

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



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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 picture:

158720 crossing the junction of the Far North Line and the Kyle line, approaching Dingwall with the 19:28 Ardgay to Inverness on Wednesday 23 May 2018.

Photo: **Alexander Johnson**

HEADCODE

This edition of Far North Express is overshadowed by the untimely death of Bob Barnes-Watts, one of our committee members who very sadly passed away on 13th August.

Bob, who had the most extraordinary career, including many years as a radio D.J. in the U.S., had one overriding aim in his work as a transport consultant and his involvement with FoFNL and SAPT [Scottish Association for Public Transport]. He was passionate about public transport and just wanted all operators to understand that travellers need, above all, accurate information, both real-time and printed, and connections that work, and maps.

He told me recently that in some circles he is known as the "Connections Zealot", something he was clearly proud of, whilst amused at the slightly pejorative use of the word "zealot". He had no time for unnecessary "studies" and "consultations", he wished that the money be spent instead to "Just Do It!" because in so many cases what should be done was totally obvious. If buses and trains do not connect properly at a particular place all that is required is a few phone calls to the companies concerned, and perhaps the local authority in question - not a study.

He was baffled that no comprehensive transport map of the Highlands exists, and he was puzzled that no-one has taken the initiative to set up a body, independent of the various operators, to ensure that all public transport connects properly.

Bob's passing leaves a void in FoFNL which we are unlikely ever to fill. Here are some words I have received from various people who knew him:

...Plethora was Bob's favourite word, and he did indeed have a plethora of transport and other interests. At times he seemed equally passionate about all modes of transport, but it was on how they related to each other that his focus lay. He could be steely in his determination, but soon a merry twinkle would return to his eye as a reminder of his great kindness and generosity of spirit. It became my privilege to count him as a friend, and I shall miss his effervescent wit and thorough decency.

...I had the pleasure of meeting him on a number of occasions. He was always well-informed, interesting (and interested) and courteous.

...I learned a lot from his detailed knowledge of bus as well as rail from Devon to Durness. He will indeed be sorely missed.

...Bob's encyclopaedic knowledge of public transport and other matters in the Highlands and Islands was a great help to me when I was convener.

...What I think I shall miss most was his ability to see the lighter side to the darkest of clouds.

...I'm just so sad that I'll never be able to have beers with him again in Inverness, discuss the Far North Line, public transport, bus timetables between Wick and Thurso, airport lounges and obscure airline routings - I'm delighted one of his last flights was from Bristol to Inverness via Amsterdam for the additional lounge access!

A plaque, with these words by John Yellowlees, is to be erected in the beer garden of Platform 1864 in Tain, with the kind agreement of the owner, Graham Rooney:

Remembering our friend, campaigner and timetabling expert Bob Barnes-Watts (1955-2018) who tirelessly championed all that was best in public transport.

Here is his sister Mary's description of Bob's funeral:

"The funeral was a beautiful and touching service and Bob's ashes were scattered from the sea lock into the Caledonian Canal as he wished. It was very moving and some of his great friends came together at his favourite Clachnaharry Inn to share their memories. As we returned from the funeral, as if by magic, the Royal Scotsman went past the Clachnaharry Inn, sounding its whistle as if in tribute. When Bob's ashes were scattered a rainbow appeared over Inverness - it was a reminder to 'look on the bright side of life'."

BOB BARNES-WATTS

As a tribute to Bob, rather than an obituary, we are reprinting a piece that John Yellowlees, FoFNL member and ScotRail Honorary Rail Ambassador, wrote in 2014, using Bob's own words, as background for a talk that Bob gave to the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport.

Bob's childhood ambitions were to get into railways and radio, and both gave him a heightened appreciation of the value of time.

As a clerk dealing with guards' journals at Paddington, he found himself writing to them with, among other things, answers to questions about connections.

At Penzance Station the lack of a winter bus connection to Mousehole led to him walking an attractive American girl there, and having thus walked into her life he married her.

They moved to the States where the lack of public transport in first Kansas City, Missouri and then North Carolina meant that he had to overcome his opposition to acquiring a driving licence.

Next his walking took him into a radio station where he landed a plum job, but tired of the lack of public transport so moved to Chicago where he loved the Elevated Railway.

A return to England saw Bob working on a transport website which ironically had him revisiting the U.S reporting on conferences dealing with the burgeoning electronic travel information systems industry, but radio called him again, this time to a station in Exeter which was sold to AA Roadwatch.

So he joined Wessex Trains, gained expertise in the Kadfire system of computerised timetable production and having met a new partner moved to be near her at Inverness. Bob was however no stranger to the Highlands, for his artist and headmistress parents' impecuniousness meant that each summer they rented out their home and went camping in the north of Scotland.

Thus he came to discover locations like the waiting room at Garve and the delights of the Travelpass which, using the Highlands and Islands Development Board's integrated timetable,

enabled him to enjoy such experiences as what is now Scotland's last mainland postbus route linking Lairg with Tongue six times a week via the legendary Crask Inn.

Another postbus that has not survived was from Lairg to Lochinver on which he met an American determined to "go to Laxford Bridge and take in a show" because, being in large type, it was presumed to be a big town! The Travelpass started to lose its identity when routes began to drop out with bus deregulation in 1987, and it was left to writers like Peter White to try to fill the gap left by the demise of the HIBD timetable.

The Durness/Tongue/Thurso route that operates just once a month is critical to many Lands End - John o' Groats travellers, yet may prove elusive to anyone required to search online timetable systems by date of travel. Another curse of the modern traveller is the website not kept up to date, of which Visit Scotland's is an example, still claiming that Scotland has "lots of postbuses". Bus stops across Britain sport customer information screens that all too often are not maintained in real time so can carry advice that there are "no current departures, please refer to timetables". Mind you some passengers operators even find it hard to synchronise their clocks and watches, but the public's ability to read timetables is often underestimated.

A comprehensive timetable from an organisation, perhaps Visit Scotland, is as much needed as an ability by Transport Scotland to act as an intermediary between different modes in the planning and holding of connections. Meanwhile Bob has enabled ScotRail to expand coverage of its Highland Connections leaflet so that its new edition coming out this spring will extend south to the, as far as he is concerned anyway, strategically important Rannoch/Kinloch Rannoch/Pitlochry bus link.



AGM AND CONFERENCE REPORT

This year's AGM and Conference was held in the Pentland Hotel, Thurso. The fact that we were at the north end of the line probably contributed to the smaller than usual attendance. However, we feel it is important that we hold the AGM in a different place on the line each year.

We were delighted to welcome Rhoda Grant MSP, one of our Vice Presidents, to the AGM. Sadly our other VP, Gail Ross MSP, was held up en route and didn't make it. Unfortunately our President, Jamie Stone MP was unable to attend - fingers crossed for next year.

After I read out the President's Welcome the Conference heard from four excellent speakers.

Alex Hynes (MD of the ScotRail Alliance) gave a very upbeat talk, as always. Things on the Far North Line, and ScotRail in general, looking good, as various problems are resolved - from no more 'skip-stopping' to much improved punctuality on the FNL. He mentioned that figures for revenue and journeys on the line are recovering and that significant money has been spent on signalling reliability. On-train catering, which had become very unreliable indeed, has been restored.

Alastair Dalton (Transport Correspondent for The Scotsman) gave a thought provoking view of how difficult it can sometimes be for the railways to get a good press and some of the pitfalls they should try and avoid.

Kirsty Watson (Project Manager, ScotRail) shared many of her rail experiences with us, including work on the Airdrie-Bathgate reopening and the Borders Railway. It was interesting to hear from her just how much work was involved in getting the temporary Class 365 electric trains brought in to help on Edinburgh-Glasgow - driver training, maintenance staff training and physical alterations to the trains, before any running could begin. Just like Alex, it was her absolute enthusiasm for railway work that came over.

Judith Crow (Finance and Administration Officer, Flows to the Future, Forsinard) gave us a wonderful insight into her work and motivated me to put RSPB Forsinard right at the top of places I want to visit.

The conference ended with a progress report from FoFNL member Frank Roach of HITRANS including information about the new Bus/Rail interchange being considered in Inverness, as well as the Caithness Sleeper proposal and work towards persuading more companies to use the railway for freight.

Ian Budd

PRAISE FOR SCOTRAIL CONDUCTOR

This letter appeared in the *Press & Journal* on 3rd July:

SIR, - Over the years I have read quite a few letters of criticism, usually justified, of ScotRail so I feel I have to redress the balance.

Last Thursday [28th June] I was due to travel home from Glasgow to Keith on the 6:11 p.m. train. Due to the abnormally hot conditions, which were affecting the rails, all trains from Glasgow Queen Street were cancelled or delayed until after 7 p.m. which meant we would miss the connection for Keith at Inverness.

When the train eventually left, some time after 7 p.m., the conductor came round asking for passengers who were travelling on from Inverness. Before arriving there at about 11 p.m. she had collected the numbers affected, contacted Inverness and we were told we would be met at Inverness by station staff and taken to our destinations by taxi.

I was eventually dropped off at Fochabers some time after midnight.

I feel I must congratulate ScotRail staff not only for their efficient organisation but for the trouble they took to keep us up to date on the situation.

Anne G Illingworth, Portknockie

ORR 2018 PERIODIC REVIEW

This is the response of the Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL) to this document. We are not qualified to analyse the content in detail but wish to comment on some of the matters which arise therein.

We are pleased to note that Network Rail's higher expenditure plans for CP6 include mention of increased weather resilience. It is a source of frustration that extreme temperatures and high winds, all experienced in recent times on the Far North Line can so adversely affect the running of trains which traditionally have had the edge over

This is FoFNL's response to the Office of Rail and Road [ORR] *Draft Determination - Summary of Conclusions for Scotland*

road transport when bad weather strikes. The plans for extensive clearance of intruding vegetation are particularly welcomed.

FoFNL notes the reference to a higher spend on "core electrification" which reflects Transport Scotland's extremely welcome continuing policy of electrifying 100 track kms per year - in marked contrast to the ill-advised retrenchment in electrification by the current Secretary of State, and his commitment to the unsatisfactory bi-mode trains seen in England & Wales. The shortcomings of these trains will be highlighted when they take over running of the *Highland Chieftain* and struggle to keep to time over Drumochter and Slochd on the HML. The cost overruns which occurred on the GWR, due to the lack of recent electrification design and implementation experience have not been replicated in Scotland.

It was good to see the comment that NR had "engaged well with stakeholders". We are looking forward to being kept abreast of the progress of CP6 plans once they are 'in the pipeline' as promised by NR at the Transport Scotland Rail Infrastructure Strategy Workshop in Glasgow in April.

We are particularly pleased to see a requirement for freight growth of 7.5% by the end of CP6. Currently the only freight being carried on the FNL is pipes for Subsea 7. There is an issue with the length and number of passing loops on this line, and the Highland Main Line, which needs to be addressed. There is however some ambiguity around the question of how much of this 7.5% requirement is new business. Different descriptions appear in the Annex at 3.1:

"Network Rail is required to ensure that 7.5% of that growth [of 7.5%] is new business" and later, *"at least 7.5% of the final net freight tonnage must be product new to rail during CP6"*.

There are various references throughout the document to differences between the way NR relates to the UK Government and the Scottish Government. Whilst we are aware that the present SoS does not wish to remove the anomaly that the Scottish rail infrastructure provider is accountable to the DfT rather than the Scottish Government, we feel that this will need to be revisited. We think it is unnecessarily difficult, in terms of the management of large projects, for the provider to be accountable to the funder through an intermediary. Scottish timetabling was caught up in the débâcle in May 2018 and has had some improvements deferred because of it. This would not have been the case if NR Scotland Route had been set up as an autonomous entity.

REVIEW TEAM MEETING 7 SEPTEMBER

The Far North Review Team met to discuss a summary of progress to date and the next steps for implementing future plans.

Network Rail and ScotRail are working hard with Transport Scotland on a raft of improvements to the Far North Line, some incremental and some radical.

The fruits of the discussions cannot be shared yet, as announcements will be made in due course. Suffice to say that Mike Lunan and Ian Budd came away *smiling broadly!*

FOFNL PRESS RELEASES

An important part of FoFNL's work is to issue press releases to stimulate discussion, and hopefully resolution, of issues that arise.

This year so far we have issued three Press Releases, which we reproduce here. As this magazine is distributed widely around the Scottish rail industry, government and press, we also hope that publishing them here will serve as a reminder to those able to help resolve the problems mentioned.

INVERNESS STATION TRANSPORT INTERCHANGE

WEDNESDAY 18TH APRIL 2018

Last week Royal Mail announced that it is to vacate its site in Strothers Lane, west of Inverness Railway Station. This releases the land between the present bus station and the railway station, allowing the construction of a new interchange by relocating the bus station to be next to the railway station.

The Friends of the Far North Line campaigns for improvements for travellers using the railway between Inverness and Thurso/Wick, and onwards to Orkney. A frequent element of our campaigning concerns the lack of easy inter modal interchange which sometimes makes travelling by public transport unattractive.

At a time when there is general agreement of the need to reduce road traffic, by encouraging the switch to public transport, this is an ideal opportunity to radically improve the interchange facilities in the Highland Capital. This is something of benefit to travellers and to the city itself which now has the chance to show a lead in Scotland.

It would be tragic for Inverness to miss this chance. We hope that The Highland Council will appreciate the tremendous possibilities which Royal Mail's decision offers and make rapid moves to bring about a successful redevelopment of the land beside the railway station so that passengers can transfer between buses and trains in comfort.

HIGHLAND CHIEFTAIN CONNECTIONS AT INVERNESS

TUESDAY 22ND MAY 2018

The Friends of the Far North Line are delighted to see that, as a result of Richard Lochhead MSP's comments reported in the *Press & Journal* on Monday 21 May, a Virgin Trains East Coast spokesman has expressed support for ScotRail's efforts to work with Transport Scotland to resolve a timetabling anomaly which has a train from Inverness to Moray and Aberdeen leaving at 20:04, the same time as the VTEC "*Highland Chieftain*" service from London arrives in Inverness, thus denying onward travellers a connection.

Whilst we naturally applaud all attempts to improve connections for passengers, we feel this is an ideal opportunity also to take permanent action on the connection from the 06:14 from Ardgay which arrives in Inverness at 07:43, allowing 12 minutes for onward travellers to board the 07:55 "*Highland Chieftain*" to King's Cross.

On the face of it a 12 minute connection is relatively safe; the truth of the matter, however, is that on arrival at Inverness, passengers have a fair distance to cover with their luggage to get to the London departure platform at the other side of the station. Add to this the fact that the Far North Line is single track*, and therefore prone to delay, and it is easy to see why prospective passengers from north of Inverness don't risk the train but drive down to Inverness.

This is a very undesirable outcome for the railways as, although the services are provided by different operating companies, one would expect that all efforts would be made to maintain the connection. Unfortunately, VTEC has been unwilling to hold the departure of the "Highland Chieftain" even for 5 minutes.

We very much hope that Transport Scotland, ScotRail and VTEC or their successors, are able to work out a solution to these issues for the benefit of passengers. In the case of the southbound morning services, if it is not possible to change any of the train times, an agreement to hold departures for a few minutes to maintain connections would be very helpful.

**The building of the Lentrans Loop, for which FoFNL has been campaigning for a long time, would also help to make this a more reliable connection.*

CAMPAIGNERS ATTACK 'BROKEN PROMISES' ON HIGHLAND MAIN LINE RAIL UPGRADE

FRIDAY 4TH AUGUST 2018

ISSUED JOINTLY WITH TRANSFORM SCOTLAND AND THE RAIL FREIGHT GROUP

The Scottish Government has failed to deliver on a promise made 10 years ago by the then First Minister to slash train journey times from Inverness to Edinburgh and Glasgow, say rail campaigners. To mark the 10th anniversary of the public commitment [1] to cut 35 minutes from the average journey time by 2012, rail and environmental campaigners highlight that an average of just four minutes' time saving has been achieved to date, leaving the largely single-track [2] Highland Main Line from Perth to Inverness struggling to compete with the £3bn upgrade of the parallel A9 road.

Paul Tetlaw, of Transform Scotland, the sustainable transport alliance [3], commented:

"In 2008, then First Minister Alex Salmond said that within four years the rail journey time would be cut to two hours forty-five minutes, but a decade later it remains on average around three and a half hours – yet A9 journeys are getting faster and faster as road dualling advances. The public were told that there would be additional rail passing loops and double-tracking, but all that is being delivered is resignalling of two crossing loops. Hourly passenger trains and an average journey time saving of 10 minutes are promised but with no additional track it's highly likely we'll see more delays and cancellations as more trains are squeezed onto the single track railway. Lessons need to be learned from the Borders Railway where de-scoping has created long single track sections which has led to poor performance. That's the nature of a single track railway. The Scottish Government now needs to deliver on its promises with serious investment made in the railway to ensure there is a level playing field between road and rail."

Ian Budd from rail campaign group, the Friends of the Far North Line [4], said:

"The Highland Main Line is key to the whole regional rail network. Slow journey times and unreliability between Perth and Inverness have a knock-on impact on connecting trains to the Far North Line, Kyle and Elgin, and discourage people from switching from car to train. Rail travellers are entitled to see the Scottish Government deliver on its manifesto promises and make the step-change improvements which Alex Salmond announced 10 years ago. What we have at the moment in no way equates with the government's stated transport policy."

David Spaven from the Rail Freight Group [5] commented:

'Everyone wants to see fewer 44-tonne trucks on the A9, but the current very limited upgrade to

the Highland Main Line offers little or nothing for rail freight [6]. Indeed the worry now is that rather than freight shifting from road to rail – the Scottish Government’s policy objective – we will see the loss of existing rail traffics, as the A9 gets faster and the single-track railway becomes increasingly congested. That’s economic and environmental madness. We need longer crossing loops, so that freight trains 40% longer than at present can compete much more effectively with road hauliers [7].’

The groups are looking to see firm, committed plans for doubling and electrification of the Highland Main Line as part of the Scottish Government’s newly-commenced ‘*Strategic Transport Projects Review*’ (STPR2). The original review, which reported in December 2008, concluded that investment in the Highland Main Line should be one of the three highest-priority investment priorities for the country — which makes the subsequent lack of investment all the more unacceptable. [8]

NOTES FOR EDITORS:

[1] As quoted in *The Herald* on 6 August 2008, First Minister Alex Salmond, in front of an audience of more than 100 in Inverness Town House, following a Cabinet Meeting, said:

“Railways must at least compete with the roads . . . Work being negotiated with Network Rail will cut journey times [from Edinburgh to Inverness] to two hours 45 minutes - 35 minutes less than at present. This at least makes railway travel to the heart of the Highlands, in terms of time, competitive with roads. The railway journey times will be cut by a mixture of projects including line improvement, additional passing loops, double-tracking and signalling upgrades. They will cost £54.5m and the timescale for implementation is 2011-2012”.

[2] Two-thirds of the 118-mile Highland Main Line is single-track (with nine crossing loops). The parallel A9 is entirely dual-lane or dual-carriageway.

[3] Transform Scotland is the national alliance for sustainable transport, bringing together organisations from the private, public and voluntary sectors. Transform Scotland has been running its ‘Inter-City Express’ campaign for the past few years. <https://archive2022.intercityexpress.transform.scot/site/index.html>

[4] FoFNL is the campaign group for better passenger and freight services on the Far North Line which links Orkney with Inverness and points south. www.fofnl.org.uk

[5] The Rail Freight Group represents users and suppliers of rail freight throughout Britain. David Spaven is its Scottish Representative. <https://rfg.org.uk/>

[6] The crossing loops at Aviemore and Pitlochry are being resignalled, with the loop at Aviemore lengthened – but the capacity of both loops will be taken up all day by a new hourly passenger service frequency.

[7] The Class 66 locomotives which haul the daily Stobart / Tesco container train from Central Scotland to Inverness have enough power to pull a train of 28 containers – the equivalent of 28 lorries – but the lack of long crossing loops restricts the operation to just 20 containers.

[8] The Scottish Government’s ‘*Strategic Transport Projects Review*’ in 2008 identified upgrading the HML as the third-top priority among 29 schemes across Scotland. Investment of between £200m and £450m was envisaged, including ‘additional loops, dynamic loops or lengthening of double track sections’.

On 21st August Mike Robinson, Chief Executive of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society, organised a meeting in Perth which became an unofficial follow-up to the press release. Alex Hynes, MD of the ScotRail Alliance, and Phil Matthews, Chair of Transform Scotland, addressed the meeting and a discussion about the railways to Perth, and the station itself, followed.

This was a particularly useful forum as there were representatives of Perth & Kinross Council, Perth City Development Board - including members from BT Connect and Stagecoach, Tactran, Inverness Chamber of Commerce, Rail Freight Group and FoFNL. Also present was Charles Gallagher, a Deputy Lieutenant of Perth and Kinross.



INVERNESS - ABERDEEN IMPROVEMENTS

With the completion of the major works on the western part of the line last October, including the replacement and relocation of Forres Station, the lengthening of the platforms at Elgin and the upgrading of the signalling between Inverness and Keith, attention has turned to the doubling of the track from Aberdeen to Inverurie and the associated signalling.



The first of the two 'blockades' needed on the railway has now come to an end. The second is scheduled to take place between May and August next year.

[Upper left] Don Street, Aberdeen - wider trackbed being formed.

[Above] Retaining wall construction in Stoneywood

[Left] Kittybrewster

This year's closure was to enable installation of new second track and signalling equipment between Aberdeen and Dyce. Next year's is needed for extending the double track from Dyce to Inverurie and the installation of the necessary signalling equipment.

Network Rail's Twitter feed has carried progress reports and pictures. NR kindly supplied the photographs for this feature.



[Above and Left] By 6th July a new set of points had been laid at Kittybrewster in Aberdeen.

[Below] Alex Hynes, Managing Director Abellio ScotRail Alliance putting in the final clip on the redoubled track between Kittybrewster and Dyce.

[Bottom] A line up of 66s at Raiths Farm freight terminal, Dyce. (Look closely, there are four!)
Photo: Jordan Kearney



FAR NORTH LINE UPDATE

Timekeeping has been generally better over the past few months as the Secretary's weekly reports on our website show. At the end of September he will be filing his 100th report. Well done Malcolm!

The last meeting of the FNL Review Team is also due this month and we look forward to hearing what improvements to FNL infrastructure and services are to go ahead. HITRANS' bid for money for a study on the possible reopening of Evanton station was not immediately successful but no doubt they will try again. The village mounted a strong campaign for the reinstatement of their work- and school- time bus service to Dingwall. If more local rail services between Inverness and Invergordon are proposed, Evanton could be a part of that.

Another source of future business for the line could be the proposed UK space port at Melness on the north coast which has been awarded £2.5m of initial funding. Lairg could be the passenger and freight hub for that. The historical exhibition about the railway through Lairg is open until the end of October at the Ferrycroft Centre.

We have still had no details of the £6m proposals for Inverness station improvements although invitations to tender have been sought. Following a request from FoFNL, a Highland Railcard leaflet has been published. Sadly, the pocket timetable famine at Inverness over the busiest weeks of the summer may well have lost some potential passengers. Publicity with both of these leaflets is essential to market rail services in the north.

INVERNESS-ABERDEEN UPDATE

It is wonderful to see the new two track line between Kittybrewster (Aberdeen) and Dyce timeously completed to reopen the line on 20 August after a thirteen week closure. Well done to all concerned. A similar closure next year should see the Dyce to Inverurie section completed together with modern signalling to be controlled by Inverness.

Early decisions must now be made on dualling much of the 15 mile section between Inverness and Nairn and on what happens in the middle on the 18 miles between Elgin and Keith. A four mile dynamic loop at least? Keith station and the 13 mile section between there and Huntly also merit examination. There are plenty of potential

additional passengers for a more frequent clockface timetable on this route. Freight paths are also required for potential timber and whisky related traffic. The new Co-op distribution depot and the expanded Norbord wood plant near Dalcross are not yet being served. This demand cannot be met by the continued existence of long single track sections.

2019 should see some proper intercity trains (HSTs) on the route and extra services at both ends, but for the 91 miles between Inverurie and Inverness, these crippling single track constraints will still exist. There is a long way to go yet to fully modernise this line.

HML MUST BE ABLE TO COMPETE WITH A9

Scottish Government ministers have agreed that railways should at least be competitive with roads. This is surely a pre-requisite for Government policy to limit carbon emissions by making transport less polluting and sustainable for the future.

Sadly, it does not seem to be happening yet for the Highland Main Line against the backdrop of the £3bn of investment going in to the A9, the other main player in this busy and strategic transport corridor between the central belt and the Highlands. Inverness at one end is rightly recognised as the Hub of the Highlands connecting by rail and road with three more corridors to the

north, east and west.

The regular July and August overloading of passenger trains on the HML seems to have been worse than ever this year. Part of the reason will have been the increase in tourist numbers. Tourism is one of Scotland's biggest industries. The Inverness area is Scotland's second most visited area after Edinburgh. The many stories of overcrowded trains are damaging the Scottish economy, inconveniencing many people and no doubt deterring some from using the railway again. Hopefully, it will be a lot better next year with the planned increases of train capacity and service

frequency which should be introduced by May 2019.

Dualling of the A9 is apparent to all, with new sections opened and frequent press releases and consultative meetings. A lot of work has gone on in the past five years. During this time planning for promised extra line capacity on the railway has been painfully slow with just two operational improvements at Aviemore and Pitlochry now under construction and the Scottish Government short-sightedly congratulating itself on spending less money than was allocated for CP5!! There is no sign of the suggested loop reinstatements at Ballinluig, Etteridge (near Newtonmore) and Murthly, nor of any dualling of parts of the line. [I am advised that continuing the double track section northwards from Dalwhinnie for two miles might be cheaper than rebuilding the Etteridge loop. Either would minimise delays on this 13-mile-long uphill single track section bottleneck].

Freight operators are wanting loops made longer, including at Ballinluig, so that they can operate 40% more efficiently with 28 containers on a train rather than the existing limit of 20. Much whisky related traffic to and from Speyside goes by road along the A9 to Aviemore and then on the very narrow A95 towards Keith. HITRANS funded trials which showed that much could go by rail given suitable investment in track and terminals. This has not happened and, instead, lorry speed limits have been increased on the A9 part of the journey. How is the railway expected to achieve the government target of 7.5% more new business for railfreight?

FARES POLICY

Abellio ScotRail's response to the HML overcrowding is to reduce the number of cheaper Advance tickets on sale. That is not unreasonable in the circumstances but those who are not put off from travelling on the train will pay full fare with no guarantee of a seat, sometimes standing for much of the journey with the refreshment trolley also stuck in one doorway and unable to serve the majority of passengers.

Meanwhile there is an all too easy option for Scottish residents who are aged over 60. Go by bus for free and maybe even get your refreshments paid for by the taxpayer! Increase the congestion on the approaches to the cities in particular and add to the emissions and potholes from more and more road vehicles! Trains cannot compete with this free road travel on price.

I have heard of charity board members travelling by bus all the way from Inverness to their meetings in Edinburgh. There is a train at exactly the same time but, because they are in their sixties, they commendably travel by bus to save the charity money when paying expenses.

An earlier ScotRail change of policy here has not helped. Their cheaper Advance tickets are no longer available on the early trains from Inverness because the rule has been changed back to prohibit use on trains leaving before 09.15am. The first cheaper train to Edinburgh is now the 09.41 "tortoise" train from Inverness which takes 3 hours 43 minutes and arrives at 13.24. A very far cry from

LMS Jubilee 45699 Galatea leaving Aviemore with the Great Britain tour on 23 April 2018.

Will there still be paths for this train next year when the more intensive HML timetable comes in?



Photo: Richard Ardern

the 2 hours 45 minutes headline journey time promise of 2008!

The reason for the restriction is to avoid overcrowding on morning peak services into the cities. FoFNL succeeded in getting this restriction changed to "Trains arriving in Edinburgh and Glasgow before 09.30" some years ago. This was much more competitive for the HML market and still sorted out the city problem. Sadly, ScotRail in Glasgow changed it all back again a few years ago thus making the HML less competitive once again. The remedy is in their hands!

The refurbished ScotRail Inter-City trains will completely eclipse buses for comfort. Train travel is far less stressful than driving and also gives the option of getting some work done at the same time or just enjoying the scenery which is a tremendous asset on the HML. There is plenty of scope to market the train if a better fares structure can be devised.

ACTION NEEDED

We must get a grip on sorting out this line with its increasing demand for passenger and freight services. Both the Highland and the Scottish

economies are being damaged by the delay.

The really helpful Far North Line Review Team has now been replicated for several other lines. In the past I have called for a 'Czar' to animate action on the HML. So far, I have resisted jumping on the Review Team band wagon for fear of the deleterious effects of further workload on the rail teams at Transport Scotland and Network Rail. I now believe the time has come to move the planning and implementing the many possible HML line capacity improvements up to top gear without delay.

In a Transport Scotland press release on 17 August concerning the A96, the Transport Minister is quoted as "relishing" the "huge task" of dualling the road. Please may we have a Scottish Government team which will relish making the HML the strategic railway that Scotland needs? The impressive Airdrie to Bathgate line would be the kind of standard to aim for initially. Thereafter another 30 minutes could be saved by continuing Perth and Inverness services to Edinburgh by the direct Kinross-shire corridor route which was closed in 1970 to make way for the M90. Rail passengers would relish that!

Richard Ardern

FIERY TRAIN

On Wednesday 27th June 2018 there was a crash on the A9 just north of the Cromarty Bridge. The road was closed for about 6 hours in all directions. There was a back road available but someone ended up crashing into a ditch and made that road get closed too. All buses were stopped so everyone had to get a train

This account, written by young commuter Kurt Keiro, demonstrates how the Far North Line can come to the rescue when disaster strikes on the road. Our correspondent was on the 17:12 commuter service from Inverness to Ardgay.

home or deal with waiting in this queue that was going back for what seemed like miles. For me it was just a normal Wednesday as I hadn't heard about the crash till my mother texted me when I was about to get onto the train saying she was stuck in traffic. I ended up managing to get into the train that had about 50 people standing in each coach because all the seats were used up. All the corridors of the carriages

were filled with people too. So I managed to squeeze into a corner at the train doors. Some people were actually turned away because of the number of people on the train. The trip to Beauly, that usually feels like it takes five minutes, felt like hours. I couldn't move due to being surrounded by people. That day was one of the hottest of the year hitting 30.9°C outside. With that many people in the train it felt like it was about 35-40°C. I was next to a nice guy who was just out of the pub, and he was going to the same place I was - Invergordon. He had brought up an article to do with the crash, on his phone, and explained to other people on the train what was happening. At every stop we had to get out to let people actually be able to get off the train. As I said before, my mum was stuck on the bridge with no food or water. She was waiting for about three hours so she didn't get the full waiting time but this was all happening on her birthday!

This was definitely an experience I don't want to experience again!

BARMOUTH, A LESSON FROM WALES?

I am sure the lemming rush to 'smart' ticketing will eventually run out of benefits, maybe in fact quite soon.

GUIDANCE

Passengers are only *potential* passengers until they buy their ticket. Many passengers will continue to seek guidance through the maze of ticket types (maybe reassurance too) from the knowledgeable staff in ticket offices. They also value the greater security of a staffed station over the isolation of a deserted one.

Economics dictate that not every station can be staffed of course but in the Highlands we appreciate the physical presence of railway staff at the likes of Wick, Thurso, Dingwall, Kyle, Nairn, Aviemore, Kingussie and Pitlochry together with Forres, Elgin, Keith Junction and Huntly etc. Generally these stations are only staffed for one shift from something like 7 a.m. until 3 p.m. With 'smart' being the current flavour of the year, there is a danger that the powers that be might seek to downgrade some of these staffed stations, forgetting that potential passengers might then switch to other modes or not travel at all.

COUNTER PRODUCTIVE

In many parts of Britain the removal of staff has been counter productive. In a few cases, local communities, or community minded people, have come forward to keep a service to passengers going, sometimes enhancing it. One such is Barmouth on the scenic Cambrian Coast line in west Wales. The local news sheet tells us...

"2018 sees the first appearance of a new venture at the railway station in Barmouth. Following Gwynedd County Council's decision to close the tourist information office in 2016, a local businessman has spent the last year negotiating with Network Rail, Abellio Trains Wales, and Gwynedd Council to use the building to house a variety of services for the benefit of the local community and visitors.

First off the blocks is the Ticketing Office. Initially focused on train tickets, this facility will expand during the year to support other services... Alongside the ticketing office is the Tourist Information Point. You'll also find Lounge Holidays in the station with a wide range of self catering properties... Finally, Sunset Bay Lifestyle fulfils all your needs for local souvenirs, canvas art, maps and guide books. And there is also a small coffee bar with free wi-fi".

SYMBIOTIC

I do not wish to advocate any diminution of staff on the FNL, HML and elsewhere but merely to point out that a symbiotic relationship such as the above could be developed at some of our stations. Perhaps the best example in the north at present is at Kyle of Lochalsh where the Friends of the Kyle Line run a museum with coffee also available. With the advent of the Tourist Trains (next year?) there may be scope for creative thinking to help further boost the use of our treasured lines.

Richard Ardern

Contents

10:59 train to Birmingham about
to cross from Barmouth to Morfa
Mawddach 3 July 2018

Photo: Richard Ardern



FREIGHT FAILURE

Rail passengers doubtless welcomed the recent news that Transport Scotland had awarded a £10m contract for upgrading crossing loops at Aviemore and Pitlochry as part of a wider £57m programme to enhance the largely single-track Highland Main Line (HML) from Perth to Inverness. But – compared with the steady progress of the £3bn dualling of the parallel A9 road – is that rail funding enough to make trains fully competitive with the car, the coach and the lorry?

Trace the history back to 2008, when the Scottish Government's 'Strategic Transport Projects Review' (STPR) identified upgrading the HML as one of four top priorities among 29 schemes across Scotland. Investment of between £200m and £450m was envisaged, including "additional loops, dynamic loops or lengthening of double track sections" – a far cry from the works now underway.

Government is on the wrong track with insufficient upgrading of the Highland Main Line

The upgrade of just two loops, which is driven entirely by ScotRail's new timetable – in combination with the introduction of refurbished High Speed Trains and cutting out stops south of Perth – is intended to secure an average passenger train time-saving of 10 minutes between Edinburgh/Glasgow and Inverness, plus an enhanced hourly frequency of train service between Perth and Inverness.

These quantitative improvements will satisfy Transport Scotland's 2012 'High Level Output Specification' requirement from the rail industry for the 2014-19 period, which also requires the industry to achieve the rather vaguer target of "more efficient freight operations" on the Highland Main Line. So what will the current upgrade do for rail freight and its efforts to keep heavy lorry traffic off the A9?

In practice, very little. The crossing loop to be extended at Aviemore was already the longest on the line, and at Pitlochry – the shortest loop –

there will be no extension, so lengthy freight trains will get no benefit. The Class 66 locomotives which haul the daily Stobart/Tesco container train from Central Scotland to Inverness have enough power to pull a train of 28 containers – the equivalent of 28 lorries – but the lack of long crossing loops restricts the operation to just 20 containers. So rail is 30 per cent less efficient than it should be.

Signalling improvements at Aviemore and Pitlochry may, in theory, offer some time saving for freight trains – but the two enhanced loops will be occupied by the hourly passenger train service for most of the day!

A much brighter future was promised for rail freight back in the 2008 STPR document, based on: "provision of bi-directional signalling to reduce the impact of engineering works on the route (permitting the route to remain open for freight throughout the day and week); increased length of freight loops (allowing longer freight trains); and removal of speed limits below 75 mph Permanent Speed Reductions (PSRs) for freight trains". The outcome would be that: "the freight improvements would make it considerably more attractive for freight hauliers to move containers and other goods by rail, by reducing journey times".

So modest is the Scottish Government's current plan for rail freight infrastructure improvements on the HML that there is a real danger that A9 dualling will, in practice, lead to a switch of freight from rail to road – the opposite of government policy.

A Scottish national newspaper revealed last year that an expert report commissioned by the Scottish Government – which Ministers did not intend to publish – concluded that 80 more lorries a day would travel the A9 in each direction by 2025, but rail freight's share of the market would drop by one tenth.

The report – released in response to a Freedom of Information request – concluded that: "Realistically, the shorter journey times and improved reliability offered by A9 dualling will lessen the potential switch from road to rail and all other things being equal, likely to constrain

future rail freight growth.”

In its defence, Transport Scotland is making noises about further improvements in a “next phase” of rail upgrading after 2019 – but how long can the freight railway afford to wait without seeing serious A9-inflicted damage to its existing core business?

In the admirable 2017 High Level Output Specification for the 2019-24 period, Scottish Ministers “require all reasonable steps to be taken to facilitate growth of 7.5 per cent in rail freight traffic carried on the Scotland route, of which, at least 7.5 per cent will represent a growth in new business (i.e. new traffic flows, not previously

moving by rail)”. Achieving that growth on the ground – and avoiding loss of existing freight traffic from rail to road – will be the real test of government policy.

Along the Highland Main Line in particular, the rail freight industry needs serious infrastructure investment so that it can compete more effectively against road haulage – and deliver the significant economic and environmental prizes which freight on rail offers.

David Spaven, Scottish representative, Rail Freight Group.

Article first appeared in *The Scotsman* on 29th July 2018 [this edition contains a small clarification by the author]

NETWORK RAIL DEVOLUTION

A report entitled “Is Scotland On The Right Track?” was published on 13 August. Commissioned by ScotRail franchise holder, Abellio, research for the report was carried out independently.

The writers, former UK Transport Minister Tom Harris and Mark Diffley Consultancy and Research, employed ScotPulse to conduct a survey of 1,063 people, the results of which are central to the report.

One section covers the anomaly that the infrastructure of Scottish railways, although managed in Scotland by Network Rail Scotland Route and funded by Transport Scotland, is ultimately answerable to the DfT in England - a situation not mirrored in the road sector. Here's what the report has to say about the survey results:

“More than six in ten Scots believe that all decisions about the railways in Scotland should be taken by organisations overseen by the Scottish Government, while a further 30 per cent want a combination of UK and Scottish Government oversight. Among the most frequent passengers, 93 per cent want either exclusively Scottish Government oversight (73 per cent) or UK and Scottish Government oversight (21 per cent). Arguably, the results are unsurprising given the natural preference towards devolution in wider public life in Scotland.” The UK government is unwilling to consider any change to the current arrangement.

BTP AND POLICE SCOTLAND MERGER ON HOLD

The devolution of the policing of the railways was a recommendation of the Smith Commission report in the wake of the result of the Independence Referendum in 2014.

The report offered three routes to devolution of rail policing to Scotland. The Scottish Government chose to pursue the route of abolition of the current 'D Division' of BTP, which is the Scottish division, and the taking over of its responsibilities by Police Scotland - Option 3 in the report.

It is well worth reading the report in full. It can be found at www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/reports/BTP-Scottish-Options.pdf

As a supporter of Scottish Independence, having read the report I can only think that the government's choosing of Option 3 is based on an emotional response rather than a reasoned one. Whilst I like the idea that everything done in Scotland is under Scottish control, the policing of the railways appears to be an exception. At the very least there must always be a separate body, dedicated to policing the railways, for reasons clearly explained in the report. Whether this body can, or should, be run entirely separately from the rest of the BTP would be for detailed discussion. Difficulties associated with cross-border trains may be insurmountable.

I was delighted with the news that the implementation has been indefinitely postponed until a workable solution can be found. As a much-respected colleague put it recently, “The warm arms (mixed metaphor alert) of the long grass beckon”.

GEORGEMAS PIPE TRAINS



These were scenes at Georgemas on the Far North Line this summer as deliveries of pipes for Subsea 7's bundle fabrication facility near Wick got into full swing.

This is the kind of traffic that is ideally suited to rail and scenes like these should be far more common than they are.

[Top and Right]
Arrival and unloading sleeve pipes, June 2018.
Photos: **Leon Gray**

[Bottom]
30th May, 66101
Heading south past Dorrery, near Scotsclader, to collect more pipes.
Photo:
Niall Laybourne



The geometric shapes made by the pipes, the trains, the cranes and the surroundings make for very pleasing photographs.

The summer of 2018 has also provided a calm and warm-looking backdrop to what can often be quite wild country.

It's worth having a close look at the bottom picture where Morven (706m) can be seen in the distance, complementing the horizon tree shapes.

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S5W-16005: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered: 26/04/18

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S5W-14852 by Humza Yousaf on 6 March 2018, what progress has been made in identifying the suitable public sector body to make a bid for the ScotRail franchise.

Humza Yousaf: As previously described, although a complex matter, I expect to make an announcement on the issue of a Public Sector Bidder for rail franchises in Scotland before summer recess and in line with the Programme for Government commitment.

Question S5W-16006: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered: 01/05/18

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: In his discussion with Jo Johnson MP, Minister of State for Transport on 27 March, the Minister for Transport and the Islands re-iterated the Scottish Government's long-held position that the Network Rail Scotland route should be fully devolved. Scottish Government officials have also had regular and detailed discussions with UK Government counterparts on the matter.

Changes to Network Rail's devolved structure should take place well in advance of the start of Control Period 6 in April 2019, and this point has been made to the UK Government on several occasions. Such lead in time is required to ensure that sufficiently robust governance and accountability is in place to manage the change from capital borrowing to capital grant. Also to maximise the efficiency and adaptability of the Network Rail route in Scotland as we enter the new Control Period.

RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE 16 MAY 2018

[edited excerpts]

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD):

We know that 54 class 43 high-speed trains—the old Intercity 125s—will enter service across Scotland later this year, after substantial refurbishment. What is the expected lifetime mileage capacity of a class 43 train?

Humza Yousaf:

It should be said that refurbishment of older rolling stock is not uncommon. In fact, many people in the rail industry will say that the effect of refurbishing a train—I am pleased that some of the refurbishment work in question is being done here in Scotland—can be equivalent to the provision of new rolling stock.

We expect the trains to perform to their capability for the time that we have them for the lease. They will make a transformative difference: for the first time, we will have a high-speed intercity network between Scotland's cities. *[The 'HSTs, whilst very comfortable, much more powerful and a great improvement over the current trains, will not produce a "high-speed network" as maximum linespeeds have not been raised - Ed]*

Bill Reeve (Director of Rail - Transport Scotland):

I do not think that there is any such thing as a mileage capability for a train. The question is whether we keep it re-engineered and as good as new. The trains have already had new engines fitted recently. We are putting new power-operated doors on and controlled-emission toilets in. If you are interested, Mr Rumbles, it would be worth going to have a look at the extent of the re-engineering on the carriages. They are stripped right down to the metal, all corrosion is removed and new metal is put in place.

From colleagues around the rail industry, there is a widespread appreciation that the carriages are about to come and that the refit that they are getting will make them among the most popular intercity carriages anywhere in Britain. As an engineer, I do not recognise the concept of a limited mileage for a fleet of that nature.

PASSENGER RIGHTS

Derek Mitchell, Chief Executive of Citizens Advice Scotland, and thus no slouch when it comes to consumers' rights, had an article in the *Sunday Herald* on 5 August. He described the cancellation at the last minute, and with no prior warning, of a budget airline flight from London to Edinburgh. A month later he still hadn't received even an acknowledgement of his compensation claim, while another passenger had had his rejected.

Mike Lunan discusses delays and compensation for consequential loss.

DELAY REPAY

At least Train Operating Companies (TOCs) have improved their act considerably in the last few months. Now a Delay Repay (DR) mechanism is in place on ScotRail and other TOCs, and the time at which compensation kicks in is now commonly only 15 minutes, with a full refund of the ticket price being made after a delay of 60 minutes. Compensation, which used to be by means of a voucher for use within a year, is now routinely paid directly to a bank account or credit card. We applaud this, and think it high time the airlines copied it.

CONSEQUENTIAL LOSS

However the real issue lies deeper. With the possible exception of train nuts like the present writer, most passengers travel as a means to an end: a connection, or an appointment of some kind whether business or pleasure. That a delayed train disrupts those plans is outwith the railway's responsibility to offer compensation. It should not be so. In the case Derek Mitchell encountered no alternative flight was offered for over 24 hours, necessitating an unplanned overnight stay at very short notice, and the probable loss of onward travel tickets. Consequential loss at the hands of a transport operator must be the subject of compensation. It would need legislation to impose such a duty on an operator. We should mount a campaign to bring this about.

CONTRACT

When you buy a ticket to travel on the rail network you enter into a binding contract with the TOC. The National Rail Conditions of Carriage (NRCoC) set out the rights and obligations of passengers and the TOC. For claims made under the NRCoC arrangements for losses caused by the delay and/or cancellation of a train service, you can only recover up to the price of your ticket. However, the latest version of the NRCoC makes reference to the Consumer Rights Act (CRA) 2015 that provides consumers with various rights, specifically rights where a service is not performed with reasonable care and skill. This effectively says

- that you can claim for delays via the railway's own compensation mechanisms (DR) or look to use the CRA;
- that TOCs will not normally consider claims for consequential loss – eg. taxis, missed flights, missed appointments etc., but that you can pursue a claim through the CRA route if you wish. In other words it is saying that you have statutory rights that sit alongside the railway's own mechanisms.

IRRESPECTIVE

In most instances it will still be easier to use the industry mechanism to claim for a delay as DR is paid irrespective of cause, while a claim under the CRA would require you to demonstrate fault on their part and potentially to take them to court. What this change does is to tell you that this right exists. In the past the Conditions have either excluded any liability for consequential loss or have severely limited it to "exceptional circumstances". There was no mention of you having the option of taking them to court. Exercising these statutory rights would involve you bringing a legal claim.

COMPREHENSIVE

Anthony Smith, Chief Executive of Transport Focus, the consumer rights body for rail passengers, added this: "We are pushing for a more comprehensive review of the NRCoC – a cover-to-cover review of all the terms. This will give us the opportunity to raise many of the issues that come up through our complaints process."

PANDORA LOOKS SOUTH

Long, long ago on a railway far away...

"It's going to rain for a long time. Build an ark, or you'll all drown. This is how big it's got to be: 300 cubits by 50 by 30. Now get on with it. Oh, by the way, there will be passengers and livestock."

If only the DfT had managed to order the electrification of the GWR main line as succinctly. Any builder worth his salt knows that it's the modifications after the contract's been signed that pay for the yacht. Would that the DfT were staffed, at least to a useful extent, by builders.

ELECTRIFICATION

What did we want? Electrification of Brunel's billiard table (nice and wide because of his one Big Mistake) to Bristol, and then on to Swansea. A few side bits as well. Nice electric trains to deliver the inter-city and different nice electric trains to do the more local stuff.

What have we got? Some electrification, grossly over-engineered at least in terms of the OLE stanchions, and we haven't got it yet, by the way. A decision not to electrify beyond Cardiff, which meant that purely electric trains would be no good. So we have the equivalent of a donkey engine strapped on to do the bits that the DfT de-scoped (a technical term for "couldn't see the operational idiocy for cancelling on spurious grounds of cost"). Cost saving is, of course, a perfectly reasonable and

laudable objective. Let's order really cheap seats then: that'll save a bob or two. And all the time the railway equivalent of the yacht salesmen are rubbing their hands gleefully.

Except there aren't any. If all the vast amount wasted by the hidden and unpunished ineptitude of officials in the DfT who think that it's as easy as running the Hornby Dublo on their bedroom floor was when they were 10 (a compound noun as easy to pick through as your average franchising document) were to end up in the hands of yacht builders at least there would be a benefit to be had by taxing their profits. But no. The vast waste consequent upon grown-up small boys who got it wrong by making modifications will be used as justification for more whopping fare increases in January. "They pay for all the improvements," we will be told.

Watch with me while we await the increases in fuel duty "to pay for all the new roads". Watch and grieve.

CHAOS

The Northern chaos was of course the same small boys not bothering to press on with the electrification of a bit of line that didn't seem very important in a far off county of which they knew nothing. The head small boy didn't seem to notice either, and set about blaming whomever he could.

It couldn't happen here, could it ... ?

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

CRUISE SHIPS AND TRAINS

It is Tuesday 1 May and the largest cruise ship to date has just docked at Invergordon. My first glimpse is a smudgy column of smoke from its funnels eight miles away, looking out of the window from the 7:00 Inverness to Wick train shortly after leaving Dingwall.

There are not many cruise ports within easy walking distance of a great scenic railway. The purpose of my trip is to see what the arrival of a cruise ship of this size in the Highlands looks like, and what possibilities it might offer for the Far North Line.

At closer range, MSC Miraviglia looks more like a high-rise building than a ship. No classic lines here, but I can't help feeling impressed by the size. At 316 metres long and 19 decks tall, this floating resort can accommodate over 5000 passengers. I am informed by a crew member that today's passenger complement is about 4400, of which about 3000 will go ashore. Roughly half of those going ashore will take a guided tour by coach, minibus, or taxi. That leaves us with some 1500 visitors invading the Highlands using their own initiative.

A return bus ticket costs £12.50. By comparison

1 May 2018 - Invergordon, 7:58 train to Wick with cruise ship in background



the train costs £14.40, is less frequent, and takes 20 minutes longer. However the train is more comfortable and offers really fine scenery on its way around the Beauty Firth.

Just eight cruise passengers take the 9:42 train to Inverness. The next one at 11:31 attracts similarly low numbers. In addition, two cruise passengers are joining me on platform 2 for the 11:30 northbound train. They are an elderly but enterprising couple from Switzerland heading for Dunrobin Castle which is exactly where I am going.

Cruise passengers in Invergordon High Street



Bathed in watery sunshine, Invergordon High Street has a festive holiday feel to it despite the cold breeze. People take selfies outside Farmfoods and crowd into double-decker buses laid on by Stagecoach to take them to Inverness.

In total there are just 15 passengers on the two-coach train. This means there is plenty of space for a few more cruise passengers, at least this early in the season.

Five people leave the train at Dunrobin Castle: two backpackers, the Swiss couple from the cruise ship, and your intrepid correspondent.

The castle itself is a pleasant 400 metre walk from the station, and there is no denying that it makes a perfect destination for cruise passengers. Here is a fairy-tale castle in a fairy-tale setting with lots of history. The operation seems smooth and well geared-up for mass tourism. This is just as well because no fewer

than eight coaches from *MSC Miraviglia* will call here today.

to Helmsdale, with an hour and twenty minutes there.



Dunrobin Castle

Inside the castle every bit of brass, copper, and silver is polished like a mirror. Informal conversations with friendly staff suggest to me that the castle would very much welcome more of their visitors arriving by rail.

The current rail timetable allows from 12:48 until 14:42 for a visit to Dunrobin. That is enough for an able-bodied person to walk to the castle and explore its interior and grounds. However it is a bit short if you also want to have lunch at the castle. The next train south is not until 18:08 which is too late to be of practical use.

Afterwards, my Swiss travel companions tell me they have really enjoyed the train journey and the castle. Coming from people who have the *Glacier Express*, the *Golden Pass*, and the *Bernina Express* where they live, I think we should take this as encouragement.

This year 12 cruise ships visit Invergordon during May, increasing to 24 during the month of August. A cruise ship is typically ready for disembarkation at Invergordon at 8:00, and most passengers will want to be back at their ship by about 16:00 – 18:00.

The current rail timetable allows a trip south to Inverness, north to Dunrobin Castle, or possibly

The cost of a self-organised train trip compares favourably. A return train ticket from Invergordon to Dunrobin Castle costs £22.80 while entry to the castle costs £11.50. A guided coach tour to Dornoch and Dunrobin Castle is advertised at £56 on the MSC Cruises website.

The obvious way to get more cruise passengers onto the Far North Line is to advertise it through the information stand at the foot passenger exit of the port. There may also be possibilities on-line.

Ironically, with this many potential customers we are at risk of seriously overcrowding the trains instead of just filling spare seats if the idea catches on. On the other hand there may be scope for longer trains, especially when DMUs become available with the introduction of the new modified HST sets.



Invergordon station shortly before the 9:42 train to Inverness arrives

Ultimately there is the idea of a dedicated tourist train, with panoramic coaches and cream teas and such things, marketed through the cruise companies and bookable on-line. Whether enough people could be persuaded to choose it in favour of a bus trip to Culloden Battlefield and Loch Ness is a different matter. For me the choice would be easy.

Rolf Schmidt
neweracruises@gmail.com

In the 15 August issue of *RAIL* (859) a letter on p37 seems to suggest that EBIGate was "switched off" by NR following a Rail Accident Investigation Branch report into malfunction in the trial installation in Norfolk. The inference from the letter is that EBIGate is no longer safe and is not in use anywhere.

The letter refers to an article by Ian Prosser (HM Chief Inspector at ORR, who spoke to our Annual Conference in Tain in 2016) in *RAIL* 855 where Ian says " ... NR had installed some of the [EBIGate] equipment at a number of crossings but then decided to switch it off because of [safety] concerns ... "

This worried me, and I decided to check the correct position with Simon Constable at NR in Glasgow. He assured me that the EBIGate kit did indeed have problems, necessitating the installed equipment to be shrouded in black bin bags for a while. But the bin bags are off, and all is now well. Why this wasn't made clear in an Editor's helpful note after the original letter remains a mystery.

(Helpful note to readers. EBIGate is the new kit recently installed at Chapelton crossing north of Muir of Ord, making life easier - and safer - for the landowner, thus allowing trains to wheech by at a sensible speed.)

Mike Lunan

TIMETABLE CHAOS

Once upon a time ...

... there were some really skilled chaps who, with years of experience and a plentiful supply of paper, pencils, string and pins (I'm not making this up), were employed by Network Rail to devise timetables. Generally speaking their way of working was to everyone's satisfaction. The volume of work each time (twice a year) didn't vary much from one year to the next, so the number of chaps didn't vary much either. A few retirees and trainees joined - just like in every other properly-run business.

Then, out of a clear blue sky, came that most dreaded of Wicked Fairies - *CHANGE*. She wore the usual disguise called "improvement", but nobody was fooled. *CHANGE* said that all the chaps from all over the place - and there were chaps in lots of places, Best Beloved - must up sticks and go to Milton Keynes (a place sufficiently far from London for *CHANGE* and her masters to pretend that it was somehow in the centre of the country). Chaps being what they are, quite a lot of them looked the other way when *CHANGE* made her wishes known, and in consequence there were fewer - far fewer - chaps in Milton Keynes than there had been all over the place. Worse, the kind of chaps who said 'no' were more likely to be chaps who, for whatever reason, didn't want to move to a nowhere kind of somewhere - generally the older and more experienced ones.

That wouldn't have mattered all that much if *CHANGE* had not, at roughly the same time, had the bright idea of quite suddenly increasing the volume of work by a factor needing the fingers of a second hand to count.

And even that wouldn't have spelt the end of civilisation if *CHANGE*'s string-pullers hadn't left the important bits of their input until pretty much the last minute. As was once so trenchantly observed, it was a bit like "sending your opening batsmen to the crease only for them to find ... that their bats had been broken before the game by the team captain".

Happily the timetable chaos south of the Border was confined to that unhappy place. Eight TOCs who had plans to introduce a better timetable (better largely because of new rolling stock being introduced) in December have been told to wait until May. The words "if you're lucky" were strangely omitted from the accompanying press release.

Up here though things are OK, and ScotRail is not among the Unlucky Eight. I wonder why.

Mike Lunan

PLATFORM 1864 AWARD

Graham Rooney, chef and owner of Platform 1864 on Tain Railway Station, was presented with a plaque in June in recognition of the transformation he has made to the original station building. Presenting the plaque, given by Tain & Easter Ross Civic Trust, Lachie Stewart, chairman of the trust, said, "Until Graham opened as a restaurant, train travellers to Tain were met with an initial depressing view of boarded up buildings upon their arrival."



The restaurant opened in 2015, having received backing from Transport Scotland's Community Regeneration Fund and the Railway Heritage Trust.

The name of the restaurant was suggested by Emily Vass, a pupil at Craighill Primary School. Emily's great, great, great grandparents had,

coincidentally, been the first people to buy a ticket when Tain Station opened on 1st June 1864.

CLASS 153 CONVERSION



Stakeholder workshops are now taking place as ScotRail plans exactly how to convert the five Class 153 single-car units that have been obtained from GWR. The idea is to strip the interior and reconfigure for the carriage of bikes. Also being considered is the inclusion of a 'premium' section for tourists.

Units will be attached to trains on the West Highland, Kyle and Far North Lines, starting with the WHR next summer.

153370 passing Abbotswood with the 12:26 service from Southampton Central to Great Malvern.
Photo: Robert Cooke - 4th May 2011

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

I have to confess to a smile upon reading the following announcement on 14th June:

"Our staff have reported a trampoline on the line at Helmsdale. Our Traincrew are trying to remove this safely but help is on the way from our on-track staff."

However, after a couple of seconds, the thought of comedy disappeared as I began to imagine the possible consequences of a train hitting a trampoline at speed. This picture, supplied by ScotRail, of a similar occurrence, shows why.

As we head towards autumn, and begin to expect high winds, I would hope that anyone living near a railway line would give some thought to what is lying around in their garden. Many items - trampolines, gazebos, garden table parasols - are quite substantial yet have built-in 'sails' and can fly far on a high wind. **Tell your friends!**



A RIGHT TO IMPROVED COMMUNICATIONS

THE GARVE & ULLAPOOL RAILWAY [PART 1]

Introduction

Among the several railways which never existed in the north of Scotland, perhaps the most famous is the branch railway from Garve Station as far as Ullapool. When first proposed around 1890, it was soon beaten back by the extension of the Dingwall-Strome Ferry line as far as Kyle. The decision of the Westminster government not

Andy Drummond traces the ultimately unsuccessful attempts to have a railway built to Ullapool.

to give any assistance at all to the Ullapool line caused considerable dismay locally, but also spawned further proposals over the course of the following six decades. Five proposals in all. Ullapudlians were not an easy race to defeat.

1890

The first proposal for a railway to link Ullapool to the rest of the British railway network saw the light of day in 1885. The 1880s was a period of considerable political interest across the UK, partly because of the series of public disorders of the 'Crofters War', occasioned by poverty and land-deprivation in the islands; partly because of the rise of the Irish Republicans in a very similar scenario on the Emerald Isle. As a result, a number of government commissions came and went to the West Coast of Scotland. On one famous occasion, Lord Lothian was moved to undertake a quasi-royal tour of the whole area - making perhaps an ill-judged boast that "*I am the first Secretary for Scotland who has come here*". From all of this great upheaval over land-use and social conditions came both the ground-breaking Crofters' Act of 1886, and numerous plans to build railways from the west coast to Inverness, primarily for the transportation of fish. There were several such lines in contention - to Mallaig and to Kyle (which we now know and love, since they *were* built), and to Ullapool, Aultbea, Lochinver and

Laxford. Fuller detail on some of these proposals can be obtained from John Thomas' book *The Skye Railway*. Suffice it to say that the competition to attract funds from the government was fierce and unforgiving. Local rivalries abounded - there was particular venom in the claims and counter-claims of the supporters of the Ullapool line on the one hand and the Aultbea on the other.

The line from Garve to Ullapool had the backing of Sir John Fowler, who had bought an estate at Braemore in 1857. But when the Garve and Ullapool Railway Company was formed by Act of Parliament in 1890, he himself remained in



the background (as 'consulting engineer') and was wheeled out only when things took a turn for the worse. As, alas, they frequently did. His son Arthur teamed up with several members of the wealthy Matheson family to form the Board of the new company. At first, things went well. Considerable support was forthcoming from locals - landowners and fishermen; as well as

from MPs across Scotland, and people in Stornoway at one end, and Dingwall at the other. Fowler even persuaded the Highland Railway to undertake a survey of the 33-mile line, which was carried out by their engineer, Murdoch Paterson.

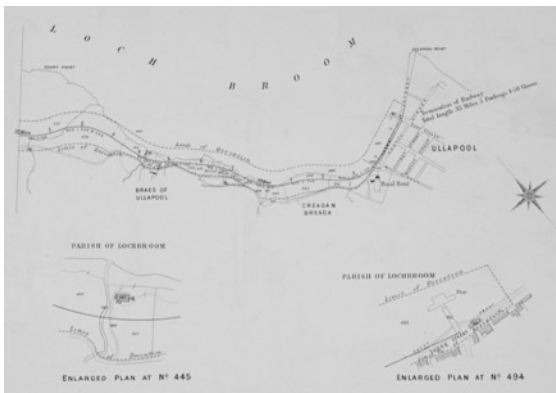
Anyone with a passing knowledge of the road that links Garve to Ullapool will be aware of the interesting physical challenge that is encountered at Braemore, at the head of Loch Broom. Here the land drops away from 900ft to sea-level in the space of a couple of miles, leaving a gradient of around 1:22 to overcome. But rather than try that approach, Paterson elected to do something far more interesting. At Braemore, the line would curve westwards to follow the road to Dundonnell (now A832) for a couple of miles. It then crosses the road, leaps over the Cuileag river (100ft below), and then, about 220 yards from the road, the railway enters a 590-yard tunnel, which curves back to



Gradient profile of the descent into Ullapool.

the east to follow the line of the river and glen. After the tunnel, on the long descent to the head of Loch Broom, several significant gorges have to be crossed. It was a brilliant and spectacular solution.

Regrettably, Sir John Fowler vetoed the idea of a tunnel. In any case, it was academic: the Highland was by this time far more interested in its own extension to Kyle, and showed convincing symptoms of cold feet about Ullapool almost from the start. In 1891, Fowler and the Mathesons decided to try to hand over their legal rights to the line to the Great North of Scotland Railway, who were itching to get a foothold west of Inverness. But there, too, things did not go well. The Secretary of State for



Excerpt from 1890 plan showing the terminus.

Scotland sent out two commissions in 1890 and 1891, to look into all the proposed railways in more detail. Neither seemed to have made a very good job of it, and their reports simply made it harder for the Ullapool line to gain traction. The first Commission dithered over which of the six plans to go with, and was in any case more focused on promoting emigration than deciding on a railway; the second Commission got its facts all wrong concerning the viability of Ullapool as a safe harbour ("*encumbered with islets and rocks*"), and came down in favour of the lines further south. And so, in a complex story of back-stabbing, broken promises, government leaks and sheer incompetence, the Mallaig and Kyle lines got the money, and the Ullapool line did not. In August 1893, the sadly-named "Garve and Ullapool Railway (Abandonment) Act" was passed.

1896

The Light Railways Act of 1896 much simplified the procedures for developing a light railway. There were many proposals in response to the provisions of the Act. In the event, only around thirty 'light railways' were constructed between 1899 and 1925, of which six were in Scotland: the Wick & Lybster (1899), the Lauder (1901), the Cromarty & Dingwall (begun 1914, but never completed), the Dornoch (1902), the Leadhills & Wanlockhead (1902), and the Campbeltown & Machrihanish (1906).

Before the ink was even dry on the Act, Arthur

Fowler was knocking on the door of the Highland Railway, wanting to know whether the company would be interested in a joint venture to establish the Garve-Ullapool line as a light railway. The Highland rolled its eyes and went along to meet Fowler. Three times in March 1896. And then dashed his hopes by stating that the company would not contemplate paying for the construction, but was prepared to operate a completed railway under the same conditions as in 1890. Which was not helpful.

It is to Fowler's credit, however, that he did not take 'no' for an answer. In September 1898, the Board of the Highland Railway was to be found debating the question of this light railway once more, this time going so far as agreeing to survey the proposed line - just as long as Fowler footed the bill. Fowler himself died unexpectedly in 1899 and, although a local MP continued to pester the Highland for several months thereafter, the plan also slipped away.

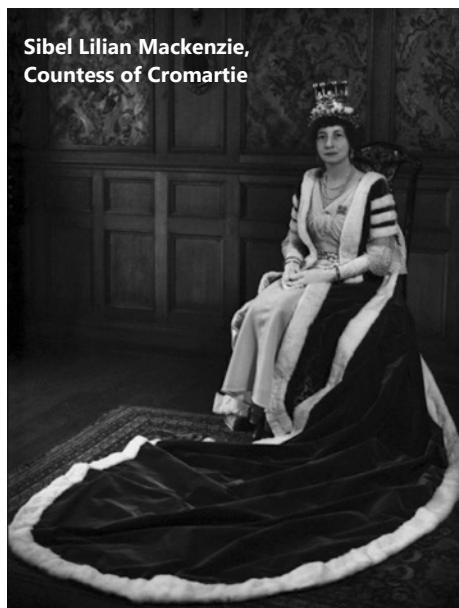
But only for two years.

1901

In November 1901, a letter turned up in the post-box of the Congested Districts Board. It came from a Major Blunt, resident at Tarbat House, near Invergordon. The Major was planning to build a 'tram-line' running from Garve, as far as Ullapool, and then some - it was to lead all the way to the shore opposite Isle Martin, another three miles to the west of Ullapool. The purpose of this tram-line was to facilitate the transportation of freshly-caught fish to the railways which converged on Inverness. All Blunt wanted from the Board was a grant towards widening the existing road (now the A835) by 50% in order to accommodate the tram-line alongside. All in all, he felt it was a capital plan. He failed, however, to give any indication of estimated costs.

The members of the Board discussed the proposal amongst themselves, with some scepticism. One doubtful gentleman expressed the thought that "*this is a proposal to supply the luxury (so to speak) of a steam-tramway alongside of a good carriage road*". In its reply, at the end of December, the Board pointed out that, firstly, much of the route did not in fact run through a 'congested district'; and secondly, that the road was already there, transporting fish as required from the fishing-boats on the west coast to Garve and beyond - so why would anyone need a tram-line? The request was turned down.

We should remark in passing that Major Blunt



**Sibel Lilian Mackenzie,
Countess of Cromartie**

was the husband of the Countess of Cromartie. Probably not a gentleman fitting the standard profile of a beneficiary of the Congested Districts Board.

To be continued...

Notes

Andy Drummond's novel describing the construction of the railway to Ullapool, *An Abridged History*, (2004, reprinted 2018) is available on Amazon.

This article above is based on a more detailed study to be published in book-form in 2019.

The maps and plans printed in this article are available for viewing in detail on www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/2018/gur.html

ARTICLE INSPIRES MEMORIES

Reading the article in *FNE 74*, my interest was aroused by the performance of the 6:30 a.m. Inverness-Wick/Thurso in August 1960 with the train formation containing a through coach from Glasgow to Wick being an LNER composite corridor. I was not aware of such a through working, although some of the Inverness-Glasgow/Edinburgh workings that joined/detached at Perth nominally had the Edinburgh portion as LNER stock. The LNER had in fact a number of coaches specifically built (according to *LNER Carriages* by Michael Harris) in 1939 and 1941 for this service and given

When FoFNL member, John Macnab, read the final part of "Inverness: Somewhere in the South" he began to reminisce about his time as a coaching stock controller for BR in the 1960s, based beside Glasgow Queen Street station.

"Adaptor" gangways, contrary to the normal "PG" (Pullman Gangway) fitments, to enable them to adjoin LMSR stock which were "BS" (British Standard). Over the years a good number of LMS carriages were altered to having an "Adaptor" gangway fitted - mainly, I reckon, to join with BR Standard stock from the 50s. In total, the LNER stock so fitted numbered 5 corridor composites, 3 corridor thirds (seconds), 4 corridor brake thirds (seconds) and 3 corridor brake composites.

Whether their planned working was carried out to the letter throughout the years I know not, but the last coach of its kind, composite 18407, was

not withdrawn until 1964. Perhaps this was the one given a mention?

The LMS restaurant car noted would have been one of the splendid Stanier six-wheeled bogie type, the last of these withdrawn late 1963/early 1964 replaced by new BR builds. I have note of three of them from Inverness pausing briefly in Ardmore Yard before going on to Faslane for breaking up in March 1964.

The Mound-Dornoch service (mentioned in *Dunrobin's Sisters* on page 23) I always find intriguing, with the diminutive HR 0-4-4 tank loco dwarfed by an LMS brake composite corridor. The Ballinluig-Aberfeldy service was also so provided stock wise but with bigger locos! This made me reflect that as far as I was aware in my coaching rolling stock control days (1961-67) there was no non-corridor stock in any shape or form in the Inverness area as there was no diagrammed need. I could stand corrected on this by experts but I never had to contact Inverness to track down lost/stolen/strayed examples.

Most of this kind of coach in the Aberdeen area emanated from Inverurie Works as either repair jobs or the final resting place (in farmyards) of condemned examples.

In passing, no non-corridors were used on the West Highland Line either (apart from the Craigendoran-Arrochar push-pull) with a few operating the Killin branch from time to time, as did several used at Oban for Ballachulish services.

I wallow in nostalgia!

John Macnab

KILDONAN STATION

On 22 June a letter appeared in the *John O'Groat Journal* for a correspondent worried about the rumoured closure of Kildonan Station. This prompted a family who are FoFNL members to contact Rhoda Grant MSP. Rhoda contacted ScotRail and received the following assurance from David Simpson, Operations Director:

"...I can confirm that we have no plans to reduce calls at Kildonan and that it will therefore remain open on this route. On a request stop system, funding has been made available to undertake a trial of the technology to prove the system works. This is taking place over the course of the summer and autumn using mobile test equipment that doesn't need to be fitted in the station. Once the tests are completed, we'll be able to refine our proposals and provide timescales for installing the system at the stations. I'd be happy to keep you updated on this."

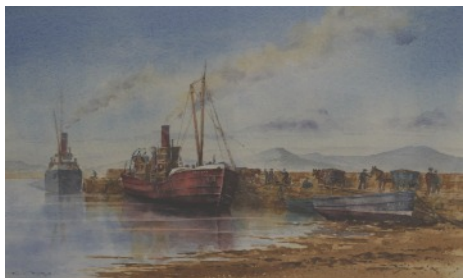
LOADS OF POTATOES

Douglas Gordon of *W. O. Gordon Bindal & Co of Portmahomack* describes the varied history of shipping the company's potatoes.

All produce from our family potato business originally went out by ship from Portmahomack. I have one photo of two ships in Portmahomack harbour taken between 30th May - 1st June 1934 which, according to harbour records, was the only time these two ships were in the harbour together. The *Argentum* (95 tons) is in the inner harbour unloading 178 tons of coal and in the outer harbour the *S.S. Edenside* (147 tons) is loading up with 156 tons of potatoes.



For my 50th birthday Ken Birks painted a water colour version of the scene. I said to Ken that that's our potatoes in carts - well it could have been our potatoes, as well as lots of other farms' potatoes too. It was a shuttle service with coal getting unloaded and the ships returning south with potatoes, all transported by horse and cart.



My father, William O. Gordon, was still sending potatoes by ship from Portmahomack until 1950. They went down to Wisbech in Cambridgeshire and up the

River Nene to the same buyers we are dealing with today, the Hartley's. One year a big storm started with our year's supply of seed potatoes on board and the ship could not sail for two weeks; my father hardly slept worrying about his potatoes! That's when he must have decided to send potatoes by rail from Fearn Station instead.

All the farmers and local businesses owned the harbour trust and it was about this time it was wound up as more and more stuff was going by rail, not dependant on tides and weather. Also there were more lorries, which were able to carry bigger loads, but some farms still delivered by tractor and trailer to Fearn Station.

The railway wagons could take either 10 tons of seed potatoes or 11 tons of ware (eating) potatoes. This translated into either 200 hessian bags of seed potatoes, or 440 paper bags of ware potatoes, which had to be manhandled into each wagon. They were stacked to the roof.

Nearly all the farms were producing potatoes and they all came to Fearn station to get loaded into wagons by hand. It was hard work, but nice on a calm sunny day and not so nice if windy. The wind, full of dried potato dust and hessian bag hairs would blow into your side of the wagon.

When it became frosty the wagons had to be lined with paper stapled on to the wooden sides and floor. The bags were loaded on to a bed of straw with more straw against the paper lining as it was loaded, and once the wagon was full, straw was placed over the top of the bags to help keep frost out. The station staff would organise the papering of the wagons with big rolls of brown paper and, once loaded, they would put labels in a clip

below the floor level of the wagon to say what was on board and where it was to go - all recorded by hand, and given to the guard on the goods train.



Later the train would come to pick up the wagons. If you got a nice driver he would gently push against the wagons and they would be coupled to the engine with the empty ones left uncoupled at the back, if you had not finished filling them all. If you had the impatient type he would ram up against the wagons and, if you had not finished loading, all your stacked bags would end up in a heap and would all have to be pulled out and then rebuilt. We got wise to this and when it was an impatient driver you would rush and fill the wagons with bales of straw to keep the bags stacked together, then shut the doors.

After the necessary shunting, the guard would climb back on board to his nice cosy stove in the brake van and the train would head off.

I remember we arrived at the station one morning to discover the wagons had not been pushed into the siding far enough. We had to drive across the rails with a forklift, release the train brake and use the forklift to push the wagons into the siding so we could load them.

There was one really nice man at Fearn station called Willie Black, a real character, always quick with old stories which I loved to hear, and the different jobs he did on the railways over the years. The one story I always remember him telling me was when the Far North Line was blocked with huge drifts in Caithness and the far north was cut off from supplies or food by rail or sea. Two big steam

engines with a snow plough in front came north from Inverness, Willie got on at Tain and they hit the mile long snow drifts at 50-60 miles an hour slicing through them to open the line once more. We are very fortunate we do not get these big snow storms now.

We next started putting potato bags on pallets and roping them on, and then we got bigger wagons that could take pallets or boxes of potatoes loaded by forklift for one customer, but they still had to be lined with straw and paper in case of frost.

Then the railways came out with a brand new wagon, VGA 28 tons, with fantastic long metal doors and sealed. We were the first to get them but then other firms found out about them and demanded them, so the following year we had the old wagons again.



My father must have traded 70,000 tons by rail during his lifetime as a potato merchant. Once his brother, John O. Gordon of Balmuchy died, he merchanted all his potatoes as well, so it was a huge undertaking and a lot of organising.

With the end of 'wagonload freight', lorries took over the transport of all our potatoes. For a while the railways did organise a haulier to pick up potatoes and take them to the railhead at Elgin, from where they travelled south to be delivered to the farmer. Then the Ness Railway Viaduct in Inverness got washed away in a flood and we never went back to the rail again.

A RAILMAN REMEMBERS

8 – ONE POTATO, TWO POTATO...

As the potato traffic swung into top gear I started to become intimately acquainted with the covered wagons which were in their final years as the mainstay of British Rail freight workings. They were like sheds on wheels, banged and bashed the length and breadth of the country, carrying an assortment of goods.

They had wooden bodies on steel frames with a pair of heavy doors each side. Step inside and you couldn't fail to notice their distinctive, pungent odour. Not unpleasant, but strong enough to permeate your clothes. They smelled like old, very dry, mature wood which had been aged in ventilated darkness.

They were also fairly dirty, having run thousands of journeys with thousands of loads, with no-one responsible for cleaning them.

Although these four wheeled short wheelbase vans could carry up to twelve tons, their design predated pallets and forklifts, and they mostly had to be loaded by hand.

Three local firms made good use of the freight facilities at Fearn; Paterson's of Balintore sent boxes of salmon away on the 3:15 passenger service during the summer, with fishy ice melting over the barrow, the platform and the parcels cage in the guard's coach. They then went south on the Royal Highlander, which was what the Caledonian Sleeper used to be called. (The salmon still get whisked down to London on the sleeper, the difference being now it's farmed salmon travelling in polystyrene boxes, rather than wild salmon in wooden crates. That's progress folks!)

Another firm was Easter Ross Farmers, an

amalgamation of several local farms, who dispatched a few vans of potatoes without too much fuss. But the big shot who made the most noise was John O Gordon of Balmuchy, seed potato merchants and suppliers to growers in East Anglia. It was effectively their business which had kept the station open when so many others closed in the early 60s. You got the impression that if John O was displeased, ripples of discomfort would be felt in the Area Manager's office in Invergordon, if not further afield.

The thing about seed potatoes is, as well as being fairly valuable, they're quite fussy. If it's too hot, they start sprouting before they should. If it's too humid, they sweat. Worst of all, if they get frosted, they go black and mushy, then it spreads and the whole load is a write-off.

Now we get to main point of this memoir, and the only hard information in it. To my knowledge, no historian or rail commentator has ever communicated this knowledge, and I may be the only person in a position to do so. So it behoves me to pass this vital snippet on to my children and my children's children. Here we go.

These old vans needed to be wallpapered before any potatoes got loaded into them. Yes, someone, somewhere, doubtless after an insurance claim for the replacement and disposal of 12 tons of black mush, had decreed that all vans carrying potatoes were to be lined in thick brown paper as insulation to protect against frost.

So, the seed potatoes arrived in hessian sacks



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

behind a fairly old lorry which parked on the goods platform, and a team of men fed the sacks into the vans and stacked them, with lots of straw in between each layer. Except they couldn't start, because I hadn't finished papering the van yet.

This is how you paper a 12 ton goods van for carriage of potatoes:

1 Take a bundle of six pre-cut rolls of brown paper.

Problem, I hadn't cut very many rolls over the summer; it was really tedious job, so I had to cut the rolls before I could get any papering done.

2 Also take a staple gun.

Problem, you forgot the staple gun. Go back to the booking office. The staple gun is not there, maybe you left it in the other van.

3 Walk back through the wind, mud and puddles in the goods yard carrying said rolls of paper.

Problem, it's dark, the paper is getting wet and I have no suitable clothing or footwear to be doing manual work. Or any experience of doing manual work, come to think of it.

4 Staple one of the long rolls from the top left end, down and along the length of the floor and up the other end.

Problem, your hands are now frozen, and you can't manipulate wallpaper with gloves on. Anyway, you don't have gloves, this is 1974 remember.

5 Repeat to the right. You now have the two ends and the floor papered. Be careful not to tear the paper now you're walking on it.

Problem, the staple gun has jammed.

6 Free off stapler and use it to fix the two shorter rolls of paper to the side opposite the wagon door; one roll above the other.

Problem, it's particularly hard to hold the paper up sideways and staple it at the same time, it wants to fall out of line.

7 Repeat on the door side.

Problem, the gun has run out of staples. Also you won't be able to get out if you paper across the door, so you have to sort of roll them up and leave them tucked in to the side for the men to affix when they've finished doing the real man's work of feeding in the sacks and straw bedding.

So much for wallpapering vans; a job I could probably do with ease now, but which then I found exhausting and filthy. Hopefully this detailed account will prevent the ancient craft of potato van papering being lost forever.

Once the vans were loaded, they needed a wagon label correctly filled in with the date, weight and destination, often March, Ely, St Neots or Spalding. The label went in a sprung holder outside the wagon. Because the loop had been removed from Fearn, the goods train could only deliver or collect wagons on its way south. Otherwise the engine would block itself in.

To my knowledge, none of my consignments were ever lost to frost, or shunted into the wrong siding for a few weeks on their way to the Fens. But how would I know if they were?

As autumn ran in to winter, to my relief the potato dispatching started to wind down. One Friday afternoon, all the men gathered in the booking office to be thanked and paid by the great man himself; John O Gordon was visiting the station. Ceremoniously, each man was also given a bottle of whisky. Finally John O Gordon turned to me; "And this is for you" he said.

There was an expectant, slightly nervous silence. John O Gordon had just handed me a tin of toffees.

Well what to do? In a gentle, highland way, it was his way of saying I was a useless twat who couldn't even be relied on to paper a potato wagon. And I, in my own gentle highland way, had to admit he was absolutely right. There was only one thing I could do. I smiled and said "Oh, I love toffees", and thanked Mr Gordon earnestly. Then I opened the tin and offered them round.



**Laing Local
History Society**

LAIRG 150 EXHIBITION

Laing Local History Society has had an exhibition of photographs, signalling diagrams and track plans of Laing Station, and pictures of various local industries, at the Ferrycroft Visitor Centre in Laing since April.

This is to mark the 150th anniversary of the opening of this section of the Far North Line. A commemorative plaque was unveiled at the station on 12th May by Sally Mackenzie, daughter of the last Laing Stationmaster.

Also included are two N gauge model railways - one of Invershin and the other of Laing Station.

You still have time to catch the exhibition which is open every day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and has been extended to Sunday 18th November.



ROGART CAIRN

How many people know, as their train rushes through the request stop of Rogart, that they will also pass a memorial to the moving spirit behind Canadian transcontinental railways.

Just west of the village is a cairn and Canadian flag to the memory of Sir John Macdonald, first Prime Minister of Canada. His grandparents lived on the site of the cairn and their cottage provided the stone for its building in 1968.

So far as is known, he never visited Rogart. In retrospect a rather controversial character of whom much is written on the Internet.



HIGHLAND RAILCARD

The Railcard available to Highland Residents can save you 50% on selected routes. Plus when you use it, kids can travel for a flat fare of only £2 return each.



abellio
ScotRail.co.uk/
highlandrailcard

In June ScotRail produced a new leaflet to promote the Highland Railcard, available to Highland residents for use on the Far North Line, the Kyle Line and the West Highland Line


The leaflet contains all the information needed, clearly laid out, including a list of the qualifying residential postcodes.

Unfortunately FoFNL's request to include a photo from each of the three lines covered went unheeded and, for those amused by such things, the photo at Glasgow Queen Street shows a type of train you definitely won't be using!

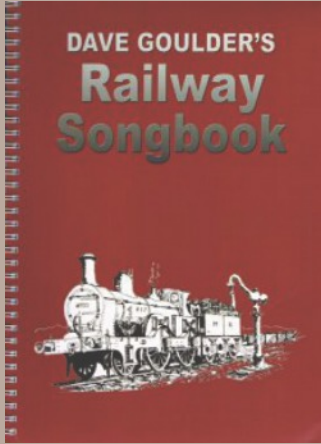
We applaud ScotRail's new enthusiasm to promote this excellent offer.

WHICH ROUTES CAN I TRAVEL ON?

The Highland Railcard is available on the following routes:
 Mullingford to Wickham Green and from Glasgow
 Wickhamford to and from Inverness
 Kirkcaldy to and from Inverness


BOOK REVIEWS



Dave Goulder's Railway Songbook

£15.00 direct from www.davegoulder.co.uk

What a fantastic mix of autobiography, history, songs, photographs and drawings.

Dave Goulder worked for BR in the English Midlands until 1961 when he realised that "a lifetime of shovelling wet ashes is not what I have in mind" and went to live in Wester Ross. I'm not going to give anything else away - you'll have to buy the book!

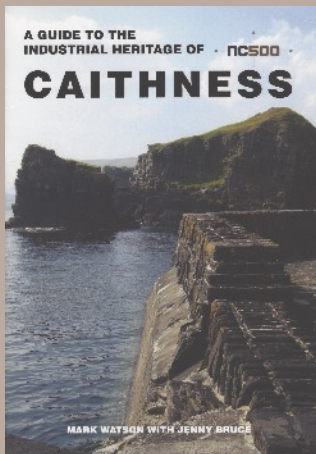
If you do, I strongly recommend that you learn to read music, if you can't already (and, by the way, it's extremely easy!), so that you can sing along in your head with all the songs as you laugh at the stories and enjoy the pictures.



I know this book fits under both my personal hats of music and railways, but it's one of the most enjoyable reads I've had. It's not cheap but when you see the quality of the production you won't mind that at all.

This is also a good place to mention that if you fancy the idea of spending a few nights in [ex-]Ardgay signalbox now's your chance...

[See Dave's website for details]



A Guide to the Industrial Heritage of Caithness

Mark Watson with Jenny Bruce ISBN 978-1-901971-14-9 **£6.50 inc. p+p**

Some copies are available in local outlets e.g. the Castletown and Wick Heritage Centres. Copies can also be obtained by BACS or cheque payable to the Scottish Industrial Heritage Society from:

rcrollo@btinternet.com or

Robert C Rollo, Treasurer, Scottish Industrial Heritage Society
23 Lady Jane Gate, Bothwell, Glasgow, G71 8BW

I found this guide rather inspiring, it covers so many different categories: bridges, mills, doocots, harbours, roads... I wish there were something similar for where I live.

I can see at least two great uses for a book like this - those times when something catches your eye and you want to know more, and a resource

for when you fancy a bit of exploring and are looking for ideas.

It seems a little churlish to point out an error but as we are a railway campaign group I have to mention the note about the Wick and Lybster Railway being narrow gauge. It was *standard* gauge but 'light railway'!

These 40 pages are packed with colour photos, maps and drawings. The contents are arranged geographically rather than by subject, which increases the chances of stumbling across something fascinating that you weren't looking for.

The first complete refurbished HST set has now arrived in Scotland.

The train, led by 43033, is seen here on its way from Craigentenny to Dundee.

Photo: Jonathan Drummond



A classic FNL view!

The 06:18 from Wick on the Oykel Viaduct crossing the Kyle of Sutherland on its way to Inverness on 26 June 2018.

The viaduct has a single 70 m span and was opened in 1868.

Photo: Niall Laybourne

© Flow North Photography

On 18 April 2018 73971 with a test run of the new sleeper stock from Arrochar to Polmadie. It is seen passing through Westerton, near Glasgow, where the Milngavie branch joins the West Highland Line.

Photo: Sandy Colley

