

# FAR NORTH EXPRESS



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THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

*Cairdean Na Loine Tuath*

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## FOFNL OFFICE BEARERS

### President:

Jamie Stone MP

### Vice-Presidents:

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Gail Ross MSP

John Finnie MSP

### Convener and Editor:

Ian Budd, *Bishopbriggs*

### Hon. Secretary:

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David Spaven, *Edinburgh*

Malcolm Wood, *Ardgay*

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**Website:** [www.fofnl.org.uk](http://www.fofnl.org.uk)

**Facebook:** [www.facebook.com/fofnl](https://www.facebook.com/fofnl)

**E-mail:** [editor@fofnl.org.uk](mailto:editor@fofnl.org.uk)

### Editorial Address:

3 Villafield Loan,

Bishopbriggs,

Glasgow, G64 3NZ

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### Cover picture:

No wires yet - what a waste of an electric train! Azuma 800210 on the return test working from Inverness to Doncaster on 6 December at Cradlehall, passing 43169 leading a refurbished Inter7City unit on the 07:07 from Glasgow.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**

# HEADCODE

The announcement of the *Far North Line Review Team Final Report* came at the beginning of November, more than six months later than we expected. It was worth the wait. Read the full report in this issue.

The prospects for the FNL are exciting with a completely revised service pattern which will give an hourly service between Tain and Inverness and a half-hourly peak service between Dingwall and Inverness. Commuting will become much more attractive and reliable. The provision of the Lentrans Loop is key to this and something we have been campaigning for for many years.

The 'Next Big Thing' is the Transport Scotland's *Strategic Transport Projects Review 2*. The original STPR was published in December 2008 and from the point of view of rail it has partially failed, since work on the Highland Main Line, the third most important project identified out of the 29 listed for all modes, has scarcely been started, while items one and two are complete. The HML work was announced in 2008 for completion by 2012, extended in 2011 to 2025! We make no apologies for mentioning the HML all the time. It is our most important connecting route for business, freight, leisure and tourism yet it is still mostly single track and diesel operated. Even the limited amount of work that has been done has been inadequate from the freight point of view. STPR2 is the Scottish Government's chance to very publicly state that to address climate change rail projects have to be given priority over road. This includes the prestigious opportunity to reopen the direct route from Perth to Edinburgh which was closed in 1970 to facilitate the building of the M90 - *unthinkable* now!

The other major news since the last issue of FNE is the early termination of Abellio's contract to run ScotRail. As heavily involved rail campaigners, even we do not know the full picture, but the fact that this has happened should give politicians and the media pause for thought. By their utterances on the subject there are many in both fields who simply do not take the time to understand the way the railway works before speaking or going into print. In this way they have nurtured a kind of national shorthand: "Blame ScotRail for all rail problems". This helps no-one. We can understand that journalists are always looking for a good story and that it is part of the job of opposition MSPs to make political capital out of government difficulties, but there is no excuse for anyone to wilfully ignore basic railway-operation facts.

Ian Budd

## 2020 AGM & CONFERENCE

FoFNL's AGM & Conference will take place in **Dingwall** this year on **Friday 19 June**.

The venue is the **Ross County Football Club**. This is near the station and there are plenty of places to stay in the area.

We are hoping that many more members will attend this year than last. We currently have three of the four speakers booked:

- David Simpson - Operations Director, ScotRail
- Stephen Kent - Teaching Fellow in the Birmingham Centre for Railway Research and Education
- James Abbott - Editor, Modern Railways



After last year we have decided that from now on Tea & Coffee will be provided. Lunch is not available at the venue but the town centre is nearby. Details of exact times will be in *FNE 80* but starting time will be around 11:30, assuming the summer timetable is the same as usual.

Ian Budd

# PANDORA

Longfellow reminds us that *the mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small*. The mills of the ScotRail Alliance seem to rival those of the Almighty in their speed of processing; Pandora is encouraged to hope that their output will be as productive. The Review Team, set up by Fergus Ewing in December 2016, heard the outline plans to provide more services, with some necessary infrastructure enhancements (railway-speak for passing loops or even - with luck - longer stretches of double track) in early 2018. Grind, grind the mills have doubtless been going ever since.

Somewhere within Transport Scotland there is a pipeline (and here the metaphor is in danger of becoming mixed) into which ideas are introduced at one end and Magical And Thoughtful Processes occur along its length. At the other end of the pipeline stand hopeful people, some from Levenmouth, some from St Andrews, some even from Caithness. Will the pipeline deliver grindings? St Matthew enjoins us to *watch and pray*.

\*\*\*\*\*

Last night I dreamed I was back at Waverley...

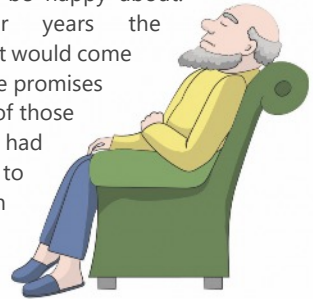
A Government was elected on a detailed list of promises. It would take a few years to deliver all of them - that's the nature of things, after all: plans had to be made, things had to be built - but

## Pandora muses about plans and government

there were some things which would happen quickly. Nice things: things people would notice and be happy about.

After four years the Government would come

back to us and ask whether we wanted them to carry on: had the promises been met? Sadly in dreams it's sometimes the case that some of those darned promises take longer to plan, to build, to deliver than had been 'promised', but the people in the Government explain that to us, and promise - really, really promise - that if we give them another go everything will be fine.



That's how my dream started, but then, as dreams do, it got all fuzzy and suddenly it wasn't a Government any more but a bunch of people running a railway. They'd done the promising thing too, and their promises were taking longer to come true as well - the people fixing the trains made too optimistic a promise about how long it would take, and the people making new trains got things wrong too. The railway people were cross but, a bit like the Government, they thought that if they were given a bit longer it would all be fine.

And then there was another shift in the dream. A man from the Government appeared again and began to beat the railway people with a big stick, and the railway people were chased away. Then he stopped chasing and looked around to see who would make the trains go. Most of the railway people came tip-toeing back and the Government man tried not to notice that the trains wouldn't go if the people who knew how to do it didn't do it, so since the Government people really wanted the trains - really, really badly - they all agreed not to talk about it any more. And all the promises the poor railway people had made all came true just before I woke up.

And over my breakfast I wondered if anyone would be nasty to the Government and beat them with a big stick if any of their promises were a little bit late. I hoped not but...

# FRANCHISE TERMINATION IN THE PRESS

It was announced on 18 December that Abellio is to have its contract for the ScotRail franchise terminated three years early, in 2022.

There has been political pressure applied to the Scottish Government for many months to sort out the problems rail travellers have been experiencing. Unfortunately this is partly the result of confused journalists mis-informing the public, as seen in this rather absurd paragraph from a newspaper on 27 December 2019 used to introduce a 'Letter to the Editor':

## **ScotRail services hit by signal woes on the Far North Line**

*A signal failure sparked the cancellation of some rail services on the Far North Line last week, just one day after it was announced that ScotRail franchise holder, Abellio, would be stripped of its contract earlier than expected. Scottish Government transport secretary Michael Matheson announced he had triggered an early break clause which means Abellio will cease operating ScotRail services from March 2022 - three years early. It comes amid growing passenger frustration at crowded trains and cancellations.*

Basic knowledge of the current railway industry, including the fact that Network Rail, not ScotRail, is responsible for the signalling system would have avoided this.

## **Fortunately intelligent comment is also published:**

### **Inverness Courier 24-12-19 - Fraser Grieve, Regional Director, Scottish Council for Development and Industry**

Last week we heard the news that Abellio is to lose the ScotRail contract in 2022, three years earlier than planned.

It's been a difficult time for our railways over these past few years with upheaval caused by rail upgrades in the central belt and upgrades to deliver more electrification of the rail network there.

We've also seen delays in the delivery of new trains to service those routes and refurbished trains for the services south and east of Inverness.

No one utilising our railway over these past two years could have failed to notice the challenges it faced, but at a time when so much change was taking place, and efforts to deliver more services, any operator would struggle. Abellio have not been perfect but we need to be realistic about what any operator could achieve over this period.

As we look ahead at how we deliver a transport network to meet the needs of differing areas of the country, we need to be clearer on our purpose.

We need to take action to unblock the rail

bottlenecks that exist throughout Scotland starting with those areas that have seen the greatest decline in service, such as here in the Highlands.

If we're really to deliver a service that meets the needs of those that live, work, or visit this part of Scotland, then we need to see greater urgency in addressing the maintenance and upgrading of our railways to ensure they keep pace with other parts of the country.

Our existing transport networks continue to struggle in the face of no clear strategy or timetable to see them improved.

Promised journey time reductions on our railways that would see services of two hours and 45 minutes between Inverness and Glasgow or Edinburgh seem a long way down the track, with no noticeable effort being made to achieve them.

Having promised improvements is one thing, but without a plan and resource to deliver them they'll always remain a distant destination.

Let's hope we see action to get our railways back on track.

# REVIEW TEAM - FINAL REPORT

On 1 November the long-awaited Far North Line Review Team Report was signed off by ministers and its plans published by Transport Scotland.

Because of the way projects are now managed, the main infrastructure work is not listed in detail as it is still going through early development work.

Unlike previous Control Periods where projects were announced by Transport Scotland before some of the detailed work had been done, and were therefore at risk of running over budget, definite commitment will now be given once all the costs are known. This is the 'pipeline' approach, where projects which will be started in the current Control Period (CP6) are not yet officially committed.

From the point of view of campaigners, such as FoFNL, this can be frustrating. Suffice to say at this point that, given that the likely cost of the works outlined in the Report is already known, and that the whole new service specification (timetable and service pattern) which has been agreed in the Report depends on the infrastructure work, such as the Lentrans Loop, being done, it is hard to see a scenario in which it will not take place. We just hope it's pretty soon!

**Ian Budd**

## TRANSPORT SCOTLAND PRESS RELEASE 01-11-19

### **Potential next steps outlined**

Working collaboratively local stakeholders and the railway industry have developed an exciting programme of improvements to the Far North Line which delivers benefits for passengers and local communities.

The Far North Line Review Group [Team] has successfully driven a range of benefits along the route, as well as a potential programme of further improvements which are now under early development work.

Achievements to date include improved safety and journey time benefits, as well as customer service enhancements.

Bill Reeve, Transport Scotland's Director of Rail and chair of the Review Group said:

"The Group has been an exemplar of good practice with the industry and local stakeholders each contributing expertise and knowledge to deliver a shared ambition to maximise the potential of the Far North Line for passengers, communities and businesses along the route.

"By building on the achievements to date, the

Far North Line will yield economic benefits from improved services and infrastructure by encouraging more rail use by passengers and by freight operators."

Ian Budd, Convener, Friends of the Far North Line said:

"The Far North Line Review Team was set up in response to issues raised by FoFNL's 2016 Consultant's Report and proved to be an extremely effective vehicle for identifying and tackling the many problems being experienced on the line.

"The workings of the group were exemplary and it was a pleasure to be involved.

"FoFNL is delighted that the Review Team's task is now complete and that work on implementing its recommendations is about to proceed."

Network Rail is now developing a Strategic Business Case for improvements to services on the Far North Line. Once this concludes, Transport Scotland will assess the deliverability and affordability of the detailed options for potential implementation during future rail funding periods.

# Far North Line Review Team

## Consolidation Report

*"It is essential we make the most of this important asset for passengers, for sustainable freight transport, and for the communities and businesses along the whole route."* Fergus Ewing, 16 December 2016



## August 2019

### Remit

Fergus Ewing MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy, established the Far North Line Review Team in December 2016 with a remit to identify potential opportunities to improve connectivity, operational performance and journey time on the line.

### Membership

The Review Team comprised senior representatives from the railway industry (Transport Scotland, Network Rail, ScotRail) as well as relevant stakeholders (HITRANS, Highland Council, HIE, Caithness Transport Forum and Friends of the Far North Line). The Team has now concluded and this report reviews the Team's achievements and sets out activities and responsibilities for future years.

### Report

This report provides a high-level overview of achievements, work-in-progress and future opportunities.



### Achievements to date:

#### Safety and Improved Journey Time

In support of safety and improved journey time we:

1. Implemented Stage 1 of Level Crossing Upgrade by installing automatic barrier prior to closing the crossing by 2024.
2. Upgraded two level crossings to full barriers.
3. Started a programme of improved animal fencing and removed lineside vegetation to reduce the attractiveness of the line to livestock and deer.
4. Established six new full-time posts in Helmsdale to address fencing and vegetation issues along the line.
5. Removed the speed restriction near Chapelton Farm to allow a linespeed of 75mph.
6. Upgraded open level crossing operations at Brora, Lairg and Rovie to deliver improved line speed and a reduction in the end to end journey time



## Achievements to date:

### Customer service improvements

In support of improved customer service we:

1. implemented a programme of enhancements at Invergordon station including real time information at the port and wayfinding signage to assist local travellers and the increasing number of cruise ship visitors seeking onward travel.
2. completed the programme to roll out Customer Information Screens at key stations. Almost all of these screens are sustainably powered by solar energy.

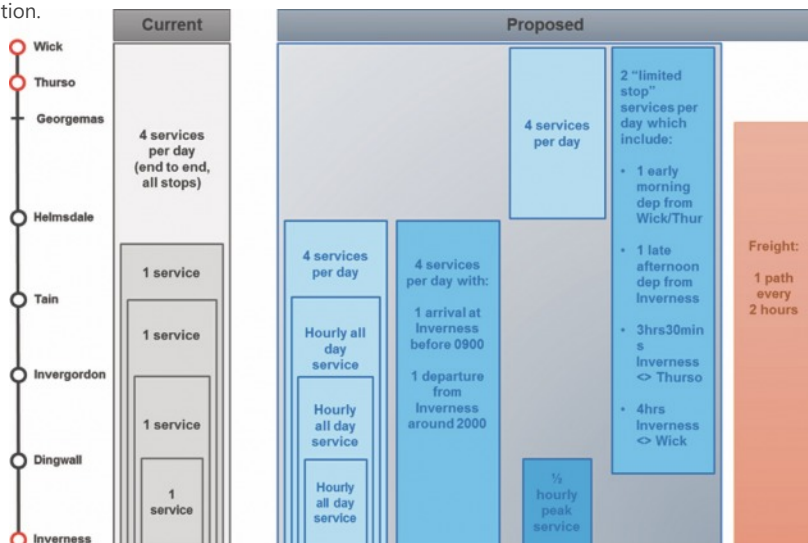


## Achievements to date:

Timetable and Infrastructure Development

In support of improved connectivity we:

- identified the need for a substantial change to the timetable structure to address the differing needs of the communities (and visitors) along the length of the rail corridor.
- developed a proposed specification which focuses on addressing future demand and economic sustainability. This includes more regular services to meet the needs of the growing commuter market on the corridor between Tain and Inverness, as well as proving better timed services both for intermediate and end-to-end journeys and to improve freight access on the line.
- undertook a technical review and strategic analysis along the length of the route to understand the magnitude of improvements required to the track and signalling systems to support the proposed new enhanced service specification.
- commissioned Network Rail to develop infrastructure proposals to deliver the proposed service specification.



## Work in development:

### Signalling

Understanding the operation of the unique signalling system, Radio Electronic Token Block (RETB), operating in the Far North route led to the identification of several enhancement opportunities to improve operations on the route. These include the introduction of **Enhanced Token Transfer** and

**Automated Train Describer** integration. These improvements will streamline the exchange of safety-critical data by operational staff to the benefit of passengers and freight customers.

**Enhanced Token Transfer** is an innovation that will better use the capability of the RETB system to reduce the “on air” radio time for token transfers which will greatly reduce the demand on the radio network, allowing it to be utilised in other ways, and reduce signaller and driver workload, whilst providing timetable resilience benefits. The proposal could have wider application through its use on the West Highland Line.

### Request to Stop

The Press ‘n’ Ride concept is one that has been promoted to improve performance and reliability of trains at “request-only” stops. This would see the installation of an automated request system at each station whereby the driver would be aware of any waiting passenger/s in advance, via an alert to the conductor generated by the communications system. If there was no requirement to stop, this would allow the driver to maintain line speed and help improve reliability in the first instance and eventually reduce journey times.

### Identified Opportunities

A range of opportunities has been identified as a consequence of the workings of the Review Team and these include:

#### Freight

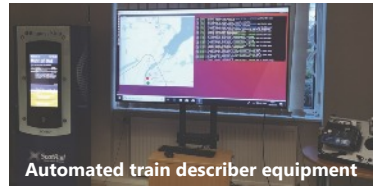
It is positive to note that the train carrying pipes from Hartlepool to Georgemas Junction for the off-shore oil industry has restarted (photo). HITRANS has been leading on various discussions including the potential to restart timber movement by rail and these discussions are ongoing. There is a shared desire across both industries to find a workable solution.



Photo: Leon Gray

#### Tourism

Transport Scotland will work with the rail industry and stakeholders, including the North Highland Initiative, to explore a brand for the Far North Line and develop a detailed tourism pilot proposition with the aim of attracting more visitors on the line. There is clear potential to exploit the fact that the railway accesses parts of Sutherland and Caithness that are beyond the reach of the North Coast 500. Transport Scotland intends to maintain the momentum stimulated by the Review Team through a single point of contact responsible for ensuring the consideration and, if appropriate, development and delivery of proposals with partners.



## Review

In March 2018 Transport Scotland published the Rail Enhancements & Capital Investment Strategy, which set out the Scottish Ministers' commitment to investment in the rail network. The Strategy introduced a pipeline-based approach to rail project development and delivery.

Utilising that process, the rail industry, led by Network Rail, is developing a Strategic Business Case for improvements in services on the Far North Line. Once this work concludes, investment recommendations will be presented to Transport Scotland who will assess the deliverability and affordability of the detailed options for potential implementation during Control Periods 6 and 7.

A dedicated Transport Scotland project sponsor has been appointed to progress project development with Network Rail and ScotRail.

The Far North Line Review process has been successful. It has already identified and driven delivery of direct and ancillary benefits along the route, including new, sustainable employment in Helmsdale. It has also set a programme of potential further improvements on the corridor, the development of which has now commenced.

## Next Steps

Transport Scotland has approved further development work for the following:

- RETB Enhancements
- Request to Stop
- Automated Train Describer
- Enhanced Token Transfer
- Linespeed Improvements
- Lentrans Loop Development
- Further RETB Enhancements
- Collapsing tokens
- Loop clear aids/automated loop clear
- Automated inter cabinet fringing

**For a closer look at the graphics the Final Report can be viewed on our website:**  
<http://www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/FNLRT-Final-Report.pdf>

## CLASS 153 NEWS

The Far North Line received an unexpected setback in October to plans to add specially converted Class 153 units to some trains to carry bikes and other large sports equipment. As stakeholders FoFNL attend the meetings concerning design and implementation.

We already knew that introduction would begin on the West Highland Line (its trains being based in Glasgow), but we believed the Far North Line would follow soon after. We had been questioning how the depot allocation of the five units would work, the FNL trains being based in Inverness.

Only in response to a question at a meeting in October we were told that deployment on the WHL is seen as experimental and, depending how well it works, use on the FNL would then be considered - *"we haven't forgotten about the Far North Line"*.

This lengthy delay is particularly disappointing since the FNL probably sees considerably more use by cyclists than the WHL and has only 1/3 of the cycle spaces.

Ian Budd



## **Tony Glazebrook - Comments on the "Far North Line Review Team Consolidation Report – August 2019"**

In August 2016 I was commissioned by FoFNL to carry out a performance study on the FNL to give them an independent view of the problems being experienced regularly on the line at that time. I carried out the study throughout the route during one week in early October 2016 and issued my report later the same month. In addition to the insightful briefings that I received from FoFNL itself, my study would not have been possible without the assistance of the many exceptionally willing and committed staff from within ScotRail.

My report was discussed and my recommendations and their progress regularly reviewed at a series of most useful ScotRail meetings commencing in November 2016, to which I was invited. Also, I presented it formally to FoFNL at their AGM in Inverness on 23 June 2017.

It is most encouraging to see that continuing work by all interested parties has now culminated in the "Far North Line Review Team Consolidation Report, August 2019". All of the initiatives contained therein are well-considered and will be of great value to this far-flung route with its unique operational challenges.

There has been much activity in recent years investigating ways to reduce the escalating costs of work on the UK railway system. Having been a railway professional for almost 50 years in the UK and Internationally, I have a number of observations on this issue.

Network Rail is funded through regularly reviewed agreements with Government on a 'not for dividend' basis – but that is not synonymous with 'not for inefficiency'. In recent years, much focus appears to have been directed onto the costs of systems, but it is not evident that the costs of processes has been analysed with similar rigour. It is striking how some small companies can achieve so much with so few resources because actual work takes precedence over prevarication. All organisations, especially large ones, need to question thoroughly the actual added value of any internal processes that surround productive work, and adjust accordingly.

The UK culture is notably unique. As an example, in my time in International R&D and manufacturing – and this dates from way back in the 1990's - we wanted to see how practicable an LED railway signal would be. The UK reaction was that committees of learned people would need to cogitate for some time before producing an outline specification, leading to the formation of a working party to formulate detailed requirements, followed by the production of a comprehensive safety case and then preliminary consideration of R&D funding etc etc – timescale estimated to be at least a year. The US approach was similar but somewhat shorter. The reaction of certain other European country reps was . . . to disagree on everything, possibly because of protecting National interests! However, the response from my antipodean colleagues was "It's Monday, so tell us what you want and we'll get a prototype working by Friday, then we can refine it afterwards"; they achieved their objective and in practice very little modification was needed to the basic design because the people doing it knew their stuff and were not impeded by others. This is reminiscent of a mathematical technique known as "Newton's method" essentially whereby, if a problem is just too difficult, then take a stab at it, look at the result and reiterate until a plausible result emerges.

The most successful commercial approach is to determine for any specific functionality actually what can be afforded, covering the entirety of the project - the physical items AND their surrounding processes. Then to use ingenuity (from which the word "Engineering" is derived) to produce the affordable solution. This is precisely how AMSTRAD quickly and overwhelmingly gained market share in the early days of PCs.

Within the "Next Steps" at the end of the Consolidation Report is the item "Lentran Loop Development". This will probably be the single most costly item listed. As an exemplar, through open-minded collaboration it would be a welcome step forward if the focused might of cross-party ingenuity led to an economically optimal and affordable result for Lentran.

# RAIL FREIGHT – A KEY PART OF TACKLING THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

*This article, by renowned railway author and FoFNL Committee member David Spaven, originally appeared as a Friends of the Scotsman piece on 12 November 2019*

Since First Minister Nicola Sturgeon declared a 'climate emergency' in April, the political agenda has been moving inexorably – albeit too slowly – towards a radical transformation of Scottish transport investment priorities. And last month a collaboration of seven sustainable transport campaigns came together to make the case for a fundamental re-prioritisation, 'starting with an end to creating new trunk road capacity'.

Scottish Government *policy* already backs rail freight – not least for its substantial carbon advantages over road haulage – but achieving (and hopefully far exceeding) the growth targets it has set the industry will need a very significant change in the balance of investment between rail and road. New or enhanced infrastructure is a fundamental part of the solution, with the road haulage industry having benefited enormously from high levels of funding for new roads such as the Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route, A9 dualling, M8 completion and the M74 Northern Extension.

Earlier this year, the National Infrastructure Commission published its Freight Study – [www.nic.org.uk/our-work/freight-study/](http://www.nic.org.uk/our-work/freight-study/) – which included a key recommendation with important lessons for Scotland:

*"Government should undertake detailed cross-modal analysis, using a corridor-based approach, of the long term options for rail freight's transition to zero emissions, including low carbon rail services and the scope for road based alternatives."*

This kind of approach has been sadly lacking from the Scottish Government, classically in the context of imbalanced road and rail investment on the Perth-Inverness corridor. The rail spend has been just £65m to date – despite £200m-£450m mooted in 2008 – in contrast to road

benefiting from the £3,000m A9 dualling project. And still the daily Stobart / Tesco train to Inverness is restricted to 20 containers – because of the short crossing loops on this largely single-track railway – when the locomotive could actually pull 28.

So, what are the key enhancements required to create a competitive 'level playing field' between road haulage and rail freight?

The **modernisation of strategic Anglo-Scottish route corridors** is fundamental to unlocking the potential for rail freight to better serve domestic and export markets. Amongst the core upgrades needed are:

- lengthened overtaking loops on the East Coast Main Line (ECML) and the West Coast Main Line (WCML) to accommodate 775-metre length freight trains, the maximum which can pass through the Channel Tunnel (and the equivalent of more than 40 lorry loads)
- to match 'loading gauge' along the ECML (height and width of structures to readily accommodate the latest container dimensions), equivalent improvements are needed on the core rail freight spine from Grangemouth through Coatbridge and Mossend, then over the WCML to Carlisle and southern markets.

But rail freight cannot prosper simply by concentrating on the Anglo-Scottish lines. **Upgrading key feeder rail routes within Scotland** is crucial to the strategy, and some of the obvious targets are:

- early electrification of the routes from Central Scotland to Aberdeen and Inverness – speeding up transits, improving route capacity and further cutting carbon emissions compared to road haulage

- long-overdue enhancement of the largely single-track Highland Main Line from Perth to Inverness, with longer crossing loops and more double track allowing rail freight to increase the capacity of each container train from 20 to 28 containers – improving rail productivity by up to 40%
- lengthened overtaking loops on the route linking rail hubs at Mossend, Coatbridge and Grangemouth with Aberdeen – allowing longer, greener and more cost-effective trains to compete better with road haulage
- loading gauge enhancements on the routes to Inverness and Aberdeen to allow rail conveyance of wider refrigerated containers for chilled and frozen food

Improved rail routes are essential, but realising their potential depends in part on the creation of **new or enhanced rail freight terminals** to serve currently neglected regions. Amongst the priorities should be:

- Dundee – one of the largest cities in Britain with no rail freight facilities (indeed there

are none in the whole of Tayside)

- Speyside – terminals at Keith and/or Elgin are needed to allow rail freight to serve the market for food & drink, helping to cut down on the 50,000 long-distance whisky lorry trips on the A9 annually
- direct rail access to key whisky industry sites, such as Cameron Bridge in Fife (the largest grain distillery in Europe) and Cambus / Blackgrange near Alloa (the largest bonded warehouse site in Europe) – both sites are adjacent to rail corridors
- Bathgate – serving one of Scotland’s major concentrations of Regional Distribution Centres, bringing in retail goods from suppliers worldwide

Serious progress on this kind of programme will demonstrate that the Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that transport plays a full and proper part in tackling the climate emergency – and, in so doing, also securing the substantial road congestion, road safety and road damage benefits of switching freight from truck to train.

**David Spaven**  
**Scottish Representative, Rail Freight Group**  
[www.rfg.org.uk](http://www.rfg.org.uk)



Train including "Tesco" branded 45 foot rigid sided containers seen at Feabue on the Highland Main Line on 7 December.

Photo: Sandy Colley

# CLIMATE CHALLENGE

## **The Climate Emergency, Safety and Sustainability**

These three themes are now said to be underpinning Scottish Government actions on spending.

The climate emergency was declared by the First Minister on 5 September 2019

Safety is always with us. Four lorries being blown over in one December day on the A1 south of Edinburgh and many other overturning incidents in the past few years suggest all may not be well there.

## **The challenges facing railways to the North of Scotland in the current political climate**

Sustainability was built in to the Scottish Parliament since it opened in July 1999. Everything was supposed to be future proofed.

How well has this been followed? A 20 year review by SPICe (Scottish Parliament Information Centre) has revealed the answer to be not very well, but with more interest being shown in the last few months.

Carbon emissions from transport generally are continuing to rise in Scotland

Air and sea links are essential for the Scottish islands but both are currently major polluters due to the amount and kind of fuel used and use of the former is continuing to expand. Road usage is not showing many signs of falling either. Congestion and pollution (especially in cities) is increasing.

Rail has been shown to be a much more sustainable mode than air, maritime and road transport.

We need to make sure that railways exist that are fit for purpose to serve most of Scotland. Too many lines, particularly ones that could be used as diversionary routes were closed. Examples are Edinburgh to Perth via Kinross-shire and Perth to Aberdeen via Forfar.

## **Making more dynamic progress in tackling the job**

Passengers will hope to learn in the annual Programme for Government Statement during the first week of September how Scottish Ministers will approach the Climate Emergency. With the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change “conference of the parties” COP26 to be held in Glasgow in November we can hope for some good forward thinking. The current Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) will also feed in to this.

This should include a quick final push to finish the substantial outstanding work to complete the 2008 STPR priorities. These are an hourly passenger service frequency with average journey times of 3 hours (and headline times of 2 hours 45 minutes) between both Edinburgh and Glasgow to Inverness. Similarly completion of an hourly passenger service with average journey times of no more than 2 hours between Aberdeen and Inverness. Both lines were also to get much improved capacity for an expansion of rail freight traffic, and there is a requirement for capacity to enable each to provide a diversionary route for the other if one route is blocked. Freight traffic in particular needs to get through.

The completion of the redoubling of track and modernising of signalling between Aberdeen and Inverurie is the one major part of STPR which has been completed and very impressively too. There is a lot more to do on both lines. Ministers’ aspirations were to have the whole of the Scottish inter-city routes electrified by 2030. This might fit in with the further extended life of the ScotRail High Speed diesel Trains. They cannot go on for ever. Ministers aspire to ending diesel traction on most railway lines by 2035.

The prosperity of the Far North and Kyle lines depends on the connections at Inverness with the two feeder lines mentioned above. It is unlikely we could run freight in isolation on the FNL nor attract long distance passengers without good connections through Inverness. The pioneering Far North Review has been a

wonderful catalyst for much valuable background work to be done by Transport Scotland, Network Rail and ScotRail on making major improvements to rail services north of Inverness. We look forward to enhancement schemes such as the Lentrans Loop and signalling enhancements such as “collapsing” block sections which will be hugely progressive in making the FNL fit for purpose.

### **How do we finance all this?**

We should ditch the “More Bang for the Buck” philosophy espoused by almost every new incumbent, whether he/she be Transport Minister; CEO of Network Rail, CEO of ScotRail or of the ScotRail franchisee. It will only serve to create a two tier railway network with the less populated regions falling further behind the population centres. Yes, it is really good to have five electrified routes between Glasgow and Edinburgh with Stirling now brought in to the club, but should this be at the expense of the continued exclusion of Perth, Inverness, Dundee, and Aberdeen?

In England, the vast amounts being spent on railways in the London area has forced two of the past three Governments to recognise this imbalance and the Northern Powerhouse idea was born, underpinned now by fresh ideas to change the Treasury spending rules which have favoured the rich areas of London and the south east. The idea is to put more focus on overall national economic growth and wellbeing in the North and Midlands. South West England, and Wales, are not mentioned.

The compelling arguments were well set out in a 27 December article in *The Times* “Treasury to rip up public spending rules in cash boost for North and Midlands”. Cambridge and Manchester academics have shown that the present rules have produced a disparity between the least and the most productive regions which is “extreme” by the standards of most developed countries. Critics say that if we do not improve transport links in poorer regions they will never fulfil their potential.

### **Application to Scotland**

We are already ahead of the game here in

Scotland with the new Borders Railway showing the way. This project has helped to show considerable economic growth in the area and a rise in average incomes and productivity. How and when can we see more of this wealth generation in Scotland?

The completion of electrification of lines between the seven Scottish cities should be much more of a priority. The electrification of the Glasgow to Carlisle route via Dumfries would also considerably add to its value as a diversionary route for freight and passengers.

We hope to learn more of the Scottish Government’s plans to decarbonise Scotland’s passenger railways by 2035 in a Ministerial announcement in March. The UK target for this is 2040.

As in England, the policy here must be made to benefit the north. Routes are longer than from Glasgow to Edinburgh so the line costs will be greater. This has to be faced.

The 2008 STPR priorities were hugely welcomed at the time, as is what has been achieved, but it is still far short of what is required and promised to modernise Priority 3 the Highland Main Line and Priority 4 the Inverness to Aberdeen line.

It is worrying that there have been long periods of silence when very little seems to be happening let alone many progress reports published. The focus is now on “transport corridors” but once again there seems to be a total “hush” about any HML proposals. Is the HML currently stuck in a rut?

The contrast with the numerous press releases, consultations and meetings about the different sections of the A9 dualling project could not be greater. A corridor approach is a sensible idea, but Government policy is declared to be environmentally friendly in encouraging both freight and passenger transport to switch from road to rail. The continuing lack of attention to the railway seems likely to achieve the opposite. Does this approach really square with the now declared Climate Emergency?

Will the March statement lay out how and when electrification of the first section of the routes north from Dunblane to Perth will be achieved

and what the policy will be to continue it further north to Inverness and to Dundee and Aberdeen? Journey times averaging three hours between Inverness and Glasgow by 2025 should not be too difficult to achieve, Edinburgh is more of a challenge. This was the revised target published in 2011. There are only five years of these 14 years left now, and still a long way to go!

### Highland Needs

Fraser Grieve, Highlands Director of the Scottish Council Development and Industry, used his column on page 10 in the *Inverness Courier* on 24 December to stress the greater urgency now needed to upgrade the Highland lines. He says that the long promised significant journey time improvements seem to have no clear strategy or timetable and need a plan and resources to achieve delivery. In her New Year message Liz Cameron, CEO of the Scottish Chambers of Commerce, has said that the Scottish Government “needs to ensure that the signals sent out to investors in infrastructure – including in the transport sector – ring loud and clear that Scotland is truly open for business”. She also asks that public investment in infrastructure should be raised to at least 1.4% of GDP, up from the 1.2% recommended by the National Infrastructure Commission.

As reported on page 15 of *FNE 68* (May 2016) as long ago as April that year, Liz Cameron was

saying that “Scotland’s northern cities need to be better connected and single track sections linking Inverness, Aberdeen and the Central Belt are unacceptable in the 21st Century.” Many would agree with that and, while grateful for the completion of the doubling between Aberdeen and Inverurie, there is a long long way to go yet to finish the task. Stuart Nicol, CEO of the Inverness Chamber, frequently calls on the Government to make the Highland railways fit for purpose. It is only by creating much more double track capacity as well as line speed improvements that the 2025 targets on journey times can be reached. Even with an EGIP scale of project, the other required option of electrification is unlikely to be achieved by 2025.

The front page and editorial of the *Inverness Courier* for Friday 3 January is full of the number of large developments, particularly hotels, planned for Inverness. More huge housing developments were started in 2019 also. These will all provide more traffic for the railway. The trial for the Norbord wood factory freight train was illustrated on the back cover of the last *FNE*. The area is booming, the single track lines can’t cope, we must act upon the climate emergency and provide more safe and sustainable means of transport to underpin the Highland economy and the Scottish economy.

**ACT (Action on Current and Tracks) NOW please!**

**Richard Ardern**

## MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

We are currently updating our membership system. We have added the option of paying by PayPal; this gives the same choices as before, £15.00 for one year, £12.00 p.a. if you set up a repeating PayPal payment, which is the equivalent of a standing order, and £120.00 for life membership.

This was in response to a message we received for a potential member who was amazed that they were required to print out and post a membership form. Setting up PayPal means that we lose 75p from our £15.00 subscription, a small price for the extra convenience.

We have also decided, in line with some other organisations, for example the Friends of the Settle & Carlisle Line, that printed membership cards are unnecessary. The only use we have for them is to provide proof of membership when voting at the AGM, something we could cover with a registration sheet if we felt it necessary. Anyone who would like to continue to have a card will still be able to.

The membership cards issued with this copy of *FNE* will be the last but members will be given an opportunity at the AGM on 19 June to express a contrary view.

# JOINED-UP TRANSPORT?

This letter was published in the *Herald on Sunday* on 24 November 2019. If Bob Barnes-Watts were still with us he would probably have been shouting, "Hear, hear!"

I read with interest your article on sustainable tourism (*Herald on Sunday*, November 17), and in particular the segment about Cairngorms Connected.

## *Joined-up transport? I'd settle for joined-up thinking*

As is usual in Scotland when faced with poor, declining or an absence of services we carry out a project which will almost inevitably reach blindingly obvious conclusions and not uncommonly borrow solutions which have been in place for years elsewhere (e.g. integrated transport is a reality all over Europe).

One such project may be the EU/HITRANS project: *Cairngorms Connected* – which it is certainly not at present.

Earlier in the year my teenage son needed to get to Cairngorm (from Inverness – the regional hub) in the morning where he was doing some volunteering. He looked at the train and bus timetables and found to his dismay that the bus left Aviemore station less than 10 minutes before the train arrived.

In his frustration he wrote to all of the Highland MSPs (only three of whom contacted him) asking why the bus and train services could not meet and

why with a little thought could a through ticket not be available. He also suggested perhaps some other initiative such as a through travel ticket which gave a discount on a lift pass (notwithstanding the disaster that is the funicular) or food.

In the event Fergus Ewing took on the case and his researcher contacted both ScotRail and Stagecoach and got short shrift – one stating that they could hardly change the service for one person. Strategic thinking of this standard is hard to come by!

The issue culminated in a long letter from the Cabinet Secretary for Transport advising of the huge subsidy paid to these companies and of the various bureaucratic fixes he intended to put in place to improve public transport (including of course the mandatory committee).

However, the only conclusion my son and I came to on the matter was that significant public subsidy and two Cabinet Secretaries couldn't get a bus effectively to nowhere to wait 10 minutes for a train at Aviemore!

Since re-telling the story to friends the incident has been serially trumped by trains not meeting ferries, buses not meeting ferries or trains and so on.

**Colin Clark, Inverness**

## EPIDEMIC OF WASTED ENERGY

At Georgemas Junction the platform lights have been on 24/7 for at least seven years for a safety reason (part of the platform is in darkness under the A9 overbridge), so with 99% of trains being only two-car, shortening the platform would have saved ScotRail some £55,000. Even fitting lights with photocells would cost around £500 and save over £7000 per year. Station lights burning when not required costs the railway around £30 million a year, let alone the extra costs of lamp renewal. Electric units stored with lighting and heating on will cost the TOCs around 10% of the units' total electrical usage, so £millions more wasted. Yet the biggest sin of wasted energy is Network Rail installing gas boilers for station heating that have no timed switch or external thermostats. If a station is staffed 05:30-23:00 why does the heating need to be on overnight? That's £300 per month per platform. To really save energy it is time that the TOCs took station maintenance in-house, as there is a conflict of interest with the contractors - the more lights, heating and air-conditioning work there is, the more repairs they require. That's £millions wasted from the pockets of passengers and from investors in the TOCs. Time for change.

**Tom King, Wigston, Leics.** (Letter to *RailNews*, December 2019)

# HML UPDATE

The good news over the past months has been the introduction of the new sleeper stock onto the *Highlander* in October and the replacement of the much loved 125s with the Azuma electric/diesel bimode train on LNER's Inverness to Kings Cross *Highland Chieftain* service.

We would be pleased to receive ontrain reports from the Sleeper. *FNE* was expecting a report from the first passengers in the double bedded compartment on inauguration day last June but the new stock introduction was delayed and our correspondent flew north instead. We trust the service is bedding in well.

## New trains but no new track on the Highland Main Line

The Inverness launch of the Azuma at 07.30 on 10 December was spectacular with drummers, a piper and fire dancers in the dark. I am pleased to report that my fears that in diesel mode the train would have difficulty keeping to the HST timings over *Druimuachdar* and *Slochd* appear to be unfounded. Further south the acceleration of the train in electric mode is astounding but its riding on some stretches of track eg near Dunbar and Tomatin to Moy was not smooth with plates sliding down the tables at the former.

On the tracks, we continue in the state of no news. No news of the substantial track capacity improvements which are still needed to support the hourly service frequency with journey times headlining at 2 hours 45 minutes and averaging 3 hours between Inverness and both Edinburgh and Glasgow. The revised deadline to achieve this by 2025 is not far away now and is becoming more and more challenging.

Maybe the HML should be elevated to the status of a "Project"? The Edinburgh to Glasgow Improvement (EGIP) was a "Project" and it happened. The HML was supposed to be third "priority" in the *Strategic Transport Projects Review* of December 2008. I would have thought "priority" was a very strong word, but events have left HML modernisation far from complete. It is quite obvious from the proposed 2018 then

2019 now [December?] 2020 timetable that, even once we get the full squadron of faster ScotRail HST trains, the planners are struggling to improve journey times due to the number of trains to be fitted through the longer sections of single track eg the 13 miles between Dunkeld and Pitlochry and the 13 miles between Dalwhinnie and Kingussie.

MSPs were told in answer to several PQs over the past seven years that the HML upgrade was "likely" to include reinstating passing loops at Ballinluig on the former 13 mile bottleneck and another on the latter. It has not happened.

Ballinluig should be a quick fix to implement and the reinstatement could be long enough to meet the expressed wish of the freight carriers for a much longer loop at this point. Ideally it needs to be tackled at the same time as fixing the other 13 mile long constriction north of Dalwhinnie. The idea put forward of extending tracks up to three miles northwards from Dalwhinnie and two miles south from Kingussie to around Newtonmore was suggested in *FNE 76* and *77*.

These initial two **project** components would make operating easier by temporarily harmonising the longest individual stretches of single track down to 8 miles initially. Many more interventions are needed and expected in order to achieve the 2025 targets for passenger journey times and give scope for more freight trains and diversions.

Post 2025 what is needed is electrification. Once it got into electric mode south of Dunblane, the Azuma going out of Stirling showed just how fast it can accelerate. It was an eye-opener. The way electric trains can flatten out hills by galloping up the likes of the Beattock bank is another way they will really shorten the journey north to Inverness over *Druimuachdar* and *Slochd*. This applies to freight haulage as well and will make the HML so much more efficient and easier to operate.

Combining this with the reopening of the direct route between Edinburgh and Perth through Kinross-shire will transform services between Edinburgh and Perth and between

Glasgow/Edinburgh and Inverness. This is the kind of bold project that the Scottish Government needs to embrace to meet the challenge of the Climate Emergency through the provision of efficient sustainable transport solutions.

May we hope that the Strategic Transport Projects Review no 2 will see the unfinished

priority work from the December 2008 STPR prioritised once again and that the Scottish Government will release the money northwards. There should be Barnett consequential from the UK Government's signalled intention to invest more in infrastructure and to channel much of this money to the North of England.

**Richard Ardern**

## INVERNESS-ABERDEEN UPDATE

### *Building on what has now been achieved:*

There is very good news in the new December 2019 timetable for the line between Inverness and Aberdeen. The aim is to have an hourly frequency of trains taking on, or under, 2 hours to complete the journey between the cities.

With average journey times currently towards 2 hours 20 minutes (46 mph), the following trains are worthy of note

06:01 and 21:07 SuO ex Inverness due to take 2 hours 3 minutes

11:02 and 15:30 SuO ex Inverness due to take 2 hours 4 minutes.

This is part of the dividend from the relocation of Forres station, improvements at Elgin, redoubling of track from Inverurie to within a mile of Aberdeen, and improvements to signalling.

However, sadly some of the trains still take much longer because of the shackles of the single track. Many of the notes in the timetable advise of earlier arrivals and long waits for a path forward. The 09:01 from Inverness waits for 11 minutes at Elgin and the 13:43 from Aberdeen waits for 13 minutes at Elgin.

The 108 mile journey with 7 intermediate stops at an average, including stops, of 52 mph is hardly speedy progress. Time waiting in stations or in loops such as Keith Loop to pass trains going in the other direction is time wasted.

Kintore and Inverness Airport (Dalcross) stations will add two more stops. One of the reasons for improving the railway at Forres was to compensate for the extra time which will be spent stopping at Dalcross. With the increase

in trains from 45 to 76 [three trains per hour] each weekday following the redoubling of the track from Inverurie to Aberdeen, it would seem hardly necessary now to have all the Inverness trains stop at Kintore when it opens in May.

News of submission of the planning application from Transport Scotland for the proposed two platform station at Dalcross is still awaited.

### **Service missing**

The extra daytime services introduced in December 2018 between Inverness and Elgin are very welcome, but I suspect usage has been held back by lack of reliability. They have suffered cancellations when crew shortages have happened and the same is true of some of the new Inverurie to Montrose services through Aberdeen.

It is much quicker by train between Inverness and Elgin. The bus takes twice as long at 80 minutes and by car 50 to 60 minutes. The train should be on to a winner, now that the frequency is hourly.

One service is missing though. It is an 08:05 from Inverness which could be a commuter service for the many people who live in the Inverness area and work in Nairn, Forres or Elgin. If it were continued through to arrive at Aberdeen at about 10:20, it would sort the problem of there being no arrival there between 09:30 and 11:22 from stations such as Insh, Huntly, Keith, Elgin and beyond all the way from Inverness.

The restrictive single track nature of the Aberdeen to Inverness line has long made it difficult to operate sufficient services at times when non commuting passengers most want to travel. This tends to be outwards after breakfast

and home in time for tea. A return service from Aberdeen at around 16:25 would usefully fill the current gap between the busy 15:25 and 17:20 services north to Insh and all stations to Inverness.

Doubling the tracks from Aberdeen to Inverurie is only the start of improving track capacity along this line. Following British Rail proposals in 1994 and 1996, Network Rail produced a 70 page "*Aberdeen to Inverness Rail Improvement*" document no 116647 in 2010 and subsequently an outline timescale to do all the work by February 2017.

The Achilles Heel of the line is the long 22 minute single line section between Keith Loop

and Elgin station. I hope all the required work has since been firmed up such that the proposed intermediate passing loop at Orton is now "shovel ready" for the financial green light! Taken together with the long loop now promised through the new two platform Dalcross station we have a chance of seeing the hourly service pattern realised with, hopefully, some freight and diversionary paths too. Both Norbord timber and the whisky industry have now run trial freight services.

There are so many opportunities for this line, not least as a connection to and from the Far North Line. Let us make the Aberdeen to Inverness line fit for purpose to release its obvious potential!

**Richard Ardern**

**STOP PRESS: HML closed all day Saturday 11 January due to flooding between AVM and Kingussie. Need for more resilience here and on the Tay Valley flood plain.**

## AZUMA TRACK TEST

*Tuesday 10 December launch of Azuma service from Inverness:*

Richard Ardern and his wife travelled on the 07:55 Inverness-Kings Cross as far as York on a 9-car set. They returned Friday 13 December.

### **LNER launch in Inverness Station**

Speeches by David Horne, MD LNER and Helen Carmichael, Provost of Inverness.

Drummers, piper and fire dancers – very effective in the dark.

Coach L – First Class. I did not manage to track test the Standard accommodation.

### **Ambience**

Single seat tables, facing forward or back depending on position in carriage, on one side and tables for four on the other.

Just room for two trolleys to pass. Seems narrower than 125 for two people to pass and if the aisle seats are reclined you cannot move sideways into an empty seat space to facilitate this. The reason is that when the seats are reclined the base slides forward as the back angles backwards. This can also make it difficult to get out of a window seat .

Coach L is First Class for full length and thus seemed roomier than coaches M and K which are composites, therefore only part of the carriage. Kitchen is in coach M at the very front of the train.

Our seats L44 and L51.

K on the way back was busier than L going down and we certainly felt squashed. Not the former First Class ambience. A very portly gentleman in a single seat opposite said to the trolley host "I feel particularly constrained in this new train. This is my first time in one".

Fairly high seat backs restrict views.

Difficult to adjust the head rests in First Class. I suspect the different positions will suit some people and not others.

Walking through Standard Class the heating was inconsistent.

Standard seat squabs have little, if any, padding. Coach H for "Hush" is the Quiet Coach. There is not one in First though one of the composites could easily have been designated as such.

### **Ride and Performance**

Acceleration was impressive at times leaving stations and the trains didn't slow down nearly as much on entering stations as the HSTs did - even Newcastle had none of the 10mph nonsense which affects Perth.

Riding was sometimes poor, with yawing between Tomatin and Moy. As it was only intermittent it is maybe due more to the track than the train, or a combination of both. Around Dunbar going south the ride was lurchy and plates were sliding down the table on the camber. There was also some rough riding south of Darlington in both directions. Sometimes there was a clunk underneath the coach which seemed to coincide with lateral movement.

### The "Usual Services"

Insufficient number of toilets in First Class – only two, including the Universally Accessible Toilet in the end carriage.

Standard Class has two toilets at one end of several carriages.

Bijou but adequate, with a largish wash basin and better hand drier than many other trains.

Water dispenser outlet is too close to front of basin, so when in use water found on the floor beneath. [New Trans Pennine Mark 5As are better]

Several of the spaces at the ends of carriages were available for bikes (two somehow suspended vertically) or for large items of luggage.

### Onboard catering

First Class "offer" seems to be much as before. Weekdays only. No hot food at weekends.

The "special" is on for a week and for regular travellers or even those travelling only twice but coming back within the same week it may appear repetitive.

Buffet is in coach G and provides toasties and other hot snacks.

### Passenger service on the train

It would be nice if there were no shortcomings to report, but there were several issues.

The recorded announcements of a stop at "Kin-gussy" with a "g" were drawn to the attention of the MD as we left Inverness.

The mispronunciation was still being heard as far south as York on the Friday. Hopefully this will be fixed soon.

Toilets out of water and toilet paper by Darlington southbound and the train was far from crowded, and by Berwick northbound.

Wifi intermittent – kept dropping.

The seat reservations traffic light system seemed to work well - we knew from it that there would be people coming to sit next to us from Newcastle to Gleneagles.

The Times newspaper was available to First Class passengers northbound and from Edinburgh southbound.

Rear four coaches off the platform at Falkirk Grahamston - it is a long way for passengers with luggage to get through from coach M to J or H to get off.

Luggage racks are roomy enough for most moderate sized cases.

Summary: *An interesting train with fabulous acceleration under the wires.*

RJA

## PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

**Question S5W-25839: John Finnie**, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered 30/10/19

*To ask the Scottish Government how much it will cost to dual the (a) A9 and (b) A96; when this will be completed, and what the benefit/cost ratio will be.*

**Michael Matheson:** The Scottish Government intends to dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness by 2025. Design work is progressing well with the statutory process underway for eight of the remaining nine schemes. We are currently on track to deliver the dualling programme within the £3bn estimate already identified. The A9 Dualling - Case for Investment, published in 2016, reports a benefit to cost ratio of 1.12.

In terms of the A96 Dualling, the Scottish Government intends to dual the A96 by 2030, subject to the satisfactory completion of the statutory process for each section. At this early stage of development it is difficult to give an accurate estimate of the cost of the dualling programme. However, it is estimated that the cost of dualling will be similar to that for dualling the A9 and be in the region of £3 billion. The published A96 Dualling Strategic Business Case reports a benefit to cost ratio in the range of 1.0 – 1.25.

As the design and preparation of both programmes proceed, a more detailed estimate for each section of the programmes will be developed.

**Question S5W-26169: Gail Ross**, Caithness, Sutherland and Ross, Scottish National Party, answered 18/11/19

*To ask the Scottish Government how much each section of the A9 dualling work will cost.*

**Michael Matheson:** To date, we have delivered the £35m contract between Kincairdie and Dalraddy, which opened to traffic in September 2017, and have made good progress on the second section between Luncarty and Pass of Birnam at an estimated cost of £96m. Construction of this section is well underway, and subject to any unforeseen circumstances, such as exceptional adverse weather, it is expected to be open to traffic in spring 2021.

Design work is progressing well on the remaining sections, with the statutory process underway for eight of the remaining nine schemes. As the design and preparation of the A9 Dualling programme proceeds and the statutory procedures are completed, a more detailed estimate for each section of the programme will be finalised.

The Scottish Government intends to dual the A9 between Perth and Inverness within the £3 billion estimate already identified.

## **Meeting of the Parliament 28 November 2019 - General Question Time**

### **Train Fares (Split Ticketing)**

**John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP):**

*To ask the Scottish Government what it can do to tackle the issue of split ticketing for train fares, whereby it can be cheaper to purchase tickets for component parts of a journey than for one straight-through ticket. (S5O-03843)*

**The Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (Michael Matheson):**

The ScotRail franchise prohibits the franchisee from implementing any train fare that creates an anomaly, whereby purchasing separate tickets might be cheaper than purchasing one straight-through ticket. Where anomalies are identified, ScotRail should reduce the affected fare at the next fares-setting round, thereby removing the anomaly.

The current franchise includes a price-promise scheme so that passengers do not have to pay a higher fare than is necessary.

Additionally, the Rail Delivery Group is conducting a review of ticketing systems across the UK, and aims to guarantee that the systems are focused on customer needs.

**John Mason:**

I appreciate that work is being done. However, in reality, an off-peak day return from Garrowhill—my local station—to Perth, costs £29.90. An off-peak day return from Garrowhill to Glasgow Queen Street costs £3.30, and an off-peak day return from Queen Street to Perth costs £16.60, so the total cost is £19.90. That is a £10, or 50 per cent, difference in the fare. If a constituent buys a ticket at a machine, they cannot know about that, whereas if they buy a ticket at the ticket office, the ticket officer can tell them to split the ticket.

**Michael Matheson:**

I recognise the concerns that John Mason has raised. Significant work has been undertaken since 2012 to eradicate anomalies. I understand that some of the anomalies date back as far as the 1990s because of various promotions and schemes that have operated over the years, which at times can come out through the existing system. I assure the member that I will ask my officials to raise with ScotRail the anomaly that he has mentioned, to ensure that it is eradicated from the system.

# TRAVEL TO THE HIGHLANDS

For many years I travelled to the Highlands on business from London, initially on *The Clansman*, taking forever as it wobbled round the West Midlands with frequent changes of loco, eventually splitting at Carstairs for Glasgow and Edinburgh sections. The latter also split again in Edinburgh into Inverness and Aberdeen parts giving me ample time to acquire a tasty takeaway meal from the Food Centre in Princes Street to the great surprise of other passengers. Otherwise I would travel on the *Highland*

## FoFNL member Frank Faulkner shares his frustrations about long distance travel in Great Britain

*Chieftain* which, for me, then conveniently stopped at Peterborough in both directions or sometimes by sleeper to various destinations.

In retirement I take fewer, but now leisure trips to the Highlands, and fly.

Call me a GOM if you wish but I cannot now face the uncertainty of being able to acquire an affordable Advance ticket for my long journeys northwards. And even having done that there remains no certainty of being able to acquire the same for my return as bookings don't open simultaneously, even if registered for an "Early Warning" (which failed on the last occasion I trusted to use it and priced my return at three times the outward journey - I flew, for the first time) Even Advance Fares seem to have increased exponentially on this route.

I will admit that in those halcyon days EVERY coach was usually a quiet coach and excellent value meals served by long-serving and thoroughly professional staff enhanced the

journey - specially the High Tea, served after Edinburgh - for BOTH classes of passenger.

So today I fly. I can book my holiday dates with certainty over 12 months in advance at a return fare which is less than the cheapest Advance rail single and I find myself driving in the Highlands before the *Highland Chieftain* has even left Kings Cross and gain an extra day's holiday. Nor do I have to tolerate a crowded coach of boisterous children returning from a foreign holiday and trampolining around the coach seats. That train was overfull and there was no point in trying to force my way past mountains of luggage in every vestibule in search of a calmer place to sit.

None of the recent East Coast companies seems to have realised that an earlier start from London would add appeal to the *Highland Chieftain* which currently arrives in Inverness after 20:00 necessitating an overnight and additional expense there. Guaranteed proper meals for both classes and the certainty of a confirmed booking at least 12 months in advance could transform this train into one of the really Great Rail Journeys of the UK.

I have not tried the Serco sleeper, now extravagantly expensive for the single traveller but my last journey on its predecessor with totally casual staff and breakfast in a brown paper bag lost its appeal especially when I was ordered off the sleeper long before the published last disembarkation time in Glasgow. And I never really slept after being rough shunted in Edinburgh in the early hours on the Highland sleepers.

Come on Railways. Some of us know you can do better.

**Frank Faulkner**

## MINISTERIAL STATEMENT ON CALEDONIAN SLEEPER SERVICE - 6 DECEMBER 2019

Caledonian Sleeper's performance has fallen below the contractual levels and those expected by passengers and Ministers alike. This has been caused by a number of internal and external factors, which are being addressed by Caledonian Sleeper and its industry partners CAF, GB Railfreight and Network Rail.

Therefore, as part of the routine franchise monitoring, Caledonian Sleeper has provided Transport Scotland with a Performance Improvement Plan which sets out the key areas for improvement and actions that will be taken to address these.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

I joined the Friends of the Far North Line a couple of years ago, having moved to the Beaulieu area four years ago and I am a regular user of the train into Inverness.

I started trainspotting in 1963 in Lewes in East Sussex and have never given up.

I am at the present reading *Highland Survivor* by David Spaven.

Unfortunately, my wife has Parkinson's disease and attends singing and keep-fit classes in Inverness with other Parkinson sufferers.

She was talking to other members of the class who visit Glasgow for various treatments and queried if they travel by train. She was surprised at the response, "*God no, we all use coaches, which travel every hour, the trains are so unreliable and are often cancelled.*"

If you have appointments, you cannot rely on the railways.

If the railways are to survive in Scotland, surely something has to be done to improve the service.

The SNP wants to make Scotland green, but instead is making more of the A9 dual-carriageway, and ignoring the railway.

The coach guarantees you a reserved seat while the train does not even guarantee you a seat at all, as my wife has experienced in the past.

What a travesty that Scottish railways cannot even provide a service for its own people.

**Michael Crossfield**  
**FoFNL member**

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As an occasional user of the A9 I always look forward to assessing how the dualling project is progressing towards the projected completion date of 2025 as to my inexperienced eyes given the slow rate of progress 2025 is unlikely to be achieved and given the fiasco of some major civil constructions finishing late and going over budget one feels the same will happen with the A9. So, I was not surprised to find recently (September) that the only activity taking place was on the Bankfoot section north of Perth.

What has prompted me to put pen to paper was the startling revelation on page 8 *FNE 78* that it is now public knowledge that the single section at Dunkeld is likely to account for almost 50% of the total projected cost of the project.

I am not a civil engineer, my initial career being in aeronautical engineering, I am though, interested in geography and geology of which the route of the A9 provides some very interesting examples. This leads to the question that if the Dunkeld section can cost so much how much will it be to build the Slochd and Carrbridge sections, to name just two. It is not rocket science to realise that, as I recently wrote in my letter to MPs, "*They could abandon those sections leaving the road as a single carriageway and divert the funds saved into improving the entire rail structure north of Perth. Again it is a matter of applying the Pareto Principle to the costs involved in dualling. Eighty percent of the total cost of dualling will be absorbed by dualling the difficult parts whilst 20% is incurred on the simple parts.*"

Surely our northern MSPs will occasionally look out of the train window before they get to Aviemore and wonder just where the new carriageway is going to be routed. Even the sight of the rock drilling/soil sampling teams didn't give a great deal away.

Just in case I was being too negative I decided to look at a few websites detailing the various aspects of the dualling only to discover that very few were up to date and one, [www.roads.org.uk](http://www.roads.org.uk), showed that all sections were scheduled to have been started by now with 2019+ being the latest! Perhaps they are too embarrassed to show the latest situation.

So, where do we go from here? I am not advocating that we pursue their tardiness but to make good use of the fact and push for the realisation that matters are not going well and with the simple expedient of abandoning the difficult expensive sections and diverting the money to rail the Scottish Parliament would achieve a win- win situation. Rail users will be extremely happy. Road users will get some very useful sections of dual carriageway plus a saving in the major delays caused by driving through miles of roads works often frustrated by the apparent lack of effort being put into completion.

**Roger Piercy**  
**FoFNL member No. 14**

Roger also sent a copy of this letter to all the MSPs who work for his area, adding a paragraph asking that they do their best to encourage the diversion of funds from the A9 dualling budget to rail projects. He suggested this would not only result in significant benefits all round but would gain the respect of road and rail travellers for the governance of Scotland, a win-win situation.

Unfortunately, as John Finnie MSP (Green Party), one of our Vice Presidents, pointed out, "*The Scottish Government and the three other opposition parties are all fully committed to those dualling projects.*"

He did receive a fairly supportive response, presumably because no MSP can fail to notice the eye-watering cost of widening an already fast road, or fail to realise how much railway infrastructure could be provided instead. On the evidence of those replies there does seem to be cross-party support for improving the Highland Main Line as well - this, as we frequently point out, is an urgent requirement for Scotland.

## INVERNESS INTERCHANGE?

There has been renewed speculation in the press that there is hope of a Transport Hub being built on the land next to Inverness Station - redeveloping both the vacant Royal Mail premises in Strothers Lane and the current TK Maxx store beside the station.

Speaking of the Royal Mail building Stewart Nicol, Chief Executive of Inverness Chamber of Commerce said, "It is positive that it seems to be making progress", adding that it would be a "missed opportunity" if the existing building were to be replaced with a similar construction. "It's far too important a site for it to be used for something like that, it's a key part of the city centre. There is plenty of space for warehouses at the Longman Industrial Estate."

Fraser Grieve, Regional Director of the Scottish Council for Development and Industry, commented that any offer made for the site would be a "positive step forward", adding, "There is an opportunity to make much better use of that site, given previous discussions. I would really hope that we don't miss the chance to do something special with it."

FoFNL strongly supports the idea of providing a proper transport exchange at the station since easy transfer between modes is a vital incentive to using the railway as the main part of any journey. Scotland has far too few examples of good interchanges, this is a chance for Inverness to show how it should be done.

**Ian Budd**

# ‘A RAILWAY TERMINUS ON THE MOON’

## *A short history of the Loch Maree & Aultbea Railway*

In May 1889, a series of public-meetings was held in the villages of Poolewe, Gairloch and Aultbea. From these, a body of land-owners, merchants, ministers and sundry Mackenzies came together on the 14th of the month to constitute a grand-sounding ‘Joint Committee’, chaired by John Dixon. The decision of this meeting was to recommend the construction of a railway from

finance, to build it; plans were already well advanced to conduct a full survey of the route and to apply for an Act of Parliament to build the line. This is almost certainly what spurred the people of Gairloch parish into action; thereafter, almost every argument made in favour of the Aultbea line referenced the Ullapool proposal – and not in a good way.

The main proposers of the Aultbea railway were – unsurprisingly – either rich, or owners of large estates, or both. They comprised: Sir Kenneth Mackenzie, 6th Baronet of Gairloch, and owner of some 170,000 acres of land; the Earl of Lovelace and Duncan Darroch of Torridon, both owners of large estates in Torridon (Darroch later dropped out, to be replaced by his neighbour, Ogilvie-Dalglish of the Coulin estate); Paul Liot Bankes, son-in-law of the deceased coal-magnate Meyrick Bankes, who owned the Letterewe and Gruinard estate; and John Dixon, a man described by a contemporary as ‘a reputed Croesus’, who rented Inveran House from the Mackenzie. It was Dixon who coordinated all the activities: he was an indefatigable letter-writer and propagandist, and adept at scathing critiques of the Ullapool project. The arguments put forward in favour of the Aultbea line, and rehearsed almost daily in letters and petitions and memoranda between 1889 and 1892 were that:



John Henry Dixon FSA

Aultbea was closer to Stornoway than Ullapool, and therefore more convenient for both fisheries, mail and passenger traffic;

Aultbea was closer to ‘the sea’ than Ullapool, and the latter was much beset by the tides;

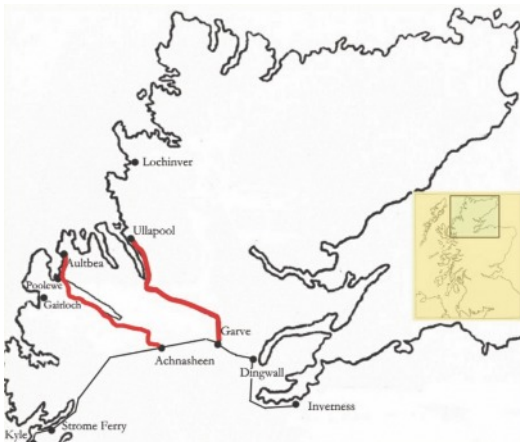
Loch Ewe was a far better haven than Loch Broom – indeed, navigation in the latter was fraught with danger from rocks and reefs and unpredictable squalls;

the construction of a railway line to Aultbea was going to be far easier than one to Ullapool;

*Andy Drummond visits another unsuccessful attempt for a railway to catch West Coast fish traffic.*

Achnasheen to ‘such a point on the parish of Gairloch as would best develop to their utmost extent the fisheries of the Lews, and of the North-West Highlands and Islands of Scotland generally.’ This was the beginning of a short – but energetic – campaign to construct what later became known as the ‘Loch Maree & Aultbea Railway’.

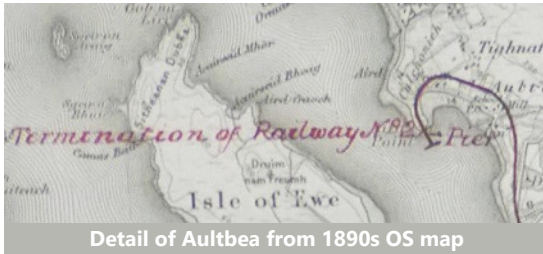
In its conception, and in the campaign which followed, the principal motivation for the Aultbea line was a determination that the rival Garve to Ullapool railway should fail. The latter had been first proposed in 1885, but it was in the Spring of 1889 that serious moves took place to acquire legal permission and – more importantly –



Ullapool was in decay, while Gairloch and Aultbea were thriving.

These, and anything else which came to mind, were the arguments which raged back and forth between the Loch Broomites and the Loch Eweites. It was not a pretty sight.

Both parties vied for support, not just from the locals and Whitehall, but also from the population



Detail of Aultbea from 1890s OS map

of Lewis. In the long dark evenings of winter, fishermen and crofters attended public meetings in Stornoway, Carloway and the smaller townships, signing petitions to their heart's content and berating the opposition. By and large, but not exclusively, the Lewis people supported Ullapool. After one such meeting, the Reverend Hector Cameron of Back wrote to the newspapers announcing that 'should a census be taken to-morrow of the entire population of the Lews, we should henceforward hear as little of an agitation for a railway terminus on the moon as for one at Aultbea.'

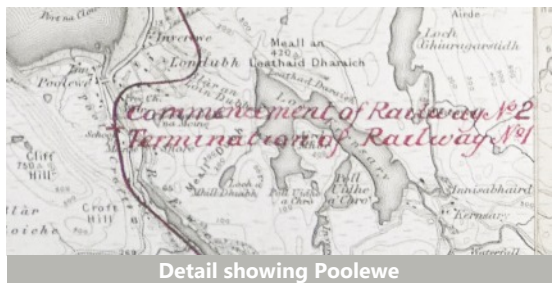
But if Aultbea was losing the popular campaign on Lewis, Dixon was second-to-none in making a noise in Whitehall; the staff at Dover House, office of the Secretary for Scotland, were soon clutching their heads in despair at the sheer volume of correspondence arriving from the Gairloch area. So many were the letters sent out, that Dixon had special notepaper ordered up, with a printed heading stating unequivocally 'Proposed Fisheries Railway to Aultbea for the Lews'.

A proper survey of the proposed route was conducted in 1892, by the most reputable firm of Thomas Meik and Sons. The Meiks' 'Plans and Sections' document was a masterly piece of work. Slightly eccentrically, the document identified not one, but three railway-lines.

The first – confusingly labelled 'Railway No.3' – ran south-westwards from a junction just west of Achnasheen station on the Dingwall to Strome Ferry line for a distance of 7 chains and 13 yards. This took it clear of Highland Railway land and into virgin territory.

The second section, 'Railway No.1', by far the longest at 29 miles 4 furlongs 8 chains and 5 yards, ran all the way to Poolewe. Rather than follow the road (now the A832) west out of Achnasheen, it circled round the back of Ledgowan Lodge, passed south of Loch a'Chroisg, and remained well south of the road to take advantage of the hillside contours, before looping north to enter Glen Docherty. Then up the hill to the highest point on the line (750ft); descending the glen on its southern slope

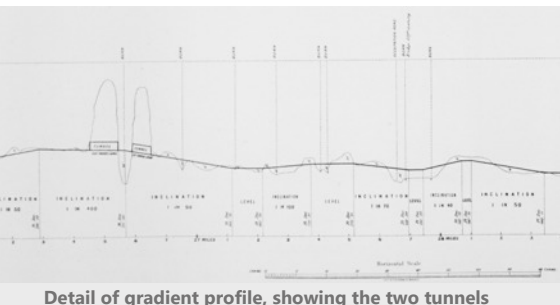
at a gradient of 1:33 for three miles; swooping around the western end of the glen; circling south of the village of Kinlochewe on a tall viaduct; and then rejoining the road. It then hugged the south shore of Loch Maree as far as Slattadale. Where the road then veers due west towards Gairloch, the railway instead heads north along the shore, straight for Poolewe. Which was an interesting move: the southern shore of Loch Maree is by no means a level plain at the western end. Indeed at grid reference NG880766 there are two major bluffs of rock which loom 300ft high above the waters. No problem: the Meiks envisaged here not just one tunnel, but two, 100 yards apart.



Detail showing Poolewe

'Railway No.1' ends at Poolewe, and is immediately succeeded by 'No.2'. This split may have been to allow for the line to terminate at Poolewe, should finances run dry. No.2 heads northwards along the east shore of Loch Ewe, skirting round the back of Osgood Mackenzie's Inverewe estate and terminating at the shore-end

of the new pier at Aultbea. The total distance was 7 miles 5 furlongs and 9 chains. A new pier would be constructed for steamer traffic – and no modest stubby thing either: this one would be 180 yards long so that, at the far end, its deck would stand 25ft above the low water mark. A very respectable pier indeed.



Detail of gradient profile, showing the two tunnels

The total length of the railway, therefore, was to be just under 37½ miles. But it had its fair share of engineering excitements. Over its total length, there were some thirty bridges to be constructed, of lengths between 15ft and 90ft. There were three major viaducts – one across the glen behind Kinlochewe with a length of 325ft (50ft high), another of 200ft at Ob Gorm, about two miles east of Talladale, and the third of 315ft across the inlet named Ob nam Muic, a mile further west, both about 35ft high. The railway would run within gawping distance of the renowned Victoria Falls. And then of course there was the magnificent double tunnel: the east tunnel would be 200 yards long, the west tunnel 137 yards, both buried under 200ft of mountain. The two tunnels were separated by a stretch of 100 yards above an 82ft drop – no viaduct is mentioned here on the plans, so we must suppose that the railway would cling by its fingernails to the hillside.

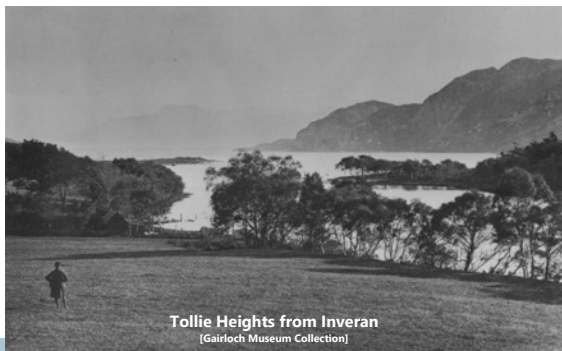
The 'Western Highlands and Islands Commission' of 1890, which visited all the proposed lines of the area and expressed itself thoroughly indecisive about most of them, recommended that any line to Aultbea should detour via Gairloch. But Mr Dixon was having none of that, pointing out that

it would involve negotiating two small hills (the challenge of two tunnels above Loch Maree was clearly preferable); and possibly – although left unsaid – such a diversion would bring the line unacceptably close to Sir Kenneth Mackenzie's summer residence, Flowerdale House.

Ominously, the second Commission to investigate options for building railway lines, the so-called 'North-West Coast of Scotland Railways Committee', issued a report in early 1892 which almost completely ignored Aultbea's claims.

The Meik survey was a pre-requisite for submitting a Private Bill to Parliament, which would, it was hoped, result in an Act permitting the 'Loch Maree and Aultbea Railway Company' to acquire land, issue shares and ultimately build the line. Regardless of all the omens – the snub by the second Commission, the fact that Treasury was clearly going to subsidise the Kyle of Lochalsh and Mallaig lines, a change of government in August 1892, and the usual opposition from the Highland Railway – the proposers went ahead; a Bill was announced in the Edinburgh Gazette at the end of 1892. There is a report of the Bill being given a second reading in the Commons on 21st April 1893. And then – nothing. Sadly, the Aultbea railway, despite all its promise, received no further support.

Which is a shame: just imagine how a railway with not one, but three viaducts (not to mention two Alpine tunnels) would attract the tourists and film-crews in the 21st century!



Tollie Heights from Inveran  
(Gairloch Museum Collection)

Andy Drummond's book on the Aultbea and Ullapool railways will be published in May 2020.

The maps and plans printed in this article were made available by the National Records for Scotland and are available for viewing in detail on [www.fofnl.org.uk/LMA.php](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/LMA.php)

This is a companion to the *Garve & Ullapool Railway* article we published in 2018-9



Driving wheels - all new except the crank axle



New boiler barrel and outer firebox wrapper beside inner firebox

# DUNROBIN PROGRESS

Photos:

Top left and bottom - Ken Livermore

Top right and middle - Paul Jarman,  
Beamish Museum

The Duke of Sutherland's second private locomotive, *Dunrobin*, is nearing the end of her restoration at Bridgnorth on the Severn Valley Railway. *Dunrobin* was built to order in 1895 by Sharp, Stewart & Co. at the Atlas Works in Springburn.

After being sold by the Duke in 1949 and being privately owned in England then Canada, *Dunrobin* ended up being purchased by the Government of British Columbia. She was last steamed in 2005 before being bought in 2011 by the Beamish Museum. Once restoration is completed at Bridgnorth, *Dunrobin* will return to Beamish to join the operational fleet there.



New tanks

The extensive restoration includes replacing large parts of the boiler and firebox as well as the tanks and driving wheels. A new cylinder block has also been cast.

It is not known for certain when *Dunrobin* will be completed, but early 2021 seems likely. This does tie in rather well with the 150th anniversary of the completion of the "Duke of Sutherland's Railway" to Helmsdale, on 19 June 2021.

Ian Budd

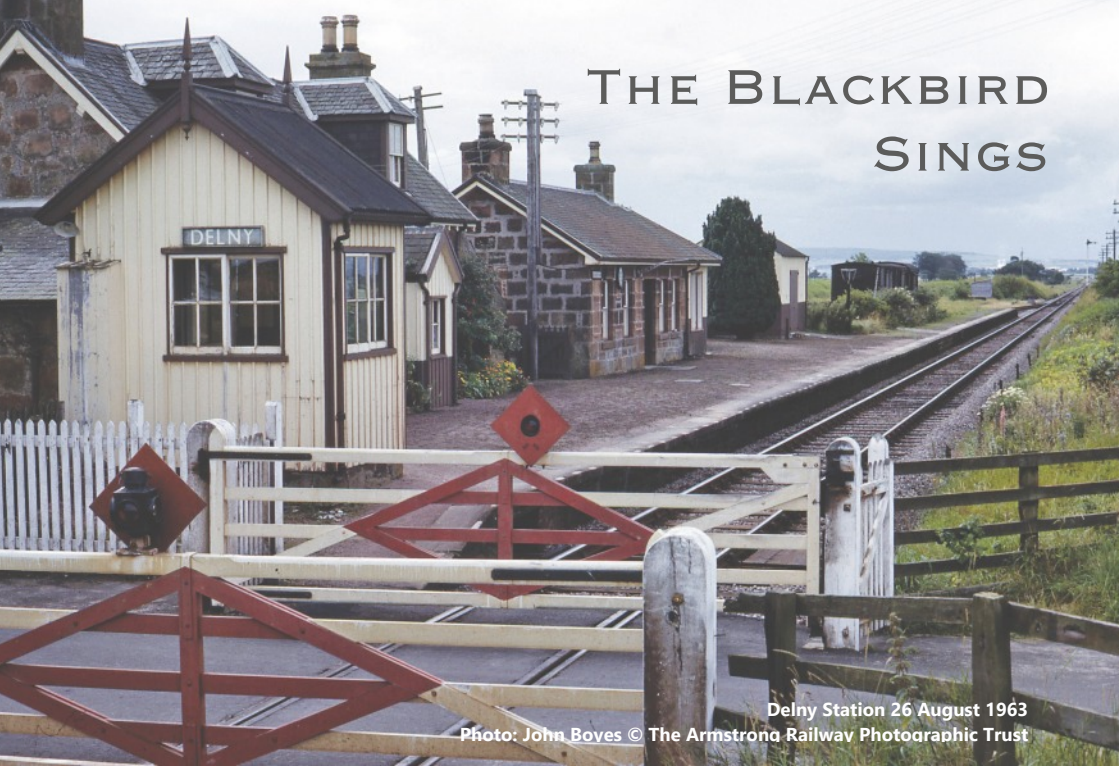


Newly cast cylinder block



Running plate, rear of cab and bunker, beside the new wheels

# THE BLACKBIRD SINGS



Delny Station 26 August 1963

Photo: John Boyes © The Armstrong Railway Photographic Trust

I started work at my local railway station, Delny, straight out of school when I was 15 as a junior porter. This was to be my job for the next three and a bit years. Life was quite varied at such

*Retired signalman and long time FoFNL committee member Iain MacDonald remembers a lot of hard work!*

small country stations and one learnt all about selling tickets etc.

We sent off lots of seed potatoes in the winter and one of the jobs was to line the vans with straw as they were being loaded, 8 to 10 tones in each van. This was OK as long as the straw was dry but some farmers sent very wet straw. One had to be very careful when putting the labels on the vans and not have a different destination on each side. Access to the label clips was restricted on the side next to the loading bank as the floor of the van was level with the loading bank, always a squeeze to get access.

Grain was another of the outwards goods the grain sacks were hired to the farmers, I well remember the first one I carried, 2 cwt = 16 stone and I was still a small light-built boy of 16 yrs, I thought my legs would buckle under me.

When the sack hire was over they were taken back to the station, a bundle of ten and a bundle of nine and put in one sack to total twenty. I always had to empty them out and count them, big awkward and clumsy to do.

Folding wagon sheets (covers) another job and on a windy day, I'm sure I was the first hang glider pilot at that station.

Now, although I had this job, I had no desire to be doing it and had wanted to be a motor mechanic, unfortunately I couldn't get an apprenticeship.

There was a level crossing at the station in those days and last thing at night the station master always closed the gates to the road and pulled the signals but if the milkman beat me to it in the morning I was in a spot of bother. It didn't make for a pleasant few hours.

One crofter, who lived nearby, had a pair of horses and he, like a few locals, came in to chat. He would tie the horses to the gate and one horse in particular would chew the top bar of the gate, indeed it was almost eaten through.

Now that I had become 18 it was time to be off to do my bit for Queen and Country so it was goodbye to the railways for the next two years. After returning to civvy street I searched around for a job, but nothing was happening so I went to see the staff people in Inverness as there was a job in Bonar Bridge (now Ardgay) which would have done me fine. They had other ideas though as they had a few places they couldn't get staff for, namely Struan, Strome Ferry and Achnasheen. I told them I'd think it over.

A couple of weeks later, and still no job. I spoke to the staff office, Achnasheen was the only job on offer so I decided I would take it. [This would have been a junction had the *Loch Maree & Aultbea Railway* been built, as described in the article on p26 - Ed] After three weeks training I was passed in rules/regs etc and appointed to the job. I was still 20 yrs old and the youngest signalman in Scotland. In those days at rural stations signalmen had to perform many and

varied duties. One of the duties at Achnasheen was the mid-day trains, shunting the dining car from the rear of the Down passenger train to the Up passenger service, not too difficult as long as the Up train crew remembered to shut the steam off after leaving Achanalt. Otherwise a very dodgy exercise with scalding steam.

Well, life went on, and living in the railway bothy at Achnasheen was hard, it wasn't unusual to find your breath frozen on the blankets in the morning. No TV or electric in it either.

I remember one day the mid-day trains were in the station and it was really busy when a swarm of bees arrived, I can guarantee it's the quickest I've ever seen a platform clear of people (me included).

After a year at Achnasheen a job for a different relief signalman at Inverness came up, so I applied and got the job.

The first job I got sent to was Halkirk, a few weeks there then it was learning the different boxes in the area. The area for Inverness staff was Georgemas to Dunkeld, Kyle to Forres and the Dava line to Aviemore. Including the Inverness station boxes. One instance which sticks in my mind is Millburn Junction, I learnt it

Halkirk Station © Ernie's Railway Archive





Invergordon Station 26 August 1963 Photo: John Boyes © ARPT

over a couple of weeks, two days one week, three days another, then I got a shift in the box. I wasn't in that box for another 19 months when my orders were to take duty at 00:01 on a Monday until 06:00, then 14:00 - 22:00. That was an all time challenge, figure out all the train movements and not route Aberdeen train to Perth line and vice versa.

After ten years on Inverness relief, a job came up at Kyle of Lochalsh as a rest day relief signaller/relief signalman. Well, by this time I was getting a bit tired of roaming all over the place so I applied and got the job, almost semi-retired.

One of the jobs was to be on site when contractors were blasting close to the track, apart from the weather it was a good paying job, lots of overtime.

By 1974 Invergordon was very busy and had only two signallers instead of three. Unfortunately one of them passed away so Syd Atkinson came up to Kyle and asked if I would go to Invergordon to help out as I'd worked there before. At that time the Kyle line was under

severe threat of closure so I said I would go for 12 weeks, as by that time I would know what was to happen at Kyle, and if it closed I could collect my redundancy money, leave the service and join at Invergordon as a new start, all very handy as I was about to get married. In the end the Kyle Line got a deserved reprieve and, as for me, the house supply at Kyle was dire, I knew of one man who waited seven years for a house so in the end, and for domestic reasons, I reduced my grade and took the job at Invergordon, so my 12 week job lasted for 12 years.

During the 70s - 80s Invergordon was the busiest station north of Inverness, with pipe trains, oil trains, smelter trains, plus general freight, distillery traffic etc.

Well, over the years one or two instances occurred, for example, I got a message from Control to say that a motor bike had crashed onto the track between the distillery and the station, I sent 6 bells (obstruction danger) to Tain but almost immediately I got the 'train entering section' from Tain. There had been two on the motorcycle and one had a suspected

broken back. The Area Manager lived in Alness and the District Inspector lived in Tain. Well there was no time to deliberate on the matter, I wrote in the train register, "signalman out of box to attend an emergency", I grabbed my hand lamp and detonators and headed for Delny level crossing, I remember driving through Saltburn at 80 mph. I got to Delny ahead of the train and got the detonators on the track while waving a red light violently to get the train stopped, I remember the driver that night was renowned for a bit of speeding. I instructed him to proceed at walking speed and be prepared to stop between the distillery and the station.

Even at my first station, Delny, there was a customer who enjoyed a tippie on a Saturday and as he was walking along while the train was leaving the station he fell between the train and the platform, I put a red to the fireman and either he was looking back, the driver being the other side, or the guard stopped the train. I didn't know what to expect but our hero had climbed out between the train and the platform and not a bit the worse.

In January 1978 a severe snow storm took down miles of overhead wires and due to the time/cost to replace them a method of controlling the token instruments was contrived to operate them by radio from Tain northwards. Further developments of this led to the RETB system coming into being. It trialled very successfully on the Kyle Line for a year and by December 1985 it was decided it would be used from Dingwall northwards. After many trials and tribulations, in particular at Lairg and Forsinard, Chris Green said the system was to be commissioned. Well, for a while it had to be discontinued north of Helmsdale. By that time I was redundant at Invergordon, along with all the other signallers on the Far North Line. New jobs on the RETB were advertised but as no grading was in place the points system of traditional to grade a signalbox was not available so the jobs were advertised as temporary. I got one of the jobs and a sort of simulator was rigged up, but we had to do the training without a driver on the other end of the

radio. After 3 weeks of this we were considered competent. So to coincide with Chris Green's commissioning date it all began. I'll not go into all the details, but the drivers refused to use it, so a pilotman system had to be invented. The drivers refused to write out the cards. In the end the signallers and supervisors were being sent on the trains as pilotmen. A real shambles.



After around 18 months, by which time the system was somewhat better, the whole thing was moved to Inverness. Again I got one of the jobs there and completed my signalling after 18 years, as a RETB signalman.

I was on duty when the Ness Viaduct got washed away, so I sent the final train over the old viaduct, and it was arranged for the same drivers/signallers to be on duty for the official opening of the new one. I asked the driver of the Up Kyle, "Why are you two years late?"

Lots of railway staff had nicknames such as The Hen, The Duck, The Gull, The Crow, The Penguin, Budgie, Magpie, Blackbird, Deputy Dog, Jaws, Cowboy, The Duke, Fugitive, Clava and so on.

So that was my 50 years as a Highland railway signalman. Would I do it again?

"No!"

# DEER LEAPS



*This article appeared on the website of the British Deer Society in November 2019 after Network Rail had installed deer leaps at Morvich and Altnabreac on the Far North Line.*

Young deer straying onto Highland rail tracks are being given an escape route to prevent them from being hit by trains.

Sections of lineside fencing are being lowered to enable the young and their mothers to leap out of danger.

Collisions are most likely to happen on rural routes, including the Highland Main Line between Perth and Inverness, and those in the West Highlands and north of Inverness.

There are around 100 such incidents a year, which accounts for one in three animals hit on the network. While deer are less likely to derail a train they can cause significant damage. In addition, deer can get onto the track at stations, level crossing and gaps in fencing, but younger animals can find themselves unable to find a way out.

John Bruce, chairman of the British Deer Society's Scottish Council, said:

"Network Rail is to be commended for their initiatives to reduce collisions with animals. The deer leaps described should help deer to escape from the track."

"Any such measures are to be encouraged as it is inevitable that animals gain access to the track when a fence is breached by a falling tree, a river spate, rockslide or when dug under, so building planned escape places is a better strategy than ignoring the issue."

"We are already in discussions about fence design and requirements on certain other routes."



Photo: Network Rail

# BOOK REVIEW

## Renewing Britain's Railways

**Gordon Webster**, *Renewing Britain's Railways: Scotland*. 96pp. Amberley Publishing, 2019.

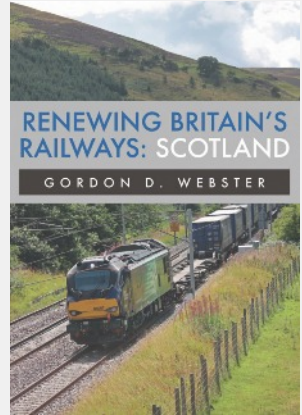
ISBN 978-1-4456-8921-0 £14.99

A well illustrated volume of changes particularly over the past four years, but with some archive memories back to the 1980s and 90s. There are separate chapters on freight; Edinburgh to Glasgow electrification; the sleepers; the Borders Railway; the West Highland Line; the Highland Main Line (HML) where the current capacity constraints are highlighted and the Glasgow area.

An interesting chapter discusses the lines where manual signalling still exists or has recently been replaced and tells us how budgets have slowed down further progress but the remaining manual signal boxes on the HML may be replaced by 2024.

Mentions of the Far North Line include the lack of catering staff and the occasional struggles of the pipe train to get to Georgemas. The author seems unaware that the refurbishment of the 158s was largely to bring the Haymarket allocation up to the higher standards we achieved for the Inverness allocated sets in 2008. ScotRail's publicity was a bit wide of the mark there and, as he says, the "tourist train" concept is still awaited.

**Richard Ardern**



## FoFNL 25

### **FoFNL 25: Marking 25 Years of the Friends of the Far North Line**

ISBN 978-1-5272-5108-3 £5.00

In November FoFNL published a 76pp A5 book to mark our 25th Anniversary in 2019.

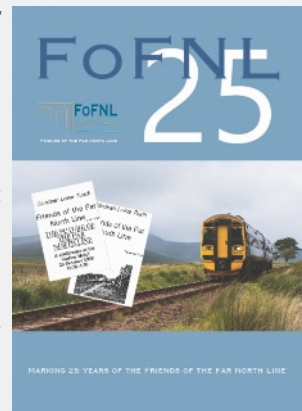
It went to print just too early to catch the Review Team Final Report which was released on 1 November.

The book opens with a section introducing the reader to many of the people who have been, or are still, part of the organisation. It gives an insight to the vital skills and contributions which have made FoFNL what it is.

The remainder of the book is a 'timeline' in which we've reprinted a large selection of material, mostly from our newsletters/magazines, which introduces the reader to the work that FoFNL does.

FoFNL 25 concludes with a four-page illustrated guide to the line and a select bibliography.

The book is illustrated with a large number of photographs showing various aspects of the railway. Our members have already received their own copy but *FoFNL 25* can be purchased from our website: [www.fofnl.org.uk/FoFNL25.php](http://www.fofnl.org.uk/FoFNL25.php)



**Ian Budd**



# FAR NORTH SEASONS

Contrasting views by photographer Peter Moore

[Above] 158703 passing the Bannock Burn just north of Kinbrace on 3 August 2019.

[Below] Always enjoy photographing the Struie.  
158707 bound for Wick east of Ardgay on 2 February 2019.

