

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 98
May 2026



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

£3.00

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www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne98.html is a companion page with some web links and larger versions of pictures found in this issue. This sign on a page denotes available material:

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Front cover: A unique sight on the Far North Line - a pair of class 20 locomotives, 20118 *Saltburn-by-the-Sea* and 20132, crossing the Conon bridge as they head for Kyle of Lochalsh on 22 June 2025 with the Scottish Railway Preservation Society *Lochalsh Chopper* tour. According to the photographer the weather was "pretty dreich that day"!

Photo: **Peter Moore**

IMPORTANT NOTE TO OUR MEMBERS

Our Treasurer, David Start, has requested that we make sure to **fill in the 'reference' box** on all bank transactions. The ideal format would be **full name + membership number**.

If we don't do it ourselves the bank generates a reference, and data protection legislation prevents the bank from being allowed to inform David to which name the reference is attached. This can cause confusion when two or more members share a surname.

The bank is now charging **50p** for each cheque paid in - please consider **BACS** or a **Standing Order**.

HEADCODE

The **Holyrood elections** will have taken place by the time you read this. As you will see in this issue, FoFNL has produced a pamphlet which is being delivered to all the 129 MSPs. Of course we hope firstly that they read it, and secondly that they absorb the message and remember their obligations to look after the whole of Scotland.

Looking back five years to *Headcode*, September 2021, demonstrates the nature of rail campaigning all too well:

Is it too much to hope that we may at last be looking at a new era in the Scottish Government's view on rail? Until now, whilst some excellent improvements have been made elsewhere in Scotland, there has been only some acknowledgement that there is a serious shortfall in the rail provision in the Highlands - especially the intercity routes.

The answer apparently is "Yes, it was too much to hope." So we carry on repeating ourselves, and frustratingly the reaction from Transport Ministers, Transport Scotland, Scottish Rail Holdings, ScotRail and Network Rail is that they generally agree with our points.

As an organisation, we are absolutely apolitical and one would hope that the wish for the Highlands to have a good rail service would be shared by MSPs of all parties.

The shortfall in reliability, speed, frequency and capacity in the Highlands' railways makes one hope that our tourists have never been on trains in countries like Switzerland - the contrast does nothing for Scotland's reputation.

Only Holyrood can fix this - perhaps the next five years will see light dawn...

Ian Budd

FOFNL AGM & CONFERENCE

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

This year's **three-week blockade** of the Far North Line was announced when it was too late for us to change the date, which is **Friday 19 June**. As there will be no trains on the line north of Dingwall, members and other attendees travelling to Beaully from that direction will arrive by bus, unless they choose to drive.

This year's venue is the **Lovat Arms Hotel** in Beaully, which is near the station, allowing ample time for travellers from the north on the rail replacement bus, arriving at 10:18, to reach the hotel for the start of the AGM at **10:45**.

As always, we have an interesting mix of speakers beginning with **Jim Summers**, former Regional Operations Manager, British Rail Scottish Region. Besides a lifetime working in railways, Jim is the founder of the Chartered Institution of Railway Operators, a UK-wide organisation which develops and promotes the profession of rail operators.

Jim will be followed by **Tom Smith**, ScotRail's Head of Fleet Technical. We look forward to hearing about the challenges of keeping Scotland's rolling stock running smoothly.

After lunch we will hear from **Graeme Cook**, Director of Rail Delivery, Transport Scotland, who has succeeded the well kent Bill Reeve in the top TS rail job.

As always, the conference, beginning at **11:30**, will be open to the public, and after each talk there will be the opportunity to ask the speaker questions.



PANDORA...

...writes

It's some years since Pandora was moved to think about the road/rail interface. On many occasions the matter of Level Crossing safety was the issue, almost entirely because road users, for whatever reasons, couldn't be bothered to obey the rules. Sometimes the penalty for such folly was death, and on a very few occasions the deaths were among railway passengers or staff. However Pandora's concern about the criminal stupidity of some road users today lies with bridge bashes (a topic regular readers will have encountered from Pandora before).

A recent issue of *RAIL* (1058) dilates at some length about bridge bashes, informing what should be a terrified readership that bridges are bashed several times a day. The figure for 2024/25 is 1666, a number which by itself ought to cause shivers. The vast majority of culprits are HGVs. What is to be done beyond hand-wringing?

A particularly low bridge in the Fen Country has a clearance of only 6'6" (and comes third in the bash table at 15 last year). There is a Level Crossing nearby which large vehicles are supposed to use. Clearly not all do. Network Rail and Cambridgeshire County Council, in whose joint hands the solution must lie, seem unable to take any useful action. What is to be done?

Pandora offers a suggestion. Any vehicle striking - or at least caught under - the bridge should have its number plate recorded by the local bobby (always assuming such a character exists) or a public-spirited passer-by with a mobile phone. This number is then transmitted to two places. First, the DVLA so that ownership of the offending vehicle may be confirmed. That being done the number is sent to a central authority (see below) who issues a demand for payment of one million pounds, to be made within 30 days.



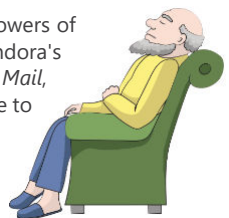
Harlaxton Road bridge, Grantham - struck 18 times in 2024/25. Perhaps not the most sensible signage! Photo: Network Rail

Over-reaction? Pandora doesn't think so. The 6'6" bridge on the B1089 is lightly used by rail, and were a derailment to occur - itself unlikely - the risk to life is exceedingly small (but not wholly absent). However second on the bash list is Harlaxton Road, immediately to the north of Grantham station. The line speed there exceeds 100mph. Knock that bridge a few inches out of true and the deaths will be in the dozens. The million pounds is there to send a message to HGV drivers

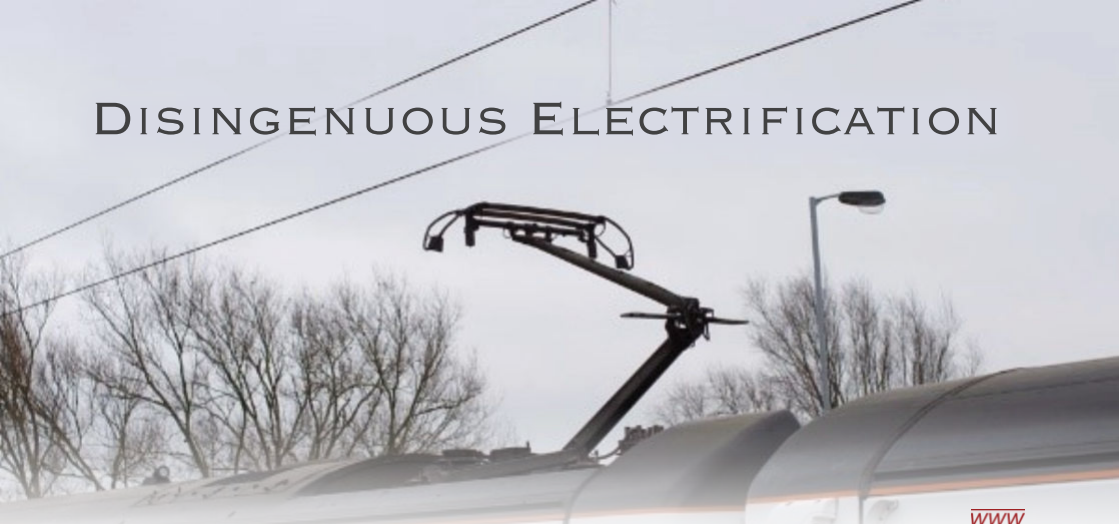
everywhere, including those hitting the Grantham bridge 18 times.

Who is the "central authority"? Pandora doesn't know. But it's within the powers of Government to legislate for the fine and the power given to DfT to levy it. Pandora's guess is that a whopping fine like that, bound to make the pages of the *Daily Mail*, will so focus minds, especially of HGV owners, that it would be unlikely to have to be levied more than a handful of times.

And if Pandora were wrong, and it were levied 1666 times - think of the benefit to the Treasury!



DISINGENUOUS ELECTRIFICATION



[www](#)

I've read every copy of *Modern Railways* since May 1973 and I rely on the highly qualified regular columnists, **Roger Ford** and **Ian Walmsley**, for insights into the progress, or lack of it, of the rail industry. Another source of reliable information and opinion is the superb industry magazine *Rail Engineer*, whose editor, **David Shirres** was a speaker at our AGM & Conference in Brora in 2019. In all matters I make a point of trying to begin from an agnostic position, and allow the opinions I find, from experts I trust, to crystallise a reliable viewpoint.

The electrification saga of British railways in those 53 years is a shocking indictment of the way governments and politicians work. It seems no-one is strong enough to overrule the almost inevitable short-termism which is endemic in the way major operations, such as the rail network, are handled.

Since 2005 Scotland has been a beacon of hope and an example to England, of how to go about electrifying the railway. However, in the aftermath of Covid and less than ideal financial settlements for Scotland, cracks have begun to appear. The rush to rid the rail network of diesel traction by 2045 has led to the abandonment (or, at least indefinite postponement) of full intercity electrification in Scotland and the advent of Discontinuous Electrification (DE).

There is no discussion necessary to establish that the Swiss made the correct decision to electrify their entire system by 1960. Simple physics tells us that hauling tons of batteries (or diesel fuel and diesel generators) around, as well as passengers or freight, is not the best use of the power we generate. David's Performance Comparisons table from his 2019 talk gives a startling illustration of fuel efficiency for diesel, hydrogen and OLE - 27%, 29% and 83% respectively. This is almost the definition of a "no-brainer".

On the face of it, DE is quite an attractive idea - the rapid removal of diesel power, and the avoidance of a portion of expensive Overhead Line Equipment (OLE) installation - until you do the arithmetic.

Current issues of both *Modern Railways* and *Rail Engineer*, contain stark warnings about the long-term adoption of DE.

Ian Walmsley, of *MR*, says that DE should stand for Disingenuous Electrification, because its proponents are being less than honest about its real cost, as opposed to full OLE.

Here are the factors to consider:

- DE is no use for main lines and freight - battery-electric locomotives do not have the range or

speed

- Battery-electric Multiple Units (BEMUS):
 - are less energy-efficient than straight electric
 - are heavier, shortening track life, therefore adding cost
 - are more technically complex
 - carry a higher risk of a serious fire
 - more costly in whole life terms
- The discontinuous OLE supply still has to provide enough power for the whole journey, leading to potential supply problems
- OLE sections have to be joined by expensive underground cables which, unlike overhead wires, suffer from high transmission losses (wasted electricity which has to be paid for)
- Static charging increases time spent at termini, or at stations en route
- Charging on the move can only be done realistically whilst the train is coasting, to avoid overloading and melting the wires

To summarise: the total installation cost of DE as opposed to full electrification is only marginally lower, and if the OLE sections represent 50% or more of the route it would be cheaper to fully electrify at the outset. In whole life cost terms, full electrification is cheaper in all cases.

I repeat, *in whole life cost terms, full electrification is cheaper in all cases.*

Of course, this relies on using the correct figures in discussion. Ian Walmsley again:

"I'm told that the Treasury still uses the appalling cost per stkm (single track kilometre) from Great Western electrification of £3.5 million, which inflated to today is around £6 million. Actual costs for new schemes are around £2 million, but if you didn't want to do it, which [figure] would you use?"

Transport Scotland is well aware of all these factors, but has been put in a position where it now advocates DE. There seem to be two reasons for this - firstly, the Scottish Government has very limited borrowing powers for capital investment, thanks to the devolution settlement, and secondly its own policy of Net Zero prevents extending the use of diesel power beyond 2045, even though rail's contribution to harmful emissions at present is microscopic [around 1% in Scotland]. The trouble with DE is that it is not easy to justify conversion once it's in place and the trains have been built.

Ian Walmsley characterises the tendency toward DE as "Stealing from the Next Generation". In future decades there is likely to be much regret about what we are doing now. This is not being publicly acknowledged, hence "Disingenuous Electrification".

No government ever has enough money to do everything it would like, but that does not give politicians, or civil servants the right to be less than honest about it. Far better in this case to say publicly that it makes economic sense to stick with a policy of rolling full electrification, and that, in the meantime, diesel traction will be used until the whole network is electrified.

The climate change imperative has distorted policy-making. It would be very interesting to know (if *any* scientist does) exactly how much of a contribution to global warming diesel train emissions in the UK actually make. It seems to have become politically unacceptable to do anything other than a complete, and comparatively sudden, removal of all use of fossil fuels, regardless of whether in the

process we use more of those fuels to extract lithium and build new vehicles before the old ones need to be replaced.

Transport Scotland's recent document, *Rail Recharged*, which lays out rolling stock policy, contains some worrying quotes:

"Where there is no freight market, or as a transitional measure on InterCity routes, the operation of battery-electric trains can deliver the same carbon [they mean CO₂] benefits as a fully electric train while significantly reducing the capital investment required in the short to medium term." *No freight market* - we hope the rural routes aren't included in this, since it is part of Scottish Government policy to increase the transport of freight by rail, which must include new flows. In any case, the agreed timber loading facility at Altnabreac means that the FNL already has some new freight on offer (once wagons are sourced - something we assume Transport Scotland is pressing for).

"Undertaking too much disruptive engineering work across the network at the same time would have significant revenue impacts and would diminish the attractiveness of rail." This sounds like more of an excuse than a reason.

"Our InterCity routes intertwine with wider parts of our network, however, given the vast distances between passenger destinations along with the *importance of rail freight* [my italics] on these routes, electric services with *sufficient electrification* are the desired end-state for this part of the network." *The importance of rail freight...sufficient electrification* - yet only full electrification allows the removal of diesel traction.

"...our current plan has identified the opportunity for a *transition fleet*". There is no such thing as a transition fleet for freight.

Ian Walmsley sums up the present situation in England thus: "Time to stop pretending that discontinuous electrification is a clever innovation when it is actually a millstone around the neck of the next generation."

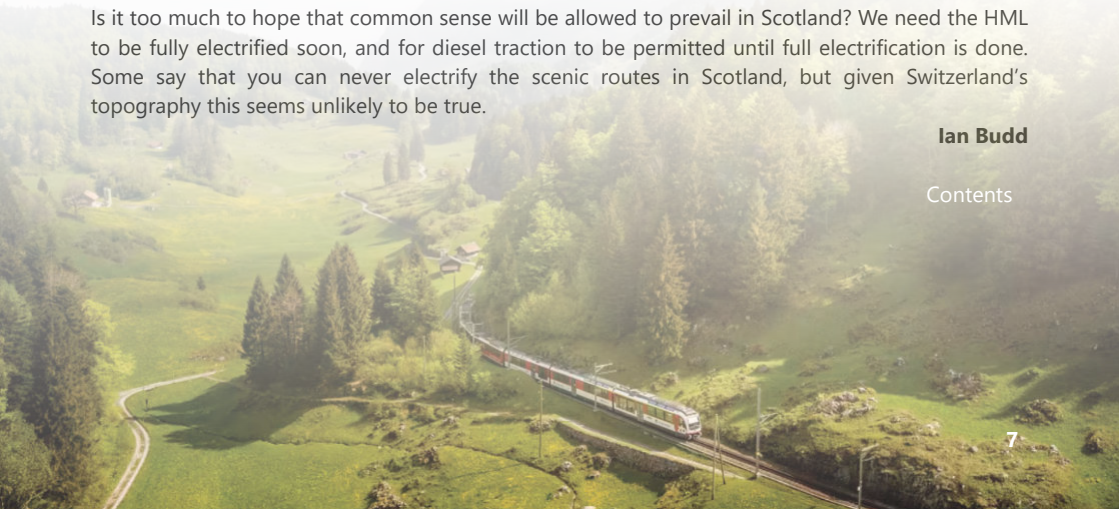
He adds:

"We're in trouble now - disingenuous electrification is becoming a starting point. It impresses politicians and Treasury mandarins, for whom five years is long term. We are lucky the railway engineers of old didn't have a similarly parsimonious attitude. There is a rolling stock strategy coming soon and you can be sure it will be full of diesel substitutes. You can also be sure there will be no whole life cost/benefit analysis."

Is it too much to hope that common sense will be allowed to prevail in Scotland? We need the HML to be fully electrified soon, and for diesel traction to be permitted until full electrification is done. Some say that you can never electrify the scenic routes in Scotland, but given Switzerland's topography this seems unlikely to be true.

Ian Budd

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FOFNL PAMPHLET FOR NEW HOLYROOD SESSION

This year we decided to send a pamphlet, about how far the Highlands' railways have fallen behind, to all the MSPs elected in the 2026 Holyrood election.

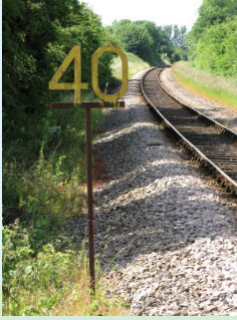
The four-page pamphlet, reproduced on this and the following three pages, encourages them to put Highlands' railways at the forefront of their minds.

I.B.



21st century system running along 19th century lines





Starved of investment

- The railways in the Highlands have been allowed to fall **far behind** most of the Scottish rail network

Modal shift

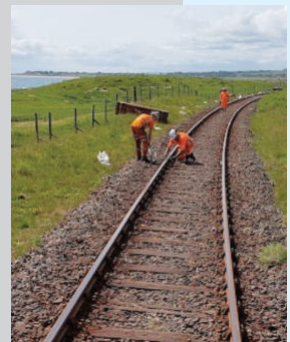
- Scottish Government policy is to **promote modal shift** from road to rail - the environmental benefits are obvious
- **Investment** is needed for this to happen
- The service must be **reliable** as a cancellation often causes a 3-4 hour wait, or an uncomfortable bus ride

Highlands railway journeys are slow

- HML and FNL average speeds are **52 mph** and **37 mph**
- Edinburgh-Perth takes about the same time as it did in **1895**

Single track railways are difficult to run

- Perth to Wick - 279 miles - **243 miles of single track**, 36 miles of double track
- Only 20 passing loops remain
- Average distance between loops is 13 miles
- FNL has gaps of **21** and **24** miles - (28 and 34 mins respectively)
- A 10-minute delay can easily become **1 hour** if a late runner is held for trains to pass the other way



How long since any additional track was added?

- Highland Main Line - **48 years** (reinstatement of 23 miles of double track removed 12 years earlier)
- Far North Line - **113 years** (six miles of double track installed, subsequently removed)

What about freight?

- An existing railway is a great opportunity to **clear heavy freight from the roads**
- The Far North Line now has **no freight**, apart from the occasional nuclear waste flask
- Proposed timber loading at Altnabreac for the new freight terminal at Dalcross would be **great news**, if only there were timber wagons available
- SSEN power line project offers significant freight traffic - **new loops** are needed to provide paths in the timetable

What about the trains?

- The class 158s used on the Far North Line are now around **35 years old**
- Spare parts are hard to come by
- **Cancellations** due to train faults are too common
- **No prospect** of replacements in the foreseeable future

Scotland's population is very unevenly distributed

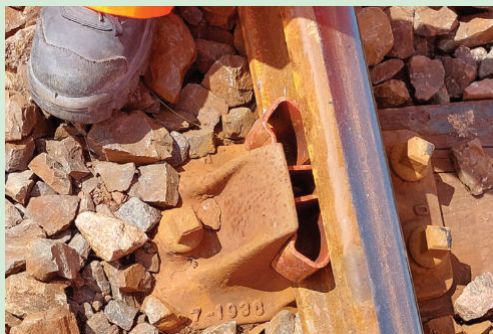
- Capital projects have to achieve a "business case"
- Unless economic, social and environmental benefits are fully factored in, Highland residents and tourists remain **2nd class** 'transport citizens'

As a whole, Scotland's railway system, and the way it is run, is an exemplar of good practice. But although a traveller between Scotland's two largest cities is whisked between them by a fast, reliable railway, anyone venturing to the Highlands from the Central Belt, will experience a shocking decline in what they are offered, making it far more likely that they'll just choose to drive.

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

This needs to **change**. Now that you're elected you can help begin the process of bringing the Highlands railways up to scratch.

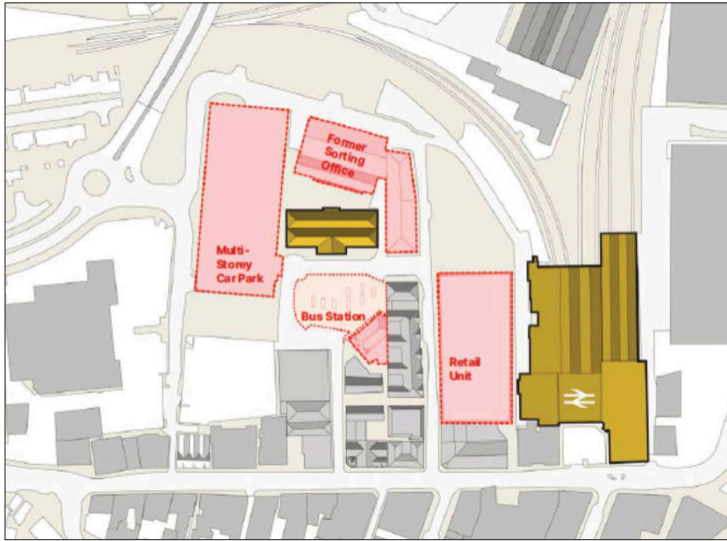
- Railway works are not cheap, but they are very resilient and extremely long-lasting and **great value for money**
- Some track refurbishment on the Far North Line last year reused components nearly **100 years old**



Keep Highlands' railways at the forefront of your mind

- These railways are an **under-used** resource
- **Improvements** are needed now
- We need **more passing loops**, and **modern trains** on the tourist routes
- When the service is **reliable** more travellers will take the train
- These lines can **bring more tourism** to the Highlands, without clogging the roads with more cars
- Be **proactive** in keeping the government focused on Highlands rail
- Give **cross-party support**
- It is the **Scottish Government's duty** to provide a good standard of railway infrastructure, no matter where it is in Scotland



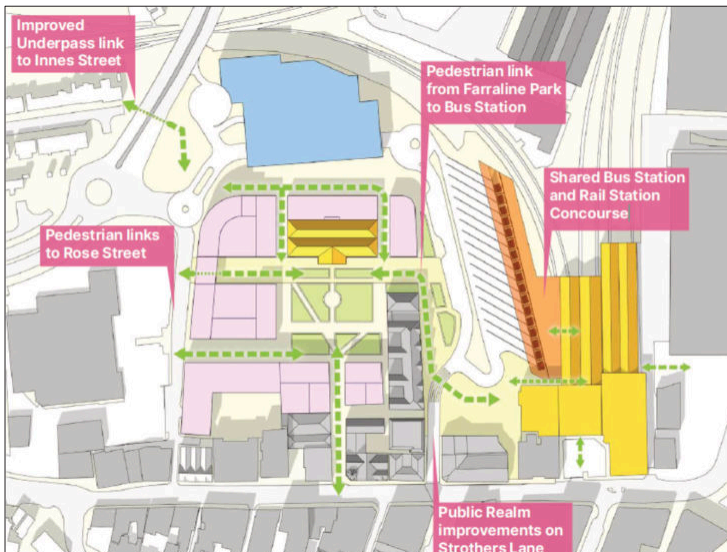


The **Outline Proposals** recommend the demolition of:

- the existing Rose Street Multi-Storey Car Park
- the existing Bus Station on Farraline Park
- the former Sorting Office
- the retail unit on Strothers Lane

Option 3:

- a 16-stance Bus & Coach Station (drive-in, reverse-out) accessed off Strothers Lane (two-way linking to A82 Longman Road and Academy Street)
- a Multi-Storey Car Park behind the Library accessed from A82 Longman Road



JOINT PLEA TO HITRANS

[www](#)

As Frank Roach, our founder and long time Partnership Manager at HITRANS nears retirement, alarm bells are ringing around Scotland's rail community.

It is absolutely vital that Frank's full-time successor has his knowledge, commitment and passion for rail provision in the Highlands.

We have put together a group of eight co-signatories to a strongly worded letter to members of the appointment panel at HITRANS, emphasising that the role is too important to be merged with another. You can read the letter on this issue's [companion page](#).

FLOW COUNTRY TOURISM STRATEGY

On the 22nd of April Les Turner, a colleague on the FoFNL Committee, and I attended one of two Community Consultation Events as part of the development of the Sustainable Tourism Strategy for The Flow Country World Heritage Site. The events were facilitated by Blue Sail on behalf of the The Flow Country Partnership.

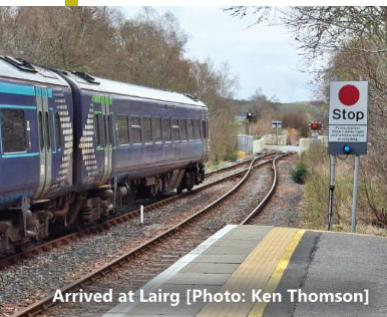
The Flow Country (FC) is the most intact and extensive blanket bog system in the world, stretching across Caithness and Sutherland in the far north of Scotland. It received UNESCO World Heritage Site designation in 2024 and is the UK's newest World Heritage Site (WHS).



What struck me was that the FC-WHS is not only vast but is not one giant "circle" on the map but seven discrete areas.

Partner organisations, community groups, businesses and other stakeholders attended the meeting at Lairg Community Hall. Blue Sail presented their draft strategy/ideas and via small "breakaway" groups the attendees discussed the proposals, added comments, proposed additions and input further ideas. These coupled with the other event outputs held in Thurso will be used to refine a fuller strategy round about June.

Several small businesses attended and I was pleased to see that both Blue Sail and many local people (without prompting from Les or me) recognised the value of the FNL for tourism initiatives. In fact some of the local business groups came up with ideas for "tour" opportunities from FNL stations local to them. Although the strategy perhaps won't go down to tour ideas level it is good to see the germination of these ideas, which can hopefully increase passenger numbers on the line (and not necessarily just from Inverness).



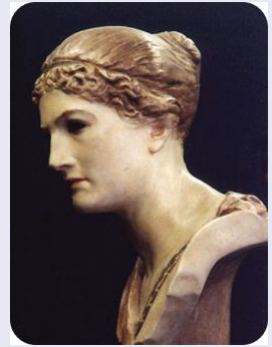
Arrived at Lairg [Photo: Ken Thomson]

I took the 07:00 Inverness - Wick service to Lairg, the "local" station (being about 2 miles from the village), which boosted my steps target for the day!

I was pleased to note that all stations to, and including, Ardgay had northbound passengers boarding, admittedly single numbers were the norm. We even stopped at Culrain for a disembarkation - a Carbisdale Castle visitor?

Ken Thomson

CASSANDRA writes



We are told that the Secretary of State will have "the power to reopen five-year settlements at any time without consultation" (*RAIL 1058*). Did the earth move for you on reading this? It certainly should have done. Since the privatisation 30-odd years ago the funding for Railtrack, and now Network Rail, has been agreed (after much arguing) for 5-year Control Periods. Short of external shocks (the unknown unknowns so wisely foreseen by Donald Rumsfeld and foolishly mocked by illiterate commentators) this model had held fast, and successive SoSs have not interfered.

It may have escaped general notice that Control Periods share their periodicity with General Elections, and there is therefore almost a 100% chance that an Election will be held to entertain us while a Control Period winds its way to the preparative stages for the next one. Life being what it is there must be something close to a 50% chance that the governing party will change. What incoming SoS will not rub his or her hands with joy at the thought of imposing his or her will upon the railway? These people are, after all, human beings cursed with all the short-term thinking and I-know-bestness of mankind. And we are about to enact an Act giving an SoS the power to change the rules of the game at half time.

Elsewhere the UK and Scottish governments have put together a Memorandum of Understanding about where the views and actions of one lot will impinge upon those of the other. Less clear is where the ultimate decision will lie when an accommodation is not to be found. Cassandra, ever keen to nibble away at the embarrassing difficult bits, hopes that the text of the MoU is sufficiently pliable that - as usual - a way will be found. However the fact that HMG has a bigger stick than Scottish Ministers cannot be overlooked.

Cassandra is encouraged by much of it, as affecting day-to-day operation. These extracts bring some comfort:

- Great British Railways will not roll back devolution or functional decentralisation.
- The company will be Scotland domiciled.
- Scottish and UK Ministers and GBR will agree an approach to assets which presents the best outcome for the integrated railway in Scotland.
- Where Scottish Ministers chose to pursue an alliance arrangement rather than a GBR subsidiary or joint owned company model, the SoS will support a deepened operational and strategic partnership between ScotRail and GBR.
- Where services are designated by the Scottish Ministers, including when being delivered via a GBR subsidiary or jointly owned company, the Scottish Ministers will retain full control of branding of services - including trains, stations and uniforms. Both ScotRail and Caledonian Sleeper's bespoke train livery and station branding will remain outside the scope of any GBR changes and will be preserved and developed over time at the discretion of the Scottish Ministers. Stations operated by ScotRail will also retain current Scottish branding within full control of Scottish Ministers. This does not apply to SoS designated services.
- Where GBR assets are branded GBR, and are funded by the Scottish Ministers, including infrastructure, major delivery works, road vehicles and bridge signage, these should also prominently feature the Scotland's Railway branding.

But do not forget that the SoS has "the power to reopen five-year settlements at any time without consultation"

WEST FRASER CONNECTS...

...AN UPDATE

Looking west towards Inverness, main line on the right

www

Construction of the railhead for the West Fraser (WF) plant, formerly Norbord (or "Cloud Factory" as locals call it) near Inverness, has been moving on apace since planning was granted.

Signalling and siding point works were completed as part of the Inverness Airport loop and station project some time ago. However, as **Timon Rose's** great pictures taken on 12 April show, commissioning is not far off, following the completion of the main on-site construction works.

Story Contracting delivered two new rail sidings that connect directly to the WF plant. Some stats (courtesy of Story's Facebook page):

- 2,800m of new rail installed
- 2,000+ sleepers laid
- 4,000 tonnes of ballast used
- Two new turnouts installed
- Completion of 170 welds, tamped to the final line and level



All photos with kind permission
of Timon Rose



The main line connection adjacent to the plant, looking west. The similarity in design of the connection with that to be found at Highland Spring's Railfreight Terminal at Blackford is evident.

An early April WF statement said "training to take place mid-April with first loaded train expected to leave site at the end of April". Route learning trips between Inverness and the Airport using a light loco have been observed, but at the time of writing nothing is known to have been into the site. The terminal, however, is noted in Realtime Trains as "Dalcross Freight Facility" so it is "in the system".

The original planning conditions were recently updated to allow site operations to be carried out later on a Saturday, due to pathing issues.

As well as being used by WF, who manufacture wood based panel products such as MDF, it is thought the "Tesco train" could use the sidings instead of loading/unloading at Inverness, and



The "Cloud Factory"



Raw materials

future freight customers could also use the sidings. Of course nirvana would be timber logs being delivered to site direct from loading points on the FNL e.g. Altnabreac. One stumbling block seems to be the availability of suitable wagons in the UK.

Hopefully by the September edition of *FNE* we'll be able to report on the successful start up of freight movements at Dalcross.

Ken Thomson

NEWS FLASH!

While this edition of *FNE* was at the printer operations began at the new terminal.

Ken Thomson writes: Today (Tue 28th April) saw "The Cloud Factory" aka West Fraser plant (formerly Norbord) receive its first train. 4H48 (topped and tailed 66s) arrived from Inverness with 6 "twins" bang on time just after midday.

Following a short delay the 12 containers were offloaded within 35 mins and the train later returned empty to Inverness as 4D48 at 14:13.



The first train into the terminal comes to rest at its final stopping point.



An Inverness-bound HST passes.



The reach stacker gets to work

NEWS

FOFNL MEMBERSHIP UPDATE

At a recent FoFNL committee meeting we decided to make a small change to our PayPal membership arrangement. Up to now anyone joining via PayPal using the one-year basic rate of £18.00 has a membership year which expires on the anniversary of joining. This gives our Membership Secretary an ongoing problem of having to check when each person's membership will expire, and then send them a reminder. This is really unsustainable, so we have discontinued the £18.00 PayPal option.

Our membership year will now run from 1 January for everyone except those using PayPal automatic payments. PayPal sends out a message if an automatic payment is missed, so Richard can easily get in touch to check that it was intentional (sometimes it is because someone has forgotten to update an expired card in the PayPal system).

We have also agreed that anyone who hasn't renewed by 30 April will be deemed to have lapsed their FoFNL membership and no further action will be taken.

David Start our Treasurer, makes this plea:

Please may I encourage members to renew promptly and to avoid the use of cheques where practicable [there is a 50p bank charge for cashing them].

JUNE BLOCKADE

Network Rail has announced another three-week blockade of the Far North Line to allow track renewal and refurbishment. The commitment to major work on the line is of course excellent news.

Last year we fully understood why NR chose June to do this kind of work, whilst being disappointed that it meant closing the line in the tourist season. We're not so sure now that doing it three years running (although 2027's blockade will be in May) is the most sensible plan. Especially at the same time as parallel bus journeys now cost a maximum of £2.00.

Unfortunately for us we didn't learn about it in time to move our AGM & Conference to a different date.

BOOK PROJECT

Many thanks to everyone who responded to the request for photographs for the planned 'Far North' railway book. As a result we now have some good additional sources of images from the 1960s and more recent times. However we still need more good quality images of service trains, plus freight and other workings from the 1970s and 1980s. So if you have some and would like to see them in print, please get in touch.

ALTNABREAC UPDATE

An article by Philip Murray in the Highland News & Media newspapers on 16 March brought us up to date with the legal proceedings against Ian Appleby and Elizabeth Howe who live in Station House. Their trial in Wick Sheriff Court is set for 23 June. They are representing themselves against the charge of acting "culpably and recklessly and to the danger of themselves, passengers and train staff" when they crossed level crossing barriers into the path of an approaching train on 1 March 2024. They are also accused of shouting, swearing, making abusive comments towards two police constables, and struggling with them.

As part of the process an intermediate diet was set to take place in court on 15 April to allow them

to view about 2½ hours of video evidence collected by the crown. Twenty minutes before the hearing was due to commence court officials received an email from Mr Appleby informing them that his car had broken down near Halkirk and they would not be able to attend. In the email he said that Elizabeth Howe was requesting an intermediate diet to be set in early June.

Sheriff Philip Mann suggested that Appleby and Howe were using “delaying tactics”.

In March the defendants had unsuccessfully tried to have the proceedings against them “deserted” on the grounds of “oppression”.

NATIONAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY DELIVERY PLAN

Transport Scotland published this year's update to the National Transport Strategy - the Fifth delivery Plan - on 18 March.

To be fair, this is a strategy document, not a detailed list of forthcoming works. However, it's disappointingly thin on rail, even in the supporting documents, such as the *Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline*, from which these excerpts are taken.

Introduction:

- £1.2 billion investment in the period renewing our rail fleet
- investing £519 million to deliver rail electrification in Fife and the Borders over the course of the Spending Review period

Annex A – Infrastructure Delivery Pipeline:

- Rail Services Improvement and Decarbonisation programme
- Borders Railway electrification and Fife electrification (Including Suburban Fleet Replacement and Dundee – Arbroath enhancements)
- Intercity fleet replacement and rail enhancement projects

Annex B – Development and Future Pipelines

A. Development Pipeline:

- Rail services improvement and decarbonisation programme
- Rural rail renewal project (incl. Highland Mainline)

B. Future Pipeline:

- local road or rail improvements to support the delivery and operation of the renewables energy sector

From our Highlands’ railways perspective this is quite alarming as well as disappointing. It does show that our pamphlet being sent to all MSPs after the 7 May election is essential to try and make them look beyond the areas of greatest population and meet the Scottish Government’s obligation to work for the whole of Scotland.

UK WORLD HERITAGE SITES MAP

We are looking forward to the imminent publication of the revised map to include the Forsinard UNESCO World Heritage Site.

In a FoFNL initiative the design and production costs for this are being met by funding from ourselves, the Flow Country Partnership, Venture North and the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership.

09:15 THRESHOLD HELD

After a false start ScotRail's abolition of peak fares arrived triumphantly in September 2025. A sigh of relief from all who considered that peak fares had become an anachronism since Covid had permanently reshaped many workers' travel needs.

Excellent news! - now we'll be able to make long journeys in a day at those quiet times of the year when Club50 offers flat-rate return tickets for £19, as well as the rest of the year, when you get a 20% discount. Tourists who purchase a *Spirit of Scotland* travel pass, allowing the freedom of ScotRail for four days in a period of eight, and eight days in a period of fifteen will be able to do meaningful long trips, setting off nice and early to really get to see what Scotland has to offer.

But no. These tickets, along with any other special offers, continue with the rule that you can only board a train which departs after 09:15, which often means mid-morning, or even after midday.

On the face of it, that's not too much of a problem. Anyone purchasing a *Spirit of Scotland* pass might, if they did read the small print, think "That's OK, we'll have a leisurely breakfast, say 7.30/8.00, then pop round to the station and get a train around 9.30."

If they hadn't thought to check the timetables before paying for the ticket they probably wouldn't have guessed the truth about what this means:

| Earliest Possible Travel Times | | |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|------------------------|
| | No restriction | With 09:15 restriction |
| EDB/GLQ-INV | 06:33/07:07-10:29 | 09:39/10:08-13:25 |
| INV-EDB/GLQ | 05:35-08:56/09:21 | 09:42-13:14/13:21 |
| ABD-INV | 06:14-08:26 | 10:08-12:24 |
| INV-ABD | 04:54-07:06 | 10:56-13:09 |
| INV-WCK | 07:00-11:31 | 10:41-14:56 |
| WCK-INV | 06:18-10:39 | 12:34-17:08 |
| INV-KYL | 08:55-11:31 | 10:56-13:35 |
| KYL-INV | 05:45-08:29 | 12:06-14:42 |
| GLQ-OBN | 05:20-08:35 | 10:36-13:43 |
| OBN-GLQ | 05:17-08:42 | 12:11-15:34 |
| GLQ-MLG | 08:22-13:40 | 12:22-17:43 |
| MLG-GLQ | 06:03-11:33 | 10:09-15:34 |

This table shows the *earliest* times intrepid travellers could opt for, if they wanted to fit in as much as possible in one day. There are often later trains which also depart before 09:15.

Have a close look at the table. Suffice to say, if you were caught out you'd not be best pleased. There would be nothing you could do about it. You would wish you'd noticed the restriction before purchase - had you done so you might well not have bought the pass or joined Club50 in the first place.

We've taken this up with ScotRail and Transport Scotland, both being adamant that this will not change because of the risk of crowds of passengers with luggage clogging up rush-hour trains. This is odd because the rush hour crowding is much reduced since Covid, and even before, it would only have applied to passengers arriving in Central Belt stations. This seems a weak, and rather perverse argument. Surely, if this really is such a major risk, local exclusions could be established. It's hard to imagine that tourists boarding the 06:18 from Wick are ever likely to cause overcrowding. To make them wait until 12:34 seems extraordinary. We asked how many such tickets and passes are currently sold, but the

information was not available.

This self-inflicted reputational damage to the railway seems particularly pointless and unfriendly, and some travellers may end up feeling they have been conned.

I.B.

HARE-BRAINED IN MARCH

We have to confess - the announcement in March of a £2 fare cap on all bus journeys within the Highland Council area rather took our breath away.

Whilst we obviously understand the wish to make travel by public transport more affordable, we simply cannot see the logic behind doing it this way.

The plan is for this to be a one-year pilot, costing £10m. There are four worrying aspects:

- Politically it would be very difficult for the Scottish Government to scrap, or significantly raise, the £2 cap in future
- The £10m quoted may not include the loss of rail income - we have asked, and are awaiting a reply from, Transport Scotland's Bus Team
- If the scheme proves very popular there may be cases of passengers, who've ventured far from home or hotel, who discover that there is simply no space on the return bus of their choice - which may be the last of the day - presumably paid-for taxis will be available to cover this eventuality
- If half of the cruise passengers who disembark at Invergordon in one year were to book a return to Inverness it might cost the government around £800,000 in subsidy

This has all the hallmarks of a political decision, rather than a carefully worked-out transport policy. Capital investment projects require a 'business case' to be made, so it would be interesting to see the financial case for the £2 cap, including both reimbursements to bus companies and reduced rail ticket income. One would hope that it would not contain any trickery, such as the £420m "driver frustration" figure which was offset against the A9 dualling budget to get it past an otherwise impossible business case in 2016.

The government's reimbursement rate to the bus companies, per £2 ticket sold, is not published. However, we do know the figures for the three schemes already in place:

| Scottish Government Per-Ticket-Sold Reimbursement Percentage | |
|--|-------|
| 5-15 | 47.9% |
| 16-22 | 72.4% |
| Over 60 | 52.9% |

A reasonable guess would be a rate in the 45-55% range. Rail campaigners have never understood why the government has taken an all-or-nothing approach to this issue. Free, or

very cheap, bus travel artificially distorts the balance between bus and rail. It must be in the interest of the Scottish Government policy of modal shift from road to rail to have a system which spreads the benefits of cheap/free travel across the two modes, rather than encouraging 'reverse modal shift'.

Add to the **£10m+** cost of this new scheme the **£200m** the government has recently spent purchasing electric buses, and charging infrastructure, for the privately owned bus companies, and we see a high level of investment, much of which will be used by long-distance bus operators to compete for rail traffic. Is this really the best way to manage the public transport system?

As rail campaigners we are, of course, not 'anti bus' in any way. Buses are vital to link in to the rail network and to extend public transport to areas with no railway. However, allocating money which will cause a deleterious effect on the railway's finances seems counter-intuitive to say the least.

HIGH ENDORSEMENT

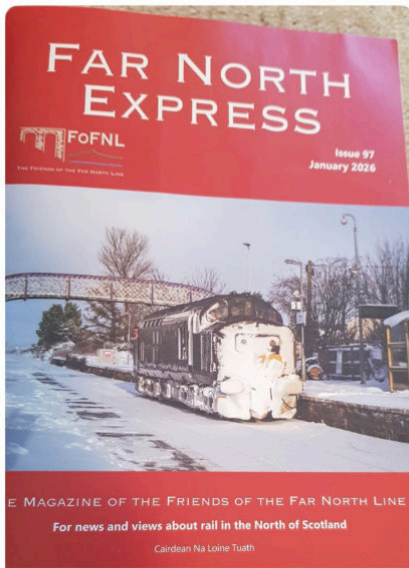
Contrasting with the decidedly chilly feel to the front cover of our January magazine, a nice warm feeling engulfed your editor on receiving these screen shots of two highly-respected railway luminaries' comments on X, on receiving their complimentary copies.



Roger Ford
@Captain_Deltic

X.com

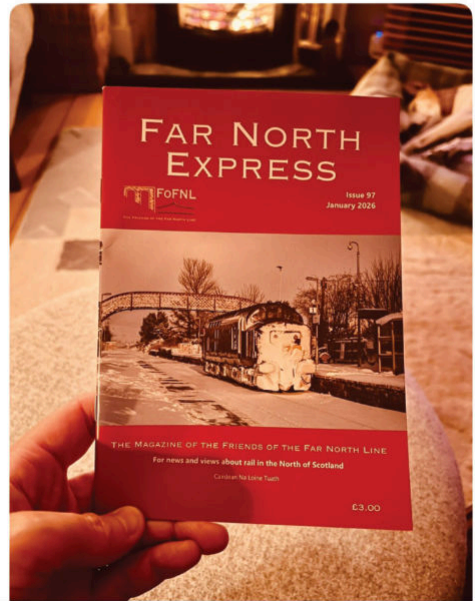
Not just a great cover, but inside Ian Budd does a brilliant job on skewering what he calls the GBR conundrum - GBR's relationship with an integrated railway in Scotland.



Alex Hynes
@AlexHynes

X.com

Time to catch up with news from the Far North Line, whilst still recovering from the Traitors final!



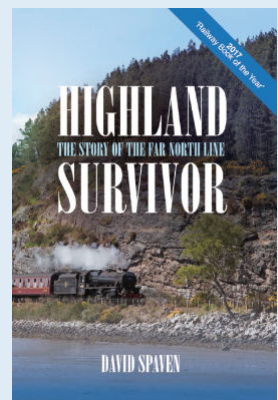
PRICE REDUCTION

As happens with all books, David Spaven's wonderful story of the Far North Line, which has become our quick-reference 'bible', has reached the end of its publisher's support.

Keen for as many people as possible to get hold of the book, David and the FoFNL Committee have agreed for us to stock the remaining copies, and sell them from our website at a figure which just exceeds postage and packing costs - £5.00.



We're sure that many will jump at this chance. Given that this is a history book, its contents will not be superseded - only future news will be missing.



MOBILE-FRIENDLY!

Our website has a very large number of pages.

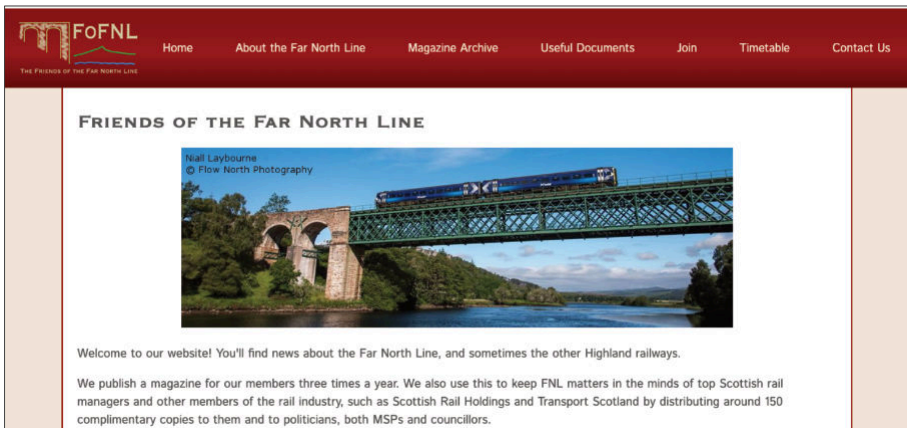
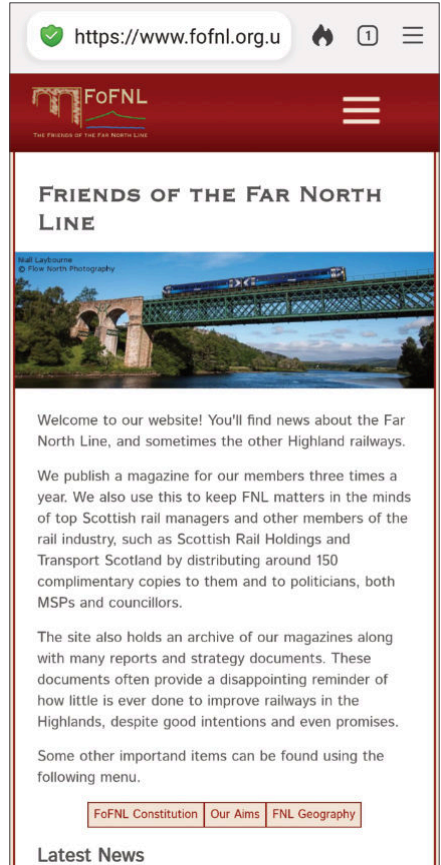
This is one reason why we still haven't made it 'mobile friendly'. Plans are afoot to remedy this, and as part of the process the January *Far North Express* archived on the site is a pdf file, which you can download, or read in a web browser. All future issues will be available in that format, which dramatically reduces the amount of work needed to include them in the magazine archive. In time, the remaining 84 back issues will be converted. As you can imagine, this is a long-term project!

The main menu will be available on a mobile phone [right] by tapping the 'hamburger menu' on the right-hand end of the red header bar.

On a computer the same page will appear as below, with a list of menu items in words, instead of the 'hamburger menu'.

The coding for this is known as "Responsive Web Design" as it automatically detects the screen size and proportions and makes the content fit. The web designer has to choose the various parameters for each range of screen widths using a feature called "media queries". This information is stored in a master 'styles' file on the site and the browser you are using to look at the website will obey the rules held in that file and display accordingly (I hope!)

Ian Budd



JOIN IN!

*A new project recording characteristic artefacts at mainline railway stations is looking for your help - and anyone can take part. Transport writer **Daniel Wright** introduces the idea.*

A *Mainline Station Heritage Artefacts Collection* is an online catalogue of the things which give each of Britain's railway stations their own unique character.

At the moment, the rail industry has no complete record of such features at railway stations, and they have little protection, despite their historic or cultural importance to stations and the wider communities around them.

Heritage artefacts are the smaller items which give stations their local character and tell their story, and often that of the wider rail industry. They're appreciated by regular users and visitors, even though they might not be of enormous financial value. They're permanent (or at least, intended to be permanent...), they're not architecture, and they're things it would be sad to lose if they were removed.

In the days when the railways had a common carrier obligation which obliged them to accept any goods presented for transport, most stations had a weighbridge or weighing machine. There's a weighing machine in the booking hall at Thurso, but there are reckoned to be only around 20 weighbridges surviving across the rail network.

Other artefacts which sometimes survive, albeit not always formally recorded anywhere, include drinking water fountains, clocks, datestones, commemorative plaques, original light fittings, vintage signage, boundary stones, gates and fencing, fireplaces and original seating.

British Rail went through a phase of ruthlessly rationalising many stations from the 1960s onwards, leaving many of them without any historic features at all. But even at these locations, modern artefacts have been installed, which will one day become historic items too. Murals, history boards, commemorative plaques, sculptures, Sustrans Millennium Mileposts and the like are just as important to record, raising awareness and helping protect them in future. On the Far North Line, there is no reason the Jellicoe Express history panels, for instance, shouldn't have a long life and become part of the cultural story of the stations they're found at.

Unfortunately, the lack of a



Pooley weighing machine, Thurso Station

Photo: John Yellowlees



Sustrans National Cycle Network route marker



Plaque commemorating the Duke of Sutherland's Railway, on the bridge abutment at Golspie Station

Photo: John Yellowlees

comprehensive register of artefacts at stations leaves them at risk of being accidentally removed. A *Mainline Station Heritage Artefacts Collection* addresses this by using the power of local experts, who can submit photographs and information about the artefacts at their local stations, or stations they have visited.

Some Far North Line stations are already on the website, though their records might not necessarily be complete at the moment. It would be wonderful to record all the stations on the Far North Line in full - I would love to hear from you. Even if there are no heritage artefacts at a station, that's useful to know too. It's not just the Far North Line either; findings for any other station that readers know of on the national rail network would be welcome too.

Full instructions on how to submit photos and information are at www.stationheritageartefacts.org.uk/join-in but if you just want to marvel at the variety of artefacts that have already been found (around 20% of stations on the national rail network already have full or partial records), head over to www.stationheritageartefacts.org.uk

Daniel Wright

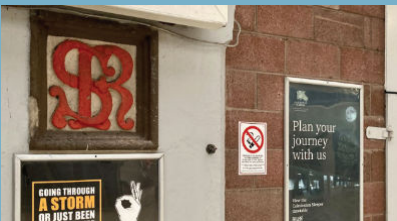


Tain Station plaque commemorating 2015 restoration.

Photo: John Yellowlees



Drinking water fountain, Nairn



Sutherland Railway monogram, Inverness Station

Uncredited photos by Daniel Wright



Highland Railway crest, Inverness Station platform 4

Photo: Fiona Sanderson

THE FAR, FAR NORTH IN WINTER



Photos: Rob James

Having travelled the length of the Far North Line several times over the years, (including three trips to Altnabreac) each in the summer, I always had a desire to travel the northern part of the line in the depth of winter. My wife is not keen on cold, dark days so this was a trip I was going to have to undertake on my own when a suitable occasion arose. I was fortunate to be able to take early retirement during the summer of 2024 and that provided the opportunity at last to plan my winter visit. The winter of 24/25 was too full of other things, so last autumn I made my plans and booked my winter excursion.

FoFNL member Rob James achieved a long-held ambition in January - venturing north from the far south!

I live in Hampshire on the south coast of England, so travelling on the Far North line is always a bit of an expedition. More so on this occasion as at the last minute I had to postpone my trip by 7 days due to the heavy snow that hit the north of Scotland during the

first week of January.

For the first time I had booked myself a Club En-suite room on the Caledonian Sleeper from Euston to Inverness (highly recommended), where, after a visit to some friends near Inverness Airport for a late breakfast, I collected my hire car and drove north to Thurso.

I left Inverness in torrential rain which persisted until just before the Cromarty Bridge, after that it was dry but grey with plenty of snow on the ground from the previous week's blizzards. As I headed further north, I passed several minor roads that were still covered with snow and ice. I was booked into the Thurso member of a well-known national hotel chain, which had the advantage of giving me a fantastic view of comings and goings at the station. More on that later.

This far north, daylight is in short supply, so I knew that I would only be able to enjoy the scenery on one leg of my journey. My main objective was to travel the section from Georgemas to Helmsdale, my favourite railway trip. I booked myself onto the 13:06 from Thurso which would provide a daylight trip across the wild and snowy Flow Country. I booked through to Golspie mainly because that minimised the amount of time I would be waiting for a return train north. Nearly every tourist facility is shut at this time of year, so I knew filling more than a couple of hours was going to be challenging.

On the train's arrival at Thurso there were ten people on board, and ten of us joined. We headed off on time on the first leg of the journey to Forsinard where we were scheduled to pass the 10:59 ex-Inverness. Beyond Scotsalder, as we headed into the Flow Country proper, there was a lot of snow on the ground and every loch was frozen. We raced through Altnabreac without intervention from the locals and arrived at Forsinard on time. The down train was already waiting and by my quick count through the window had eight passengers on board as it departed. I spotted a couple of cars parked

up in the snow-covered car park of what was the Forsinard Hotel and is now some kind of self-service accommodation, so I wasn't the only tourist this far north.

Upon leaving Forsinard there were several stags rummaging in the snow by the roadside. Later on I just managed to spot an eagle landing on a fence post, and several large groups of deer. I don't quite know why the Far North is seen as inferior to the Kyle and West Highland lines - it really is stunning in places, and the snow and ice added to, rather than detracted from, the spectacle. Shortly after passing through Kildonan, it started to rain and continued to do so until we reached Helmsdale where as far as I could tell no-one joined or alighted. From Helmsdale, as you may know, the scenery changes, with the main interest being the run along the North Sea coast. It was cold and grey and very few cars passed on the adjacent A9.

My train about to leave me at Golspie



All too soon we arrived at Golspie where two people joined as I got off. I now had just under 90 minutes to wait until the train north. Sorry Golspie, but on a cold grey afternoon in January there isn't much to amuse the tourist! After making use of the local facilities and stocking up at the Co-op I took a walk along the seafront, which was pleasant enough even in the prevailing weather conditions.

I arrived back at the station just before 16:00 to find that the 16:10 was 6 minutes late departing Lairg. Still, it could have been worse, as there had been many cancellations during the previous week (not all weather-related). By the time the train arrived it was dark, so it wasn't possible to see much on the journey back to Thurso.

After having my ticket checked I was pleasantly surprised to find a refreshment trolley arrive beside my seat. After availing myself of the necessary tea and fruit cake I had a very pleasant conversation with the young stewardess. There were only two other passengers in the carriage with me and apparently only seven in the other carriage. The stewardess told me that January is the quietest month, but this year had been exceptionally quiet. Usually, numbers start improving from mid-February onwards. To prove the point about low numbers, when we passed the 16:00 ex-Wick at Forsinard there were only two passengers on board that service. It seemed a far cry from nearly 50 years ago when in January 1978 a north-bound service got stuck in blizzards near the County March Summit and 70 passengers had to be rescued.

We arrived in Thurso on time and eight of us alighted leaving two passengers and four crew to head on to Wick. Later that evening I saw the 22:23 from Inverness arrive at the station with one person alighting and one person travelling on to Wick. On a couple of mornings during my stay I observed the 08:34 depart from Thurso and both times there were fewer than five passengers on board. I was somewhat alarmed by the sparse use of the services. Hopefully it's not typical and was in some way connected to the awful weather the previous week. As it was, it would have been cheaper to put us all in a taxi!

In conclusion if you haven't ventured north during the winter then I can highly recommend doing so. I had four wonderful days with the sun shining on three of them. I plan to be a regular winter traveller. As a FoFNL member I need to play my part in boosting passenger numbers!

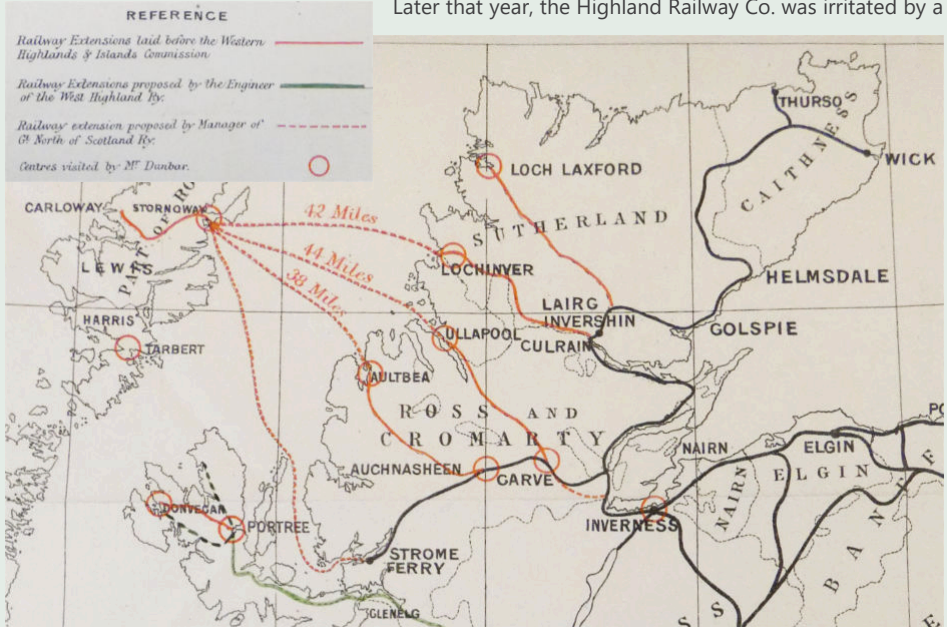
THE LOCHINVER RAILWAY : PART II

'Railway or Aerial Ropeway' - Andy Drummond

www

In the excitement occasioned by the Light Railways Act of 1896, the promoters of some of the rejected north-west lines put their heads once more above the parapet. In a letter and printed memorial sent to the Scottish Office in March 1896, Mr McLeod of Elphin told of 'a large meeting held in Elphin on Tuesday last', and cited the recommendations of the Walpole report. He also reported that the Highland Railway had offered to build and maintain a railway 38 miles long at a cost not exceeding £250,000, as long as Government guaranteed a dividend of 3% for 30 years. An attached petition held a hundred signatures. Similar missives arrived from Drumbeg and Assynt.

Later that year, the Highland Railway Co. was irritated by a



Sketch map prepared by W.C. Dunbar of the Scottish Office, 1892, showing all the proposed branch railways. Courtesy of the National Records of Scotland: AF67/201

letter from the Sutherlandshire County Council clerk asking about light railways from 'Invershin or Lairg to Lochinver or Loch Laxford'. That was a question deemed too indefinite to merit a reply. However, by March 1897 something clearly had happened: our Mr Gordon wrote to the Highland Railway, asking that the plans for the Lochinver line, prepared from a survey by Murdoch Paterson, should be sent to him. The Highland resolved instead to send Paterson himself to explain everything. Unfortunately, we do not know what was said, or what the plans contained; but this is perhaps the explanation for a 'sum of £435 8s 5d in connection with the proposed Lochinver Line', which appeared in the Highland Railway Board's minutes for October 1894.

And with that attempt, despite a plausible survey, a brief flicker of life died once more.

And still all was not lost. In 1918, the Westminster government, correctly fearing that there would be radical discontent among Scottish soldiers and sailors returning from the war, sent out the 'Rural Transport (Scotland) Committee (RTS), led by Sir Carlaw Martin, to analyse the Scottish transportation

infrastructure and to make recommendations for improvement. And they did a fine job; their report was published in April 1919. All options on land and sea had been explored. And among these, hope was breathed into the corpse of the Lochinver scheme. A railway, 40 miles long – and this time passing from Ledmore northwards to Inchnadamph and Loch Assynt – ‘would, in the course of a few years, save the fishermen a sum in excess of its capital value ... [and] would develop the intervening territory.’ Indeed, it featured in the seventeen new railway schemes which the Committee proposed across Scotland, alongside one for Ullapool; both were to be standard gauge lines, and both were to improve the movement of fish, people and goods.

As a result of the RTS report, local campaigns sprang into action all across Scotland. Throughout the next two years, numerous letters were sent down to London, in the hope that the RTS report meant what it said. They were to be sadly disappointed. In the immediate post-war economic and political unrest, the Westminster government had far more pressing things to consider. Ominously, a new Ministry of Transport was established in August 1919, and from that point onwards, transportation options in Britain were increasingly focussed on new roads.

But, without the hindsight of history, the campaigners did what they could. It must be said, however, that the Lochinver scheme was not well-served by its spokespersons. The Secretary for Scotland had established the ‘Edinburgh Standing Conference’ in the summer of 1920, with a brief to examine ‘schemes for the development of inland transport in Scotland’; this, yet another committee, was a likely clue that the RTS report was never going to be implemented. A flurry of letters then passed between civil servants, and between civil servants and local authorities. One of the former set revealed that Sir Leicester Harmsworth, Liberal MP for Caithness (and brother of two newspaper magnates), was taking a lively interest in the Lochinver line; the civil servants needed to be seen doing something. A questionnaire was created to gather information about what was needed and why, and was sent out to the hopeful local authorities. Several reminders were sent from Edinburgh to Mr Argo, the beleaguered County Clerk in Golspie; but Argo’s colleague, Mr Fearnside of the Sutherlandshire District Agricultural Executive Committee in Thurso, refused to fill out any questionnaires, asserting – boldly, correctly, but unhelpfully – that all the information was contained in the 1919 RTS report. While Fearnside fumed and sent lengthy telegrams of complaint to Edinburgh, other information was slowly being gathered. This included statistics from the Highland Railway, on traffic through Culrain (in 1919, there had been 2,610 passengers, 2,800 tons of freight, 2,580 items of livestock).

At length, Fearnside (or, more exactly, Mr Argo) sent in the requested answers. To the critical question ‘Nature of Requirements’, the answer was: ‘(a) Standard Gauge Light Railway or (b) 2’ 0” or 3’ 0” Gauge Light Railway. (c) Road Service. (d) Aerial ropeway or other special transit.’ The last item is puzzling – and quite plausibly a bitter joke from someone expecting no positive result from the ‘Edinburgh Conference’. Attached to the questionnaire were four pages of justification, lifted bodily from the RTS report; this indicated that the route from Ledmore to Lochinver was now to follow the road.

But that, not surprisingly, was that. Nothing more happened.

Remarkably, five years later, it all kicked off once more. This time the pressure came, not from the north, but from south-east England. A series of letters arrived at Whitehall in the summer of 1925. They were sent by an unlikely correspondent, Jeremiah MacVeagh, one-time Irish nationalist MP for South Down. Since 1922, MacVeagh had been out of Parliament, having lost his seat and having failed in attempts to be elected either as Labour MP for Sunderland, or to the Irish Senate. What was his interest in an obscure Scottish railway? We only know that he held directorships



**Jeremiah MacVeagh MP, 1920s
champion of the Lochinver line
(1898)**

Photo: Benjamin Stone, Courtesy of the
National Portrait Gallery


in at least four railways, the Dublin & South Eastern, the North Devon & Cornwall Junction, the Shropshire & Montgomeryshire and the Kent & East Sussex; and that he had spoken passionately in 1921 in the House of Commons about light railways. He had teamed up with none other than Colonel Holman Stephens, the famed light railway engineer and operator. Stephens had put together some estimates for a light railway capable of transporting people, fish, coal and quarried stone to and from Lochinver. (The stone references the considerable output from the quarries at Ledmore, including famed "Ledmore Marble".) Stephens calculated that the annual income on the line would reach £60,000, with running expenses of £45,000, and a government capital loan would be needed for construction.

Sir John Gilmour, the Scottish Secretary met MacVeagh and Stephens in June 1925; also in attendance was a representative from the LMS, which had absorbed the Highland in the 'Grouping' of 1923, who provided sympathy, advice and no financial offers; subsequently Gilmour expressed himself 'afraid there is little or no hope of this scheme being adopted in view especially of the heavy charge on the Exchequer which it would involve'. The Lochinver proposal died, for the fourth time.

And yet still they came... in the summer of 1929, the Lochinver proposal raised its head again. MacVeagh took encouragement from the election of a Labour government in May 1929. He put pen to paper, both to 'my dear Thomas' (Jimmy Thomas, erstwhile railway worker, now Labour MP and Lord Privy Seal) and to 'my dear Adamson' (William Adamson, ex-miner and now Secretary for Scotland), congratulating them on their return to power, and pressing on them the merits of the Lochinver line, stressing all the while that his intervention was purely 'in the national interest'. A Whitehall memorandum was duly ordered and prepared; its introduction suggests some confusion on Scottish geography, since it described a light railway 'along the Oykel Valley from Invershin to Lochinver (or Culrain)'. (A later memo in the same archive talks of the 'Invershin to Lochinver (Culrain) Railway proposal' – which did not clarify matters.) The memo reprised all the old arguments and refusals, but suggested that there was now scope for re-considering the scheme as a measure to relieve chronic unemployment. The document was commented on by other civil servants, and slowly passed up the chain, until it landed on the desk of the Lord Privy Seal. How bitter must have been MacVeagh's disappointment to receive a reply from Adamson to the effect that 'the Government are carefully considering at the present time what steps can usefully be taken to increase the prosperity of the Highlands of Scotland.'

By the end of 1929, it really was all over. Despite the best efforts of locals and entirely unlikely champions, no railway line would ever connect Lochinver to the Far North Line. It was a proposal which, at least between 1890 and 1920, had considerable merit; but the enormous growth in motorised road transport after 1918 tolled the end for railway schemes. It was a line which not only had much to recommend it, both in social and economic terms, but also for its scenery. How wonderful it might have been to sit in a small train as it passed below the precipitous slopes of Suilven.

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Loch Veyatie and Suilven from the south. The railway would have hugged the far shore of the loch.

Andy Drummond is not just an author concentrating on railways which might have been. He has written many books. If you visit his website - <https://www.andydrummond.net> - you will find an eclectic mix of fact and fiction, from elephants to travellers, international languages, historic biography and a story about golf courses...

His books are lined up at the top of the page, you click on each to investigate. Here is a screenshot of what you find when you click on his story of the railway which wasn't built to Ullapool. While you're there, if you find the idea of travelling to Ullapool, Lochinver, Aultbea, or Portree by rail appealing, you can hop on board one of the Highland Railway Company's services and do just that, without leaving your armchair - just click on the big button!

The screenshot shows the website's navigation menu at the top, followed by a banner for the book "A Quite Impossible Proposal". Below the banner is the title "How Not to Build a Railway." and a book cover image. The main text describes the book's content, focusing on the railway project in north-west Scotland. At the bottom, there is a red navigation bar with station names and a button that says "Plan your journey - buy tickets!".

This short extract from Andy's website gives you a flavour of what you'll find there:

Blurbs...and honesty?

I saw in the shops the paperback edition of [redacted]

This is not the place to put forward my view of the book - we authors should stick together, even if we are appalled by each other's works. Suffice it to say that I was much astonished and greatly amused to read on the back of this edition an extract from a review from *The Observer*: 'Wildly imaginative...It's bound to be an international bestseller.'

Great blurb.

The only problem is that the original review in *The Observer* read as follows: '...undoubtedly a **wildly imaginative** collage of stories, but it is almost certainly one of the worst pieces of writing you will come across this year.... A truly pedestrian effort that would have benefited from some serious editorial debridement. **It's bound to be an international bestseller.**'

It does make you wonder, doesn't it? Or am I just naïve? (Don't answer that).

Well worth a visit!

ON THE MAP

www

Andy Drummond's article in the January 2026 edition of *Far North Express* caught my attention, because when we were researching the history of the Cromarty and Dingwall Light Railway for the History of Culbokie group we too experienced a conundrum regarding Bartholomew's maps. See the story in the September 2016 issue of *FNE*.

When the History of Culbokie project was started, an early decision was taken that it would be web-based. We anticipated that we would be receiving regular updates on our research that would be regularly publicised, as has happened with this subject. Sufficient material was available for research, but a search at the time, of available maps on the web, suggested that no organisation had ever produced a map with even the route of the proposed line shown. This was a disappointment as a picture is worth a thousand words, or so they say.

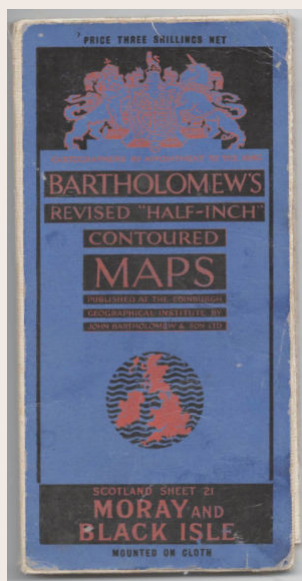
Imagine the delight the team felt when quite by chance we were donated a *Bartholomew's Revised "Half-Inch" Contoured Map - Scotland - Sheet 21, Moray and Black Isle* on which the route of line was clearly marked including the location of the stations.

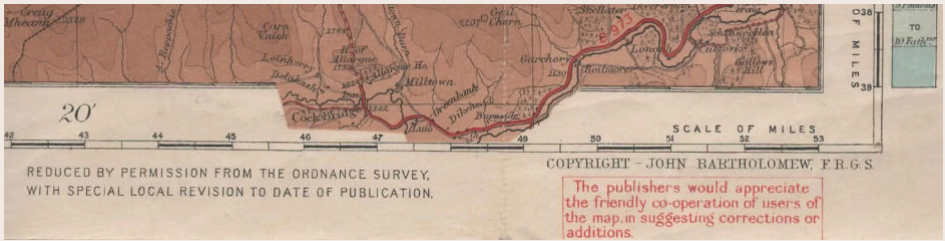
Now, this was clearly misleading as sufficient published articles on the line clearly demonstrated that the line was never finished, that construction didn't get anywhere near Conon Bridge/Dingwall and those few pieces of completed construction were rapidly disappearing. Moving on 10 years or so at an Open Day of historical artefacts from the Culbokie area, an enthusiastic archaeologist, well used to working with maps, enquired as to why we had placed so much significance on displaying our map. On learning the background to its uniqueness it was too much of an incentive to find why the map existed and this is the story of the background to the map.

On approaching Chris Fleet of the National Library of Scotland (NLS) Map Section the following was learnt about the background to our map which was published in 1925 between July and December.

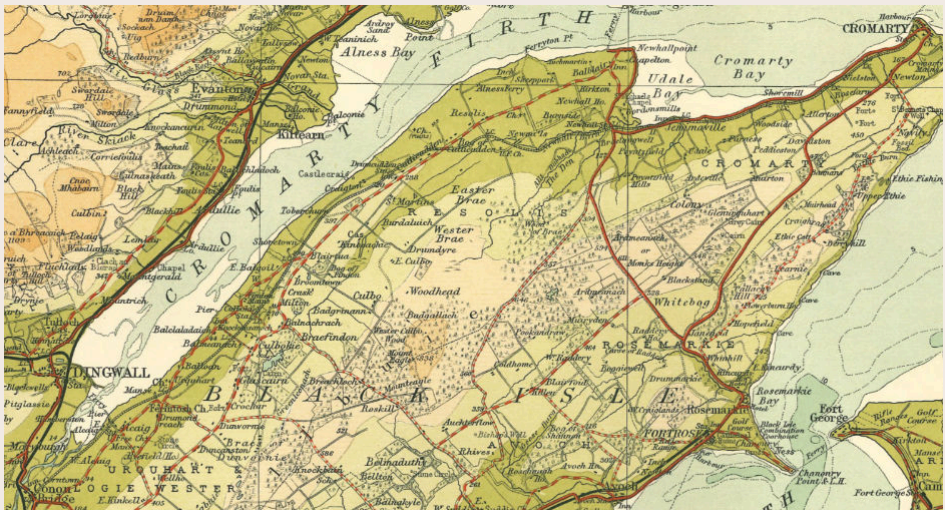
Bartholomew gathered their information from quite a range of sources and they never did any direct surveying, so it would be interesting to know how they came to show this line when it clearly was not completed. Many commercial map-makers did anticipate developments however, Bartholomew and Ordnance Survey didn't. There were editions of the Bartholomew Sheet 21 Inverness & Spey in 1909, 1912, 1918, and 1921. They had renamed Sheet 21 to 'Moray and the Black Isle' for our 1925 edition. The next edition was in 1931. The Line first appeared on these maps in 1912, remained on following editions, when in 1931 it was removed.

Basically Bartholomew were desk based cartographers, compiling their information as best they could from others. There were no surveyors or teams of people who actually went out and about into the landscape like Ordnance Survey and recorded information directly. What Bartholomew did was primarily to base their mapping on Ordnance Survey's one-inch to the mile maps, reducing these down to the half-inch to the mile scale, and adding their layer colours, etc. and some other details. They then took information from whoever they could. Sometimes this involved sending their maps with accompanying letters to county councils, town councils, or road surveyors based in councils, and asking them to let them know of errors or omissions. Bartholomew also solicited information on errors and corrections from their map purchasers, and entered into formal arrangements with





recreational groups. For example, from the late 1890s, Bartholomew entered into an agreement with the Cyclists' Touring Club, whereby Bartholomew supplied them with discounted copies of their half-inch maps in return for CTC members writing in with corrections.



Bartholomew 1912 half inch to the mile, showing the line as 'ladder'.

Ordnance Survey only surveyed the Black Isle at the basic large scales in ca. 1904 and again in the 1960s. At one inch to the mile, which was always less comprehensive, the main editions had revisions in 1896 and 1909. Bartholomew would have seen these maps, and neither of the OS maps show the Light Railway, so presumably Bartholomew must have been given details of its planned route from somewhere else. The next OS One-Inch map was revised in 1926-27, again without the Light Railway. Presumably once Bartholomew saw this, the penny dropped, and they were able to then correct their map. Unfortunately, so it seems, no member of the public or CTC wrote in to point out that the railway shouldn't have been there during this time – one of the problems of 'crowdsourcing' map revision information.

So it is not thought that this is Bartholomew wrongly anticipating a new development, so much as being informed from someone that the railway had been constructed, when it hadn't.

Roger Piercy

When placing this article in FNE I felt drawn in to do a bit more research and I also ended up in an email conversation with Chris Fleet from the National Library of Scotland, at the suggestion of Collins, the book publishers, who publish map data under the Collins Bartholomew name as a result of the 1989 merger of the two companies.

Chris added an additional thought to that quoted by Roger:

"...it does seem as if Bartholomew were in the bad habit of anticipating future railways elsewhere too. In their 1895 Survey Atlas of Scotland, Bartholomew showed in solid black (ie. as complete) the railway from Strome Ferry to Kyle of Lochalsh (opened in 1897) and the line between Carr Bridge and Inverness (opened 1898). The 1895 Survey Atlas also includes details of a railway between Culrain and Lochinver, which was proposed before 1892, but effectively not taken forward. I have been told from another user, that it seems that the plans for the railway were firmly rejected by 1893, but that one of the informants to the Survey Atlas, James Gordon, Factor to the Duke of Sutherland, may have even suggested this route as a spoiler! His idea is that could even have been submitted as disinformation to ensure that the plan which the Duke of Sutherland really didn't want to proceed, a railway from Lairg through the Reay Forest to Laxford, was not revived."



Bartholomew's 10 miles to an inch road and railway map, 1920

On the NLS website I found a 1920 map, which shows the Cromarty and Dingwall Railway as a solid black line.

Further enquiry with Andy Drummond (whose article in our last issue inspired this) elicited a quote he received from a correspondent, which may go some way towards explaining why the 1920 map still showed the railway: "The black lines for these maps were engraved, while the colouring was entirely lithographic."

The engraved plates were probably the more expensive items to alter, or replace. Close examination of the different maps shows intriguing differences between the 10 miles to 1 inch map, where railways are shown crossing over all the roads, whereas on the half inch to the mile maps, if the road crosses over the railway, it's shown that way.

Although the track laid before WWI was lifted, some being sent to Orkney, evidence on the ground



remains if you know where to look. This bridge over a filled-in cutting under the B9163 at Cullicudden, west of Resolis Primary School, has been there over 100 years, the steel girders still visible (Photo: Philip Murray, HNM)

Ian Budd

MEANWHILE, ON THE...

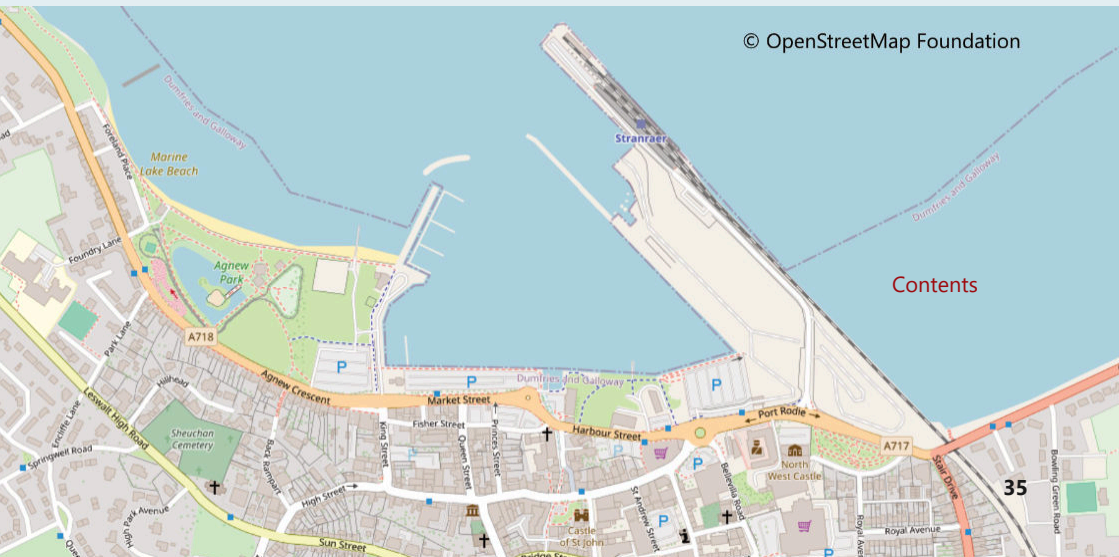


...FAR SOUTH LINE

Photo: Mike Wedgewood

Last year the **Branch Line Society's** raitour *Because We Can 3* visited the Far North Line. This year's *BWC 4* ran on 19 to 23 March, a five day tour originating in Peterborough and visiting Dundee and Stranraer, with many branch lines and loops being traversed in between. On 20 March Europhoenix's 37423 *Perseus* and 37611 *Pegasus* are seen in Mike's photo departing from Stranraer with the 15:58 to Largs. The tour ran close to time throughout the five days, a tribute to the locomotives and all the staff involved.

Looking at the map, it's easy to see why there are calls to build a new station nearer the town. The Larne ferry service moved up the coast to Cairnryan in 2011, leaving the station at the far end of a deserted, derelict car park. Transport Scotland has funded a Network Rail feasibility study, but has given no commitment so far.



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FAR NORTH SPRING...



Photographer **Peter Moore** is well-known to FNE readers. This month's covers feature three excellent photos he took last spring.

[Above] Running slightly late on 15 May 2025, southbound 158725 east of the site of Loth Station. The backdrop of gorse (or is it broom?) is the classic character of Scotland in May.

[Below] 'Black Five' 45407 *The Lancashire Fusilier* heads the Great Britain XVII tour south of Lairg on 1 May 2025. It's not often that you see a train from London Victoria on the Far North Line!

...WITH PETER MOORE

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