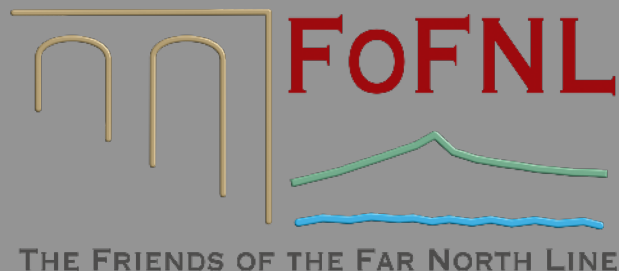


FAR NORTH EXPRESS

January 2016

Issue 67



Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

The campaign group for rail,
north of Inverness,

Lobbying for improved services
for the local users, tourists and
freight customers.



£1.50 where sold

Headcode	3
Editorial	4
FoFNL Submission to Transport Scotland Railfreight Consultation	5
David Spaven - Railway Atlas of Scotland	5
Far North Blockade	6
Far North Line Update	8
Highland Main Line Update	9
Inverness - Aberdeen Update	11
HITRANS Rail Stakeholder Conference	11
Station Usage Figures 2014-15	13
Stations Survey 2015	14
Summary of FNL Station Visits - August 2015	17
Summary of Inverness Station Visit - August 2015	18
Model Railway: Culrain Station in 1960	20
Interesting Question...	21
The Urgent Need for the Lentrane Long Loop	22
ScotRail Signs Up to Town Centre First Principle	24
Viewhill House Restoration Project	25
Trackwalker	26
2016 AGM	28
Book Reviews	29
Helmsdale Station Update	30
...and Finally	31

President:

Paul Monaghan MP

Vice-President:

Rhoda Grant MSP

Convener:

Mike Lunan, Thurso

Hon. Secretary:

gay Malcolm George Wood, Ard-
secretary@fofnl.org.uk

Hon. Treasurer:

David Start, Worthing

Membership Secretary:

Angus Stewart, St Andrews

Newsletter Editor:

Ian Budd, Glasgow

Committee Members:

ness Bob Barnes-Watts, Inver-
Richard Arden, Inverness
Stewart Campbell, Alness

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

FoFNL Website: www.fofnl.org.uk

Editorial Address:E-mail: editor@fofnl.org.uk

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

Cover photo: 158701, the first of the fleet to be refurbished, forms the 08:55 service to Kyle of Lochalsh waiting to depart from platform 6 at Inverness on 25th November 2015.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**

FOFNL MEMBERSHIP FORM

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

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

If you prefer, you can phone our Membership Secretary on +44 (0)1334 475311. Annual membership is only £12.00 (£10.00 for concessions).

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

There's a lot going on on Scotland's railway as I write (in the first week of the year), but much of it is buses. That's not entirely fair, of course, as Network Rail's (NR) orange army is out there mending the bridges that the extreme rainfall has carried away. However the sheer scale of the disruption (both in location and time) requires a long hard look at the strategy of coping with the climate changes so clearly taking place. The Scottish Government has said that the whole issue of flooding must move up the agenda - the rail industry must play its part in the debate about What To Do once the mopping (and shoring) up is complete.

It's Consultation Time out there. The Department "for" Transport has sought three reviews about various aspects of NR and the wider matter of regulation. We await the final outcomes - will NR be reprivatised? will ORR be swept away as was the Strategic Rail Authority? indeed, will NR be wholly wrapped in the welcoming bosom of the State? The nation holds its breath.

Well, it doesn't, actually. The nation - when its members are being passengers - couldn't care less who owns the various bits of the railway or how they are stitched together. So long as the trains do what the timetable says, they're pretty contented. Getting a seat is nice too (not a problem up here, unless you are the third bike seeking a space). Abellio, after an uninspiring start, are getting their act in gear and seem responsive to suggestions about how things might be improved. The performance statistics on the FNL are poor - we know that, Abellio

acknowledges that - and there are beginning to be signs of improvement. FoFNL is watching.

In franchises operating south of the Border there is a requirement that CaSL figures are below a certain level. These measure Ca(ncellations) and S(eriously) L(ate) running. Transport Scotland makes no such demands on Abellio (why not?). In consequence all the FNL services which omit Thurso, or Conon Bridge and Beaully, fail to register on the radar as CaSL. In England a train is Ca(ncelled) for this purpose if it omits even one timetabled station. Does the SQUIRE monitoring regime look at this? If not, should it?

With another hat on, the present writer remarked at a meeting in Elgin in September 2003 that "the railways [were] bleeding to death". Happily the bleeding stopped, and a long period of recovery - and fresh growth - occurred. There's been more bleeding lately; the patient is in A&E while the floods are dealt with; the family, gathered round the bed, are anxiously seeking signs of improvement. The nation holds its breath.

Abellio's commitments for Scotland's railway are considerable, and in many cases visionary (if sexing up a 40-year-old train can be called that): once we can travel inter-city in a decent carriage things will be a lot better. But what is needed in 2016 is delivery. New trains will whizz about in the Central Belt, but up here there will be no change. All that can be delivered on the FNL is the timetable - all day, every day ... please.

Mike Lunan

FNL RELIABILITY IN PARLIAMENT

S4W-29164; Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands (Lab): (Answered 20/01/2016)

To ask the Scottish Government on how many of the 309 weekdays between 15 December 2014 and 12 December 2015 rail services on the Far North Line achieved 100% reliability.

Derek Mackay:

Of the 309 weekdays between 15 December 2014 and 12 December 2015, 100 percent reliability (that is, no full cancellations, part-cancellations, or incidents where a train failed to stop where it should have stopped) was achieved on 216 days.

MISMATCH

Having listened to various talks in 2015 given by people right at the top of managing the railway and, as FoFNL editor, reading the daily emails between committee members about problems on the line, I'm very struck by the mismatch between what is said and what actually happens.

CONTEXT

Taking a step back, and looking at the FNL in the context of Scotland, my first thought is that in a wealthy, highly organised country, the current situation on the FNL is just - surprising. As a rail industry outsider I find it hard to see why the FNL seems to be permanently crippled for the lack of spending on track capacity which is required in order to run a proper service. Perhaps the cause is an over-reliance on things like benefit/cost analysis during decision making. The fact is that if it is agreed in a country that good infrastructure is essential, even in under-populated areas, and that certain roads and railways should exist for the general benefit of the country, it is perverse to then apply BCR calculations to individual needs such as the redoubling at Lentrane or the provision of dynamic loops or proper signalling. Once a railway or road is deemed necessary all essential work should automatically be done. The definition of "essential" has to be about making the asset work properly, not trying to calculate how many people will benefit, and by how much, for each detail. It is common sense, not formulas, that is needed.

IRONIC

The present situation, where the stop at Canon Bridge is sometimes omitted to make up lost time, is pretty ironic when that station was itself only reopened less than three years ago to meet demand.

POLITICAL WILL

Clearly those in charge of running the railway would love to get on and make it all work. Phil Verster, MD of the ScotRail/Network Rail Alliance, made it very clear at the HITRANS

conference in December that it is the political will at all levels that is necessary to make things happen.

CLUB 50

It was good to hear about ScotRail's new £16 Club 50 return fare between Scottish stations, particularly that online and advance booking is not required as tickets can be purchased in the usual ways. When the offer was announced it oddly excluded return tickets with a destination of Lockerbie although travellers could book returns *from* that station. This has since been remedied, although it is disappointing that travel to/from Carlisle and Berwick is not included as it was in First ScotRail's Club 55.

ADVANTAGES

Having heard ScotRail managers being quizzed last year about the decision not to have an equivalent to the £19 return that Club 55 offered, and being given a hard time in many quarters, whilst explaining that the advantages of Club 50 far outweighed those of their predecessor, it is hard not to think that Abellio ScotRail has been forced to reconsider. If that is the case, they could score quite a few points, I feel, by admitting that, thereby showing that they really do listen to passengers!

VIEWHILL HOUSE

A very enjoyable editorial duty is to be able to respond to requests for help in terms of publicity.

The Highland Historic Buildings Trust project to renovate Viewhill House so it can be restored to its imposing presence near Inverness Castle is described elsewhere in this issue.

It is hoped that FoFNL will have a part to play in the small museum which is to be included. I can't help thinking that Joseph Mitchell the Scottish civil engineer, whose house it was, would be pleased about that. I do wonder though, what he would have made of the present state of his Far North Line.

Ian Budd

Further thoughts on the cover photo:

It is a shame that two of the four bike spaces have been compromised in the refurbishment in order to fit an extra wheelchair berth. Not good news for End to End riders to John o Groats. Not many years ago ScotRail ran a "bike van" to cope with the demand. And, by the way, that puddle on the platform has needed fixing for years. How about it NR?

FoFNL has submitted a detailed response on the future of rail freight to Transport Scotland. Essentially we believe that the Scottish Government needs to be much more ambitious and proactive in trying to steer traffic from road to rail in situations where the train is environmentally preferable and a practical alternative.

FoFNL has identified the distilling, timber and retail sectors as promising significant traffic for major growth. On safety grounds we would also like to see the gas traffic to Caithness and outbound domestic waste traffic from the Highlands transferred from road to rail.

A major constraint at present is the lack of capacity on all lines serving Inverness. Major works to modernise signalling, provide more and longer passing loops and significantly more double track are required. Carrying freight by rail rather than by road will help achieve carbon reduction targets and secure a more environmentally friendly and sustainable future.

You can read the full response at www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/submissions-and-responses/FoFNL-Railfreight-Consultation-Response-2016.pdf or visit the Scottish Government website at <https://consult.gov.scot/transport-scotland/rail-freight-strategy/> to see all the responses.

DAVID SPAVEN - RAILWAY ATLAS OF SCOTLAND

The Railway Atlas of Scotland : Two Hundred Years of History in Maps

David Spaven

255 pages, £30.00 (Review by **Richard Ardern**)

Birlinn in association with the National Library of Scotland, 2015
ISBN 978-1-78027-238-2

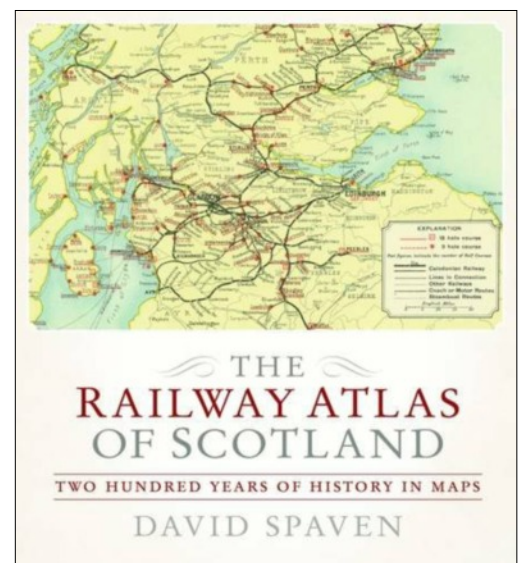
David Spaven, son of Frank Spaven FoFNL's former Membership Secretary and Vice President, has had a busy year in publishing two books with the same number of pages but vastly different in format.

The atlas is a large hardback book profusely illustrated by coloured maps of all kinds. It is an absolute treasure and is dedicated to his parents, Frank and Sheila. 181 maps of all kinds cover nearly 200 years of railways with an informed commentary and there is a useful and extensive bibliography.

Although the Brora tramway was too early for the scope of this book, the Far North Line is well represented and even the proposed Dingwall and Ben Wyvis Railway is covered. It was to be electrified using the BR system so that through working would be possible once the Highland Lines were also energised!

The TRACKatlas page shows the FNL in detail north of Lairg. The author observes that the 24 miles from Helmsdale to Forsinard is the longest single-line railway section in Britain. Over the 68 track miles north of Helmsdale there are 48 crossings, 41 of them are User Worked Crossings. The AOCL-B half barrier crossings "can be viewed as an expensive indulgence of the negligence of motorists". The author is critical of the over schematic depiction of the north in the recent First Group and Abellio ScotRail maps. He really likes the Alan Jowett maps of 1989 although it must be said that Clacknaharry (sic) is shown as being immediately north of the River Ness rather than north of the Caledonian Canal.

There is so much in this atlas. Seek it out for many hours of enjoyment.



FAR NORTH BLOCKADE



[a]



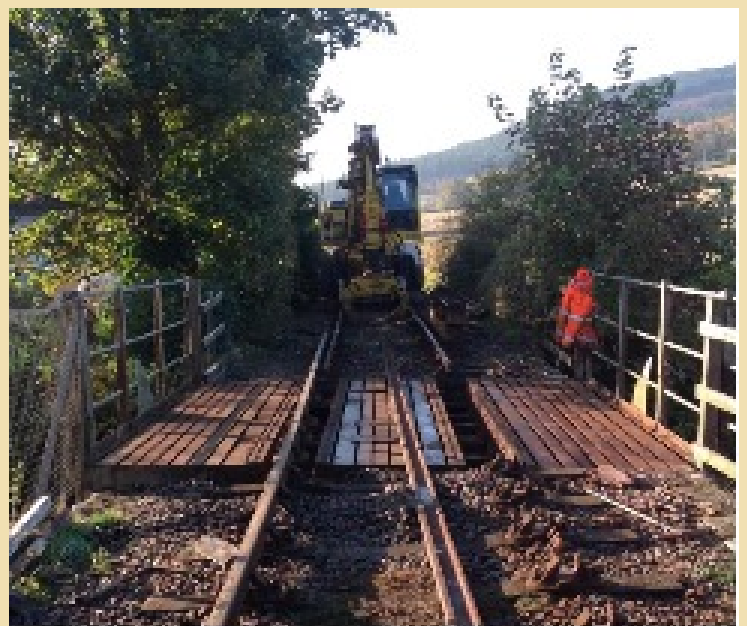
[b]

The FNL was completely closed for eight days during November. During this time work was carried out at Invergordon ([a] and [b] re-railing, new sleepers and points work), and at three sites in the Helmsdale section. These included points work at Ardgay, timber renewal on the Oykel Viaduct [c], and major work on the Tower Street bridge in Golspie [d]. As well as these, extensive work was carried out at

various locations to replace track and to improve the condition of the line generally. This included almost five miles of track renewal in the Altnabreac area. Drainage work was carried out at Meikle Ferry between Tain and Ardgay. To improve adhesion in the leaf-fall season, and to improve vegetation growth beside the track, eight miles of encroaching growth was flailed and over a thousand lineside



[c]



[d]



A long section of the route at Meikle Ferry had been vulnerable to flooding with some parts water-logged for most of the year. Drainage work was carried out on a 1 km length of track.



trees removed. Anyone who travelled behind Tornado on her summer visit to Brora would have been amazed at the quantity of branches caught up in the smoke deflectors, as well as the constant scratching of the wider-than-158 carriages, requiring much TLC when the train returned to HQ. In eight

days Network Rail carried out work which would otherwise have required nineteen weekend closures, and users of the line would surely much rather have a winter closure for eight days than a long series of closures in the summer with all the inconvenience to tourists and locals alike. **Mike Lunan**



Before and after at Delny after massive vegetation removal work.

FAR NORTH LINE UPDATE

10:38 Inverness to Wick due 14:56

This train is being delayed at Helmsdale by 70 minutes and is expected to be delayed at Georgemas Junction by 50 minutes.

This train will no longer call at Georgemas Junction (from Inverness at 14:14) and Thurso.

This is due to congestion.

Last Updated :16/01/2016 14:25

16:00 Wick to Inverness due 20:10

This train will be starting late from Wick by 30 minutes and is expected to be 10 minutes late at Georgemas Junction.

This train will no longer call at Georgemas Junction (from Wick at 16:18) and Thurso.

This is due to congestion.

Last Updated :16/01/2016 14:25

This scenario from Saturday 16 January is quite a common occurrence because of the capacity constraints of our 160 mile long single track line. The Controller has had to make a decision to let one train run on time and seriously delay one going in the opposite direction. The 12:34 from Wick is running on time and passengers have connections to make at Inverness. The northbound 10:38 is only 18 minutes late, but will have to sit at Helmsdale for a further 54 minutes before it can proceed the 24 miles on to the next loop at Forsinard. This is the longest single track section in Britain and trains are timed to take 34 minutes over it.

25 minutes can be saved if it omits its usual trundle down the Thurso branch from and back to Georgemas Junction before going on to Wick. Passengers are bussed to Thurso and the train might have reached Wick around 15:45 now some 48 minutes late. It is due to form the 16:00 back to Inverness.

The crew need a break as this is the long 10 hour shift from Inverness. The driver will have spent more than 5 hours in his small cabin. The official maximum is 4 hours 30 min. The

Controller will have asked if the crew (driver, conductor and trolley attendant) would forgo part of their hour long break to allow the train to start again at 16:30. By missing out Thurso once again, it can be away from Georgemas only about 5 minutes late and hopefully get to Inverness in time for the 5 minute connection with the last train to Glasgow at 20:15. On a Saturday there is no Caledonian Sleeper connection to make.

All this shows that the deceleration of services by nearly 30 minutes since 10 years ago has made this long line tremendously difficult to operate. This situation at Helmsdale, where a train about 15 minutes late is made to wait nearly another hour to complete its journey is mirrored in the south at Muir of Ord. The solution there is to reinstate the loop at Lentrán half way between Muir and Inverness and FoFNL is campaigning vigorously for this.

The solution further north is similar. Reinstate the loop at Kinbrace. Hopefully this might be achieved in conjunction with the current project to install timber sidings at Kinbrace. A decision is urgent because the RETB radio signalling is being reconfigured this summer. It is essential that the new RETB does not prevent enhancements to the line such as this. The latest figures show that after many years of growth, passengers have been put off travelling due to too many delays and cancellations during the last two years. Action is needed now to make the line more reliable and speedier.

This is being tackled in two ways. A task force in Inverness is now monitoring train performance on the FNL daily and, although it is early days, it would seem that service reliability and punctuality is starting to improve. Another working group, convened by Network Rail in Glasgow, has drawn up a list of over 20 enhancements which might be made. Many are small, saving literally seconds here and there, but the Lentrán loop is certainly on that list and we hope that Kinbrace loop will also progress.

Community activists in Evanton have been calling for the reopening of their station. This has been brought about by a serious reduction in the

bus services serving the village. On the present timetable it would seem that about 5 trains per day could call there but some of the Wick services could not. Certainly the commuters to and from Inverness could be served. Speeding up the line might create other timetabling opportunities. It would be particularly good if Highland Council would include helping to fund the Lentrane Loop in their City and Region Deal projects.

The latest passenger figures for the line covering April 2014 to March 2015 were released in December. After years of steady and significant growth, numbers were down. While

figures for Wick and Thurso were only marginally lower, the big worry was the decline of between 12 and 14% at the commuter towns of Tain, Invergordon and Dingwall. This suggests that the reliability problems over the last two years have lost the railway some of its regular users. Another factor might have been the completion of the two years of road works on the A9 Kessock Bridge with some commuters going back to road transport. We do not have any more recent figures to be able to tell if passenger numbers have stabilised again. We certainly hope so.

Richard Ardern

HIGHLAND MAIN LINE UPDATE

We are still waiting... Waiting for details of the infrastructure improvements promised to permit an hourly frequency and journey time improvements averaging ten minutes by 2019.

A parliamentary answer to David Stewart MSP on 7 January has admitted that the December 2012 improvements achieved only a one minute average reduction for weekday southbound trains from Inverness to both Edinburgh and Glasgow and improvements of seven and five minutes respectively northbound.

It is disappointing that all these average reductions have actually even been reversed by one minute since the December 2012 timetable. The problem is one of capacity on a predominantly single track "main" line with insufficient passing loops for the number of trains. Two extra services were added in each direction in December 2012.

INFRASTRUCTURE ENHANCEMENTS

A further two services each way need to be added to achieve the 2019 hourly frequency target, so it is obvious that significant doubling of track and provision of extra loops is required between Perth and Inverness (and at least one loop between Perth and Ladybank on the current circuitous route to Edinburgh). Double tracking is the real answer as it makes it so much easier to operate services when there are no delays caused by waiting for another train to vacate the single line section ahead.

Some indications of what is being considered can be gleaned from Network Rail's recently published draft "Scotland Route Study" open for public consultation until 10 March. This recommends the following in CP6 (2019-2024)

1. Perth station remodelling. Close platforms 3 & 4 and make 5 & 6 through lines.
2. The short Stanley Junction linespeed improvement should at last go ahead.
3. Kingussie loop extension and simultaneous arrivals from both directions allowed.
4. Carrbridge station enhancements and double tracking up the hill towards the Slochd.

Not preferred options include

1. Doubling on the other side of the hill from Culloden to Moy.
2. 100mph double track from the Spey Viaduct to Kinraig.
3. A dynamic loop from north of Dunkeld to Pitlochry.

It seems that current thought is to devise a timetable where the hourly passenger services would cross each other at Pitlochry and Aviemore. An Aviemore loop extension and signalling improvement to allow simultaneous arrivals is being considered for CP5.

Electrification from Dunblane to Perth and from Perth to Dundee is pencilled in for CP6 and onwards to Aberdeen in CP8 (2029-2034). Electrification from Perth to Inverness is not suggested for progression until CP10 (2039-2044)! This is a huge disappointment when we have been lobbying to have the wires installed to Inverness first on account of the significantly greater journey time reductions which would be achieved on our mountainous route. The decision on timing and priority is for the Scottish government, not for Network Rail. We need to redouble our political lobbying.

ROLLING STOCK POTENTIAL

Using more powerful rolling stock is another way to speed up the trains. Electric trains would be streaks ahead, but more powerful diesels are a stop gap. The currently used class 170s are poor on the hills. It is rare to climb to Slochd from either side or northbound on Druimuachdar at more than 60 mph. Abellio's plans to use HSTs in shortened five or four car formations should see some useful time savings. Industry problems have so far prevented the track measuring train from doing any timing calculations over the line nor, as far as we are aware, has a short HST been tried out. It is unlikely that the HSTs will last until 2044 when they would be nearly 70 years old if electrification is delayed that long!

TIMETABLING

The third way to speed up trains between Inverness and Glasgow/Edinburgh is to remove the current impediments south of Perth. Enhancements of central belt services some years ago demoted the Inverness expresses to the secondary route from Stirling to Glasgow via Cumbernauld and Springburn increasing running time by over 10 minutes. A similar time penalty is imposed on Edinburgh trains which now follow a local stopping train in from Kirkcaldy.

Using all three of these remedies could potentially reduce average journey times by far more than ten minutes provided proper dovetailing with the new EGIP timetable is achieved. Hopefully this will bring to an end Inverness expresses stopping at the likes of Bridge of Allan, nor would it be helpful (on balance) to insert an extra stop at the new Edinburgh Gateway station.

Using the same 55 minute timetable between Glasgow Queen Street and Perth as some Aberdeen expresses enjoy, and the best 120 minute schedule between Perth and Inverness could give a 3 hour journey time now. Unfortunately the long stretches of single track north of Perth make it difficult to operate such a schedule. Maximum early dualling is the most pressing need of all. No prizes will be gained by trying to continue to operate the HML with too little double track.

FLOODING

There was good news on Monday 11 January that the HML had reopened after the flooding and washouts at Inchmagranachan and Dalguise north of Dunkeld. Earlier in the winter there had been closures due to flooding at Kingussie and nearby. Both these areas are well known trouble spots and present major challenges to the track men and engineers. Rebuilding an embankment through flooded fields or raising the height of the track over a bridge which is next to a level crossing and a station are not straightforward tasks. Some solutions will have to be devised to make the line more resilient and also to provide more capacity on the only possible diversion, the single track line via Elgin and Aberdeen. This is particularly important to keep hold of the freight contracts.

GLASGOW QUEEN STREET CLOSURE

EGIP enhancements preparing the tunnel at Queen Street High Level for electrification mean that it will be closed from 20 March until 8 August. Inverness trains will be diverted to and from Glasgow Central adding between 15 and 30 minutes on to journey times, with the trains leaving Glasgow Central that much earlier. Although this will cause inconvenience, the improvements being made will be good news for passengers including those from and to the HML.

Other encouraging news is that passenger numbers have again increased on the line and that the Findhorn Viaduct at Tomatin is to be overhauled and be painted green instead of black. It should look splendid in green. Let us hope that this is the first of many green lights for substantial improvements on the HML.

Richard Ardern

INVERNESS - ABERDEEN UPDATE

A *Railnews* headline in March 1988 read “Super Sprinter triumphs on debut in Scotland”

A new class 156 diesel multiple unit reached *ultima thule* in Wick on 26 January. British Rail Manager, Chris Leah, promised “Inverness to Aberdeen journeys will be cut by around 20 minutes to two hours” by this new train.

Twenty eight years later the fastest journey takes 2 hours 9 minutes but several take more than 2 hours 20 minutes. Services are now more frequent but line capacity has not been increased and much of the problem is due to the lack of double track and the overlong lengths of single track between passing loops.

A good start has now been made with plans to redouble the track between Aberdeen Hutcheon Street and Inverurie for which contractors have been appointed. A recent lecture highlighted the many problems which have to be overcome because of how the line was singled in the 1960s and 1970s. Some bridges have been redecked as single track width only, track has been slewed to the centre, and there is new cabling along some of the old track bed.

Elgin is getting a new footbridge with lifts and a new bay platform facing Inverness, and Forres will have a new station on a mile long straight loop designed for simultaneous arrivals from both directions. Planning applications are

imminent including for the new road bridge to replace the level crossing.

Inverness Airport (Dalcross) new station planning application is also imminent. Initially this will have a single platform and no crossing loop. Trains will take three minutes longer between Inverness and Nairn. This will be partially offset by the three minutes saved by the improvements at Forres but will have an unfortunate effect at times of late running when outgoing trains may have to wait the extra three minutes to start their journey from Inverness and that extra late start will be carried forwards throughout the journey to Aberdeen.

Clearly this is not a good outcome for passengers. Reinstatement of the double track from Inverness to Woodend (Dalcross) or at least a loop at the new station should be provided from opening day. Passenger numbers continue to increase at intermediate stations and a huge 400% potential increase by 2043 with the promised clockface hourly frequency is vividly shown in Network Rail’s marketing study.

British Rail asked for the hourly service capacity and journey time of under two hours end to end in 1994. This, and increased freight capacity, for the wood and whisky industries in particular is long overdue. Phase 2 should be accelerated so that it is all done and the line fully modernised by 2024.

Richard Ardern

HITRANS RAIL STAKEHOLDER CONFERENCE

The conference took place in the Royal Highland Hotel, Inverness on Friday 11 December 2015.

Four FoFNL committee members attended: Mike Lunan, Bob Barnes-Watts, Richard Ardern and Ian Budd.

This is the HITRANS press release of 15th December:

Timber from the Flow Country – rail conference delegates hear of ambitious plans

Ambitious plans to transport timber from the Flow Country in remote North Sutherland to Inverness via rail instead of road could pave the way for other projects in rural communities throughout the UK, delegates were told at a rail stakeholder conference organised by HITRANS, the regional transport partnership for the Highlands and Islands.

HITRANS is co-ordinating investigations into the feasibility of the proposal, called Branchliner, which would see a major new facility created at Kinbrace to freight the timber to southern markets via an expanded siding at Inverness railway station.

It is deemed to be a pioneering project that could be mirrored in other rural communities in the United Kingdom.

An estimated windblow of 230,000 tonnes of timber needs to be harvested in the Flow Country. Kinbrace is situated in the heart of the target area - between Helmsdale and Melvich. The value of the wood at the mill gate is estimated at between £8 - £10 million. Its value if left to rot is zero.

Presentations were made by Colin Mackenzie, projects consultant to the Highland Timber Transport Group, and Frank Roach, HITRANS Partnership Manager, highlighting the potential of the project.

Preliminary studies had been carried out; key stakeholders had been briefed and it was hoped that a potential operator of the Branchliner project could be identified early in the new year.

HITRANS Chairman Councillor James Stockan said: "This is a very exciting project that has the potential to protect our hard-pressed roads, protect the environment and importantly in North Sutherland boost the local economy and create jobs. In the New Year we hope to continue progress towards identifying the necessary funding from partners and secure an operator. It is a pioneering project that could be mirrored in other rural communities in the United Kingdom."

A later presentation by Fiona Hesling of Transport Scotland on the Scottish Government's rail freight strategy highlighted that the deployment of one freight train would remove 76 lorries from the road.

Delegates were also advised of progress being made to open a new rail station at Inverness Airport, Dalcross. The first phase of development would feature a single platform on the north side of the railway line. A 150-space car park would be run by HIAL, who own the airport, and a free shuttle bus operated between the car park and the airport.

A consequence of the new stop would be the closure of the nearby level crossing to avoid adding to journey times between Inverness – Aberdeen. A traffic survey during the summer had identified daily use by only 71 vehicles and 8 pedestrians.

Initial findings from a business case review was that the station would return £5 for every £1 invested. It was hoped that when the business case and transport assessment were completed a planning application could be submitted next year. Local consultations would be at the centre of the process.

Keynote speakers included Phil Verster, the Managing Director of ScotRail Alliance, which combines ScotRail Abellio and Network Rail, and Peter Strachan, Managing Director of Serco Caledonian Sleeper, which has its new base in Station Square, Inverness.

Mr Verster said his aim was to bring the Highlands and Islands closer to the central belt, putting customers first. By 2019, it was planned to reduce travel times through investment in modern rolling stock, including high speed trains. An hourly service to Perth would be extended to Edinburgh and Glasgow. A £2 million upgrade of Inverness rail station was included in spending plans.

Mr Strachan said Serco would be introducing 75 new sleeper coaches by April 2018. He unveiled images of the compartments which he said would provide "a high quality customer experience". Serco were pleased to have chosen Inverness as the headquarters of its sleeper operation and sourced much of its catering products from the Highlands.

Delegates were also brought up to speed with progress being made by Network Rail to improve journey times on the rail network in Scotland and upgrade rolling stock and rail stations, including Forres and Elgin.

As a postscript to this item it is worth noting that both when answering a question and later, in an email, Mr Verster emphasised that FoFNL's approach is correct in lobbying Transport Scotland as the funder, Network Rail being the channel to deliver what the funder decides.

STATION USAGE FIGURES 2014-15

These are the figures issued by the Office of Rail Regulation. They show an overall drop of 8.81% in the total for the Far North Line excluding Inverness (for which no FNL-only figures exist). Looking at the stations from Tain southwards the drop is 9.79% with Conon Bridge showing a much larger reduction of 14.38%.

	2014/15	2013/14	% Change	Position 2014/15	Position 2013/14
Wick	21442	21884	-2.02	8	8
Thurso	42082	43802	-3.93	4	4
Georgemas Junction	1696	1652	2.66	16	18
Scots Calder	388	376	3.19	23	23
Altnabreac	240	138	73.91	24	25
Forsinard	1456	1718	-15.25	18	16
Kinbrace	528	1092	-51.65	21	19
Kildonan	96	144	-33.33	25	24
Helmsdale	5096	5778	-11.8	15	15
Brora	5616	6380	-11.97	14	14
Dunrobin Castle	822	916	-10.26	19	20
Golspie	6770	7788	-13.07	12	11
Rogart	1522	1662	-8.42	17	17
Lairg	7514	7440	0.99	11	12
Invershin	486	790	-38.48	22	21
Culrain	530	628	-15.61	20	22
Ardgay	8416	8806	-4.43	10	10
Tain	30004	34580	-13.23	6	6
Fearn	6130	6606	-7.21	13	13
Invergordon	31962	36356	-12.09	5	5
Alness	25934	27796	-6.7	7	7
Dingwall	87782	101996	-13.94	1	1
Conon Bridge	15510	18114	-14.38	9	9
Muir Of Ord	66576	72832	-8.59	2	2
Beaully	57446	57946	-0.86	3	3
Inverness	1303662	1282445	1.65		
Total (Excluding Inverness)	426044	467220	-8.81		

FNL RELIABILITY IN PARLIAMENT AGAIN

Question S4W-28461: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, (Answered 30/11/2015)

To ask the Scottish Government on what days since April 2015 the 06:18 rail service from Wick has been delayed at Muir of Ord due to late running, also broken down by length of the delay.

Derek Mackay: The Scottish Government does not routinely hold information on specific delays per service, however ScotRail has provided the following details on incidents of delay since April 2015 affecting the 06:18 service from Wick between Dingwall and Inverness: [table followed]

[The published table shows 11 incidents between 25th April and 11th November; 5 of a 1 min delay, 2 of 2 mins, 1 of 4 mins and 3 between 49 and 65 mins. *FoFNL notes, however, that this reply does not include several services that were terminated at Muir of Ord and so for statistical purposes ceased to exist. It is the 50-60 minute delays which so inconvenience passengers and would be avoided if the Lentrane Loop were built.*]

STATIONS SURVEY 2015

FoFNL carried out a survey of all stations on the FNL during August. The report below was sent to ScotRail in October. A reply was received from Phil Verster, MD of ScotRail Alliance setting out what was planned. These items are shown in **bold type** below. In addition to these ScotRail will also install lower counters at ticket offices in Wick and Thurso, and improve cycle parking at Inverness. They will be “looking at” the demolition of the derelict station buildings at Georgemas Junction and Invershin, and “reviewing” the issues surrounding stepping distances. Short of unjustifiably expensive rebuilding of many platforms there are only two simple ways of ameliorating large stepping distances. The method already in use at many platforms – of providing moveable steps – seems the simplest. Building a “Harrington hump” (a raised section of platform) seems unnecessarily costly given the small numbers of passengers boarding or alighting at the affected platforms. We expect the provision of more sets of steps to be the outcome of the review. FoFNL is pleased to see that the more safety-related matters identified are being attended to, but are disappointed that the installation of tactile edging to modern standards (as at Dingwall) is not being progressed.

What Needs to Be Done - 2015

This Appendix is set out in order from Wick to Inverness. Actions are set out in the order Network Rail (NR); Abellio ScotRail (ASR), others. Some actions naturally require co-operation among different parties, but appear under what we regard as the lead stakeholder. The list is not exhaustive, and some of the problems may already have been attended to since our inspection.

1 NETWORK RAIL

WICK	Install a train indicator				Attend to malfunctioning gate on DOWN side
THURSO	Install a train indicator				Install double arrow (missing)
GEORGEMAS JUNCTION	Repair platform surface				Install HELP button on UP platform
	Replace tactile edging				
	Repaint white line				
	Seek a user for the derelict building or demolish it			KINBRACE	Repair or replace tactile edging
	Install a train indicator				Repaint white line
					Install a train indicator
SCOTSCALDER	Replace tactile edging				
	Install a train indicator			KILDONAN	Install tactile edging
ALTNABREAC	Replace tactile edging				Repaint white line
	Install a train indicator				Install a train indicator
FORSINARD	Replace tactile edging			HELMSDALE	Install tactile edging on UP platform
	Repaint white lines				Repaint white lines on both platforms
	Attend to drainage in the four-foot at UP end				Install a train indicator

	Give thought to access to DOWN platform: ramp, barrow crossing?	ARDGAY	Install tactile edging and repaint white lines
BRORA	Give thought to access to UP platform: ramp, barrow crossing?	TAIN	Install a train indicator
DUNROBIN CASTLE	Install tactile edging Paint white line Install train indicator	FEARN	Install tactile edging and repaint white lines Install a train indicator
ROGART	Install tactile edging and repaint white lines Install a train indicator	INVERGORDON	Install tactile edging and repaint white lines
LAIRG	Install tactile edging and repaint white lines	ALNESS	Install tactile edging and repaint white line
INVERSHIN	Install tactile edging and repaint white line Check platform surface for muddiness in wet weather Install a train indicator Consider safety of ruined building; demolish?	DINGWALL	Move the arrivals/departures screen in the booking office onto another wall so that it may be read from outside when the office is closed
CULRAIN	Install tactile edging and repaint white line Install a train indicator	INVERNESS	Clean trackbed of foul waste (Platforms 1 and 2) Clean trackbeds of litter and consider condition Resurface areas where puddles are endemic

2 ABELLIO SCOTRAIL

WICK	Clean or remove luggage lockers and trolleys		wheelchair users to UP platform
THURSO	Clean or remove luggage lockers and trolleys	GOLSPIE	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?
GEORGEMAS JUNCTION	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?	LAIRG	Move one set of steps to UP platform (or provide another)
ALTNABREAC	Provide one set of steps	INVERSHIN	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?
HELMSDALE	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?	CULRAIN	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?
BRORA	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed? Improve signage for	ARDGAY	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?

TAIN	Reinstate the signs on both platforms 1 and 2 advising passengers of the correct departure platform for trains to Inverness which start at Tain; these are the 22:21 Mons-Sats and 10:55, 14:08 & 22:23 Sundays	sometimes not in the Waiting Room). Use a less pungent cleaning agent in the Waiting Room. Remove the charging ATM and get a bank to install a free one.
INVERGORDON	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?	Allow staff manning gates to use the announcement system rather than having to call out – scope for confusion if one train is ready for boarding while another is not ready.
ALNESS	Consider stepping distance: are steps needed?	Be more flexible with holding trains for connections, particularly final trains. Hold-ups using the gates make many passengers miss their connections.
DINGWALL	Ensure toilet is always open (remove RADAR lock?)	
INVERNESS	Ensure that announcements are clear and complete (as they are	

3 OTHERS

These are almost entirely concerned with signage between the town centre and the station (in both directions). All stations now display maps of the locality, including the town or village centre, but not everyone can read maps. A finger post outside the station pointing along the road towards the town or village centre would be useful. In many towns, not least Thurso, there is no indication of any kind that there is a railway station – no road sign, no pedestrian fingerpost – until the double arrow (itself of the small kind) is seen. In Wick the station is hidden away and there is only one road sign in the town centre (from the north) bearing a direction to the station. In many smaller villages there is little indication: sometimes a fingerpost with small double arrow at the turning itself, which is often too late to make a safe turning. The Highland Council should examine all these, perhaps by driving from Inverness to Wick and back and observing the lack of signage – a merry day's work on a nice day.

Whoever is responsible for the publication and display of bus timetables should review their practice as it is often poor, inaccurate or non-existent. Presumably someone is paying for this to be done, and if so they should monitor what is being provided (or not provided).

It is not clear who is responsible for the state of the car park at Golspie. In 2008 this was recorded as being well-maintained and well-surfaced. The spate of new buildings, commercial and domestic, since then has rendered the parking area inadequate and poorly maintained. The surface is full of puddles.

We have not sought to set out all the many minor irritations there are to users of Inverness station. There is every likelihood that most of these, certainly the structural ones, will be addressed in the chosen redevelopment plan. FoFNL hopes to be able to input ideas when the final plan is chosen, but before it is set in stone. Other nuisances are generally the result of thoughtless behaviour – bad parking, for example - by others, often non-users of the station. Good station planners will seek to design these out where possible.

Friends of the Far North Line carried out a series of station inspections in the Spring of 2008, publishing their findings in the FoFNL Newsletter and sending copies of the Report to Network Rail, First ScotRail (FSR) and others seeking action where it was thought necessary. To the credit of FSR most of the actions which fell within their remit were carried out fairly quickly.

Now, seven years later and with a new train operator – Abellio ScotRail (ASR) – 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.

The general level of provision of appropriate things at each station is very good. New technology has been introduced at several stations – card readers, for example, are installed but not yet operational. CCTV is advertised as being installed at most stations, and in many cases the cameras are clearly visible. It would be interesting to know whether particularly well-concealed cameras are in use in some stations, or whether the “There is CCTV here” signs are sufficient to deter anti-social behaviour without the need for any cameras. It is good to see that Train Indicators have been installed at some stations, some with solar-power panels, but it is disappointing to see untrue or vapid messages being displayed. To see that “No train is due” when a train is due 7 minutes later (and a check was made to ascertain that it was indeed on time) is not clever. Nor is there any point in reminding passengers at a small rural station to keep a close eye on their luggage. The Fat Controller should have a higher opinion of the general common-sense of his “customers”. Such indicators should either show truth – the next train is due at XXXX and is on time (or is expected at YYYY) – or should be blank if there is no further train today. We see no reason why there should not be train indicators at all stations other than Inverness. The indicator in the Ticket Office at Dingwall is hard to read through the window when the office is closed: it should be made more clearly visible.

We found seven years ago that many platforms were less well-kept than they should be. Were these stations in an urban setting, even with low footfall, we doubt that they would remain apparently neglected for so long. It is depressing to see that stations with poor white line edging, for example, still failed the same test in 2015. Network Rail must attend to these defects as a safety matter. The white lines are not there to look pretty. Other platform faults are harder to rectify: indeed some are probably impossible without disproportionate expenditure (although “disproportionate” in the context of passenger safety is a slippery term to nail down). The tactile edging at many platforms is of poor quality, and is wholly absent in some. Yet at some stations at the southern end of the line it is of a high quality. Platform surfaces are often gravel. This renders the station impossible to use for a wheelchair-bound passenger, and very awkward for someone with a push-chair. While it is unlikely that a wheelchair user will wish to explore the delights of Altnabreac it is quite possible that a family with a small child might visit Forsinard to see the RSPB visitor centre. Many platforms are too low for modern standards. Again, rectifying this would be very expensive, and in recent years portable sets of steps have been provided. However their use, on which we commented in 2008, is not well managed. In 2008 we measured stepping distances between the train and the platform. We did not repeat this test in 2015 as it was time-consuming and the data collected then will be the same now.

HELP buttons (always provided with a 999 button as well) are installed at all stations including Inverness. All were tested and at two locations (Altnabreac and Golspie) were found not to be working. The former was reported to ASR immediately and the fault was repaired the following day (it had already been noted). It was indeed working when checked several days later. It is

reassuring to know that such faults are monitored and fixed by the train operator. In 2008 we identified a problem at Forsinard which remains today. There are two platforms, access between which is by the public road which crosses by a level crossing adjacent to the platform ends. The HELP button is on the DOWN platform. If a passenger having to check the UP train does so, and learns that the train is imminent (and invisible), it will be impossible to cross safely to the UP platform without transgressing the flashing lights at the level crossing. Naturally passengers will ignore the lights and cross quickly, knowing that the train is due to stop. Naturally, but unlawfully. At stations where there are two platforms there should be two HELP buttons unless access between them is by footbridge on station premises.

Footbridges themselves are generally in good repair, although often needing a lick of paint. However access for anyone with reduced mobility (or with luggage or a push-chair) is poor. At some stations it is necessary to leave railway premises and use public roads (never clearly signed) to reach the other platform. We accept that building ramps is expensive, but ramps have been installed elsewhere (Inverkeithing, for example) and there is no reason why they should not be installed at FNL stations with higher footfall (eg. Dingwall).

Toilets are not provided at most stations. Where they are (Wick, Thurso, Dingwall and Inverness) they should be open during the hours advertised. At Dingwall access is by a RADAR key kept in the Ticket Office. While the staff member is attending to other duties on the station this means that the toilets are inaccessible. This is not acceptable and some means must be found of keeping the toilets open. If there is a vandalism problem it should be dealt with: closing the toilets is not a solution to a vandalism problem. Toilets were found to be clean and well maintained. Charges are imposed at Inverness (but not at Perth) – why? Shower provision is principally for the benefit of Sleeper passengers, and a charge is reasonable as towels are provided.

Wick and Thurso station buildings are fine structures, well maintained and provided with pleasant plants and seating in the old circulation area. Each has railway memorabilia and carries tourist information. But, as in 2008, each also has a stack of rusty and out-of-use luggage lockers, and rusty unloved (and unused) trolleys. If there is clearly no demand for these facilities they should be removed and sent for recycling. If, on the other hand, it is felt by ASR that luggage storage – perhaps less than is there now – is needed, then it should be modern, clean and in working order. With most suitcases now provided with wheels the need for trolleys is probably nil, and they should be scrapped – after all, they live in the station building and are invisible to any passenger alighting.

Signage within the responsibility of the railway industry is generally good (although not at Tain where there is confusion about the correct platform for UP trains starting there). The double arrow fingerposts on the A9 at Brora (absent in 2008 but replaced since, and frequently noted over the years) were absent when checked this time. We expect this was due to vandalism, and recommend stronger bolts. Signage to the station from town centres is generally poor, if there is any at all.

Inverness is dealt with in a separate Report.

SUMMARY OF INVERNESS STATION VISIT – AUGUST 2015

Friends of the Far North Line are aware that there are plans being discussed for the redevelopment of Inverness Station. This Report is intended to give a snapshot of the facilities provided on one day in 2015, thus giving an insight into what changes and improvements might be incorporated when redevelopment takes place. Indeed, some of our recommendations could – should – be implemented before then.

Generally the provision of passenger and public facilities on the station itself is good. The train information board was replaced some years ago and is a great improvement. Metal seating (cold and uncomfortable) is provided on the concourse and in a heated, if spartan, waiting room

(equipped with a HELP button). The station is brighter and more attractive following a major cleaning of the glass roof. There are automated ticket machines and a pre-paid collection machine. There is an ATM which charges – this is no longer acceptable practice in such a location, and this machine should be replaced by a bank one carrying out this vital function without charge. There is a bar and a separate buffet; there is a well-stocked bookstall and a barber's shop; there are left luggage facilities and a lost property office; there is a BTP office which displays a contact number when it is unstaffed. There are photo booths and a kiddies' ride. All these are welcome and provide the sort of things which passengers expect to see at a main station.

Alas these passengers are obliged to suffer the indignities visited upon them by the insistence of Transport Scotland that gated barriers be installed. This was doubtless done as a box-ticking exercise by someone with no working knowledge of the layout and daily practice of Inverness station. The structure of the building necessitates two separate gated areas: Platforms 1 and 2; and Platforms 3 to 6. There is no access between the two gated areas: one must be exited and the other entered. Consequently when a train from the south arrives at P1 or P2 any passenger with a tight connection (and not all trains on the Highland Main Line run perfectly to time) to Aberdeen, Wick or Kyle has to sprint (and be lucky) or miss the connection. In practice of course the sensible platform staff (who have learned how to work the system for maximum passenger benefit and minimum staff stress) lock the gates open at such times. A demonstration that installing gates at Inverness was and is daft, and a waste of precious resources. There is of course no gate for Platform 7. Too difficult.

Whereas Class 158 DMUs now have Controlled-emission toilets (CETs) (and Class 170s always had them) the track bed is still befouled with toilet waste on Platforms 1 and 2 where the HST Highland Chieftain continues to discharge waste (despite notices in each toilet). It is thought that not all these discharges are at the hands of passengers. The Sleeper, which also uses Platform 1 and 2, has CETs, so the soil would appear to come from one train a day in each direction. Track beds at other platforms were littered with food waste and packaging – all of which is probably tidied routinely. However the underlying track bed itself appears in a poor state with much soiling from diesel and general muck. While no train passes over this track at more than walking pace it is nevertheless unsightly, even if probably safe.

The difficulties (apart from the gates) at Inverness lie outside the station and are largely outwith the railway's ability to bring about change. Much information about buses – location, timetables – is wrong, and exhibited in the wrong places. The digital bus information screen was not working. The Plan Your Journey screen bears inaccurate information about buses (reported to FSR and Transport Scotland in 2014, but to no avail). Cycle storage is good, in contrast to car parking which is dire. The Short Stay (adjacent to Platform 1) is inadequate, with only 13 spaces (one for disabled) and only one "drop-off" space. Planning application promised 22 spaces, but the rest are chained off apart from 2 used by Shopmobility buses. The turning circle is tight for cars and is frequently blocked. It is impossible for rail replacement buses to turn – surely the obvious and most passenger-friendly place for them to be. Cars are often parked here, sometimes on the pavement. As well as being a hazard for wheelchairs (and others) this is unlawful. The other car park (for which a charge is made) is reached along Platform 6 and passengers have to negotiate puddles – some so large as to be unavoidable in heavy rain [see *cover photo*]. There are 42 spaces (including 3 disabled); one is used by BTP.

If redevelopment plans go ahead we hope that these parking criticisms will be heeded, and more useful arrangements put in place. We have no objection to there being reasonable charges, but the short-stay provision, which must be free, must be greater. At a station where late-arriving trains are common we question whether 20 minutes is the right upper limit for short-stay parking. We suggest 60 minutes until such time as trains routinely arrive at Inverness within 10 minutes of their due time on at least 95% of occasions.

MODEL RAILWAY: CULRAIN STATION IN 1960

A 1500 mile round trip from Exeter to Culrain Village Hall with my 4mm scale model railway Kyle of Sutherland filling the car, and no room for passengers. That was back in September last year, and I'm still recovering.

The model shows Culrain station as it was in 1960, complete with a dozen or so scale buildings, the road bridge from the south, platforms, loading bank and around 50 model trees.

I'd been researching Culrain since 1980, when I first surveyed the site of the station, and started the model in 2001 after retirement. Local people were extremely helpful, especially Alison Young of Station Cottage. Through Alison I met many other Culrain people and even some of the former railway employees. Over a period of time I photographed and measured everything that



remained at the station. Unfortunately, the station building and most of the other structures were long gone, and only one platform remained. However, with the information I had and with the help of a few published photographs I drew up 4mm scale plans of everything as it was in 1960.

The size of the scenic part of the model, shown above, is 10 feet by 3 feet. That's the same size as a 00 gauge Hornby model would be: after all they are built to the same scale of 4mm to the foot. The track and rolling stock on Kyle of Sutherland are, however, made to P4 standards. This means the rails are a scale 4' 8½" apart (18.83mm), just like the real thing, compared to only 4' 1½" in 00 gauge. This becomes more obvious when looking along the line.

Working to P4 standards does require extra work. The track is usually handmade: lengths of some types of track can now be bought off the shelf, but not points. The big difference comes with the modelling of locomotives and rolling stock. The clearances between the working parts of a steam locomotive, for example, can be very, very small. Sometimes as small as a few thousandths of an inch. Along with other P4 modellers, I find that a set of digital Vernier callipers is essential.

In 00 gauge, just place the train on the track and off it goes. By contrast, any imperfection, bump or wiggle in P4 track can cause a train to derail. The reason is that the scale flanges on the rolling stock are very, very small. The solution is to compensate the chassis, particularly of

steam locomotives, which means allowing the wheels to move up and down independently. This is achieved by either springing, a system of beams bearing on the axles, or a combination of both. Never a fast worker, the chassis of a P4 steam locomotive might take me a month to make.

But it's all worth it: over 150 people came along to Culrain Village Hall to see the model and to share their memories. Old friends met and reminisced about the station and the railway over coffee and cake. And some brought old photographs adding to my knowledge of what it was like in the 1950s and 1960s. Here's thanks to them all. And especially to the man who told me that as a little boy he used to climb up into the metal frame of a station lamp (presumably the lamp itself was being repaired) and sit there to the amusement of passengers. I wish I had a picture of that.



CULRAIN STATION, ROSS-SHIRE, SCOTLAND

Looking south from the signal cabin steps

Stuart Holt
Exeter, Devon

INTERESTING QUESTION...

The following parliamentary exchange on 24th September 2015 sets FoFNL wondering whether we need to ask Highland Council to "get its finger out" re the Lentrane Loop. Perhaps the minister would then oblige!

(S4O-04632) Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab):

To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to increase the availability of rail travel in the West Scotland region.

Follow-up question:

I thank the minister for that answer. "We must develop alternatives to the reliance on the M8 and the road network, which is hard-pushed to cope with demand, particularly at peak times, so with rail now becoming possible once again we should seize the opportunity. What I'm suggesting is the route that would go from Braehead to Glasgow, as this would involve minimal disruption."

Those were the words of Derek Mackay in 2012, before his appointment as transport minister, when he was discussing rail links to Renfrew. Can the transport minister tell me now what he is doing to bring such links to Renfrew?

Derek Mackay:

As a fellow resident of Renfrew - the largest town in Scotland without a railway station I agree with Mary Fee, but I will not let my ministerial interest be compromised. All that needs to happen is for Labour-led Renfrewshire Council to put in an application as promoter of the scheme. However, given that it has failed to do so, I cannot even execute my desire for rail to be extended to the town of Renfrew at Braehead. The £5 billion investment in rail in Scotland is the reason why patronage on the railways is increasing, and that is in addition to the multibillion pound investment in roads.

If Mary Fee wants to tell her pals on Renfrewshire Council to get their finger out, I will happily oblige.

“Good to see you this afternoon. We had arrived a few minutes late but when we got to the station for the homeward journey the 17:12 to Ardgay was cancelled. As you know this is a very busy commuter train so we had to all pile on to the 17:54 train to Kyle of Lochalsh. I have had problems before with trains at this time. All I can say is that this doesn't encourage people to travel on the train when they should be leaving their cars at home or in a station car park.”

This email came from a regular traveller between Beaulay and Inverness on the Far North Line on Thursday 24 September 2015. The regrettable cancellation was to the commuter train which serves Beaulay, Muir of Ord, Conon Bridge, Dingwall, Alness, Invergordon, Fearn, Tain and Ardgay in Easter Ross.

The cause was the late running of two inbound trains from Kyle of Lochalsh and from Wick which were both projecting arrivals soon after 17:30. Because of the 1960s singling of the track for the entire 20 minute journey between Muir of Ord and Inverness, when these two trains were coming in, nothing could go out in the opposite direction.

This single line section is a real impediment. The delays and cancellation on 24 September provide just one instance of the frustration felt by passengers at the continued lack of progress to update the inadequate infrastructure on the Far North Line. FoFNL tries to impress on ScotRail that the commuter trains are vital to the line and should not be cancelled. Network Rail needs to provide more line capacity and politicians are asked to ensure that they are funded to do this.

Please read on for the detail.

The Kyle train had left Kyle 64 minutes late at 14:50. By Dingwall it was 67 minutes late leaving at 16:58. It would have reached Muir of Ord at about 17:10 wishing to occupy the single track on to Inverness. The signaller had a choice either to let it through and delay the 17:12 Ardgay commuter or to hold the incoming Kyle at Muir of Ord for 20 minutes and make it

nearly 90 minutes late. There was just a chance that passengers from the north might catch the 17:30 connection to Glasgow at Inverness. In fact, the train was let through but the 17:30 seems to have left on time so any passengers for the south missed it by just three minutes and would have had to wait until the next service at 18:46. The reason for the delay to departure from Kyle was a lineside fire at Muir of Ord which had delayed the outbound working at Muir of Ord between 11:20 and 12:27.

The 17:12 commuter could have been allowed to leave and occupy the single line from 17:31 but there was still the 12:34 train from Wick to come in. This had been delayed by 21 minutes very early in its journey at Georgemas Junction because a passenger had been taken ill. It was 35 minutes late from Lairg because it had had to wait there to pass the 14:00 northbound service which it should have crossed at the next passing loop further south at Ardgay. It then lost another 13 minutes between Alness and Dingwall because the late running train from Kyle (above) was to be first through the junction at Dingwall where the two lines merge. Thus it was 48 minutes late from Dingwall and would have reached Muir of Ord at around 17:25. This was before the 17:12 Ardgay commuter could have left Inverness that night and so the Wick train was allowed to use the single track and arrived in Inverness 50 minutes late at 17:51.

You will note that this is just before the departure time for the next scheduled train north, the 17:54 to Kyle of Lochalsh. There was no track space to run the 17:12 commuter unless it had been attached to the 17:54 at Inverness and detached at Dingwall to go north. Such is the challenging intricacy of making the Far North Line timetable work due to the paucity and wide spacing of passing loops that this would have been tricky to achieve.

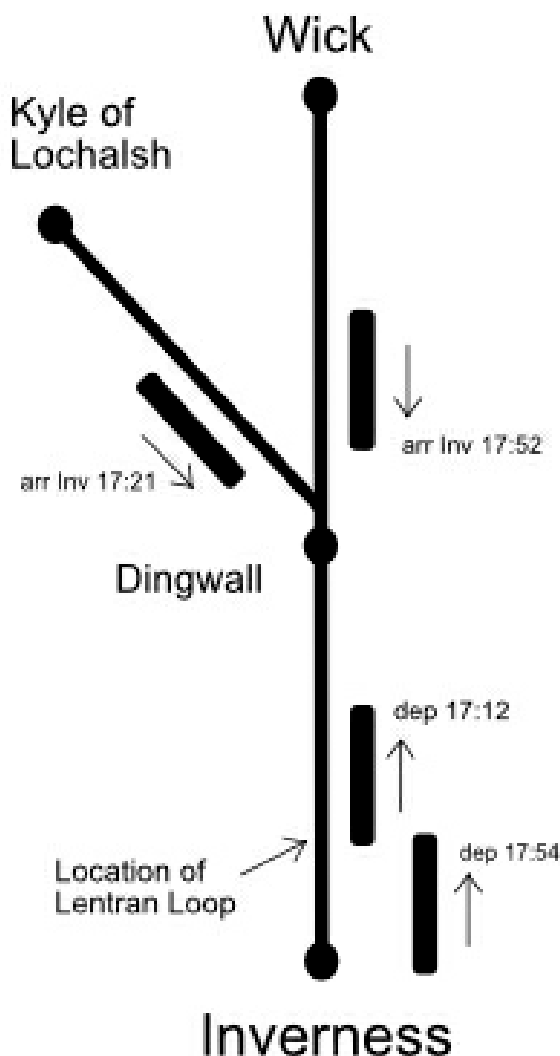
Merging the rolling stock of the 17:12 and the 17:54 into one train at 17:54 would have made the journey much more comfortable for the passengers who were crammed in to one set. Once detached the 17:12 could also have found a path north to Tain arriving there at 19:07 at

the right time to avoid any delay to the 16:00 from Wick due to leave Tain at 19:08. If it had been terminated there and taxis found for the remaining Ardgay passengers, the 17:12 could have picked up its return schedule and saved that train being cancelled anyway.

What ScotRail chose to do was to bus those passengers on the 17:12 who were going north of Dingwall and cram the 17:12 passengers for Beauly, Muir, Conon and Dingwall on to the 17:54. The passengers for north of Dingwall might well have got home at roughly normal time due to the A9 road to Alness being more direct than the route of the railway since the Kessock Bridge was built. If there was road congestion getting out of Inverness or on the bridge this might not have been the case. Road congestion is one reason why the rail service is so valuable and needs to be nurtured and improved.

These sorts of delays have been happening frequently for many years and, as traffic increases have become more acute, are leading to a decline in

passenger confidence and satisfaction. Passenger usage which has been regularly showing substantial increases each year has now seen a (hopefully temporary) fall over the last 18 months largely due to the recent unreliability of the services.



The success of the line has meant that passenger services have been expanded and it is now difficult to provide paths for extra freight, or for lucrative charter trains attracted by the stunning scenery of the lines to Wick and Kyle. Both lines share the same tracks as far as Dingwall and the long single track section from Inverness to Muir of Ord is right at the start of both journeys. Six miles from Clachnaharry through Lentrán to Clunes (Kirkhill) used to be double track and its reinstatement would make a huge improvement to capacity and punctuality. Altering the timetable is not an effective option because trains from both lines have to be flighted together in both directions to achieve connections at Inverness.

Please may we see plans drawn up for the Lentrán Long Loop without further delay?

Richard Ardern

LENTRAN LONG LOOP IN PARLIAMENT

The following exchanges took place in parliament on 8th October 2015 during discussion resulting from oral question S4O-04690.

David Stewart (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):

When the minister next meets Network Rail, will he raise the problem of the congested 20-minute long single-track section of rail between Inverness and Muir of Ord, which has led to cancellations and severe delays in services? It frustrates the further expansion of passenger, freight and charter train traffic on the Kyle and far north lines. Will the minister support the reinstatement of the six-mile section through Lentrán to double track, which would solve the problem?

(continued)

Derek Mackay:

I fear that the member might have pre-empted the next question, but I will answer anyway.

In the current control period, we are trying to maximise what we can do through timetabling and the deployment of resources. There have been issues around staff deployment, but I believe that they have been resolved.

For longer-term investment, we will look at the next control period, but there are two major issues to consider: the availability of resources and the potential restructuring of Network Rail. That is why I will participate in any review that is undertaken of United Kingdom-wide Network Rail issues. While considering resources and potential restructuring, I will bear the member's suggestions in mind.

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD):

The minister will be aware that the issue is of concern not just to those in the inner Moray Firth area but to my constituents, who rely on the line north of Inverness. I encourage him to look seriously at the option of twin tracking, not just because it would benefit the passenger service but because it would encourage the movement of freight off roads and on to rail. Will the minister give that serious consideration?

Derek Mackay:

Of course we will give the option serious consideration, but we are constrained by the available resources in the current control period. We will be as creative as we can be to maximise our railways' potential.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind):

I am similarly interested in the Far North Line and in the representations that have been made to the minister. Will he look at how the city deal could be involved in funding the Lentrane loop and addressing the signalling challenges to movement on the Far North Line?

Derek Mackay:

It is open to local authorities that are in collaborations such as a city deal to come up with transport projects, and it is for them to decide on their local priorities. I would welcome any bid from city deal alliances, from wherever they come, to support transport infrastructure investment.

SCOTRAIL SIGNS UP TO TOWN CENTRE FIRST PRINCIPLE

On 20th November FoFNL received this email from Phil Verster:

This is to let you know that ScotRail is the first private company to sign up to the Scotland's Town Centre First Principle which aims to boost the economic, social and environmental fabric of the nation's towns.

The Scottish Government and COSLA jointly launched the Town Centre First Principle to encourage organisations to make long-term decisions and investment choices that acknowledge the importance of town centres.

As part of our commitment, we will create a Local Stations Strategy to help identify and deliver town centre investment and development projects. These could include initiatives such as

residential, leisure or retail schemes, as well as partnerships with external organisations such as councils, house builders and developers.

We share the view of Derek Mackay, Minister for Transport and Islands, that good accessibility by public transport is a vital component of vibrant town centres. I am pleased that he has acknowledged how our approach builds on the valuable work we are doing through the Stations Community Regeneration Fund, which is breathing new life into old and disused railway station premises.

I would particularly endorse the minister's observations that stations can be a hub for local communities - with the opportunity to improve the rail experience, support community initiatives and create jobs.

If you know of opportunities where we can work in partnership to support town centre initiatives please contact my colleague iain.wilson@scotrail.co.uk

Regards

Phil Verster

Managing Director, ScotRail Alliance

VIEWHILL HOUSE RESTORATION PROJECT

Highland Historic Buildings Trust is involved in securing funding to restore Viewhill House in Inverness which has lain derelict since a fire in 2007. The house was designed by, and built for, Joseph Mitchell, a civil engineer who was heavily involved in the design and construction of railways in the north of Scotland. He worked on the design for the Oykel Viaduct, as well as Tain, Lairg and Ardgay (formerly Bonar Bridge) stations on the Far North Line.

The house is No.1, Old Edinburgh Road and was built in 1835. It is an imposing building that looks out over the city and the River Ness. HHBT is working to save the house for conversion to eight serviced apartments.

Of particular interest to FoFNL is the proposal for the provision of an organised presentation and display of the life and achievements of Mitchell, particularly in respect of the Highland Railway which ran from Perth to Inverness and then on up the east coast to Wick and Thurso.

Have a look at <http://highlandhbt.org.uk/projects/viewhill-house-inverness> for more details.



Viewhill House seen on the skyline from across the River Ness

FOFNL SPRING MEETING

Adrian Varwell and David Martin will be our guests and they will reminisce about their times as Secretary of the Highland Branch of the Scottish Association for Public Transport during the 1970s and 1980s. Notable events included the reopening of Alness and Muir of Ord stations and the Centenary Train to Wick in 1974 which they organised. The SAPT was known as the Scottish Railway Development Association until 1972.

The meeting will be at 19:30 on Tuesday 15 March in the Lounge at Crown Church (garden entrance) Kingsmills Road, Inverness.

We hope to see many of you there.

TRACKWALKER

This is an article that first appeared in *North 7*, issue no 45 May/June 1981.

North 7 was the bi-monthly magazine of the HIDB. The 7 refers to the seven crofting counties.

THE TRACKWALKER - NEGLECTED FIGURE IN AN AGE OF HIGH SPEED TRAVEL

Rob MacLachlan talks to a man with a vital, if sometimes forgotten, job.

"This Is the Age of the Train" proclaim British Rail's speed-blurred adverts to branch line commuters and intercontinental explorers alike.

Alas, it is also the Age of Taking Things for Granted. How many people, winding their familiar way home at night or hurtling through the time barrier on an Inter-city 125, know that for every 10 miles of track designed to carry them on carefree comfort there is a man who earns his living primarily BY WALKING.

Men like James Sutherland, who bears the same name as the county - second most northerly on the British mainland - where he works in one of the 'permanent way' or 'P-way' gangs on British Rail's North Highland Line (Far North Line).

The 161 mile single track railway hugs the indented eastern coast of Ross-shire and Sutherland for most of its journey from Inverness to Helmsdale. Then it veers suddenly inland across the Sutherland bogs to avoid the steeply looming Ord of Caithness.

Mr Sutherland is one of three trackwalkers who keep a time-sharpened eye on the desolate 23 mile section between Helmsdale and Forsinard, split into three more or less equal stretches by the lonely moorland villages of Kildonan and Kinbrace.

Twice a week, whatever the season, walking one side of the line on Mondays and the other

on Fridays, they make sure that the rails, sleepers and fastenings are in sound condition to carry the three passenger trains and one goods train in both directions each day.

In theory at least, the trackman's task is simple enough - though, as in other jobs, you have to learn the language first.

Each rail is made up of 60 foot lengths aligned by fishplates bolted on either side of every

join. The rails sit in U-shaped chairs and are made fast by wedges - called keys - hammered tight between rail and chair. The chairs are bolted onto wooden or concrete sleepers bedded in stone ballast.



At one time, each section of the line was walked every day. But gradual improvements - for example replacing wooden keys with metal keys, wooden sleepers with concrete sleepers, and ash ballast with stone ballast - allowed BR finally to reduce their inspection rate about 10 years ago.

EMERGENCY KIT

Most maintenance jobs, like replacing rotted sleepers or cracked fishplates, and redistributing ballast require more than one man, so the trackwalker makes a note to return with help another day.

Minor defects can be put to rights immediately. Walking the mid section of the Helmsdale to Forsinard line, from Kildonan to Kinbrace, James Sutherland carries the standard

trackman's kit: a hammer to strike wayward keys into place, a spanner to tighten loose fishplate bolts, and warning flags and detonators to stop trains in an emergency.

Intending passengers need not panic - the 'detonators' are merely percussion caps which, placed on the rail and set off by a passing train, make a loud enough bang to warn the driver that something's amiss.

Mr Sutherland joined BR as a fireman in Glasgow 35 years ago, and lived a while in Inverness before moving back to his native Helmsdale to tend the family croft - like many thousand other Highlanders - on a part-time basis.

In 1962, when diesel took over from steam on the North Highland Line and the old engine shed at Helmsdale was closed, he was faced with the choice of leaving Sutherland to continue working as a footplateman somewhere else, or staying on his croft and joining the P-way gang.

He stayed: but in 19 years as a trackman he has never had to bring a train to an emergency halt!

Which is not to say that there have been no emergencies. Occasionally, he has been called out in the night to check flood damage to the track. But his most worrying moment came just three years ago, in the early stages of the ferocious blizzards which blocked the North Highland Line for a full week in January 1978.

'FREEZING HARD'

One of the wintertime dangers is that snow on the inside of the rails will be compacted into ice by the wheels of successive trains until it reaches the same height as the rails. Now and again, freak weather conditions arrive faster than the track patrols.

The Saturday night train to Wick had been derailed by compacted snow just north of

Forsinard. The passengers were rescued in spectacular style by a military helicopter on Sunday, but the hard work of re-opening the line - made top priority because the roads had been hopelessly blocked - could not begin until a relief train from Inverness reached Helmsdale on Monday morning.

"We made it about halfway to the stranded train", recalls Mr Sutherland, "when we ourselves were derailed just south of Kinbrace.

"Fortunately we were spotted by a rescue helicopter, which alerted Inverness to send up another train. But we were stuck for all of five hours, and the track was badly damaged."

"Where the engine had come off the rails, it sheared across the chairs. I cleared away the packed snow to find that it was only the snow that was still holding the rails in place".

Ever since that fierce winter week, railway wits have renamed Forsinard as

'Freezing Hard'.

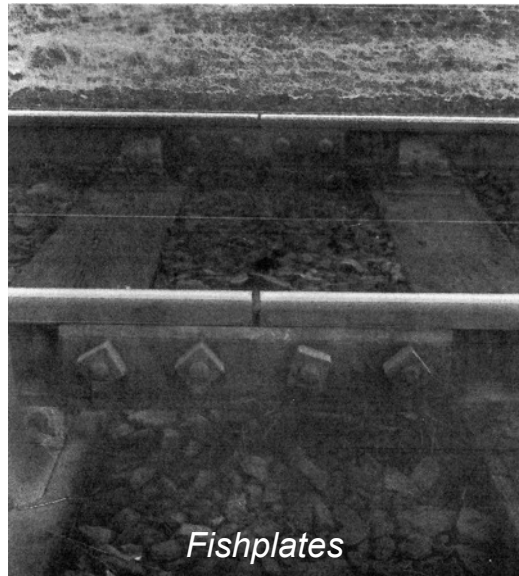
Fortunately, even in the wild north, familiar as it is with the terrible temper of the elements, such dramas are rare.

DANGER SIGNS

A track walker, who must recognise all the early warning signs of danger, goes first through an apprenticeship and then a training course. But winter requires an extra qualification - toughness.

He cannot turn back just because the cess - his lowered path between the track ballast and embankment - happens to be filled with snow. Up ahead, fishplates may have been cracked by severe overnight frost, and the rails may be heaving,

During the harshest months, James Sutherland must carefully weigh the advantage of more warmth from extra clothing against the disadvantages of increased weight and restriction of movement.



The Highland summer is more benign, but it too can cause concern. The danger of rails contracting and heaving in extreme cold is replaced by the possibility of them expanding and buckling in high temperatures.

A maximum gap of three eighths of an inch between 60 foot lengths of rail doesn't give much of a margin to play with, so patrols are stepped up during a heatwave. That's when the trackman - wearing his compulsory bright orange safety vest - can sweat like a walking sauna.

Despite his concentration on the rails, and the distractions of the shimmering, summertime moorland world, he must keep his wits sharp lest a train takes him unawares - a particular danger on a single track line, especially at bends and cuttings.

Somehow that is a harder discipline when the trains are an hour or more apart than it is on the busy inter-city lines of urban Britain where they flash past every five minutes, and the trackmen still have to walk their beat daily because of the faster wear and tear.

LETHAL TRAP

But compared with men, who understand the railways, animals who wander onto the line can find it a lethal and bewildering trap. Inevitably, over the years, the North Highland Line has taken a fair number of the sheep that provide the backbone of the crofting economy.

The trackmen do their best to shore up the boundary fences, but it would take very costly high fences to stop the wild deer - who come down to graze on the low ground in winter - from leaping onto the track. Too often they meet a distressing fate.

"If a deer crosses the line to graze on the other side", explains Mr Sutherland, "and is then startled by a train, its natural instinct tells it that the safest course is to go back the way it came."

"Unfortunately, that means trying to cross the line in front of the oncoming train, and many of them don't make it".

He has also seen the occasional fox or badger come to grief, paralysed in the dark by the noise or lights of a fast-approaching engine.

There is one creature, however, which the trains rarely injure, but the trackmen destroy at every opportunity. Adders - known locally as 'serpents' - are fond of the peat embankments and in hot weather they coil up on the warm, exposed sleeper ends to bask in the sun.

"We kill the serpents" says Mr Sutherland, with the countryman's unsentimental pragmatism. "If we don't, there's always the risk that next time they meet a human, it's they who'll be on the winning side".

2016 AGM

The 2016 AGM will take place on Friday 17th June at Platform 1864 in Tain. This is the recently opened restaurant in Tain station's original building.

The AGM (members only) will run from 11:15 - 12:00. A two-course lunch will then be available for £11.95.

At 13:00 we will reconvene to listen to the President's address from Paul Monaghan MP. This will be followed by our guest speakers:

- Anthony Smith, CEO of Transport (formerly Passenger) Focus
- Ian Prosser, Chief Inspector of Railways
- Phil Verster, MD of Abellio ScotRail Alliance
- Frank Roach, Partnership Manager HITRANS

The Waverley Route - Its Heritage and Revival

Ann Glen

Softback, 144 pages, £18.50 (Review by **Ian Budd**)

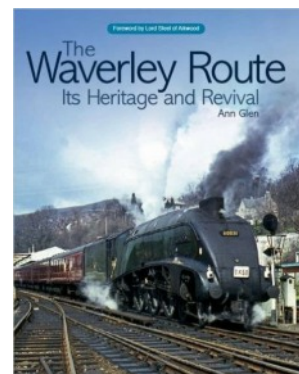
Lily Publications (2015) ISBN 978-1911177043

If you are looking for a book packed with information and photographs about the history of the Waverley Route and associated railway projects in the Borders, up to the reopening of part of the route in 2015, this is well worth considering.

The narrative is very matter-of-fact, making it quite a concentrated read from cover to cover but it is an excellent reference book. I particularly enjoyed seeing photos of the lifting of the track in 1971, and the relaying in 2015, both showing the Ladhope retaining wall, part of which had dramatically collapsed in 1916 and which had remained a tantalising reminder of the railway during its absence.

Those with a knowledge of the Far North Line will enjoy the reference to the Euston-Thurso through trains that ran via the Waverley Route from 1917-19 for the movement of Navy personnel. These were colloquially known as the "*Jellicoe Express*", although that title does not appear in the book.

Ann Glen does not emphasise the consequences of the scaling down of the project in terms of double-tracking, or the shortsighted decision to build some overbridges as single-track when it is hard to believe that the cost of making them wide enough for double would have been very significant.



Waverley Route - The Battle for the Borders Railway

David Spaven

256 pages, £14.99 (Review by **Richard Ardern**)

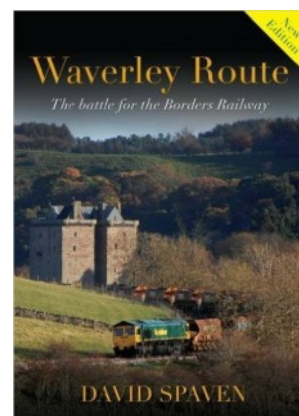
Argyll Publishing (2015 - New edition) ISBN 978-1908931825

David Spaven has grown up, man and boy, with the Waverley route from Edinburgh to Carlisle via Galashiels, Hawick and Riccarton Junction. A key member of the Campaign for Borders Rail he is well qualified to take us through the long and convoluted struggle to get the northern part of the line reinstated.

The closure years from Dr Beeching's report in March 1963 until final closure in January 1969 are covered in detail. No other closure in Britain left so large a population so far from the rail network. The political manoeuvring which went on is absolutely fascinating to read today and it is difficult to escape the view that the route (at least as far south as Hawick) was unlucky to be closed. The North Berwick line was in a similar situation but escaped the axe and has gone on to be extremely successful.

There followed the three years of "lingering death" before the lines were torn up and another twenty years before a group came together to pursue reopening. In 1998 the Campaign for Borders Rail was being founded and economic development necessities and support from the Scottish Office led to consultancies reappraising 28 reports on the line dating back to 1966. The Scott Wilson report in 2000 suggested reopening as far as Tweedbank and a new Scottish Parliament was able to take things forward – eventually, with many turns and twists in the story, all equally fascinating.

The opening of the railway has been a triumph for persistence, but there are disappointments too. The railway project has had to pay for 10 km of new road as well as 49 km of railway. Maybe it was this that led to the cutback of some proposed lengths of double track (including at Portobello Junction) thus failing to learn the lessons elsewhere in Scotland (such as on the FNL) of how crippling this can be to operating efficiency. A faster service could have been achieved, but passengers have enthusiastically supported the line and the Borders have received a huge economic boost and a fine transport interchange at Galashiels. Everyone interested in railways should read this book.



HELMSDALE STATION UPDATE

The Helmsdale Station Project has attempted a fully integrated station building restoration, combining renovating the listed building for holiday accommodation – providing income-generating potential to sustain the project, with restoring original platform features, reinstating passenger benefits (a waiting room / visitor information point) and, to attract additional visitors, a 'Unique Selling Point', a photographic darkroom – occasional residential photographic courses are planned.

The community project which restored the listed Helmsdale station building in 2013/14 has had its first full trading year in 2015 which has been successful. There was a worry that there would be insufficient bookings for the project to pay its way but this has been unfounded. The summary for the year is as follows:

- 11 bookings for around 60 people in all
- Use by Timespan as residence for temporary staff in weeks when not otherwise booked.
- Three residential working weeks in which volunteers have assisted with maintenance and further development – much of the work in the past year has been on restoring the Station House garden.
- Recognised by ScotRail as Helmsdale station adopter.
- Highly commended in the Scottish Civic Trust 'Angels Awards'. This adds to the Railway Heritage Trust commendation awarded at the end of 2014.
- Award winner of the ACoRP (Association of Community Rail Partnerships) Innovation in Community Rail Award.

The ACoRP award came with a £250 cheque which we propose putting towards a replica Highland Railway station clock. It was through his article 'Restoring Station Clocks' in the January 2015 of Far North Express that we made contact with antiquarian horologist and clockmaker Chris Edwards who is assisting in drawing up design plans and we hope, in the year ahead, will make the clock.

The trading surplus of the Community Interest Company (CIC) for the past year has been around £1,000. This will be split equally between supporting local community causes (£500 already donated to four community funds) and planned station improvements.

In consequence of the restoration of the main station building, Network Rail has generously redecorated in matching finish their store alongside. Historically this is an interesting building, built we think in the early 1900s as a pair of railway workers' cottages. Part of our station improvement plan is to commission an artist to paint trompe l'oeil scenes in the blanked windows recalling the original residential use of the building. We hope this might be along similar lines to the artwork at Invergordon station.



Helmsdale Station CIC seeks readers' support in three ways:

- Spreading the word that this holiday accommodation is available for letting – with the message that every booking benefits the local community (www.helmsdalestation.co.uk for

details). We are pleased to offer additional discount on rates for FoFNL members and their friends – apply or enquire to the email address below.

- We are currently seeking an artist for the cottage windows project; please let us know if you have any suggestions.
- We continue our search for volunteers – especially people living in or near to Helmsdale – to join our Board. If you would like more information about this, Please get in touch.

Michael Wilmott - helmsdalestation@gmail.com

...AND FINALLY

MORALE-SAPPING

FoFNL is not alone in thinking that the best way for Government to involve itself in the railway is for it to sit down every so often (once in 5 years seems about right) and work out what it wants the railway to do, and how much it will have to pay to achieve it. Apart from half a dozen people making sure that what has been bought is actually being delivered, Government should then go away for 5 years. The costly morale-sapping involvement of DfT in procuring the Class 800 (the trains which will replace the diesel-powered Class 43 High Speed Trains from the Great Western and East Coast routes - allowing some of them to be refurbished and sent to Scotland) is a case in point. Here is what Roger Ford and Ian Walmsley had to say in the January 2016 issue of *Modern Railways*:

One word sums up our first impression [they had been visiting 800002]: disappointment. Technically and functionally [it] will do what it is supposed to do and take people where they want to go. But from the passengers' viewpoint, when compared with the best trains in Europe it is nowhere.

It is eight years since procurement started, since when DfT has spent over £30 million on consultancy. The GWR trains will cost roughly twice as much as a Pendolino to lease. ... It will do the job, with an austere ambience for an age of austerity. It is unlikely that DfT will allow any change to the GWR interior until the replacement franchise in 2019. Whether Virgin will be able to create the "wow" factor on the East Coast remains to be seen.

COMMERCIAL WISDOM

What an appalling indictment! A fine example of a camel designed by a committee, and a prohibitively expensive one at that. In *FNE 43* (January 2008) we told the story of how Nigel Gresley took the revolutionary A4 from Board agreement to build in spring 1935 to the inaugural service on 27 September *of the same year*. Drawing board to drawing a train in 5 months. Oh, and he designed and built the carriages too. The directors of the LNER, having been persuaded of the commercial wisdom of having what was then a high-speed service between London and Newcastle, told the bloke in charge to get on with it. What a pleasant change it would be if the railway were run that way nowadays. Lead the way, Scotland!

NEW DMU

Way back in the Dark Ages when our 158s discharged effluent onto the tracks, we were repeatedly told that it was impossible to fit toilet retention tanks underneath a 158. Well, thanks to South West Trains 159s, we knew that it could be done, and thanks to FoFNL it has been. We are repeatedly told that there will be no more orders of new diesel units - too expensive, they say. Well, thanks to the new Northern franchise we know that Arriva will order 55 new two- and three-car DMUs. It would be good if Transport Scotland broke my go-away-for-5-years injunction to require Abellio to bolt an order for new DMUs to replace the 156s and 158s trundling around up here. The "scenic train" was a bright idea a couple of years ago: a spanking new DMU, now that we know it is possible, would be a far brighter one today.

Mike Lunan



Double-headed "Lairg Tanks" on Culloden Viaduct on the HML on 19th December 2015. 66111 on that day's returning tanks and the loco and tanks from two weeks before delayed by the flooding and by 66102 being "borrowed" for a ballast train.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**

Four road-rail vehicles at Meikle Ferry on 3rd November 2015 during drainage work during the blockade described in this issue.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**



Heading for Meikle Ferry on 3rd November 2015, Freightliner 66525 in Tain Station at the head of a train of ballast hoppers. 66549 was on the other end of the train and this may well have been the first working of Freightliner locos this far north.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**