

PRESS RELEASE

150th anniversary event to mark the railway reaching the north coast of Scotland, 21st June 2024

The railway may have reached the south coast, at Brighton, in 1841 but it took another 33 years to reach the Scottish north coast, the line to Thurso and Wick opening on 28 July 1874.

The Sutherland and Caithness Railway company was responsible for constructing the line north from Helmsdale. This was the terminus of the Third Duke of Sutherland's personally financed railway which followed the coast across 17 miles of his estates and was completed in 1871. But further north the coastal route was made difficult by high hills reaching the shore and so the chosen route struck inland following the Strath of Kildonan – almost deserted since the Highland Clearances – and climbing steadily to the remote peat bogs of the Caithness Flow (from Old Norse 'floi' meaning wet, marshy ground) before descending to the fertile flat lands of the far north east.

The 25 miles of track across the Flow is amongst the most remote in the UK; the derelict lineside cottages of surfacemen of past ages bear witness to lives lived – in service to the railway – in isolation with no road access and none of the services most households in the country take for granted today.



The Flow itself is a place of rare habitats developed over thousands of years. The deep layers of peat that lie beneath the blanket bog are an important carbon store. Such peat bogs cover just 3% of the world, but hold nearly 30% of all the

earth's carbon. Hence the renewed interest in the area as a contributor to combatting climate change and the application for UNESCO World Heritage Site status, currently being assessed, for 4,000km² of peat bog, including the RSPB reserve at Forsinard.

Remains of railway cottages at Altnegoul

(Andy Grant)

To celebrate the history and survival of this remarkable route, the Far North Line Community Rail Partnership in collaboration with the Friends of the Far North Line are organising a one-day event at RSPB Forsinard on Friday 21st June. Speakers will cover the history and the future prospects of both the line and the landscape. Following this a bus will take those interested to Thurso to travel the line – and on to Inverness if required – on the last southbound train of the day. (The start time of the event follows the arrival of the first train of the day from Inverness)



Flow Country Partnership

Participants will receive a booklet which will include both a line guide to the route and accounts of the history and operation of this lonely, scenic line.

Completing the Far North Line, published to mark the event, will be on sale.

Further details and booking form from Michael Willmot at helmsdalestation@gmail.com

Notes for Editors

- Numbers of places are limited so booking is essential
- Photos in the above item above are attached as separate PNG files. Feel free to use with acknowledgements shown
- Far North Line CRP website: www.fnlcrp.co.uk
- Friends of the Far North Line website: www.fofni.org.uk

- Further information from Michael Willmot, Secretary, Far North Line Community Rail Partnership

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