

FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE



WINDOW GAZER'S GUIDE

The Friends of the Far North Line was involved with the 2007 specification for refurbishing the Class 158 trains on the line, which created more bike and luggage space. This configuration, which also included comfortable seats aligned with the windows, was kept in the subsequent refurbishment programme.



Leaving **Inverness Station**, the train is soon on the new Ness Viaduct (which replaces the one swept away in 1989) over the river at the inward end of the harbour. There might be shipping to see or, depending on the state of the tide, the sheer rush of water to marvel at. The Beaully Firth is reached just before the Caledonian Canal swing bridge at Clachnaharry Lock which the train clunks over at 10 mph.

Once the former fishing village of Clachnaharry is passed, the view opens up up to the head of the Firth with Ben Wyvis dominant in the background beyond the Black Isle peninsula. A passing loop to relieve this busy stretch of line is to be built here when funds become available, and will be known as the Delmore Loop. The sea sometimes freezes as far out as the canal sea lock and when the tide is full or the sea pastel blue, this is one of the most inspiring views on the line, best enjoyed from the right hand (coastal) side of the train. Further along near Lentrane is a great place to spot wading birds of all kinds particularly on an incoming tide.

Beaully and **Conon Bridge** are the two shortest station platforms in Britain and passengers have to use one of the middle doors. The small addition to the Beaully stationmaster's house (now privately owned) used to be Lord Lovat's private waiting room. The golf course approaching **Muir of Ord** was once the great tryst where cattle from the Highlands were gathered together before being driven south to market. Until 1960, the Muir was the junction for a branch line to Fortrose. Ben Wyvis now dominates the view from the left hand side of the train all the way to Dingwall

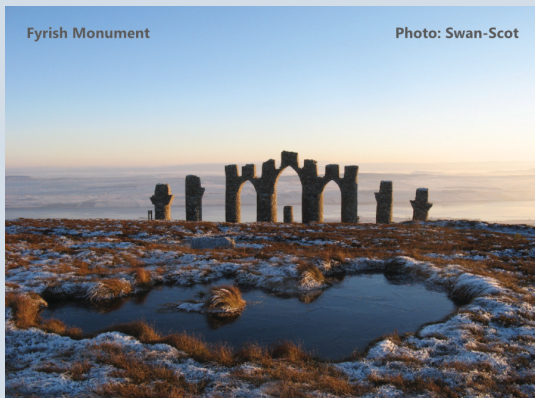


and it is a good area to spot the red kites reintroduced to the area in 1989. Conon Bridge was reopened in 2013 and but for WWI intervening would have been the junction with a branch for Cromarty.

Entering **Dingwall**, the county town of Ross-shire, high up on the left you can see the new agricultural mart building with café and exhibition on cattle droving. Dingwall used to be a busy station with an

engine shed and it is the junction for the line to Kyle of Lochalsh which heads off to the left. We now travel along the shores of the Cromarty Firth past the Cromarty Bridge which was one of three estuarial crossings which have considerably shortened the A9 road to the north to the detriment of the railway.

The Fyrih Monument on top of the hill to the left is a folly, commissioned in 1782 by Sir Hector Munro, modelled on the Gates of Negapatam in India. Its appearance from a distance is reminiscent of the stick-like figures in Lowry paintings.



Alness Station reopened in 1973 and is famous for its floral displays.

Nearing **Invergordon**, offshore oil platforms may already have been spotted. Offshore maintenance is a big industry in the Cromarty Firth as is passenger traffic from the biggest cruise liners in the world which use Invergordon's deep water pier regularly throughout the summer. Invergordon is a former naval base (with a mutiny in 1931), and also has an extensive grain distillery which we pass through. To



the right we can see the entrance to the Cromarty Firth between the two headlands known as the Sutors. Beneath the North Sutor is the former oil fabrication yard at Nigg now used for the assembly of offshore wind turbine towers. Rich level farmland extends all the way to Tain.

At **Tain** we start to travel along the Dornoch Firth with views north along the coast of Sutherland which we will not reach for another hour. The 1991 Dornoch Bridge for the A9 was built so that a railway bridge could be erected

alongside, a scheme which British Rail promoted. This fell short by a £4m contribution required from the Scottish Office which was not independent or much involved in railways in those days.

Tain is a former Royal Burgh, a pleasant town with an interesting museum. The station was the former terminus of the stopping train service to Inverness which ceased when the line was rationalised in 1960. The station buildings have been superbly restored as a restaurant named Platform 1864. Just to the north is the Glenmorangie distillery which has been extended recently and, further on, another at Edderton. Steel magnate Andrew Carnegie's former home, Skibo Castle, is visible across the water between the trees but you have to be quick to see it.

Ardgay used to be named for the town of



Bonar Bridge at the head of the estuary on the opposite shore. The railway reached this point in October 1864.

We are now in Sutherland, and the continuation and completion of the line to Wick and Thurso took another 10 years and was achieved largely due to the efforts of the 3rd Duke of Sutherland. After passing through the attractive wayside station at **Culrain** we cross the Oykel Viaduct and go through **Invershin**, another by-request halt. Dominating the view is Carbisdale Castle on a crag on the left. For many years this was a youth hostel, but millions of pounds of repairs needed on the roof brought about its closure. It was built as a flamboyant piece of one-upmanship on the Sutherland family by the Dowager Duchess of Sutherland and is again on the market, having been partially renovated.

Up the hill towards **Lairg**, the scenery changes to open moorland and hill grazing. Lairg Station is two miles above the village and was formerly an interchange point for passengers and mails to places like Tongue and Lochinver on the north and west coasts. The bus connection is now more limited. The line turns south east, over the summit and down the glen through **Rogart** to Strath Fleet meeting up with the A9 again at The Mound, once a junction for the 1902 light railway to Dornoch which closed in 1960. Loch Fleet is a National Nature Reserve and another good place to watch for bird life, seals and maybe an otter.



Entering **Golspie**, the line hugs the coast and the train may then stop at the request halt at **Dunrobin Castle**. This was the seat of the Duke and is open to the public from April to October. The Victorian museum in the gardens is a fascinating period piece and the wooden station building is most attractive and houses a small railway museum opened on special occasions. The next stop is **Brora** where there used to be a woollen mill and earlier a brick works and coal mine which didn't close until the 1970s. This hive of industry created the earliest (wooden) railway in the north in the 1770s between the mine and the harbour.



The next 15 minutes is one of the highlights of the journey as the line runs along the coastline of sandy beaches giving way eventually to rocky shores. Seals are plentiful, as are rabbits. The extensive views stretch more than 25 miles out to sea past Tarbat Ness lighthouse to the Moray Coast. To the north when nearing Helmsdale the huge offshore wind farm may be seen. It has replaced the three installations of the former Beatrice Oil Field.

The fishing village of **Helmsdale** has the extensive Timespan Museum which includes material on the 1869 Sutherland Goldrush. The restored station building is now a self-catering unit sleeping up to ten people. The line

turns inland along the Strath of Kildonan and is at its most beautiful during May when the yellow gorse and broom are in full flower. The River Helmsdale is renowned for its salmon fishing, and red deer are evident most of the year. **Kildonan** is the nearest station to the gold panning sites. It is a long way to the next passing place (not **Kinbrace**) which is **Forsinard**. Here there is an RSPB reserve with a visitor centre and viewing tower with walks to experience the peaty Flow Country with sphagnum moss, sundew flowers and rare birds such as the Greenshank. The area was confirmed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in July 2024.

On over the moors, look out for the County March Summit board (at 708 feet) as we cross into Caithness and then through the remote station of **Altnabreac**. Looking south we can see the monadnocks of Morven and Ben Alisky sticking up above the peaty and rocky landscape.

Looking north from the late train in the winter there is always the possibility of a display of the Aurora Borealis. **Scotscauder** station has been nicely restored and we soon arrive at **Georgemas Junction**, where the branch to Thurso comes in from the left.

Here the train reverses to serve **Thurso**. We are back into farming country with flagstones used vertically as field boundaries. Behind Thurso can be seen the hills of the island of Hoy across the Pentland Firth in

Orkney. Those with a keen eye may see the top of the Old Man of Hoy sticking up above the general level of the cliffs. Two miles from Thurso at Scrabster there are regular sailings to Stromness in Orkney. A bus service runs along the north coast to John o Groats, passing the Queen Mother's Castle of Mey on the way.

Leaving Thurso the train retraces its steps to Georgemas where you will see the new sidings and huge gantry crane used to take low level radioactive waste away from the decommissioned Dounreay nuclear reactors.

Another 15 minutes brings us to the end of the line in **Wick**, a fishing port with a really interesting maritime heritage museum and, some ten minutes walk away, the stunning award-winning new building known as Nucleus, which combines local archives and those of the entire UK nuclear industry.

Wick is 161 miles by rail from Inverness or 174 when you go via Thurso. There is plenty of scope with a rover ticket to break the journey en route and enjoy some of the many attractions.

The Far North Line is widely recognised as a railway with unique features and wonderfully varied scenery.

Richard Ardern (2025)

www.fofnl.org.uk

Looking across Thurso and the Pentland Firth to Orkney



Photo: Niall Laybourne