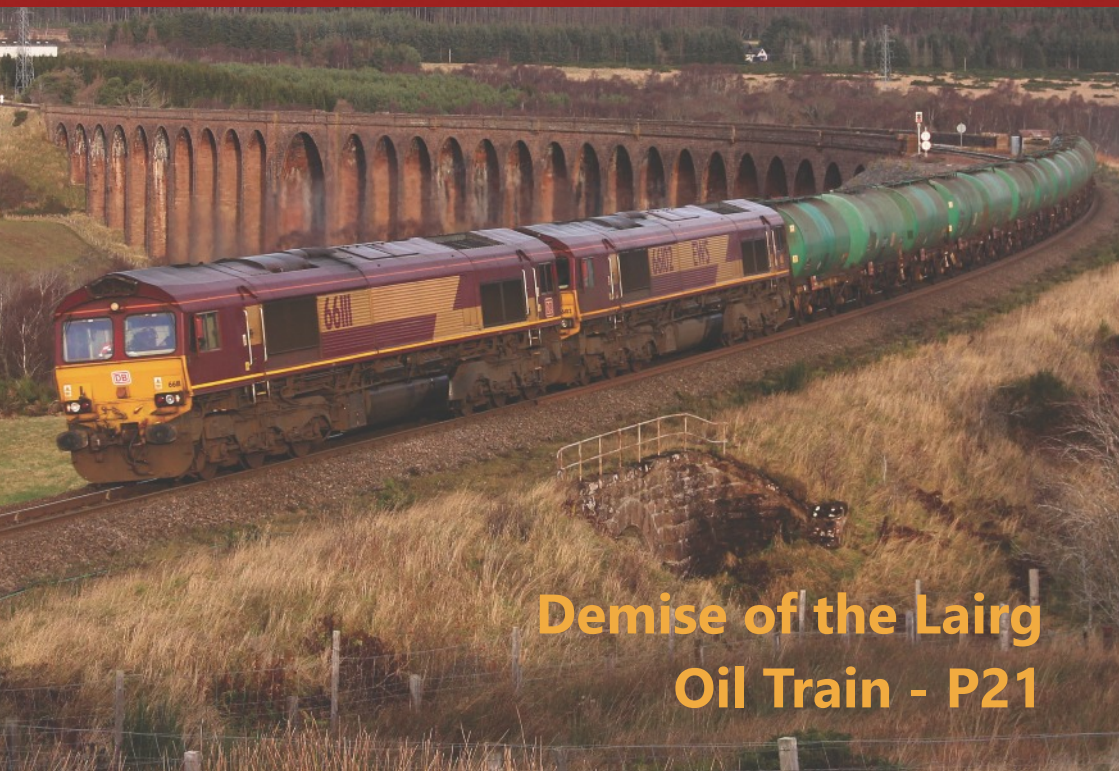


# FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 71  
May 2017



## Demise of the Lairg Oil Train - P21

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

*Cairdean Na Loine Tuath*

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

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### Cover photo:

66111 and 66102 hauling an extended collection of returning tanks southwards over Culloden viaduct on 19 December 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](http://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 £15.00 (£12.00 by standing order) or £17 for organisations.

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

# HEADCODE

As every schoolboy knows, to make a soufflé five things are needed: eggs, flour, butter, milk and a recipe - a set of instructions. Each ingredient is essential, but without the instructions there will be no soufflé. The railway is much the same. It has four essential ingredients: infrastructure, rolling stock, people to run it, and money to pay for it all. Without all four of these the set of instructions - in this case, the timetable - is meaningless.

## **DOUBLE TRACK**

Readers will be aware of FoFNL's views about the infrastructure. As a bare minimum some double track in the Lentrane area must be provided; we will soon know whether Scottish Ministers agree with us. We have been less noisy about our views on rolling stock and people. Not any more. On Easter Monday there was severe inconvenience to passengers when the 17:13 from Kyle - the last train of the day - was cancelled "due to a fault on the train". This was made worse by an announcement on-line 40 minutes after departure time that no alternative transport could be arranged. Despite Class 158s being re-imagined as ScotRail's "tourist train" FoFNL does not believe that they are reliable enough for our services. Long-distance trains are being cancelled too often for reasons of rolling stock failure.

## **PEOPLE PROBLEM**

The following day the 18:28 from Inverness to Wick - the last train of the day - was cancelled as a crew member called off "at the last moment". The cancellation was announced on-line at 11:51, so in fact there was still over 6½ hours before it was due to leave. This is a good example of the "people" problem. There will always be times when a crew member, or one of a crew member's family, is suddenly ill. The problem is that nowadays there are no spare staff able to take over in such circumstances. We have not written a detailed paper about HR matters, but having a few extra staff members wouldn't seem altogether silly, and could well cost less over a year than taxi-ing passengers about the north of Scotland.

## **RECIPE**

So eggs, flour and butter are not of the quality they should be (or in the case of staff, quantity). There isn't much the recipe - the timetable - can do in these circumstances. The fourth - money - is at least a known quantity, and isn't in any case something we are capable of influencing.

## **HOT AIR**

The secret of a soufflé is, of course, hot air. But with an Election in the offing there will be no shortage of that.

**Mike Lunan**

Our detailed views on Scotland's rolling stock needs are on our website [www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/articles/Rolling-Stock-Needs-in-Scotland-2017.pdf](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/articles/Rolling-Stock-Needs-in-Scotland-2017.pdf)

While FoFNL is the campaign group for the FNL and rightly concentrates its efforts on making the case for improvements to this line, the line itself is a vital part of a chain stretching from Orkney to the South of England and beyond. People living and working everywhere along this chain require the most convenient, reliable and fast service that is possible.

## MUDDLED

Looking at our links to the South it is hard not to notice the muddled thinking which has resulted in the spending of £3000m to achieve a saving of about 20 mins travelling time on what is already a fast road. This is clearly a luxury expense, and ignores the fact that Inverness, one of Scotland's major population and tourist centres is still only reachable by rail along single-track lines with (very few) passing places.

## FRUSTRATED

I honestly think that our politicians, in the Scottish Government, are not taking the time as individuals to think this through. ScotRail and Network Rail seem to be as frustrated as passengers and campaign groups with a situation where the A9 dualling (remembering that road dualling = rail quadrupling) is seen as more fundamental to the country's needs than making sure that the required rail infrastructure is in place. A9 dualling is a luxury but main line dualling (and electrification) is a necessity. Past mistakes such as this cannot be rectified but hopefully future decision-making will be informed by them.

## INEXPLICABLE

In addition the inexplicable lack of a fast rail route between Perth and

Edinburgh conspires to make rail travel from the Far North to the capital something of an expedition. Comparable journeys in most of the UK are achieved much more quickly and with far fewer delays. Perth to Edinburgh train journeys now take longer than they did at the end of the nineteenth century. [See P25]

## FREIGHT

It is also true that, given the correct infrastructure, more freight movements will be possible by rail, thus benefiting road users too. The lamentable demise of the Lairg and Fort William oil trains is another symptom of the muddled thinking.

## PRIORITIES

Eye-watering amounts of money are being spent on road projects which, although they will undoubtedly help motorists, should clearly be much further down the priorities list than the provision of a fast, reliable rail system. Such a system would be to the Scottish Government's credit in a way that luxurious road spending is not.

What is needed is plain speaking and an end to the spin that attempts to make minor changes to the railway look like major improvements.

**Ian Budd**

**£3000m would buy:  
4 complete EGIP Projects/  
8.5 Borders Rail Re-openings/  
9 Aberdeen-Inverness  
Improvement Projects/  
300 passing loops**

# FoFNL AGM

The AGM will take place at 1100 on Friday 23 June in The Town House, Inverness. While renovations are taking place access is in Castle Street, at the entrance nearer High Street. Coffee will be available from 1030. Members are reminded that they should carry their 2017 membership card.

The intention is to conclude the AGM by 1140, allowing time for a short break before the Conference starts at 1145. The provisional timing for this is:

- 1145 **Conference starts:** President's welcome
- 1155 Keynote address by Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Connectivity
- 1215 Questions
- 1230 End of morning session
- 1345 **Afternoon session:** Bill Reeve, Head of Rail, Transport Scotland
- 1405 Alex Sharkey, Area Director East, Network Rail
- 1425 Alex Hynes, MD ScotRail Alliance
- 1445 Questions
- 1510 Frank Roach, HITRANS
- 1525 Convener's closing remarks
- 1535 End of Conference

This year FoFNL will not be making lunch arrangements on behalf of Members. There are several places within easy walking distance offering a wide range of meals at a wide range of prices.

## PROPOSED AMENDMENT

Members of the Committee communicate several times a month by exchange of emails, and in practice the bulk of the work gets done this way. Nevertheless making decisions like this is technically unconstitutional, hence the desire to regulate matters in a manner more consistent with current practice.

Delete Clause 17 and replace by:

17. The Executive Committee shall meet at least once per annum, and shall be called on a minimum of 14 clear days' notice in writing or electronically. In addition to those taken in a formal meeting, decisions may be taken through the medium of emails addressed to a single member who will act as the designated member. This single member shall normally be the Convener, or in his absence a committee member appointed by the Convener for the purpose. Committee members taking part in such a discussion are required to copy to all other committee members their views as the discussion progresses. Should the matter require a vote, the designated member will count the votes in favour of a proposal and the proposal will be deemed to have passed once a majority of the committee members have voted in favour. The designated member will then notify the committee members as to whether the proposal has been carried. All decisions taken by email are to be documented and referred to in the minutes of the following formal meeting.

# FNL PUNCTUALITY STATISTICS

Since the end of October FoFNL Secretary, Malcolm Wood, has been compiling weekly figures for late-running and cancellation on the FNL. These statistics are proving invaluable as they are far more illuminating than the official figures which ScotRail has to publish. The official figures run on a rolling 12-month aggregation which carries a built-in time lag and doesn't show the extremes which actually take place from week to week. Malcolm's summary allows short-term changes and trends to be easily seen. These are more relevant to passengers: imagine a year with a theoretical 100% on-time record

FAR NORTH LINE						
% of trains ON TIME at their destination (Mondays-Saturdays)						
Week Beginning:	OVERALL PPM (less than 5 minutes late)		OVERALL (Where late = late)	(Southbound)	(Northbound)	Cancellations
31-10-2016	46.9%		18%	18%	18%	6
07-11-2016	69.1%		31%	24%	39%	nil
14-11-2016	50.6%		16%	11%	22%	3
21-11-2016	70.4%		39.8%	37%	43%	1
28-11-2016	74.4%		29.5%	27.7%	32%	4
05-12-2016	87.7%		50%	48%	52%	2
12-12-2016	76.5%		41.8%	37%	48%	4
19-12-2016	75.8%		50.5%	56.6%	42.8%	4
26-12-2016	81%		41.7%	45.4%	37.1%	4
02-01-2017	84.7%		51%	54%	47.6%	2
09-01-2017	63.2%		42.8%	53.7%	29.5%	18
16-01-2017	94.8%		72.4%	77.7%	65.9%	2
23-01-2017	88.7%		73.4%	72%	75%	2
30-01-2017	92.8%		56%	57%	54.5%	1
06-02-2017	93.8%		67.3%	64.8%	70.4%	nil
13-02-2017	92.8%		69.3%	75.9%	61.3%	1
20-02-2017	87.7%		65.3%	75.9%	52.2%	3
27-02-2017	94.8%		73.4%	72.2%	75%	2
06-03-2017	97.9%		75.5%	75.9%	75%	nil
13-03-2017	93.8%		70.4%	72.2%	67.1%	1
20-03-2017	94.8%		72.4%	77.7%	65.9%	nil
27-03-2017	88.7%		70.4%	72.2%	68.1%	5
03-04-2017	79.5%		47.9%	57.4%	36.3%	1

for 50 weeks and only 10% on-time arrivals for the other 2 weeks. Whilst showing a very satisfactory 96.5% on time for the year, the official figure would mask the horrendous weeks when people would have been late for work, or missed important connections.

*Malcolm's weekly figures, including this summary, are much easier to read on the FoFNL website where they are also constantly updated.*



# THE FAR NORTH LINE REVIEW TEAM

The RT has met twice since it was set up by Cabinet Secretary Fergus Ewing last December. Regular readers will remember that its remit was two-fold: first to look at what can be done using existing funds to improve the timetable "immediately"; secondly to look at what infrastructure and other things can be done "in the medium to long term". I interpret these as being, first, in the remaining 22 months of CP5 (up to March 2019), and secondly stuff to be done in CP6 (April 2019 to March 2024).

There are quite a few things going on on the Level Crossing front which will allow trains to go more quickly. As these have not been completed in time for the May timetable change there will be no immediate benefit, but the December timetable should be several minutes faster than the current one. I'm hopeful that in the slightly longer term a way will be found to allow faster travel into, along, and out of the many loops on the line.

One of the recommendations made in Tony Glazebrook's Consultation last year was that some more efficient way should be devised of alerting the driver at a request stop. At present the train has to slow down so that it can stop if an intending passenger waves it down (a bit like a bus stop). Network Rail has picked up on this idea and is looking to see whether some kind of advance warning can be given, allowing the driver to know whether there is a passenger before the train would otherwise start to slow down. As the line-speed through many request stops is at a good lick this ought to shave another few minutes off the end-to-end timings. The next RT meeting on 12 May should see how this might be done.

The biggie, of course, is the "medium to long term" matter of double track at Lentrane. Progress towards achieving this is still being made, I believe, and we await the HLOS announcement in June or July.

**Mike Lunan**

## CRUISE MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

Several people have pointed out that increasing numbers of cruise ships are calling at Invergordon and Scrabster nowadays, and they have wondered whether trips by train could be provided for those passengers wishing to spend time ashore. At present there are several trips by coach laid on at Invergordon - the position at Scrabster is not known as there are far fewer ships calling there. It is common in the cruise industry for passengers to pay, sometimes quite a lot of money, for these "extras", so expense ought not to be too big a problem.

Such shore-based excursions are organised by a small number of agents, mostly based in London, who operate internationally. The cruise operator has little or no input, and merely gets a percentage of the price paid by the passenger. Margins are very tight, and

there is no scope for speculative provision of a new type of tour. Almost all are coach-based, and most are well-established, having run - and proved to be financially profitable - for many years. Breaking into this market, especially with a new product (like a train trip), however attractive and different, is well-nigh impossible. In order to succeed with an agent a third party would have to guarantee a level of income in the first year (at least) even to get an agent's serious attention.

The operational logistics of providing a dedicated special train on the FNL would be substantial. Using the scheduled services would be unwise until a significantly greater degree of confidence in the accurate delivery of the timetable could be assured.

In short, while this looks good on paper, it is wholly outwith the realms of reality.

# CONSULTATION ON SCOTLAND'S RAIL INFRASTRUCTURE STRATEGY - FOFNL RESPONSE

**1** Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL), established in 1994, has over 150 members, including several Community Councils, and supports the railway line from Inverness to Thurso and Wick, both for passengers and freight consigners. This line is dependent on, and integrated with, feeder rail services from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness and (in the absence of other rail user groups) FoFNL does considerable work in support of these lines also.

**2** We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Consultation; we hope our Response will help the decision-makers in Transport Scotland (TS) to advise Scottish Ministers that relatively small-scale enhancements in rural areas should not be overlooked merely because the populations served are small and dispersed.

**3** We note the injunction (on p5) that the Consultation is not about prioritising schemes set out in Network Rail's Scotland Route Study (SRS), but about higher-level principles. That we obey this injunction does not mean that we do not have clear ideas about appropriate schemes for the FNL and elsewhere: we have set these out in other formal Responses, not least in our Response to the SRS made in 2016.

**4** Before setting out our responses to the specific Questions posed we shall make comments on various parts of the Consultation Document, asking questions of our own.

**5** On p10 much is rightly made of the success - greater than had been forecast - of the Borders Railway. Two points arise. We have commented before, most recently in our Response to the SRS, and before that in our Response to the Scotland Route Utilisation Study a few years ago, that the STAG process seems to us to have an inbuilt bias against small rural schemes. We said then that

"It is widely believed that the STAG process, although useful, contains within it an insidious weighting against rural schemes where the number of passengers benefiting is relatively low. This is not the place to argue for a re-evaluation of the underlying mechanism of STAG - although such a thing would be entirely proper after over a decade of use - but there is a danger because of it that small schemes continually fail to reach even the preliminary stage of proper evaluation."

**6** We are not aware that such an appraisal has taken place: surely it is entirely proper that systemic processes which are routinely used to inform policy decisions are revisited periodically. We believe that a revision is overdue, and should be carried out swiftly. Our belief is reinforced by the recent news that passenger numbers on the Borders Line greatly exceed those predicted by the use of a formula. The formula clearly gave the wrong answers about passenger numbers, as was the case with other re-openings in Scotland in the last decade. Furthermore its use played a significant part in the decision to descope the project by removing several miles of planned double track. The frequent poor delivery of the timetable, with stations missed, has demonstrated in the first year the degree to which this decision was flawed. The STAG process must be revisited quickly to discover and correct the hidden weaknesses which led to such miscalculation of passenger numbers

on the Borders Railway. We are conscious that funds will be less readily available in Control Period 6 from April 2019 (CP6) than heretofore, and we wish to avoid any repeat of the short-term descoping errors highlighted on the Borders Railway.

**7** The second point is that nowhere in the Consultation does there appear to be any process described for examining other re-openings of closed routes. We are aware of the desire to re-open the line to Levenmouth in Fife: where is the mechanism for campaigners seeking this?

**8** On p16 are set out the three priorities used in the Strategic Transport Projects Review. We endorse these. However we would draw attention to two omissions. In the second priority ("Promoting whole industry measures ... [making] better use of railway assets") there is no mention of human assets. Many of the problems of maintaining the timetable, particularly on the FNL but, we suspect, also elsewhere in Scotland, arise because of so-called "staff shortages". We question whether the ScotRail Alliance has enough members of staff to do the job, allowing for training, holidays and sickness. Any maintenance engineer knows that more units are required in a fleet than those out in service on any day - does the same thinking carry through to human resources with equal rigour? Should voluntary overtime play as large a part in staffing rotas as it does?

**9** The third priority seems to be built on an insecure foundation. Surely before expanding and improving capacity "to support the growth in demand" it should be expanded and improved *to deliver the current timetable*. Our experience on the FNL in recent years has been that the timetable has been adjusted to fit what the capacity of the line can deliver. This puts the cart before the horse. End to end journey times on the FNL have grown incrementally by around 30 minutes since 2000 and there have been several occasions when delivery has been so poor that a timetable more capable of being delivered has been published. That the reasons for these changes - TPWS, new station openings, rolling stock problems - have all been real does not mask the cart-horse interface problem.

**10** On p16 the very next paragraph paints a rosy picture of how the Scottish Government will build its strategy for CP6 and beyond. As with all strategies, however, things change following the first encounter with the enemy. Which of the high-level core principles ("improving reliability, reducing crowding, cutting journey times") will be sacrificed, or modified, to ensure delivery of the others - for in the real world they are conflicting if not actually incompatible? We have seen on the FNL that improving reliability has led to a 30-minute *increase* in journey times since 2000.

**11** On p17 the second bullet point ("Safety") seeks to "[exploit] opportunities to improve safety at level crossings". The Joint Law Commission Report a few years ago produced a suite of recommendations, including a Draft Bill, but, despite (anecdotally) the DfT being keen, no parliamentary time either at Westminster or Holyrood has been found. As Brexit is likely to put extreme pressure on time at Westminster it behoves the Scottish Parliament to start the process of giving effect to the recommendations by enacting those legislative changes within its power - principally to do with land rights. We accept that rail safety is a reserved matter, but we believe that if Westminster were given a nudge in this way

Parliamentary time could be found. We are not aware of any serious objection to the draft proposals.

**12** Later on p17 in a paragraph about the Lamington viaduct we are told that TS will work with NR to improve resilience to weather-related challenges. We believe that "working with" is insufficiently robust, given the RAIB finding that organisational changes within NR, including its evolution from Railtrack, led to many instances of best practice being lost. We learn that scour management has been absent at over 100 locations: what other organisational failings of a similar nature have been discovered?

**13** On p25 we learn that the Scottish Government "will continue to explore opportunities for service-based initiatives, such as variations to rolling stock, and/or timetable structures, to improve journey times". This is intriguing - we wonder whether "rolling stock variations" will be interpreted widely. Will it be permitted for the ScotRail Alliance to acquire different, or even new, rolling stock during the current franchise? Would the Vivarail Class 230 development of ex-District Line D78 stock have a place (we think it would)? The Inverness-based Class 158 fleet is in the process of being refurbished to provide the "Tourist Train", but has the development of the Class 230 with its much larger windows and flexible (because effectively new-build above the sole bar) interior fittings overtaken the 158 during this process? Is there a market among wealthy tourists for a quasi-Pullman service (at a suitable price) within one of the 3 cars of a 230? The Royal Highlander service would seem to imply that there is a market for very luxurious rail travel in the Highlands. Has this possibility been explored? We are aware of a suggestion made by HITRANS that using a 230 on the Kyle Line might be a way of overcoming the landslide problem at Stromeferry; we hope that this will be taken seriously and given proper consideration.

**14** On the same page the issue of connectivity is raised. Following the ill-judged deregulation of buses in the 1980s a bus has been seen by many (not least the Competition authorities) as operating in competition with a train: not so (the real competition is between train and private car). It is counter-productive to having an integrated transport system if one part of the public transport provision is allowed to act independently of another. This is not the place to advocate re-regulation of the bus industry in Scotland, but until that day comes Scottish Ministers must have the power to compel bus and ferry companies to work together with the rail companies operating in Scotland to seek to provide better connections, and to avoid the nonsense of a bus being timetabled to leave 5 minutes before a train is due to arrive. The structure whereby ferry operators or train operators suffer a financial penalty for delaying a departure to allow a connection must be made more flexible.

**15** The issue of innovative rolling stock is picked up again on p27 where Independently Powered Electric Multiple Units (IPEMUs) are mentioned. Presumably this means battery-operated. The trial in East Anglia of such a train seems to have been successful, but we are not aware how far (or how reliably) the trial vehicle can travel without being recharged (nor how long a recharge would take). It is hard to see where an IPEMU might

usefully operate on the Scottish network as there will be relatively few short unelectrified routes once EGIP is concluded (including the extensions in the Glasgow area) in CP5. Were it possible to find a solution whereby a battery-operated IPEMU could travel say 150 miles then such a vehicle would have a use on the Stranraer line, on the GSWR line through Dumfries, on the Borders Railway and perhaps elsewhere. We support research in this area as we believe that the passenger experience is noticeably enhanced by greater comfort within the train, leading to modal shift as the difference in comfort with the private car is thereby reduced.

We now turn to the Questions posed in the Consultation:

**Q1** We endorse the approach being suggested. However we feel there is a constant need for the social inclusion aspect of public policy to be remembered. It is all too easy to fall into utilitarian thinking and to overlook that the greatest number have their needs all too easily fulfilled. We believe that the structure of ministerial responsibilities, whereby the Minister for Transport is also Minister for The Islands, is logical and will mean that remote communities (not being islands) will also receive due weight.

**Q2** The glib answer is "with difficulty". This question goes to the heart of public policy. Officials advising Ministers operating within tight financial constraints have to make difficult choices (or to present the Minister with a recommendation for a difficult choice). The guiding principle must surely start from utilitarian ideals, but must not stop there. If a group of people - passengers - have received a benefit because they are many in number - a nice new electric train in the Central Belt - then they retreat somewhat in the queue despite still being many in number. The d'Hondt method leaps to mind. Sooner or later even the least get *something*.

**Q3** We strongly endorse the move to a "pipeline" approach as we believe it allows a more flexible attitude to new factors presenting themselves during the planning and development phases of a long and complex piece of work. A good example of what goes wrong with too rigid an approach is the GWR electrification project. The wrong trains were ordered because they were ordered too soon in a process which (for many reasons not set forth here) took much longer than was anticipated. A pipeline approach would have been likely to have avoided most, if not all, of the extra costs this rigid approach has occasioned. Provided that care is taken to avoid any clogging of the pipeline we see no downside. Too cautious is as bad as too bold.

**Q4** We believe that the ring-fenced funding for stations and for level crossing removal has brought substantial benefits for passengers (and members of the public at level crossings) and we would wish to see these continued. While large stations receive improvements there is a need for minor works at many - most - smaller stations on the network, and a dedicated fund for such works allows them to proceed independently of, and not in competition with, works at large stations. Given the points we have made in paragraphs 13 and 15 above we believe there is an argument in favour of a ring-fenced fund (perhaps of no more than £10 million) for development work on innovative rolling stock issues.

**Q5** *Cui bono?* Where there is housing or industrial development there is a strong case that the developer should pay some of the costs of any necessary improvements. Elimination of a level crossing because nearby development increases the traffic movement to such a degree that a bridge is required, surely obliges the developer to make a contribution. However this argument goes only so far. The public funds spent on building dual carriageway along the A9 between Perth and Inverness cannot stand alone: the public purse must pay for any railway doubling on the competing HML. That no developer will wish to contribute towards a major strategic investment should not be a reason for the public purse failing to do so. A distinction must be made between the enhancement of strategic arteries and smaller-scale works where an identifiable beneficiary can be expected to make a contribution. Whether this extends into other parts of the public realm - local authorities or groups like HITRANS - will surely depend on the degree to which funds from such sources will be available, and whether funds would be generated for them by the proposed enhancement. The sensible solution, of course, although probably not open to Scottish Ministers, is to borrow long term on the bond market to fund long lasting infrastructure construction.

**Q6** Beyond what the intelligent layman has to offer in this area we have no specific expertise. However we note that achieving modal shift requires a pro-active approach from government. Exhortation will not work while the private car (drawbacks notwithstanding) is so much *nicer* to be in than most trains. The Rail Passengers' Committee for Scotland did some illuminating work on modal shift in 2004 which is still available.

**Q7** The only genuine measure of performance output is the percentage of passengers who are completely satisfied with their journey. Measuring this is, of course, impossible not least because it is wholly subjective and my satisfaction with my journey may be affected by the fact that I have a lousy cold and I'm on the way to the office and it's raining. So proxies have to be devised (although satisfaction is measured twice a year by Transport Focus, allowing an observation to be made about whether or not things are generally improving). Delivering the timetable (and by "delivering" we do *not* mean "arriving within 4'59") is very important, but not so important that passengers with a connection are inconvenienced because Train 2 left on time despite Train 1 being 5 minutes late. This is important at all times, but becomes essential where Train 2 is the last train of the day. Thus the "delivering the timetable" proxy has to be devised in a thoughtful way. We are very rarely troubled with passengers standing on the FNL, so our experience in this area is anecdotal.

Where *routine* standing for more than a brief time - 10 to 15 minutes seems reasonable - occurs then something is wrong and steps should be taken to deal with it. Occasional failures to deliver enough seats will usually be down to a rolling stock failure, the solution to which lies in having better rolling stock less prone to failure. We note that the performance of Class 158s on SouthWest Trains in Salisbury is vastly better than the performance of the same class in Scotland. While we accept that the uses are different - fewer hills, fewer stations, all units at home depot every night - we do not believe that this

can account for a factor of over 20 in the miles-per-incident statistics.

**Q8** We alluded to this dilemma in paragraph 10 above. While it is undoubtedly better for the published timetable to be reliably delivered (allowing therefore for connections, and for keeping appointments) there has to be a limit to which the timetable can be extended to deliver this laudable outcome. The experience on the FNL is not typical of the Scottish experience, but for passengers in Caithness and Sutherland it is a very real detriment to rail travel. Passenger numbers have fallen over recent years from Wick and Thurso against a background of generally rising ridership in most of Scotland. We believe that the bulk of the falling-away is because the journey time is 30 minutes longer than it was in 2000. We repeat this to illustrate our belief that reduced journey times, while not sufficient on their own to obtain modal shift, are a necessary condition. In a nutshell what needs to be done on the FNL is to bring the infrastructure to a condition which allows the 2000 timetable (as a minimum) to be delivered 92% of the time. We are under an injunction not to proceed too far in this direction in this Response: suffice it to say that the FNL's problems are a microcosm of the problems of the network as a whole. Get the infrastructure up to standard; get the kit right. If you build it, they will come.

**Q9** More of the same. The level crossing closure programme has been excellent in CP4 and CP5. The installation of AOCL+B crossings on the FNL and elsewhere has been very welcome, and indicates that NR has an imaginative approach to this whole area. We are aware of difficulties at various sites on the FNL and Kyle Lines and of the measures which are planned to deal with them. This approach must be encouraged to continue in CP6 (and beyond).

Safety also includes less obvious areas for tackling, where fatalities are rare but minor injuries not uncommon. The platform heights on many FNL stations (and elsewhere - Dunkeld & Birnam, for instance) are such that stepping distances are often considerable. Why are Harrington Humps not commonplace? We are accustomed to using only one door at Beaully and Conon Bridge - if a Hump were the preferred access at other stations would this pose an insuperable operating problem?

**Q10** We endorse this approach and look forward to an example of its implementation. A Harrington Hump at Dunkeld would seem an obvious one.. On a more strategic level we are keen to see some research which will enable TS to get a handle on whether the prices quoted by Network Rail for infrastructure work, particularly enhancements, is or is not reasonable. The view has been expressed to us that a high price is sometimes quoted "just to be on the safe side". The Secretary of State's recent announcement about East-West Rail in England (between Oxford and Cambridge) may shed some light, but a Scottish experience would be useful, and might be obtained more quickly. Levenmouth - nice and easy as the solum is all still there?

**Q11** Were this the final question in a degree examination this would be where the Firsts distanced themselves from the 2:1s. However blessed FoFNL is with bright ideas about the FNL we are not experts and, with regret, we leave this question unanswered.

**Mike Lunan, Convener, Friends of the Far North Line, 6 January 2017**

# RAILWAY POLICING (SCOTLAND) BILL

I am responding to the invitation from The Scottish Parliament's Justice Committee to comment on the proposed Bill. I do so in three capacities: as Convener of the Friends of the Far North Line (a Rail User Group with over 150 members campaigning for passengers and freight consignors on the route between Inverness and Caithness); as the lay passenger representative on the Office of Rail and Road's *Rail Industry Health and Safety Advisory Committee*; and as a member of the public who makes frequent use of the rail network both within and furth of Scotland. Before the old Rail Passengers' Council structure was altered in 2005 I was Chairman of its Safety Task Force, and had frequent meetings with the BTP Chief Constable and many serving officers, and had considerable experience of how BTP goes about its work. I am by professional training an actuary, and therefore have an intimate knowledge of risk, its measurement and management.

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The Bill has been widely described as "politically driven". It is the nature of politics that opposition parties will argue against a piece of government legislation - a process which is designed to expose weaknesses in the drafting and, ultimately, produce a better Bill. However in this case opposition is being heard from many non-political sources who would not normally voice an opinion. I am particularly concerned that the Assistant Chief Constable of BTP resigned over this issue - a signal, surely, from the most senior serving officer in the Scottish arm of BTP - D division - that he believes the proposal to be wrong. He may, of course, be wrong himself, but his resignation should not be brushed aside as being of no consequence. When a senior figure resigns a warning bell is sounded - one has only to remember Sir Geoffrey Howe in 1990 and only this month Sir Ivan Rogers. A warning bell is not, of course, a signal that a U-turn is the only wise response, but equally it should suggest that a careful re-examination of the benefits and drawbacks of a proposed course of action is needed.

My reading of the Bill and the supporting documentation, together with comment in the public domain leads me to the view that the benefits - which are significant - lie exclusively in the area of organisational structure. There will be cost savings as a level of head-office duplication will be eliminated; there will be public accountability through The Scottish Parliament; there may well be scope for more efficient deployment of officers once the Police

Scotland reorganisation has bedded down; there will be one single police force in Scotland with whom Ministers, Officials and members of the public will be dealing.

The drawbacks are almost all operational. "Almost" because one of the most intractable will be the matters of accrued pension rights and associated staff benefits. I shall return to these.

At present BTP delivers a highly specialised and highly efficient service to rail companies and the travelling public. In recent years there has been a very successful focus on specifically railway incidents. BTP has a target for re-opening the railway within 90 minutes if a non-suspect fatality occurs. This is much sooner than was the case a decade or more ago. The specialist knowledge and experience that leads BTP officers to deliver this is likely to be weakened within Police Scotland which has no such target in areas where it currently deals with a similar non-suspect fatality - a single-car road fatality for example. It is not uncommon for a road routinely to be closed for several hours. Naturally if there are "suspicious circumstances" one would not quibble at this, but the presumption within Police Scotland appears to be that circumstances are deemed to be suspicious until evidence disproving this is gathered - a time-consuming process. BTP's presumption, unless there is clear evidence of a crime, is that a suicide is a sad incident, but not one which requires more than 90 minutes

to deal with. I use suicide as an example, but there are many others where the philosophy of BTP differs from that of Police Scotland (or the Home Office police south of the Border). Neither approach is wrong, but because the environments in which they operate are different, with different underlying service requirements (like running a railway) the approaches have to be different. My fear is that, as a much smaller body of officers within Police Scotland, the officers in what is now D division will gradually be subsumed culturally within the larger group, to their, and the railway's, detriment.

Much is made in the accompanying documents that Ministers are aware of this risk, and would wish to ensure that the specialist expertise of BTP is not lost, or its skills diluted, but there is nothing in the Bill actually to prevent this from happening.

At the moment a BTP presence on a cross-border train can deal with an incident anywhere on that train's route. What will happen after the Bill is enacted when an incident - brawling, for example, breaks out on a train travelling north in the Durham area? BTP officers will board at Newcastle and deal with the problem. By the time that this has been done the train is on its way to Edinburgh. Does the train have to make an unscheduled stop at Berwick, still within England and where the Newcastle-based BTP officers still have jurisdiction? Or does it continue to Edinburgh? What happens then - do the on-board BTP officers still have the right to make arrests in England and hand over the culprits in Scotland? This may seem like a teasing question in a first year Law exam, but it exposes a real series of difficulties. At present BTP officers travel the entire length of the GB rail network and carry out their duties despite the fact that Scotland's legal system differs from that of England and Wales. Will this still be the case? May a Police Scotland officer carry out policing duties in Northumberland? My understanding is that Home Office forces in England and Wales guard their patches jealously, and only in the case of major crimes

is there routine cross-boundary working.

I now turn to the six bullet points where specific comments are sought.

1 In my view there will inevitably be a gradual diminution of specialist skills and experience. We have only to look at what happened in the railway industry at privatisation. Two factors came into play at the same time. The first was the natural human resistance to change, especially change in the workplace. Many staff (at all levels) in their 50s - those with the experience - took the opportunity of early retirement, or merely sought employment outwith the industry. Nothing can prevent this natural behaviour short of some system of golden handcuffs - highly unlikely to be available in this case. The other factor - less likely here, but not impossible - is that the new management seriously under-estimate the staffing levels and skills required to deliver the promised service. At privatisation this led to a dramatic shortage of drivers in some areas; is the risk that a similar mis-calculation by senior officers at Police Scotland might find too few coppers on trains or at major stations to deal with trouble a risk too great?

2 I do not regard "cross-border *security arrangements*" as being put at risk by the proposals. However I do regard cross-border *everyday policing matters* as being put at risk, as I have described earlier. I am confident that the awareness of terrorist threats nowadays, and the experience of all police forces to combat it, makes any gaps in cross-border counter-terrorist capability minimal. But terrorism is mercifully infrequent; hooliganism is not.

3 Again I do not foresee a difficulty here provided that the officers formerly with BTP remain the officers within Police Scotland who carry out policing duties on the railway. Easy to say, and easy for Ministers to expect, but harder to deliver when there is a flu epidemic among police officers at a particular location and it's "all hands to the pump". I return to this in the next bullet point.

4 I believe that this risk is very significant.

Occasionally planned events take place - G8 at Gleneagles being a good example - where the security arrangements required are so stringent that all police leave is cancelled and every officer is needed, either at the location or providing a thinner police presence elsewhere in Scotland. It is impossible to believe that the BTP officers within Police Scotland will somehow be ring-fenced in their duties, inevitably leading to the delivery of a poorer service to the railway and passengers. Worse will be the inevitable occurrence of a non-planned emergency - a terrorist outrage, say - where a blanket police presence is needed. I do not criticize the response, but in such circumstances I would expect to see a proportionately greater presence on and around transport infrastructure than for example, on ordinary streets. Will Gold Command see it that way? Will "ordinary" Police Scotland officers be drafted into Waverley rather than protecting The Scottish Parliament?

5 Any processes will be tricky, and require careful management, but I do not see this as being particularly a difficulty. Railway operators will continue to pay for policing services and will be keen to see that they receive value for money.

6 This whole area is going to be very difficult to resolve satisfactorily, and failure to get it right exposes the risk that, as indicated earlier, staff with not long to serve before retirement may well vote with their feet. The only sensible way will be to continue the status and conditions of employment (including pension provision and perks) of BTP officers as they transfer into Police Scotland. By the nature of things the numbers affected will always be a small percentage of Police Scotland officers, and they will diminish as time passes. New entrants, of course, would join Police Scotland under Police Scotland terms and conditions as Crown Servants. It must be borne in mind that every serving BTP officer chose to be a member of BTP, and not of a Home Office (or Police Scotland) force. A conscious decision to "work on the railway" was made, and this motivation must be acknowledged and respected. The risk of officers walking away, taking vital experience

with them, is the greatest risk posed by this proposal, and everything possible must be done to ameliorate it. Telling serving officers that they must be transferred into Crown Servant status, with the insecurity of stable family life that that implies, and into a poorer pension arrangement could have a disastrous effect on morale at precisely the time when old hands are needed to pass on skills and keep morale high. Change inevitably brings risks: successful change happens only when risks are measured, understood and managed. I see little evidence that this is happening.

In all the foregoing I have referred to "police officers". It should not be overlooked that in addition to uniformed officers BTP also has civilian support staff whose willingness to continue employment within a much larger organisation should not be taken for granted. Like their uniformed colleagues they may well have sought employment within a small, specialised, force offering greater scope for career advancement and promotion. The position of Special Constables should be considered. Some years ago GNER, then the operator for long-distance services on the East Coast Main Line, successfully recruited several of their on-board staff to train as Special Constables. I have no current knowledge of whether cross-border Train Operating Companies (Virgin Trains East Coast, Virgin Trains, TransPennine Express and CrossCountry Trains, as well as Caledonian Sleeper) or the ScotRail Alliance currently have employees who are Special Constables, but questions should be asked about how they would fit in to Police Scotland, and indeed how willing they would be to continue as Specials in the new environment. Indeed a survey of *all* BTP officers and civilian support staff would be useful. If it is found that more than an insignificant number of those likely to be affected turn out to be disaffected then the whole proposal, despite its apparent attractions set out at the beginning of this Response, must be called into question.

Mike Lunan

5 January 2017

# NEW ALLIANCE MANAGING DIRECTOR

Phil Verster, who was ScotRail Alliance Managing Director from May 2015, left his post on Friday 20 January to take up the post of Managing Director of the newly formed East West Rail project. This will be responsible for construction work and service provision on the Oxford to Cambridge route in England, closed by Beeching over 50 years ago. The route will re-establish a link between East Anglia and Central, Southern and Western England.

His successor in Scotland will be **Alex Hynes**, currently MD of Arriva Rail North's franchise in the north of England. Mr Hynes has been managing director of the franchise since 2013, at which time it was operated jointly by Abellio and Serco. He retained his position as MD when Arriva took over in April 2016.

His previous employment by Abellio and Serco will be useful in his new role. Mr Hynes said, "I am delighted to have been appointed to lead the ScotRail Alliance, this

cutting-edge arrangement, which brings together the management of ScotRail and Network Rail to deliver the very best for customers. The ScotRail Alliance is delivering one of the largest programmes of investment, change and modernisation

since the railway was built. To be part of that, and the plans to vastly improve services and capacity for customers, is hugely exciting for me."

Mark Carne, chief executive of Network Rail added: "We are very pleased that Alex is joining Network Rail to lead the ScotRail Alliance.

This is one of the most pressurised, high profile roles in the whole railway industry and we look forward to helping him succeed."

FoFNL is looking forward to working with Mr Hynes when he takes up his appointment on 1 June. He has accepted the invitation, originally made to Phil Verster, to speak at our AGM/Conference in Inverness on 23 June.



## NURSERY LEARNING JOURNEY

In February, Park Primary School Nursery in Invergordon decided to use the Far North Line to give thirty-five of their children the experience of travelling by train.

They went to Alness for a visit to the High Street shops. They then walked to the park to have a picnic snack and some time to play, before heading to the station to catch the train back to Invergordon.

The nursery's childcare manager Isaac Williamson said, "We had a wonderful morning out, which the children loved, helped by several parents." He thanked ScotRail staff and the parent volunteers for their support during the trip and commented that the children "made quite a sight walking up the Alness High Street in their high-visibility vests."

# SCOTRAIL HSTs

ScotRail has published some information about the fleet of HSTs which will begin to enter service between the seven cities from May 2018.

The complete refurbishment will make what are effectively new trains out of existing stock from the 70s and 80s. Some press reports about this have made much of the age of the trains; this is to miss the point: a fine stone villa would never be described as "just a hundred-year-old house".

Wabtec Rail begins the refurbishment of 121 Mk3 coaches this year. They will be formed into 9 4-coach units for the HML and 17 5-coach units for Central Belt to Aberdeen services giving 206/278 standard class seats and 32 first class. This compares with the current trains which are in fixed 3-coach units with 179 standard class and 18 first class in each set.

From the passenger point of view the whole environment of the Mk3 coaches is more comfortable, with more legroom and with less noise, because the engines are in separate power cars and not beneath the coaches.

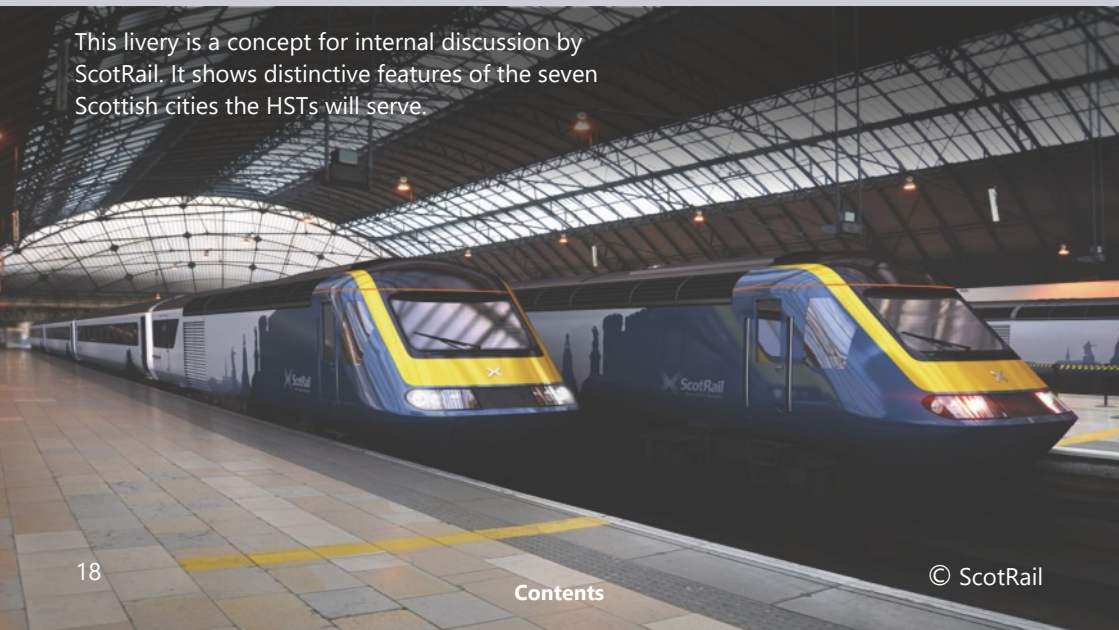
The refurbishment involves the installation of power doors and the replacement of all seating. First class will have leather reclining seats and standard class will have the same seats as the Inverness-based Class 158 units currently used on the FNL. First class passengers will be provided with complementary self-service catering including a coffee machine, hot water and a microwave. There will also be a fridge/chiller cabinet.

Cycle storage will be available for two bikes in one carriage and there will also be room for three bikes in both power cars for end-to-end travellers, making a total of eight spaces.

ScotRail states that journey times will be reduced e.g. journeys between Inverness and Edinburgh/Glasgow will, on average, be 10 minutes quicker. This is because the power/weight ratio of the HSTs is significantly better than the class 170s which operate the routes at present. Class 170s have a p/w ratio of 9.3 hp/tonne whereas the HSTs come in at 16 hp/tonne for a four coach unit and 14.2 hp/tonne for a five coach unit.

Brush Traction of Loughborough is to refurbish the 54 Class 43 power cars.

This livery is a concept for internal discussion by ScotRail. It shows distinctive features of the seven Scottish cities the HSTs will serve.



# CAITHNESS SLEEPER

## The Proposed Sleeper Service Between Caithness and the Central Belt

This started as a gleam in the eye of James Stockan of Orkney, Chairman of HITRANS, and has now reached the stage of a consultation being awarded. Its report is expected in the summer. If serious money is being spent in this way then clearly any objections from the operator (Serco, trading as Caledonian Sleepers (CS)) did not happen. The new Mk 5 Sleeper coaches are under construction in Spain, and when they are in service all the existing Mk 3 sleeper and Mk 2 lounge coaches will no longer be needed. It is these which would be used for the Caithness service. While the consultants are about their business some of the details are likely to change, but the preliminary plan is to run a service from Thurso to Edinburgh (possibly to Glasgow) on alternate nights with the return working on the other nights. A service on Saturday night would

not run as this would interfere with possible weekend maintenance (this is why no Sleeper runs now on a Saturday night, popular though it would undoubtedly be). The route would be via Aberdeen - much longer, but speed and journey times are not important overnight. The services would be timed, where possible, to connect with the Orkney ferry at Scrabster.

Peter Strachan, MD of CS, is open to the idea of running services outwith the contracted ones in the franchise. Oban has been mentioned. Splitting and joining at Crianlarich would seem the obvious way on paper, but the existing Highland Sleeper, serving Aberdeen, Inverness and Fort William, and splitting/joining at Waverley is already the longest train in Britain, and so any Oban vehicles wouldn't fit into Euston. One for the diagrammers to solve!



# RAILS BY SEA

Rail replacement on the 6½ mile Thurso to Georgemas branch began in April. It is now more than 50 years since the rails were last replaced - economical railway indeed!

1,100 60' lengths of rail were required and the innovative decision was taken by Network Rail to have them delivered by sea to nearby Scrabster from Rotterdam, after manufacture in Austria. This was estimated to have saved 110 road freight journeys and reduced carbon emissions by around 200 tonnes. Had the proposed Scrabster branch of the Highland Railway been built the rails could have completed their journey by train!

All the £3m upgrade work was carried out overnight to avoid disruption to

passengers.

Alex Sharkey, Network Rail Area Director (Network Operations, Scotland East), said: "We are committed to investing in the Far North line and between 2014 and 2019 we will spend over £30m in the area.

"We have already delivered a renewal of the signalling systems on the route and have plans in place to renew track, raise linespeeds over level crossings and improve earthworks and structures.

"As an industry we are also determined to reduce the environmental impact of our activities. This is a wonderful example of how we can do that – taking traffic off the roads and substantially reducing the carbon footprint of the project."



# LAIRG OIL TRAIN DEMISE

News came at the end of March that the oil deliveries to Lairg and Fort William Scottish Fuels depots will no longer be made by rail.

Scottish Fuels is owned by Certas Energy and a spokesman stated, "We can confirm that a decision has been taken to supply the Fort William depot by road to reduce travel costs and improve stock-holding efficiency. The depot in Lairg will now receive stock from our Inverness terminal by road."

"The rail contract ended last week and we estimate there will be 400 truck movements annually split between Fort William and Lairg."

In response, the Scottish Representative of the Rail Freight Group, David Spaven, said, "While the volume of oil traffic moving by rail to Lairg was relatively modest by modern trainload standards, the loss of traffic to road haulage is highly regrettable at a time when rail freight desperately needs new markets to replace coal - and policy at all levels of

government firmly favours modal switch in the opposite direction. Transport Scotland and Network Rail need to reflect on the rail infrastructure constraints which undermined the economics of the service, limiting freight train speeds to just 30 mph between Dingwall and Tain and restricting the tank weights to only 75% of full loading capability. These are constraints which simply would not be tolerated on the road network."

"However, if a through freight service to Caithness can be established again – perhaps on the basis of the mixed sleeper and freight service mooted by HITRANS – then maybe the economics of oil to Lairg can be put on a sounder footing. We should remember that there is a precedent for this traffic being lost to road but later regained by rail – the tank traffic came to an abrupt end when the Ness Viaduct collapsed in 1989, but eventually switched back to rail in 2002 as part of a wider Freight Facilities Grant package for oil traffic from Grangemouth."

**...constraints which simply would not be tolerated on the road network**

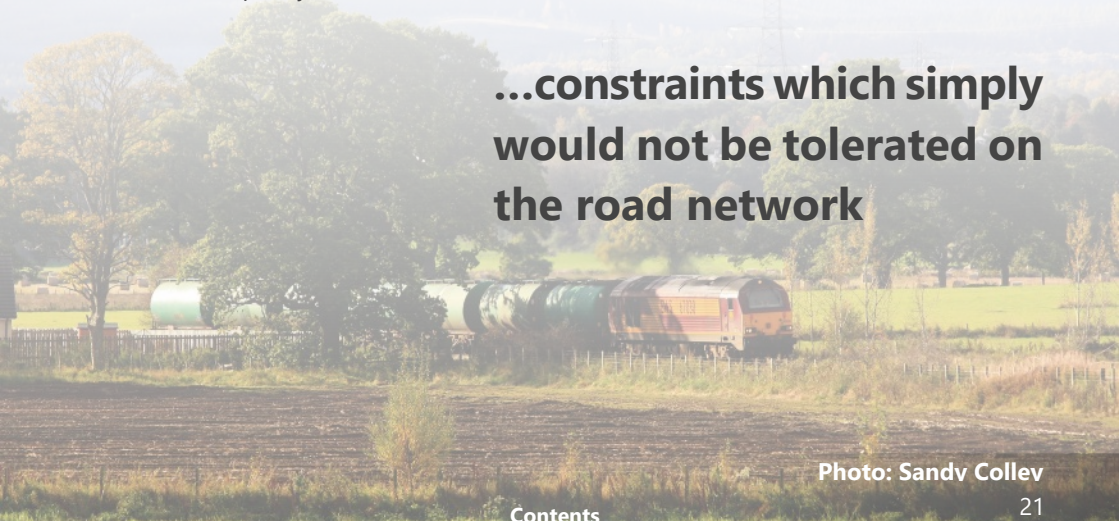


Photo: Sandy Colley

## **"All the wrong signals?"**

The contrast between ongoing work on, and publicity for, the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness and that for improving the Highland Main Line (HML) is huge. There have been so many glossy brochures and consultations for the A9 and so little about the railway. The Transport Scotland websites are similarly skewed. The HML page is thankfully still promising an average journey time of 3 hours between Inverness and the Central Belt with a 2 hours 45 minutes fastest time by 2025, but the maps show the M90 and the M80 as the connections south of Perth!

We are now less than two years before the end of the five year financial control period 5 (CP5) and the GRIP3 report detailing what work is to be done by March 2019 is still not published. Phil Verster, the last MD of the ScotRail Alliance, promised it by April 2016. All we know is that improvements are to be made to the passing loops at Aviemore and Pitlochry. There is no word yet of putting back loops at Ballinluig and elsewhere or of any double tracking to ease the serious lack of capacity and reduce delays.

Meantime, minds should be being concentrated by the recent realisation that diesel engines in cars particularly but also buses and lorries are a very serious health risk to the population due to the emissions of nitrogen oxides and particulates. "NOx pollution is responsible for tens of thousands of early deaths across Europe with the UK suffering a particularly heavy toll" (Guardian, 6 January 2017). The Scottish Government emission reduction targets for transport continue to be missed by a mile and the latest blow is that the Grangemouth to Lairg (via HML) and Fort William oil trains are to be replaced by road tankers!

In a hard hitting editorial in its March magazine, the CEO of Inverness Chamber of Commerce has called for an end to the delay in properly upgrading the Highland Main Line. He is worried that the recent Transport Scotland

consultation on the future for Scotland's rail infrastructure strategy heralds a diminishing spend on rail enhancements and continued channelling of the money primarily towards central Scotland. This time last year the Scottish Chambers of Commerce nationally spoke out about strategic connectivity for Scotland and how the "single track sections of the railways linking the cities of Inverness, Aberdeen and the Central Belt are 'unacceptable' in the 21st century". Strong words underlining yet again the need for policies to be implemented.

My heading is slightly unfair. Abellio ScotRail has contracted to introduce faster and roomier trains on the line from 2018/19. The High Speed Trains built in the 1970s can only be a stop gap until electrification of the line. Bimode (electric and diesel propulsion) trains are also talked about but, as presently designed, the diesel engines which they carry are not sufficiently powerful for the HML gradients. Electric trains are really effective on long steep hills as can be seen at Beattock north of Carlisle. The HSTs will be most welcome, but their age does give electrification some urgency.

The 2 hours 45 minute journey time between Edinburgh and Inverness was promised by First Minister Alex Salmond in his 5 August 2008 Inverness Town House speech to be implemented by 2011/12 (Herald and Press & Journal, 6 August 2008) and confirmed to Mary Scanlon MSP in Scottish Parliament written answer S3W-24784 by Transport Minister Stewart Stevenson on 19 July 2009 that the new estimated completion date was 2012/13.

Some increase in service frequency has been provided since then, which is very welcome. However, journey times are not competitive with the car and the completion of dualling the A9 is not many years away now. The railway needs to be more competitive for freight. Investment is needed to allow the intermodal grocery etc trains be lengthened from 20 to a more competitive 28 containers and this requires key loops to be extended and others to be provided. To meet customer needs good

freight paths have to be available during the day as well as in the depths of the night.

The HML railway has to be seen as a priority for funding during CP6 to complete all the promised journey time reductions and, significantly, to prevent modal shift to road and consequently further damage to the environment and environmental harm reduction targets.

The Far North, Kyle and Inverness to Aberdeen

line stations such as Nairn and Forres all depend on the HML for connections and for through freight traffic both existing and potential. The HML is the main rail artery to and from the north of Scotland. It is vital to the economic and social fabric of Scotland and it is a scenic asset which does much to attract visitors to the area. There must be a big push to get this line properly modernised by the end of CP6 in 2024.

## INVERNESS-ABERDEEN UPDATE

The Inverness to Aberdeen line is blooming marvellous just now with the whin (or gorse, if you prefer) at its best particularly on either side of Nairn. Enhancement work at Forres has taken great strides. The new road overbridge at Forres Station is under construction with the earth ramps on either side looking fairly complete.

New track is being laid. 1200 tonnes of ballast have been brought in by road and 2500 concrete sleepers laid and 2000 steel sleepers reutilised. 4,230 metres of troughing has been laid and 4.2km of cable used. 2,500 tonnes of spoil were taken away by rail.

Work continues too at Elgin, not least at the Wards level crossing, with a further weekend closure on 25 May. The main bulk of the work, including resignalling, will be done during a 10 day blockade commencing Friday 6 October. 6,000 letters have been delivered to lineside neighbours within 500 metres of the line in Aberdeen and Dyce ahead of further site investigation works there from the end of April.

Building works to double the size of the Norbord wood processing factory at Morayhill are well advanced with the new building line seemingly too close to the railway to allow for a siding in addition to the much-needed redoubling of the line between Inverness and Dalcross airport. The factory was originally built with a siding and it is hoped that one can be provided to accept timber from Kinbrace on the FNL (under HITRANS's Branchliner project)

and to allow despatch of the finished products.

Transport Scotland and Network Rail are developing a Scotland-wide Rail Projects Portal which will provide updates on major projects. In the interim I am told that NR provide regular updates via the project Twitter feed (@NetworkRailA21). At the end of February the proposed station at Inverness Airport (Dalcross) received planning permission for a single platform initially.

A latent demand for more frequent services and an Aberdeen to Inverness journey time of two hours or less was apparent over twenty years ago in the 1994 proposals to modernise the line. Additional passenger services have been added but only at the cost of even slower journeys due to the long sections of single track.

Buoyant passenger numbers in the past decade have highlighted how many more passengers would use the line regularly if there was an even interval hourly service from end to end, impossible without more doubling than is currently being carried out.

Prospects for new freight flows for the whisky and timber industries are also good. It is therefore vital that enhancements in CP6 provide the capacity for hourly end to end passenger services with paths for freight trains also. Such work will also help towards providing the faster journey times to maintain the railway's current advantage over the road.

Updates by **Richard Ardern**

# LEVEL CROSSINGS - 11

## UPDATE

There's good news and bad news. The good news is that Network Rail will be carrying out important work at some LXs on the FNL in the next few months which will allow the line-speeds to be increased. This should enable the December timetable to shave several minutes off the end-to-end timings.

### TEMPORARY

The long-running saga on the "temporary" speed restriction at Chapelton Farm just north of Muir of Ord should be over as this issue of *Far North Express* is being printed. The newly-designed kit ran into problems with safety authorisation, and had to be re-designed. It will allow trains to run much more quickly for several hundred metres approaching (and more usefully when leaving) Muir of Ord station.

### PERMANENT

Work will be done during the summer at Lairg and at Delny. In the latter case the crossing will be temporarily upgraded to an ACBL (ie. with a barrier and a white light to show the train driver that the barrier has fallen). This is due to be done in August and will allow a substantial increase in speed. The permanent solution is to close the LX altogether, replacing it with an improved bridge a few hundred metres away. When this is done (expected in 2019) the LX kit will be moved to Kildonan where the Open Crossing still, well into the 21st Century, requires the

train to come to a complete stop.

### IMPROVED

A trial is under way at Ardrossan Princes Street (where the road crossed is quite wide) of an improved type of crossing kit. If successful it is planned for introduction at two of the Dingwall crossings in 2018.

### CONSEQUENCES

The bad news was made clear at a meeting I attended at ORR in April. Earlier articles in this series have dealt with a detailed set of recommendations from the Joint Law Commissions into the modernisation of the law governing LX matters. We were assured before the last Westminster election that the necessary primary legislation was expected during that Parliament. It appears that the DfT was less keen than it had earlier seemed, and nothing happened. We were then led to believe that time would be found in this Parliament. Then Brexit blew that out of the water. It is obvious that the legislative consequences of Brexit, and the unbelievable amount of time required to unpick the complex web of European legislation, and re-fasten it into UK law, will obliterate any possibility of any new law on any subject at all for this, and probably the next, Westminster Parliament. Would it be sensible for Holyrood to pass the necessary Scottish law first?

**Mike Lunan**

## **Mike Robinson, Chief Executive, Royal Scottish Geographical Society**

Given the huge developments in technology and transport since the Victorian age you would probably assume that transport links between our cities would be faster now than in the age of steam trains. However, you would be wrong. The fastest train between Edinburgh and Perth in 2015 took 71 minutes, 6 minutes slower than in 1895! Most trains take 80 minutes, whereas driving can take under an hour. Transform Scotland, a charity transport network, is convinced that reinstating a direct rail link from Edinburgh to Perth via Kinross would cut ten miles off the distance and up to 35 minutes off the journey time. Any acceleration of this train journey would transform travel north of the capital, not just to Perth but beyond.

Given the Scottish Government's pledge to encourage sustainable transport and improve access beyond the Central Belt, more needs to be done. A faster rail route would start to address the huge discrepancy in house prices north of the Bridges compared to the capital city, and it would be a great step towards improving access to, and unlocking public transport for, the whole of the North of Scotland. Furthermore, improved public transport would boost tourism to the rest of the country and stop the "hemming in" of tourists to the capital.

The potential benefits for Perth go wider than faster travel and its capacity to be a national passenger and freight hub for Scotland. Half an hour's reduction in the train journey from Edinburgh to Perth is also half an hour off the journey from Edinburgh to Inverness. Whilst there are other rail improvements required, this is the first, and most vital step, in better connecting all of Scotland's cities and

becoming a primary transport route for the whole of Scotland north of the Central Belt. Furthermore if the railway that used to run from Perth to Forfar was also replaced, it would greatly reduce journey times to Aberdeen too.

It would probably cost less than half of the A9 road-dualling project and do a great deal more for connectivity and sustainability, and create significant economic benefits across a very wide area. Not to mention greatly assisting with the Scottish Government's carbon reduction targets.

I think it is time to test this idea more fully. In November 2016 RSGS convened a meeting with representatives from SCDI, Transform

### **Half an hour's reduction in the train journey from Edinburgh to Perth is also half an hour off the journey from Edinburgh to Inverness**

Scotland, the Rail Freight Group, Perth City Development Board, VisitScotland, and rail groups from Inverness and Aberdeen. We found a real enthusiasm to explore this idea further. Like Transform, SCDI and others, RSGS sees Perth's huge potential as a national infrastructure priority for rail, in unlocking economic growth throughout Fife, Tayside, the Highlands and Aberdeenshire.

This national rail hub needs to take its place in Scotland's infrastructure priorities. With such evident long-term knock-on economic merit, here is a great opportunity to see a step change in our railways, benefiting the whole of Scotland, and moving from a 19th century railway to a rail service fit for the 21st century.

**FoFNL supports Inter-City Express, a key ambition of Transform Scotland.**

**For full details see:**

**<https://archive2022.intercityexpress.transform.scot/site/index.html>**

## *Reform Scotland News Release, 24 February 2017: **Borders Railway shows current thinking is short-term and lacks a clear strategy***

Reform Scotland, the independent, non-party think tank, has released written evidence which it has sent to Transport Scotland's Rail Infrastructure Strategy Consultation.

The evidence has been submitted on behalf of Reform Scotland by Tom Harris, the former Labour Transport Minister in the UK Government and now a Reform Scotland

### Government needs a Rail Commission to create a bold, long-term vision

Advisory Board member.

In wide-ranging evidence, Mr Harris suggests that:

- a Scottish Rail Infrastructure Commission is required to inject some bigger thinking into our long-term rail vision, such as whether new lines from the central belt to the north and/or south of Scotland could improve growth and reverse population decline in those areas
- the Scottish Government should work with the Competition and Markets Authority to explore how its proposals for open access on-rail competition could benefit some Scottish routes
- infrastructure build such as the Borders Railway was short sighted because it is not

electrified, and single-track, with bridges built only to accommodate the width of single-track, and therefore has limited potential for expansion

Commenting, Tom Harris said:

"We are in danger of missing the bigger picture when it comes to discussing rail in Scotland. We talk in very narrow terms about ScotRail and its operation, but what we actually need is an injection of some creative, strategic thinking so that we can give the Scottish people a rail system built for the future and one to be proud of."

Reform Scotland believes that the Scottish Government should create a Scottish Rail Infrastructure Commission to examine what ambitious transformational projects and new railway lines we need to boost the Scottish economy and transform our connectivity as a nation.

"The Borders Railway showed us that there is an appetite for new railways in Scotland, but it also showed us that our thinking is too small and our planning too short-term. That ship has now sailed, but we must learn the lessons from it, think big, and plan long, and that is why the need for a Commission is now critical."

The logo for Reform Scotland, with 'reform' in a dark red font and 'scotland' in a blue font, both in a lowercase, sans-serif typeface.

**Reform Scotland is an independent 'think-tank', describing itself as "a public policy institute which works to promote increased economic prosperity and more effective public services based on the principles of limited government, diversity and personal responsibility"**

**We publish their response to Transport Scotland's Rail Infrastructure Strategy Consultation alongside our own, as an interesting, and different, view on this subject.**

# SUNRAIL



Being forced to go and work in a sunnier place for a couple of weeks in March, I took the opportunity to have a look at the new 'SunRail' system which passes through Orlando in Florida. The contrast with Scottish railways is more than meteorological! The trains are not more frequent than every 30 mins, and do not reach high speeds. Florida being extremely flat, railways are expected to cross roads on the level. The very many crossings are controlled with traffic lights and barriers but there are very few fences along the line and none in the downtown area, so pedestrians could just wander onto the track if they didn't think trains were dangerous.

The main station in Orlando is called Lynx Central. The bus station is contiguous with the railway station [B], with direct pedestrian access between them [C]. Diagrams of train and bus route



connections are prominently displayed and easy to understand [A]. A quick look at [www.golynx.com](http://www.golynx.com) lets you see how good information can be.

Health & Safety officers from the UK would be advised to take tranquillisers before venturing onto the Lynx system. The official route for pedestrians to change platforms is across the tracks. The electronic departure boards suggest that you should "Always expect a second train. Obey all warning signals. Cross only at designated areas." At Winter Park, two stops north of Lynx Central, the train passes through a public park [D] - still no fences!

Ian Budd

# A RAILMAN REMEMBERS

## 4 – THE SUMMER OF OUR CONTENT

As winter made way for spring and the paranoia of the petrol shortages and the three day week receded, life at Fearn took on a bucolic quality for the idle railman.

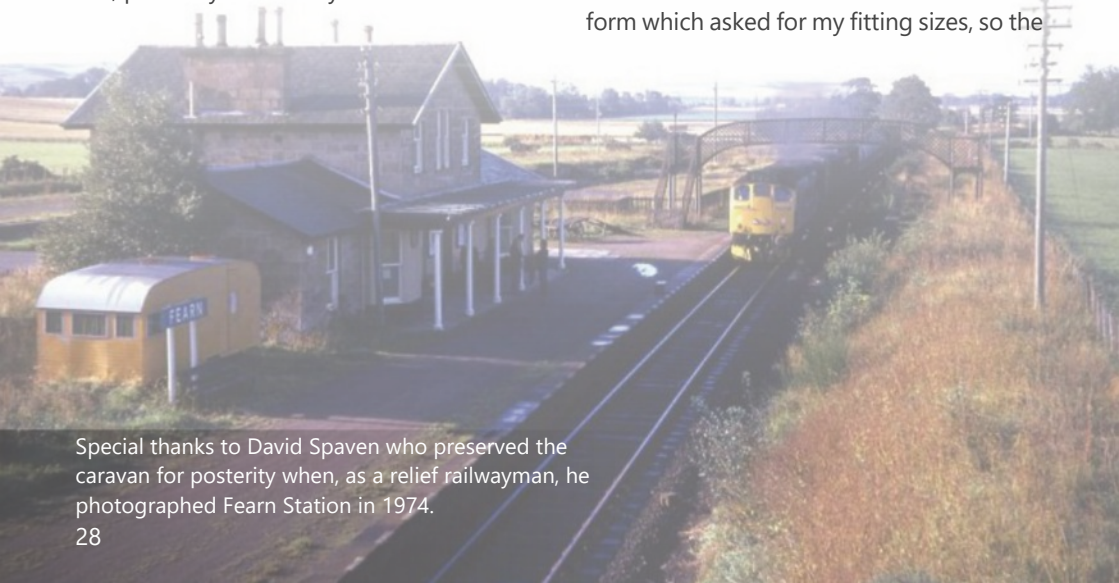
Dick would roll in on Friday afternoons to make up the clerical returns from my meagre accounts. I didn't sell a lot of tickets as only a few passengers could make use of the infrequent services. The 9am southbound was the most likely to be used for a day trip to Inverness. I made myself quite popular by letting everyone wait in the ticket office, it being the only warm place on the station.

Other passengers were a bit more demanding. "I'd like a return to Westerham but coming back via Aberdeen with an extra half fare and accompanied luggage on the final leg. Oh and..." "Let me stop you there. Even if I knew where Westerham was, and could find the correct add-on in the supplementary fares manual, the train will have come and gone before I've worked it out, probably incorrectly. Here's a ticket to

Inverness, they'll sort you out there."

As the station was surrounded by fields, most of the few travellers needed to arrive or depart by car. Unwary Nigg workers would stagger off the morning train, having sat up drinking all night from Glasgow, saying "Hey Pal, where's the phone box?" Depending on my mood and their politeness, I would say "There isn't one" and shut the hatch. Eventually I would take pity on them and phone Nigg 666 to let them know there were a few bears at the station and maybe someone should come and pick them up. "Why's the station so far from the village?" was a familiar cry. It wasn't until years later I learned the appropriate response; "They were planning to put the station in the village, but in the end they decided it would be more useful next to the railway."

Of course as far as the public was concerned, I was the Station Master, even though I didn't wear a uniform. Due to my rebellious streak I never even filled in the form which asked for my fitting sizes, so the



Special thanks to David Spaven who preserved the caravan for posterity when, as a relief railwayman, he photographed Fearn Station in 1974.

uniform duly never arrived.

What did arrive in due course was a caravan. My no-fixed-abode status had not gone unnoticed. In any longer term I needed somewhere to live, but the accommodation above the station had already been rented out to a tenant. "How about a caravan?" said Dick. "I'll ask the Area Manager if you can put one on the platform". Much to my surprise, the answer was yes. A friend knew about a caravan which had been used as a site office by a scaffolding contractor, which I bought for £50. It was in reasonable condition and watertight, but completely stripped of fittings. That wasn't too much of a problem as the station had a loo and a rudimentary kitchen. In time honoured hippy tradition I cut up a couple of pallets for a bed base and threw a mattress on top. The caravan was tucked in to a plot of land on the platform between the station building and the road bridge, and I took up full time residence at Fearn.

The platform was, and still is, very low, so there were some wooden steps which could be placed at the train doors to assist passengers on or off. One day the early train pulled out and there was a cup of tea on the step.

Originally I had been travelling in to Fearn on the early train and back to Invergordon or Dingwall at 3.30 in the afternoon. Alec, the buffet car attendant on those services, was a similar age to me, friendly, cheerful and as delighted with his job as I was with mine. And bless him, every time he came through Fearn he left a cup of tea for me on the platform, much to the shaking of the guard's head and anyone else who saw it.

I had to come up with some sort of response. I worked out that one thing Alec couldn't do in the buffet car was fry bacon. This led to feverish preparation and a miracle of timing. By pre-heating the frying pan, lining everything up and listening for the train whistle at Nigg Station crossing, I was able to hit Alec with a hot bacon and egg toasted sandwich just as the train arrived. This signalled the end of the Fearn master chef catering competition, but the morning tea continued to be a much appreciated perk until the end of my time at Fearn.

## Continuing Mark Nolan's reminiscences of his time working at Fearn station

Having carte blanche to ride any train north of Inverness was another great benefit for me, although for some reason I never took advantage of it to go much further north. I was also allowed quarter fare travel across the rest of the British Rail network, as well as four free return tickets a year. I took full advantage of these, but there was a problem; I couldn't leave before Friday afternoon, and I had to be back by Monday morning. The only way I could exploit all my free travel was by catching the overnight train south on Friday, and the Glasgow-Inverness sleeper back on Sunday night. I never failed to be back at my station by Monday morning, but there was to be another unexpected development which would restrict my travel opportunities even more than geography; it came in the form of a musical postman.

# JELICOE SPECIALS CENTENARY



It is appropriate to mark the recent centenary of the first "Jellicoe Special" which ran between Euston and Thurso on February 15 1917.

At the time, the Grand Fleet was based at Scapa Flow in Orkney. This had involved some very complicated ad hoc travel arrangements for sailors returning to the UK on leave. Regular train services were not always able to cope with the numbers involved, so the special service was set up running on weekdays once a day in both directions. The service lasted until a few months after the armistice and nearly half a million passengers were carried in total. Running for 717 miles, it was the longest scheduled UK service that ever ran.

Similar trains ran in WWII and in 2002 a plaque was unveiled at Thurso station [top] to commemorate the "Jellicoe Expresses". Another plaque exists at Dingwall station commemorating the tea stall, provided by Ross & Cromarty Red Cross Society, which served an astonishing 134,864 men between 1915 and 1919.

There is an article in our [April 2003 Newsletter](#) about the unveiling in 2002.



# BOOK REVIEW

*Scottish Region Engine Sheds & Their Motive Power. The 60 group: 60A to 60E.*

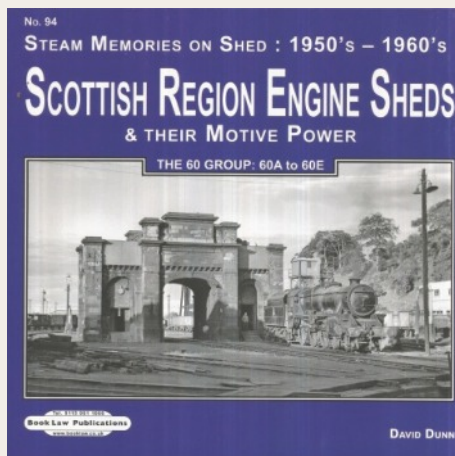
(*Steam Memories* series no 94). Book Law Publications, 2017. 72pp. £9.99.

(£8.50 online at [www.booklaw.co.uk](http://www.booklaw.co.uk)) ISBN 978-1-909625-70-9.

A volume of black and white photographs largely from the 1950s of steam engines at Inverness, Aviemore, Helmsdale, Wick and Forres and at their sub-sheds of Dingwall, Kyle, Boat of Garten, Dornoch, Tain, and Thurso. The photographs are of high quality with many gems, but the quality of the proof reading of the captions is not so good.

The only photograph of Tain shed is from 1961 after the engines had left showing it acting as a store for two lines of covered vans. My memories from 1959 were of the same two engines nos 45098 and 54470 stabled there on consecutive nights. Might one or more of our members have a photograph showing at least one locomotive at Tain shed which we might print in a future issue of *FNE*?

**Richard Ardern**



## NETWORK RAIL DEVOLUTION QUESTION

The following exchange took place during the House of Commons *Rail Network: Investment* debate on March 30. **Alan Brown** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP) asked,

*"As we move towards the post-Brexit world, and as the Scottish Parliament is supposedly going to get new powers, will this Government do something that is already in their gift — devolve the power in Network Rail to Scotland, so that the Scottish Government can fully take control of investment and maintenance delivery and programming in Scotland?"*

**Paul Maynard**, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport replied,

*"I am always happy to answer this question each month in Transport Questions. We looked at that issue carefully in the Smith Commission; there was no consensus, and we are not taking the proposal forward."*

## SERVICE CHANGES

In the timetable from 21 May onwards there will be a new Southbound service from Tain to Muir of Ord departing at 00:48 on Saturday and Sunday mornings. It will call only at Invergordon at 01:05, Dingwall at 01:21 and will terminate at Muir of Ord at 01:31. The service is being provided by what was an empty stock positioning movement of the 23:33 Inverness-Tain.

Late diners on Friday and Saturday nights at **Platform 1864** at Tain station will appreciate this!

Another timetable change has been made: from 22 May the 10:38 Inverness-Wick will drop its Beaulieu and Conon Bridge calls, thus leaving at 10:41 in order to improve the reliability of the connection from Glasgow. The following train to Kyle will leave at 10:56 instead of 11:00, calling at Conon Bridge as well as Beaulieu.



A selection of photos by **Jamie Squibbs** showing some of the variety of Far North scenery.

All pictures were taken on 5 April 2015. *The Easter Chieftain*, run by Pathfinder Tours, featured DRS Class 37s nos 37218 and 37607.

*Above:* Heading to Wick from Thurso at Geise beside the River Thurso.

## FAR NORTH SCENERY



*Right:* Heading North from Dunrobin.



*Left:* In Strath Fleet, near Rogart.