Far North Express

FoFNL

The Friends of the Far North Line

Issue 99
September 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

Contents

Headcode	3	Timber Rail Fail	18
Magnificent Machine	3	Bridge Strikes	19
AGM & Conference	4	Transform Scotland - Fleet Investment	20
Class 222	10	Class 158 Enhancement Programme	21
Pandora	11	Parliamentary Questions	22
Bridge Keeper	11	The Far, Far North in Winter - Prequel	25
The £2 Bus fare Cap	12	All Aboard to Northampton	26
Carbisdale Castle Bought	13	Green Signals	29
App Disaster	14	The Shaping of the Far North Line *	30
Letters	15	Musical Mountain	34
Growing Rail Freight	16	Book Review	35

** There is a subtle visual reference to something in this article somewhere in this edition of FNE - see if you can spot it...*

www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne99.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: *WWW*

FoFNL Office Bearers

President:
Jamie Stone MP

Vice-Presidents:
Maree Todd MSP
Kristopher Leask MSP

Convener and Editor:
Ian Budd, *Bishopbriggs*

Hon. Secretary:
Ken Thomson, *Culloden*

Hon. Treasurer:
David Start, *Tonbridge*

Membership Secretary:
Richard Mansfield, *Inverness*

Committee Members:
Colin Alston, *Oban*
Iain MacDonald, *Alness*
Les Turner, *Inverness*
Neil Wallace, *Kiltarlity*

Articles in *Far North Express* are attributed, except for 'news' items, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the committee. Some columnists use a pseudonym.

Website: www.fofnl.org.uk
Facebook: www.facebook.com/fofnl
E-mail: editor@fofnl.org.uk

Editorial Address:
3 Villafield Loan,
Bishopbriggs,
Glasgow , G64 3NZ

Far North Express is published in January, May and September

Front cover: Class 37s 37516 and 37685 hauling a timber trial train across the Oykel Viaduct on15th August 2020. Photo: **Gary Lennon**

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

We always wish to be optimistic about railways in general and the Far North Line in particular, but at this moment that aim is being stretched. Our railway is currently battling headwinds which are nothing to do with weather.

Blockade

This June saw the second three-week blockade of the line in the tourist season. Of course we understand the attraction for Network Rail of doing this extensive work under the best possible conditions of weather and daylight, but three weeks represents a nearly six percent pro rata cut in annual passenger numbers, probably quite a lot more, because June is also a time when casual travellers might well think of sampling the line, enjoying the generous daylight.

We hope that next year's blockade, currently planned for May, will be rescheduled.

Bus Fare Cap

Then there is the extraordinary decision to cap all Highland bus fares, regardless of length, to £2.00, discussed in detail on page 12..

158 Failures

As if this is not enough, we are seeing regular cancellations due to failing Class 158 units. The Scottish Government currently expects us to wait until at least 2035 for replacement units - this caused by its naïve determination to remove all fossil fuel traction from the railway, in spite of rail's contribution to CO_2 emissions in Scotland being microscopic compared with those of road vehicles.

Illness

And finally, the Far North Line is struggling with a surprisingly unhealthy work force, causing a significant number of cancellations - this in spite of the fact that contractual cover exists - not much use if the staff member covering is also ill.

Fortunately the Far North Line itself is a wonderful asset, although if serious steps are not taken to cure all the current problems we can expect to see passenger numbers dwindle.

Ian Budd

Magnificent Machine

www

Balfour Beatty's New Track Construction (NTC) unit was put to good use on the FNL in June, replacing 4km of track between Tain and Ardgay at an amazing rate of around 1km per day. Work carried out also included bridge work, line drainage and repairing the troublesome Rogart crossing.

Balfour Beatty NTC unit working during the FNL 2026 blockade.

Screenshot from Network Rail video.

AGM & Conference 2026

www

Our 2026 AGM & Conference in Beauly on Friday 19 June was a most enjoyable occasion. It was great to see an attendance of nearly 30, including, as always, several from the "Far South" (e.g. Portsmouth and Tonbridge). Fortunately the engineering blockade didn't seem to affect the numbers too much.

Once the AGM business was completed, the conference was opened by our President, Jamie Stone MP. Jamie, being a railway aficionado, is very supportive of FoFNL and our aims, and mentioned that he will endeavour to have copies of our magazine held in the House of Commons library.

Jamie covered various topics in his Welcome Remarks, including a possible autumn election, the process of setting up Great British Railways and how it will affect Scotland, and FNL problems with old rolling stock.

He expressed a hope that, with new ministers in charge of railways in Scotland, and probably the UK, progress would be made on getting more freight off the roads and onto the railways.

We were lucky again this year to have three excellent guest speakers.

Graeme Cook, Director of Rail Delivery, Transport Scotland opened the conference with a talk entitled *Railway Policy – How It's Made with Ministers*. He described Scottish railway policy as basically "a conversation between politicians and civil servants". Using freight as an example he explained that politicians are aware that rail freight needs to grow, and that there is a Rail Freight Growth Target. The civil service (Transport Scotland) is then tasked to provide details and parameters. Discussions take place with potential rail freight users, and TS will offer options to present to the Cabinet Secretary.

Typically there will be three options submitted, ranging from 'easy' to 'bold', noting cost, risk and delivery. Ultimately it is for the Cabinet Secretary to decide which option to take.

The recent opening of West Fraser's freight terminal, to which the Scottish Government contributed £3m, is a good example of the process functioning.

Graeme noted that although rail freight in Scotland has increased, there are still loading gauge issues to address.

He also made a general point that the direct cost of rail provision is not the deciding factor for investment decisions. Even in the 1960s, when the FNL was threatened with closure, the Scottish Office looked at the wider picture, acknowledging local concerns, and ultimately made economies by closing some stations.

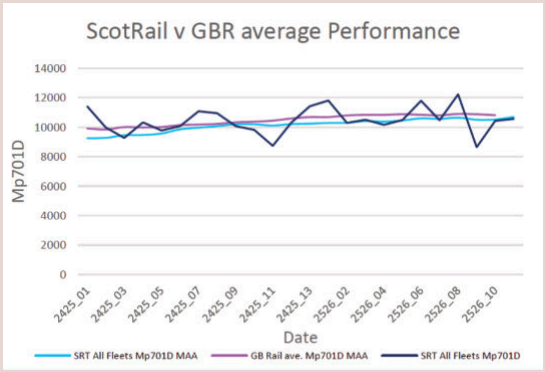
Our second speaker was Tom Smith, ScotRail's Head of Fleet Technical. Now that we know the Class 158s will be with us until 2037, when they will be around 47 years old, it was interesting to hear Tom's news about how they are faring.

He began by describing the main challenges faced by his team. He told us that ScotRail's fleet, which contains ten different types of unit, has an average age of 26 years, the second-oldest in the UK. In spite of this, a 4% improvement in performance year on year is being achieved.

Focusing on the Class 158s, Tom noted an 11.8% performance improvement in the last year. The main issue, responsible for 80% of failures, has been the engines. The fleet is currently undergoing its 500,000 miles overhaul.

The main factor affecting unit availability is the regular overhauls: C4 (underframe) and C6 (bodywork). Hairline cracks in the aluminium bodyshells have been discovered.

Tom gave us some good news regarding safety, especially as we approach the leaf-fall season. Siemens SVRS (Single Variable Rate Sanding) equipment is being fitted to the fleet. A big improvement over the previous sanding methods, achieving a stopping distance of 400m from 75 mph.



Miles per 701D (equipment failure incident). MAA is Moving Annual Average

He spoke about the ongoing trial of Starlink satellite broadband on the units, and the opportunities this gives for being able to monitor train components in real time, which will flag up problems in their earlier stages.

Tom concluded with a look ahead to the replacement of the Inter7City HST units with Class 222s coming into service in Autumn 2027, and mentioned the current Class 158 refresh project.

From the left: **Tom Smith**, **Graeme Cook** and Ian Budd. The signal box sign belongs to one of our members who brought it along to remind all present that we *really* need a new loop somewhere in that area!

The final item before lunch was a list of ongoing work from **Frank Roach** of HITRANS, who was unable to attend this year:

1. **HITRANS Rail Development Strategy** *Route and Branch* currently being written up. FoFNL will receive a draft for comment.
2. Working on a plan for **rail freight services to Georgemas and Lairg** for pylon line traffic.

3. The **three week blockade** is regrettable as we approach the summer peak.
4. **Inverness Interchange:** The three options for bus station and car park are now being appraised.
5. ***HITRANSformers*** is a multimodal study looking at network capacity for handling renewables developments.
6. **West Fraser terminal,** just east of Inverness Airport Station is up and running.

The afternoon held a much longer than usual talk by **Jim Summers**, Former Chief Operations Manager, Scotland. The title was *The Emergence of ScotRail*, and it became clear that Jim was at the 'cutting edge' of that process, which saw British Rail headquarters allowing an unprecedented level of devolution to BR Scottish Region.

Jim presented a huge amount of material in his talk which could perhaps be best summed up as 'local empowerment'. He told how Area Business Groups were set up, and explained why this resulted in a transformation in the running of the railway in Scotland.

The 1980s saw the beginning of developing opportunities to improve the system: Edinburgh to Bathgate was reopened and electrification was extended to Ayr.

Sadly, the Dornoch Link, another element in the plans, was scuppered by a lack of financial backing from the Scottish Office.

I.B.

Area Business Groups

- **Built on the Area Managers of the 1970s**
- **Multi-disciplinary**
- **Empowered and perhaps indulged**
- **Locally in touch with the markets**
- **Owned a bottom line.**

SCOTRAIL
BASIC INTERVAL TIMETABLE

WHAT IS SCOTRAIL?

SCOTRAIL is the name for the many improvements we are introducing this Spring in the 1982/83 passenger train timetable.

These include:
Basic Interval Timings
More and faster HSTs
HSTs serving the routes to Queen Street and Perth
Air-conditioned stock on more routes
New through services
Faster journey times
Class 37s north of Inverness

The aim is to improve the image of rail travel in Scotland — to create a product we can operate well and be proud of — enabling us to confidently sell to our customers and keeping them informed.

It will be sold under a brand name — SCOTRAIL.

WHAT IS THE BASIC INTERVAL TIMETABLE?

In recent years, Dutch, Swiss, Austrian and West German Railways have developed the idea of a Basic Interval Timetable and as a result in some areas their Inter-City network has gained 20% more business.

The principle of operating regular pattern services is not new in Scotland, but from 17 May 1982, it becomes the foundation of our timetable as never before.

The Basic Interval Timetable (BIT) is the vital part of the SCOTRAIL concept. It creates regular times for trains, making it easier for passengers to remember. By careful planning, new and better connections will be available on a regular pattern.

The plan has been built on the basis of the same events occurring at the same number of minutes past each hour at each station. Not every route has enough traffic, however, to support an hourly service, so a map has been prepared to show out customers the routes we operate and how often the trains run.

YOUR ROLE

With your support the BIT will help us to gain business in the face of determined competition by providing a product quality service to our customers.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Keep passengers informed.
Know your timetable.
Keep within your Station Duty times.
Know your passenger connecting services.
Know your connectional allowances.
Deal with Parcels and Mails effectively.

B.I.T.
The Cornerstone of Scotrail. Let's Make It Work!

Scotrail
This is the age of the train

Excerpt from a Staff Information sheet

MINUTES OF AGM 2026

Held on 19 June 2026 at the Lovat Arms Hotel, Beauly

SEDERUNT

Total 24 members - recorded separately.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

24 apologies received - recorded with sederunt.

1 Welcome

Ian Budd, Convener, welcomed members to Beauly for the AGM.

2 AGM Minutes

The Minutes of the previous AGM, held in Wick on 4 July, had been circulated. No objections or amendments had been received.

Adoption of AGM 2025 Minutes:

Proposer: *John Brandon*

Seconder: *David Start*

3 Reports

Reports by Convener, Membership Secretary and Treasurer had been circulated in advance of the meeting, and questions were invited.

Adoption of accounts:

Proposer: *Ian Budd*

Seconder: *Richard Mansfield*

Election of Independent Examiner of Accounts:

Ioannis Sklavenitis

Proposer: *Les Turner,* Seconder: *John Brandon*

4 Election of Officers

Convener - Ian Budd

Proposer: *Rob James*

Seconder: *Ken Barclay*

Secretary - Ken Thomson

Proposer: *Neil Wallace*

Seconder: *Richard Mansfield*

Treasurer - David Start

Proposer: *Ian Budd*

Seconder: *Iain MacDonald*

Membership Secretary - Richard Mansfield

Proposer: *David Start*

Seconder: *Giles Baker*

Newsletter Editor - Ian Budd

Proposer: *Richard Ardern*

Seconder: *John Brandon*

5 Election of Committee

• Colin Alston

Proposer: *Ian Budd*, Seconder: *Iain MacDonald*

• Iain MacDonald

Proposer: *David Start*, Seconder: *Les Turner*

• Les Turner

Proposer: *John Brandon*, Seconder: *Richard Mansfield*

• Neil Wallace

Proposer: *Ian Budd*, Seconder: *Rob James*

6 AOB

There was no other business, so the meeting closed at 11:05.

Ian Budd & **Neil Wallace**, in the absence of an elected Secretary.

Membership Matters

The following members have not yet given us an email address:

33, 235, 260, 282, 349, 367, 373, 404, 480, 488, 543, 586, 587, 624, 639.

We would really appreciate it if any of those members who do now have an email address would send it to us.

We are covered by the GDPR regulations so will never under any circumstances share your email address with anyone.

Ian Budd

Convener's Report

Writing my annual report always fires up an instant feeling of déjà vu which on this occasion I'm making a conscious effort to avoid in this survey of the past year.

Blockade

Our AGM & Conference was delayed last year by what we assumed was a one-off three-week blockade of the Far North Line north of Dingwall. We had no inkling that this would take place again in 2026 and in May 2027.

Obviously we are delighted that essential work is being done on the line, and we understand why it's the best time of year for engineers to do the work, but three consecutive years of closing most of the line for three weeks in the tourist season seems inadvisable to say the least. The extraordinary decision by the Scottish Government to place a £2 fare cap on Highland bus journeys, whilst making no similar provision on Highland train fares, may exacerbate the damage to the line's ridership.

FNL Performance

It's been another year of sub-standard performance on the line, mostly caused by a mix of unsurprising Class 158 failures and a surprising level of staff illness.

Rolling Stock

Currently there is an intention, but no plan, to replace the diesel units on the "rural" routes. We have just discovered that ScotRail's lease of the units has been extended by three years to 2035, with an option for a further extension to 2037, by which time the units will be around 47 years old and spare parts will possibly be even more difficult to obtain.

The scrap of good news on this front is that all 25 Inverness-based units are currently being "refreshed" - the next issue of *Far North Express* will contain details.

Station Usage Figures

The Office of Rail and Road publishes station usage figures annually. These appear in the January edition of FNE and were very disappointing for 2024-5. 2025-6 may be even worse because of the June 2025 blockade.

Altnabreac

The Altnabreac saga rolls on. The trial of the station house owners will take place on 23 June in Wick Sheriff Court, having been delayed when snowfall prevented the couple from attending in February. They are charged with "acting culpably and recklessly to the danger of themselves, passengers and train staff" when they stood on the track in front of a train on 1 March 2024. We hope that this results in normality returning to the station.

West Fraser

This year's best news for rail in the Highlands was the opening in April of the freight terminal at West Fraser's Dalcross factory. Initially this will enable finished product to leave by rail, and it is intended that incoming timber from the Altnabreac loading facility (permitted, but not yet built) will come by rail. The cause for this being delayed seems to be a lack of suitable timber vehicles. We assume that Transport Scotland will be working with West Fraser to resolve this, as it is government policy for freight to be carried by rail if possible.

Satellite Broadband

The Low Earth Orbit satellite broadband trial is going very well, with positive feedback on speed and reliability. There are currently three units fitted and the ScotRail Engineering Team is currently working on the next three. We know that the Class 222 trains, which are being refurbished to replace the HSTs on the HML and intercity routes to Aberdeen, will all be fitted with the necessary equipment.

Holyrood Election

This year saw a General Election in Scotland, so we took the opportunity to send a pamphlet to every new MSP, explaining how far behind the rest of Scottish railways the Highlands system has fallen and asking them to ensure that this is addressed. Five years ago we sent a pamphlet to all candidates before the election, asking them to put rail at the forefront of their transport priorities. Scotland is in a difficult position financially with regard to expensive infrastructure as it has extremely limited borrowing powers for capital projects. However, that's no excuse for the lack of even small assistance for the FNL, such as the pressing need

for a loop between Muir of Ord and Inverness, for which we have been campaigning for over 20 years. This is at least still under discussion - having been described in February 2024 by Fiona Hyslop, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, as delayed, not cancelled...

Rhoda Grant

Rhoda did not stand for election in May and, as our Vice Presidents are always sitting MSPs, she will no longer be performing that role. She has been a FoFNL Vice President since 2015 and has been very supportive, asking Parliamentary Questions for us on many occasions. As a token of our appreciation we are offering her Honorary Membership of FoFNL. We hope she will enjoy continuing to read about FNL matters!

Kristopher Leask MSP

We are grateful to Kristopher for accepting our request to become a FoFNL Vice President. Kristopher is an Orkney resident and is one of the Scottish Green Party list members for Highlands & Islands. His Orkney background is very appropriate for us, as we regard Orkney as the northern terminus of the Far North Line. The inadequate connection arrangements for train and ferry passengers between Thurso Station and Scrabster Harbour has been a bugbear for many years. If only the Highland Railway Company had had the money to build the link they wished for.

FoFNL

Meanwhile we continue to do our job of enquiring, trying to persuade, and keeping a check on what's happening - or in too many cases, not happening.

I had a very useful introductory meeting with Graeme Cook last December. He has taken over from Bill Reeve in Transport Scotland, with the job title of Director of Rail Delivery. Bill was always very willing to listen to our views and explain TS' view of the matter in question. Graeme agreed straight away when I invited him to speak at our conference and I'm certain that he will prove to be as easy to work with as Bill.

Colin Alston and I have been having promising discussions with Network Rail on a couple of matters. It's too soon to give any indications about their outcomes, but we're optimistic.

My regular meetings with Mark Ilderton, ScotRail's Service Delivery Director continue, and provide a useful forum to discuss the day-to-day operation of the FNL.

Ian Budd - 8 June 2026

Membership Secretary's Report

My 18 months as Membership Secretary was initially challenging in the process and finding my feet! I am happy in the role which I found provides social and personal connections with many Members - widespread in geography and varying years of your connection with FoFNL. Your continued membership, and encouraging others to join us, is a credit.

I have enjoyed communicating with members who auto-renew with PayPal or cheques. There are many of you with Bank Transfers who are not in my admin process. That makes my role easier and I thank you for that!

Looking at our membership it is pleasing to see how widespread we are in our "Friends of the Far North Line"

Richard Mansfield - Membership Secretary

Treasurer's report

The accounts are presented for the year ending 31st December 2025.

Membership numbers remain good with continuing take up of Life Membership.

I continue to be indebted to Ian Budd and Richard Mansfield for their support and help liaising with membership.

To reduce our costs please where possible make payments to our account by direct payment through your bank.

I have prepared the accounts but await account examination to be concluded.

All known expenses presented to the Treasurer have been paid in full.

I commend this report to the AGM.

David Start - Hon. Treasurer 6th June 2026

Class 222

On 19 March 2026 ScotRail announced the replacement of the HST Intercity fleet with 22 5-car Class 222 diesel trains, to be introduced in 2027-8. They are part of the Voyager family built in 2003-5, with a top speed of 125 mph. The trains will have:

- Full exterior repaint and updated livery.
- Comprehensive interior refresh, including new carpets and full interior repaint.
- A new passenger information system, including multimedia displays.
- New Wi-Fi with Low Earth Orbit Satellite connectivity and VoIP* phone capability.
- Family friendly area, providing space for passengers with an unfolded pushchair.
- Wheelchair facilities in both First Class and two spaces in Standard Class.
- Storage for six bikes.
- New electronic seat reservation system.
- New CCTV system – enhancing the safety and security of customers and staff.
- Intelligent Engine Start Stop (automatically stops an engine to reduce emissions).
- New First and Standard Class seats and tables, with plug sockets, USB-A and USB-C at every seat.
- Onboard catering facilities to support at-seat and trolley service.
- Reconfigured carriage layout to maximise window alignment and luggage storage.

Room for Growth 2006 proposed these trains and studied the potential Inverness-Edinburgh journey times. The current HST fleet numbers 25, so it suggests that the quantum of services each day will remain the same.

Frank Roach, Partnership Manager, HITRANS

* Voice over Internet Protocol

AI image from TheTraveler.org

Arguably perhaps one of the least important aspects of rolling stock is the chosen colour scheme. However, as these two AI images show, the design makes a huge difference to the subconscious perception of a train.

Of course, it is completely subjective, but this writer sees a great difference in the impression of speed and purpose achieved when the window line is continuously dark, in contrast to lighter sides, giving the intercity train a sleek appearance - a marked contrast to the rather suburban look of the standard ScotRail scheme.

I.B.

AI image from ScotRail

Pandora...

...welcomes 222s

Existing Class 222 trains operating in the East Midlands and by Lumo between London and Stirling have had a very bad press in recent weeks, with repeated failures and, in Lumo's case, trains running with no toilet facilities. It's a long way from London to Stirling and trains have had to make unscheduled stops for passengers to use station toilets. Hardly an ideal situation.

ScotRail passengers need not worry, however, for the "refurbishments" detailed above are really a lot more than "refurbishment" usually implies. As far as passenger comfort is concerned there will be new - better, one hopes - seats; families, cyclists and wheelchair-users will find their needs met; passengers whose need to feed or to be electronically-connected will be happy.

This is the biggest improvement in long-distance travel on Scotland's railway for a long time.

Roll on the replacement for 156s and 158s! 170s anyone? We're long-distance too.

***RAIL* magazine** discussed the Lumo difficulties in its 19 August edition, reporting that the units had arrived for refurbishment at Alstom's Widnes facility in a far worse condition than expected by the manufacturer or by Lumo - the units being described by one source as 'in an awful state'.

The refurbishment which had been carried out for Lumo was mostly concerned with the interiors, including the removal of First Class.

Commenting on the Class 222s' failures, an Alstom spokesperson said: "Alstom has been working with Lumo to address a number of unprecedented faults on the operator's West Coast fleet, including replacing defective components, carrying out door repairs, investigating and stripping down the affected waste system, and completing tanking and checks to return toilets to service."

ScotRail is believed to be confident that the much more comprehensive programme of work planned on preparing its Class 222s will avoid any such problems.

Bridge Keeper

www

Network Rail has posted a great video featuring **Alan McDougall**, one of the bridge keepers at Clachnaharry.

One feature of the Far North Line which hasn't really changed in decades!

The £2 Bus Fare Cap

90%-98% reimbursement rate

In the previous issue of *FNE* *Hare-Brained in March* we expressed dismay and astonishment at the way the £2 bus fare cap pilot in the Highland Council area has been implemented.

It's hard to believe that Transport Scotland and/or the Scottish Government has taken a view on how this will affect the whole of public transport.

On 3 April I sent a request for information to the TS Bus Team via Graeme Cook:

Given that all transport investment is required by TS to justify it with a business case, I'd be interested to know how the Scottish Government's decision to spent £10m in one year on providing such cheap travel on the buses was arrived at, and passed a similar process.

In addition to the stated £10m cost there will presumably be a reduction in the purchase of rail tickets, especially as the fares cap is available to all, resident or not. I hope that at the end of the pilot we will be given that figure too.

An additional question would be to ask how the resultant overcrowding on the buses, which will probably take place in the main tourist season, will be dealt with. I hope no returning passengers are left stuck somewhere because of it.

The TS Bus Team responded on 14 May, too late for the May issue of *FNE*:

The purpose of the pilot is to test the impact on bus patronage and modal shift of such an intervention.

The focus of analysis will be on an ex-post evaluation* of the impact on bus patronage, car use and rail passengers which will be published following the conclusion of the pilot.

As part of the preparation for the evaluation, analysis was undertaken on the potential cross mode effects using the Transport Model for Scotland. [no description of what that showed]

The pilot presents a valuable opportunity to assess the potential of the fare cap to improve affordability, increase patronage, strengthen bus services – as the most widely available form of public transport in Scotland - and improve connectivity in rural, island and low-income communities.

As part of the evaluation process, Transport Scotland will also consider how the pilot operates across different types of services and locations, including any *unintended consequences* [my italics] that may emerge.

As a result of the May article, Liam Kerr MSP tabled a question in parliament (S7W-01245) which is published on the Parliamentary Questions pages in this issue.

The minister's answer is confusing, and incomplete. He states that "evaluation of the impact on bus patronage, car use, and rail passengers [...] will be published following the conclusion of the pilot", as well as "We are also committed to bringing forward legislation for a £2 bus fare cap across Scotland by the end of this parliament, building on the evidence from the current pilot." The second quote implies that it will happen regardless of the "unintended consequences" mentioned in the TS reply above. The answer also ignores the content of the question, making no mention of publishing any figures.

On 4 August I emailed the Bus Team to find out about the reimbursement level for the pilot and received a reply the next day:

Thank you for your email seeking further information about the £2 bus fare cap pilot.

The bus fare cap pilot operates by capping the cost of single adult journey fares at £2 to the

passenger. Participating operators are reimbursed between 90% and 98% of the differential between the operator's usual single adult journey fare and £2 for each journey taken under the pilot.

This was a *far* higher figure than we had expected. Also, unlike the parallel system in England which applies the fare cap to local and regional services only, e.g. Shrewsbury-Telford, 15 miles, the Scottish fare cap applies to long distance operators too. A Birmingham to London return, a comparable distance to Inverness to Wick by road, costs around £18 - Inverness to Wick return is now £4.

The Scottish Government has therefore placed the privately owned bus services in direct competition with the government owned railway. Perhaps this doesn't matter, but if it turns out that rail loses a significant number of passengers, especially once the system operates across the whole of Scotland, will the government start looking at lower passenger numbers as an excuse to reduce investment or even consider some closures?

Until recently it was very clear that the Scottish Government has a declared policy of achieving modal shift from road to rail. Roads are fully funded by government and the maintenance cost of the damage done by HGVs and buses (especially electric buses carrying heavy batteries) is absorbed without question. Roads are *provided*, whereas the money required to provide the railway system is described as a *subsidy*, a word that implies that rail should really be self-funding.

Even the bus companies are unsure about the way the pilot is operated. In an article in *Bus News* Ember was quoted, "This sounds simple and attractive. The problem is not the goal. The problem is the mechanism." Ember's view is that a far more targeted approach is needed - something which will help with the provision of local bus services where there is insufficient passenger demand to sustain routes.

Rail campaigners find it impossible to understand why schemes to reduce/remove the cost of public transport in Scotland are only applied to bus travel. The Scottish Government seems to be rushing ahead without due care and attention. If the Highlands pilot is shown to have too many "unintended consequences" will the government have the political nerve to discontinue or change it?

I.B.

*Ex-post evaluations are used to assess whether a specific intervention was justified and whether it worked (or is working) as expected in achieving its objectives and why.

Carbisdale Castle Bought

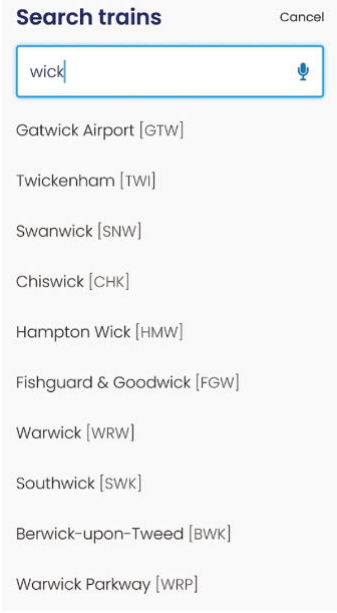
Carbisdale Castle has new owners after the controversial, self-styled Lady Carbisdale decided to return to London saying, "I love Scotland but I have decided it's best loved from a distance".

The new owners are Suzanne and Lance Holmquist, who live in Florida and run a boat charter and excursion company. On social media Suzanne wrote, "It is such a beautiful building with a great history and the local people are wonderful. We are excited to become a part of the community.

"One day we hope to turn it into a hotel so all our loved ones and friends can come stay and we can make many new acquaintances."

Let's hope many of their future guests arrive by train!

App Disaster



Wick Station recently made an unwanted appearance in national railway news when on 30 July, during Glasgow's hosting of the Commonwealth Games, ScotRail replaced its successful mobile phone and tablet app with a new version.

Prompted by the need to reduce costs, the decision was made to change provider when the contract with **The Trainline** expired. SR opted for **SilverRail** ("*Turn your travellers into loyal customers with market-leading digital experiences that grow revenue and reduce cost.*").

Passengers were advised that the old app would cease to work immediately when the new app became available on the morning of the 30th, and that existing login details would not work. This produced the totally predictable collapse of the system, which was unable to process the huge number of registration requests.

The Google Play Store reviews for the new app totalled nearly a thousand by 8 August - almost all of them bad. This was a public relations disaster for ScotRail, caused by SilverRail's apparent lack of attention to detail, and therefore completely avoidable.

The decision to opt for "fuzzy search" whereby when a user types in a mis-spelling, AI will offer up to 10 suggestions, was the cause of Wick Station making the news. ScotRail told us that if you typed in 'wick', the actual station was coming up as 11 or 12 in the list, which had been programmed to display only 10 options. To give SR due credit, it only took a few days for this to be fixed, but in the meantime there was an element of comedy - if you typed in 'wack', 'weck', 'wick', 'wock' or 'wuck', all except 'wick' and 'wock' gave you Wick. This was AI madness, when a simple database query of all UK stations, both full name and code (e.g. WCK) would have instantly filled in the field correctly.

It soon became clear too that the system is only partially aware of the station codes, which many people use to avoid typing in long station names (I always type BBG rather than Bishopbriggs). Initially eight FNL station codes didn't work; at the time of writing (24 August) there are still five which don't.

It's difficult not to conclude that some programmers see AI as the answer to everything, regardless of whether it's actually useful.

Other issues with the new app include difficulties for those with long season tickets purchased through the old app, and a very puzzling change to the display of possible train times in the journey planner. It used to be the case that when you opted for an arrival or departure time you were able to request earlier or later times once you'd looked at the search result. In the new app, if you don't want to use one of the few options offered, you have to do a new search from scratch - hardly an improvement!

As one SR official commented to us, ScotRail's aim was for this to be a "customer benefit". Sadly the programmers at SilverRail have failed badly in this simple aspiration. We know that ScotRail is working hard to get the app programmers to fix the various problems, but it will take a while to repair the damage done to SR's reputation. Disinterested travellers will not know, or care, where the original blame lies.

I.B.

Letters

to the Editor

Sir:- Call me old fashioned if you will, and you wouldn't be the first to do so, but I find the current liveries and colours applied to trains on the Far North Line garish. In fact I would go so far as to say that I find the purple used on the stations, halts and platforms, to say nothing of the pedestrian crossover bridges, horrid. Oh these "bright vibrant" shades are all very well in the brutal urban environment but clash dreadfully with the softer shades that nature provides in the rural landscape. In short, they are not conducive, but intrusive, to the setting that the trains operate in.

I am not advocating a return to B.R black, lined in red and white, for carriages/DMU/EMU or what have you, but an S.R. green, or a cream and maroon - even the B.R. blue would be more in keeping I feel.. (Oh good grief he's off again, it will be "and more name plates" next, you'll see…)

Paul Tiney

to The Herald

6 July 2026

While it's a good idea to try to deter fare dodgers on trains, by imposing a £10 fine on those who evade payment, it's not always easy to access methods of payment ("ScotRail to introduce £10 minimum fare to tackle ticketless travel", *Herald*, February 20).

I recently attempted to book a fare, to travel from Conon Bridge to Inverness with a bicycle. How to do so was not made clear on the app or the online portal, so I rang the helpline.

The gentleman tried to be helpful, but I eventually had to spell Conon Bridge.

He then said it wasn't possible to book a bike on that journey, because it was too short. So I said I'd just go to the ticket office in Dingwall, and asked if he'd tell me the opening times. He said the ticket office was only open from 10:45-12:45.

He added that he thought this was odd, because it wasn't the length of a shift. I decided to visit the ticket office at 08:00 the next day, and discovered it was open from 07:30 - 14:34 (yes, *34*).

I asked the ticket seller why the website gave the wrong information. She revealed that for some time the staff had themselves been complaining about this to the powers that be. However, they were informed that the website couldn't be changed. I wrote to ScotRail myself.

The reply I received informed me that I had accessed the wrong website. I assured them, with attached pictures, that I was referring to the information that was displayed on the ScotRail website. Up to this point, I've had no further reply.

It made me wonder if ScotRail genuinely wants people to buy tickets in my part of the world.

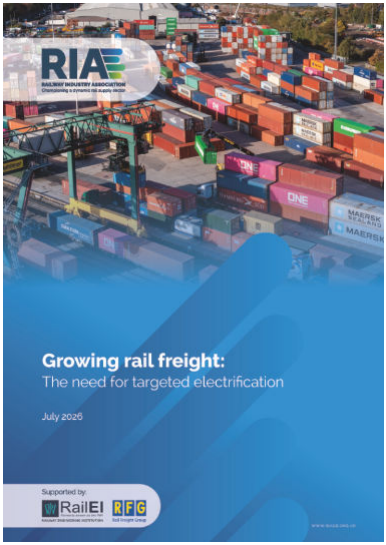
If it does, why is the organisation providing the wrong information about when to buy tickets?

Irene Munro, Conon Bridge

Growing Rail Freight

In July the Railway Industry Association (RIA) published a short report entitled Growing rail freight: The need for targeted electrification. *RIA's press release (below) summarises its findings. The RIA web page also gives a link to a longer report produced by a joint steering group made up of members of RIA, the Rail Freight Group (RFG) and the Railway Engineering Institution (RailEI). This is based on the University of Birmingham's simulation exercise to understand the feasibility of battery locomotives, which was commissioned by RIA, RFG and RailEI. All three reports can be found on our website.*

www



RIA Press Release

Electric rail freight can deliver faster services, greater network capacity, lower costs and significant carbon savings – but the UK must act now to maximise the value of existing electrification, according to a new industry report, written by the Railway Industry Association (RIA) in conjunction with the Rail Freight Group (RFG) and the Railway Engineering Institution (RailEI), with research undertaken by the University of Birmingham.

A new report, *Growing rail freight: The need for targeted electrification*, highlights how increasing the use of electric rail freight could deliver immediate benefits for freight customers, passengers and taxpayers.

There are many good reasons to grow rail freight. It takes pressure off the roads, boosts economic growth, supports resilient supply chains across sectors such as food and construction, and supports decarbonisation.

As a proven technology for high-volume passenger and freight transport, rail electrification improves performance, lowers whole-life costs and offers strong long-term value.

To achieve the Government's target for 75% growth by 2050, there will need to be a strategic rail freight network that is electrified. This does not mean electrifying the entire UK railway, as a previous RIA report found electrifying a further third of the network for passenger traffic would also electrify 95% of freight traffic. On these critical routes, electric traction is essential to enable freight trains to haul heavier loads and operate at speeds that minimise conflicts with passenger services potentially increasing capacity for all rail users. While electrification requires upfront investment, it reduces the whole-life cost of the railway and delivers lasting benefits for customers, operators and taxpayers.

As the Government develops its plans for future rail investment, the report identifies a number of practical proposals to maximise the future potential for electric freight haulage and make better use of the existing electrified network

Key findings:

- **Rail freight is a strategic economic asset for the UK**. It moves a quarter of all containerised goods, delivers £2.45 billion in economic benefits, and removes 1.6 billion lorry kilometres from the road network
- **Rail freight supports national priorities,** including housing, infrastructure, economic

transformation, resilience, and energy security.

- **Investment benefits both passengers and freight.** Freight and passenger services share the same network, so investment for one often benefits the other.
- **Electric Freight increases capacity.** With their greater power and acceleration electric locomotives (and bi-mode and hybrid locomotives operating under electric power) can haul heavier and longer trains whilst delivering faster climbing, higher average speeds, and more available train paths for both freight and passenger services.
- **For future freight services research has found:**
  - Electric locomotives are the optimum long-term solution
  - Bi-mode (electric and diesel) locomotives are a practical interim solution
  - Battery only locomotives are not a substitute for main line electrification
  - Hybrid Locomotives (electric and battery) will become more important over time in specific situations.
- **A strategic programme of freight-focused electrification** would enable the railway to accommodate future freight growth while supporting wider decarbonisation and economic objectives.

Commenting on the report, **RIA Senior Technical Advisor David Clarke** said: "Rail freight is one of the UK's greatest but often overlooked economic assets. This report demonstrates that by maximising the use of electric freight, we can unlock additional capacity, improve reliability, reduce costs and deliver great economic benefits across the country."

"The Government has set an ambitious target to grow rail freight by 75% by 2050. Achieving that target will require a strategic approach to freight electrification, focused on the key routes where electric traction can deliver the greatest benefits. Electrification has a crucial role to play in creating more capacity and train paths for both freight and passengers."

Maggie Simpson OBE, RFG Director General said: "Electric rail freight offers many advantages for customers, and we need to use it wherever possible. The private sector freight operators are investing in new bi-mode locomotives which represent a step change in capability, and with the right frameworks can help maximise rail's environmental advantages. This report provides a pragmatic framework to help achieve this."

Stephen Barber, CEO of the Railway Engineering Institution said: "RailEI is delighted to have co-funded this important work with RIA.

"The report's research and modelling conclusively endorses the case for further electrification of freight routes. The report identifies viable solutions for replacing diesel powered locomotives on a range of haulage duties. It dispels the myth that battery powered locomotives will remove the need for future electrification.

"The report offers immediate opportunities for investment in electrification of infill sections on freight routes. Opportunities which should exploit the findings of the June 2026 RIA Electrification Cost Challenge 2.0 report - that a rolling programme of electrification is likely to reduce costs by a third.

"Together, these reports highlight the urgent need for a National Strategy for Electrification. Railway Engineering Institution stands ready to work with key stakeholders to deliver this essential strategy, which will enable the planning and delivery of electrification to meet growing demand for route capacity, providing greater reliability, lower costs, faster journey times, and reducing carbon emissions."

Timber Rail Fail

Photo: Gary Lennon

One of our members recently pointed us towards an article from the August 2020 edition of *RAIL* magazine. Beneath a wonderful photo of one of the timber trial trains were various comments made at the time. The fact that timber is still not being loaded at Altnabreac for transport to the West Fraser factory near Inverness, with its new rail link, apparently due to a lack of suitable wagons, would suggest that although the Scottish Government has said all the right things, it has failed to actually make sure it happens.

We know from correspondence with West Fraser, that they intend to transfer incoming timber to rail eventually.

The *RAIL* article quoted the then Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure & Connectivity, Michael Matheson:

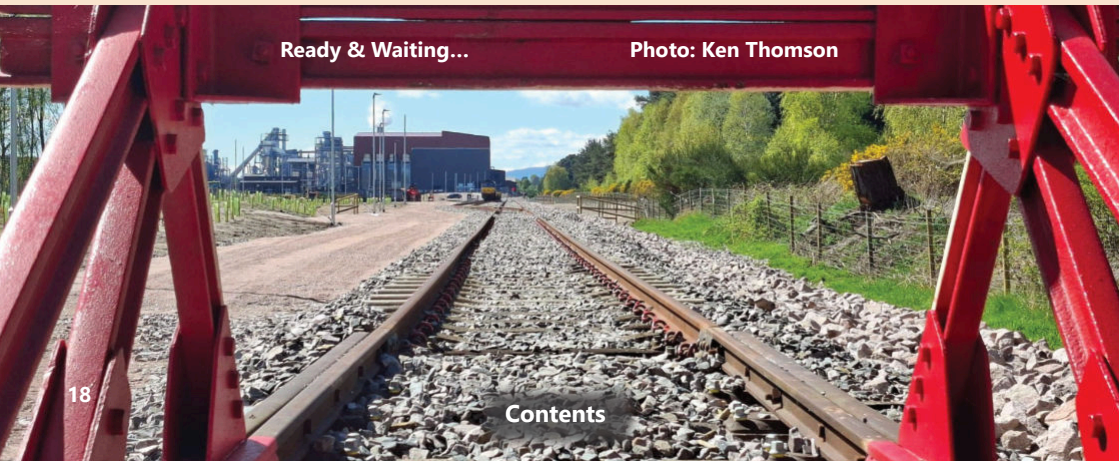
"We have worked closely with the timber and rail freight industry to explore opportunities tor modal shift. I am delighted to confirm funding for this rail freight trial which will remove around 250 lorries from our busy roads.

"This government has a strong track record of support for rail freight. We know that rail freight and modal shift to rail reduces road congestion, improves air quality and reduces emissions.

"The trial will help to demonstrate that the movement of timber in Scotland by rail is possible as well as efficient. It will provide confidence to both the timber and rail freight industries to develop permanent and sustainable solutions to meet market needs."

Six years have passed.

I.B.



Ready & Waiting... **Photo: Ken Thomson**

Bridge Strikes

The bridge near Edderton, showing how far the beam was moved

The Far North Line experienced an unusual bridge strike on 19 June. A verge-cutting tractor became stuck under a bridge in Edderton, near Tain. The impact moved one of the bridge's concrete beams, opening up a gap, through which ballast fell to the road below.

Fortunately the FNL was closed at the time, and the bridge was repaired over that weekend.

Bridge strikes continue to be a major problem for Network Rail, despite much publicity and systems being available to warn drivers about potential strikes in time to stop.

One such system is Centrad's Low Bridge Warning. An on-board device contains an automatically updated database of over 2000 low bridges in the UK. A 'geofence' exists for each location.

A geofence is a virtual perimeter, or fence, around a given location and is recognised by the device's GPS. On approaching such a location, the driver receives an audio, and optional video, warning. Each device is programmed with the vehicle's dimensions.

The system is available for HGVs and buses, so it is surprising that there are still around five bridge strikes every day in the UK in spite of the existence of this and similar products.

I.B.

ADJUSTABLE VEHICLE HEIGHT:

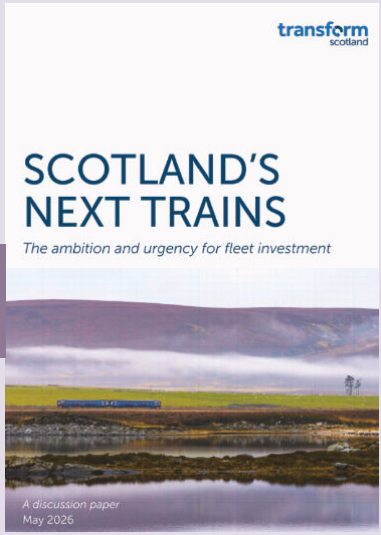
www

Variable Detection: Allows drivers to configure the system for vehicles with variable trailer heights. Using an in-cab keypad, the driver can update the vehicle's height so that alerts reflect the new configuration, ensuring accurate low bridge detection at all times.

Transform Scotland Fleet Investment Discussion

www

On 10 June Transform Scotland, of which FoFNL is one of the member organisations, held a very useful event in Edinburgh. The discussion paper which was produced for the event is available on our website.



The challenge facing Scotland's rail network is no longer about whether new trains are needed; it's about how we actually deliver them.

Scotland is running some of the oldest rolling stock in the UK, with roughly two-thirds of the current fleet requiring replacement over the next 15 years. This isn't a distant problem for future policymakers; it's a structural reality hitting the network today. With public finances under unprecedented pressure and transport budgets competing directly with health and social care, the temptation to defer long-term capital investment is high.

That's why this June, we brought together over 40 senior leaders at The Scotsman Hotel for our **New Trains for Scotland** stakeholder working lunch.

Rather than treating this as a niche rail issue, we hosted a cross-sector room of operators, manufacturers, financiers, accessibility advocates, passenger groups, and environment and health interests.

Why new trains matter beyond transport

One of the strongest takeaways from our roundtable discussions was that a train is never just an operational asset, it is foundational infrastructure for the entire country. The benefits of strategic investment, and the severe penalties of inaction, ripple across every sector:

- **Economy & tourism:** A modern network expands regional labour markets, access to jobs, and drives productivity. Moreover, for Scotland's scenic routes in particular, getting the fleet specifications right is crucial to unlocking and supporting the leisure tourism market.
- **Public health & climate:** Replacing ageing diesel units improves air quality around our stations, whilst investing in the railway encourages the modal shift needed to (i) discourage more sedentary lifestyles associated with car use and (ii) meet our climate commitments.
- **Passenger experience:** Upgrading the fleet is a unique opportunity to build a network that actively competes with private cars. Discussions focused heavily on the necessity of consulting passengers in design (as done in Liverpool), system-wide level boarding, robust multi-modal journey tracking (including visual, audible, and British Sign Language formats), reliable air conditioning, quality wi-fi connections, as well as comfortable seating!

The cost of delay

A key theme of the day was that delaying fleet renewal doesn't eliminate costs; it simply shifts where they hit the balance sheet. When we defer strategic capital investment, public money is instead

drained by rising day-to-day operational and maintenance spend just to keep near-obsolete assets moving. In essence, we end up spending more to maintain a lower standard of service, while missing out on a clear (albeit underestimated) economic multiplier effect, and damaging supply chain confidence. Planning early and strategically is simply cheaper than waiting for asset depreciation to turn into crisis management.

Because immediate public capital is tightly constrained, and the Scottish Government is facing a £5bn black hole in its budget by 2029-2030, the room were frank that there were no easy answers. Instead, attendees debated practical, innovative delivery models – including structures that split risk between the government and private finance, EUROFIMA, borrowing capabilities, ROSCOs evolution and wider mechanisms like Land Value Capture.

What next?

Many thanks to everyone who contributed to such a thoughtful, constructive discussion, to our chair George Lowder, and speakers Laura Hyde-White (Transform), Alastair Camelford (Transport Scotland) & Barry Graham (Northern) for framing the debate.

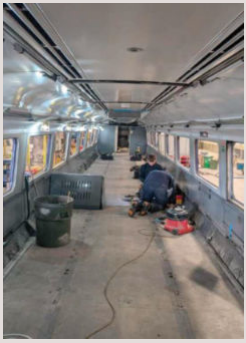
We look forward to building momentum around this issue with the cross-sector alliance established at this event. We are incredibly pleased that Transport Scotland and Scottish Rail Holdings are actively engaged with us on this, and we welcome ongoing discussions with them and other decision-makers.

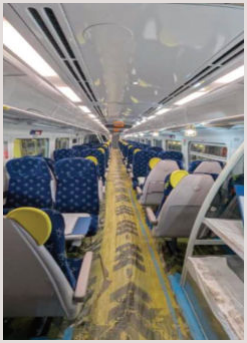
Ultimately, the insights and evidence gathered from the day will directly shape our upcoming report this autumn. We're ready to show policymakers that investing in new trains isn't just a win for the rail network; it's a critical lever for Scotland and it's economy, its environment, its health, and its future.

ScotRail Class 158 Enhancement Programme

June 2026 Update - £8.1m Project

ScotRail continues to conduct C6 exams on our Class 158 units that serve the Far North Line. C6 exams are part of the maintenance process for rolling stock and involve a series of checks and repairs to ensure safety and operational efficiency. These checks can include heavy maintenance, repairs, enhancements, and modifications. This process aims to improve the condition of the units to ensure they are ready for service.





ScotRail's enhancements will include interior refresh of carpets, seats, panels, plugs, and USB sockets, and an interior paint refresh. Toilets and cycle areas will also be included, with design work ongoing to enhance cycle space with two additional bike spaces.

So far, seven units have gone through Phase One refurbishment at our Inverness depot and are now back in service. Phase One work on the additional 18 units based at Inverness will continue throughout 2026.

Question S7W-00387: Tim Eagle, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 8 June 2026

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Network Rail regarding the feasibility of the Caledonian Sleeper Service using the Eurotunnel, including what consideration has been given to the loading gauge requirements associated with access to the tunnel by the service.

Stephen Flynn: As part of the 100-day manifesto commitment, Transport Scotland, Scottish Rail Holdings Group and Caledonian Sleeper Limited will work together to undertake a feasibility study into extending the Caledonian Sleeper service to Europe. This will include engagement with relevant rail infrastructure managers.

Question S7W-00279: Tim Eagle, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered by Stephen Flynn on 5 June 2026

To ask the Scottish Government whether ScotRail plans to upgrade the class 158 trains that are currently operating on the Far North Line.

Stephen Flynn: Rail Recharged: Scotland's Fleet Transition Strategy, published in November 2025, sets out how we will renew ScotRail fleets as they reach the end of their operational life in the coming years.

ScotRail is committed to ensuring its trains remain safe, reliable and fit for purpose. This is delivered through a programme of ongoing maintenance, periodic overhaul and targeted upgrades across its fleet. These activities are designed to sustain performance, extend asset life and enhance the passenger experience.

Improvements, including those made to class 158 trains so far, have involved upgrades to interiors, passenger information systems, and accessibility features, alongside technical modifications to support reliability and operational resilience.

This approach ensures the fleets can meet current service requirements while supporting wider objectives around passenger satisfaction and network performance.

Question S7W-00272: Tim Eagle, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 3 June 2026

To ask the Scottish Government what investment it plans to make to increase the average speeds of trains on the (a) Highland Main Line and (b) Far North Line.

Stephen Flynn: In regards to a) Highland Main Line, I refer the Member to the answer to question S6W-27087 on 7 May 2026.

In regards to (b) Far North Line, the Scottish Government granted authority and funding for enhancements to the Radio Electronic Token Block signalling system on the Far North Line and for line speed improvements at various points on the Line and the majority of these enhancements are now completed. In relation passing loops, I refer the Member to answer to question S6W-29458 on 17 September 2024.

Transport Scotland continually revises its programme of works against priorities in the context of available funding. This ensures it can deliver the right projects at the right time as it seeks to progress its rolling programme of decarbonisation, whilst also delivering rail passenger and freight services that meet user expectations.

Question S7W-00436: Miles Briggs, MSP for Edinburgh and Lothians East, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 1 June 2026

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Network Rail Scotland with a view to increasing the number of passing loops on railways in Scotland to increase the frequency of trains serving for rural stations.

Stephen Flynn: Transport Scotland officials engage regularly with Network Rail Scotland to ensure that Scottish Minister's requirements as specified here: Scottish Ministers' High Level Output Specification (HLOS) - Control Period 7 - 2024 – 2029 | Transport Scotland are met by Network Rail.

Transport Scotland works with Network Rail to review and revise its programme of works against priorities in the context of available funding. This ensures Transport Scotland can deliver the right projects at the right time as it seeks to progress its rolling programme of decarbonisation, whilst also delivering rail passenger and freight services that meet user expectations.

The railway delivery partners will continue to review and assess suitability of railway infrastructure to ensure it continues to meet the current and future passenger demand, as much as possible and in the context of the available funding.

Question S7W-00386: Tim Eagle, MSP for Highlands and Islands, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 29 May 2026

To ask the Scottish Government when the 22 Class 222 trains, that were announced by ScotRail as the replacement for the High Speed Trains in March 2026, will enter service.

Stephen Flynn: The Class 222 trains are expected to enter passenger service by late 2027, with a phased introduction continuing through 2028. The full fleet is expected to be in operation by the December 2028 timetable.

Following successful procurement, the Class 222 trains will undergo an extensive £80 million overhaul and refurbishment prior to delivery to ScotRail, supported by £67 million of investment from the Scottish Government.

They will provide a more consistent, reliable, comfortable, accessible and family-friendly experience for passengers, helping to encourage more people to travel by rail rather than by car, while also support the long-term sustainability of InterCity services by reducing emissions and lowering operating costs through improved energy efficiency.

Question S7W-01245: Liam Kerr MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 9 July 2026

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will publish the financial case for the £2 bus fare cap, including the total projected (a) cost of reimbursements to bus companies and (b) reduction in rail ticket income.

Stephen Flynn: The purpose of the £2 bus fare cap pilot in the Highlands and Islands is to test the impact on bus patronage and subsequent modal shift of such an intervention. The focus of the analysis of the pilot will include evaluation of the impact on bus patronage, car use, and rail passengers, and will be published following the conclusion of the pilot.

Work is underway to progress a £2 bus fare cap to Glasgow, Ayrshire, Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, Lanarkshire and Inverclyde within the first 100 days of this government. We are also committed to bringing forward legislation for a £2 bus fare cap across Scotland by the end of this parliament, building on the evidence from the current pilot.

The Highlands and Islands pilot is providing us with valuable real-world evidence on customer behaviour, pricing impacts and operator engagement, which will directly inform how we design future schemes.

Question S7W-01246 Liam Kerr MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 9 July 2026

To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the ScotRail Spirit of Scotland pass, (a) for what reason it is limited to trains departing after 9.15am, (b) whether consideration has been given to local exclusions

and exclusions reflecting timetabling of services in areas outside the Central Belt, and (c) whether it plans to review this restriction.

Stephen Flynn: ScotRail Spirit of Scotland pass is aimed at leisure travellers, with morning timing restrictions in place to encourage travel at quieter times out with busy commuting times.

For those who wish to travel earlier, we've reduced the cost of rail travel by removing ScotRail peak fares for good, saving 17% on average on previously peak fares. We've also frozen rail fares this year. Given these significant savings already in place for rail passengers before 9:15 am, we have no plans to review the conditions of the Spirit of Scotland pass.

Question S7W-01247 Liam Kerr MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 9 July 2026

To ask the Scottish Government, regarding the planned programme of discontinuous electrification of sections of Scotland's railway, what the total cost is and what the projected cost would be if those sections were to be covered by full overhead line continuous electrification.

Stephen Flynn: The Scottish Government does not have the figures requested by the Member and does not hold any such comparison.

Question S7W-01248 Liam Kerr MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 9 July 2026

To ask the Scottish Government what the projected whole-life cost is of the battery electric multiple units (BEMUs) to be used on stretches of Scotland's railway network with discontinuous electrification, and how this compares with the equivalent whole-life cost for locomotives with fully electric engines.

Stephen Flynn: The Scottish Government does not have the figures requested by the Member and does not hold any such comparison.

Question S7W-01249 Liam Kerr MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 9 July 2026

To ask the Scottish Government what proportion of Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions is attributable to rail transport.

Stephen Flynn: In 2024, rail emissions accounted for around 0.4% of Scotland's total greenhouse gas emissions. This information is publicly available in the Scottish Government publication Scottish Greenhouse Gas Statistics 2024.

Question S7W-01250 Liam Kerr MSP for North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered on 9 July 2026

To ask the Scottish Government what assessment it has made of any projected impact of the introduction of a £2 bus fare cap on income for Scotland's railway.

Stephen Flynn: I refer the member to the answer to question S7W-01245 on 9 July 2026.

It is good to see such a flurry of railway questions in the new parliamentary session, and they do serve to highlight issues and bring them to the attention of the governing politicians. It also shows that railways are in the minds of more MSPs. However, the answers are almost always disappointing to us as we already know Transport Scotland's views on most of the matters raised.

FoFNL is grateful to Liam Kerr MSP for following up on several of the issues raised in the May edition of *FNE*. The answer to question S7W-01245 is actually quite disturbing, since it states that the Scottish Government is already committed to extending the £2 bus fare cap across Scotland, yet the results of the H&I pilot are not known.

The Far, Far North in Winter - Prequel

*FoFNL member, **Ian K Watson**, was reminded of his own foray to the Far North, when he read Rob James' article in the May issue of* FNE.

Like Rob James I have gone to the Far North in winter out of curiosity to see what it was like.

I went in January 2009 for the first time, and that was a different experience from Rob's. At that time ScotRail (then a First Group franchise) had a winter offer of anywhere in Scotland return for £13 (with a railcard). So I chose to go to Thurso, where I had the chance to meet Mike Lunan with whom I had worked on the Rail Passengers' Council's Safety Taskforce.

In Thurso I stayed for two nights in the Pentland Hotel. It obviously must be cold up here, I thought: not only was there an electric blanket on the bed, there was also a hot water bottle available. But on the first morning I walked down to the sea front and there sat on a bench overlooking the sea. The temperature was quite mild: I was wearing a pullover, but no coat, nor gloves, nor scarf. While sitting on the bench I rang my wife, back home in Carlisle. She reported that the temperature there was minus 8 degrees – "How was it in Thurso?" So I reported what clothes I had on, and she was astounded. Later I went on a train at 11:04 to Wick, and was surprised to find the fare (with railcard) was £6.66 which seemed expensive , particularly compared to the £13 return fare Carlisle to Thurso! In Wick I had a good look round – it was now very quiet compared to my previous visit in 1984 when the harbour was extremely busy with North Sea oil exploration vessels. Here I did begin to feel cold, and decided not to wait for the train back to Thurso, so caught the 82 bus back, where the fare was £3, so hardly surprising not many use the train to travel between the two towns, never mind the difference in frequencies of service.

I made another short visit to the Far North in December 2019, when I stayed in Tain for several days. Apart from the darkness and the absence of leaves on the trees I don't remember being cold, and there's nothing in my diary about that. I was very impressed by the Christmas lights in Tain. Whilst there I went to Culrain and took a long walk around the grounds of Carbisdale Castle where I stopped on the way for a picnic.

I have seen the photos in *Far North Express* of snow ploughs at work, but my two attempts to experience something like that have been a failure.

Photo: Ian K Watson

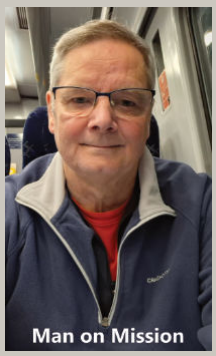
All Aboard to Northampton

– "Achanalt, where's that?"

*FoFNL Secretary **Ken Thomson** had a mission…*

It was mid-December, and I'd retired only three weeks earlier. I'd also had a bit of a health scare in early September (all good now), so some bucket list items were taking on a sharper focus.

It wasn't that long ago I'd discovered "All Aboard to Northampton", a collection of train tickets from railway stations all around the UK to Northampton. This was the brain child of Elliot Badger, Retail Travel Advisor at Northampton and has since blossomed into a "cult" project followed by rail enthusiasts and passengers alike. Several huge display boards at the station now hold hundreds of tickets from around the country.


Man on Mission

Surely I could help to fill a gap in the collection from one of my "local" stations? Despite some research I couldn't determine for certain what stations were still "blanks" in the collection, but I was gripped with the thought of perhaps contributing. I live in Culloden, on the outskirts of Inverness, and I was pretty sure the little known station of Achanalt on the Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh line would be a potential blank in the collection.

Ironically I bought my ticket in Kirkcaldy (Fife) when I had a change of trains there about a week before my planned trip. A busy station and change point it still has a ticket office, so ideal to make a purchase and provide a "ticket" – app/web bought or on board tickets don't provide the credit card sized tickets required. I had researched my routing and had written this down for the ticket staff who gave me some odd looks at such an unusual request. "Achanalt, where's that?" being one of the queries. Relieved of £97.90 for an off peak single (railcard discount applied) I was all set.

It was with trepidation I set my alarm for a 5 a.m. wake up call to prepare to set off by car to travel the 37 miles to Achanalt. I needed to take 5 trains, most with quite tight connection times, but more worrying was the Met Office yellow and amber rain alerts covering the North West of Scotland and Cumbria both of which were on my route. A derailment near Shap due to a landslip only a few weeks earlier highlighted the vulnerability of the network to weather events. Worse, Network Rail had imposed speed restrictions on both the Kyle line and the West Coast Main Line (WCML), so I was fully prepared for doing some thinking on my feet to plan how to complete the trip. As it turned out the situation was improving on the day I travelled, although

some Avanti West Coast (AWC) services were cancelled, luckily not affecting me.

I arrived at Achanalt in good time and was pleased to see my Class 158 (158720) was on time and due at 07:12. It was -1°C, almost windless and pitch black. One major issue was that the station was in complete darkness. I wondered if the platform lights would come on via a timeclock before the train arrived, but it was soon apparent this wasn't the case, presumably a fault. Achanalt is remote and only consists of a few isolated houses, so is a request stop. Unlike on the Far North Line there are no push button facilities for passengers to alert trains that they are required to stop. So as the train headlight appeared I started madly waving my mobile phone torch and shining it at a reflective jacket I happened to have. Luckily the driver gave a reassuring "toot" to say he'd seen me. The short platform was skilfully negotiated by the driver, and I boarded to an odd look from the guard.

I arrived in Inverness on time at 08:29 and managed a quick dash to Harry Gow's (a local baker, other outlets are available!) for a takeaway sausage roll, empire biscuit and a cuppa (don't tell my cardiologist). My I7C HST set (43138 + 43181) heading to Glasgow was due at 08:42. The Highland Main Line (HML) to Perth is largely single track with passing loops, and in my experience delays are common. To be fair these are generally relatively small, but my connection in Perth was only 12 minutes, so another tense leg of my trip was on the cards as we started losing minutes e*n route*.

As we arrived into Perth (11:08) the changeover was down to 7 mins, but due to the HST pulling into the adjacent platform I comfortably managed to catch my Class 158/170 combo (158729/170404) to Edinburgh at 11:15. Another short connection time loomed at Waverley (arr 12:43) as my AWC service was due to leave at 12:52. Luckily my ScotRail service pulled into Platform 17 spot on time.

I was now feeling more confident I'd actually make Northampton, as although some AWC services were cancelled due to the flooding issues, presumably due to sets/crews being out of sync, my service to Euston was running. I needed to change at Birmingham New Street.

A 6 min late departure at 12:58 saw Pendolino 390152 head off towards Carstairs and the remodelled curve on to the WCML. Just as we started to recover time we came to a stand just North of Lockerbie, I assumed due to flooding issues. We eventually puttered through Lockerbie but soon regained line speed. The train manager later told us the delay was due the driver being asked to inspect the track due to a report of animals on the line.

Leaving Carlisle we were 20 mins late and eventually pulled into Birmingham 24 late. An apology from the train manager revealed the "animals" were in fact a swan! The bird caused me to engage in a mad dash to Platform 4 for my final West Midlands Trains Class 350 (350117 + 350130) to Euston. Panic over as the service left 5 mins late at 17:41, ironically to let my original Pendolino priority in front of us. Arrival at Northampton was 13 late at 18:50, a total train travel time of 11 hrs 38 min from Achanalt. Google Maps suggests 9 hrs 43 min by car.

Like a giddy schoolboy I skipped up to the giant display "cabinets" in the station looking for and hoping someone hadn't beaten me to furnish an Achanalt – Northampton ticket for the collection …… luckily the stations are set out alphabetically and the white rectangular card indicating an empty spot was quickly found.

Mightily relieved I surveyed the full gamut of display cabinets and noted the next two empty

stations alphabetically along from Achanalt were Achnasheen and Achnashellach, both on the Kyle line. Further study of the boards indicated plenty of scope for more excursions from remote highland stations on the West Highland Lines and the Kyle Line (only Attadale and now Achanalt had been done).

I'd assumed there would also have been rich pickings on the Far North Line to Northampton, however amazingly ALL had already been tackled, most if not all using an "under 16 year old with staff card" discount.

Of course the project is a living moving one as "new" stations are being added to the list, in Scotland that included the Borders Line (not that new now), the Leven Line stations, Kintore, Reston and Inverness Airport.

After a feeble attempt to get a decent "selfie" including the blank card showing Achanalt, I ambled over to speak to a couple of station staff members who directed me to a nearby desk. I rocked up beaming, to announce I was adding to the collection, only to be met with a slight ambivalence as the bod manning the desk seemed more interested in texts on his phone. Slightly deflated I was "escorted" through the gate line by a friendlier guy who gave me a knowing smile as if to acknowledge my contribution.

Earlyish next day I returned to the station to head to London and catch a flight from Gatwick back to Inverness (compare circa £36 for the flight with circa £98 for the train). Faith was restored however, as my ticket was already up in the display cabinet!! Cheesy grins ensued and yet more selfies.

Just to bookend the whole trip I had to get the evening train from Inverness to Achanalt to collect my car. I reminded the guard to let me off because there isn't any public transport after that train for just over 12 hours. Again I arrived after dark but this time the station platform lights were on and I could watch 158703 eventually disappear into the gloom. A bonkers couple of days, but enjoyable nonetheless. If I could afford the circa £98 train fare, plus hotels, food, petrol, connections, and flights and so on, could I make a career out of this??

Achanalt Station, Photos: Ken Thomson

Green Signals

UWC Trial for FNL?

www

Green Signals – what's that? Thanks to Frank Roach I discovered this excellent Podcast by Nigel Harris (former Managing Editor/ Events Director *RAIL* Magazine) and Richard Bowker (former Chair/CEO Strategic Rail Authority), [**www.greensignals.org/**]

Whilst surfing the latest podcast episode I discovered a nugget on a trial for Network Rail in Wales. John Yellowlees had also contacted FoFNL about the trial as it had potential opportunities for both the Far North and Kyle lines.

The trial, part of a project led by Universal Signalling, known as Space Technology for Low-Cost Rural Signalling (SteLoRS), used innovative technology to help manage and monitor User Worked Level Crossings (UWCs). The initial "shadow" trial (November 2025) had been conducted on an 11 mile stretch of the Heart of Wales line. Now Network Rail/Transport for Wales are to extend the trial to the full line (96 miles/126 UWCs), initially in "shadow" mode and then made live. Full line roll out is estimated to cost "seven figures" (tbc).

UWCs are very common on largely rural single track lines with low train frequency and relatively low crossing usage. Typically a UWC is a "private" crossing with user manually operated gates. A lineside phone is provided to contact the signaller for permission to cross. Farming activities can mean intense use of crossings at certain times of year for example when harvesting activities are evident.

For the initial Welsh trial the controlling signal box would expect 300-400 calls per day from crossing users. The system is called U-Cross. Beacons, about the size of saucers, are attached to every 30th sleeper and the train carries a beacon reader attached to its tail lamp bracket. Beacon readers could be deployed easily on track maintenance trains such as tampers or charter and one off trains. Communications from the beacon reader is via a high grade commercial satellite mobile system to the controlling signal box monitor.

Installation of beacons is simple and quick

The monitor shows a "map" of the line, the UWC locations, any train locations and each UWC is colour coded – red for train approaching (not safe to cross), amber for train approaching (safe to cross – limited time available but within safety envelope) and green for train in section (but safe to cross) or train passed (safe to cross). The company responsible for the system (Universal Signalling) has been to the Inverness RETB Signalling Centre to discuss a possible trial, probably on the Far North Line, in 2027.

The big advantages of U-Cross are primarily safety related and user experience. Signallers can make better decisions on authorising crossings knowing where trains are and users will have better access to information via the signaller on timescale to cross including "instant" crossing after a train passes. Under the existing system up to 45 mins could elapse between a train entering and leaving a section before users were allowed to cross. Protection of trackside workers is another benefit.

Footnote: The Editor discovered a fascinating internet article on how "space weather" can affect satellites. Presumably satellite based train monitoring/tracking systems assess the risk of "space weather" interaction and potential issues.

Ken Thomson

The Shaping of the Far North Line

A Geomorphological Jaunt

On the raised beach north of Brora - tapered well down from the fifty-foot norm but still safely above beach level

*FoFNL member **David Jarman** is a hillgoer and geomorphologist who has studied extensively the structuring and evolution of the mountain ranges in Scotland and Europe.*

All railways have had to overcome physical obstacles to reach ever-farther-flung destinations - thus the Highland Line north from Perth had to cross Drumochter Pass (usefully enlarged by ice overflowing through the ancient col from Rannoch into Speyside) and then the Slochd (which is a slot cut by glacial meltwater flooding out of the Findhorn Monadhliath).

The Far North Line first had to contend with the three firths – the Inverness Firth as was (now termed Inner Moray Firth) with its Beauly Firth extension, then the Cromarty Firth, and finally the Dornoch Firth. These are former river valleys, drowned by rising sea levels as the great continental ice sheets vanished. How convenient it would have been if the North Sea had stayed largely dry, as when Dogger Bank was roamed by mammoths and their hunters. The Far North could not afford to bridge the firths, even though they are quite shallow or narrow, whereas the Forth and Tay crossings served much wealthier catchments. Hence the long loops round by Beauly and by Lairg – albeit some suggest the latter detour may have suited the Duke of Sutherland in opening up his estates.

Beyond the firths, the surveyors and engineers will have sighed briefly with great relief, as a near-absence of 'relief' extends along the coast from Loch Fleet and Golspie to Helmsdale – just the River Brora to bridge, otherwise open fields – albeit said Duke imposed some unnecessary gradients to preserve his gardened vista from Dunrobin Castle to the North Sea (perhaps he liked to hear his engines working hard up round the back).

But in Scotland, such good things soon come to an end, and the broad fertile coastal swathe tapers out to almost nothing at Helmsdale. Ahead, the Ord of Caithness. This massive obstacle drops steeply straight into the sea, with not a sliver of beach to follow, and it goes on for many miles, far too long to tunnel. The A9 has to climb abruptly to over 700 feet to cross it, and then has a turbulent career (the notorious Berriedale Braes still terrify North Coast 500 campervanners) before relative sanity is restored from Dunbeath to Wick.

So the projectors of the Far North had no option but to turn inland at Helmsdale, up the Strath of Kildonan to Forsinard, itself almost 700 feet up on the Caithness march albeit by much longer easier approaches, and then down again across the Flow Country to Thurso. Ironically the link across the waist of Caithness to Wick was probably the easiest 15 miles of the entire line.

Why this second huge detour? The Victorians had no option but to take the landscape as God had created it, unquestioned, if by then with some basic knowledge of the geology they were up against

The wide coastal strip at Brora, tapering out towards Helmsdale - ideal railway country

(the Ord is the core of the Helmsdale granite pluton). We are now discovering rather more about our landscape origins here, although it has yet to make it to the guide books or school texts, hence this story to while away some *longeur* in your next trip to Altnabreac (a platform I have indeed sampled, in an entertainingly unplanned reversal of direction).

Coastal railways

If you think about it, as I only just have, putting insomnia to good use, there are remarkably few stretches of British coast graced by railways. Mostly the tracks venture down valleys to coastal termini, stopping nervously well short of the waves. So although England famously has Dawlish and Folkestone and Cumbrian Coast, they are altogether much briefer than the countless glamorous photos would suggest (and are all regretted by today's hapless operators). East Coast Main Line, West Coast Main Line - trades descriptions... For once, Wales wins out, big time, along much of its north coast and halfway round Cardigan Bay - Aberdovey to Pwllheli.

Scotland's east coast railway kicks off right from the Border, if cautiously, with glimpses of sombre sea north of Berwick and passing Torness and then snippets from the Forth Bridge along the Fife coast to Kirkcaldy. Beyond Dundee there are affinities with the Far North route (Firth of Tay: Cromarty Firth). The sea is seen at Carnoustie and Lunan Bay, but the line still keeps mostly inland. The Highland Boundary Fault finally brings that Grampian mountain chain to the coast at Stonehaven, which could have been another Ord, but there the land is flat enough for the line to creep round the low clifftop by Portlethen to Aberdeen. The railway scarcely touches our rugged, heavily indented west coast, pace the Firth of Clyde with Ailsa Craig famously seen from Troon and Girvan, and of course nearing Arisaig, so far as encroaching rhodojungle still permits.

Golspie to Helmsdale thus turns out to be something of a rarity, and a railway builders' idea of heaven (do the good folk of Brora know?). So what in the making of our landscape has bequeathed it to us - and why does it run out of puff at Helmsdale?

Fault not entirely to blame

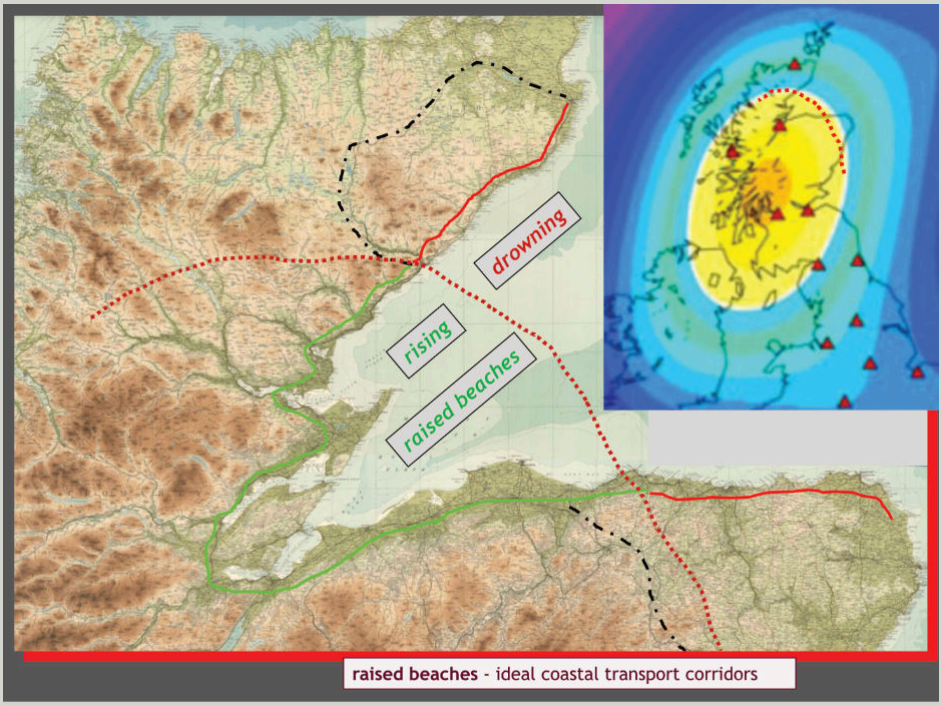
First of all, this is not a no-fault claim. The Great Glen Fault is well-known, where the two halves of

the Highlands slid alongside, unerringly straight Inverness-Fort William and a long way either end. It clips the Caithness coast off Wick on its way east of Orkney to slice Shetland. But there are others parallel to it almost as impressive – the Highland Railway converges with the Loch Ericht Fault at Dalwhinnie to follow it down Strath Spey. On our north-west side of it, we have a sequence of faults bracketing Ben Wyvis, delimiting the mountain rocks from the Old Red Sandstone of the firths, and finally meeting the North Sea coast as the Helmsdale Fault, carrying on just offshore to make a 'railway points' merge with the Great Glen Fault.

But while this Helmsdale Fault brings seriously ancient very hard rocks up against slightly younger slightly softer rocks to define our precious coastal strip, that isn't even half the story. For the Helmsdale River cuts up the middle of that gorse-clad granite pluton, with The Ord just comprising the NE half - our precious coastal strip runs nicely along beneath the SW half. And even younger (Jurassic) rocks occur the seaward side of the Helmsdale Fault, all the way from Brora (where they just come ashore to host our defunct Brora coalfield) to Wick (they also give us the Beatrice oilfield, visible offshore from the Ord). So geologically, the fertile strip could have carried on beneath the Ord, affording the railway easy passage into Caithness. What has stopped it?

See-saw sea and trampoline land

Look closely at the strip of land the railway is following past Brora: it is not cruising just behind the beach near sea level, but a bit above, flat fields atop a low cliff; inland of it there is a bolder but still grassy cliff, and above that yet more farmland, more undulating, through which the A9 has to snake amongst the crofts and townships, and only above them does the rough gorse-clad mountainside rear up. In our train we are following a 'raised beach' once washed by the tides, and where storms cut the backing cliff into the lush pasture slopes.



The 'hinge line' intersecting the Moray Firth coasts at Helmsdale and Cullen (inset - most of Scotland is still bouncing back - yellow oval). Most of the green coastline has raised beaches; most of the red is cliffed. Black dashes – Far North and Aberdeen lines forced inland to avoid coastal cliffs.

This raised beach is a vital feature that can be traced right round the Moray Firth and many other Scottish shores. It was first mapped as the Fifty-foot beach (above sea level), until geomorphologists measured it and found it tailed off in all directions from the centre.

The centre being Rannoch Moor and Ben Nevis, where the Scottish ice sheet was thickest (well burying the summits). It thinned out all around, so tops like Ben Hope usually poked out. The weight of a kilometre or two of ice depressed the land like a slo-mo trampoline. Take away all that ice (astonishingly quickly), and the landmass trampolines back up - much faster than global sea levels could keep up (the vast Canadian and Scando-Russian ice sheets lasted longer, went slower).

The trampoline effect isn't just upwards - round the edges, it's downwards. So there is a hinge point outside which the land is subsiding - and getting drowned as sea levels catch up. You can guess just where that hinge point is on the Sutherland coast - and for support, look at the other side of the outer Moray Firth, where the friendly coastal strip runs out and cliffs bar road and rail communication. For Helmsdale read Cullen. And somewhere between Stonehaven and Montrose. And beyond Dunbar and Torness.....

In fact all of England - south of that Cumbrian coastal strip and Berwick - is in debit, which is why all the river mouths are drowned estuaries, or deeply-drowned Cornish rias (so why is Wales the exception, as ever? well, if there is enough sand and silt, and strong currents to shape them, spits, bars and dunes can veil the drowned river mouths).

The raised beach tapering down and out at Portgower, just enough width left for both road and rail to squeeze round that corner into Helmsdale

So there you are. If Caithness hadn't stuck out so Far North, the Ord could have had a slightly-raised beach at the foot of its cliffs - probably for the operators to curse.

David Jarman - Mountain Landform Research - Ross-shire
davidjarman914@gmail.com for talks and shows, in aid of pancreatic cancer charities.

As some of the geological terms used here are perhaps unfamiliar, a short explanation seems appropriate:

***col** - the lowest point on a mountain ridge between two peaks. It may also be called a gap or pass.*

***pluton** - a large, deep underground body of igneous rock formed from magma that cooled slowly. Plutons can become visible at the surface after erosion removes the overlying rocks.*

***ria** - a coastal inlet formed by the partial submergence of an unglaciated river valley. It is a drowned river valley that remains open to the sea.*

Musical Mountain

Andrew Drummond's Lochinver Railway article in *FNE* 98 prompted Richard Ardern to send in a greetings card which his late father, a great Suilven enthusiast, had had printed when he was the owner of a second-hand bookshop in Kirkcudbright after retirement.

Suilven from Lochinver - 1818

Watercolour by **William Daniell** 1769-1837

The card contains a poem by Norman MacCaig (1910-96) which sees the mountain in musical terms:

Musical Moment in Assynt by Norman MacCalg

A mountain is a sort of music: theme
And counter theme displaced in air amongst
Their own variations.
Wagnerian Devil signed the Coigach score;
And God was Mozart when he wrote Cul Mor.
You climb a trio when you climb Cul Beag.
Stac Polly - there's a rondo in seven sharps,
Neat as a trivet.
And Quinag, rallentando in the haze,
Is one long tune extending phrase by phrase.
I listen with my eyes and see through that
Mellifluous din of shapes my masterpiece
Of masterpieces;
One sandstone chord that holds up time in space -
Sforzando SUILVEN reared on his ground bass.

Sharps - a sharp sign ♯, when placed before a note, raises the pitch by a 'semitone' (the smallest change in pitch possible in most Western music). "Seven sharps" refers to a 'key signature' which can be found at the beginning of every line of written music, informing the player which notes must always be raised by a semitone. "Seven sharps" is the most possible, as there are only seven different note names in music - A through to G.

Rallentando - Italian musical term which means 'slow down gradually'.

Chord - two or more notes of the same length, played at the same time. The poet is probably thinking of the sound of a whole orchestra playing one long chord together.

Sforzando - Italian musical term - literally 'suddenly, with force' - it applies to one note at a time, often to the start of a long note or chord.

Ground bass - a short pattern of notes played by the lowest instruments. It is repeated often, while the other players contribute more interesting notes above it. The most obvious example is Pachelbel's *Canon*, loved by wedding organisers, hated by cello players (same 8 notes, 28 times)!

Book Review

Railways Through Settle

Mike Wedgewood & **Eddie Parker**

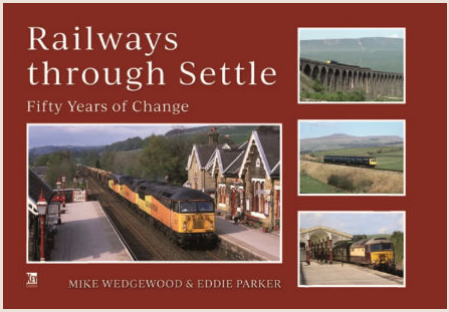
Volume 79 of the *Britain's Railways* series.

Key Publishing, 2026, **£29.95**

Format: Landscape 30cm x 22cm, 160pp

ISBN: 9781836320944

www.keypublishing.com



The reader can be forgiven for wondering why a review of *Railways Through Settle* is relevant to the Far North Line. There is a story attached: In the May 2025 issue of *FNE* we featured a "Mystery" photo which turned out to be Golspie. Investigation at the time resulted in confirmation from Mike Wedgewood, a FoFNL member whose book, *Highland Railways - Four Decades of Diesel Traction North of Perth*, I had reviewed in the past.

I had never met Mike, but in the course of email exchanges I mentioned a wish I had had since putting together our 2024 150th Exhibition, to publish a book featuring the wonderful photos from Niall Laybourne and Peter Moore. Mike very kindly offered his help and expertise.

Many emails followed and a long phone conversation took place - plans for a book began to crystallise, on different and better lines from my original thoughts. Our planned volume will be along the same lines as *Railways Through Settle*, showing how the Far North Line's appearance has changed from around 1960 to the present. We both want to feature fine photos where the train is the subject, but the scenery and the lineside features are a vital component.

Wishing to meet up, we agreed that we should find a suitable city between Mike's home near Hull and mine near Glasgow. We settled upon Newcastle, and in July we met for an excellent pub lunch and a long chat.

Our task now is to find photos to fill some of the gaps - obviously the earlier ones are harder to find and the quality is more of an issue, as fewer people had access to good cameras. If you either have photos of your own, or know someone who was taking photos then, please do get in touch.

Railways Through Settle is not just another Settle & Carlisle volume, the authors decided to include all the lines which pass through Settle Junction, which is where the railway to Carlisle begins. There is a substantial introduction to the book and to each chapter, giving some history and geographical information. The captions to each photograph also include much of interest, more than just a note about the trains.

Most of the pictures are chosen not only to show how the trains and the railway environment have changed over the decades, but to portray the wonderful scenery in all its variety. This will be our aim in the FNL volume.

Looking through the photos you can almost imagine yourself there at the lineside - but warm and comfortable at home, not cold and wet as the photographers often must have been! I've always thought that our beautiful scenery in the UK can look wonderful in all weathers, so I found plenty to enjoy here.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the book is just how many different types of train traverse these lines, from steam specials to diesel-hauled rail tours, and from freight to normal service trains.

Having seen *Railways Through Settle* I'm very excited to see what we can produce for the Far North Line.

I.B.

Blending In

Kyle Tricker, a familiar photographer for *FNE*, was busy this summer catching trains on camera in their natural environment. The wonderful skies are a bonus!

Leven livered 158719 coasting away from Brora bound for Wick on 29 July (above) and 158709 thundering through Evanton with an Inverness bound train from Ardgay on 4 May (below).