

# FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 77

May 2019



Freight  
Future

Page 6

THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

*Cairdean Na Loine Tuath*

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FAR NORTH EXPRESS IS PUBLISHED IN JANUARY, MAY AND SEPTEMBER

### Cover picture:

Freight trains crossing at Helmsdale on a wet evening at the beginning of August 2018.

Photo: **Peter Moore**

# HEADCODE

I had been hoping that by the time this Headcode was being written there would have been a veritable fanfare of news about the future of the Far North Line, resulting from the labours of the Review Team over two years - it would be fair to say though, that most of the 'labouring' has been done by Network Rail and ScotRail as they have worked up ways of improving the service on the Far North Line.

However, it is the nature, and deliberate intent, of the new 'pipeline' process for allocating works in the Control Periods, that there is no 'Grand Announcement'. We have been hoping for news of a definite decision to install a passing loop at Lentrán and - fingers crossed - another at Kinbrace and perhaps Bill Reeve will lift a corner of the curtain at our AGM & Conference...

Last week there was a classic example of why single track railways are such a problem. Some of us were travelling up to Forsinard to witness the unveiling of the 19th, and final, "Jellicoe Plaque". The event was timed to fit with the railway timetable. We missed the unveiling because we were 69 minutes late and the unveiling had to take place as planned to allow some participants to return south.

## Suspended animation - stasis - frozen in time - the search for suitable synonyms continues...

We arrived at Rogart on time. The driver was then unable to get a signal from the RETB system so a 'card' was issued by phone and we left 20 mins late. This meant that we were going to cause a long delay to the southbound train we were due to cross at Forsinard by being 20 mins late. The decision was taken by Control to hold us at Helmsdale until the southbound reached there - a 49 minute wait for us but the correct decision for southbound passengers with onward connections. After dropping us at Forsinard the train omitted Thurso, and did the same on its return journey from Wick, to try and make up time.

Obviously the timetable is designed to function perfectly well using the single track but if anything goes wrong the delays rapidly become dramatic.

If the Scottish Government is serious about there being a "Climate Emergency" and follows its own stated policy of encouraging modal shift from road to rail, we can expect to see an early change in emphasis from massive road projects to serious spending on rail provision. This needs to stretch all the way from the comparatively microscopic cost of building passing loops at Lentrán and Kinbrace to seriously expensive projects such as reopening the proper route from Edinburgh to Perth which was obliterated in part by over-enthusiastic road building in another era.

It is our job to convince politicians to act on this.

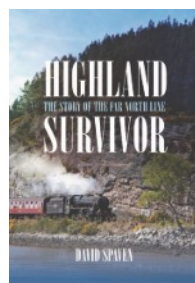
Ian Budd

## HIGHLAND SURVIVOR

The first print-run of David Spaven's *Highland Survivor: the Story of the Far North Line* sold out some time ago, but a revised edition has now been published.

David tells us that the new edition mainly corrects mistakes and typos, but does contain one new historical fact – which he challenges aficionados to find! Since its original publication in 2016, *Highland Survivor* has been awarded '2017 Railway Book of the Year' by the Railway & Canal Historical Society.

If you have not purchased this book yet we strongly advise that you do. For all who are interested in the line, either as users or readers, it is invaluable.



# FoFNL 2019 AGM & CONFERENCE

It is FoFNL policy to choose venues for our AGM which are different each year, to reflect our membership being drawn from the whole route. In 2017 we met in Inverness, last year the AGM was held in Thurso and in 2019 we are heading back part of the way south to **Brora**.

This year's AGM & Conference will be held on Friday 21 June in the **Royal Marine Hotel**:

Golf Road, Brora, KW9 6QS, Tel: 01408 621252

The AGM, which is open only to members, will begin at **10:30**, followed by the Conference, which is open to the public, at **11:15**.

First to speak will be **Bill Reeve**, Director of Rail at Transport Scotland, who will bring us up to date on the work in progress on the Far North Line which was proposed by the Review Team which had its final meeting in February.

We will then hear from **Sir Peter Hendy**, Chairman of Network Rail who will talk about the current changes in the organisation as the constituent routes are devolved. In Scotland there are strong views in the government and the rail industry that NR Scotland Route should be split from NR and join the rest of the rail provision (apart from cross-border operators) in being financed and controlled by the Scottish Government. We cannot expect Sir Peter to express a view on that, as he is an appointee of the UK Secretary of State.

**David Shirres**, editor of *Railway Engineer* magazine will speak to us about current developments and innovation in powering rolling stock, particularly apt as FoFNL is hoping that one of the Vivarail battery trains might be used to provide an experimental Thurso-Wick shuttle service if money becomes available.

ScotRail's plans for future service patterns and timetables on the Far North Line will be discussed by **Scott Prentice**, Head of Business Development, ScotRail.

The next speaker will be **Dr Nick Lindsay**, chairman of Clyne Heritage Society who will give us some insight into the work of the society, which is based in Brora, and came into being to help preserve the area's fascinating heritage.

The conference will be concluded as always with an update from **Frank Roach**, FoFNL member and HIRANS Partnership Manager.

## FoFNL MEMBERSHIP FORM

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

[www.fofnl.org.uk/membership/memform.pdf](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/membership/memform.pdf)

If you prefer, you can phone our Membership Secretary on **+44 (0)1334 475311**. Annual membership is only **£15.00 (£12.00 by standing order)** or **£17 for organisations**.

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

We have decided to introduce Life Membership of the Friends for **£120**. To mark our 25th Anniversary this year we are offering a reduced rate of **£100** for those who take up the offer by 31 October 2019.

# SCOTRAIL REMEDIAL PLAN

ScotRail was required by Transport Scotland to produce a Remedial Plan in February due to performance being below contracted levels. Here are three extracts relevant to the Far North Line:

## **3 - Steps proposed for remedying the cancellations Breach**

3.1.2

### **Recruiting additional traincrew to deliver a reliable service**

As identified in section 2.1, there has been a shortfall in traincrew numbers to operate a reliable service. The main reason for this is losing more drivers than forecast to other train operators. To address this, we will undertake a further recruitment campaign to bring 55 new drivers and 30 new conductors to work on Scotland's Railway, in addition to the hundreds who are already recruited and in training.

These new drivers and conductors will fill vacancies at our key depots to enable full coverage of all timetabled services.

3.2.3

### **Reducing class 158 and 170 technical cancellations**

ScotRail's engineering team has identified specific actions to make sure that class 170 and class 158 train reliability is sufficient to operate the required diagrams. The following is taking place:

Class 158

- Replacement of engine water pumps
- Improved starter motor performance
- Cab door lock replacement

## **5 - Steps proposed for remedying the PPM (*Public Performance Measure*) Breach**

5.1

### **Integrated Control Centre**

The ScotRail Alliance Integrated Control Centre – a partnership between Network Rail Scotland and ScotRail – at Springburn, Glasgow is where we manage Scotland's Railway on a day-to-day basis. Decisions made at the centre impact passengers across Scotland. As we continue to run more trains on the network to provide a better service to customers it becomes ever more difficult to recover from incidents on Scotland's railway network.

We will recruit three additional train running controllers – train running controllers currently manage every service across Scotland. Following a workload review, we will be increasing the number of controllers by three, to allow for dedicated teams for the East of Scotland and the North of Scotland – these areas were previously combined into one role. By doing this we can achieve extra focus on punctual train running.

## CLEARING THE VIEW

ScotRail has been in touch with FoFNL looking for help with identifying stretches of lineside where the view is currently obstructed by trees and bushes. We have put out a request on our Facebook page and our website for suggestions. ScotRail emphasises that clearing is quite a long-term project, not least for financial and manpower reasons. We are very pleased that this is on its radar as the Far North Line has many fine views.

# FREIGHT FUTURE

In 2017's *High Level Output Specification* [HLOS] Transport Scotland set out its requirement for freight growth in Scotland:

*Under this plan the Scottish Ministers would require all reasonable steps to be taken to facilitate growth of 7.5% in rail freight traffic carried on the Scotland route, of which, at least 7.5% will represent a growth in new business (i.e. new traffic flows, not previously moving by rail). Both targets should be achieved by the end of CP6 and be measured in net thousand gross tonne miles, relative to the baseline at March 2019.*

The Scottish rail industry is well aware of the need to move quickly to meet these targets. We hope that Scottish politicians are ready to assist where possible, as is already being done in Germany. There follows a small selection of articles and comments.

## GERMAN STATE AID - RAILWAY GAZETTE

### State aid for road to rail freight shift approved

A German state aid programme designed to promote a shift of freight from road to rail has been given the go-ahead by the European Commission.

A total of €350m is being made available in 2018-23 to cover up to 45% of the track access charges paid by freight operators, who are required to pass on the benefits by lowering the prices they charge to freight shippers.

"Promoting the shift of freight transport from road to rail is one of many measures that Europe needs to take to help reduce our environmental footprint", said Margrethe Vestager, Commissioner in charge of competition policy, on December 10. "The German aid scheme does exactly that; it supports this shift, ensures benefits are passed to customers and will contribute to meeting the EU's environmental and transport objectives, without unduly distorting competition."

*Railway Gazette - 20 December*

## SCOTTISH FREIGHT PLAN - RAIL BUSINESS DAILY

### Scottish freight community launches plan to boost freight on the network

The Scottish freight community has today launched a joint strategy to grow the amount of freight on the rails, as part of plans to meet a target of 7.5 percent growth set by the Scottish Government last year.

Network Rail, Freight Operating Companies, freight users, industry bodies and hauliers came together to build the ambitious plan, which sets out what is required to support rail freight growth as well as looking at improving the average speed a freight train can travel at and increasing reliability, meaning that more trains reach their destination on time.

The plan sets out four actions for growth, aligned to workstreams, covering four areas that the rail

freight industry believes we collectively need to improve upon:

- Encouraging Customer Confidence
- Developing Growth
- Doing Things Differently
- Achieving Simpler Solutions

Moving goods by rail boosts productivity and brings in around £200m in benefits to Scotland's economy. There are over 600 freight trains running on Great Britain's network every single day, with around 50 of these trains running in Scotland delivering goods 24 hours of the day. Over 4 million tonnes of product was transported by rail in the last 12 months.

Rail freight also boasts significant environmental benefits and as part of this plan the rail freight industry commits to work in partnership to transfer at least 1,700 lorry movements a year from Scotland's road network to rail over the next five years. Each tonne of freight transported by rail reduces carbon emissions by 7 percent compared to road and each freight train removes between 25 and 62 HGVs from Scottish roads.

Alex Hynes, ScotRail Alliance managing director, said: "We are working closely with our rail freight operators to grow freight traffic on Scotland's railway over the next five years.

"There are individual businesses and whole industry sectors which could benefit hugely from making rail freight part of their logistics mix and we will be working hard to encourage them onto our network.

"We are also committed to making rail freight as fast and reliable as it can be and are investing in our infrastructure to make switching from road to rail as easy as possible for customers."

Paul McMahon, managing director of Freight and National Passenger Operators at Network Rail, said: "Our freight customers are a vital part of Scotland's railways and the Scottish economy. Scottish growth also needs to be considered as part of our GB-wide network as this will make sure that the required capacity and capability exists both north and south of the border.

"Network Rail champions and supports freight. We, and the rail freight industry, welcome the growth target and we will continue to work together in delivering the uplift."

Ken Russell, managing director Russell Group, said: "Russell Group has been pioneering the use of rail freight for over 40 years, promoting its numerous economic and environmental benefits. The company continues to invest in rail freight,

working in partnership with the industry to support growth and boost productivity. It is particularly pleasing to see Transport Scotland placing a requirement on Network Rail to grow rail freight over the next control period and that Network Rail has grasped this with industry mapping out a growth programme."

Andrew Malcolm, chief executive officer WH Malcolm, said: "WH Malcolm have been delivering intermodal rail to the logistics sector since 2001. We are pleased to see this commitment to rail freight from Transport Scotland, Network Rail and the wider industry. Only by working together, across government, industry and transport modes will we achieve the greatest benefits."

Chris Swan, head of rail at Tarmac, said: "As one of the UK's largest private sector users of rail freight it's great to see its value as an economic enabler recognised by this industry-led growth plan for Scotland. We believe that building capacity in the rail network is vital to help the effective delivery of infrastructure ambitions and look forward to working together to achieve the positive growth targets in place."

Debbie Francis, managing director of Direct Rail Services, said: "DRS fully support Network Rail's industry growth plan in Scotland. Being one of the main intermodal freight operators north of the border it is key that Network Rail and industry partners understand the needs of freight customers. Freight services offered in Scotland need to meet delivery requirements and we hope that by working in partnership we can all ensure freight and its customers has a voice equal to train operating companies."

For further information please visit:  
[www.networkrail.co.uk/industry-and-commercial/rail-freight/freight-growth/](http://www.networkrail.co.uk/industry-and-commercial/rail-freight/freight-growth/)

*Rail Business Daily - 15 March 2019*

**Fergus Ewing**, Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy wrote in his diary in the *Inverness Courier*, 2 April 2019:

**Monday, March 25:** I chaired the rail freight summit which was attended by railway representatives and freight companies at Scotland House, London. One option that was discussed was for more timber transport to go on railways between Inverness and Aberdeen. There was a positive view from leading hauliers who see that the time is now to shift from road to rail – provided that practical, viable schemes can be delivered. There was an agreement to form a working group to look at what would take a huge number of lorries off our road network.

### Transport Secretary to consider plan to move more whisky by rail

Transport Secretary Michael Matheson is to look at setting up a task force to encourage the transportation of whisky distilled in the north and north-east by rail.

Mr Matheson said he would consider the proposal for a working group focusing in on moving food and drink by freight rail when it was suggested by north-east MSP Mike Rumbles at Holyrood.

The Lib Dem MSP said 100% of the 1.5 million tonnes of whisky transported from north and north-east to the Central Belt currently goes by road.

Mr Rumbles said a move away from heavy lorries would ease damage to roads and reduce carbon emissions.

In parliament, Mr Matheson said Mr Rumbles's plan was "very reasonable" and merited "further consideration".

Mr Rumbles said: "Whisky is a major industry in Scotland. Rail can help ensure a sustainable future for the industry.

"By switching whisky freight to rail, carbon emissions would reduce, traffic would reduce and the damage to our roads would also be reduced.

"I am pleased that the Cabinet Secretary has agreed to consider my suggestion. I shall continue to press the Scottish Government to ensure they stay on track for rail freight."

*Press & Journal, 5 April 2019*

### David Spaven, Rail Freight Group Scotland Representative and FoFNL Committee member commented:

The economics of serving individual malt distilleries directly by rail were creaking by the early 1960s – as per Beeching's analysis of much wagonload traffic – and this was reflected by closure of most of the malt distillery private sidings by the end of the decade. The classic example was the closure of the Speyside line in 1968, with rail traffic then concentrated on modern railheads at Elgin, Dufftown and Keith. Of course, the road competition got progressively tougher until even these railheads had disappeared by 1992.

The seven grain distilleries in Scotland, all except Invergordon being in the Central Belt, operate on a much larger scale. Cameron Bridge has the capacity for c.140m litres p.a., compared to c.10m litres p.a. at the largest malt distilleries (Roseisle and Glenfiddich), so their private sidings lasted longer than those of the malt distilleries. But now all bulk spirit within Scotland is transported by road, with each road tanker carrying around 30,000 litres – a quick calculation showing that even Glenfiddich and Roseisle generate the equivalent of less than a couple of lorries a day.

The only realistic potential for direct rail access to distilleries on the FNL is Invergordon. At 40m litres p.a., it generates up to around 25 lorry loads a week, so perhaps enough for a part-train a couple of times a week feeding into existing or proposed trains at Inverness (the railhead for smaller distilleries along the FNL), Elgin and Keith. But road haulage has the advantage of feeding in regular daily volumes, whereas rail volumes would be more peaked. And of course capital investment would be required to reinstate the direct rail connection.

None of this is easy! It needs a strategy with buy-in from all stakeholders, but spreading the risk and getting commitment requires the Scottish Government to provide underpinning, e.g. by pump-priming the first year of operation of a regular food & drink train to the Central Belt.

# INVERNESS TO ABERDEEN LINE: PROSPECTS FOR FREIGHT

The redoubling and resignalling of the line between Aberdeen and Inverurie should be completed by this autumn facilitated by another three month closure affecting this section. Details of this are given in Derek Glasgow's article on p12. We look forward to this brand new double track railway for the first 16 miles of the 108 mile route to Inverness. New stations at Kintore and Inverness Airport are also planned.

Next we should look forward to some redoubling at the western end between Dalcross and Inverness during CP6 to increase the reliability of services together with further new capacity in the middle between Keith and Elgin to break up the long 18 mile single line between those stations.

On 26 March, the Transport Minister announced certain works to progress during Control Period 6: 2019-2024 including "new phases of the Aberdeen to Inverness improvements". More specifically these included Aberdeen to Inverness Improvement Project Phases One and Two – freight capacity at the west end of the line." Hopefully this means a siding of some kind for the Norbord wood factory some 5 miles east of Inverness which would allow the direct receipt of timber by rail from lineside loading at Kinbrace on the FNL.

The "Branchliner" paper to the HITRANS board

meeting in Inverness on 8 February reported that Government Minister, Fergus Ewing, had sanctioned a meeting in London on 25 March to discuss opportunities for transporting Scottish timber by rail with all the Freight Operating Companies. HITRANS's role is to promote the business opportunities for this from Altnabreac, Kinbrace, Georgemas, Aberdeenshire, Keith, and the West Highlands.

Subsequent to that meeting, Mike Rumbles (List MSP for North East Scotland) asked the Transport Minister in the Scottish Parliament on 4 April to establish a working group to promote the transport of food and drink by rail. Whisky and its associated traffic would be a major part of that. The Minister agreed to consider this.

It could be that "the west end of the line" freight capacity enhancements mentioned above will extend geographically to Elgin and Keith to facilitate this. It is important to have freight path capacity improved along the whole of the line. Attracting freight traffic to rail also requires a diversionary route in case of line blockages. Although it is a very long way round we should remember that the Inverness to Aberdeen line is crucial for this at times when either the Highland Main Line or the line south from Aberdeen are inadvertently blocked.

**Richard Ardern**

## KYLE LINE PLAN WILL BENEFIT FNL

It was reported to the HITRANS board meeting on 8 February that Network Rail has taken charge of the HITRANS proposals to automate request stop alerts to drivers as part of the Far North Line Review. It is now proposed to use the £230k allocated to HITRANS for this to develop a different scheme.

The new idea is to pump-prime the creation of a new Token Exchange Point on the Kyle line near Stromeferry. This will increase the capacity of the line which is constrained by a long 42 minute section between Strathcarron and Kyle- perhaps the longest single track section (journey-time wise) in the UK. This will enable trains to leave Strathcarron while shunting is taking place at Kyle. It allows trains to follow each other into Kyle at 25 min intervals rather than 42 min, provides greater access to the track for maintenance, and allows for greater flexibility during periods of rockfall maintenance.

The cost is not yet established, but will involve a new Uninterruptible Power Supply, a radio mast and Train Protection Warning System equipment on the ground; and software changes within the RETB signalling system.

One benefit shared with the whole system north of Inverness would be to reduce the length of delays which can occur due to late running as many Kyle trains have to cross with Far North trains at either, or both, Dingwall and Muir of Ord. Making all the single track sections on the Kyle line roughly equal in running time at around 25 minutes considerably improves operating flexibility. The idea is to be applauded.

**Richard Ardern**

# FAR NORTH LINE INVESTMENT IS ON THE RIGHT TRACK

This article from the Network Rail website lists some of the work that has been done in Control Period 5 on the Far North and Kyle Lines. Although your editor hates rail story headlines which include the astonishingly clever “on the right track”, he let this one pass!

Network Rail has completed an £11m, two and a half-year project to renew and replace sections of track at 59 sites along the Far North Line in the north of Scotland.

Work included replacing a total of 36 miles of rail and more than 11,000 sleepers, as well as in some cases full renewal of sections of track on some of the most remote stretches of railway in the country.

The upgraded rail will improve reliability and comfort for passengers as well as delivering a reduction in future maintenance requirements.

In addition to the logistical challenges of working in some extremely remote locations on the single-track railway, the delivery of work also endured the challenge of winter weather in the far north of Scotland – overcoming both a washout of a section of track at Loch Luichart following heavy rain as well as the winter blast from the beast from the east.

When storm floods caused the track to ‘wash-out’ at Loch Luichart in August 2017, the Network Rail team with contractor Stobart Rail,

were able to divert plant and resources working locally on the project to the site of the damaged track.

After clearing debris from the damaged area, 300 tonnes of ballast was replaced and the track stabilised; a rapid response which ensured that the line could quickly re-open for passenger service.

One of the most significant sections of work was at Thurso where the project renewed more than 6.5 miles of track between the town’s station and Georgemas junction – removing more than 40 track faults on this section alone.

In an innovative first for Scotland’s railway, the 1,100 rails used in the work were delivered by sea to Scrabster harbour – which saved 110 road freight journeys and reduced carbon emissions by approximately 200 tonnes.

Lindsay Saddler, Network Rail’s head of maintenance, said: “We are committed to investing in the Far North line and between 2014 and 2019 we carried out more than £30m of work on the line – including £11m alone on the track renewals.

“The overall investment we have made includes renewing signalling systems and track sections across the route, improving earth works and structures and work at Level crossings to improve line-speeds and is all part of improving resilience and reliability in this part of the network.

“Although the Far North Line is not the busiest or highest profile part of our network, we realise and value the role that it plays in connecting isolated locations and the importance that it has in rural and remote communities it serves.”

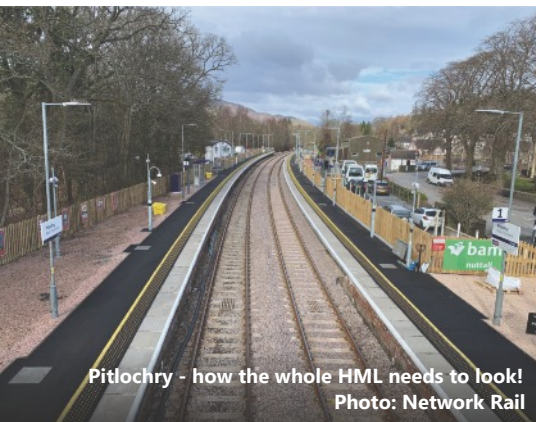
Relaid track on the Thurso branch.

Photo: Network Rail



# HIGHLAND MAIN LINE INVESTMENT

The splendid new loops and signalling at Aviemore and Pitlochry are now in use allowing simultaneous arrivals of trains from both directions and thus reducing crossing times for trains. Bidirectional working also means some northbound services can now use the more convenient “up” platform at Pitlochry.



ScotRail is putting in an immense amount of effort to redesign the timetable between the Central Belt and Inverness to give an hourly frequency and some journey time improvements. I do hope that by December there will be sufficient refurbished HSTs to operate this to the full extent.

Coming back from the Scottish Association for Public Transport AGM at Perth on Friday 5 April we had a fully loaded “classic” four coach 125 on the 13:36 from Edinburgh. Time was lost because the conductor still has to manually check that the doors are all properly shut. Further time was lost waiting at Stanley for the late running southbound service to vacate the single track and again further north when we had to visit Kincaig loop because we had lost our path.

With the deadline of the A9 dualling completion looming at the end of CP6 it is so important that extra double track capacity is provided before then to get the travelling public used to a faster and more reliable HML which can more nearly compete with the road so that rail passengers are not further captured to road. Surely the climate

saving imperatives so much in the news just now mean that we must prioritise the railway over the road for both passenger and freight traffic.

The Government looks like achieving its promise to introduce an hourly passenger frequency by this December, but what a struggle it has been to fit all these trains in on a largely single track railway. The £50m “saved” from the £117m budgeted for the now completed HML phase 2 has no doubt been welcomed elsewhere, but it could have been invaluable to reinstall previous HML capacity at Ballinluig, Murthly and Etteridge for example. Freight interests have been asking for the long loop at the former and there have been three train breakdown blockages of the long 13 mile section which includes the latter in the last 18 months causing long delays to passengers.

It is good that the promise to make services south of Perth limited stop expresses in the new timetable is being honoured. It is hoped that the days of these expresses following a stopping train all the way from Kirkcaldy to Haymarket will be ended which is no mean task on that intensively used track. Similarly, the task of accommodating more and faster services north of Perth, making sure stations both large and small are served regularly, and allowing paths for freight, maintenance and charter trains together with possible diversions (for freight at least) if the line south of Aberdeen is blocked is a herculean task within the constraints of the current single track infrastructure.

We are getting uncomfortably close to the revised time limit of 2025 for the promised three hour average service time between Inverness and the Central Belt with fastest times of 2 hours 45 minutes. With a fully dualled A9, the driving time will be more like 2 hours 30 minutes and the express buses may well be scheduled to less than 3 hours. A lot is dependent on the CP6 pipeline producing the goods in rail track capacity terms. The job doesn't end there either. Robust connections at Inverness with the Far North and Aberdeen lines have to be provided. We live in interesting times!

**Richard Ardern**

# ABERDEEN-INVERNESS IMPROVEMENT PROJECT

## Introduction

The Aberdeen-Inverness Improvement Project, which is funded by the Scottish Government, will reduce journey times and increase capacity on the route between the two cities. Delivered in stages, the project will deliver incremental benefits throughout the life of the scheme. This May sees the start of an important phase of works to deliver significant benefits to the economy and local communities.

## Benefits

This summer's work builds on the successful closure of the line between May - August 2018, which saw the completion of the first phase of double-tracking between Aberdeen and Dyce.

Upon completion of the project in August 2019, passengers will be able to benefit from the following enhancements:

- Redoubled track between Aberdeen and Inverurie allowing for increased connectivity and service frequency
- Upgraded signalling infrastructure on the route
- Platform extensions at Inch and Elgin to support the introduction of longer High-speed Trains (HSTs)
- A new and fully accessible station at Forres
- Increased services that call at Inverurie Monday to Friday will increase from 45 to 76, with similar improvements on Saturday.
- An improved cross-city service, with 27 trains per day between Inverurie, Dyce, Stonehaven and Montrose. This includes an additional direct morning peak service from Montrose to Dyce and Inverurie.

## Engineering challenges

The project is a major engineering undertaking. Currently, the Aberdeen to Inverness line is approximately 108 miles long and is primarily single track with passing loops. Once the line

is re-opened in August 2019, the project will have added 16 miles of new track, 39,000 new sleepers, 120,000 new tones of ballast, 5 UTX bridge underpasses, 19 bridge improvements, including major strengthening work on the Don Viaduct, and capacity for a future new station at Kintore.

## Impact of works

In order to deliver the proposed improvements, there will inevitably be disruption to services. From 4th May for 15 weeks the line will close to allow engineers to double the track between Dyce and Inverurie, carry out bridge upgrades and deliver signalling enhancements. Some of this will include night-time work to minimise the disruption to rail services.

During the disruption the following replacement bus services will be in place:

4th May – 14th June: Replacement bus between Dyce and Inverurie.

15th June – 9th August: Replacement bus between Dyce and Huntly.

10th August – 12th August: Replacement bus between Aberdeen and Inverness.

13th August – 19th August: Replacement bus between Aberdeen and Huntly.

## Local community and business engagement

We're committed to working with businesses and residents. Wherever possible we have been highlighting new business opportunities arising from the project works. The project team has been delivering letters and leaflets with details of all the current and upcoming work to every home in the area affected by the ongoing works. Our Inverurie Compound is open on the first Tuesday of every month for any enquiries, supplementing our public meetings and regular meetings with local elected representatives and community councils.

**Derek Glasgow**  
**A2I Project Manager**

# £1.6 MILLION DEPOT UPGRADE TO IMPROVE HIGHLAND TRAIN PERFORMANCE

The ScotRail Alliance has installed new equipment at Inverness Depot to improve train performance in the Highlands.

A new £1.6 million mobile wheel lathe has been installed which will improve the performance and reliability of services between Inverness and Aberdeen, Kyle of Lochalsh, Wick and Thurso.



The machine reprofiles train wheels - which can become misshapen – removing any imperfections or flat spots which have developed, keeping the wheels completely round without having to remove them from the train.

In the past this task would be time consuming and involved transporting the trains to the Central Belt at low speed to allow the work to be carried out.

The introduction of the new equipment also included the installation of new synchronised lifting jacks that allow two-carriage trains to be lifted without uncoupling, reducing the time it takes to service the train.

Both ScotRail's existing Class 158 trains - which operate to and from Kyle of Lochalsh, Wick and Thurso – and new fleet of high-speed Inter7City trains will be serviced at the depot.

The £1.6 million project was funded through Network Rail's Control Period 5 Scottish Network Improvement Fund, where investment was made available to deliver enhancements to the rail network

and services.

ScotRail Project Manager John MacDonald said: "The installation of the new wheel lathe at Inverness Depot will improve the performance and reliability of services in the region.

"Trains can now be serviced locally, allowing the depot to get them back in passenger service faster, saving valuable time.

"With the busy tourist season fast approaching, this is a real boost for the Highlands."

Transport Scotland's Rolling Stock Programme Manager Dougie Andrews said:

"Passengers across the Highlands will be delighted that this equipment is now being used to help enable trains to return to service quickly and provide a more

reliable level of performance.

"This Scottish Government funding builds upon the significant on-going investment in infrastructure and rolling stock across the area, enabling more services and seats to be provided. This, in turn, is helping make rail travel a more attractive choice for commuters and leisure travellers in the north of Scotland."



# PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

**Question S5W-20998: Rhoda Grant**, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 01/02/19

*To ask the Scottish Government what action it has taken to fulfil the commitment that was made by the then First Minister in August 2008, following a Cabinet meeting in Inverness, to reduce train journey times between Inverness and Edinburgh to at least two hours 45 minutes, and an average of three hours, with the aim of making "railway travel to the heart of the Highlands, in terms of time, competitive with roads... by a mixture of projects, including line improvement, additional passing loops, double-tracking and signalling upgrades"; what improvements projects were introduced, broken down by what progress has been made with each, and, in light of the comment that "the timescale for implementation is 2011-12", for what reason the target date was not met, and by what date this level of service will be operational.*

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

Phase one was delivered as planned in December 2012, increasing services from 9 to 11 trains per day in each direction, and reducing journey times by an average of 6 minutes at a cost of £1.2 million.

Phase two, which is currently scheduled to be completed in December 2019, will see a £57 million investment providing an hourly service between Perth and Inverness, delivery of a reduction in average journey times by around 10 minutes and more efficient freight operations. A fleet of refurbished High Speed Trains is planned to be used for this new timetable offering customers greater comfort and more capacity. We are engaged with local communities regarding calling points with the aim of providing calls at stations which represent maximum benefit for users of the service. The new timetable will also include improvements to the first and last trains. Overall, these plans will provide passengers with better connectivity with the Central Belt and Inverness whilst boosting the economic growth for the whole of Scotland.

The long term aspiration remains to deliver a fastest journey time of 2 hours 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt.

**Question S5W-22443: Rhoda Grant**, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 15/04/19

*To ask the Scottish Government how many rail services were (a) cancelled or (b) delayed, broken down by minutes delayed, following the breakdown of a freight train on the single track north of Dalwhinnie on 11 March 2019.*

**Michael Matheson:** Transport Scotland does not hold this information as the Franchise Agreement with Abellio does not obligate them to provide this information to the level requested.

**Question S5W-22447: Rhoda Grant**, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 15/04/19

*To ask the Scottish when double-tracking will be installed on the railway line north of Dalwhinnie to prevent blockages, such as that caused by the breakdown of a freight train on 11 March 2019.*

**Michael Matheson:** Currently there are no plans to double track the Highland Main Line north of Dalwhinnie. The completion, on 25 March 2019, of phase 2 of the Highland Main Line enhancements programme on time and under budget has delivered new infrastructure which provides an immediate performance and resilience enhancement onto the route. This will allow the roll out of improved ScotRail Inter7city services as the re-engineered High Speed Trains are delivered.

The long-term goal of the Highland Main Line enhancements programme seeks to achieve a fastest journey time of 2 hours 45 minutes between Inverness and the Central Belt with an average journey time of 3 hours and an hourly service by 2025.

The exact scope and timing of works for future phases has yet to be determined and will be led initially by the forthcoming refresh of the Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR). The STPR will be informed by a review of our National Transport Strategy (NTS) which is underway. To achieve these outputs, an increase in double tracking may be required, however, interventions will be determined through Network Rail's development process.

## Meeting of the Parliament 7 March 2019 - General Question Time

### Gemini Rail Services (Springburn Closure)

#### Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP):

The announcement of 120 redundancies and the looming closure of the Gemini Rail Services works in my constituency is a devastating blow for a skilled and dedicated workforce. Gemini Rail has been inflexible, unimaginative and slow to engage meaningfully in our efforts to retain jobs and operations. Will the First Minister commit to continuing to explore all options to support workers to retain jobs and operations at the site? I stress that, if the Springburn works was to win the ScotRail 170 class train tender—work that Gemini Rail has staggeringly still failed to bid for—30 jobs would be provided for three years and it would potentially kick-start the railway hub model that the Scottish Government is exploring.

#### The First Minister (Nicola Sturgeon):

I pay tribute to Bob Doris for the way in which he is representing the interests of his constituents and I agree with the latter point that he made.

I was extremely disappointed to receive a letter from Gemini Rail yesterday that confirmed the closure of the workshops at Springburn and I know that it will be a very concerning time for workers there and their families. I stress that consideration needs to be given to potential options for keeping the site open. There will be a further meeting of stakeholders at the end of this month to discuss the way forward. The workshops have work to complete on vehicles that are leased to ScotRail until July this year and Gemini Rail has retained the lease until March next year. That means that there is time to work with industry with a view to repurposing the site for future rail use. To that end, Scottish Enterprise has already engaged independent financial advice in reviewing Gemini Rail's model for the site. We will keep members fully updated on any progress.

## NEW SLEEPER STOCK DEBUT

Caledonian Sleeper launched its brand new trains on the Lowlander service on 28 April. Introduction on the Highlander services should follow in a few weeks.

The whole process of travelling by sleeper has been re-thought:

- Completely new redesigned comfort seats with personal locker, reading light and charging point
- Classic Rooms (solo or shared use with an option of interconnecting rooms, toiletries included)
- Club Rooms (solo or shared use with en-suite, station lounge access, breakfast, luxury toiletries included)
- Caledonian Double (double bed with en-suite, station lounge access, breakfast, luxury toiletries included)
- Accessible Rooms (double or twin, toiletries included and directly adjacent to accessible toilet)

The initial runs got a bad press due to serious delays, and there were some teething problems. Once the stock has settled down, and any remaining problems have been ironed out, the new trains should attract people who've not used sleepers before. Although the fares seem high at first glance, the 'room supplement' easily equates with the cost of a hotel room, plus taxis, especially in London or Edinburgh, and they start to look good value.



# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR [ 1 ]

*I received this letter from Adrian Varwell about cruise ship passenger opportunities. I suggested that he sent a copy to Alasdair Smart, ScotRail's Tourism Manager. Alasdair duly replied and I'm reproducing this too.*

## **Capturing the Cruise Market: a note from Adrian Varwell**

Back in the 1970s I witnessed three special trains being dispatched from Invergordon, one to Glasgow and two to Edinburgh, all in the space of around 90 minutes. These specials had been arranged at short notice because a cruise liner (the Uganda, I think) had terminated its cruise short of its ultimate destination. Whilst it would be wonderful to see our present train operators rising to such a challenge, there is surely one modest step that could be taken to capture just a small part of the cruise ship market.

At the moment there are fleets of coaches offering a number of tours for passengers, and there are reports that some cost-conscious travellers are taking to the local service buses to Inverness, causing problems for those waiting in Alness and Evanton. Are there opportunities for ScotRail to promote its services to cruise passengers?

With 110 cruise liners expected to call at Invergordon in 2019 <sup>1</sup> the Far North Line could attract some of the 178,000 passengers by promoting the present service in an imaginative way. By offering up to thirty seats (with a packed lunch?) on the 11:30 from Invergordon cruise passengers could enjoy nearly two hours at Dunrobin Castle before returning on the 14:42 back to the port. Apart from the busiest summer Saturdays it should be possible to reserve a number of seats without adversely affecting other passengers on these trains. A trip to Inverness on the 11:31, returning from the Highland capital at 14:50 could be equally attractive.

Just recently, an article in Wanderlust magazine by my son, Simon, has highlighted five must-visit stations in the Highlands, including Invergordon and Dunrobin <sup>2</sup>: surely some of this year's cruise passengers will be looking to experience these stations for themselves?

<sup>1</sup> [www.cruisethehighlands.com](http://www.cruisethehighlands.com)

<sup>2</sup> [www.wanderlust.co.uk/content/5-little-known-scottish-highland-stations-you-must-visit/](http://www.wanderlust.co.uk/content/5-little-known-scottish-highland-stations-you-must-visit/)

## **Alasdair Smart's Reply**

Good afternoon Adrian,

You raise a number of very pertinent points. The opportunities arising from cruise passengers is one we are aware of and have been liaising with CruiseScotland, Port of Cromarty, VisitScotland and many others to try and advocate towards rail.

Train has a number of advantages over road travel (comfort, environmental, scenic views etc) and not just the practicality of reducing the traffic impact on the local community. Fundamentally, I believe it gives our visitors the best opportunity to meet and see the real people and places of Scotland, to give them unique experiences and create lasting memories.

I agree there is clearly significant potential but, despite our best efforts, we have not yet been able to successfully convert the Ground Handling Agents and Tour Operators away from their coaches. The independent travellers are more difficult to communicate with directly as we work through intermediaries such as the cruise line operators themselves and local welcome volunteers.

However, that is not to say we have not had some success over the last 2 or 3 years and I know it is currently a hot topic. We are looking at a number of additional promotional activities this year, including increased social media presence (incl highlighting trips to Dunrobin, where rail passengers can benefit from a reduced admission rate), visitor leaflets and a number of other items we are working on, but which are still in the development stage so are not yet ready to share.

I always welcome ideas and suggestions for identifying new passenger markets and improving our customers' experience, so thank you for forwarding on.

Regards  
Alasdair Smart  
Tourism Manager

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR [2]

*Editor's note: Letters to the Editor are always extremely welcome. This is an ideal way for members to express a view without worrying whether it is the same as FoFNL's current line on the topic.*

## **John Brandon, a past Convener of FoFNL picks up on Richard Ardern's article *Transforming the Highland Main Line: An Urgent Task in the January 2019 FNE.***

Richard Ardern's item on the upgrade of the Highland Main Line is in the "bleeding obvious" category to quote Basil Fawly and goes further than any previous proposals I remember seeing. However, the bean counters want much more than "nice to have" even if the operators think it's all a good idea. The usual way of justifying what needs to be upgraded is to start with the timetable you want to operate. You then do only what's necessary to make it work. Cutting to the bone, though, is seldom a good idea as we have seen with Borders: in order to run any specials, advertised train services have to be cancelled. Nonetheless there is a precedent. Tisbury loop west of Salisbury was originally installed only for perturbations and the then Southern Region General Manager said it was not to be used for the normal train service. These days, it is used hourly for the normal service! Thank goodness it was built. Sadly, though, it's not in the station as, at the time, the down platform was owned by an agricultural machinery company, no longer trading, who wouldn't let it go. Perhaps with hindsight that was a good thing as level access would have had to have been provided.

That moves me on to the first of a couple of comments on Richard's plans. Rather than start double track at the Spey bridge I would suggest it starts north of Newtonmore as providing level access to the reinstated up (southbound) platform would be prohibitively expensive. My second suggestion is to spent a LOT more money by starting the Dalguise to Ballinluig double track south of the Grade A Tay bridge with a completely new down (northbound) line alignment of around 1½ miles including a second bridge across the river. It would also need to take some class 3.2 agricultural land. It would, though, give a much better alignment than the present line which would be retained for up trains and could actually be extended further south. I wonder how the cost would compare with a similar length of A9 dualling even at Network Rail's inflated prices?

Yours faithfully,

John Brandon.



**New northbound alignment shown in red.**

## **NOT THE BUCHAN LINE!**

***Herald Diary, 14 March 2019***

READER John Gerrard in Glasgow tells us: "*The Herald* feature on John Buchan reminded me of my Easter Ross granny whose nickname for the long and tedious rail journey from Inverness to Wick and Thurso was *The 39 Stops*. That was before so many of the stations were closed and she was not far wrong."

# NORWAY IMAGINATION

## What is the Art of the Possible?

*The Norwegian Government is considering extending the Nordland Line from Fauske (near the line's terminus at Bodø) to Tromsø, the largest town in northern Norway. Fauske and Bodø are both in latitude 67 degrees 17 north and Tromsø is 69 degrees 40 north. There are many fjords in between. The cities are 300 km apart, further than Dalwhinnie to Kirkwall, but 480 km by road. A firm of engineering and architectural consultants has been appointed to produce a study.*

With Norwegian dynamism, tunnelling experience and a similar offshore oil revenues fund we could easily construct the **Dornoch** short cut and an all-weather rail tunnel under

the **Pentland Firth to Orkney!**

Further south, we could reopen the much shorter direct route from **Edinburgh to Perth via Kinross** and new tunnels at Glenfarg to make that journey 30 minutes faster.

Additionally, reopening the direct **Perth to Aberdeen** line via Forfar would give Aberdeen a second and faster route to the south. The freight train derailment blockage at Dundee a few years ago effectively cut off Aberdeen by rail from the south.

Then, there is the Borders Railway from **Tweedbank to Carlisle...**

*Might we have a little more vision and ambition like this for rail in Scotland please?*

However, before we get too carried away with the feeling that everything works better abroad, we should note (with sympathy) that during January there were a large number of cancellations on the Trondheim-Bodø Nordlandsbanen because of unplanned stock maintenance. One weekend only one of the five train sets was working so bus replacements were used.

The equivalent of our Class 158s are the slightly older Norges Statsbaner Class 92 DMUs. Unit 9283 seen here at Åsen Station, Norway on 26 June 2008

Photo: Alasdair McLellan



**MEANWHILE...On 11 March the Stobart Tesco train broke down and blocked the single line south of Kingussie for two and a half hours. The LNER Highland Chieftain was held at Kingussie from 08:42 until 11:08. Other trains piled up behind in both directions or were cancelled. Amusingly, the reason given online for the half dozen or so cancellations was "traction failure" which although strictly accurate did imply a woefully unreliable fleet.**

**This was the third train to break down on that same stretch of the Highland Main Line in 18 months, all of which caused lengthy delays. The freight was rescued by West Coast 47245 and arrived at Inverness at 12:30 instead of 09:39. The London train was 152 mins late in Edinburgh and terminated there at 13:50.**

**This is the main line from Scotland's northern city to the rest of the country and it is *still single track!***



Photo: Sandy Colley

# PANDORA OPENS THE FARE BOX

## **Easier fares for all, the Rail Delivery Group proposal for "a more transparent, simpler to use, modern system of tickets and fares" (February 2019).**

I have read this document carefully, and it is hard to argue with any of its research or recommendations. In collaboration with Transport Focus almost 20,000 responses to its 3-month consultation in 2018 were received, along with representations from over 60 organisations. In very simple terms they suggest that, over the next few years, trials be undertaken with selected TOCs of various proposed ticket simplifications in order that, in perhaps five years, a thorough understanding of the issues highlighted by these trials may allow the construction of a permanent GB-wide ticket structure for the foreseeable future. This is indeed a laudable objective, and one it is impossible to argue against.

However it's worth noting some snags along the way. The first is that it is easy to let the best be the enemy of the good. An eventual system which fails to achieve a small number of the desired outcomes but which satisfies the majority of them must not be allowed to be dropped merely because those unsatisfied may have a loud voice. No examination has a 100% pass mark.

There is a system already in place which is vastly more simple than that proposed by RDG - it operates in Japan. The Japanese railway system is like ours in many ways: it has extremely dense commuter flows, it has a variety of long-distance services, and it has deeply rural lines. With HS1 and the coming of HS2 we have Shinkansen-type lines, mirroring the entire Japanese system.

The (English language) JR Railway Timetable contains these words. "Regardless of which type of trains are taken, a basic fare ticket which differs according to the distance travelled ... is required." In Japan a small supplement is charged on rural lines, but since this would be

contrary to Scottish Government policy (where there is a social requirement to ameliorate the problems of isolated communities) that aspect is ignored for GB purposes. There is no mention of Season Tickets - indeed the only mention of commuters says that the two lowest tiers of train "serve as commuter trains, requiring no surcharge" and by implication, no discount either. However it's worth noting that this is an English-language timetable aimed at foreign tourists, so any mention of a season ticket would have been out of place. It would be useful (through a Japanese railway contact) to find out whether season tickets are available for commuter journeys. Even if there were it should not weaken the general argument, merely introducing an extra tier that a 7-day Season Ticket would be priced at say 3.5 times the daily ticket.

It would be foolish if this extremely simple model were overlooked in the next few years. Inevitably something more complex than the established - and presumably efficient - Japanese system is likely to be instituted here, but if it is it should only be because a Japanese-style trial on some part of the GB network were carried out, and failed, or showed where a more complex model better served passengers. One major problem is that of overcrowding in the peak. A "flat" fares system will not encourage travel outwith peak commuter flows, and it will be necessary to tackle this head on. Nevertheless the Japanese system - a truly flat one - seems to work.

Scotland would seem an ideal test bed. We have commuting into two large and a number of smaller cities; we have an inter-city network; we have long diverse rural lines - exactly the mix needed to test a radical new fares structure. *Ganbatte kudasai!*

# TECHNOLOGY ADVANCES

## The Safest Mode of Public Transport

What do lifts and trains have in common? Recently I got stuck in a lift in a college building; four people in a very small space with the air becoming increasingly difficult to breathe due to inadequate ventilation. Pressing the red emergency button produced an automated voice that kept asking what the problem was without ever connecting to a living human being. The lift cage was a mini high-security prison and impossible to break out of, even if we had possessed the foresight to bring crowbars and dynamite. Being made of thick and practically seamless stainless steel plating, it was also impenetrable to radio waves. The latter meant that all attempts to contact the outside world by mobile phone were futile.

Someone on the other side of the door eventually heard our frantic shouting and banging. About 45 minutes after I had commenced my short vertical journey, a special key was found that could override the hyper-active safety system that probably caused the thing to stall in the first place, and the door could be prised open. Lifts are supposed to be the safest kind of transport in the world, but I'm not so sure about that anymore.

The relevance with regard to railways is this: In many cities around the world, metro trains are already running driverless without any staff on board. Trials are underway with driverless trams and mainline trains. It is only a matter of time before our trains become like lifts that move horizontally. The perverted notion of safety on the part of the muppets that design everything these days will see passengers locked in steel cages without escape and with the emergency button connecting to a deaf robot. Or am I just being cynical?

**Rolf Schmidt**

## Electric Cars

A question which I've not seen asked, which seems to me to be fundamental to the whole point about electric road vehicles – let's just say cars – is this. It takes me roughly three minutes to put enough fuel in my car (and pay for it) to drive around 350 miles. How long will it take me to charge a battery to go the same distance?

Supplementary questions include: if it takes  $x$  times as long to charge a battery as it does to put petrol in, then the space taken up by the replacement for petrol stations will occupy  $x$  times as much area as that no longer needed by petrol stations. Where will this be sited? Town centres are already fairly full, and it's not reasonable to suppose that all forecourts can be increased by a factor of  $x$ . Laying huge areas of concrete is not environmentally friendly (making the stuff is very polluting, and the loss of grass, whatever, when the concrete is laid is detrimental too). If I can plug in at home overnight (itself somewhat risky, I'd have thought) where do I do it? Most cars in towns and cities (which is where most cars are) are parked in the street. I can't imagine that Local Authorities will take kindly to power-bearing cables criss-crossing pavements. H&S will have a fit. However green my credentials might be I'm not going to buy an electric vehicle if it's going to take even 15 minutes to charge it, and my guess is that 15 minutes is far too low.

So let's just electrify the railway, or at least most of it, and buses whose function is to travel relatively short distances in towns and cities, and which can spend the night hooked up in a secure garage.

**Mike Lunan**

# DETERMINED EFFORT

Rail aficionado Leon Gray and his dog Deano have completed a remarkable project - amazing for the sheer tenacity needed!



Wick station staff now have a large wall display in their office depicting every one of the 25 Class 158 units that operate their line sitting at the platform at Wick Station. The collection took Leon and his dog 15 months to complete!

## Inverness Courier 30 May 1902 - Strathpeffer Speeding

A loco driver on the branch was called to give evidence in a case at Dingwall Sheriff Court where a motorist was charged with exceeding the speed limit of 12 mph.

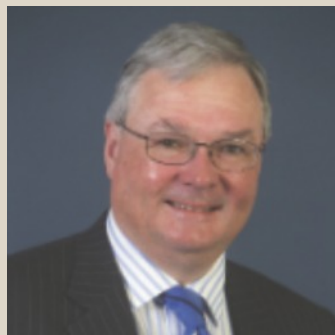
The railwayman testified that the car outran the Strathpeffer train and this was corroborated by railway passengers leading to the car driver's conviction..

"No whistle blew, nor was any green flag waved, when the announcement was quietly slipped out a few weeks ago that wise counsels have prevailed in the Scottish Government, and plans to merge the British Transport Police and Police Scotland have been dropped."

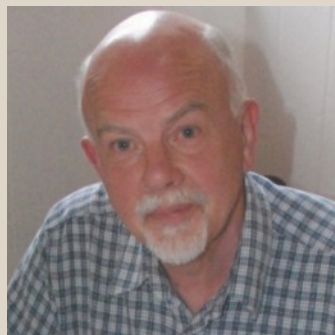


## RECOGNITION FOR TWO SCOTTISH RAIL INDUSTRY FIGURES

At the Rail Business Awards ceremony in London on 21 February, **Bill Reeve**, Director of Rail, Transport Scotland was awarded UK Rail Industry Leader 2019. Bill said that it was an award to the wider Scottish industry and its partners but we feel that it represents a great personal achievement and the evidence of this is the healthy state of the Scottish railway industry. Our colleagues in the south look on with envy.



FoFNL committee member, Scottish Representative of the Rail Freight Group, and highly respected railway author, **David Spaven**, has been made an Honorary Fellow of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society. David modestly remarked that his father would have been a worthier recipient, but said it is a great honour to have.



## FINAL JELlicOE PLAQUE UNVEILED

On Tuesday 30 April the unveiling of the 19th, and final, "Jellicoe Plaque" took place at the RSPB Forsinard Flows visitor centre, the former Forsinard station building.

The plaques commemorate the troop trains that ran the length of Great Britain to Thurso, for Scapa Flow in Orkney, during both world wars.

The Forsinard plaque was unveiled by Johnny Jellicoe, grandson of Admiral of the Fleet, Sir John Jellicoe, on a beautiful day, in the presence of well over 100 people including many school children.

There was an illustrated talk given by Robert Foden, a historian from Kirkwall; an exhibition and refreshments. It was organised by Moya McDonald of Another Orkney Production, who is the driving force behind the whole project and Caroline Eccles, Project Manager, *Flows to the Future* at Forsinard.

**Dr Monica Main, Lord Lieutenant of Sutherland, and Johnny Jellicoe unveiling the plaque and interpretation board.**

**Photo: John Yellowlees**



## A CRP FOR THE FAR NORTH LINE?

On 1 May I attended a meeting at Helmsdale organised by ScotRail and Mike Willmot, who was responsible for the extremely successful project to restore the former station building at Helmsdale in which we met.

ScotRail is very keen to set up a Community Rail Partnership for the FNL. Our view is that, although CRPs do excellent work in motivating local support and activities for their railways, the FNL is simply far too long for a single voluntary group to manage, and possibly a kind of 'umbrella' linking the various local groups, existing and new, is what would work best.

The main difference between a CRP and FoFNL is that we are a totally independent body, self-funded and, as such, we can talk to anyone in the rail industry and the Government, about any aspect of the FNL, complaining and criticising if necessary. We do not get involved in individual "community projects" although we think they are very important and useful.

It was agreed that it is worth exploring the practical options for establishing a kind of CRP for the line and a further meeting will be held in the near future. Whatever the final form, FoFNL will keep in close touch and establish what was described to me by Graham Atkins, Chair of the Borders Rail Community Partnership as a "symbiotic relationship".

**Ian Budd**

# CIS INSTALLATIONS NEARLY COMPLETE

ScotRail has very nearly completed the installation of standard Customer Information Screens (CIS, also sometimes known as PIS from

the days when passengers were referred to as passengers) at all stations in Scotland.

On the Far North Line these replace the screens previously provided by HITRANS at some stations.

At Altnabreac and Culrain the installations are solar-powered. The final two stations to be equipped were Tain and Invergordon, installation having been completed in April along with some outstanding configuration and back-office processes.

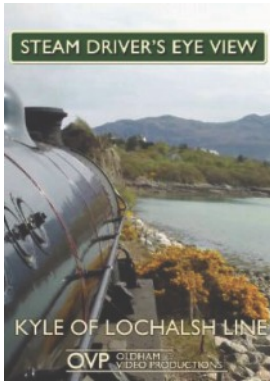
The single station currently missing a CIS is Dunrobin Castle which awaits final funding decisions.

The new screens will provide significant benefit for passengers, particularly reassurance while waiting at a remote outpost!



## DVDS REVIEW

### Steam Driver's Eye View DVDs: Kyle and Highland Main Lines



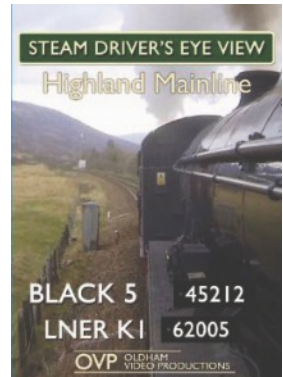
**Oldham Video Productions** has created this series of DVDs, two of which relate to the Highlands. All are priced at **£14.95** despite varying in length between one and three hours. Blu-ray is available at £19.95. Further details can be found at [www.ovpsteam.co.uk](http://www.ovpsteam.co.uk) and orders directed via the link to Videoscene.

The Kyle Line DVD lasts for 3 hours and 15 minutes and features LNER K1 62005. The first 45 minutes or so will cover the tracks shared with the FNL between Inverness and Dingwall. Cameras mounted on both sides of the engine give a very steady picture and the DVD can be played with or without commentary. The commentary is brief and the tapes are refreshingly not spoiled by music.

The Highland Main Line DVD lasts for 3 hours 20 minutes and covers a southbound journey on a brilliant day with Black Five 45212 and LNER K1 62005. There is also bonus coverage of parts of the northbound climbs to Druimuachdar and Slochd. Both DVDs give some lineside runpasts also. Highland place names are a challenge to the commentator but are displayed on the screen simultaneously.

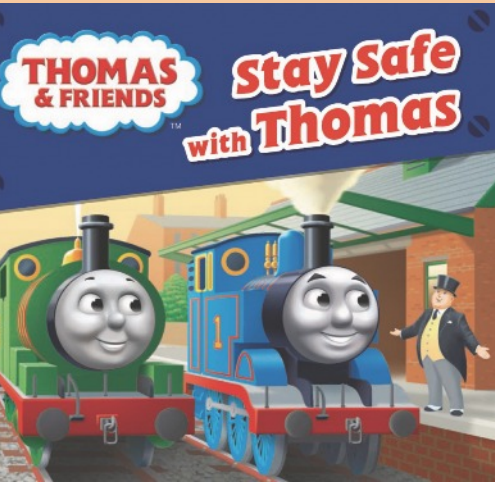
Recommended. Maybe the FNL from Dingwall to Caithness will be covered in the future, although we may have to wait a year or two before the next steam special to cover the full length of the line.

**Richard Ardern**



# STAY SAFE WITH NETWORK RAIL & THOMAS

In a new venture, announced on World Book Day on 7 March, Network Rail has teamed up with Thomas the Tank Engine™ to help pre- and primary-school children to understand the dangers that exist on railways.



Mattel, the licensee, and NR have produced a story book to help parents and teachers to explain about rail safety. This is available in print and e-book versions. NR and British Transport Police are distributing copies to

libraries, nurseries and doctors' surgeries.

The launch of the book follows the *You vs Train* campaign, run by the rail industry and BTP last summer, which targeted older children and teenagers to warn them of the dangers of the railway. In the last five years, the number of young people taking risks on the railway has gone up by almost 80 per cent.

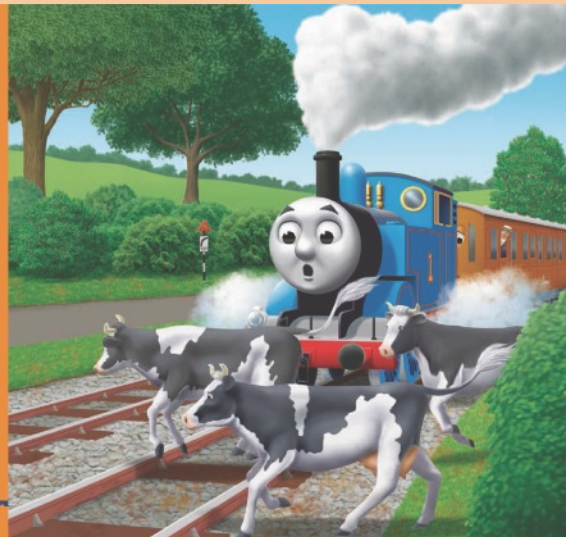
Allan Spence, head of public and passenger safety at Network Rail, said: "The railway is full of both obvious and hidden dangers. By offering parents an engaging and fun way to talk to their children at a young age about safety on the railway, we hope children will grow up knowing the dangers and keep themselves and their friends safe."

BTP Superintendent Susan Peters said: "Our focus is keeping people safe and working with such a well-known children's television character is exciting. This Thomas the Tank Engine™ story book gives us an engaging and accessible way to ensure essential safety messaging is reaching young children. Although BTP runs activity through the year to educate the public of the seen and unseen dangers in and around the railway tracks, we hope that being able to discuss this subject through the use of these books will make our safety messages go further."



Then The Fat Controller reminded Thomas about the time a gate had been left open. A herd of cows had wandered onto the tracks and it had nearly caused a nasty accident.

"People must always close gates behind them," said The Fat Controller, "and engines must watch out for animals."





I was in Edinburgh last week. Wednesday morning saw me waiting on a busy Haymarket platform 2 waiting to catch the 8:38 home to Inverness. I catch that train a lot, and for three reasons. First, it's direct, meaning I don't have to wait in the wind-tunnel of Perth Station. Second, it tends to be fairly quiet, meaning I should be able to get on with some work. And third, it's the fastest direct service of the day, aiming to get me north in 3 hours 21 minutes.

it ran on time. How many ScotRail passengers can say the same for their recent journeys?

In the four years since Abellio took over ScotRail trains, our hopes of getting a service with the same efficiency, reliability, cleanliness and – dare we have wished for it – value for money as Abellio deliver in The Netherlands, have sunk without trace. In the run up to Christmas, with industrial action and staff

## Posh trains to the north? Nice, but not enough says Nicky Marr



Haymarket is unlike any station in the north of Scotland. Rather than the half dozen trains that might rumble through in a day up here, half a dozen whizz past every few minutes. Which is why, as a sleek Inter-city pulled up at platform 2, I stepped back to allow others to get on; clearly this train was not destined for the Highlands.

I glanced up at the information board. The Inverness train was, apparently, 'due'. I checked my watch and looked again at the train. This long, clean and bright beast couldn't really be for me, could it? I yelled my question down the platform; the surprise answer came back. I threw my bag on and slammed the door behind me as the train began to ease away.

Goodness. How conditioned we Highlanders have become to expecting the worst from ScotRail. I had been convinced this posh train wasn't for us. Even the ticket-collector was surprised; an hour earlier he'd been told that the service had been cancelled.

I took to Twitter and was informed by a chatty 'CT' that I was on a 'Classic' (i.e. 40-year-old) Intercity high-speed train, which, CT wrote, 'will be upgraded to #Inter7city standard over the next year.' Despite a lack of table seats, I was smitten. This old bird may have been 40-plus, but, like many of her vintage, she was sleek, stylish, welcoming and – on this occasion – reliable. There were power sockets and a trolley service too. We rolled quietly north and slid gracefully into Inverness station on schedule.

I know – I was lucky. A train turned up. It had heating, sockets and comfortable seats for all, and crucially,

shortages compounding the late delivery of new rolling-stock, the company rightly had its knuckles rapped by The Scottish Government. And just as the problems reached their worst, an average ticket price increase of 2.8% was announced.

The service we get is poor, and although new trains are promised between Scotland's seven major cities, will they materialise? Will the new trains solve problems of reliability and staff shortages? Will journey times and ticket prices be slashed? And what will happen beyond the cities, such as between Inverness and Wick and Thurso, or Inverness and Kyle?

During my smooth journey north, I took advantage of the excellent Wi-Fi to ask these questions on Twitter. But as my questions became more pointed, CT became less chatty. Yes, there would be a reduction in journey time between Inverness and the central belt, but only of 10 minutes. But of the rest? Silence.

At the same time as I was travelling my 150 miles north, Mr Marr was on a train from Edinburgh to London, 400 miles south. My journey time was 201 minutes; his just 250 minutes. And no, there wasn't much difference in ticket price.

That speaks volumes. In the north we need and deserve better trains, which are more reliable and can go faster. We need and deserve more than the single-track lines we have. We need and deserve not to be treated as third-class citizens. Is anyone listening?

# TIME DOES TRANSFIX

FoFNL member, Les Turner, kindly passed on to us a book written by Alfred H. Forbes. He eventually became Provost of Forres from 1965-75. However, he left school early and became an employee of the Highland Railway, weeks before it became part of the L.M.S., where he found himself placed at various locations. He has many stories to tell, here is one...

I worked several times at Dingwall, which was the junction with the Skye line and the terminus of the Strathpeffer branch line.

One September day in either 1927 or 1928 I received a telegram from Train Control, instructing us to detach from the rear of the train from Wick, the travelling Post Office, and attach it to the Skye Boat train which arrived ten minutes after the mail had left for Inverness, 22 miles away. A local train from Tain followed the first two, but it was unaffected. I walked to the locomotive shed to make sure that the shunting engine driver was fully informed and then returned to the office to instruct the signal cabins and the passenger shunter, but I met on the platform a girl I had met when working at Kildary some weeks earlier. We had a lot to say, and I was startled to see the sixteen coach train arrive. It was now too late for me to do anything, and returning to the office I stuck the form on the metal spike, and said nothing. It was possible that the change would not cause much trouble at Inverness, for it would arrive as normal.

When the three trains had gone I went for lunch, and put the matter out of my mind before I returned. On entering the office I knew by the faces of those present that all was not well, and Willie Sim indicated with his thumbs the door of the stationmaster's office which was closed. I knocked and entered, to find the occupant seated at his desk, wearing his uniform gold braided cap, an ominous sign. He handed me a telegram form, and I quickly read the message. It demanded by return the name of the person responsible for the delay of 40 minutes to the London train, and the reason for the failure to carry out the instructions sent. I could think of nothing to say and stood irresolutely with the paper in my hand. "Black Sandy" stabbed with his forefinger towards the door, and as I turned he shouted "You are not on my staff you're on

your own", and then added, "Shut the door".

I was soon enlightened: the Duke of Athlone, the only surviving son of Queen Victoria was returning to London after having spent the grouse season at Farr House, and the royal coach had been sent north for his use. It was to have been attached at the rear of the long train, so that the noise of the engine would not disturb him, and the Post Office coach attached at the rear, as it would have a stabilising influence and also act as a buffer if the train was rammed in the rear by another, a most unlikely occurrence for most collisions were "head on".

The Duke, who was now very old, was furious at the delay, and heads would have to roll. As soon as Black Sandy had gone home, the duty staff assembled in the office to discuss my plight. Almost everyone was sure that this was the end of my career, and the first suggestion was that I should resign, as this was better than getting the sack. Traffic had continued to fall after the General Strike, and a number of men in my age group had resigned to take posts in the Benguela Railway, now expanding in Angola, knowing that there would be little promotion for them in the future. All had been on strike in 1926.

I rejected this and asked for suggestions, but these were more jocular than useful; fainting fit, temporary loss of memory, attacked by an enraged passenger, still under the influence of alcohol consumed on the previous evening. "Dynamite Dan" Macgillivray, the branch train guard, offered to give evidence that he had once gone to "Bochans" at Muir of Ord, whose whisky was so potent, being made by a local and illegal whisky still, that it had been several days before the influence wore off. It seemed so far the only possible excuse, but I decided to ignore it. "Townie" the foreman porter returned to the "fainting fit" proposal, and I remembered the two Indian peddlers I had casually noticed in the

station. Dan said that they had been on the branch train. and this was all the information I required for the explanation I was to give. A few minutes discussion and my reply was ready to be transmitted to the Traffic Manager. It said that I had started to make the necessary arrangements for the change over, but on my way to the signal cabin I had been intercepted by two Indian peddlers, with very poor English and so gave them the information they needed in Hindustani. They became very importunate, both holding me firmly and questioning me on many matters, with

On the third day Mr Dempster, an inspector, arrived and went into Black Sandy's office, without giving any sign of recognition. After a considerable period of time I was summoned to his presence. Mr Mathieson stood respectfully beside the desk, while "Spring Balance" (Mr Dempster) sat in the chair with a file of papers of alarming thickness before him. Without any preamble he asked. "What's this cock and bull story about you speaking this Asian language?"

Summoning all my aplomb I looked at him, and tried to inject a note of indignation into my voice.

**Dingwall Station, looking south, in the 1930s.  
Photo from the Highland Railway Society  
collection.**



the result that the train concerned had arrived.

The telegrapher at the other end of the line acknowledged receipt with the letters "MIM" and "IMI", instead of the procedural "RD". The first group was our informal code for "amazement" and the second for "incredulous laughter". Townie, a Pontefract man, had been a sergeant major in the "Ross-shire Buffs" and had spent much of his service in India; he had a stock of the words used by the soldiers there, most of them terms of abuse for the native servants which even private soldiers had to serve them. I memorised as many as possible in the next two days, while Townie attended to the details outside the station.

I replied. "I beg pardon, sir! I have some knowledge of Hindustani". He seemed nonplussed and fingered the papers before him before turning to the stationmaster to ask. "Have you any knowledge of it, Mr Mathieson?" It was some seconds before he could reply, so taken aback was he by the query. "No! no! no!... Mr Dempster, just the Gaelic ... nothing more ... nothing more".

Dempster stared at me, while I shuffled uneasily, then he abruptly told me to leave, which I did hurriedly.

I stood outside the closed door, straining to catch what was being said inside, without success, until I was called in again. Did I know anyone in Dingwall fluent in the language. I regretted that I did not, but so many of the men in the area had served abroad that there was certain to be a good number. I suggested "Townie", but Mr Dempster said sharply that he did not want any railwaymen, and then, changing his mind, said that he would like to see the foreman porter. I was again dismissed. and Townie was sent for.

He had given the names of several people, who, he knew had a knowledge of Indian languages but all were rejected. He then added that he had heard that the manager of the Conservative Club had been employed for many years in India, and would perhaps be able to assist. The title of the club obviously impressed Mr Dempster, who told me to accompany him to this establishment. The club was two rooms above a greengrocer's shop, and the manager was Duncan Durward. a friend of Townie's. The area from Dingwall to Invergordon formed the "State Control Area" where all the licensed premises were owned by the Government, a relic of the First World War, when the area was flooded with soldiers, sailors and dockyard workers.

Drunkenness was so rife that the State had to take over all places where it was sold. The State's policy was to reduce drinking, and the only place where a bottle of spirits could be purchased in Dingwall was in the "Liquor Store" a former shop on the High Street with large clear glass windows. Most members of the club were the farmers, and only in this way could they obtain a drink between 3 o'clock and opening time in the evening. No food was made available, and Duncan's job was to see that a stock of drink was always on hand, and to keep the rooms tidy. He had served in the army and had tried many jobs, and claimed that he had been with a troupe of actors for a number of years, and had often played the leading part. He was a plausible rogue and was willing to do almost anything for a reward. Townie and he had assiduously rehearsed the part he was now to play.

He met us at the top of the stairs and I introduced myself and Mr Dempster, who outlined what he wanted. Duncan nodded understandingly. "I am most willing to help in any way. I spent many years in India, and in addition to Hindustani I had to pick up many of the varied tongues spoken in that vast and fascinating country. Hindustani I know best, that being the *lingua franca* of the rajahs and princes, and most of my dealings were with these. All speak excellent English but naturally like us to speak their language."

Dempster listened with little interest. "Right then", he said, "let us have a trial".

Duncan turned to me, "Could you say a few sentences?" he asked. Holding my hands behind my back, and gripping them firmly, I drew a deep breath and repeated some of the words and phrases I had learned, starting with the numbers from one to ten. "Eki, do, chin, panj, sat, ath, naw, das" and continued with words like "panee lao, juldee, budmash". I tried to make them sound like sentences.

Duncan responded with a stream of words, and I said "Hang, hang" at intervals, the word I believed meant, yes. Duncan turned to Dempster, "That's quite good", he said. "Naturally his accent is bad, but he can be understood, which is required in everyday life". I interjected that I did not understand all that he had said, in case Dempster asked me what it did mean. But he stood for a minute, undecided as to what he would now do. Then he turned on his heel, and left, saying over his shoulder, "Get back to work". I ventured to stay a few seconds to promise Durward that I would be in the National bar that night.

I got a letter of warning from the Traffic Manager, reminding me that my first duty was to work in the interest of the company, and that the public should be directed to the station office if I was engaged on other duties. My success in evading any penalty gave me a reputation as an expert in this field, and I was often asked to write letters of explanation for falls from grace. Many of my actions were motivated by vanity, not the only deadly sin I committed.



# CHARLEVOIX: LOVELY BUT LOOK CAREFULLY

Some viewers of Michael Portillo's *Great Canadian Rail Journeys* might have been surprised to hear him describe as the country's most beautiful journey a line of which they had never heard. Your Editor certainly was, so he despatched his special correspondent to lead a no expenses (the word "spared" has been deliberately omitted) investigation. Here is the resultant report.

## John Yellowlees has a look at a tourist line in Quebec

The journey to which Michael referred is along the north shore of the St Lawrence Estuary from Quebec City downstream on the Charlevoix Railway. Viewers saw him travel in a modern diesel multiple-unit with excellent all-round visibility from Quebec City's Chute Montmorency station, alighting at the fabulous basilica of Saint Anne de Beaurpré, likened by him to Lourdes, where we caught sight of crutches discarded by those for whom a miracle had returned the power of their legs. Hugging the shore, the train continued on its 125-km journey to La Malbaie, and he broke his journey on the way back at Baie St Paul and the Montmorency Falls.

We learned from Michael that La Malbaie developed a century ago as a fashionable resort that attracted the likes of U.S. President Taft. Inland lies a wilderness of mountain peaks in the Laurentian Shield, and his adventures included landing by seaplane on a remote lake. Near Baie St Paul, another settlement redolent of wealth and good taste, Michael visited a couple who turn tomatoes into wine, and at the Montmorency Falls where the French defeated General Wolfe in 1759 he ascended in a lift to ride across the

foaming waters on a zipwire.

The Quebec, Montmorency and Charlevoix Railway Company (QM&C) was incorporated by an act of the Legislature of Quebec in 1881. The railway was to be built along the Saint Lawrence River and was intended to provide service to as far east as Baie-Sainte-Catherine, which was in turn expected to be developed into a major seaport with ice-free shipping even in winter.

The first part of the line between Limoilou and Sainte-Anne-de-Beaurpré, Quebec went into service on Saturday 10 August 1889. It was built at the time for the pilgrimage to the Basilica of Sainte-Anne-de-Beaurpré, and the railway was nicknamed the "*Railway of Good Saint Anne*". Initial operations were with steam locomotive hauled trains. The line was electrified in 1904, when the company changed its name to Quebec Railway Light & Power (QRL&P). Between 1904 and 1959 electric trains provided an interurban type service for passengers between Quebec and Sainte-Anne-de-Beaurpré.

The second part of the line, extending from Beaurpré to Clermont in Charlevoix, was built between 1909 and 1919. The Richelieu & Ontario Navigation Company had built the large Manoir



Richelieu at Pointe-au-Pic (now part of La Malbaie) in the 1890s. At first hotel guests would get to the hotel via Canada Steamship Lines steamships. Rodolphe Forget ran for the House of Commons in 1904 promising voters an extension of the QM&C line, which was eventually done. This part of the line is very scenic because it is literally wedged between mountains and river. It required huge investments in time and money: there are two tunnels and 900 bridges and culverts, or an average of one every 165 metres.

With the line extended, Manoir Richelieu hotel customers could use the QRL&P trains instead of Canada Steamship Lines (CSL) vessels to get to the hotel. The hotel building burned down in the fall of 1928 but was rebuilt to designs by John Smith Archibald and reopened in June 1929. CSL vessels continued to call at the hotel until 1966.

In 1951 Canadian National (CN) took over as owner of the railway. The line became known as the Murray Bay Subdivision of CN, Murray Bay being an English name for La Malbaie. In 1959 CN terminated passenger service and dismantled the overhead lines used for electrification between Limoilou and Saint-Joachim.

In 1984 the line saw the reintroduction of passenger service when a diner train known as the Le Tortillard du Saint-Laurent started operating between Quebec and La Malbaie, but this lasted for only two seasons. In 1994 CN sold the whole line to the Quebec Railway Corporation. The Tortillard du Saint-Laurent dinner train was restarted under another company and ran again in 1995 and 1996 before declaring bankruptcy. In 1996 the Charlevoix Railway Company created a major timber transshipment yard at Clermont, which is used by

almost all timber processors of the Côte-Nord.

On 7 May 2007 Nancy Belley, who had spent more than 10 years managing the Chemin de fer Charlevoix subsidiary of the Quebec Rail Corporation, was hired by Le Massif to serve as the manager of their railway project. Work on restarting passenger trains began in September 2008 with renovation of Charlevoix Railway track partially funded by grants from the national and provincial governments, and with a total cost of C\$18.4 million. In April 2009 Le Massif de Charlevoix organisation purchased the line between Quebec and La Malbaie from the Quebec Railway Corporation.

Infrastructure Canada announced in November 2009 that the governments of Canada and Quebec would contribute C\$5 million toward the railway line upgrade.

Train de Charlevoix has two two-car trains which are unique in Quebec. They were manufactured in 1981 by Deutsche Bahn in Germany.

From September 2011 the new tourist train service began operation along the Charlevoix Railway between Quebec City and La Malbaie. CN still has running rights to use the line to haul freight between Clermont and Quebec. The Port of Quebec City lists the Chemin de fer Charlevoix as a rail transport provider to the port's facilities.

Note that the passenger train no longer runs in the winter, so there is no service to the ski area. In fact the timetable operates only from June to October - so again folk who believe that countries like Canada and New Zealand combine the best of local rail service with tourist delights should be careful what they wish for!



# VISITING OUR NEIGHBOUR

On 22 March a refurbished Inter7City HST passed through Aviemore heading to Inverness for training. This set was just newly released and it would have been the only refurbished one to pass the old semaphore signals which were about to be removed.

## SANDY COLLEY HAS A LOOK AT HML HAPPENINGS



Everything at Aviemore about to change:

On 22 March 170418 heads north with the new signals covered up, and work on extending the passing loop still in progress. The semaphore signals were salvaged for use on the Strathspey Railway.

*All photos by  
Sandy Colley*

In keeping with this issue's freight theme, the southbound Stobart container train seen coming off Culloden Viaduct on 9 April, unusually hauled by a Class 68 (68004).

