

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 72

September 2017



**Lairg Oil Train
Returns - for now...**

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

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Cover photo:

The Lairg and Fort William oil trains have returned to rail under a short-term contract, operated by Colas. This has brought Class 56 locomotives north of Inverness. 56302 is seen at Meikle Ferry with the southbound train on 6 July 2017.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**

HEADCODE

The Review Team set up by Fergus Ewing last December met for the third time on 9 May. At that meeting ScotRail's representatives laid before us suggestions for a significant change to the delivery of a robust (and improved) timetable for the FNL. We liked it. Go away and put flesh on these bones, we said. This will take several months, they said. That's fine, we said, no hurry. The fourth meeting has not yet taken place at the time of writing.

If you had bet me a year ago whether I could have written a paragraph as optimistic and positive as that one you would not have had a taker.

CRITICAL FRIEND

Over the 23 years since FoFNL was formed it has promoted itself as a critical friend of the railway. Further south (where else could they be?) rail user groups and individual campaigners have castigated the railway (in Scotland and furth of Scotland) as being, in varying degrees, woeful. That doesn't work. The Glasgow Crossrail isn't being built. FoFNL has achieved significant wins: controlled-emission toilets on the 158s

where fitting such gadgetry was thought to be impossible; getting a fourth train each way into the timetable; re-opening stations at Beaully (in the face of considerable opposition from the safety folk who thought that passengers were too stupid to work out how to use a short platform) and Conon Bridge. I hope very much that the list will go on. The words "Lentran" and "Loop" figure constantly in my prayers. Of course FoFNL has not achieved any of this on its own. We have worked with stakeholders, not least HITRANS, and we have demonstrated to the industry in all its guises that we are On Their Side. That's what critical friends do. And what critical friends get in return is usually Results.

LETRAN

The January Headcode will be the last - no, really, I mean it - the last Headcode I shall write. In it I hope to be able to share with you ScotRail's plans for the revised - no, the improved - timetable (faster trains, free whisky*), and Network Rail's plans to get chaps with shovels to do good things in the Lentran area. Fingers crossed, all of you.

* either will be satisfactory

Mike Lunan

2017 AGM AND CONFERENCE REPORT

FoFNL held its AGM and Annual Conference in Inverness on 23 June. Those attending the Conference heard a video address from Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Connectivity. Speakers included Tony Glazebrook, Director of Aliona Ltd, who produced the report last year into what was needed on the FNL, thus giving FoFNL the professional clout to press the industry (and its funders) to address the issues with urgency. Bill Reeve, Head of Rail at Transport Scotland outlined Scottish Ministers' view that the FNL was, and remains, a vital part of the nation's strategic rail network. Alex Hynes, MD of the ScotRail Alliance and Alex Sharkey, Head of Operations of Network Rail's Scotland Route, told us what was planned for the Far North Line. We heard of the work carried out by the Review

Team set up by Fergus Ewing last December to bring together the industry and stakeholders, including FoFNL, to identify short- and medium-term actions to improve the service. This will bring a faster timetable in December this year, with more improvements in 2018 as work at level crossings allows line-speeds to be raised.

FoFNL looks forward to the HLOS in July, and to having more detail towards the end of the year when the Investment Plan is unveiled. To keep us excited until then we await the outcome of the consultation presently being undertaken about the commercial viability of a new Sleeper service between Thurso (for Orkney) and Edinburgh using the stock which will become redundant when the new trains are delivered. Never a dull moment!

MJL - June 2017

Fingers crossed

FoFNL's purpose is very clear - do everything we can to campaign for improvements on the Far North Line. As I write we are waiting for the detail of the Scottish Government's plans for investment in Scottish railways in Control Period 6 (2019-24). We have reason to be optimistic about the prospects for the FNL. Much money has been spent already on upgrading long sections of track, improving level crossings to enable the raising of speed limits and refurbishing the Class 158 trains. Transport Scotland and the ScotRail Alliance have stated clearly that they are committed to raising the standard of the Far North Line, and the Scottish Government's *Programme for Government*, announced on 5 September by Nicola Sturgeon, mentions the FNL specifically - *service improvements for the line between Inverness and Wick/Thurso* - so our fingers are crossed and our breath bated.

Privilege

However, it is the Editor's privilege to stand back from the FNL detail and cast an eye around. The *Programme for Government* also talks about making the A9 the first electric-enabled highway in Scotland. This is part of the plan for new petrol and diesel cars and vans to be phased out in Scotland by 2032 - the end of the period covered by the government's *Climate Change Plan*.

I expect this plan will also include major railway electrification in Scotland, as well as research into better battery train technology, to enable the phasing out of diesel trains too by 2032.

We know that the latest battery operated buses are able to manage 200 miles on one charge, so battery trains on the FNL may well be possible in the foreseeable future. Indeed, the *Programme for Government* does state its intention to introduce hybrid electric trains.

Diesel

At present, however, while the Scottish Government has given no indication so far of plans to electrify the Highland Main Line, the UK Government seems to prefer 'bi-mode' trains to cover the non-electrified lines rather than electrifying them. This means that while the A9 is electric-enabled for cars, the parallel HML will be inhabited for the time being by diesel HSTs (which are however going to be excellent trains to ride in) and the bi-mode *Highland Chieftain* running on diesel.

Bi-mode

For those reading this who are not sure what 'bi-mode' trains are, I would say that basically they are excellent, powerful electric trains which also contain diesel generators which they have to drag up and down the electrified routes ready for use 'beyond the wires' - with the heavy engines and fuel wasting electricity and hindering acceleration! *The Highland Chieftain* may well end up struggling in diesel-mode on the HML with its curves and gradients. Let's hope that this is a 'stop-gap' until the Scottish Government has the HML electrified and the UK Government completes main line electrification in England and Wales so that the redundant diesel engines in these trains can be removed.

Ian Budd

FoFNL is pleased to announce that **Jamie Stone MP** has agreed to be our new president. This continues the long tradition of this position being held by the Westminster MP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

We are fortunate to have cross-party representation among our figureheads - Jamie Stone is a Liberal Democrat and our two vice-presidents, **Rhoda Grant MSP** and **Gail Ross MSP**, are Labour and SNP respectively.

A GUIDE TO THE CP6 FUNDING PROCESS

The planning process for railway funding takes place only every 5 years, so it's worth setting out in simple terms what happens. Control Period 6 (CP6) runs from 1 April 2019 to 31 March 2024; at the end of September 2017 there are still 18 months of CP5 left. The spending plans for CP6 started the long process last year with the publication by Network Rail (NR) of its long list of things it would be useful to do over the next 25 years. This gets refined by the DfT (for England and Wales) and Transport Scotland (TS) (for Scotland). Each published its High-Level Output Specification (HLOS) in July, setting out what the various Ministers wished NR to do in CP6. There is a requirement for the publication of a Statement of Funds Available (SoFA) at the same time, but for some reason Secretary of State Grayling chose to defer the DfT's SoFA until "the autumn", undertaking to do so by 13 October.

The next stage is that the Office of Rail and Road (ORR) - the economic (and safety) Regulator - goes over the shopping lists and the amount in the two purses, and comes up with what it thinks is reasonable and affordable. This should happen by the middle of 2018 when a process of haggling begins. The final determination takes place in October 2018, allowing detailed planning for work to start in April 2019.

That's how it should work. The CP5 process

in 2012/3 got it hopelessly wrong, however, with ORR demanding what, with hindsight, we now see to be too great a degree of cost-saving. As work proceeded what actually happened in many major pieces of infrastructure enhancement was that unforeseen problems caused costs to increase, in some cases by huge amounts. ORR has a degree of responsibility for this. As "Industry Insider" said in *RAIL* 832, "... those of us who have been at the sharp end know that a 24x7 operation conducted outdoors in all weathers looks a bit different when compared with the comfort of an air-conditioned office and a spreadsheet". ORR will wish to avoid this criticism in the CP6 process.

Luckily the Scottish network was spared the worst of this, but CP5 is not without problems here. Most projects are now expected to be delivered late. This causes much finger-pointing in Parliament and the Press, but it's worth remembering that a project completed late is a project completed; a project cancelled, or de-scoped (like Borders Rail) is a project left incomplete.

TS made it clear in the Scottish HLOS that there would be more detail in November. FoFNL is keeping its fingers crossed that the powerful case we have made for infrastructure spending on the Lentrans Loop is going to be heeded for CP6. We sense an open door.

MJL

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 **£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!

Comparing the English (& Welsh, but let's leave them out of it, not least because the DfT generally does) HLOS with the Scottish one produced by TS is like comparing a Mouton Rothschild with Tesco's plonk. Well, that's a bit extreme perhaps, and an insult to Tesco. I have read four different trade magazines on the subject and not one has a good word to say for the DfT's waffle. Governments continue to treat us - the ones who vote for them, and pay their salaries - as idiots, and the DfT reinforced this by releasing the English HLOS the day Parliament rose, making any form of examination impossible. Not content with this the DfT managed to restrict itself to just 6 pages, much of it vapid in the extreme. Our lot, in contrast, produced 15 pages, many of them quite detailed. It was gratifying that the reason why TS could not produce a SoFA at the same time was laid firmly at DfT's door ("the first formal proposals about how these new funding arrangements [for NR] will work in Scotland were not received from the UK Government until the evening before the publication deadline of 20 July 2017"). Doubtless once DfT works out what it wants to do (Secretary of State Grayling has said this will be "by 13 October 2017") we shall learn what crumbs the DfT will allow us peasants to have.

UNSATISFACTORY

Cross? You bet I am. TS has complete control (under Scottish Ministers) of the funding arrangements for, and quality control of, ScotRail. That is as it should be. TS has control of the funding arrangements for NR in Scotland. ScotRail and NR in Scotland are collectively under the ultimate management of Alex Hynes, no fool. The elephant in the room - one whose existence is well known to, and deeply unsatisfactory to, Humza Yousaf, the responsible Scottish Minister - is that NR is accountable only to the DfT. I won't argue

the politics of this here - my views are no secret - but it would be hard to find any of the people who moan in the newspapers who would be able to justify this situation. We pay, either by buying tickets or by paying taxes, but we don't get to tell the dominating supplier what to do.

EXPERTS

The DfT's problem is easy to understand. Far too many jolly wheezes were put into CP5 with little or no understanding of the costs, or technical challenges. I didn't know this, nor did you, but the so-called experts who write HLOSes are...well, experts, and should have known better. And if they didn't know, they should have had the wit to ask someone who did. After all, the West Coast catastrophe of 15-odd years ago must have provided lessons about employing untested technology in major projects. Where were the wise heads who should have said "hang on a minute"? GWR electrification is but one frighteningly visible example. I had an interesting conversation with Bill Reeve (Head of Rail at TS) last December when I suggested that there were three reasons why the GWR plan had gone awry. "Oh," he said, "only three?" Well, words to that effect.

EGIP

Our lot have had problems too, not least the delay to the Edinburgh - Glasgow electrification. But note the tenth word in the preceding sentence. EGIP will get done. EGIP will do what it said on the tin. OK, it's late, but in two, or twenty, years time that lateness will be of no importance. Stuff not done is never done.

TS is not perfect; ScotRail is not perfect; NR (Scotland) is not perfect. Even the Committee of FoFNL is not perfect. But up here we don't know how well off we are.

MJL

LETTER TO THE HERALD

Although FoFNL does not directly campaign on matters concerning other lines, the route onwards to Edinburgh from Inverness is so important to FNL passengers that FoFNL does support Transform Scotland's Inter-City Express project which is trying to persuade the Scottish Government to rebuild the direct link from Edinburgh to Perth, which inexplicably closed in 1970. Richard Ardern recently took up the issue in *The Herald*...

John Macnab (Letters, August 29) seems happy with the journey times of trains through his Falkirk home town but I suggest it would be a different story if he lived in Perth. Journey times from there to Glasgow are competitive with the bus or car but not so to Edinburgh, which was the subject of your original report.

The direct line from Perth to Edinburgh through Kinross-shire was closed in 1970, reputedly to make it easier to build the M90 through the difficult terrain around Glenfarg. Road traffic now powers down this road while the train takes a much longer meander in the wrong direction on a single-track line to Newburgh before it can turn south.

The 13:34 train from Edinburgh to Perth is actually a through service to Inverness and Highland passengers have to share its tortuous progress too. The Scottish Government has some infrastructure investment decisions to make in the next few weeks and will, I hope, realise the strategic and environmental importance to Scotland of, at long last, seriously upgrading this whole route up the spine of Scotland to Perth and the Highlands.

Transform Scotland made a serious proposal to Transport Scotland and the Scottish Government in March 2014 that a direct rail route through Kinross-shire should be reinstated. This should reduce the journey time between Edinburgh and Perth (and thus all stations to Inverness) by 30 minutes and has received wide ranging support.

In view of all the press stories in the past few weeks about the harm that pollutants are causing to humans, we need to embrace an environmentally sustainable transport structure to improve our economy and society's health.

GREEN THOUGHTS FROM RAILFUTURE

Trains (in place of planes) cut emissions

A shift from air to rail for passengers travelling between Scotland and London has led to a major reduction in carbon emissions, BBC Scotland has reported. Transform Scotland said rail journeys between central Scotland and London rose from a 20% market share to 33% between 2005 and 2015. It said the move to rail had saved more than 680,000 tonnes of emissions. This would be equivalent to removing all traffic on the M8 between Glasgow and Edinburgh for two years, it said. The figures were included in Transform Scotland's *A Green Journey to Growth* report, which said that additional emissions would be saved should rail use continue towards a 50% share of the travel market between Edinburgh and London by 2023.

The sustainable transport alliance's director, Colin Howden, said: "The Scottish transport sector has failed to take significant action to tackle climate change, and has recently become the single largest source of carbon emissions. "However, one area where there has been significant progress is in Anglo-Scottish travel, where rail's share of the travel market has grown strongly over the past decade. "For Scotland to meet its challenging climate targets, it is imperative that further action be taken to ensure that rail can grow to at least a 50% market share of the Scotland-London travel market over the next decade." He said this would include increased investment in the rail network, public bodies using the train rather than flying their staff to London, and a fairer taxation system for Anglo-Scottish travel.

HML & INVERNESS STATION UPDATES

Pregnant Pause: Highland Main Line Update

We wait on tenterhooks to hear, in the next few weeks, how the Scottish Government will fund the outstanding work to make the Highland Main Line competitive with the dualled A9 road between Perth and Inverness.

This main rail artery to Inverness and the Highlands is promised improved freight capacity and at least an hourly service of passenger trains alternating to (and from) Edinburgh and Glasgow with an average journey time of 3 hours, and headline expresses taking 2 hours 45 minutes, all by 2025. However, the aspiration to have the line electrified by 2030 seems to be extending into injury time.

The speed up requires extensive track and signalling improvements to provide faster speed and significant doubling of track to provide capacity for more trains and prevent out of course delays for trains waiting to occupy single track sections. The regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, published another Network Rail Scotland Monitor in July again repeating "Development remains slow which is a concern" and promising to carry out an efficiency review of current developments.

This relates to the proposed introduction of short high speed trains and improved crossing loop facilities at Aviemore and Pitlochry. The performance of these two-power-car plus four passenger-coach HSTs, with a different power to weight ratio, has not yet been tested on the line to see what they can achieve. The hope is that they, and limiting stops south of Perth to Stirling or Haymarket with Kirkcaldy, can (with better timetabling) bring about a 10 minute overall saving. I have not seen any more than four passengers at a time using Edinburgh Gateway station. The Aberdeen expresses do not stop there.

Virgin East Coast's new Azuma train has made its first trial journey across the Border as far as Dunbar. They will operate the Highland Chieftain service from Inverness to London Kings Cross and much is being made of the time savings they should achieve in electric mode south of Edinburgh. It would be good to see one tested to Inverness quite soon to demonstrate the

capabilities of its diesel engine north of Edinburgh. Calculations suggest it will be some 10 minutes slower than the existing HSTs over the gradients between Perth and Inverness.

New trains are also being built for the Caledonian Sleeper so it will be all change on HML passenger rolling stock in the next two years. Just as important as the traction will be the passenger comfort and catering for the passengers inside the trains. CS seems to be going for a high standard here. Hopefully ScotRail and VTEC will also impress.

At the lineside, Tomatin Viaduct is being overhauled and is looking very smart in its new paint. The southbound platform at Kingussie has been rebuilt up to standard height with a smooth tarred surface. Dunkeld also needs a higher platform but the listed station building is a complication as are the plans to dual the A9 alongside.

Pregnant Pause 2: Inverness Station

The plans to spend several million pounds upgrading Inverness Station have not yet been made public. There is an aspiration to make the station work better for pedestrians which is highly commendable. There is talk too of some improvements for cyclists. There is a need to make the interface with local and long distance buses much easier, and part of this is improving the signage and information about connecting services. It is a great pity that the opportunity to locate the Tourist Information Office there has been missed. It has relocated to the High Street. Opportunities to relocate the bus station to an adjacent location were missed many years ago.

This compartmentalisation (rather than integration) of development also led to the hemming-in of the station by the Eastgate Centre retail development. Insufficient room has been left for rail replacement buses to turn, or for taxis and private cars to pick up and set down passengers. Inverness Railway Station is a major transport interchange hub with passengers travelling many miles to catch the train. Inverness is a major tourist hub as is demonstrated by the number of field centre minibuses which meet their clientele there. Suggestions to move the taxi rank would give

even more of a challenge.

It will be interesting to see if the main driver of the redevelopment is to increase commercial gain from rents rather than make the station more pleasant for passengers to use. Developments with the bookstall at Inverness and elsewhere such as Edinburgh Waverley seem strange. They have become coffee shops and the magazines are now tightly packed, squeezed into shelves extending vertically up behind the shelf in front. Not easy to use at all. What will be the effect of this on the viability of the on-train catering if

passengers are increasingly being encouraged to buy food and drink before getting on the train?

Passengers are right to be wary of how the railway is changing. Sadly, we no longer have the strong voice of the former Rail Passengers Committee for Scotland with a board member in every part of Scotland to keep an eye on things on our behalf. The gestation period for the station plan should surely soon be over. Watch this space and make your views known. The reincarnation of Haymarket station has set the standard. We would like to see the new Inverness equally as good please.

INVERNESS - ABERDEEN UPDATE

Rising excitement: Inverness - Aberdeen update September 2017

The Forres and Elgin improvements to the Aberdeen to Inverness railway (A2I) are due to see service from 17 October after a 10 day blockade to connect up all the new points and test them and the new signalling. This will be a major milestone for a route which has seen relatively little investment over recent decades.

The straightened out track and new station at Forres will be signalled to allow simultaneous arrivals and departures of trains requiring to pass there. No longer will one train have to wait outside until the other is safely in the loop which wasn't in the station anyway so passengers could not embark or disembark and just had to wait. This should normally save at least three minutes in journey time.

The new station will have two platforms connected by a footbridge and lifts. The other major work has been the construction of a road overbridge to replace the current level crossing. The existing booking hall at Forres has a treasury of photographs and a model of the station in former years. Sadly, although the new station will be staffed, no room has been found for the displays. I hope they will be found museum space elsewhere in Forres.

At Elgin the hoped-for road overbridge was not funded and the Wards level crossing will remain. The loop will be extended across it and train stabling will take place overnight in the former goods yard. The signalling will all be controlled

from a new panel in Inverness. Buses will run between Inverness and Keith from 7 to 16 October inclusive while all the new works are connected up.

Travelling on the line continues to delight, with a fox seen from the train near Gollanfield followed shortly afterwards by a roe deer in the barley. Organic growth is in evidence too with the new "green" tunnel at Raigmore magically shaped to the "envelope" of the trains. See photo on page 16. Work is about to start in earnest on doubling the track between the other tunnel on the line at Woolmanhill (Aberdeen) and Inverurie for completion by 2019. Hopefully the funding announcement due soon from the Scottish Government will commit to worthwhile lengths of double track in the sections between Inverness and Nairn and between Elgin and Keith Loop. These are the longest stretches of single track and dictate the number of trains which can be run and also accentuate delays to all services when trains are running late.

The line is important too as a diversionary route from the Highland Main Line for trains such as the Caledonian Sleeper and the Stobart Tesco train. The potential for timber and whisky-related traffic also needs to be factored in to the significant capacity improvements required. The "Branchliner" project being worked up by HITRANS and the timber industry is poised to bring timber from Kinbrace on the Far North Line to the expanding Norbord factory between Inverness and Dalcross. We "wood" like to see that quite soon!

Updates by Richard Ardern

RAIL FREIGHT'S ROLE IN TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE

Rail freight: A strategic approach

When the Scottish Parliament unanimously backed the Climate Change Act in 2009, much was made of this being the most ambitious climate change legislation anywhere in the world. In the intervening years, good progress on emissions has been made in a number of sectors – but the glaring exception has been transport. As noted by Transform Scotland, "there remains no systematic programme of action to make cuts in transport emissions on the necessary scale, with emission levels remaining as high as they were 25 years ago".

The Scottish Government's Climate Change Plan makes many mentions of transport, but surprisingly little of the enormous potential role of rail freight – just two references in 178 pages. Yet by the Government's own admission, "per tonne of freight, rail freight produces 76% less CO₂ than road freight". And gearing up to shift more freight from road to rail has plenty of synergies with action to encourage more passenger traffic by train.

A key example is electrification. While the Climate Change Plan commits to moving from 26% of the network being electric today to 35% by 2032, there are no detailed funding plans for electrification works beyond the current Edinburgh-Glasgow investment. In contrast, the Scottish Government has in place expensive funding commitments which will significantly increase carbon emissions – notably its £9 billion road-building programme and the proposal for an annual £300m Air Passenger Duty tax cut for the most polluting form of

transport. It is surely incumbent on the Government to provide suitable mitigation to at least balance this likely increase in emissions – and shifting freight from road to rail is a clear, early-achievable intervention which will do just that.

Longer, greener trains

As the Scottish Government's 2016 Rail Freight Strategy document acknowledged, rail is most competitive with road where it operates "longer, faster, greener freight trains". On Anglo-Scottish routes, this means investment to provide overtaking loops which can accommodate 775m length trains – the maximum which can pass through the Channel Tunnel, and the equivalent of more than 40 lorry loads in a single movement.

But rail freight cannot prosper simply by concentrating on the East Coast and West Coast Main Lines. Feeder routes within Scotland are crucial to existing and potential traffics, ensuring that the train can get as close as possible to the origin and destination of the traffic it carries.

RFG and Transform have long highlighted the contrast between the upgrading of road and rail between Perth and Inverness. But another good example concerns Britain's only aluminium smelter, at Fort William – this has its own rail sidings, receiving the alumina raw material by train. The finished product formerly moved by rail, but infrastructure constraints along the single-track West Highland Line – weight restrictions on bridges, and short crossing loops – led to the traffic being lost to road some years ago.

This article is one of the monthly briefings which Transform Scotland produces for its Members and Supporters. It was written by David Spaven, Scottish Representative of the Rail Freight Group and FoFNL committee member. David discusses the role that rail freight can play in delivering a low carbon alternative to road freight for businesses across Scotland, and the challenges ahead for shifting freight from road to rail.

The need for a 'cross-modal' approach

Now that the Fort William smelter has been taken over by the Liberty group, the anticipated growth and diversification of production provides an opportunity to re-examine rail potential, with industry and government working in partnership to reduce transport costs and keep heavy traffic off the unsuitable A82.

There are multiple other examples across the country where rail could be helping the Scottish Government to reach its climate change targets. Concerns have rightly been voiced about the dangers posed by whisky lorries on the A95 road linking Speyside with the A9 – but why are all the suggested solutions based on road investment?

Mothballed railheads at Elgin and Keith are ideally placed to act as hubs for rail movement of bulk spirit to maturation plants in Central Scotland, with trains carrying other food and drink produce from the North East to export markets. This has already been the subject of a successful trial. The Scottish Government, whisky firms and the rail industry need to work together to secure the commitment and investment which will enable trains to ease

pressure on the A95 and A9, and the communities along these roads – and in so doing also help act on climate change.

A new dawn?

This need for a 'cross-modal' approach to transport investment applies across Scotland – and only the Scottish Government can pull the appropriate strategic levers. Some very welcome encouragement came in the recent 'Scottish Ministers' High Level Output Specification for Control Period 6' which requires Network Rail to "clearly demonstrate throughout CP6 [2019-2024] that it is using all levers at its disposal to make the use of rail freight attractive to business across Scotland, including simplicity of processes and a flexible approach to accommodating new rail freight traffic". The HLOS also sets growth targets for rail freight, "both maximising the use of existing flows and the development of new business/terminal facilities".

It is in all our interests that this strong statement of policy should – through appropriate investment, innovation, facilitation and promotion over the next decade – herald a new dawn for rail freight in Scotland.



Far North Line available for more than just this and Lairg oil. Nuclear waste at Brora, 24 May 2017. Photo: Andrew Bridges

INVERNESS:

‘SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTH’

Reminiscing about the Highland Railway in 1957, historian C Hamilton Ellis observed that, by the time the weary traveller reached Caithness, ‘Inverness seemed...remote, somewhere in the South’. For Inverness to Wick was a 161½-mile trek, almost double the distance as the eagle flies.

The firths of Beauly, Cromarty and Dornoch, and the rocky Ord of Caithness, forced the promoters of the line to make long detours

The Railway Magazine’s series ‘Practice & Performance’ has been running since 1901.

We have been given permission to serialise this article by FoFNL member Keith Farr, which recalls several historic runs over the FNL.

Part 1 (of three) discusses a 1954 run logged by E R Davies.

inland. And, until the purge of June 1960, when many of the smaller stations were closed to passengers, the six-hour journey prompted the soubriquet ‘line of the 39 stops’.

Yet the locomotive work was far from lethargic, for this was not some straggling Great Western byway with pedestrian schedules and bucolic station work: it was a main line, essential in peace and invaluable in war (see *The Railway Magazine*, December 2014).

From 1935 to 1961, Stanier ‘Black Fives’,

vigorously driven singly or in pairs, handled trains of substantial length, although they tended to shed vehicles as the journey progressed.

This is a journey recorded by E R Davies in 1954 behind a single Black Five hauling 415 tons gross out of Inverness. On time, No. 44799 eased its heterogeneous caravan away from the west-facing ‘prong’ of the terminus and traversed the ill-fated Ness viaduct before slowing almost to walking pace over the Caledonian Canal swingbridge at Clachnaharry. The next six miles to Clunes comprised the only double track section beyond Inverness and, after tackling the short 1-in-100 to Bunchrew at 32mph, the big train was rolling at 50 before the first stop, at Beauly, where adverse signals contributed to a three-minute late arrival. Despite hard running, a few seconds were then lost on the station-to-station sprints on to Dingwall, where the Kyle of Lochalsh line diverges to the West.

Despite the low-lying terrain alongside the Beauly, Cromarty and Dornoch firths, the line undulates to Bonar Bridge, where the Dornoch Firth narrows into the Kyle of Sutherland. Bonar



Black Fives 44783 and 44784 at Wick Shed in 1959. [HRS Collection]

Bridge (now Ardgay) marks the transition from the former Inverness and Aberdeen Junction Railway to Sutherland Railway territory. This company planned to reach Brora but ran out of money at Golspie, where the third Duke of Sutherland came to the rescue by promoting his own railway along the coast to Gartymore, just short of Helmsdale. The final link, via an inland deviation across the moors of the Flow Country to Wick and Thurso, was completed by the Sutherland & Caithness company in 1874, the whole becoming part of the Highland Railway.

Reverting to Mr Davies's journey, it was probably curvature that prevented No. 44799

Eric Davies would have relished the music of the 'Caley Bogie' and the Black Five as they fought the winding 1-in-72 that lifts the train high above the River Shin to open moorland and easier grades; here speed rose to 44mph, helping to cut the Invershin-Lairg booking by almost two minutes.

Beyond Lairg, the two locos, so different in vintage and character, romped over the 488ft summit before bearing east-south-east down Strath Fleet at up to 56mph. Following brief calls at Rogart and The Mound, junction for the Dornoch branch, the train was again following the coast, snatching seconds from the schedule. After Golspie and the short but



Pickersgill 4-4-0 54495
at Helmsdale in 1952.
Photo: J L Stevenson

from exceeding 54mph alongside the Dornoch Firth from Tain to Bonar Bridge, from where the Class 5 was assisted by Pickersgill 4-4-0 No. 54495. The pair lost nearly a minute on the tight 5½min booking for the 3.1 miles on to Culrain, where trains cross the viaduct over the river Oykel and enter Sutherland at Invershin. The half-mile from Culrain to Invershin was apparently the shortest distance in the UK that one could travel in a restaurant car, although anyone finishing a meal in the available two-minutes would surely be in the *Guinness Book of Records*!

The line changes as it embarks on the first of its two major incursions away from the Coast, and

awkward climb at 1-in-60 to skirt Dunrobin Castle, the 'double-header' descended to Brora, with its coal mine, and continued alongside deserted beaches, with cormorants on wave-lashed rock outcrops hanging out their wings to dry. A sharp turn left brought them into Helmsdale all but two minutes early.

Here, passengers lost their restaurant car and the Black Five its pilot, leaving the 4-6-0 with 365 tons in tow to tackle the many miles of broken 1-in-60 to the Sutherland/ Caithness County March summit. The maximum permitted tare load for a Class 5 north of Invershin was 300 tons, which was presumably why the 4-4-0 assisted from Bonar Bridge, two

stops earlier. From Helmsdale, No. 44799 had 54 tons above that limit but headed gamely up Strath Ullie to Kildonan, where gold was once panned for, and where they were held seven minutes to cross the 9.45 from Wick. The ensuing 1-in-60 was tackled at 22mph and, after a brief 48 in the dip at Borrobol, another mile of the same grade before Kinbrace was mounted at an energetic 33mph.

Entering the 'Flow Country', a name derived from the Old Norse floi ('marshy place'), the Class 5 fell only to 32mph on the 1-in-60 towards Forsinard, an oasis partly sheltered by a few wind-beaten trees. 'Forsinard', incidentally, comes from 'foss' (Norse for 'waterfall'), and 'ard', Gaelic for 'high place'.

Swinging east across the moorland, the 4-6-0

mounted the 708ft County March summit at 32mph, on 1-in-60 easing to 1-in-140/80. Then, on the long descent, the featureless moorland metamorphosed into the fertile Caithness Plain, below Scotscladder farmsteads appeared and they passed the clutch of houses comprising Halkirk to arrive at Georgemas Junction just 1¼min late.

Nowadays there is a quick reversal here before the 158 unit heads for Thurso but, in 1954, the train would have been divided with much drawing up and shunting. Ex-Caledonian 4-4-0 No. 54491 added a variety of wagons to the two through coaches and van and it was as a mixed train that this vestige of the 6.40 from Inverness ambled alongside the River Thurso to Britain's most northerly station.

ALLIANCE NEWS

WiFi

Dingwall has been added to the list of Scottish stations providing free WiFi. In a press release on 30 June Communications Director Rob Shorthouse, said:

"We're building the best railway that Scotland has ever had. This means more seats, more service and faster journeys. It also means giving our customers the best experience possible. WiFi is very much a part of that.

"We've had WiFi on trains for some time now, helping people stay in touch and do work on the move. But we know that journeys start well before you board the train, which is why we're rolling out these hotspots to key stations."

Level Crossing Safety - Phones

In a press release on 14 July the ScotRail Alliance announced it is rolling out a new system at high-risk level crossings that uses mobile phone signals to warn people to stay aware.

Geo-fencing technology is being introduced at eight Scottish crossings, including Dingwall, to help tackle the issue of distraction at level crossings.

The system will be used to send alerts to mobile



phones, near the targeted level crossing, warning the user to put their phone away before crossing the line.

The new technology is being rolled out as figures from Network Rail show that young people are more likely to have a near miss at a level crossing during the summer and are more likely to be distracted when crossing.

Data reveals that 70% of near misses are due to distraction. 29% of young adults admit to using their mobile phone while crossing the railway.

Level Crossing Safety - Cyclists

Network Rail has produced a leaflet for cyclists using level crossings. It lays out the obvious, and not so obvious, dangers that exist, is well-produced and very clear about what can happen. We have placed a copy on our website - it's well worth a

look. (www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/nr/nrlxcycling.pdf)



LEVEL CROSSING NEWS

Two significant level crossings commissionings have happened in the Far North over the summer, with the first being the conversion of Chapleton Farm, near Muir of Ord, to EBI Gate 200 which led to the removal of a temporary speed restriction which had been in place for more than six years. EBI Gate is a relatively cheap £250k overlay system specifically designed for this type of line which provides the user robust information on the proximity of approaching trains through a simple red and green light system. The linespeed has been restored to 75mph.



The second was over the first weekend in September when the Delyn Level Crossing was converted from its current guise as an 'automatic open crossing' to an 'automatic half barrier, locally monitored' this has seen the removal of the 35mph speed limit back to the original 55mph. It's important to be aware that this type of crossing does limit further line speed improvements at this location

but replacement with a bridge is still being explored with the estate. Delyn was one of the two remaining automatic open crossings in Scotland, the last, on the Kyle Line in Dingwall, is to be upgraded at Easter 2018.

There are also speed improvements pending at level crossings in Lairg and Brora and at Balnacra and Rovie, these should be completed in the coming weeks; a report will follow in the January issue.

CALEDONIAN SLEEPER NEWS



The first carriages for the new Caledonian Sleeper trains have arrived at the Velim test centre in the Czech Republic. One of them is seen here en route from Spain.

You can get the latest information about the new trains from the Caledonian Sleeper website: www.sleeper.scot/

THINGS CAN ONLY GET BETTER (WHO SAID THAT?)

The Scottish HLOS contains a very interesting, and potentially life-enhancing, section on the loading gauge. Not, you might imagine, an issue to stimulate energetic debate across the corn-flakes when it hits the morning papers, but bear with me. TS observes that NR's lack of detailed knowledge about the loading gauge (i.e. what trains can go where) has added "significant risk, delay and cost to the introduction of new rolling stock, cascades of existing rolling stock, the development of new rail freight business, and the operation of charter and tourist trains". Not content with the sharp whack of ruler against knuckles in making such a public utterance, it then hands out lines to the errant misbehavior.

By the end of CP6 (March 2024) all Scottish routes must be maintained to accommodate the gauge of "all locomotives and passenger rolling stock, including cross-border services and charter operators' vehicles, which have run in Scotland in CP4 and CP5 or are planned for CP6". To achieve this NR must have a strategy in place by the end of CP5 (March 2019) to implement the "Scottish Gauge Requirement". We're going to be talking a great deal about this, so let's all become familiar with the SGR.

Now pause in your consumption of corn-flakes to read that paragraph again. During CP4 and CP5 60163, Tornado and 60009, Union of South Africa have run

on Scottish metals. Every day an HST runs on Scottish metals: indeed they will form the Inter-City fleet in 2019. I don't have details before me. but there's been an ex-LMS 8F in Thurso. The SGR obliges NR to raise the gauge, which must surely include bridge-weight, of all Scottish routes by March 2024.

All very nice, and lots of employment will be created by the realization that what's out there isn't anything like up to the standard which will be required in 78 months. This is no criticism of NR's maintenance, but it is an indictment of the way in which the Scottish network has often been at the tail of the donkey when major infrastructure (or even fairly minor infrastructure, come to that) enhancements have been planned.

What relevance has this to us, the hairs at the end of the donkey's tail? Repeated pleas for better rolling stock on the FNL than 158s have been rebutted by our being told that other DMUs can't run up here. No 170s (not altogether bad news: they're not brilliant either). But let's consider the 4 hours we spend trundling along. What about a Voyager or a Meridian? Or, to ease SR's maintenance logistics, 2+3 HSTs? Think of the freight possibilities in those power cars!

A.N. Optimist

More 'amusing juxtaposition' than relevance to this piece!

This is the view along the Inverness-Aberdeen line at Raigmore level crossing, taken by Richard Ardern, who assures me that "it was taken from the middle of the crossing in a gap between traffic both road and rail!"



RAIL & SAIL TO ORKNEY

The Far North Line is, among other things, the rail route from Scotland to Orkney, a fact that resonates back 100 years to the Jellicoe Expresses mentioned elsewhere in this issue. The FoFNL committee has been concerned for some time about the lack of promotion of through tickets to Orkney from ScotRail stations.

We contacted ScotRail Client & Communication Manager Rob Shorthouse asking him to clarify the current arrangements for, and availability of, through tickets from ScotRail stations to Orkney. We also mentioned that asking about the tickets in Glasgow Queen Street and Inverness stations had drawn a blank and told him that details of the offer appears differently on the National Rail website from those on the ScotRail site.

We received an almost immediate reply from Rob saying that our enquiry had prompted a look at staff awareness and available information and a briefing note will be sent to staff about the tickets.

He included a note summarizing the offer:

“ScotRail offers a range of Rail & Sail tickets to Orkney, allowing you to buy rail and ferry travel all in one transaction, and avoiding the hassle of time consuming airport transfers. We offer Rail & Sail tickets as follows:

- **Stromness via Scrabster. Rail & Sail ticket includes rail travel from any station to Thurso, taxi transfer to Scrabster and ferry travel from Scrabster to Stromness**
- **Kirkwall via Scrabster. Rail & Sail ticket includes rail travel from any station to Thurso, taxi transfer to Scrabster, ferry travel from Scrabster to Stromness, and bus travel from Stromness to Kirkwall**

You can get more information on these and other Rail & Sail tickets at www.scotrail.co.uk/blog/discover-islands-rail-sail”

BOOK REVIEW

The Insider Rail Guide - Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh
David Spaven and David Fasken. Kessock Books £7.99
ISBN 978-0-9930296-8-4

When I picked up this Insider Rail Guide my first reaction was *'Simply an ideal book to have on a train journey - any train journey, but especially the one to Kyle'*. For a start, it's small with very similar dimensions to my trusty Kindle. The first flick through revealed a fascinating mix of black and white photos, sketches and maps.

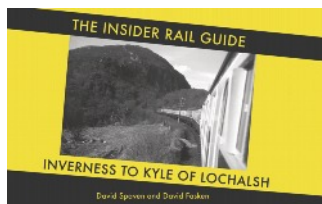
Straight away I wanted to stop and look at each one properly. Many of the photos and drawings are unconventional views, they concentrate on interesting angles and details which you could look out for as you travel.

The first half covers the history of the line from birth to the present, full of fascinating details and old photos as well as personal reminiscences, followed by chapters on "Preparing for your journey" and "Making the most of your journey", lots of practical advice and information.

The remainder of the book is entitled "The view from your window". This is the equivalent of sitting with the authors at your table on the train enthralled as they tell you stories about what you're seeing and pointing things out as you travel.

I have to confess at this point that I have never travelled the Kyle line but this book has given me the strong feeling that I must do so as soon as possible, taking the book with me!

Ian Budd



WHAT IS A TOURIST TRAIN?

Among the attractive features of the Abellio offer for the ScotRail franchise – prompted by the Scottish Government in the tender process – was promotion of ‘Great Scenic Rail Journeys’ over six Scottish rail routes, including the Far North Line. There is now a commitment to marketing Scotland’s scenery, its heritage and its tourist attractions, to a wider rail audience. And dedicated on-train tourism ‘ambassadors’, trained by VisitScotland, will provide information on attractions, history and journey connections.

But what about the rolling stock? In Switzerland, Canada and the USA, purpose-built observation cars allow the rail traveller to fully appreciate the stunning lineside scenery, but

David Spaven reflects on a train operator making the best use of wonderful scenery as he found on a trip to Germany earlier this year.

the Scottish offer goes no further than modest refurbishment of the elderly Class 158s. In contrast, I found, on a trip to Germany in June, that diesel units have been built in relatively recent times, for local or regional operators, with two distinctive features: first, the

ability to look over the driver or guard’s shoulder to see the view directly ahead or behind the train, and second, sufficient power to haul other coaches, such as those conveying bikes en masse.

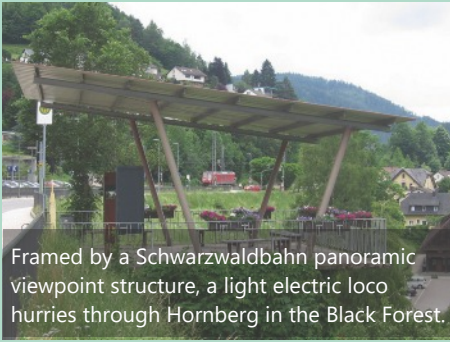
On the Black Forest Railway, Deutsche Bahn and local tourist authorities have got together to provide panoramic viewpoints and attractive information boards at stations and along the lineside. And if you’re a visitor, then a modest ‘tourist tax’ payment gives you free use of all local public transport by bus and train!

As I concluded in *Highland Survivor*: ‘realising the tourism potential will surely require new trains – not just on the line to Caithness, but for all the scenic Highland routes – with observation facilities to attract many more visitors to this very special railway.’ Will Scotland ever have the strategic vision to deliver that kind of transformational change?

PROMOTION



Seen at Hausach (the junction for Freudenstadt) on 3rd June, the Class 146.2 loco of a southbound Schwarzwaldbahn train from Karlsruhe to Konstanz sports a livery promoting the purpose-built panoramic viewpoints further south alongside this spectacular mountain railway. Completed in 1873, the line involves a height difference of no fewer than 670 metres between its lowest and highest points. Class 146.2s operate electric RE and IRE (Interregio-Express) trains across Baden-Wuerttemberg. [With thanks to Bill Jamieson for loco intelligence]



Framed by a Schwarzwaldbahn panoramic viewpoint structure, a light electric loco hurries through Hornberg in the Black Forest.

The panoramic viewpoint beside Hornberg station features detailed information boards on the history and geography of the Schwarzwald-bahn and its surroundings. Shouldn't Scotland be emulating this imaginative approach to promoting scenic railways?



[Right] A substantial information board outside Triberg station illustrates the dramatic sweep of the Schwarzwaldbahn (the black and white line) and the accompanying Erlebnispfad (discovery path) in red. This considerable feat of engineering, which proved to be a model for rail construction in other mountainous parts of the world, involved a distance of 11 km as the crow flies from Hornberg to St Georgen being extended to 26 km of track length – but with the outcome that no gradient is steeper than 1 in 50.



For a closer look go to www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/SchwartzwaldbahnMap.pdf

APPROPRIATE ROLLING STOCK



[Left] A Naturpark-Express service from Tuttlingen to Sigmaringen, operated by the regional Hohenzollerische Landesbahn company, pulls into Beuron station on 10th June. These summer Saturday and Sunday services are supported by local and regional authorities, and convey large numbers of bikes free of charge along this line which parallels the popular Danube cycle path.



[Left] A Hohenzollerische Landesbahn Naturpark-Express service from Sigmaringen to Tuttlingen departs Beuron station on 10th June. A van conveying bikes is marshalled between the two single-unit railcars – each capable of hauling a 400t trailing load – which are modified versions of the NE81 units built from 1981 for 'private' (regional) operators. Why can't we have such innovative designs for rural routes in Britain? [With thanks to Bill Jamieson for loco intelligence] You can also see out of the front of the train, over the driver's shoulder,



[Right] A Naturpark-Express service from Tuttlingen to Sigmaringen on 10th June pulls away from lonely Thiergarten station, which is served only by these summer Saturday and Sunday services. The photographer was amused to find that the exit gate from the station was locked, and he had to climb a fence to leave railway property!



The bike van on a westbound Hohenzollerische Landesbahn Naturpark-Express service, seen at Sigmaringen on 11th June.

IN THE WORKS

Earlier this year *FNE* and our sister publication *West Highland News Plus*, the magazine of the Friends of the West Highland Line, received a very kind offer from Frazer Henderson, Head of Rail Policy, Transport Scotland, of a guided tour of the refurbishment work on the class 158 and 156 trains currently being undertaken at Knorr-Bremse RailServices (KBRS) Springburn Works in Glasgow.

OPPORTUNITY

This was an opportunity not to be missed, to see just what is involved in refurbishing these trains.

John McCormick (FoWHL and SAPT), Tom Hart (SAPT), Paul Tetlaw (Transform Scotland) and I assembled at the works on the morning of 16 August. We were welcomed by Austin Wallace, General Manager, KBRS (UK) Ltd, the owners of the former Caledonian Railway works, who hosted the visit.

Also in attendance were:

Archie Ferguson, Area Production Manager, John McQueen, Production Manager, and Markus Finn, Engineering Manager, all from KBRS;

Mark Isbern, Commercial Manager from Porterbrook Leasing Co. Ltd., the owners of the trains;

Allan Anderson, ScotRail Franchise Contract Manager and George Davidson, Rolling Stock Programmes Sponsor from the Rail Franchise Management Team of Transport Scotland, the national transport agency of the Scottish Government.

PRESENTATION

The visit began with a presentation about Springburn Works from Austin Wallace. As well as refurbishment projects, heavy maintenance is done here too on both diesel and electric

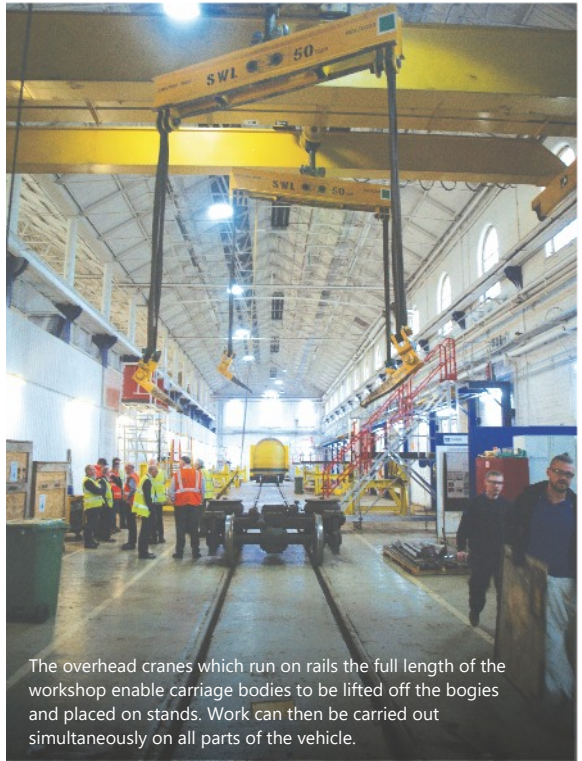
stock. The works is connected to the main line system with easy access for trains from Corkerhill and Shields depots in Glasgow. Work is also undertaken on trains from the north of England. There are fifteen vehicle locations for stripping, overhauling and rebuilding and there is a 10 kV electric track in place for testing purposes.

The works has 77 permanent employees, representing 60% of the labour force, supplemented by a dedicated group of contract staff.

BOOTS

There was an opportunity to ask questions at the end of the presentation and then it was on with the industrial boots and goggles and into the working areas.

We began by having a look inside one of the



The overhead cranes which run on rails the full length of the workshop enable carriage bodies to be lifted off the bogies and placed on stands. Work can then be carried out simultaneously on all parts of the vehicle.



electronic monitoring system which logs the performance of air-conditioning and doors, making future diagnosis and repair considerably easier.

Each unit is in the works for less than a month, the Inverness units pass through slightly more quickly than the Haymarket ones because their seating bays had already been reconfigured to line up with the windows in the 2007-8 refurbishment.

There have been worries about the 158s being underpowered for some of the gradients on the FNL. Mark Isbern from Porterbrook Leasing explained that testing has shown that the installed 350hp engines have the same acceleration characteristics as the higher-rated engines until they approach 90 mph. There has been

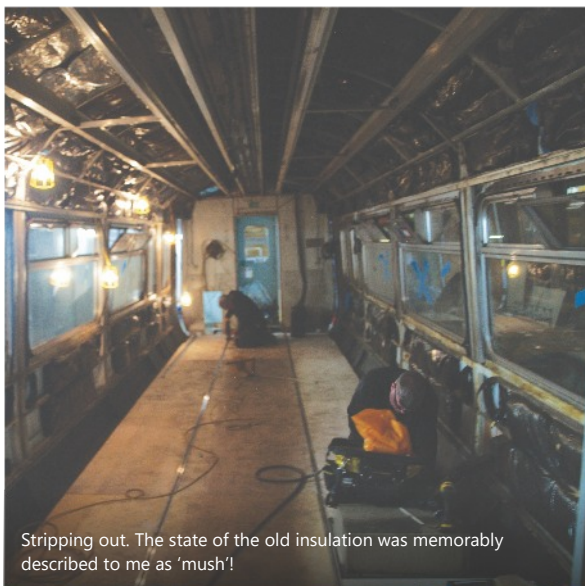
much good work carried out recently on the engines and cooling systems, with new radiators and controls fitted across the 158 fleet, which will improve performance.

Inverness-based class 158s which are used on the FNL. The work on these trains, which had last been extensively refurbished for the FNL in 2007-8, is almost complete. The Haymarket-based units are following on and indeed two of them were already there waiting their turn.

INDISTINGUISHABLE

The process involves removing the seats and the windows and all the surface coverings which are either repaired or replaced. Extensive work on improving the existing systems, such as air conditioning, toilets and motorized doors, as well as the addition of USB sockets for every fixed seat and 230v power sockets at the table bays is carried out. The interior is then put back together and the finished result, after painting and application of exterior vinyls, is indistinguishable from a new train.

The refurbished trains have an



Stripping out. The state of the old insulation was memorably described to me as 'mush'!



Extremely important not to lose the manual.

CORROSION

A major difference between the 158s and the 156s is the construction method used. The 156s bodysells are made of steel which in the 30 years since manufacture has suffered serious corrosion. This requires replacement and/or repair. The 158 units, which are a little newer, having been built between 1989 and 1992, use a monocoque construction of aluminium. This is lighter and does not suffer the corrosion problems of steel.

The detailed work we were shown was extremely interesting and made you realise that when the media complain about 'old trains' in service they are often missing the point. I was put in mind of the kind of restoration work you see at classic car shows or preserved railways where the rebuilding process means that all that's left that's actually old is the underlying structure and the visual design. I should add though that in this refurbishment the engines and wheelsets are not replaced. However, these items are continuously maintained to a high standard anyway.

COMPLICATED

We were then taken to view the work on a class 156 unit, belonging to Angel Trains, which had been lifted off its bogies and was supported by 'legs', with enough space for work to be carried out beneath at the same time as on the interiors. This facility, achieved by making use of the built-in overhead cranes allows a significant reduction in time out of service for the trains. I couldn't help but wonder just how complicated it must be to plan the workflow so that as many people as possible can work at the same time - I was assured it is indeed complicated!

PRIDE

Looking back over the day my greatest impressions are as much about the people who showed us around and the works itself, as about the work being carried out. It is very good to know that serious railway work is still being done in Springburn, providing employment and continuing the fine tradition of the town which was once one of the main producers of locomotives for the world. Chatting to people from KBRs, Porterbrook and Transport Scotland, what came over above all was a tremendous sense of pride in what they were doing and enthusiasm - all were eager to explain and discuss.

Ian Budd

What is now known as Springburn Depot was built by the Caledonian Railway in 1853. Known as St Rollox Works, it was one of four locomotive works in Springburn, a town a couple of miles north of Glasgow city centre. At their peak the railway works in the town employed around 15000 people.

Photos of the Class 156 unit are published with permission of the owner, Angel Trains.

ABERDEEN TO INVERNESS:

MEMORIES OF THE RESOURCES MANAGER

When the business sectors were being properly established in the 1980s I moved from a classic operations job as Area Operations Manager (Thanet) in North Kent to become Resources Manager for the Strathclyde profit centre in what was then commonly called ScotRail Provincial. Subsequently I became the Profit Centre Manager with my own 'bottom line'. Unlike the task facing some of my colleagues this was focused on minimising the scale of the Section 20 'claim' on the Strathclyde PTE. Optimising revenue was a relatively minor aspect as the fares were set by the PTE, which also specified the timetable and controlled marketing and branding activity. At this time British Rail sent me to Strathclyde Graduate Business School to do an MBA. So I developed

Service Group Management on the A2I in the last days of British Rail, by Paul Hadley

a very strong 'business' orientation.

As the sectorisation of BR continued the old Scottish Region was broken up. Most of the staff went to what had become Regional Railways although some did end up with InterCity, Freight or Parcels. Cyril Bleasdale became the head of a single ScotRail profit centre that directly employed all of its own staff. For 'business' purposes there was a Planning & Marketing function, under Dr Paul Prescott. This essentially undertook service specification that was then delivered by the Operations, Retail, Fleet and Infrastructure functions (which employed the bulk of the staff) supported by Human Resources, Finance & IT and Quality & Safety.

Within Planning & Marketing there were only two service groups – Strathclyde and 'everything else'. I was lucky enough to get the

'everything else' group and thus became the only person before or since to have been 'Service Group Manager' for every route within Scotland at some point. The previous distinctions between smaller service groups – ScotRail Express, East Coast Locals, South West, North Highland and West Highland were lost, making it easier to consider deploying resources and optimising connections across the whole network. The main introductions of the Class 150, 156 and 158 units in Scotland had already been set in train (if not completed) by this time.

Sectorisation had established some key financial expectations. InterCity was expected to be profitable, hence certain activities with poor economic prospects such as sleepers, Motorail and certain styles of catering were heavily rationalised. Freight and Parcels were also expected to be profitable, albeit helped by the fact that they were only charged with the incremental costs of their activities on a network and at stations that was accepted as being primarily for passenger traffic. Network SouthEast was obviously not relevant to Scotland.

It was accepted that Regional Railways routes were likely to require subsidy indefinitely, so the emphasis was on cost minimisation. This was particularly the case on routes where revenue was low and even a significant proportional increase from either service improvement or marketing activity would make a relatively small difference. Cost minimisation could take many different forms. The switch from locomotive-hauled operation of slam-door trains (with high track wear, high maintenance costs, poor fuel efficiency and the need for shunting staff, run-round loops and so forth) to multiple units had been going on for years. Installation of continuously welded rail, along with lighter trains could lead to a dramatic reduction in track maintenance costs (almost to the point of 'fit and forget' in the medium term on lightly used

lines with no freight).

Signalling rationalisation from power boxes or with RETB could also save a lot of operating costs but required significant investment. A particular problem after the Clapham Junction crash on 12 December 1988 was that the processes of signalling design and installation were subject to massive change. This created an enduring shortage of resources for any but the most urgent and important projects on a national basis.

Another area of cost saving came in the retail activity. Although the internet still lay in the future, the advent of SPORTIS ticket machines for use by on-train staff provided the scope for reductions in station staffing in many cases.

As Regional Railways got into its stride the understanding of its services became more sophisticated. As is often the case the findings seemed blindingly obvious once they were written down and circulated but were nevertheless radical at the time. This was particularly the case when it came to understanding why some services did better than others and which ones had the best potential for revenue development.

After Gordon Pettit had taken over the reins of Regional Railways and put a new headquarters senior management team in place a major strategic review was undertaken by consultants – Mercers. Although the Central (Midlands of England) sub-sector had been the focus of study the findings were of general application. They were briefed out from May 1991 although sadly were never properly written up. Managers were left to pick the bones out of packs of viewfoils.

The most significant conclusion of the review was that there were two 'viable positions' for Regional Railways. The first of these was termed 'distance-at-speed'. This type of service typically demonstrated the following characteristics:

- The rail journey was often as an adjunct to the car

- Journey speed and distance were high enough to compensate for modal interchange
- Stops were infrequent – allowing high average speeds
- The customer comes to you

Clearly these attributes had to be supported by factors such as good origin-station access and parking; large destinations (that in contrast to journey origins were preferably congested and had poor parking); well located stations at the destinations (or good interchange onto local networks); and a large proportion of longer journeys.

The second viable position was 'door-to-door', generally in the context of urban commuting. The characteristics here were:

- The train was an alternative to the car
- Frequent stops
- City centre penetration
- Routing through densely populated areas
- Short distances
- Rail goes to where the customers live

Here it was also necessary for the cities to be congested and with limited and expensive parking. The centres had to be concentrated and populations along the rail corridor had to be high, with housing close to stations.

Routes that could not provide either distance-at-speed or door-to-door risked falling into what was termed the 'hole in the middle'. There were plenty of Regional Railways routes in this category that typically demonstrated:

- Trying to compete with the car on middle-distance journeys
- High interchange penalties (such as poor parking, low frequency and lack of through trains)
- Few door-to-door opportunities (i.e. very few passengers could be expected to walk to a station, take the train and then be able to walk to their final destination)
- Local stops prejudicing speed

This may seem straightforward but the concept of 'viable' needed to be understood. For distance-at-speed, which loosely corresponded with what we used to think of as ScotRail Express, it was reasonable to expect a train service to cover all of its direct movement costs. These were fuel, train maintenance, depreciation of the capital value of a new train, cleaning and train crew. If these costs were covered the service could be said to be 'Gross Margin 1 positive' (GM1 positive). In other words it was making some contribution towards track, signalling and stations costs as well. If a service made so much money that it fully covered its infrastructure costs it would have been described as 'Gross Margin 2 positive'. It would then be able to contribute towards overheads and even enhancement. However, no Regional Railways services anywhere fell into this category.

Although some urban services were GM1 positive there were plenty that weren't. This was due to a variety of reasons including high degrees of peakiness and low fares (especially in Passenger Transport Executive (PTE) areas or where bus competition was fierce). However, such a large proportion of Regional Railways total business was in the urban sector that it could not be neglected. Door-to-door was often only a viable position in the sense that the government or local PTEs were willing to continue paying grants.

To cut a very long story short, the principal *business* aims of a service group manager were to get as many routes as possible to be GM1 positive, to maximise that positivity and to avoid slipping into the hole-in-the-middle. The key to this was generally maximising rolling stock utilisation. Although fuel and maintenance costs increased with speed and distance travelled, revenue could often increase faster. Train crew costs tended to be relatively fixed as staff have to be paid even if they are sitting around during a lengthy turn-round, waiting in loops or whatever. Back in 1991 the general rule of thumb on Regional Railways was that each vehicle had to earn at least £200,000 per

year to cover costs. In the absence of single-car units in Scotland this meant that each two-car diesel unit had to earn £400,000. Not every unit could be in traffic all day, every day either. So a hypothetical route with annual revenue of £2m could 'justify' five units.

Not only did rolling stock have to earn quite a lot of money, it was also in very short supply. The original aim had been to replace the ageing Modernisation Plan DMUs and expensive locomotive-hauled stock with the various Sprinter variants but the plan had not gone smoothly for two main reasons. Firstly there had been many technical problems, from gearboxes and brakes on Pacers, through doors on Class 155s, to track circuit operation and welds on Class 158. These manifested themselves in stock withdrawn for modification, poor reliability of what was actually operating and late delivery of new designs as production methodology was changed. Secondly there was less of it than expected. The UK economy had gone into recession in the third quarter of 1990 and public spending was under severe pressure. As part of its share of the pain BR had to see Network SouthEast give up its plans to develop a new long-distance DMU design for the Waterloo-Exeter line. Around 60 vehicles from the final Class 158 order were diverted to become Class 159s and basically 'lost' to Regional Railways.

A further factor was that some Regional Railways 'Express' routes had been doing extremely well following introduction of modern rolling stock and there was additional revenue to be had by increasing or lengthening those services even if this came from de-resourcing less lucrative routes.

The outcome of these pressures was that certain routes retained an element of locomotive hauled operation for far longer than had been hoped for. Aberdeen-Inverness (A2I) was one of these.

Having spent quite a long time setting the scene, it is hopefully clear what my business priorities for A2I had to be. Although seen (and

indeed promoted) as part of the ScotRail Express network, the line was at risk of falling into the hole-in-the-middle. Most distance-at-speed routes had hourly services or better. Practically none had anywhere near as much single track, with all the timetable limitations that that imposed. In many cases average end-to-end speeds were materially higher. For example, even the fastest Aberdeen-Inverness trains took 2h 10m for 108¼ miles; an average of just under 50mph. A more typical schedule of 2h 20m is around 46mph. My 'best' routes – Glasgow to Edinburgh and Glasgow to Aberdeen – could offer trains averaging around 57mph.

Applying this thinking to A2I, my dream was of an end-to-end journey time of 108 minutes (and 12-minute turn-rounds). This might allow a mile-a-minute hourly service with only four units although clearly there would have to be dynamic crossings at three places *en route*. Sadly this would be ruinously expensive. Partial re-doubling between Aberdeen and Keith might be possible but finding somewhere for brand new double track sections several miles long somewhere on the Keith-Elgin and Forres-Nairn intervals would be impractical.

Scaling back my ambitions it was more straightforward to at least avoid sliding into the 'hole'. Yet more stations, such as Kintore or Dalcross, were definitely not welcome from a strategic perspective. Elsewhere in Scotland I was proud to have been involved in the development of no fewer than 35 new stations but there is a world of difference between door-to-door stations such as Paisley Canal or Drumgelloch and the smaller settlements of North East Scotland.

For the record, when the Mercer methodology was applied to A2I it showed that the service represented 4% of ScotRail unit miles and generated 4% of the revenue. (By way of comparison, Edinburgh-Glasgow was 6% of the unit miles but 12% of the revenue. The Stranraer line was 3% of the miles but only 1% of the revenue.) The resource requirement was assessed as six diagrams (one locomotive

hailed at the time), including maintenance cover. So, using the rule of thumb of £400,000 per unit, it needed to generate at least £2.4m per year to cover movement costs. Revenue in 1991 was around £3.7m, so the route was comfortably GM1 positive. It earned a larger GM1 surplus for ScotRail than Glasgow/Edinburgh-Inverness (although revenue on that route was obviously shared with InterCity at the time).

Sadly there seemed to be little that could be done with A2I in the short term. Signalling rationalisation was obviously highly desirable, both to reduce staffing costs and to tackle some of the inflexibilities of loop location at Forres and Keith as well as completing the elimination of token working and the Nairn bicycle. But in the post-Clapham environment this was impossible. Track upgrades for faster running made little sense if trains then had to wait around at loops. Although rolling stock availability did improve gradually Regional Railways remained desperately short of units through to privatisation. Hence Modernisation Plan DMUs remained in service around Glasgow and Edinburgh (as well as other places, like Manchester) for far longer than anybody wanted. Pockets of locomotive hauling also remained for years.

Aberdeen to Inverness was a route that always fascinated me. I well remember my first ever trip, from Inverness to Elgin whilst on holiday with my parents back in 1970. It was the only place that I ever saw automatic token exchange used in anger. Subsequently, once I worked in the industry and had a precious annual allocation of free tickets, a grand round trip on something like a Portsmouth-Elgin return enabled trips on both the East Coast and West Coast Main Lines as well as a mini-tour of Scotland. It was fantastic to have the chance to get to know it better but so frustrating that it was impossible to change anything. The renovation of Inverurie station was probably the highlight on my 'watch' and it wasn't even one of my ideas.

Paul Hadley

ALL THE STATIONS

On Saturday 19 August Wick station saw the successful completion of the epic project known as 'All The Stations'. With the help of crowd funding Geoff Marshall and Vicki Pipe visited, or travelled through, every railway station in the UK, all 2563 of them! The pair set off from Penzance station on Sunday 7 May. The mammoth venture took 15 weeks and the couple gave an almost continuous commentary on social media, attracting a huge number of followers. Their aim was to talk to fellow travellers and local people and make an online documentary film of the journey, as well as reminding people of the joys of rail travel!



Vicki and Geoff are seen here at Dunrobin Castle station on the final day of their journey. They were welcomed by Daniel Brittain-Catlin who looks after the station, and Frank Roach of HITRANS.

JELlicOE EXPRESS PLAQUES

To commemorate the 100th anniversary of the first 'Jellicoe Express' troop trains from London to Thurso, Moya Macdonald from Another Orkney Production has been organising the placing of plaques along the route.

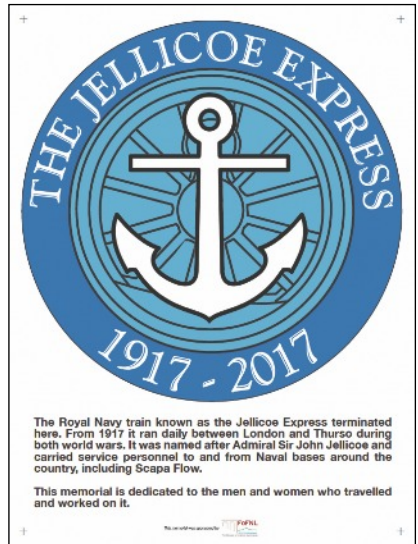
On Saturday 30 September at 10:00 the plaque at Helmsdale is to be unveiled. The ceremony will be accompanied by a small display in the Station Waiting Room and will be followed by refreshments from the WVS tea trolley to the accompaniment of music provided by

- Findlay Adams (piper)
- Alan McLeod (folk singer)
- Timespan's 'Helmsdale's War' Choral Group

At 11:45 there will be an illustrated talk at Timespan, given by Orkney historian Robert Foden entitled **THE JELlicOE EXPRESS -The Royal Naval Special from Euston to Thurso.**

Lunch will be available afterwards in the Timespan café.

On Thursday 5 October, at 11:15, the plaque, sponsored by FoFNL, is to be unveiled at Thurso station by FoFNL president Jamie Stone MP. It is particularly appropriate that we should sponsor the northernmost one.



A RAILMAN REMEMBERS

5 – THANKS MR POSTMAN

Like any proper manned Scottish railway station in the 70s, Fearn had a symbiotic relationship with another service which was even more venerable and respected than the railways: Royal Mail.

Highland posties are of course legendary; for that job you need a practical mix of energy, cheerful charm and resourcefulness. You have to be an excellent driver, willing and capable of being out in all hours and weathers, often the first up a snow bound track with an elderly person at the end of it. A vital part of the community, discreet, yet helping to join up the dots.

Fearn Post Office was a utilitarian building just down from the bustling general store in Hill of

Fearn, a convenient mile and a half from the station. In those days the sorting and delivery functions were naturally integrated with the counter services, rather than deliberately divided as they are today. It made sense in a rural setting. You could even give your postman a letter with money for the stamp, and he would happily stick it on and post it for you back at the office.

The classic, friendly lines of the red Morris Minor mail vans were a constant and welcome sight across the country. Our

postie would collect the mailbags off the train each morning, head back to sort the mail, then out again to deliver the letters. Finally the mail which had been posted that day would be sent back to Fearn Station to be dispatched on the afternoon train.

Consequently there was a mail van and a smartly turned out postman parked on Fearn's platform punctually every weekday morning and afternoon. It didn't take them long to notice the bright yellow caravan which had appeared on their platform.



Once they'd stopped laughing I got to know them quite well, and they were really helpful. In the morning there'd be a rap on the caravan door, "Wake up Mark, the train's

at Nigg!" All I had to do was throw on some jeans and a T-shirt, wipe the sleep from my eyes, step outside and I was at work. The postmen always seemed to know if the train was late, and by how much, so I never got woken up any earlier than necessary.

It turned out that one of the postmen was the father of the drummer from the band I had been playing with, and so formed another connection which turned out to have a major influence on my activities later in the summer.

Continuing our series of articles by Marc Nolan, telling the story of his early days as a railwayman at Fearn Station on the Far North Line in the 1970s.

Welcome to Wick

Xosier



ANOTHER FAR NORTH JOURNEY BY COLIN BAIRD, THE CYCLING SCOT

The Far North Line that links Inverness to Wick and Thurso is a scenic wonder that tends to get overlooked on those greatest train journeys of the world lists. It is my number one scenic railway in Scotland. Let me tell you about the section between Wick and Thurso.

passengers heading north from Inverness I was getting tired by the time we reached the last stretch to Wick. I had enjoyed the coastal section, watching seals from my window. And now we were inland and it was flat and uninteresting. After 4 hours on this train I just

SCOTLAND'S "BIG SKY COUNTRY"

For this article I am going to focus on one particular section of the line, between Wick and Thurso. It is an area of great beauty that I had not noticed until recently, despite travelling on the railway many times.

For anyone who has taken the train north they will likely say that the best section is where the line hugs the coast between Golspie and Helmsdale. Or perhaps when it travels along the Cromarty Firth. You will not expect me to be saying the section between Wick and Thurso. "What? That flat bit?" I am not saying it is the best part of the line, but it is stunning in its own right.

Probably like most

wanted to arrive.

But one bright and sunny spring day I departed from Wick. I was rested and excited about the trip south. I was not at journey's end, but at the beginning and I was going to see this with fresh eyes.

It was a revelation that it was this beautiful.



Last night someone had mentioned the clever marketing of the state of Montana as "Big Sky Country." It is a phrase that perfectly captures those endless fields stretching to the horizon, topped with blue sky and cloud puffs. A panorama of wide open spaces. This is exactly what I was looking at from my train carriage trundling across Caithness.

I could see that the lack of hills was an advantage. It meant an unobstructed field of vision of never ending sky. There is something really special about being able to see for miles. It makes you feel free, that you have endless space to lose yourself in. You can easily find solitude not in just one small corner, but have a multitude of space for your soul to escape in. You feel that you have endless time, travelling through it makes time longer because the land does not change much for mile after mile.

There used to be five stations between Thurso and Wick. Only one of these, Georgemas Junction, remains open, as the others were closed in the 1960s. I have always felt that there is a poetic quality to the list of stops on the Far North Line, rather like the Shipping



Forecast, and these five would produce a beautiful verse if these four were to reopen. They were called Hoy, Bower, Watten and Bilbster. Some of the former station buildings, now private homes, can be spotted as the train speeds by.

A part of the journey is alongside Loch Watten, the second largest loch in Caithness. It is almost three miles long and looks inviting on a sunny day. The closed Watten station was located at the eastern end of the loch and I wonder if it had been well patronised by fishermen looking to catch some trout.

Scotland's mountains are stunning. They *are* Scotland. They bring visitors to Scotland. But endless sky is also beautiful. The people who visit Montana appreciate it. Scotland should shout about its own "Big Sky Country." So, if you ever take the Far North Line take a closer look between Wick and Thurso and let me know if you agree.

*All pictures by
Colin Baird*



CROSSING WATER



Functional but elegant - Ness Viaduct. 66305 and 66304 with nuclear flask train, 11 July 2017.



Understated - Clachnaharry Swing Bridge over Caledonian Canal, 12 April 2011.

Top and above:

Sandy Colley.

Right:

Ian Budd

Not understated - lift bridge over Intracoastal Waterway, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, 26 March 2017.

