

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 74

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THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

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Cover photo:

Royal Scotsman, heading for Brora on 27th June 2017, passes through Dunrobin Castle Station hauled by 66746.

Photo: **Peter Moore**

HEADCODE

As readers will know, I took over the reins from Mike Lunan on 1st February. Mike's contribution to FoFNL has been huge and this is an opportunity to thank him for all his work and his dogged determination that the Lentrans Loop "MUST BE BUILT"! We don't yet know for certain whether this is in the 'pipeline' but the indications are excellent.

As the new Convener I have naturally been thinking about FoFNL's exact aims. They are very simple: we campaign for improvements to services and infrastructure and constantly keep an eye out for other things which will help passengers and freight consignors; chief among these being the provision of timely and accurate information, particularly in times of disruption.

The process of initiating improvement works on the railway is, to say the least, tortuous. Transport Scotland is hoping that the new process, where projects are in a

'pipeline' rather than having to compete for entry into fixed five-year blocks of work, will help. We hope it does - we just want things done quickly!

On the subject of rail projects, I felt a surge of optimism on discovering that in 2010 the business case for the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness included a monetary value of £429.8m, 23% of the total project cost, representing "Driver Frustration Benefit". "Passenger Frustration Benefit", to be derived from providing more passing loops or doubling single track railways where huge delays are caused, must also be very substantial and will contribute greatly to rail business cases.

You will notice that there is no Editorial page in this issue of *Far North Express*. I am continuing as *FNE* Editor and in future issues there may even be occasions of split personality!

Ian Budd

AGM AND CONFERENCE 1ST JUNE 2018

The AGM will take place at 11:15 on Friday 1 June in the Pentland Hotel, Princes St, Thurso KW14 7AA.

Members are reminded that they should carry their 2018 membership card.

The intention is to conclude the AGM by 11:55 and have a lunch break before the Conference.

Conference starts at 13:15. The provisional timing for this is:

- 13:15 Conference starts: President's welcome
- 13:25 Keynote address by Alex Hynes, MD ScotRail Alliance
- 13:45 Questions
- 14:00 Alastair Dalton, Transport Correspondent, The Scotsman
- 14:20 Kirsty Watson, ScotRail Project Manager
- 14:40 Judith Crow, Finance and Administration Officer, Flows to the Future Project, Forsinard
- 15:00 Questions
- 15:15 Frank Roach, HITRANS
- 15:30 Convener's closing remarks
- 15:40 End of Conference

FoFNL will not be making lunch arrangements on behalf of Members. The Pentland Hotel has a varied lunch menu.

PANDORA HAS A LOOK AT THE LAWS OF PHYSICS

In the coming months passengers on the *Highland Chieftain* running daily between Kings Cross and Inverness will have the pleasure of travelling in a bi-mode Class 800 *Azuma*. Nostalgia lovers who wish to continue to enjoy the comfort of an HST over the long demanding climbs of the HML north of Perth will have to use ScotRail services - pure diesel. Timing comparisons will be interesting as the "pocket rocket" MachSTs will be 2+4 or 2+5 formation with a much better power/weight ratio than VTEC's 2+9 formation for the *HC* nowadays. Why does any of this matter?

The rail minister south of the Border has ruled that he "wishes to see" (which is, of course, not the same thing as *will legislate to ensure that*) "all diesel-only trains off the track by 2040". At the same time the Secretary of State is busy not electrifying anything, fearful lest the GWR contagion spread. This is the wrong response. That NR got the planning and execution hopelessly wrong on the GWR does not mean either that electrification is far too expensive or, more significantly, that NR has not learnt some painful lessons whose benefit would only be felt in future electrification projects. See bath-water, see baby.

ELECTRIFICATION

If we as a nation are seriously to reduce the carbon footprint of the railway it can only be achieved meaningfully by vastly more electrification. The Netherlands, admittedly rather smaller than the UK and benefiting from having to rebuild pretty much the whole network after 1945, has 76% of its network electrified; GB a mere 42%.

But the SoS has set his face against it. There are "better" ways, the bi-mode being one of them. A bi-mode is not a system of propulsion which would have been designed by anyone starting from a clean sheet. It is a fudge. While operating under overhead wires it is dragging heavy unused diesel engines together with the fuel; while it is operating away from the wires it is dragging an electric motor. The benefit of a bi-mode is that it can operate anywhere, but wherever it does so it will operate less efficiently than a vehicle designed for operating under, or away from, the wires.

Class 800s will be expected to remain in service for at least 40 years, so we are stuck with fudge for a long time. The real killer, of course, is that having expensive (*very expensive*) bits of kit which will last for 40 years and won't need another inch of wiring being installed significantly weakens the case for doing any more electrification. They'll still puff out diesel exhaust after 2040, but the fact that there's an electric motor (heavy, and not producing power) being dragged along makes it all right. It's not just the laws of physics which are being ignored here. There's common sense too. Under the wires an 800 develops 11.2kW/tonne; using diesel it's only 6.9kW/tonne. Guess where the hills are. This is why Transport Scotland must continue its excellent policy of electrifying 100 single track kilometres of track each year into CP6 (from which any electrification is absent, apart from maybe getting to Perth) and CP7. The HML would be the natural place to start.

VISION

The industry has been tasked by the rail minister south of the Border to provide a "vision" for how it plans to decarbonise "by the autumn". Pandora would love to see that report, particularly if it said "electrify all main lines and such joiny-uppy bits that will enable 90% of freight services and 95% of all passengers services to be electrically-powered by 2030". None of this 2040 long-term nonsense.

It won't say that, of course. It will bring to the table some exotica, and this is where the laws of physics really come into play. Battery power and hydrogen power are under development, and trains using them are already in service in Europe. Each has its place, but neither will be any use for long-distance fast passenger work, nor for freight. Batteries take longer to charge than it takes to refill a diesel tank, so battery power is only any good where there is an out-and-back journey of no more than say 40km, or where any longer journey is under the wires, allowing charging while on the move. Battery technology is developing very rapidly, and no doubt the range will be significantly further in a few years' time. However by their nature batteries have low energy density.

An ordinary lead/acid battery can deliver around 0.56MJ/litre, while a lithium ion battery reaches over 2.6MJ/l. Neither is high enough to produce nippy acceleration, nor powerful enough to start a heavy train. This battery power will only be used on relatively short-distance lightly-loaded passenger services. The Wick-Thurso shuttle would be ideal, provided charging could be done at each end, and it took no more than say 20 minutes. Scotland is, or could be, well-provided with such short journeys. Borders Railway, Levenmouth, some of the Glasgow outer suburban routes still served by DMUs.

PHYSICS

Hydrogen is seen as a magic solution, mainly because it scores extremely well on the laws of chemistry (ie. no pollution). Its energy density, at 2.7MJ/l, matches that of a Li-ion battery. The laws of physics rather spoil things, however, because the energy density of diesel is 35.8MJ/l. Someone somewhere must make an intelligent decision about the weight which should be accorded to a pollution-free fuel against one which actually generates a decent level of grunt. One hopes that

this person is possessed of Physics A-level. Hydrogen will, like battery, be ideal for some rail needs. While the technology is being developed it isn't easy to see what those might be, but it's fairly clear that freight haulage won't be one of them. An energy density that low would suggest that, like battery-operated rolling stock, hydrogen power will find it difficult to move heavy trains easily. Once they're moving quickly, however, hydrogen would easily be able to keep them going at high speed since relatively little power is needed for this. What sort of trains will need to accelerate infrequently, to go very fast for a long time with little need to decelerate for stations or adverse signals? Have the words high speed and hydrogen been seen in the same sentence before? Probably not, because HS2 will be all-electric, and electric haulage beats hydrogen. So hydrogen will likely fill the same niches as battery, albeit probably more efficiently and with less need for frequent charging infrastructure.

Were this article to be revisited in 10 years' time the technology would be changed, probably beyond all recognition. But the laws of physics would not.

REVIEW TEAM REPORT

The Review Team met on 16 February. Among the matters covered were these:

- £360k has been spent on 16km of fencing on the FNL; a further £505k will be spent on 24km from April. In some places the vegetation "had become the boundary fencing" – a fact hitherto unknown. Animal incursion would therefore be less. There will be a doubling, from 9 to 18, of staff employed on vegetation, fencing, lineside drainage etc; 6 would be based in Helmsdale to cut down the working time spent in travel: this is a big win – 6 new jobs in Helmsdale doesn't happen every day. ORR has praised the work on animal control.
- The RETB desk split was trialled last September, and was described as a "slick process". A change has to be made before full operation, mainly because 3 new signallers are needed. It will go live this September.
- Work continues to improve the request stop notification by electronic means. Funding is in place to trial using the RETB system to alert drivers to a passenger wishing to board at a request stop.
- CIS screens will be installed at all stations. Funding is in place and installation will take place this year.
- Detailed work indicates that around half a minute each could be saved by increasing linespeed into, through, and out of loops at Invergordon and Brora. Linespeed will be increased at Delny LX, and increased further once it is closed in CP6.
- There will be journey time reductions in December 2018. These were expected in May, but the NR timetabling process (based in Milton Keynes) has had to cope with the largest volume of changes ever, and was hopelessly overstretched.
- In 2017 there was a 7% increase in FNL footfall over 2016 (Kyle +3%).

Mike Lunan

LEVEL CROSSINGS - 12

UPDATE

NR has announced details of work to be carried out at two of Dingwall's three crossings later this year. Dingwall Middle (where the railway crosses the A862) is currently an AOCL+B, the barriers being installed a few years ago. It will be upgraded to a full barrier crossing - the road thus being completely blocked - with object detection equipment. This will sense that there is nothing bigger than a hedgehog on the roadway before the barriers are lowered. The road will be shut for two weeks in July. Dingwall No.1 is currently an AOCL (ie. without barriers, but with red wigwag lights) and it will be upgraded in the same way as Middle. This work will be done in August. There has been a lot of misuse at both crossings, and the proximity of No.1 to the school has been a worry. While those moved by an excess of dare-devilry might still act in a foolish manner, the presence of full barriers should at least stop pupils engrossed in hand-held devices from wandering where it would be hazardous to do so. Well, we can but hope. No work is planned at Dingwall No.2 (an AOCL+B).

OVERBRIDGE

NR has made an application to The Highland Council for permission to build an overbridge to

carry the minor road from Barbaraville to the A9, allowing the closure of the crossing at Delny. Readers will remember that this was upgraded to an ABCL last autumn, allowing an increase in line-speed to 55mph. When the crossing is closed - in 2019/20 if permission is granted quickly - the lineside equipment will be taken to Kildonan. This will allow the linespeed to be increased at Delny to the prevailing 75mph either side of the crossing, and to something greater than 0mph at Kildonan. Welcome to the third decade of the 21st Century!

KYLE LINE

Further into CP6 there are plans to do work at Rogart and Bunchrew on the FNL, and Strathcarron and Balnacra on the Kyle Line. It's worth noting on the Kyle Line that work is to be carried out on the A890 at Attadale. The *Press & Journal* says (5 April) "[THC] is working with [NR] to design a bypass which will allow cars and light vehicles to use the railway between scheduled trains". It is to be hoped that a temporary scheme to last for the 12 weeks of the planned disruption might just set a precedent for a permanent way of sharing the very narrow strip of land thereabouts.

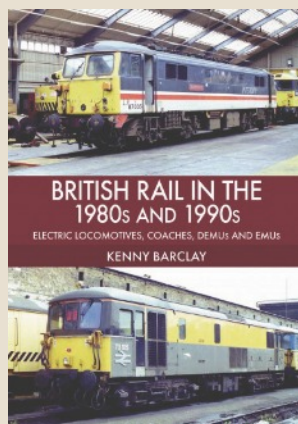
Mike Lunan

BRITISH RAIL IN THE 1980S AND 1990S: ELECTRIC LOCOMOTIVES, COACHES, DEMU AND EMUS

Kenny Barclay

Amberley Publishing **£14.99** (*special price of £11.24 applied when FNE was published*)
Paperback, 96 pages, ISBN: 9781445670218

This book of photographs, although not connected with the FNL in subject matter, was written by Kenny Barclay, erstwhile ScotRail Driver Team Manager at Inverness. Through his position in British Rail Kenny had access to a number of depots and railway works where many of his photographs were taken.



PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S5W-13801: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered: 23/01/18

To ask the Scottish Government what progress is being made toward improved rail journey times of between 2 hours 45 minutes and 3 hours between Edinburgh and Inverness.

Humza Yousaf: The Scottish Government's Infrastructure Investment Plan, published in 2011, stated that the Highland Main Line Rail Improvement project will be completed in phases between 2014 and 2025.

The long term aim of the project sought to achieve a journey time of 2hrs 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt, with an average journey time of 3 hours and hourly service by 2025.

Phase One of the project introduced two extra services per day each way and journey time improvements of up to 18 minutes in December 2012.

Phase Two of the project, which is scheduled to be delivered Spring 2019, aims to achieve (i) an hourly service between Perth-Inverness extended to Glasgow or Edinburgh, (ii) average end to end journey time improvement of around 10 mins, (iii) more efficient freight operations.

The exact scope and timing of works for future phases has yet to be determined, and will be led initially by the forthcoming refresh of the Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR). The STPR will be informed by a review of our National Transport Strategy (NTS) which is underway.

Question S5W-14851: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered: 09/03/18

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with the UK Government regarding the devolution of the functions of Network Rail.

Humza Yousaf: The Scottish Government has been pressing the UK Government for some time now for the full devolution of the Network Rail Scotland Route. Strengthened accountability to the Scottish Parliament and improved governance arrangements will improve efficiency and the ability of Network Rail to respond to the requirements of the users of Scotland's rail network.

The UK Government's decision to move Network Rail funding to a Grant basis from 2019 means that the need for change is now a matter of urgency. Initial discussions took place between officials from Transport Scotland and the UK Department for Transport at the end of last year. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Constitution also wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport on 27th February seeking a speedy conclusion to this matter.

I recently wrote to the Secretary of State for Transport about Network Rail and the letter is available from the Scottish Parliament Information Centre (Bib. Number 59598)

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!

In order to comply with EU legislation concerning data protection - the EU General Data Protection Regulation which is in force from 25th May 2018 - we now have three documents relating to FoFNL membership: an amended Membership Form, a Privacy Notice, and a Legitimate Interest Assessment.

These can be viewed at www.fofnl.org.uk/join.html

SNOW PROBLEM

2017-8 turned out to be one of the coldest winters in recent years. There was significant snow in December as Sandy Colley's photo on our January cover, taken on 9th December, showed. This was as nothing to what occurred beginning on 28th February.

ScotRail told *FNE* that nearly every set of

Brora - heading out to clear the points



Photo: Network Rail

points north of Tain and south of Georgemas required to be dug out in the first days of March due to compacted ice and snow interfering with their operation. Because of deep drifts the Far North Line had to be 'line cleared', i.e. a Class 37 traversed the route, on 3rd and 4th March. Alex Sharkey of Network

Forsinard, what railway?

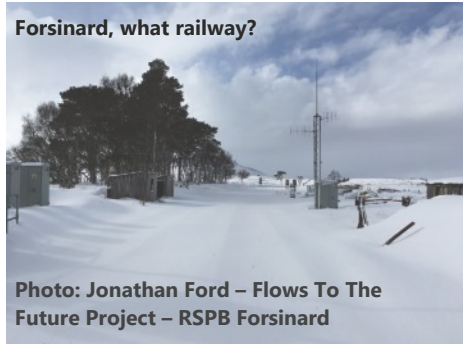


Photo: Jonathan Ford – Flows To The Future Project – RSPB Forsinard

Rail commented that the Class 37 Loco proved its worth, with its sheer weight and 'low down grunt', there wasn't much it couldn't handle.

Alex told us that the deepest drifts encountered were on the West Coast Main Line where a cutting was filled continuously for 170m with the deepest drifts being 5.3m. This couldn't be dealt with by blasting through with a plough as that would have risked damaging lineside equipment such as signalling cabinets, so a snow blower had to be brought in.

In weather like that a heroic effort is required by NR staff going out on foot to investigate, and dig out points by hand.

In terms of train performance ScotRail said that it sustained just one unit failure (158713) due to ice damaging an engine oil filter.

Route proving, Lairg



Photo: Network Rail

Lost for words at Wick



Photo: Michael 'Bubz' Mackay and Rob Kay

ARDGAY - GOLSPIE 150

Friday April 13th 2018 marked the 150th anniversary of the opening of a significant stretch of the Far North Line from Bonar Bridge (now known as Ardgay) to Golspie, the Sutherland Railway.

In a ceremony, organised by FoFNL member Frank Roach of HITRANS, a commemorative plaque was unveiled by Lord Strathnaver on Rogart station.

The section of the line from Bonar Bridge to Brora was authorized on June 29th 1865.

It was a very expensive project with major engineering challenges, including the Oykel Viaduct over the Kyle of Sutherland, and rock cuttings near Lairg.

The new railway opened as far as Golspie on April 13th 1868 and was 26 miles long.

In spite of £15,000 of assistance from the Highland Railway Company the promoters of the Sutherland Railway couldn't afford to continue the line any further. A new Act of Parliament was passed on June 20th 1870 which transferred the powers to build the remaining 6 miles, and added powers for the extension to Helmsdale. The Duke of Sutherland took over construction, and services, provided by the Highland Railway, commenced on June 19th 1871. The final section of the Far North Line to Thurso and Wick opened on July 28th 1874.



Frank Roach, Lord Strathnaver, Jamie Stone MP and Bill Reeve, Director of Rail, Transport Scotland, after the unveiling.
Photo: Richard Ardern

TRANSPORT SCOTLAND WORKSHOP REPORT

I attended the Rail Enhancements and Capital Investment Strategy & Local Rail Development Fund Workshop in Glasgow on 16th April, led by Gordon MacLeod, Acting Head of Rail Policy, Transport Scotland.

The workshop's aim was to inform everyone who might be involved in promoting a rail project about the process as it now stands.

Transport Scotland is moving away from the Control Periods of five years to a 'pipeline' method. This is aimed at achieving more flexibility about what is done when and in what order.

The STAG (Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance) process, and the passing through the various stages of Network Rail's GRIP (Governance for Railway Investment Projects), is mostly unchanged. The terminology is now that there is a 'pre-pipeline' process to work up a project and decide whether it's viable and desirable. If it gets through this it enters the 'pipeline' where detailed design work is carried out and an Outline Business case is made. If successful here it proceeds to a Final Business Case and if that is successful it will be built. At each stage there is the option for acceptance, refusal or holding back a project to a later date.

We learnt that the pipeline will be more flexible than the Control Periods because it will be possible to change the order in which projects are carried out, responding to the supply of funds and making best use of workforce and equipment availability.

Transport Scotland is currently learning how best to operate the new system and is aware of the need for groups such as FoFNL to be able to find out where in the process a given project is, and learn what the timescale for completion is likely to be. The stated aim is to be as transparent as possible.

Ian Budd

PETER MOORE

NORTH HIGHLANDS PHOTOGRAPHER



Peter Moore has lived in the North of Scotland since 1992.

He is a professional photographer who specialises in outdoor subjects.

FoFNL first became aware of his work a couple of years ago and your editor has spent much happy time admiring his photographs online.

[Top] Lone Class 37 heading south between Forsinard and Kinbrace.

[Middle] Job done - heading south for Preston of all places. Class 37 passing Balblair Distillery at Edderton.

[Bottom] A rare visitor to the Far North Line, 60163 *Tornado* in 2015 on an excursion to Brora.





Class 37 with track testing train passing through Forsinard Station.

We're delighted that Peter has given us permission to feature some of his railway photographs.

Peter has two Facebook pages: *North Highland Railways* and *Highland Noir Photography*.

An empty spent nuclear fuel train heading for Georgemas Junction, seen passing the site of Loth Station, closed pre-Beeching in 1960.



HSTs ARE COMING

The rebuilding of HST sets for the Scottish Intercity services is progressing rapidly.

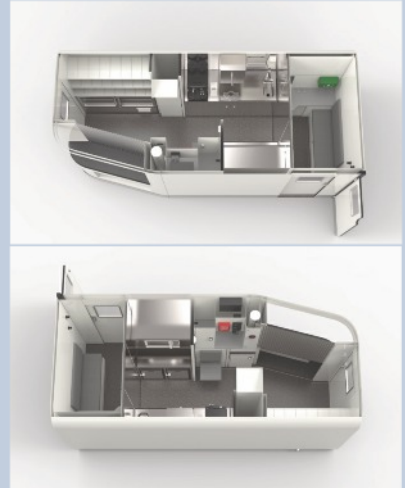
The work on the coaches has been challenging. The slam doors have to be replaced with sliding doors requiring that a pocket be inserted to receive each open door - a major structural change. The coaches were constructed originally 'by hand' meaning that dimensions and angles are approximate. The new doors and pockets are all identical and so individual tweaks are required in each carriage to make them fit! Not only that, but the loading gauge is so restricted in places that the new external door control buttons have had to be recessed, as a 1 cm projection would have compromised the clearance.



The photo below left shows work being carried out to construct the door pockets. This involves a complete rebuild of the vestibule and toilet area.

New catering base and conductor's accommodation modules are being fitted in the first class coaches.

The first set of four refurbished coaches is seen below, nearing completion, in Wabtec Rail's works in Doncaster.



All pictures are courtesy of ScotRail.

Contents

SERCO STOCK ARRIVES IN SCOTLAND



Photo: Serco Caledonian Sleeper

The new Mk 5 sleeper coaches for Serco's Caledonian Sleeper services are arriving in Scotland from manufacture in Spain. Initially the coaches were 'static tested' at Polmadie in Glasgow to make sure that all the systems are fully-functioning, especially when connected up to the Class 73 and Class 92 locomotives which will haul the stock in service.

The next stage is main line 'dynamic testing' which started in early April with runs from Glasgow down to Lancaster or Carnforth.

MIDNIGHT TRAIN TO GEORGEMAS

At the beginning of February the board of HITRANS agreed to begin work on a business case for the 'Midnight Train to Georgemas', the project to make use of some of the soon-to-be-redundant Mk3 sleeper carriages to provide a sleeper and overnight service from Thurso to Edinburgh and Glasgow.

HITRANS believes that the proposal would be especially beneficial to Caithness and Orkney enabling the saving of overnight stays on business and leisure trips to the Central Belt.

HITRANS has already held exploratory talks with Serco, the franchise holder of the Caledonian Sleeper service.

One of FoFNL's vice-presidents, Caithness MSP Gail Ross, commented, "I have been involved in the plans to create a sleeper train from Caithness since its inception. I'm delighted that this is now progressing to the business case and will give all my support to it."

INVERNESS-ABERDEEN IMPROVEMENTS

One hundred miles to go: the long journey to modernisation.

Following completion of loop and station works at Forres and Elgin, signalling between Inverness and Keith is now all controlled from Inverness. Work on the rest of phase 1 of the comprehensive upgrade is now under way at the Aberdeen end of the line.

The timetable has not yet changed. The 09.00 from Inverness now commonly waits for 13 minutes at Elgin and another scheduled 7 minutes at Inverurie to pass trains going the other way. You might think it could be accelerated by 20 minutes to give an Inverness to Aberdeen journey time of 2 hours 5 minutes, but it doesn't work like that because there are still so many long stretches of single track and trains have to be dovetailed to cross at the infrequent loops. This is why a comprehensive upgrade to increase double track sections is so vital.

The new website for the line tells us NR is now concentrating on major engineering works to redouble the track between Aberdeen and Inverurie alongside signalling and infrastructure works along the route. These will enable "increased reliability with no detriment to journey time between Inverness and Aberdeen (even allowing for new station stops at Kintore and Inverness Airport)" and an hourly service between Inverness and Elgin with 1300 additional seats daily amongst the benefits.

Installation of a new second track and signalling equipment between Aberdeen and Dyce is due by August 2018 and similarly between Dyce and Inverurie by August 2019. By 2019 the majority of trains between Inverness and Aberdeen will be provided by High Speed Trains with 1400 extra seats daily. Hopefully this will allow the new increased frequency timetable to be introduced in December 2019.

The redoubling work requires total closure of the line between Aberdeen and Dyce from 12 May to 20 August 2018 and a similar closure to Inverurie between May and August 2019. Rail replacement bus services will be provided for the affected lengths. Seemingly, the redoubling work will now start from Kittybrewster rather than from the northern end of the Hutcheon Street tunnel and it is also suggested that the 2018



Trees cleared
Photo: Network Rail

blockade may not be quite long enough to allow for commissioning of the new track to Dyce until 2019. Railway construction is also not an exact science, just as we have seen with road construction on the Aberdeen bypass.

Transport Scotland has taken over from HITRANS as client for the construction of the new station at Inverness Airport (Dalcross) and says the work will be conducted in parallel with capacity studies between Inverness and Nairn. When First Minister, Alex Salmond, announced the package of line improvements in Inverness in March 2014, which were then published on the Transport Scotland website in August 2014, it was stated that "Further development work will take place on the optimisation of the loop/double track strategy at Nairn/Dalcross". At the time that was thought to mean the work was sufficiently imminent to be finalised in time to be included in the CP5 2014/19 package.

Sadly this did not happen and we still seem to

be in the position of no decision yet. Passengers have had to suffer the inconveniences of scheduled passing delays of up to 13 minutes at Nairn because there is still no passing place/double track for 15 miles between there and Inverness. The line used to be doubled from Inverness as far as the former Dalcross station at Woodend which was only half a mile short of the new site. Robust operation of the line would be greatly improved by double track to allow trains from Inverness to start out on time without having to wait for a late runner coming in from Nairn.

Those procuring the A96 bridge which replaced the Gollanfield level crossing in the early 1970s sadly did not have the foresight to make the bridge wide enough for a double track railway. The same is true of the more recent engineering of the Raigmore A9/A96 interchange just east of Inverness. It is wider, but probably just not quite wide enough. As it was over a formerly double

track line, there is less excuse. These constraints must not make it impossible to lay a meaningful length of double track between Inverness and Nairn to cope better with the increasing number of services.

There is a long way yet to go to fully modernise this line. The remaining assets must be retained: goods yards at Huntly and Keith and the headshunt width at the north end of Aberdeen station. Too much development has been allowed to encroach upon the boundaries of the railway, not least at Inverness. Passenger and freight use of the railways should be permitted to continue to increase as congestion and pollution from other modes continue to cause concern. This strategic line across the north of Scotland should have a bright future after years of relative neglect and lack of nurture. Investment is imperative.

Richard Ardern

HITRANS RAIL STAKEHOLDER CONFERENCE 2018

This annual event took place in Inverness on January 29th.

It was an opportunity to listen to speakers from ScotRail, Network Rail, Serco, Transport Scotland, AECOM, Systra, Mott MacDonald and two Community Rail Partnerships.

Much ground was covered, Alex Hynes (MD, Abellio ScotRail/Network Rail Alliance) noting a much improved performance on the FNL with a 7% increase in passenger journeys and the best ever Class 158 reliability figures. Money is being invested in the line with an improved signalling system and work enabling removal or reduction of some speed restrictions. AH commented that he finds the franchise review process with Transport Scotland is completely different from that with the DfT in England and Wales. Here ScotRail is working in partnership with TS to promote continuing development for the benefit of all Scotland.

Both Alex Hynes and Bill Reeve (Rail Director, Transport Scotland) are looking forward to the transformation to travel on the Highland Main Line that will come with the refurbished HSTs. BR said that in rail terms there had never been a more exciting time for the Highlands with expansion,

improved quality and reduced journey times.

James Jackson of Systra gave a detailed talk about the proposed sleeper service from Thurso to the Central Belt which would enable passengers from Caithness and Orkney to travel overnight to Edinburgh or Glasgow. Thought is being given to carrying parcels and other small freight, taking advantage of the premium charged by companies, such as Amazon, for deliveries to parts of the north of Scotland. It is thought that the sleeper's economics might be similar to other British sleeper services.

There was a piece of bad news about the Inverness Station Improvements on which work will begin later this year. The intention is to pedestrianise Station Square but this is being thwarted by the Royal Highland Hotel which has invoked the terms of a 125-year lease to retain its eight parking spaces, which it deems essential for its business. So far, talks to resolve this have been unsuccessful.

Other speakers covered matters such as cycle statistics, the proposal for a stretch of the Kyle line to be shared with road traffic to avoid the £80m cost of replacing a section of road prone to rock falls, and the plans and aspirations of the two Community Rail Partnerships in the Highlands.

GRASPING THE OPPORTUNITIES

WHAT IS IN THE PIPELINE?

The 'pipeline' is the Scottish Government's new process for deciding which enhancement projects will find favour and funding in the future. Some of our committee members have been attending seminars to find out more about this during April. What we are looking for, of course, is not process but completed upgrades, and the Lentrans Loop is number one for the Far North Line!

HIGHLAND MAIN LINE

The HML is still waiting for its CP5 enhancement of improved loops and signalling at Aviemore and Pitlochry. Work has now begun to lengthen the southbound platform at Pitlochry. The Transport Scotland website on 14 April stated "Detailed information on the necessary works are anticipated Spring 2018". We are promised completion and a new faster timetable with extra trains by 2019.

New trains are coming. Will the ScotRail HSTs have a Quiet Coach? Will the East Coast *Azumas* be slower than the existing train on the HML gradients and will they have comfortable seats and catering (particularly satisfying hot food) appropriate to an eight hour journey from London? What will the new Caledonian sleepers, partly paid for with £50m from the UK government and £60m from the Scottish government and operated by Serco, be like? There are lots of questions but we should know the answers next year.

INVERNESS INTERCHANGE

The proposal by Royal Mail to vacate their Inverness building on Strothers Lane between the bus and railway stations has once again given an opportunity


to design a much better public transport interchange. "Too good an opportunity to miss" was the *Press and Journal's* headline on 13 April and their editorial stated "When you consider what a major tourist magnet the Highland capital is to travellers from around the world, it is odd that its bus and rail stations are not side by side for convenience. This rare opportunity to bring them closer together must be grasped quickly."

This author remembers walking round this area with our late Vice President, Frank Spaven, in the previous millennium and a little more recently with a former Highland Council Director of Planning. The problem has always been finding a funding package and getting landowners to agree that it would be in the public interest to do this. I would go further and say that Scotland's reputation is at stake. For one of our biggest industries, tourism, and for the second most visited part of Scotland, after Edinburgh, it is a national strategic imperative. Let us have a Scottish Government lead on this to make it happen and at the same time to considerably improve access by the HML - *please!*

Will the pipeline help in all of this by providing capacity and speed on our Highland railways and construction of new freight facilities where needed? Will we grasp the opportunities? Surely we have got beyond STOP (Studies Transport Only Procrastination) and we need to press GO (Grasp Opportunities) on all these environmentally sustainable improvements.

GO FOR IT!

Richard Ardern

Find us on  FoFNL member, *Friends of Brora Station's* Andrew Bridges, suggested to me at the end of 2016 that we should really have a Facebook page. He also kindly offered to help set it up. We finally got the page up and running in May and Andrew agreed to be an additional administrator. This is something I've been very grateful for as he has done a lot to spread the word, getting likes and followers.

We have been very pleased with our 'page reach' - the number of people who had one of our posts reach their screen - which totalled nearly 10,000 at the end of March.

If you haven't visited the page yet please do. Along with posts about all sorts of things relevant to the Far North Line we have a weekly post displaying the latest graph of train punctuality compiled by our Secretary, Malcolm Wood. The figures he assembles are incredibly useful to FoFNL when discussing things with ScotRail and Network Rail. We are hoping the page will develop into a place where users of the line post their experiences and thoughts.

www.facebook.com/fofni

Ian Budd

CLIMATE CHANGE AND MODAL SHIFT

In March the Scottish Government published its Climate Change Plan which looks ahead to the Climate Change Bill. This included a very welcome increase in the target for transport emissions reduction, up to 37%. The declared intention to phase out the sale of new fossil fuel

Transport and the Climate Change Plan: Improved targets welcome, but Plan leaves much to be desired for sustainable transport.

Gina Hanrahan, Acting Head of Policy, WWF Scotland

vehicles by 2032 as well as a doubling of funding for cycling and walking is a major part of this.

INNOVATION FUND

Interestingly from the railway perspective is the announcement of a £60m innovation fund, part of which is to be directed to transport innovation. Vivarail's new battery-operated D-

Trains have a range of 40 miles and only 8 minutes is needed to recharge (or 50 miles with a 10 minute charge). A small proportion of the innovation fund would pay for a D-Train unit, and recharging facilities, to provide a shuttle service from Thurso to Georgemas Junction thereby cutting nearly half an hour off journeys to Wick. This would indeed be innovation.*

GIGANTIC SUMS

The plan still includes a 27% assumed increase in vehicle kilometres by 2032 - if this forecast is used to shape transport and land-use planning decisions the recent trend to spend gigantic sums upgrading roads instead of railways will continue unabated.

Gina Hanrahan commented, "The plan remains technology heavy, and light on behaviour change. Much more work on managing demand for road travel and encouraging modal shift is still needed."

**Of course, if the chord at Georgemas Junction, allowing trains from the south to reach Thurso without reversing, were to be built, several more service options, using a shuttle, would be available.*

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Prototype D-Train
Photo: Vivarail

RAIL COULD TAKE THE STRAIN OFF OUR ROADS

Transport Scotland's 2017 guide to rail freight – Delivering Your Goods – highlighted the crucial role played by rail in the transport of whisky from Scotland to foreign markets. One of the key positive outcomes of the otherwise infamous Beeching Report of 1963 was the development of a network of container terminals linked by fast, fixed-formation Freightliner trains. Terminals in Glasgow, and later Coatbridge, became central to the whisky supply chain – and in 2018 Coatbridge Freightliner still provides crucial daily links to Britain's big four deep sea ports at Felixstowe, Southampton, London Gateway and Liverpool.

This article by FoFNL member David Spaven, Scottish Representative, Rail Freight Group, first appeared in The Scotsman on 4th April 2018

However, southbound movements of the finished product represent just one element of the whisky supply chain. Every year nearly 1.5m tonnes of bulk spirit is shifted from the north of Scotland to maturation sites and blending plants in Central Scotland – but 100 per cent of this traffic has been on road since 1992. Individual malt distilleries are far too small to serve by direct rail connection, and even substantial grain distilleries have seen their dedicated rail sidings fall into abeyance in the face of intense road competition.

In an attempt to find a more sustainable solution – which would also be competitive with road haulage – the regional transport partnership, HITRANS, pioneered the Lifting the Spirit trial train service from Elgin to Grangemouth in 2013, part-funded by the European Union. This attracted support from distillers and the wider food and drink sector, with the Scotch Whisky Association

concluding that the trial “demonstrated real appetite across the supply chain for change”.

Many lessons were learned, but more than four years on – in the absence to date of sufficient commitment and collaboration between the whisky sector, the rail industry and the Scottish Government – the roads are still taking all the strain. Complete dependence on road haulage has other down sides, both in terms of climate change (CO₂ emissions), road damage and road safety, with lorries disproportionately involved in fatal road accidents. There are particular worries along the single-carriageway A95 through Speyside, where half of all HGV movements are whisky-related, and on the A9 to the south which sees around 50,000 long-distance whisky vehicle trips annually.

Yet an integrated road-rail option is perfectly feasible, with convenient mothballed railheads located at Elgin and Keith. And the Scottish Government's 2017 rail freight strategy took an upbeat line which should encourage prospects for whisky by train: “We will galvanise efforts to overcome the technical, cultural and regulatory challenges towards a ‘can do’ approach, with the needs of rail freight customers at its heart.”

“We will invest, along with the industry, in the whole system solutions and innovations which can meet the demands of the modern market, for the benefit of Scotland's economy, its environment and its communities.” In Central Scotland – with appropriate pump-priming from the Scottish Government – rail is well-placed to make a breakthrough at key spirits destinations, which could be served by a shuttle train service linking Speyside, maturation and bottling plants, and hub container railheads at Coatbridge, Grangemouth and Mossend.

The largest grain distillery in Europe, at Cameron Bridge, has its own sidings connecting with the mothballed Levenmouth branch line, the subject of a grassroots campaign for the return of passenger and freight trains to this neglected corner of Scotland. It is just two miles by road from Cameron Bridge to the major bottling plant at Leven. Other large grain distilleries sit beside operational railways at Invergordon and Girvan, with opportunities to transport wheat, as well as spirit, by train. At Cambus/Blackgrange, the largest bonded warehouse site in Europe lies adjacent to the Stirling-Alloa railway, while the massive

Shieldhall bottling plant in south west Glasgow is less than a mile by road from a mothballed freight railhead at Deanside. Major maturation complexes in Dumbarton, Drumchapel and Dalmuir are on average only 12 miles by lorry from Deanside or an alternative railhead at Elderslie.

The scope for rail to provide a high-quality, sustainable alternative to road is clear, but progress is crucially dependent on a strategic perspective – and collaboration between the private and public sectors – in order to realise the substantial commercial, economic and environmental prizes on offer.

WE NEED TO PUSH MORE FREIGHT ONTO RAILWAYS

This letter was published in The Herald on 27th March and contains some startling information.

The article on a new car tax licence by the anonymous *Pinstripe* does not, as he or she advertises him or herself "tell it straight" ("*How a new car tax licence will solve our road problems*", *Herald Business*, March 26). In fact the article is definitely squinty, as a car tax capped to protect HGVs would do little to ameliorate our problems with potholes as they are by far the worst offenders. Also, by taxing only vehicles owned and registered in Scotland, many of the culprits would escape this net.

It has been known for years, and heavily researched, that HGVs exponentially damage roads. I quote here an excerpt from an article by Philippa Edmonds and published by the Campaign for Better Transport on March 13, 2017: "Lorries do cause far more damage to foundations and structures of roads than cars because the damaging power rises exponentially as weight increases. This is called the Generalized Fourth Power Law."

"The Generalised Fourth Power Law is the most commonly agreed method to approximate the relative impact of vehicles on

roads: the damage caused to the structure or foundations of a road is related the axle weight of the vehicle by a power of four. This means that a six-axle, 44-tonne truck is over 138,000 times more damaging than a typical, small, one-tonne car (such as a Ford Fiesta) with two axles."

There is much more in the same vein but I will leave it to fellow readers to do their own research.

As an industrial engineer I was trained that it is far better to prevent damage than repair it. Therefore the best solution is to push more freight on to the railways, open more railway depots and make most long-distance freight movements by rail, then onwards to final destination by lighter trucks. An added benefit of this, particularly south of the Border is that more miles would be completed sans diesel as [many of the] railways are electrified in England. Perhaps in time we will be similarly blessed by the knock-on effect of much fewer diesel emissions and healthier folk, if and when we too have electrified [intercity] railways.

Ian M Forrest, Laurencekir

INVERNESS: 'SOMEWHERE IN THE SOUTH'

It was in the 1930s that closure of the uneconomic lines – in other words, all of them – north of Inverness was first considered. And, despite the invaluable part played by the Far North Line during two world wars, the prospect of abandonment loomed again in the early 1960s. But the route, unique in Britain, was reprieved and is now going strong. Sensible economies had already been made: in June 1960, 20 stations, chiefly at the south end of the line where alternative transport was available, were closed to passengers, enabling services to Wick and Thurso to be accelerated by around 40 minutes. Sulzer Type 2 diesels replaced 'Black Fives' in 1961, so there was just one year of steam working to the accelerated schedules. How did it cope?

Alastair Wood found out when he travelled to Thurso in August 1960 on what had become the 6.30am from Inverness. But it retained its

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

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

Part 3 (of three) recalls an August 1960 run, during the last year of steam on the FNL, logged by Alastair Wood.

very mixed formation, comprising one four-wheeled van for Dingwall, two ex-GWR bogie milk vans for Kyle of Lochalsh, a former Great Northern bogie van for Wick and another for Thurso, a BR bogie van and an LNER composite coach working through from Glasgow to Wick, two LMS coaches and a van for Wick, two LMS coaches for Thurso, an LMS

restaurant car for Helmsdale, and a four-wheeled van for Bonar Bridge!

Although within the 425 tons tare limit from Inverness to Invershin, this 400-ton heterogeneous caravan demanded hard work from a single 'Black Five', and 45461 did well to drop only half-a-minute to Dingwall, by now the first stop. Many of the stations closed the previous June retained their crossing loops and were generally laid out for 40mph running, made possible by automatic tablet exchange. But trains could achieve higher speeds between such stations by not stopping at them, and here we have No. 45461 wheeling its 14 vehicles up to 62mph on the brief downhill beyond Lentrán. The rhythm of wheels on railjoints as the train passed would have been entertaining.

With load reduced to 330 tons gross at Dingwall, 62mph was again reached between the slacks through Evanton and at Alness, where they had to come down to 15mph. Despite a prolonged stop at Invergordon, left 10½min 'down', a sprint up to 64mph alongside the Cromarty Firth brought them just eight minutes late into Fearn, the next stop.

At Bonar Bridge, they had to pull up twice to detach the four-wheeled van, at the same time crossing No. 45165 on the 7.00am from Helmsdale. The request stop at Culrain was not required, although the sharp curve demanded a reduction to 15mph; and, across the Oykel Viaduct, stopping at Invershin did not augur well for the climb to Lairg.

Now with 320 tons gross, No. 45461 plugged away steadily, speed rising to 27½mph on the 1-in-72 before curves reduced it to 26. Restarting from Lairg on 1-in-70, they were up 25mph by the summit, presaging a moderate descent of Strath Fleet interrupted by a long

20mph permanent way slack at Rogart. The station at The Mound, closed, with the Dornoch branch, 2½ months earlier, lies at the summit of a short length of 1-in-70 which reduced speed from 49 to 40mph, and they were only three minutes late at Golspie.

climb to County March. It so happened that I was on the 6.30am from Inverness only five days earlier and I remember the two Dornoch pannier tanks, Nos. 1646/9, which had replaced the Highland 0-4-4Ts, looking forlorn – and, in the rain, wet – outside the tiny shed

Down freight at Dingwall, June 1949 (J L Stevenson)



Regrettably, the gain was lost by overtime and departure 'was 'seven down' as the Class 5 accelerated steadily to 20mph on the 1-in-60 to Dunrobin. There followed brisk but unexceptional progress along the coast, with a non-stop run from Brora to Helmsdale following the closure of Loth, at the entrance to Glen Loth where one of many 'last wolves' in Scotland was allegedly shot.

At Helmsdale, the 45-ton restaurant car was removed by 'Caley' 0-6-0 No. 57287, and the 12min station allowance was cut by 3½min. So, with load lightened to 270 tons gross, they departed only 1½ minutes late, the 'Black Five' slipping slightly in her eagerness to tackle the

awaiting their fate. Helmsdale must surely be the farthest north ever visited by GWR-designed locos!

Returning to Mr Wood's journey, No. 45461 took the 1-in-70 above Salzcraggie at a minimum of 42mph and attained 55 before arriving at Kildonan. The next climb, at 1-in-60, was mounted at 25½mph, followed by 52 at Borrobol Halt, which had escaped the June 1960 purge but was closed in November 1965. The minimum before windswept Kinbrace – Kinbrace is always windswept – was as high as 35mph, but speed would almost certainly have fallen further had the 1-in-60 climb been longer.

As a result of this energy they were on time into Kinbrace but had to pull up twice to cross No. 44801 heading the 9.20 from Wick, losing two minutes. Onwards to Forsinard the gradients are generally easier, partly at 1-in-

minutes early and, despite crossing a southbound freight led by classmate No. 44698, station time was shaved to 46 seconds, resulting in a departure ahead of schedule: not to be recommended but perhaps excusable in

**Caley 4-4-0 54473 at
Inverness, 23 May 1959
(J L Stevenson)**



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128, and here No. 45461 fell from 46 to 40mph. From Forsinard the short, sharp drop at 1-in-60 prompted a rapid acceleration to 43mph before tackling the final 1-in-60 at 29½mph,

Meanwhile, my thanks to those mentioned in the text and to the Railway Performance Society for information from its electronic archive.

Keith Farr

accelerating to 37½ on a short length of 1-in-140 and mounting the summit – surely the bleakest on any British railway – at 34½mph. At Altnabreac they were two

such a remote spot where any intending passenger would be visible a mile away!

Without exceeding 55mph, the 6.30am Inverness reached Georgemas 4½min early, Alastair Wood commenting that "45461...ran very well with the heavy train over a difficult road". But when he saw that the Thurso branch engine was 'Caley Bogie' No. 54482 he hurriedly transferred to that portion, comprising two coaches and a van!

During the development of the nearby Dounreay atomic power station, Thurso grew in importance while the fishing town of Wick declined; so Thurso ceased to be the branch and is now the main Caithness railhead, with a considerable time advantage from Inverness.

DUNROBIN'S SISTERS



[Left] HR 45 in BR days as 55053 waiting to leave Dornoch in July 1955. This was the last HR locomotive in service.

This article originally appeared in the Newsletter of the North British Locomotive Preservation Group and is reprinted with permission.

[Below] 55053 shunting at the mainline junction at The Mound later on the same day.

Photos: T J Edgington
[Colour-Rail]

In 1905-06, the Highland Railway built a small class of four locomotives for use on some of their lightly laid 'Far North' branch lines. They were the last locomotives to be built at Lochgorm Works in Inverness and their design was credited to HR Locomotive Superintendent Peter Drummond. However, these engines were near clones of the locally-based Duke of Sutherland's 'Dunrobin' locomotive that had been designed and built by Sharp Stewart & Co in Glasgow in 1895 and it is widely believed that Lochgorm Works simply 'borrowed' the existing drawings to create the new engines.

Known as the 'W' Class, all four locomotives passed to the LMS Railway at the Grouping of 1923, where they were numbered 15051-15054 and were unclassified until 1927 when they were given a classification of 1P. Locomotive 15052 was withdrawn in 1930, and 15054 followed in 1945, but the other two survived into BR days to



become Nos 55051 and 55053. These spent their final years based at Helmsdale shed for working on the Dornoch branch which required locomotives with exceptionally light axle loadings. By the time they were finally taken out of service in 1956 and 1957 respectively. They were the last former Highland Railway locomotives still in use.

[Right] The now preserved 'Dunrobin' is shown for comparison in 1950 en route to becoming a static exhibit in Kent. The cab was unusually large, with a 4-person upholstered seat and fully closing windows for the comfort of guests. Having moved to Canada in 1965 'Dunrobin' was purchased by Beamish Museum in 2011 and repatriated. It is currently being overhauled at Bridgnorth Works on the Severn Valley Railway and will hopefully be back in service later this year.



THE FAR NORTH LINE AND THE HIGHLAND LEAGUE FOOTBALL SUPPORTER

The Scottish Highland Football League (SHFL) was born on 4th August 1893 in a smoke-filled room of The Workmens' Club in Inverness. The founder-members were all local town Clubs – Caledonian, Camerons, Citadel, Clachnacuddin, Thistle and Union – but when, within weeks, they were joined by Forres Mechanics and Ross County (Dingwall), the Highland Railway Company had a brand new set of customers. The teams which have competed in North football for the past 125 years have constantly changed. The initial Inverness power base weakened as the League embraced communities to the east. The one common thread between all the clubs is that their players, officials and supporters have used the trains to travel to and from matches.

The grounds of many clubs such as Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Rothes, and Nairn County were (or still are) a "stone's throw" from the local station. Indeed Nairn's ground is named Station Park. Of today's SHFL clubs all, with one exception (Formartine United

in Pitmedden), have been or still are served by the railway. Junior clubs have also used the trains, indeed Inverurie Locomotive Works F.C. used their local railway connections to allow the early afternoon northbound train from Aberdeen to make an unscheduled Saturday stop for visiting teams to alight. Interestingly, this club, nicknamed "The Railwaymen", embraced the new-fangled charabanc as early as 1925 to travel to play Banff F.C.

The massive increase in private car ownership and the development of coach travel from the 1950s led to a reduction in football supporters using trains. The railway "special" has all but disappeared, although Inverness Thistle hired a special train to take 400 supporters to Ayr for a Scottish Cup tie as late as 1973. Incredibly and unthinkable today, the Glasgow Rangers Football Club players and officials travelled by train (first

class) to Dingwall to play Ross County (then in the SHFL) in the same competition in January 1966. Today's players and officials travel exclusively by bus to and from games. Ross County aside, however, the Far North Line has not benefited to the same extent as, for example, the Inverness to Aberdeen line from the football supporter. This is because, until 1963, there was no representation in the SHFL north of Dingwall. In that year Brora Rangers were admitted, to be followed by Wick Academy in 1994.

Today's rail service fits rather neatly for Brora. The 10.41 ex Inverness dovetails with either the 07.15



Dudgeon Park Stand. Photo: Chris Powell

or 08.19 ex Aberdeen and arrives in Brora at 12.57. This gives time for lunch and/or a couple of pints before the 15.00 kick-off at Dudgeon Park. The 18.00 return departure from Brora is perfect for another couple of pints or, indeed, to accommodate any extra-time and/or penalties in the event of a cup-tie. The only downside for those travelling back east from Inverness is the wait from 20.10 to 21.33 in the Highland Capital, although that does give time for a bite to eat or, yes, you've guessed it, another couple of pints. The accompanying mood to these refreshments is often tempered by the football result on the day! The length of the journey to Wick does not lend itself to rail travel (without an overnight stay) with the train arriving only four minutes before kick-off and departing at 16.00 (half-time). However, an overnight in Mackays is by no means an unpleasant experience, and there is plenty of time

to enjoy a long, leisurely breakfast before catching the Sunday 11.58 south.

I am rather disinclined these days to risk the Far North Line, given the extremely poor publicity which it receives over reliability. I am afraid that its reputation goes before it and I have a morbid fear of being stuck at a remote railway station with no communication with the outside world. I have used Altnabreac regularly as a base for walking in the Flow Country. However, this football season, I hit upon a compromise whereby I combined car and train on two occasions. My better half is in love with shopping in Dornoch, which is a Saturday afternoon "fate worse than death" as far as I'm concerned, but she agreed to deposit me onto the train, drive to Dornoch, and then drive on to Brora to collect me after the game. This is what happened on both occasions and I have to report that, despite some positives, the experiences have done little to diminish the tarnished image of the Far North rail service in my mind.

On Saturday 19th August (2017), a sunny and warm summer day, I was deposited at Golspie to

went uncollected. At Brora the poor lassie, who was looking decidedly trauchled, prioritised getting the train, already 10 minutes behind schedule for the Forsinard crossing, moving on. This confirms my previous suspicion that the passenger loading figures for the Far North Line are seriously flawed (on previous journeys the former Club 55 tickets did not account for some of the more remote stations). For the record, several supporters of both teams (Brora Rangers and Inverurie Loco. Works F.C.) alighted, including the famous "Chuff-Chuffs" band of the Locos (who thankfully had refrained from striking up on the train).

My second experience took place on Saturday 27th January (2018). Most will immediately appreciate the contrast in weather between the two dates. I was dropped off on this occasion at Rogart, the request stop, and after buying my lunch at the very friendly local store, I headed along Platform 2 to the waiting room to await the 12.34 and to enjoy my refreshment. It was locked. I pondered whether to sample the draughty bus shelter on the

opposite platform, but with no obvious means of safe crossing and the need to return over the line when my train approached, I decided to veer on the side of personal safety. As a strong squall hit the station from the west, I crouched behind the end of the station building. At this point, my paranoia about being stranded kicked in. I searched in vain for an indicator board and, on discovering that the public information telephone link was out of action, I telephoned the ScotRail Customer Relations number from my mobile. That was even more concerning as the girl at the other end (at least I got an answer) had never heard of Rogart or Brora and became confused as to which direction I and my train were travelling.

I spelt out both station names several times and, eventually, she discovered the train had left "somewhere called Fearn" on time. I have to say that I was mightily relieved to hear the toot from the train as it approached Rogart, although I had previously taken the precaution of checking the mobile of herself in Dornoch was both working and switched on – just in case!



A better day at Rogart!

Photo: David Fasken

catch the 12.46 on to Brora. I was much encouraged to discover that I was joined by 31 fellow travellers on the platform and that the train was already very full on arrival. However, the downside was that the conductor had no chance of selling tickets, and with several folk boarding and alighting at both Dunrobin and Brora, fares

The train was bang on time, warm and welcoming, and indeed arrived three minutes early into Golspie. The conductor was pleasant but, after fiddling with her technology for several minutes, she announced that her ticket machine had broken down and "I'm afraid you'll just have to go free". What happened to a back-up manual fare schedule and old-fashioned mental arithmetic? I was astonished – more money lost and another statistic that never was! There were 16 people on the train (two off, one on at Golspie) and 12 Brora Rangers and one Inverurie Locos supporter (me) got off at Brora. Three passengers remained on the train to travel further north. This means that, between Rogart and Brora at least, 81.25% of passengers were supporters of the SHFL. At least I think they were, but some may have been somewhat disorientated by the train's internal electric indicator which was announcing "The train is now approaching Lairg" as we entered Brora. Perhaps some were looking to buy sheep?

While the train was on time, indeed running ahead of itself, the negative aspects do little to dissuade travellers of the notion that this is a line in serious decline, a line uncared for, and a line where little thought is given to supporting aspects of the journey, let alone the passenger. The Rogart wait was a particularly miserable one. I felt quite deflated and depressed and it has done little to encourage me to repeat the experience. I have to temper this final comment, in fairness, by what happened at the match. It was abandoned after four minutes at 0-0 due to the high winds and I had to wait 30 minutes to be rescued from Dornoch. As for the Brora lads, they only had just under three hours to wait in the Sutherland Arms for the return train! I hope it ran on time!!

David Fasken

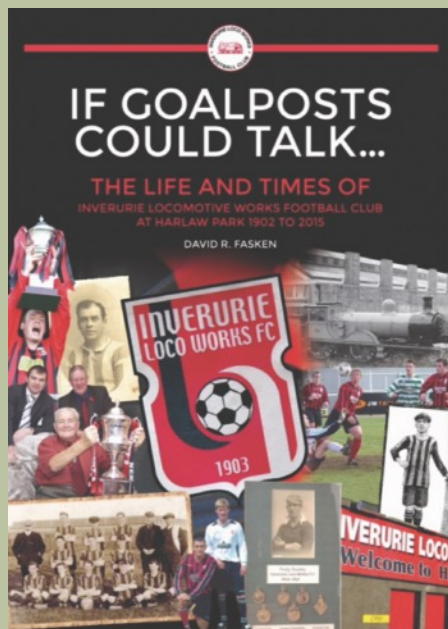
Editor's Note: The FNL has been far more reliable in 2018, with punctuality as good as the rest of the network.

The front cover of David Fasken's recent book (2015) on Inverurie Locomotive Works Football Club.

As well as charting the social history of one of Scotland's lesser known teams through 99 years of Junior football and the transition to Senior level within the Scottish Highland Football League in 2001, the book relates the establishment of the Works in Inverurie between 1898 and 1905 and its demise in 1969.

Even in Junior days Inverurie Locos played regularly against Highland League clubs such as Peterhead, Fraserburgh, Elgin City, Buckie Thistle and Ross County. The Club supplied many players to Highland League clubs down the years. On Saturday 3rd August 1968 Locos lost 4-3 to Brora Rangers in a pre-season friendly at Dudgeon Park, although the mode of travel to that match is not recorded.

However, as far back as Monday 26th July 1954 a party of 17 Inverurie Loco. Works F.C. officials and players travelled from Inverurie to Thurso by train to catch the MV *St. Ola* to Orkney and, incredibly, on that same evening they faced an Orkney Select at Bignold Park in Kirkwall. Perhaps not surprisingly, Locos lost 6-4 in an ill-tempered match, but the two teams drew a second game 3-3 the following night, before Locos caught the MV *St. Ninian* to play matches in Shetland. The Inverurie Locos centre-forward on that trip was Norman Davidson, who signed for Aberdeen the following year and went on to score the winning goal for Hearts against Kilmarnock in the 1962 Scottish League Cup Final.



CULRAIN STATION

Thoughts from FoFNL member and Culrain resident Micheal Keats

Although the line passing Culrain is celebrating its 150th anniversary this year, the station itself was not opened until 1871. My own use of the station goes back just 20 years. Then, there were 3 trains on a weekday in each direction; now there are four. In particular since the inception of Invernet, it is now possible to commute to Inverness and be there well before 9:00. There are two regrets. The southbound train that passes through Culrain around 9:00 no longer stops there and the 17:12 from Inverness terminates at Ardgay instead of continuing to Lairg. So, some of my journeys to Dingwall or Inverness have to be made from Ardgay rather than Culrain.

Then, the station was well used both by hostellers from Carbisdale Castle youth hostel and by the inhabitants of Culrain. We were sometimes entertained by Japanese hostellers dancing because of the midges! In those days I was seldom the only person catching the train. Now the castle is in private hands so the hostellers are no more and, sadly, many of the people from Culrain that used to take the train have passed on. (The midges, alas, are still with us.) As a result, when I now go to catch a train there, I am usually the only person waiting.

In the early days (my early days), some trains automatically stopped at Culrain whilst others stopped only on request. My late partner Iain was, on one occasion, returning from a trip to Tain when the train forgot to stop. By the time Iain found the conductor and the conductor had spoken to the driver, the train was half way over the Shin Viaduct [a.k.a. Oykeil Viaduct]. However the train was then reversed back into the station so that Iain could get off. I was lucky and never got carried past my stop, but I know of several others who were carried on to Invershin or, one occasion, as far as Lairg. Now trains stop at Culrain only if a request has been made. This is working much better because the scope for confusion both by passengers and by train staff has been removed.

Over the last two years. I have made nine return trips from Culrain to Berwick. The weak link in this journey is very definitely the Highland Main Line between Inverness and Perth with trains crowded and prone to delay. Twice the delays have been so great that I have been able to claim a total refund of the open return fare of over £90.

BRORA STATION

Brora and District Action Group, the village Development Trust, has just been given permission by ScotRail to brighten up the hoardings on Brora Station with some community inspired artwork. The members are currently developing ideas and gathering funding for this project.

TIMETABLE OUT OF TIME

In November 2017 there were warning signs that Network Rail's UK-wide timetable preparation system was having difficulty keeping to schedule with some changes for the December 2017 timetable still being worked on less than two weeks before issue.

Work on finalising parts of the December 2017 timetable were delayed because NR diverted resources to the "May 2018 Offer" which had to be with the Train Operating Companies by 17th November. For passengers this meant that the normal arrangement of being able to purchase tickets at reduced rates up to 12 weeks before travel was suspended.

Although the May 2018 Working Timetable was completed during November, large parts had to be rewritten due to decisions to incorporate changes caused by electrification and new train fleets in England, as well as the non-arrival of the new electric trains for the Edinburgh-Glasgow route.

The process is now so far behind schedule that the reduced price advance ticket purchase facility is now down to six weeks or less for the duration of the May timetable.

Had Network Rail been devolved so that the 'Scotland Route' was autonomous, these timetable problems would have been largely confined to England.

For the FNL this means that some journey time reduction resulting from various improvements will not appear until at least the December 2018 timetable.

ANOTHER OVERSEAS COMPARISON : VANCOUVER ISLAND

The former logging town of Chemainus on Vancouver Island was the inspiration for Invergordon and other mural towns around the world. On hearing that the Island's Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railroad operated a



Chemainus mural. Photo: Sandy Colley

passenger train using the famous Budd Railcars, North America's only successful diesel multiple-unit, FNE had to find out more, but what follows should make us grateful for what we have got.

Built originally for shipping, lumber and coal, the railroad connected Courtney with Esquimalt, the commercial port and naval base for Victoria. Latterly the Malahat Dayliner ran daily from Nanaimo in the island capital Victoria to Courtney and back, offering tourists an insight into life on the Island's eastern shore along the 362-km route with a journey-time of 4 hours 45 minutes. Canadian national rail operator VIA Rail began running the service in 1979 with a single or pair of the iconic stainless steel railcars.

Campaigners saved the train from several closure threats. However it was suspended indefinitely on March 19, 2011, due to track replacement work. Prior to further inspection of the track, service along the segment between Nanaimo and Victoria was originally planned to resume on April 8, but lack of funding prevented any of the work from taking

place leaving the service out of operation for three years. A temporary bus replacement was brought in for the service after the closure, but dropping passenger numbers of less than ten per day caused the service to be discontinued on August 7. On May 10, nearly two months after suspension, the old Budd cars were moved from the roundhouse in Victoria to a secure yard in Nanaimo, in future hopes of starting commuter service from there. On November 5, they were taken off the island to be returned to central Canada, to be replaced by a new three-car train if service resumed. However, in February 2012, the 6-kilometre (4 mi) stretch of track from Esquimalt Station to downtown Victoria was torn up due to the condition of the Johnson Street Bridge, planned to be replaced by a new, wider one which nevertheless does not have enough room to place rails along the side of the road again, and therefore Esquimalt Station became the end of the line.

Victoria terminus 1994. Photo: David Spaven



In July 2014, following successful securing of funds from the local, federal and provincial governments to replace trackage and repair bridges along the line, Via Rail reached an agreement with Southern Railway of Vancouver Island and the Island Corridor Foundation to resume island passenger rail operations. Service between Victoria and Nanaimo was expected to resume in May 2015 with service between Nanaimo and Courtenay

beginning later in summer 2015. But, as of April 2015 repairs to the track had not commenced, and it seemed that there would be no resumption of passenger service on the line before 2016–17 at the earliest.

Ownership has been bought from an American



Pair of Budd Railcars on the line on 4th August 1993. Photo: Sandy Colley

Company by a Rail Trust, the Island Corridor Foundation with the blessing of the British Columbia Government and money from local municipalities. Via Rail still owns the right to operate a passenger service, but the key freight service to a large pulp mill at Port Alberni, terminus of a branch from Parksville on the 'main line' was suspended in November 2014 following a risk assessment after the disrepair of the track had been continuously slowing train speeds down. No timeline was known for when service would resume.

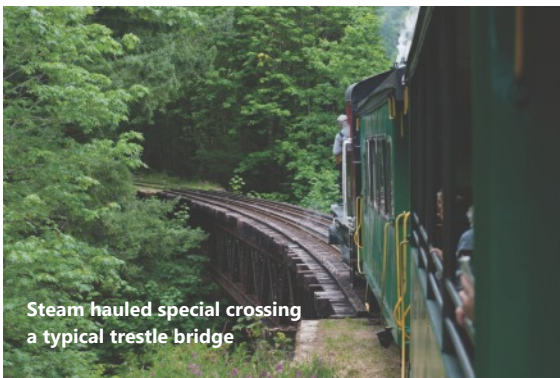
The impediments to restoration are money and Aboriginal Rights. Each municipality through which the rail runs has to come up with its proportion of the money which will be matched by the various levels of government up to the total amounts. Not every municipality is "on board": it could become a success, perhaps as a commuter train with alongside a non-motorised, multi-use corridor for walking and cycling, but one group says it's time to bury the dream of reviving passenger rail service on Vancouver Island and embrace a different future — one where the currently

unused rail network becomes a series of recreational trails. And the issue of Aboriginal Rights has seen at least one Band (or clan) file a lawsuit, claiming rights to their land upon which the railway runs in the belief that it was never ceded to the Crown or the railway company. Meanwhile the Engelwood logging railway in the north of Vancouver Island, last of its kind in the whole of North America, closed as recently as 7 November 2017, leaving a heritage operation at Port Alberni as virtually the Island's only surviving working railroad.

To mark the E&N's 130th anniversary, in April 2016 a visiting Island Explorer Excursion Train gave a couple of public runs along the E&N Corridor from Nanaimo to Wellington and the ICF hosted a family-friendly day including tours of the train, music and fun for train enthusiasts of all ages at the historic Nanaimo Train Station. Unfortunately for a country founded on railways, Canada has largely turned its back on at least passenger trains. Only a tourist train now reaches Calgary, the route to Churchill on Hudson Bay has been suspended indefinitely owing to flood damage, The Ocean using overnight stock built for the Channel Tunnel is the only passenger train in the entire Maritime Provinces, and most commuter lines in Toronto and Vancouver run only in the peaks. Suddenly our four trains a day through Invergardon to the Far North don't look so bad after all!

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John Yellowlees



Steam hauled special crossing a typical trestle bridge

A RAILMAN REMEMBERS

7 – THE MUSIC STATION

Being the sole worker at an outpost like Fearn could get lonely, so I had a little transistor radio for company. As far as music went, we had Radio 1 in mono. And that was it. The pirates were long gone; commercial stations were just starting, but it would be another eight years before Moray Firth Radio arrived to surprise everyone and transform the Highlands. In 1974 the music was frankly terrible; glam rock and novelty singles dominated. The only record I enjoyed that year was Midnight at the Oasis, a sexy laid back jazzy song which somehow made it through the mediocre playlist.

Luckily I had my trusty Yamaha acoustic guitar, so I used the time between the trains to pick a few tunes. One of the posties took a particular interest.

“I used to play a bit myself, trad jazz, you can’t beat it.” Actually Jimmy was being rather modest. He had been playing in bands for 30 years and was very well known throughout the Highlands. But trad jazz was getting even further away from the music I wanted to play.

“My son plays drums and we know a guitarist, if you play bass we could have a session...”

I didn’t take it too seriously, but one weekend we borrowed some amplifiers and set up at the station. Anyone passing by would have been amazed to hear ‘Tequila’, ‘Green Onions’, ‘Yakety Yak’ and ‘Stranger on the Shore’ wafting out of the booking hall. Jimmy was really versatile, alternating between alto or tenor sax, and clarinet. He even took care of vocals when necessary. To our delight it was a full, varied sound and everything clicked immediately. With Jimmy’s repertoire we got enough material together for a set in no time.

Jimmy was tremendously excited; “Mark boy, you guys have got it, you’ve got swing” he kept saying with a glint in his eye. He had retired from playing in his fifties, and hadn’t expected to go out with another band. But here was a chance to hit the circuit one more time, and he had all the contacts we needed. With the Nigg yard in full flow, Easter Ross was like the Wild West: every pub, hotel and social club was crying out for entertainment to attract the workers, they in turn were away from home with plenty of money and one thing on their minds.

We called ourselves ‘Summer Set’, and with Jimmy’s charm and our relaxed sound, we were quickly booked up every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. A pair of secondhand Wem PA speakers got ordered from London, which arrived a week later on the midday train. We played places like the Aluminium Smelter club and the Invergordon Social Club, as well as the many neighbouring British Legions. Then the Jackdaw Hotel in Barbaraville topped and tailed the weekends with a residency every Wednesday and Sunday. It was crazy, we were playing five nights a week, and I was earning far more with the band than the railway. For a couple of mad months I couldn’t get away to take advantage of my free train travel, and I had to fight for a weekend off.

For transport, we squeezed ourselves and the gear into Jimmy’s pride and joy, a tasty red Mk II Ford Cortina. The feral atmosphere of Easter Ross during the height of the oil madness was never more apparent than on the roads; there seemed to be an above average number of car accidents in the early 70s. Young locals with new money, incomers who didn’t know the roads, all of them out partying like mad. It was a heady mix.

Despite the access to alcohol, I was never that interested in drinking at the gigs. This didn’t go unnoticed. Although I was a relatively inexperienced driver, Jimmy put me on his insurance so I could drive the band home after gigs. I was keen to get driving experience, and flattered that they trusted me enough. Although we saw a few accidents, fortunately we were never in any.



Naturally with my new found wealth, I did what any sensible nineteen year old would do: I bought an Amstrad stereo amp with speakers, and a Garrard SP25 Mk III record deck. These were proudly set up in the ticket office. Although it wasn’t a particularly expensive stereo, it’s doubtful if there has ever been a better sound system, or more music played, in any operating British railway station. While I was bopping round the ticket office, the autumn with its potato traffic was looming ever closer. But for the time being it didn’t matter. Fearn was now officially the Music Station.

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.

TRANSPORT FOCUS

Transport Focus is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Transport to support transport users. Its remit covers rail in the whole of the UK, buses and trams in England apart from London, scheduled coach services in England, and all road users of England's Strategic Road Network.

Its only remit in Scotland is rail. It is well worth having a look at their website (www.transportfocus.org.uk), to see how they look at areas of concern. It is Transport Focus which compiles Rail Users' Satisfaction surveys which cover all aspects of travel including the availability of information - one of FoFNL's main concerns.

In his editorial for the April issue of Transport User Voice, the newsletter of Transport Focus, Anthony Smith, the Chief Executive, noted an absolutely basic truth after the heavy snowfall across Britain at the beginning of March:

"Information, as ever, is key. Transport users want to know, in plain English, why decisions have been made, what the travel advice is and how disruption will be dealt with."



PIPES TO GEORGEMAS

FoFNL understands from Subsea 7 that regular pipe deliveries to Georgemas Junction are going to begin this year.

The first train is pencilled in for June, with the bulk to follow starting in August.

This is very good news for the Far North Line and it will hopefully encourage other companies to follow suit and help to clear many lorries from the A9.

With the installation of a couple of passing loops the line could begin to develop its freight potential, thus living up to the Scottish Government's avowed intent to tackle air pollution, reduce fossil fuel consumption and improve safety.

THE PEFFERY WAY

This is a plan to use the trackbed of the Strathpeffer branch of the Highland Railway, which was closed in 1946, as a dedicated pathway and cycle route for local residents and tourists. The obvious advantage of using an old railway line is that it's nearly level.

There had been a feasibility study carried out in 2008 but, due to the objections of a landowner, the idea was not taken up.

The Peffery Way Association was set up as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) in 2015 with former Network Rail director, Ron McAuley, as chairman, and the first Annual Members' Meeting was held in April 2017. In August over 60 local people organised a walk along the route, equipped with stepladders and old carpet to negotiate barbed wire fences. The second Annual Meeting took place on the 1st March 2018 and fundraising has begun with £63,000 raised so far.

To find out more visit www.pefferywayassociation.scot.

RETURN OF THE JDI?

In a talk given to Railfuture Severnside members last November, Graham Ellis, Community Rail Officer, TransWilts Community Rail Partnership expressed his frustration with Network Rail's time-consuming GRIP (Governance for Railway Investment Projects) process. He suggested it should be replaced with JDI - Just Do It!

SEA DEFENCE REPAIR

At the end of January Network Rail lodged a planning application with The Highland Council for "Remedial coastal defence works comprising rock armour and soil stabilisation". The work is necessary to repair damaged sea defences where the Far North Line runs close to the Dornoch Firth near Ardchronie Quarry south of Ardgay. The work involves replacing three sections of sea wall.

A Network Rail spokesman commented: "Changing weather patterns are putting a strain on Scotland's railway infrastructure. The repair of the sea defences is necessary to respond to this."

GWR INVASION

In the spirit of the 1957/8 incursion into HR territory by two GWR pannier tanks to man the HR Dornoch branch, here are three more examples.



[Top] 37605 and 37259 heading a return rail tour to Cardiff south over the HML at Feabuie on 2 April. Chocolate and cream coaches bringing back childhood memories to the editor.

[Right] Two former GWR HST power cars, 43145 and 43127 passing Cradlehall on 3 April, en route to Inverness for driver training.



[Left] GWR 800003 heading to the fuelling road in Inverness while up for HML testing on 28 February.

All photos:
Sandy Colley