 Inverness based refurbished units to "run the Inverness to Aberdeen, Inverness to Kyle and Inverness to the Far North routes". There should be plenty of these units to cope with the new Borders Railway services as well, but in the first week ScotRail twice sent two unrefurbished units to Inverness on the 10:35 from Edinburgh thus depriving passengers of comfort, first class, and greater luggage and bicycle space.

Frank Roach and FoFNL members fought hard to get the 2007 specification to include more comfortable seating aligned with windows, more luggage space and 4 (instead of 2) bicycle spaces to suit the long four hour journeys and the use of the FNL by End to End cyclists who use the train to reach or return from John o Groats.

The whole fleet is now to be refurbished to become "tourist trains" but instead of starting with the Haymarket units, which so badly need refreshing with the newer seats etc, it is Inverness's 158701/11 which are first in the queue. This time we were not consulted and it seems that the good work is to be undone with the removal of two of the bike spaces and the mid coach luggage racks! The reason is because of a new rule that there should be two wheelchair spaces on each train and in order to get more seats in. FoFNL has now made strong representations to retain the four bike spaces and extra luggage capacity, suggesting that a row of seats is taken out instead to create the extra wheelchair space.

Inverness-Aberdeen line

Stacey Lynch's article explains the line enhancement progress Network Rail is making. In addition, we would like to hear whether the decision on double track between Inverness and Nairn has now been made. This is essential to avoid the late starting delays that currently occur when incoming trains are late.

Highland Main Line

Suggestions that the options report for the future would be released this month look unlikely to be met. Continuing delays to decisions on dualling and line speed improvements give cause for grave concern. The financial situation does not get any better, indeed, south of the border, Network Rail's enhancement programme is in trouble with two electrification schemes put on hold.

FoFNL has asked the Transport Minister to try to ensure that major HML work is completed at least a year before completion of the A9 dualling in order to allow modal shift to rail of both passengers and freight to become well established. If the road comes first, it is likely that the railway will lose traffic. We have also asked for electrification to be close behind to ensure retention of the specialist work team once the EGIP electrification scheme to Dunblane is completed in 2018/9.

Richard Ardern

INVERNESS - ABERDEEN

This is the latest news from Network Rail.

The Aberdeen to Inverness Improvement Project will be appointing the main contractor for the works in October 2015. We then anticipate that the final design stages for the various interventions along the route will commence with advance works on site starting in Spring 2016. Main construction works will start in Spring 2017 with Phase 1 of the project being delivered by March 2019.

The public will start to see preparatory works very soon, with the relocation of Forres station and the new fully accessible footbridge at Elgin being the first sites to be tackled.

In light of this we would invite interested members of the public to a drop in event in Elgin on Tuesday 13th October 2015, 3-7pm at Elgin Town Hall, 1 Trinity Place, Elgin, IV30 1UL or Forres on Wednesday 14th October 2015, 3-7pm at Forres House Community Centre, High Street, Forres, IV36 1BU.

As we are going to be working in the community, we want to offer the opportunity to ask what we are doing, when we are doing it and how it will benefit rail users. Members of the project team will be on hand to answer questions about the work at Elgin and Forres. If you can't make it on the night, please email any comments or questions to aberdeeninverness@networkrail.co.uk or call our Community Relations team on 03457 11 41 41. For the latest news and updates on the project, follow us on Twitter @NetworkRailA2I

Stacey Lynch - Network Rail

TEMPORARILY PERMANENT SPEED RESTRICTION

The deleterious permanent way slowing (pws) to 25 mph at Chapelton Farm user-worked level crossing (UWC) north of Muir of Ord (MOO) has been inflicted on FNL services for some six years now. It was meant to be temporary and we were told at our June 2012 AGM in Dingwall that it would be removed within weeks.

The crossing is situated 13 miles and 1100 yards north of Inverness and the restriction extends to 14 miles 260 yards where there is another UWC. This is a distance of just over half a mile, although it seems much longer. We understand the problem revolves around sighting issues and type approval for a new type of equipment installed there.

Initially, the delay was mostly masked by the extra time which had been added to the timetables in expectation of an earlier opening of Canon Bridge station than was actually achieved. When Canon opened, the effect of the "temporary" pws was more widely felt such that an emergency timetable with extra minutes was introduced in October 2013 and yet more time added to this section in December 2014.

There were suggestions that the speed restriction was to be removed in February and again in April this year, but this has not happened. Passenger confidence has been eroded by extended periods of disruption to timekeeping and reliability in the last few years. FoFNL believes that we cannot afford to let this situation continue for any longer. Removal of this damaging restriction is long overdue. Please, Network Rail, could it be removed before the new timetable starts in December?

Here's a small piece of good news for the Far North Line: At the beginning of July the line speed for passenger trains over the Nigg Automatic Half Barrier Crossing (AHBC) was increased from 65 to 75mph. We're pleased to be reporting a move in the right direction.

HITRANS FNL PROGRESS REPORT



Report to Partnership Meeting 4 September 2015

RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Points North

Purpose of Report

This report provides Members with information on Points North-North Highland Lines performance and progress following the seminar HITRANS hosted in March.

Current position

Network Rail has all disciplines working on ways to decrease NHL journey time and improve performance. A list of 28 projects has been drawn up, with short, medium and longterm timescales.

To date only a speed increase at Nigg has been implemented, resulting in a 10 second saving in the northbound direction and 5 seconds in the southbound. Chapelton Level Crossing near Muir of Ord regrettably remains a critical Temporary Speed Restriction, despite the installation of new equipment.

Recent performance and reliability has been poor, largely but not wholly due to driver shortages. A snapshot from early July bears this out:

*01 July •2H62 1234 Wck- Inv cancelled * 2H65 1828 Inv-Wck terminated at Lairg*

02 July •2H62 1234 Wck-Inv cancelled 2H65 1828 Inv-Wck skipped Thurso

03 July •2H58 0628 Lrg-Inv cancelled

04 July •2H60 0618 Wck-Inv cancelled. Started from Lairg 2H61 0702 Inv-Wck terminated at Lairg

05 July •2H62 1158 Wck-Inv cancelled (no bus repl?) 2H95 2H92 2H63 2H60 2H93 2H90 Invernets all replaced by buses 2H65 1754 Inv-Wck terminated at Lairg

08 July 2H54 0616 Ard-Inv cancelled 2H71 2H70 1142 Inv-Din and return cancelled

08 July 2H65 1828 Inv-Wck terminated•Lairg no crew

09 July 2H60 0618 Wck-Inv started Lairg 'animals on line' using up bandwidth no doubt

For your info here are the details of a colleague's return journey from Lairg 1512 to Inverness Wednesday [01 July 15](#):

Driver of Coach in ScotRail livery came into HITRANS office to check if route and email sent through to him was correct

- *Coach dep 1512 then visited every station to Invergordon including Culrain and Fearn where driver had a problem getting coach turned near station then had to run down lane to check if any passengers.*

- *No passengers at any station after initial 3 got on with myself at Lairg. Presume as bus replacement was running late to scheduled rail service that passengers had made alternative arrangements.*
- *Arrived INV 1725 where driver dropped passengers off on Academy St (two blocks away from station for no apparent reason)*

Footfall figures to March 2015 indicate patronage falling on average 11%, with Dingwall at 15% as passengers switch to more reliable modes. Conon Bridge and Beauly are sometimes missed to enable trains to regain time.

Action Plan

We have taken this up to the highest level and have an agreement from Phil Verster MD Network Rail/Abellio ScotRail Alliance to travel with us to Wick in November to see the problems at first hand and to meet stakeholders affected.

We will then run a repeat of the Points North seminar later this year to ensure wide dissemination of problems and progress.

Recommendation

1. Members are asked to note the report.

Report by: Frank Roach

Designation: Partnership Manager

Date: 25 August 2015

FoFNL members keep an eye out all the time for the kind of problems mentioned in Frank's report. We have compiled a table covering 28th May to 6th August 2015. The occasions listed above are contained in the table along with quite a few others. These give a clear indication of the seriousness of the problems faced by FNL passengers at present. The table can be viewed online at www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/failures.html

HITRANS BRANCHLINER

On 9th September HITRANS issued a press release giving details of its Branchliner initiative. In the next 10-15 years it is estimated that 4 million tonnes of standing and fallen timber will be exported from the Flow Country catchment to distant markets.

A key element of the project is the upgrading of railway sidings at Kinbrace on the Far North Line and Inverness. It is seen as vital to use the rail system wherever possible for economic, environmental and safety reasons.

The first phase will be an investigative study leading, it is hoped, to a demonstrator project to try timber deliveries by rail.

The Strategic Timber Transport Scheme and Forestry Commission Scotland have assisted with funding for the study.

FASTER SERVICE BETWEEN THE HIGHLANDS AND EDINBURGH IN JEOPARDY?

Work on constructing the new Edinburgh International Gateway station got under way earlier this year with expected completion by December 2016. The station is being built at Gogar and will provide an interchange connection with the tram serving Edinburgh Airport for passengers from trains on the lines from Fife, Aberdeen and Perth/Inverness.

A question that has to be settled is whether trains from Inverness should call there? It will add some 4 or 5 minutes on to the total travel time from Inverness to Edinburgh. This is at a time when we are desperately trying to get the journey time on the route substantially reduced.

There may be a few business people who use Edinburgh Airport combined with the train from the Highlands regularly and many more people who go on holiday once or twice a year via this route. Does this justify adding precious minutes onto an already long journey for the majority who will be wanting to get to Edinburgh rather than the Airport?

It is understood that the Edinburgh to Aberdeen trains are designated as Expresses and will not be stopping there. Shouldn't the Inverness trains be treated similarly? There is a good frequent alternative bus service straight to the airport from outside both Haymarket and Waverley stations which takes passengers closer to the terminal building than the tram stop.

Many local services to Fife, Perth, Dundee and semifast trains to Aberdeen will stop at Gateway. The scheme is seen by the Edinburgh Evening News, and others, principally as a catalyst for building offices and houses nearby as the station will be only 10 minutes by train from the city centre as against 20 minutes or more by tram.

Inverness to Edinburgh services currently take between 3 hours 16 minutes and 3 hours 43 minutes at average speeds of between 53.5mph

and 47 mph including station stops. This is not competitive with going by road. The aspiration is to get the headline journey time down to 2 hours 45 minutes or 63.6 mph. This project has been delayed by phasing and an announcement is due concerning an average journey time reduction of up to 10 minutes in the next phase to be completed by 2018/19. The full aspiration is now postponed until 2025.

There are serious constraints suffered by the Inverness trains south of Perth. They are routed via the single track line to Ladybank via Newburgh. Late running causes trains to be cancelled because there is no crossing loop at Newburgh and trains take 21 minutes to get through the section so it is impossible to run more than 3 per hour unless they are all going in the same direction.

The route along the coast from Kirkcaldy to Inverkeithing is very tortuous and slow as well as being heavily used. Southbound Inverness services take an extra 10 minutes between Kirkcaldy and Edinburgh than they do in the opposite direction because they are timetabled to run behind a local service which stops at every station.

These constraints need serious attention. The best solution would be that proposed by the sustainable transport alliance Transform Scotland to electrify the lines from Dunblane to Perth and Perth to Inverness and run electric trains from Inverness via Stirling rather than by Kirkcaldy until the former direct route to Edinburgh via Kinross is rebuilt as a fast electrified line. Connections would still be available at Perth to and from stations in Fife.

In the meantime, gradual progress towards faster services should not be jeopardised by inserting an extra stop of limited value.

Richard Ardern

Drew Hendry MP commented in the Inverness Courier on 18th August 2015 about the benefits of using the Far North Line service to Muir of Ord for the Black Isle Show:

"I was particularly impressed to see that a shuttle bus had been laid on for those wishing to get the train there. It took people from the station to the show and back again. Having sat in the heavy traffic with other patient visitors, I would definitely recommend 'letting the train take the strain' next year."

THE QUESTION OF THE REFURBISHED 158s

Rhoda Grant MSP, Lodged the following question in the Scottish Parliament on 15/06/2015:

To ask the Scottish Government when the Borders Railway will have its own rolling stock, and what class of train will be used.

This was answered by **Derek Mackay** on 29/06/2015:

The Borders Railway will be operated by diesel trains from within the Abellio fleet and these run on various routes and are not dedicated to specific lines.

His statement is at odds with the Transport Scotland's press release of 29 June 2007 which clearly states:

"The [refurbished 158s] will run the Inverness to Aberdeen, Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh and Inverness to the Far North routes bringing improved comfort and facility improvements to passengers."

At that stage 170s were in charge of the HML. The first unit was 158701 - the one that has just been refurbished again and released to traffic last week. It was provided to work the then 07:14 INV-WCK for our AGM in Thurso on 14 July 2007, scheduled arrival time 11:02 (**Note the 9 minute deceleration since then.**)

At the FoFNL AGM in July 2007, guest speaker Mary Dickson (now Grant), the MD of First ScotRail, said:

"You will not grow the railway if you do not encourage more passengers to travel by train and if you do not improve journey times."

Haven't we gone tragically backwards since then?

Rail Engineer magazine for July 2015 tells us that Story Contracting has completed the fitting of the Twinfix system of self-cleaning polycarbonate roof panels over platforms 5 and 6 at Inverness railway station to replace the life expired glazed canopies.

John MacArthur, Head of Story's Scotland Region, said "Each panel interlocks to the adjacent one with a fixing in the corners and is very quick to install. The work was delivered over a series of nightshift possessions which not only had to take into account the role Inverness plays as a night stabling facility, but also the impact that noise would have on the Royal Highland Hotel which adjoins the station concourse."

LUNATIC LINE

A new railway, built and funded by China, is being built in Kenya to replace the "Lunatic Line" built from 1896-1901 joining Mombasa on the coast to Kisumu on Lake Victoria. The purpose of the original 660 mile, metre-gauge railway was to give Uganda a rail connection to the sea. The nickname was given to the line because of the huge cost and extraordinary death-toll - 2498 Indian and African construction workers lost their lives in the construction of the line including at least 28 (and according to some accounts, over 100) who were stalked and eaten by a pair of lions.

Construction workers on the slightly less remote and rather shorter Far North Line were comparatively lucky in being eaten alive only by midges.

There is an interesting Scottish connection to the story: several ferries were constructed in kit form in Paisley by Bow, McLachlan & Co and arrived at Lake Victoria by sea and the new railway.

TRANSPORT FOCUS EVENTS SEPT 2015

The Rail Passengers' Council begat Passenger Focus, who begat Transport Focus, who held a Reception at the Scottish Parliament in September, followed the next day by a Board Meeting held in public, then an afternoon Conference. This was entitled *Can Public Transport ever offer a better choice?* Faced with such a feast some of your Committee ventured south to join in.

Rather than give a detailed account of all that took place it's probably more useful, and certainly more telling, to set down *verbatim* what some of the speakers said. Before I do so it may be a good time to reprint what other speakers have said on other occasions.

We must find and exploit real opportunities to reduce journey times, Iain Coucher, CEO of Network Rail at FoFNL AGM, 30 June 2008

Railways must at least compete with roads, Alex Salmond MSP, First Minister, at a public meeting following a Cabinet Meeting in Inverness, 4 August 2008

[The FNL and WHL] are inextricably linked to how those communities work, Phil Verster, CEO of ScotRail/Network Rail Alliance, TF Board Meeting, 16 September 2015

The customer comes first - [we must] improve what we do; improve year by year, Phil Verster *ibid.*

[We must] focus on improved journey times, Derek Mackay MSP, Minister for Transport and Islands, Conference, 16 September 2015

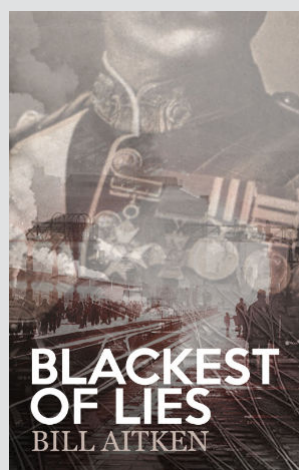
Absolutely reliable public services, Phil Verster, Conference in answer to a question about what was important for ScotRail in rural Scotland

FoFNL trusts that this year's quotes will not need to be repeated, as those made in 2008 necessarily have been.

Mike Lunan

Book Review - Blackest of Lies by Bill Aitken

ISBN-10: 1511498137 ISBN-13: 978-1511498135 Amazon £9.99 (also available on Kindle)



When I first heard about this book it ticked many boxes for me. Anything about railways, history and the story of Ireland grabs my attention. Coincidentally I had just been reading a novel in which the memorial to Kitchener's death in Orkney waters in 1916 received a passing mention, so I was already aware of the mystery surrounding his demise. I always find conspiracy theories fascinating, usually they are disappointingly ridiculous, this one is not.

Although this is a novel, and a very entertaining one, it is made all the more enjoyable by knowing that what you're reading may well be true. Most of the key characters in the book are real and the plot seems much more convincing than the official story.

When you reach the end of the book you discover that two of the characters are going to go on and have further adventures.

I thoroughly recommend this book, it's a great read and it gets you googling to find out more about the subject.

Of particular interest to FoFNL readers is the fact that either Kitchener or his lookalike did travel the Far North Line in 1916 en route to Scapa Flow to board *H.M.S. Hampshire* heading for St Petersburg.

Enjoyable, fascinating and thought-provoking.

Ian Budd

FAR NORTH

WINDOW GAZER'S GUIDE

The Friends of the Far North Line group was involved with the specification for refurbishing the Inverness allocation of class 158 trains in 2007 which created more bike and luggage space. All the comfortable new Grammer seats were aligned with the windows, an essential for a scenic railway.

Leaving Inverness station, the train is soon on the 1990 Ness Viaduct over the river at the inward end of the harbour. There might be shipping to see or, depending on the state of the tide, the sheer rush of water to marvel at. The Beaully Firth is reached just before the Caledonian Canal swing bridge at Clachnaharry Lock which the train clunks over at 10 mph.



Once the former fishing village of Clachnaharry is passed, the view opens out up to the head of the Firth with Ben Wyvis dominant in the background beyond the Black Isle peninsula.

The sea sometimes freezes as far out as the canal sea lock and when the tide is full or the sea pastel blue, this is one of the most inspiring views on the line. Passengers should sit on the right hand (coastal) side of the train.



Further along near Lentrane is a great place to spot wading birds of all kinds particularly on an incoming tide.

Beaully and Conon Bridge are two of the shortest platforms in Britain and passengers have to use one of the middle doors. The small addition to the Beaully stationmaster's house used to be Lord Lovat's private

waiting room. The golf course approaching Muir of Ord was once the great tryst where cattle from the Highlands were gathered together before being driven south to market. Until 1960, the Muir was the junction for a branch line to Fortrose. Ben Wyvis now dominates the view from the left hand side of the

train all the way to Dingwall and it is a good area to spot the red kites reintroduced some 20 years ago. Conon Bridge was reopened in 2013 and but for WW1 intervening would have been the junction with a branch for Cromarty.

Dingwall, the county town of Ross-shire, has a new agricultural mart building with tearoom and exhibition on cattle droving. It used to be a busy station with an engine shed and it is the junction for the line to Kyle of Lochalsh which heads off to the left. We now travel along the shores of the Cromarty Firth past the Cromarty causeway which was one of three estuarial crossings which have considerably shortened the A9 road to the north to the detriment of the railway. The Fyrish monument on top of the hill to the left looks like a collection of Lowry's



matchstick men and contrasts with the modern windfarm. Alness is another reopened station famous for its floral displays.

Nearing Invergordon, offshore oil platforms may already have been spotted. Offshore maintenance is a big industry in the Cromarty Firth as is passenger traffic from the biggest cruise liners in the world which use Invergordon's deep water pier regularly throughout the summer. Invergordon is a former naval base (with a mutiny in 1931), and used to have an aluminium smelter but now has a wood pellet manufacturer on the industrial site to the left. To the right we can see the entrance to the Cromarty Firth between the two headlands known as the Sutors. Beneath the North Sutor is the former oil fabrication yard



at Nigg now used for ship repair. Rich level farmland extends all the way to Tain.

At Tain we start to travel along the Dornoch Firth with views north along the coast of Sutherland which we will not reach for another hour. The 1991 Dornoch Bridge for the A9 was built so that a railway bridge could be erected alongside, a scheme which British Rail promoted. This fell short by a £4M contribution required from the Scottish Office which was not independent or much involved in railways in those days.

Tain is a former Royal Burgh, a pleasant town with an interesting museum and former terminus of the local train service to Inverness which ceased when the line was rationalised in 1960. Just to the north is the Glenmorangie distillery and further on another at Edderton. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie's former home, Skibo Castle, is visible across the water between the trees but you have

to be quick to see it. Ardgay used to be named for the town of Bonar Bridge at the head of the estuary on the opposite shore. The railway reached this point in October 1864.



We are now in Sutherland, and the continuation and completion of the line to Wick and Thurso took another 10 years and was achieved largely due to the efforts of the Duke of Sutherland. Passing through the attractive wayside station at Culrain we cross the Oykel Viaduct and go through Invershin,

another by request halt. Dominating the view is Carbisdale Castle on a crag on

the left. Until recently this was a youth hostel, but millions of pounds of repairs needed on the roof have brought about its closure. It was built as a flamboyant piece of one-upmanship on the Duke by a Dowager Duchess.

Up the hill towards Lairg, the scenery changes to open moorland and hill grazing. Lairg Station is two miles above the village and was formerly an interchange point for passengers and mails to places like Tongue and Lochinver on the north and west coasts. The bus connection is now more limited. The line turns south east, over the summit and down the glen through Rogart to Strath Fleet meeting up with the A9 again at The Mound, once a junction for the 1902 light railway to Dornoch which closed in 1960. Loch Fleet is a National Nature Reserve and another good place to watch for bird life, seals and maybe an otter.

Entering Golspie, the line hugs the coast and the train may then stop at the request halt at Dunrobin Castle. This was the seat of the Duke and is open to the public from April to October. The Victorian museum in the gardens is a fascinating period piece and the wooden station building is most



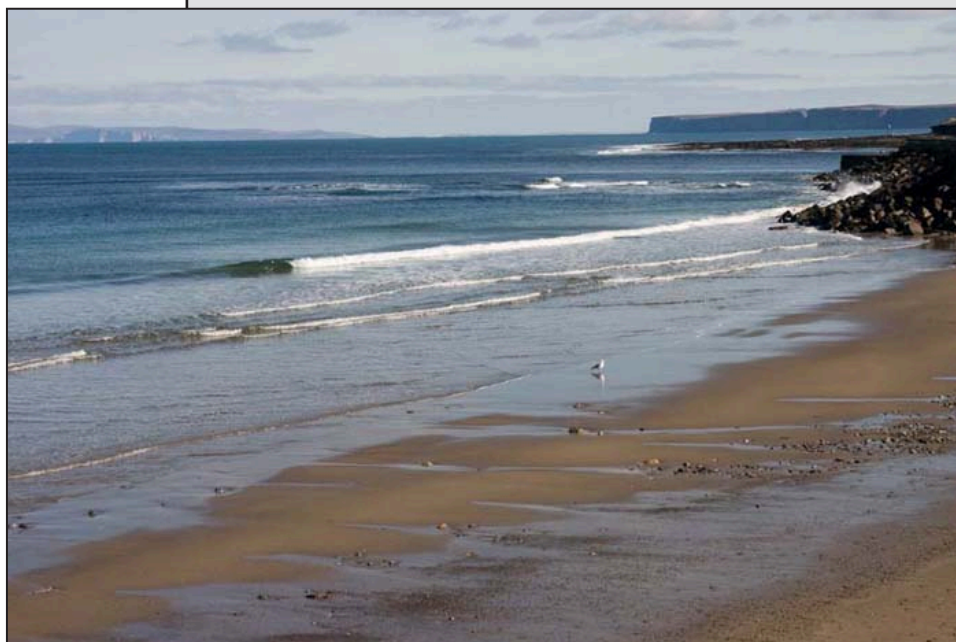
attractive and sometimes open as a railway museum. The next stop is Brora where there used to be a woollen mill and earlier a brick works and coal mine which didn't close until the 1970s. This hive of industry created the earliest (wooden) railway in the north in the 1770s between the mine and the harbour.

The next 15 minutes is one of the highlights of the journey as the line runs along the coastline of sandy beaches giving way eventually to rocky shores. Seals are plentiful, as are rabbits. The extensive views stretch more than 25 miles out to sea past Tarbat Ness lighthouse to the Moray Coast. To the north when nearing

Helmsdale it is possible to see the three installations of the Beatrice Oil Field. An offshore wind farm is planned for that area.

The fishing village of Helmsdale has the extensive Timespan Museum which includes material on the 1869 Sutherland Goldrush. The station building has recently been opened as a self catering unit sleeping up to ten people. The line turns inland along the Strath of Kildonan and is at its most beautiful during May when the yellow gorse and broom are in full flower. The Helmsdale River is renowned for its salmon fishing and red deer are evident most of the year. Kildonan is the nearest station to the gold panning sites. It is a long way to the next passing place, not at Kinbrace, but at Forsinard. Here there is an RSPB reserve with a visitor centre and walks to experience the peaty Flow Country with sphagnum moss, sundew flowers and rare birds such as the Greenshank.

On over the moors past County March Summit we cross in to Caithness and through the remote station of Altnabreac. Looking south we can see the monadnocks of Morven and Ben Alisky sticking up above the peaty and rocky landscape. Looking north from the late train in the winter there is always the possibility of a display of the Aurora Borealis. Scotscladder staion has been nicely restored and then we are soon at Georgemas Junction.



Here the train reverses to travel first down the branch to Thurso. We are back in to farming country with flagstones used vertically as field boundaries. Behind Thurso can be seen the hills of the island of Hoy across the Pentland Firth in Orkney. Those with a keen eye can see the top of the Old Man of Hoy sticking up above the general level of the cliffs. Two miles from Thurso at Scrabster there are sailings to Stromness in Orkney twice a day. A bus can be taken to the Gills Bay and John o Groats sailings to Orkney, passing the Queen Mother's Castle of Mey on the way.

The train retraces its steps to Georgemas where you will see the new sidings used to take low level radioactive waste away from the Dounreay nuclear reactors. Another 15 minutes brings us to the end of the line in Wick, a fishing port with an interesting maritime heritage museum.

Wick is 161 miles by rail from Inverness or 174 when you go via Thurso. There is plenty of scope with a rover ticket to break the journey en route and enjoy some of the many attractions. Abellio, the new franchise holders are planning to enhance the tourist experience on the line. Watch this space.

LETTERS TO THE HERALD

One of the important aspects of working for a lobbying and support group such as FoFNL is to put pen to paper to bring vital matters to public attention via the national press. The Herald has a good record for publishing such material and this is a very valuable way to attract the attention of the public and the politicians. Here are two such letters that were published in that paper:

BRING BACK SCOTS' RAIL COMMITTEE - TUESDAY 4 AUGUST 2015

You report that the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee of MSPs has written to Phil Verster, managing director of the ScotRail Alliance ("ScotRail urged to aid travellers", The Herald, August 3).

While it is never a bad thing to let senior people know that something is amiss, the MSPs would be better to urge Scottish ministers to reverse the damage done by Alastair Darling ten years ago when he wantonly abolished the Rail Passengers' Committee for Scotland (RPCS). I was its last convener and at the time tried to persuade the then Executive to set up a statutory Scottish body to take its place and to continue to hold the rail industry to account.

My pleas fell on deaf ears. But now we have a Scottish Government unconstrained by what might be happening south of the Border. So I ask again: please will you legislate to set up a new RPCS with many eyes and ears from all parts of Scotland, which will have statutory powers. Passenger Focus, the 2005 replacement for all GB's passengers, has far fewer human resources than are needed, especially now that its remit has been expanded to include buses and trunk roads.

Mike Lunan

CAPPING THE JOY OF INVERNESS - SATURDAY 8 AUGUST 2015

It is good to see that Invernessians are so cheerful ("Inverness named as happiest place to live", The Herald, August 6). People in (and wishing to travel to) the Highlands will be smiling even more broadly when Transport Scotland announces details of the next phase to improve speeds and capacity on the single track Highland Main Line (HML) railway.

Hopefully, Transport Scotland will go further and announce that the HML will be the next electrification scheme once EGIP (the Edinburgh-Glasgow Improvement Project) is completed. Electrification over such long steep gradients offers the biggest journey time reductions anywhere in Scotland. As the North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board said in the 1950s, it would be transformational.

Indeed it would, and not before time for the Scottish economy.

R J Ardern.

Guide Photo Credits:

Clachnaharry swing bridge - Photo: **Neil Fraser**

Ben Wyvis - Photo: **Grinner** (GNU Free Documentation License Version 1.2)

Fyrish Monument - Photo: **David Kratz**

Skibo Castle - Photo: **Graeme Smith** (Creative Commons Licence)

Oykel Viaduct - Photo: Courtesy **Span Engineering** (<http://spanengineering.com/>)

Dunrobin station - Photo: **FoFNL collection**

Thurso Bay - Photo: **John Keenan**

Next month FoFNL marks the twentieth anniversary of our seminal conference in Inverness. The conference concerned the future of the Far North Line and was organised by the then FoFNL Secretary, Frank Roach.

The event was extremely successful and from it sprang the Highland Rail Partnership bringing together local authorities and the rail industry. This group was eventually subsumed into the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership, HITRANS, for whom Frank holds the position of Partnership Manager on the Executive team.

A report of the conference by John Allison of the Highland Railway Society was published in their journal in 1996 and is reproduced here. Although much has been achieved in those twenty years some of the fundamental problems of the Far North Line remain and feature very prominently in this issue of FNE.

Conference on the Future of the Far North Line

John Allison

While much doom and gloom surrounds the 'privatisation' of British Rail it was extremely heartening to spend a day discussing, in a very positive way, the future development of one of Britain's most scenic routes - the Far North Line.

Speakers at the conference included Robert MacLennan MP, President of the Friends of the Far North Line, Julian Worth, Transrail, and John Ellis, ScotRail. Brian Wilson MP, Shadow Spokesman on Transport, was also due to speak but unfortunately Parliamentary business prevented him from attending. Such was the importance he attached to the conference that his speech was delivered on his behalf by conference organiser Frank Roach, Secretary of the Friends of the Far North Line. Frank is due. and on the day received. much praise for drawing together nearly 120 people who have an interest in the railways in the Highlands and the Far North Line in particular and for establishing a most impressive list of speakers.

Some of the key commitments given were as follows :

ScotRail proposes to introduce, in the next summer's timetable and earlier if possible, a commuter train leaving Tain at approximately 7.30am and arriving in Inverness at around 8.30am using an existing two car Class 156 unit between turns. With the last train north now returned to a 17.15 departure from Inverness it will, for the first time for many years, be possible to commute to Inverness by train for people living in the rapidly expanding travel to work area for Inverness.

ScotRail will attempt to achieve a three hour journey time from Wick to Inverness by a programme of running line improvements and a careful inspection of speed limits on the line. Many of the speed limits have not been reassessed since the introduction of Sprinter stock and still apply to locomotive hauled trains. This proposal will require considerable capital investment and ScotRail is looking for partners to contribute. Highlands & Islands Enterprise (the replacement for the Highlands & Islands Development Board) immediately committed themselves to 50% of the cost of an estimated £25,000 engineering survey of the line.

Julian Worth of Transrail referred to the success of the first freight train for 15 years on the line. This had carried rolled steel for Norfrost Freezers and domestic coal north and had returned with scrap metal and manufactured freezer cabinets for export to America. The next train is due on 9 November with a similar load but will drop off wagons at Lairg to be loaded with marble from Ledmore quarry. This will be picked up by the returning train the following day. The marble is of world class quality and is bound, via the Channel Tunnel, for Italy for cutting and finishing. Apparently the skills to finish the stone do not exist, at present, in this country but it is hoped these

will be developed. The manager of the quarry indicated that Transrail was the only method of transport which could get the stone to Italy at an economic cost to compete with Italian Carrera marble and hoped that his quarry was setting an example to others.

The second freight train on 9 November will experimentally carry a wagon loaded with 30 metre steel pipes for the Rockwater Pipe yard north of Wick. At present the pipes are carried by road and are the bane of all motorists especially on the Berriedale Braes north of Helmsdale where they have become stuck.

Transrail is negotiating with Railtrack to stop freight trains overnight on the running line to allow timber to be loaded direct from the line side forests and therefore cutting out transshipment costs.

John Ellis of ScotRail explained that ScotRail had no intention of taking any steps to resurrect the Dornoch Firth Rail Crossing because of the need to persuade Railtrack, among others, to make the investment. He was convinced that for a great deal less investment many other improvements could be made to the line. These would help to achieve the ultimate aim of a three hour journey time while at the same time preserving the Lairg loop. This is a vital source of passengers and potential freight traffic which could help to spread the rail access costs over a larger number of trains. Although there were murmurings of disappointment from some members of the audience, the vast majority accepted that the window of opportunity for the Dornoch Firth rail crossing has passed.

Railtrack confirmed their wish to undertake an engineering survey of the line to ensure it remained available for use by passenger and freight trains and to determine what was required to increase line speeds and welcomed the ScotRail and H&IE commitment to this project.

The final contribution to the conference came from Andrew Seedhouse based at Plymouth University, who has successfully created a partnership to promote branch lines in Devon and who has gained support for these activities from ERDF funds. The audience was most impressed with Mr Seedhouse's presentation and he, in turn, was most impressed with ScotRail's positive attitude to the development of the Highland rail network. From his presentation it seemed that Regional Railways in England were only interested in the main trunk routes rather than minor routes or branch lines.

Dr Ken MacTaggart of Highlands & Islands Enterprise offered to hold a meeting of interested parties to attempt to establish a similar partnership and to see what steps could be taken to integrate the transport network perhaps by the establishment of a PTA as suggested by Brian Wilson, to examine the development and promotion of all the railways in the Highlands, and to look closely at appointing a Railways Development Officer.

The conference concluded with a question and answer session.

Platform 1864

New Restaurant in Tain Station Building

Chef Graham Rooney is opening a restaurant in Tain Station building in October. We are hoping to carry more information about this venture in a future issue of FNE.

Latest news is on their Facebook page called *Platform 1864*.



LENTRAN LONG LOOP

FOFNL CAMPAIGN FOR REINSTATEMENT OF DOUBLE-TRACK

FoFNL is lobbying hard for the reinstatement of the Lentran Long Loop between Inverness and Muir of Ord. Until the section was singled in 1966 there were six miles of double track between Clachnaharry and Clunes. This part of the FNL is also part of the line to Kyle of Lochalsh and is used by trains traversing the full length of both lines as well as some shorter journeys to Ardgay or Tain. Currently 27 services use the route every day and the lack of places for North- and Southbound trains to pass each other is causing major delays and cancellations very frequently.

Two of the FoFNL documents are reproduced here. The campaign has been picked up in the Inverness Courier which ran a major item on 2nd September outlining the urgency of the situation as passengers are beginning to give up on the line and revert to using their cars. Mention was made of the Inverness City/Region Deal wish list which includes the intention to spend around £100 million on reducing congestion on the A9 north of Inverness. Richard Arden of FoFNL was quoted outlining the benefits which would accrue from the redoubling including additional services as well as much reduced late-running and train cancellation.

Rhoda Grant and David Stewart MSPs are giving the campaign vocal support and have written to the Scottish Government Transport Minister, Derek Mackay MSP, asking that funds from the Inverness City/Region Deal and the Scottish Government are used to reintroduce the Lentran loop ahead of preliminary planning for the next rail infrastructure development period, CP6, which starts on 1st April 2019.

In response to a parliamentary question from David Stewart in June 2015 the Transport Minister, Derek Mackay MSP, said that the redoubling was an “interesting proposal” to improve the rail network to the far north.

*This is the paper submitted by FoFNL at the Highland Council meeting in Inverness on 3rd Sept 2015 for discussion under Item 11, **City/Region Deal**:*

Capacity Improvement to Far North and Kyle Railway Lines

1 This paper seeks inclusion of a project to redouble the 6 miles of track between Clachnaharry and Clunes (Kirkhill) through Lentran and thus remove the major bottleneck which has prevented the operation of more trains to the north and west of Inverness.

2 The benefits of the Lentran Loop Project would be the ability to run

A northbound commuter service at 8 am from Inverness to Dingwall and Invergordon.

An afternoon northbound service at around 4pm to take students, shoppers and others home before the rush hour.

The early morning train from Caithness through to Inverness without the current serious one hour delay on occasions when it is 10 or more minutes late and has to wait at Muir of Ord to pass trains going north.

Additional freight and lucrative charter trains attracted by the scenic routes to Caithness and Kyle.

Services from Invergordon for cruise liner passengers.

3 The need for City/Region Deal finance priming stems from the number of higher profile rail schemes which are only now starting to reach the Highlands and which have higher priority such as the Highland Main Line and Inverness-Aberdeen line capacity, speed and electrification projects. These have already been delayed and broken in to phases because Scottish Government capital

budgets have been reduced and have had to be used, unexpectedly, for the new Queensferry road crossing.

4 Both Moir Lockhead CEO of First Group and (recently) Mike Carne CEO of Network Rail said, on taking over rail responsibilities, that “priority will be given to enhancements which benefit the largest number of people”.

5 This is where the Highlands and Islands keep losing out. Projects go ahead in the Central Belt of Scotland. We are at the end of the queue and newer projects leap in ahead of us.

6 This sort of scenario is just what the City/Region Deal is designed to assist and it seems to us that it may be the only way in which the congestion on the railway north of Inverness may be removed.

7 There is an exact parallel with the situation on the A9 north of Inverness. To ease congestion a flyover is now being proposed for the Longman Roundabout on the A9 taking traffic over the Kessock Bridge.

8 Although the numbers using the road are greater, it is rare that road users arrive a whole hour late which is what is happening on the trains.

9 Government and Highland Council policy is to encourage greater use of sustainable, greener public transport such as the railway in order to reduce carbon emissions.

10 Without the dynamic passing loop through Lentrán, the railway cannot provide the extra services detailed above. These would help support the low carbon initiatives of the Council.

11 The Lentrán Loop Project would help to grow the economy and social inclusion of Inverness and the Highlands fitting in with:

- “The Skilled Economy” in transporting students and workers to college and work.
- “The Growing and Sustainable Economy” in attracting more freight traffic and tourists to the Scottish Scenic Routes.
- “The Enabled Economy” by improving connectivity for all, not least people travelling to Inverness to access professional services including medical appointments.

12 All three railway lines to the city of Inverness suffer from a chronic lack of capacity as they have long sections of single track with sometimes infrequent passing loops.

13 Traffic has grown substantially on the Far North Line over the past ten years with the Invernet initiatives of reopened stations (such as Beaulieu), extra commuting services and a fourth train each way each day between Inverness and Caithness.

14 In the past eighteen months there have been problems sustaining punctuality of these services due to the congested nature of the line. A few passengers have decided to go back to their cars because of this.

15 The situation needs to be retrieved and the line allowed to expand its valuable services. There is currently a Network Rail working party looking at the options but Network Rail is having great difficulty in advancing enhancements on the rural lines throughout Britain.

16 Helping to fund the Lentrán Loop capacity and signalling scheme through the City/Regional Deal would be an appropriate use of such funds and a way to advance completion of the scheme by many years.

R J Ardern
Friends of the Far North Line

Reducing rail congestion north of Inverness

The case for reinstating a loop through Lentrán

Scottish Parliament 18 June 2015 Question S4W-26050

David Stewart MSP. To ask the Scottish Government whether it will consider the construction of a length of re-doubled track at Lentrán, north of Inverness, to allow for the passing of trains in order to reduce congestion and improve the rail service north of Inverness?

Derek Mackay (Minister for Transport and Islands). That is an interesting proposal, which we will of course be mindful of, as we seek to improve our rail network in the north of the country.

Who would like to be stuck in their car or lorry for an hour waiting to cross the Kessock Bridge on the A9 north of Inverness? Long delays are becoming increasingly common and the Scottish Government is looking at providing a flyover at the Longman Roundabout in Inverness, the source of much of this congestion.

Delays of one hour there would be unusual, but they are routinely happening on the railway line north from Inverness. Here capacity is also the problem. The railway line is single track and there is no longer any passing place for the 13 miles between Inverness and Muir of Ord. Trains are restricted to 10 mph over the Caledonian Canal swing bridge at Clachnaharry and, due also to speed restrictions over level crossings, the timetable allows 20 minutes for this short journey leg.

This part of the line is operating at capacity at certain times of the day and there is no flexibility for trains that are running late. When the 06.18 from Wick is more than 10 minutes late at Dingwall it loses its slot at Muir of Ord, and has to wait there for an hour until the trains from Inverness to Wick and to Kyle of Lochalsh have come through in the opposite direction. Instead of reaching Inverness at 10.38 it does not arrive until 11.40 and passengers miss their connections to Edinburgh and to Aberdeen.

Trains have to be “flighted” like this to achieve connections at Inverness. Two services arrive from Glasgow and Aberdeen around 10.30 and the above trains are the onward connections to the north and the west. The 06.18’s scheduled arrival is similarly carefully timed to make connections to Aberdeen and to Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Passenger numbers on the Far North Line have been steadily increasing and more trains are running to cater for the demand. The flexibility in operating single track railways is always very limited because trains have to pass each other in strategically placed loops. What was once operationally acceptable with a lower level of traffic eventually becomes impossible to manage without greater line capacity and that is the stage the Far North Line has now reached. It is a success story which needs investment in more loops and nowhere more so than on that initial congested section between Inverness and Muir of Ord which is shared by both the Wick and the Kyle line services.

There used to be a six mile section of double track from Clachnaharry to Clunes until the 1960s. A short passing loop was left at Lentrán until 1984 when it was swept away to simplify the introduction of radio signalling.

The formation for the double track is still *in situ* except at Phopachy where a new single track bridge was built over the A862. Thus it would be quite straightforward to relay track. A new single track

bridge would be needed and a 60 mph powered point and signalling at the Clunes end. While not inexpensive the cost would be a small fraction of the amount spent in re-opening Borders Rail.

Because of the congestion caused by lack of line capacity there is very limited scope to run extra freight or charter trains. Both have great potential which is not able to be realised. There are masses of timber to come out of the north and the liquefied gas supplies to Caithness would be much safer on the railway. The scenic reputation of both lines leads to a demand for lucrative charter trains which is not being met. Due to the congestion, the only charter paths are at 06.30 and 11.15 from Inverness.

The 06.18 from Wick had a much longer wait than usual on 2 July when it did not arrive at Inverness until 12.07, over 90 minutes late. Although it was only some 25 minutes late at Dingwall, it presumably also had to wait at Muir of Ord for an outgoing special train of some kind as well as for the two service trains.

It is difficult to imagine the substantial inconvenience to all the 51 passengers on that train. The FNL is being strangled by its own success because the extra capacity needed has not yet been supplied. Delays have become endemic and passengers have been walking away. The line is in crisis and needs investment to play its full role in providing sustainable transport and limiting some of the carbon emissions which increase as more traffic is forced on to the road.

These delays are on top of the end to end timetable having been lengthened four times in the last 10 years. It now takes almost 4 hours and 20 minutes from Inverness to Wick. In 2004 it was 3 hours 52 minutes. John Ellis, Managing Director of ScotRail, said at the 1995 conference on the future of the line that his ultimate aim was for "a three hour journey time". Why has the service been allowed to become so much slower and why is it still struggling to keep to the timetable?

Yes, Minister, the much needed Lentrane Loop is indeed "an interesting proposal" and it should appear in Network Rail's enhancement plans for Control Period 6. We hope that you will ensure that it forms part of the HLOS in due course. The Borders and the Central Belt have benefited from large railway expenditure in recent years: it's surely the turn of the more distant Highlands now.

REQUEST STOPS

Railwatch, the magazine of the Railway Development Society, carried several letters about the Far North Line in its July issue. The letter below has an interesting angle on the issue of request stops.

Far North Signals

I refer to Mr J Artherton's letter in *Railwatch* 143 in relation to the request stops on the Far North Line. I agree that little would be saved by abolishing some of the request stops, but believe, with some modest expenditure these could all be retained while the service is speeded up. I would suggest a similar system be adopted as on some secondary lines in Switzerland. Intending passengers wishing to stop a train press a button on the platform which illuminates a flashing light for the train at a safe braking distance. A light by the button shows passengers the train will stop.

The train driver does not need to slow down to look for passengers giving a hand signal. With trains able to proceed at full line speed unless definitely required to stop, several minutes can be saved on longer journeys, with the timetable based on the average number of request stops normally required. This system would benefit the Far North Line, and could be used on other lines, such as the Central Wales line.

David Carpenter, Addison Road, Rugby CV22 7DA

FOND MEMORIES OF THE *COFFEE POT*

It was referred to affectionately by the folk of Dornoch and district throughout its long, eventful and useful life as the *Coffee Pot*.

The sturdy little tank engine I first remember was already verging on obsolescence by the first decade of last century, when it pulled its first train slowly into the recently-built Dornoch Railway Station.

Yet this little loco, aided occasionally by others, served Dornoch Light Railway under three masters - Highland Railway Company, LMS and finally British Railways - for over half a century, until only three years before the picturesque line's closure in 1960.

I first became acquainted with it in 1953, when I made the traumatic move from primary school in Durness to Dornoch Academy.

I was awakened very early at my croft home in Sangobeg, two miles east of Durness, on that late August Monday morning.

My mother accompanied me as we trundled 60 miles on the Durness mail bus, a utility Bedford OZ with wooden seats, to Lairg, where we caught the northbound Inverness – Caithness train to The Mound Station, along with many other youngsters returning from remote homes to secondary school.

There we dismounted in the early afternoon, before embarking for the final seven-and-three-quarters miles of our journey on the crowded single carriage, attached along with two or three accompanying goods wagons to British Railways' sturdy little workhorse No 55053, constructed little over three years after the line's inauguration in 1902.

Presently we chugged away, very slowly, across the sluice viaduct and artificial causeway across Loch Fleet from which The Mound vicinity takes its name, passing Cambusavie Platform, wheezing and chuntering along the lochside before halting briefly at Skelbo Platform. Then on along the dunes by Coul Links to Embo, the only really significant stop on the line, where passengers may well have boarded or left.

From Embo it puffed the last two-and-a-quarter miles along above the Moray Firth, the north end of Dornoch Golf Course, Achinchanter Farm and Earl's Cross Wood, before sliding gently into the picturesque wee tree-lined Dornoch Station, at that time supervised by stationmaster, the late George Sim.

Here I must digress and admit I may be wrong about the identity of the engine involved on that first trip. No 55053, which originally bore the Highland Railway number 45, and later the LMS number 15053, was the regular loco on the line. However, a well-known photograph of Dornoch Station, taken about three weeks later, shows its sister engine No 55051, brought in when 55053 was undergoing maintenance, providing the motive power. Never mind - the replacement would still have been referred to locally as the *Coffee Pot*.

Be that as it may, after disembarking, my mother walked with me and my case, as we followed other lads the half mile to Earl's Cross Hostel, Sutherland County Council's boarding residence for secondary age boys from outwith the area, attending Dornoch Academy. Then it was a two-mile round trudge to the Academy itself, to enrol officially, before returning to the hostel, where my mother, who was staying with some friend that night, bid me a tearful farewell at the main gate. But that's another story.

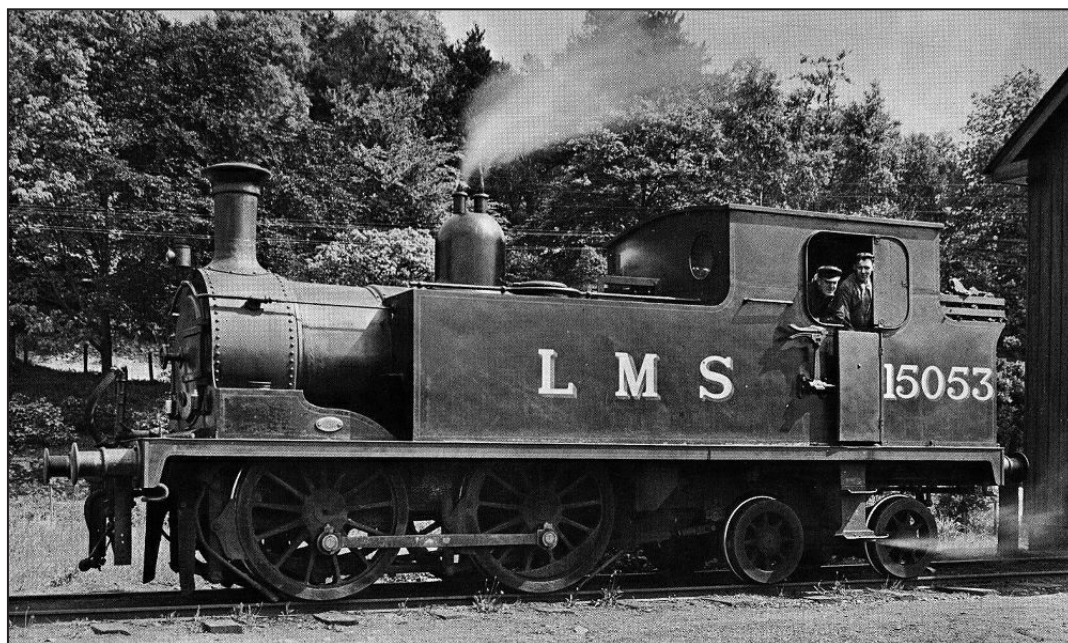
Over the next six years I became better acquainted with the *Coffee Pot*.

Although buses for hostel residents were provided to travel home or return to school at the beginning and end of most main school holidays, it was incumbent on pupils to return at the end of the summer holidays by ordinary public transport - hence the mail bus, mainline train and the *Coffee Pot*.

The same regime prevailed with regard to the two-day October break - the "tattie holidays" - although after my first year, Durness parents hired a local minibus to convey pupils home on the day the break began.

I also travelled by *Coffee Pot* on the first and last stages of a long journey from Dornoch at the tender age of 16, for an interview at the RAF aircrew selection centre at Hornchurch, Essex. Sadly, by the time I left school, my eyesight had deteriorated beyond the stage of eligibility for aircrew training - which is why I reluctantly entered tertiary education, before rather less reluctantly combining a journalistic calling with that of a part-time officer in the Territorial Army.

It must have been shortly after that particular journey that the original *Coffee Pot*, No 55053, suffered a fractured axle that rendered it beyond economic repair, leading to its replacement for the branch line's last three years by two ex-GWR pannier tank engines, No 1646 and 1649.



I remember well most of those who staffed the line - George Sim, ticket clerk Cathy Fraser, driver Tom Fraser, whose son Kenny was in my class at Dornoch Academy, guard Donnie Bain and my old friend and school contemporary Jimmy Melville, who began his working life as a teenage porter at Dornoch Station, before moving on to higher things. Jimmy, still alive in good health, is the only

survivor from those happy days, and has made a prominent appearance in a DVD detailing the line's history.

The *Coffee Pot* remained part of daily life throughout my Dornoch schooldays. We passed the station daily on the trek to and from the academy, while from Earl's Cross Hostel we would often see the ancient loco wheeze its way up the incline past Achinchanter, heading for Embo and points north, at the head of its assorted rolling stock.

When first I arrived in Dornoch the station boasted a tiny newsagent's booth, run by local woman Mrs Voight, who had married a former German prisoner of war. However, in the late 1950s, as that location proved uneconomic, she moved it up the road to the council house scheme at Bishopfield, to benefit from a greater footfall and presumably increased business.

My last journey on the line must have been in August 1958, as I returned to the ancient burgh for my sixth and last year at Dornoch Academy.

The writing was by that time on the wall for Dornoch Light Railway and many similar branch lines throughout Britain. Flexible bus services and the increasing prevalence of private motoring had issued a death sentence for so much of the local railway network throughout Britain.

By the time the last *Coffee Pot* No 1649 steamed out on its final journey on 11th June 1960, I was a student in Glasgow, far away from dreamy Dornoch.

At that time, few dreamed that local railways might be required a couple of generations hence, to alleviate road traffic problems in congested areas, or as revenue-raising tourist attractions.

Imagine what a marvellous draw, for steam railway buffs and lay visitors alike, the truly scenic nearly eight-mile Dornoch - Mound line might have been had it survived until today. What a lost opportunity.

Willie Morrison

TWO FAR NORTH PROJECTS

Forsinard

A new research centre is to be built near Forsinard on land owned by the RSPB. The centre is to be used by conservation workers and university groups.

Planning consent for the £1.9m building has been given by Highland Council and a contractor has been appointed.

There is considerable opposition from local residents concerned about increased traffic, pollution and potential problems with their water supply.

The project is expected to generate income for local businesses and should provide welcome extra traffic to Forsinard station on the Far North Line.



Falls of Shin

Plans to replace the visitor complex at the Falls of Shin which was destroyed by fire in 2013 have moved into their final stages.



After a series of exhibitions earlier this year where visitors were able to see the plans, and the provision of an online questionnaire where comments and suggestions could be given, it was announced in July that the project has been granted planning permission. Lottery and other funding applications are being made and it is hoped that funding will be in place by mid-February 2016.

The new complex includes a cafe and a small retail area as well as interpretation boards giving information about salmon and the importance to the local economy

of catch and release salmon fishing. There will also be live digital coverage of the salmon leap.

There is an excellent opportunity here to provide an on-demand public transport link to Invershin station.

LESSON FROM THE RECENT PAST

My sister on a recent visit gave me an old pocket timetable - no use to me now, she said.

It was

"Your Highland Rail Guide and Timetable" 13 May to 29 September 1991, 17cm high, 32 stapled pages.

10 pages fewer and 4mm smaller in height than the current Edinburgh & Glasgow - Dundee/Aberdeen one.

Yet it contained so much more -

All 4 routes:

Inverness - Perth - Glasgow Queen Street - Edinburgh

Inverness - Aberdeen - Stonehaven

Inverness - Thurso/Wick

Inverness - Kyle of Lochalsh

Details of tickets with a special emphasis on the rover tickets - quoting their prices.

A short description of the main towns including Aviemore and Aberdeen.

I would commend it to Abellio as better than the present tiny leaflets.

As for the services then:

The 07:02 "Orcadian" got to Thurso at 10:45 and Wick at 10:49 - 14 and 42 minutes earlier than at present (trains divided at Georgemas Junction)

The 18:20 reached Thurso at 22:05 and Wick at 22:00 - 7 and 43 minutes quicker.

Trains took 57 minutes (70 mins now) as far as Tain (arrival time)

The 06:00 Wick and 06:08 Thurso reached Inverness at 09:52 and had a trolley throughout.

Locomotive service with Observation saloon to Kyle.

New commuter service to Invergordon at 17:07 arr 17:52, return 17:57 arr Inverness 18:40, yet strangely no early morning service southbound, The Wicker being the first arrival, though The Kyler got in at 09:19.

"During this timetable, ScotRail's latest 158 Express trains will start operating between Inverness and Aberdeen."

It strikes me, it was much handier to have all the N & E Highland services in the one booklet.

Richard Ardern

PLUS ÇA CHANGE

Notices scrawled outside the Stationmaster's office at Thurso:

"First portion 63 minutes late at Helmsdale."

"Second portion 117 minutes late at Bonar Bridge"

From Wilfrid Taylor's "Scotsman Log" **1965** as quoted in *Highland Railway Journal* 114 Summer 2015.

INVERGORDON OPPORTUNITY

On 9th July the UK's largest and newest cruise ship MV Britannia docked at Invergordon as part of her maiden cruise around the UK. In 2015 the Port of Cromarty Firth, as the Invergordon port is officially known, is hosting 57 cruise liner visits with a total of around 91,000 passengers and 30,000 crew.

This level of tourism represents an ideal opportunity for the Far North Line to be the vehicle of choice for viewing large areas of northern Scotland in real comfort. Let's hope that Abellio, with its avowed interest in promoting tourist traffic, will rise to the challenge.

ABC ON THE FAR NORTH LINE

Nine members and guests sampled the delights of Altnabreac (ABC) on Wednesday 26 August under the leadership of our Past President, John Thurso. We travelled on the 12.34 from Wick (13.06 from Thurso) using the request stop at Scotsclader to pick up retired p-way chargeman, Lewis Sinclair, and arrived on time at 13.35.

The forecast had been for rain and we did have a few spots after Georgemas but we were met at Altnabreac by the local population of insects. They looked too big to be midges, but they had certainly turned out in force to greet their honoured guests. They were rewarded, just like phlebotomists, with many samples of blood but one of us with the forethought to bring a midge hood was able to road test it for the first time and it passed 100% in repelling the flying insects. The Wick contingent was so impressed that they ordered one each immediately they got home. The tube of antihistamine cream came in handy too.

FoFNL Convener, Mike Lunan, was pleased to be able to announce that the Help Point telephone which had been out of order the previous week was in full working order. John Thurso told us about being allowed, as a boy, to operate the signalling instruments and hand the token to the drivers of the steam locomotives. The old steam locomotive water tank tower is still standing and even has its contents indicator on the side.

The siding and ground frame were to be permanently removed early this July but the rails were still there. Frank Roach of HITRANS had been looking at the idea of timber loading there, so possibly that is not to be. Lewis told us about the dismantling of the signalling including a gantry in the 1960s. Only the point rodding was salvaged. The loop, which had been particularly invaluable for snow clearance operations, was taken out creating a 22 mile long section,

Dalnawillan Lodge and Lochdhu were no doubt built with materials brought by rail to Altnabreac. John Thurso told us that during his childhood they still had paraffin and Tilley

lamps. You might have imagined that they would have had a generator by then. We didn't have time to walk to the very imposing Lochdhu House which was a hotel for a while. David Spaven remembered camping nearby and going to the cocktail bar for a drink. The ladies were all in cocktail dresses and he felt rather underdressed in jeans!

The Station Master in the 1950s had a big vegetable plot on the other side of the rails and even managed to grow sweet corn. John and Lewis and Iain MacDonald (retired signaller) were able to talk about Mr Archie Macmillan, the stationmaster, and other staff. Lewis brought along the station goods traffic book from 1951 until closure in 1966. It was fascinating complete with the auditor's green writing every six months and warrants further study. He also had the morse codes for each station on the local circuit phones.

The station buildings have all been demolished and a modern bungalow built beside the platform. The former school was displaying a sign saying

"ALTNABREAC DC twinned with WASHINGTON DC"



It was fun watching John Thurso flag down our train back with Mike's jumbo umbrella. We almost expected President Obama to step off the train. Two Presidents in one day. Would ABC ever have seen the like before?

The ScotRail service was excellent in every way, but we all agreed that we would not like to be stranded at such an isolated station. Despite ScotRail's JourneyCheck sometimes advising that replacement buses and minibuses would call at all stations Forsinard, Altnabreac, Scotsclader etc none of us would like to put that to the test given the long bumpy roads and locked gates involved. We enjoyed every minute of the 20 minutes we spent there, but were content to get aboard the warm train with its hot drinks trolley and leave Altnabreac to the insects.

Bob Turner and Richard Ardern

SCOTTISH HERITAGE ANGEL AWARDS

The Helmsdale Station Volunteers who are responsible for the restoration of Helmsdale Station as featured in FNE have been shortlisted in the Caring & Protecting category of the Scottish Heritage Angel Awards for 2015 for "Volunteer-led involvement in saving/restoring heritage sites and buildings".

Winners in all categories will be announced at a special ceremony at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh on 28th September 2015.



HOPE FOR BRORA STATION?



A new fund launched on 27th August may be cause for optimism in Brora where the 1871 station is currently lying empty and boarded up. The £1.5 million Stations Community Regeneration Fund launched by ScotRail and the Scottish Government's Transport Scotland agency offers grants of £5,000 - £75,000 towards structural repairs and fitting-out costs. Larger grants may be available in return for a detailed feasibility study.

Phil Verster, ScotRail Alliance managing director, said, "We believe the fund will make a

real difference to customers and people living near stations – opening up social opportunities, restoring disused premises, and creating jobs."

Station Surveys

FoFNL carried out a series of station inspections in the Spring of 2008, publishing its findings in the Newsletter (FNE45) and sending copies of the Report to Network Rail, First ScotRail and others seeking action where it was thought necessary.

Now, seven years later and with a new train operator, it was thought right to repeat the exercise. All stations were visited during August and a pro-forma with Y/N questions was used. Learning from the experience of 2008 some extra questions were added this time. As then, surveys were carried out during daylight so that it was not possible to determine whether station lighting was adequate, or even if it was working. We plan to be vigilant during evening journeys later in the year to fill in this gap in our knowledge. A full report, together with an update of actions which we recommended be carried out, will appear in the next FNE.

This summer selection shows how hard MSPs work on behalf of the Far North Line.

S4W-25421: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, 01/05/2015

To ask the Scottish Government when the extra commuter trains between Inverness and Elgin, which were discussed at the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership board meeting of 10 April 2015, will become operational; what times of day they will operate, and how it will ensure that there will be sufficient (a) train sets available and (b) spare capacity retained at Inverness as contingency cover for breakdowns.

Derek Mackay: Transport Scotland is currently working with Abellio, ScotRail and Network Rail, progressing the development work that will ensure that the opportunities presented by investment in the Aberdeen-Inverness line for passengers and freight are realised as early as possible.

S4W-25422: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, 01/05/2015

To ask the Scottish Government how much double-tracking between Inverness and Nairn, as set out in August 2014 in the document, Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Improvements Project GRIP 3 – Phase 1 Enhancements, is to be provided; where it will be laid, and what the timescale is for the work.

Derek Mackay: Infrastructure improvements for the Aberdeen to Inverness Improvements project, including some double tracking between Inverness and Nairn, will be prioritised for delivery in the next phase of the project (during Control Period 6 2019-24). I can confirm that the Scottish Government is absolutely committed to delivering significant journey time improvements and greater connectivity on the Inverness to Aberdeen corridor, including enhancing services between Inverness and Elgin.

S4W-25466: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, 07/05/2015

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the outcome of the trial in 2013 that examined the feasibility of moving bulk spirit and other food products between Elgin and Grangemouth by rail, whether the safety benefits that were identified for the A9, A95, A96 and other roads will be taken account of when appraising proposed public investment or grant aid for a regular so-called whisky train service from the north to central Scotland.

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government's Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance requires an assessment of safety benefits as part of the overall appraisal process for transport investment. In addition, safety benefits of transferring freight from road to rail are fully taken into account when assessing applications for funding from the Government's Freight Facilities Grant Scheme.

We are currently refreshing our Rail Freight Strategy, which will include how best to maximise investment in rail freight in Scotland.

S4O-04456: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent, 03/06/2015

To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has for rail freight hubs.

Derek Mackay: Rail hubs are privately owned facilities and it remains the responsibility of operators to determine whether to invest in existing facilities to support growth or to create new ones. The Scottish Government will continue to support this process, for example through investment in the infrastructure where there are network wide benefits or by identifying appropriate opportunities in the National Planning Framework. In addition the Scottish Government is currently developing a rail freight strategy which will consider a broad range of issues and in particular how best to

work with the industry to maximise the benefits of any future public investment in rail freight facilities.

S4W-26117: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, 15/06/2015

*To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question **S4W-24607** by Derek Mackay on 6 March 2015, from which ScotRail services the Borders Railway rolling stock will be drawn, and how many of the class 158 trains that are based in Inverness will be included.*

Keith Brown: It is an operational matter for Abellio ScotRail to decide which trains from within its diesel fleet it allocates for Borders services. Those planned to be used on Borders services also work across other routes in central Scotland, including, predominantly, Fife to maximise the available capacity in and out of Edinburgh.

Borders services will be operated by class 158s and this fleet will begin a significant refurbishment programme in July 2015. When these upgraded units start to roll out they will operate on Borders services from September 2015.

S4W-26120: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, 15/06/2015

To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to reduce the number of class 158 trains on Inverness services.

Derek Mackay: It is for Abellio ScotRail (ASR) to allocate sufficient rolling stock capacity for its services from within its fleet and it has no plans to reduce seats on routes in and out of Inverness. ASR has obligations to allocate suitable capacity to match passenger loadings which Transport Scotland will continue to monitor through the franchise agreement.

DVD Review - The "Cam" Camwell Collection

DVD Volumes 4, 8 and 9.

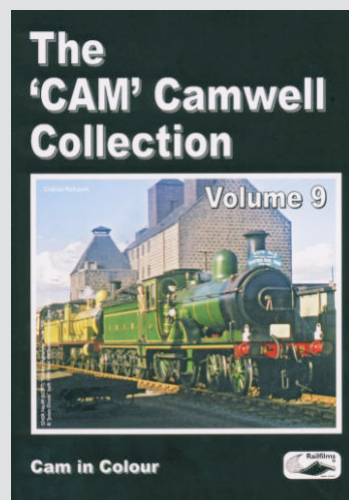
Railfilms, 2014. £20.00 each www.railfilms.com. Available from *TeleRail*, Carnforth Station LA5 9TR. 01524 735774.

Volume 8 (North East England and Scotland) includes an extended section on the north from Inverness to Fortrose which includes Muir of Ord as it was in 1960. This is followed by shunting at Dingwall and footage of, and on, a train to Achanalt with a Black Five piloted by a Pickersgill 4-4-0. Alness, Delny, Tain shed, The Mound, Golspie, Helmsdale, Georgemas and Thurso are all shown. There is some early 1950s footage of *Highland Railway* 55051 on the Dornoch branch and of *Ben Alder* at Wick.

Volume 4 (Scotland and North East England) has some good footage of the West Highland Line, Clachnaharry, and of the *Highland Railway* Jones Goods locomotive between Inverness and Aviemore. There is a highly memorable scene of a Black Five on a train from Forres overtaking a train from Craigellachie where the two single track lines run side by side on the approach to Boat of Garten.

Volume 9 (Cam in Colour) is all in colour and starts with a 3 minute sequence of the Jones Goods between Inverness and Blair Atholl. The 1960 Scottish tour headed by the Jones Goods and *Gordon Highlander* is also featured. Footage then covers the rest of the British Isles and includes an Irish horse drawn tram. The prospect advertised on the sleeve of seeing "narrow gauge tanks on the legendary *Tralee and Dingwall (sic) Railway*" proves to be an Irish myth. Geography is not the editors' strong point with many pronunciations murdered, none more so than "Craig-ell-lachie"! All the DVDs have a commentary rather than any locomotive and train sounds. An interesting collection of memories nonetheless.

Richard Ardern





Serco's new sleeper franchise has already been making a welcome impression, here 67009 and 67010 take the Inverness-bound sleeper across Culloden viaduct in morning sunshine on 7th September 2015

Photo:
Sandy Colley

158701, the first of the class to be refurbished stands outside Knorr-Bremse Rail Services' Springburn Works on 1st September 2015



Photo: **ScotRail**



We don't want this happening on the Berriedale Braes! Gas for Caithness should be transported by rail.
A tanker containing propane gas caught fire on the M56 near Chester on 10th August. Motorway closed for six hours.

Photo: **HAF Hughes** via BBC