

# THE HIGHLAND LINE

(PERTH, PITLOCHRY, AVIEMORE, INVERNESS, LAIRG, WICK/THURSO)

by **Tom Weir**



## **The Highland Line**

(PERTH, PITLOCHRY, AVIEMORE, INVERNESS, WICK/THURSO)

*Tom Weir*

### **A Pictorial Guide by Tom Weir**

Printed and Published by Famedram Publishers Limited,  
Gartocharn, Alexandria, Dunbartonshire, Scotland.

Published in 1974, the centenary of what became the Highland Railway reaching Thurso and Wick, this book provided a pictorial companion for travelling the route from Perth to Caithness.

The section of the book from Inverness northwards is presented here, giving an interesting snapshot and perspective from 1974.

With the introduction of RETB

signalling in 1985, and DMUs in 1989, the look of the Far North Line has changed, yet the line itself is almost as it was in 1974 - bar the subsequent removal of some passing loops.

Tom Weir died in 2006 at the age of 91. Having been born in Springburn, a town instrumental in the construction of thousands of locomotives, so it's hardly surprising that he had a keen interest in railways.

#### USING THIS BOOK

*THE FORM and style of this pictorial companion to the Highland Line has been chosen so that the traveller may open it anywhere he happens to be between Perth and Wick and Thurso and, against a photograph, read something relevant to the history, scenery and geography of that bit of the line. Should he read from the beginning to the end of the book, the linkage between the pictures and the text unfolds a continuous story.*

*This method of telling the story was chosen because the line Perth to Wick is so full of variety and is of such great railway interest in its climb over the high Grampians and the spanning of our greatest rivers by superb viaducts of stone and steel. To get the photographs a special trip was made by road and rail in 1974, just 100 years after the first train reached Thurso and Wick.*

*As the book goes to press the Government has presented its railway Bill which, when ratified, will pay out £1500 million in subsidies over the next five years, scrapping the Beeching principle that railways should be closed unless they pay their way. With the intention to keep the present railway network it means an expanding future for the Highland Line and should remove the threat of closure hanging over the Kyle, Mallaig and Oban lines.*

TOM WEIR

*The final photograph as the book's narrative reaches the end of the Highland Main Line, nearing Inverness, provides an appropriate place to begin, as Tom Weir's comments for the photo have a strong resonance over 50 years later.*



**The double track in this photograph** begins at Culloden junction north end and stretches to Inverness. The picture was taken one Sunday morning at the bend just before the viaduct. Surfacemen are busy laying new 600 foot lengths of welded track.

Formerly the double track continued another 4¾ miles to Daviot, but the second track was lifted at the time of the singling of the Blair Atholl to Dalwhinnie section. As mentioned elsewhere, railway consultants Mott, Hay & Anderson recommend in their report on the line re-instatement of these stretches of double track.

Costs are interesting. In the building of the line from Dunkeld to Forres, records Mitchell [Joseph Mitchell, engineer of the Inverness & Perth Junction Railway]:

"The total cost of the works, including all extra and accommodation works, amounted for the 104 miles to £798,311. The land, including severance, to £70,000 and the preliminary Parliamentary, engineering and law expenses to £50,893, making the cost of this portion of the company's lines £919,204, or £8860 per mile."

Thirty-five years later it cost over £1 million to build 34¾ miles of line for the direct route Aviemore to Inverness by Slochd. Now it would cost at least £60 million merely to convert the single line from Culloden to Stanley Junction to double track — the ideal way to increase line capacity.

**The early morning train from Perth** backs into Inverness Station after the final run down from Culloden.

Though the distance from Culloden is only 6¾ miles the run down affords fine views over the Moray Firth, with the hills of Sutherland and Ross in the background. The entry to Inverness, past the city's refuse dump and the gasometer, is of interest to rail enthusiasts. The train weaves its way through a network of lines as it loops round the Rose Street curve in order to back into the station. This loop makes it convenient to drop off any carriages for the Kyle line, since Inverness Station was never adapted to take through trains.



Such a time-consuming layout is something of a curiosity today, but it works; nor do I find any criticism of it in the report on station and terminus improvements by the consultants Mott, Hay & Anderson, who merely state that an increase in passenger-freight movements could be accommodated.

At the time of writing there are 18 car-trains a week from London to Inverness. There is also a daytime service from Stirling to Inverness and there could be an increase on this while A9 road improvements are being carried out. The high price of petrol is also a powerful argument for putting your car on the train.

**This is the busy main street** in Dingwall, expanding like Alness, Invergordon and Tain with oil-related developments. From Dingwall the Kyle Line goes off west. On the Highland Line there is a great sense of growth. The Moray Firth Report has predicted industrial expansion raising the population by as much as 60% over the next two decades.

Dingwall is the first stop out of Inverness now, the seven intermediate stations having been closed to provide a faster service.

A demand for the re-opening of Muir of Ord and Beaulie has been resisted because of the feeling that these villages can best be served by bus.

Alness, on the other hand, closed in 1960, has been re-opened because of its recent rapid population growth. Many of the new inhabitants are employed in the aluminium smelter at Invergordon.

Invergordon itself has become, as it was in war-time, a very busy station, with a special branch line leading into the smelter and pipe trains travelling daily between Grangemouth and Peterhead.

Fearn is busy too, with steel and other traffic for platforms building at Nigg Bay. Surprisingly, however, there are as yet no extra trains serving Dingwall and Invergordon — just the normal three a day from Inverness to Thurso and Wick and a newspaper train on Sundays.



---

**This is the Dornoch Firth**, seen from the Struie showing the route of the railway along the firth. The line, following the coast, crosses the little lagoon in the centre of the picture on its way to Bonar Bridge, at top left hand edge of the Firth. The little sheet of water beyond is known as the Kyle of Sutherland. In the distance is Ben More Assynt of Sutherland.

Tain, capital of Easter Ross and an important station on the line, lies out of the picture, well to the right. In pre-rail times it was the site of an important crossing-place — the Meikle Ferry. Notice the prominent spit projecting into the water in the middle of this photograph. In droving days cattle used to be swum across the Firth here.

The line from Invergordon to Bonar Bridge was opened in 1864 and Joseph Mitchell was still pressing forward with it, despite illness due to overwork and worry. He had been stricken with paralysis on the last stages of the



Perth-Inverness line in 1863, yet here he was surveying and lodging his plans that same year, building 26½ miles of new line and having it in service by October 1864.

He wrote of it: "The cuttings amount to 550,000 cubic yards, of which 20,000 are rock. There are 27 bridges over streams from 40 to 50 foot span, 26 public and accommodation road bridges."

The building cost was £5180 per mile which was truly, to quote his own words: "... a specimen of very economical railway construction."



**The loch at the head** of the Dornoch Firth, known as the Kyle of Sutherland, is really an expansion of the River Oykel. From Bonar Bridge the line keeps west of it until it gets to Culrain at Carbisdale Castle, where it crosses over. The iron girder bridge of 220 foot span is carried 55 feet above ordinary tides on five stone side arches.

There is a station at each end of the bridge: Culrain on the west and Invershin to the east. The passenger fare used to be ½d. — a

fine bargain when there was no crossing of the Oykel nearer than Bonar Bridge.

That half mile journey between stations (and over a river) could be done for a halfpenny until 1917.

The difficult section from Bonar Bridge to Golspie was sanctioned in June 1865 and opened in April 1868.

The 27 miles involved much heavy cutting through rocks and the building of embankments and breast walls.

The line goes inland almost to Loch Shin, climbing to Lairg then swinging away east over another rise to come down to the sea at Loch Fleet.

---

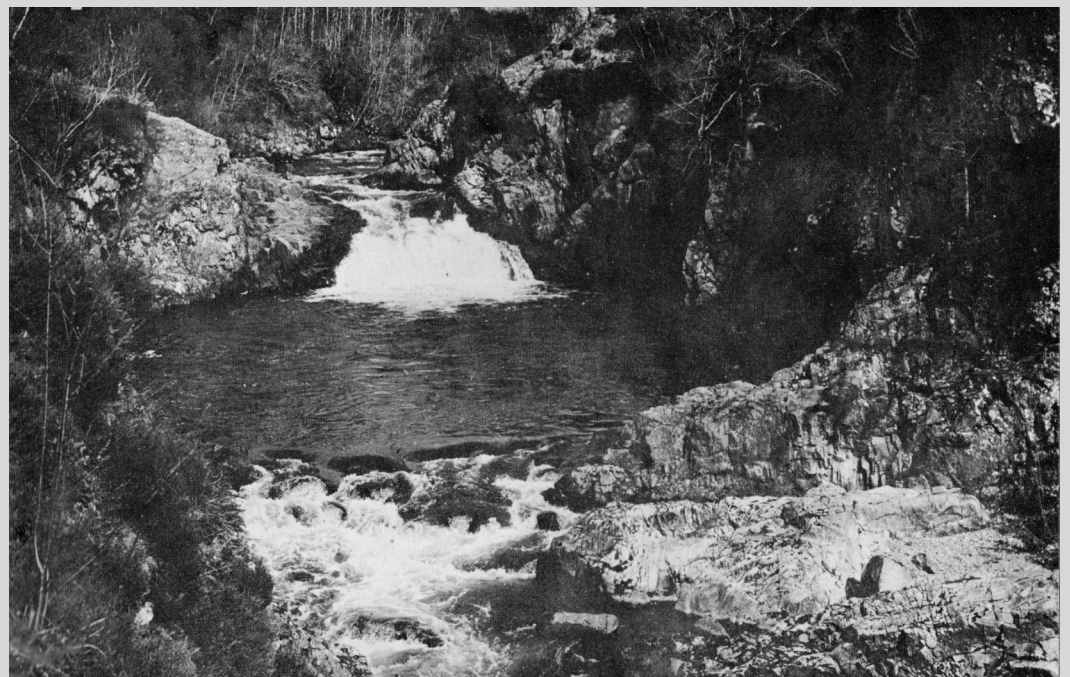
**These are the Falls of Shin**, above which, just out of sight on the right, the line climbs due north, following the valley to Lairg. The gradient here is 1 in 60 through solid rock.

This stage involved the builders in levelling a ledge above the falls to make a 40 yard platform on which to lay the line. Beyond here cuttings had to be blasted out to break a way through to the important cross-roads of ways which is Lairg.

The student of topography might wonder why the line took to the hills here into such sparsely inhabited country when the population was on the coast and an easier way presented itself from Tain if the Dornoch Firth were crossed at the Meikle Ferry, serving the Royal Burgh of Dornoch and keeping north along the coast.

It was the Duke of Sutherland, coming forward with £30,000, and adding another £12,500 when the route of the railway was in doubt, that clinched the decision to go to Lairg.

The Duke was deputy chairman of the committee considering railway proposals for an extension of the line into Sutherland and he wanted it to go to Lairg to open up the interior of his own remote lands.



**This is Lairg Station**, situated some two miles from the village on the edge of moorland.

No doubt the Duke of Sutherland had more than the welfare of the remnant populations of the interior in mind when he insisted on the route to Lairg, for the people had been largely replaced by sheep, which meant a considerable traffic for the railway.

Even today the autumn sheep sale in Lairg is the biggest in Scotland, with 30,000 and more on offer. But none are carried by rail today. Stock lorries come from all over Scotland and England to carry away the sheep.



From Lairg passenger mail buses connect to Lochinver, Durness and Tongue in the north west.

The Highland Railway actually mooted the possibility of a branch line from Lairg running along Loch Shin to Laxford Bridge. This was fortunately dropped, as was another proposal to take a line from Culrain in the Kyle of Sutherland along the River Oykel to come through the wilds of Assynt under Suilven by the River Kirkaig to Lochinver!

The difficulty of such lines was not so much the physical building through some of the rockiest country in Britain, but that of getting revenue from an area with such scant population.

---

**From Lairg the line turns away** from the hills and heads eastwards for the sea again. It climbs to 488 feet through expensive cuttings then makes a fast descent of Strath Fleet, where bleakness gives way to fields and woods at Rogart Halt.

This is just beyond Rogart Halt, where the train is heading south-east to reach the sea in another four miles.

Good exposures of conglomerate rock north above the train make this end of Strath Fleet interesting. Fulmar petrels nest on these inland cliffs and the ice-rounded summits have a nobility far beyond their lowly height.

Loch Fleet is reached at The Mound — so called because of an embankment built in 1816 sealing off the head of the loch.

With shallow lagoons good for wild duck and sandflats extending over 1400 acres it is a unique habitat, now a National Nature Reserve.



A wave-built barrier of shingle forms a natural barrier at the seaward end, admitting the tide through no more than a narrow mouth.

Apart from a big variety of wading birds and duck up to 1000 scoter may be seen, with many velvet scoter inside the estuary. There are also long tailed ducks to be seen.

It was from here that a branch line used to run to Dornoch, passing through the tiny village of Embo.



**Golspie on the sea** is only four miles from Loch Fleet. This popular holiday resort was a thriving village when the line to it was opened by the Sutherland Railway in 1868.

Authorisation had been given to carry the line on to Brora, but despite a contribution of £15,000 from the Highland Railway the expense of bridging the Kyle of Sutherland and the heavy cutting required to force a way up the Shin Valley and over the hills into Strath Fleet had absorbed the available cash.

The Duke of Sutherland, whose castle was at Dunrobin, only two miles beyond Golspie, decided to make railway history by building his own line northward.

Obtaining Parliamentary consent on June 20, 1870 for 17 miles of line along the coast to Helmsdale, he had already jumped the gun by getting so far ahead with the work that the line was open from Dunrobin to West Helmsdale in November that same year and the Duke's little locomotive and rolling stock were running a service.

Engineering problems at Golspie and Helmsdale were not solved for another seven months, but during that time two trains a day in each direction were run from Dunrobin Station to West Helmsdale and on completion of the link-up from Golspie to Helmsdale the Highland Railway took over.

**The top photograph** shows the Dunrobin section of the railway line surveyed and built by Joseph Mitchell to the order of the Third Duke of Sutherland.

In the distance, on the top of the hill, can be seen the monument to the First Duke who, in the words of a modern book, attempted "to transmit rapid economic growth to a traditional peasant economy in the Highlands..." — a round-about way of describing him as the Duke under whose regime the Clearances took place.

**The lower photograph**, taken from the same standpoint, shows where the line to Brora runs along the platform of a raised beach, marking an earlier sea-level.

These raised beaches, stretching all the way from Inverness to Helmsdale, are amongst the most perfectly preserved in Scotland, and Mitchell made good use of them to carry his line.

The Duke of Sutherland had suggested carrying the line along his own sea front at Dunrobin, but Mitchell had seen that it would be an interruption of his privacy, so had taken it high, through a cutting half a mile up the hill, where it could not be seen.

Mitchell's line was adopted, but he was to run into trouble with the parsimonious Duke in his survey northward to Wick and Thurso.



**The train has left Brora** behind it and is heading for Helmsdale. The scattered houses of the little town are in the background and the rubble of a former glacier descends to the shore.



Brora has always been noted for its coal mine, the oldest in Scotland producing the youngest coal — Jurassic coal as distinct from the usual Carboniferous, which at 260 million years old belongs to a period twice as distant as the Brora coal.

Alas, the little mine, worked by crofters on a profit-sharing basis, ran up against difficult times and had to close. It could one day become viable again, since there is still plenty of coal underground.

The 'black stones' had been in use since 1529, when it was used for fires to extract salt from sea water. In all its years it never knew a serious labour dispute.

In Brora we are also brought up against the Clearances, for here, on the links, on land unfit for cultivation, crofters evicted from better holdings were expected to make a new life or emigrate. It had begun in 1807, with an avowed aim to improve the lot of the people.

The intention read:

"Situations in various ways will be fixed on for the people: Fishing stations in which mechanics will be settled; inland villages, with carding machines; moors and detached spots calculated for the purpose will be found, but the people must work...man was not born to be idle."

---

**Helmsdale gleams in the sun** in this view from the new road bridge over the river. Just below where it was taken lies the sheltered harbour.

This was one of the fishing stations set up by the Sutherland Estate in their 'improvement' programme of clearing the straths of people and re-settling the evicted crofters on the coast to make a better living for themselves.

The better living was slow to materialise. The fishing villages were too remote and it did not pay to make textiles in the north when the mills of the south could produce them so much more cheaply.

Instead of curing the poverty the First Duke of Sutherland created more, working on the theory that:

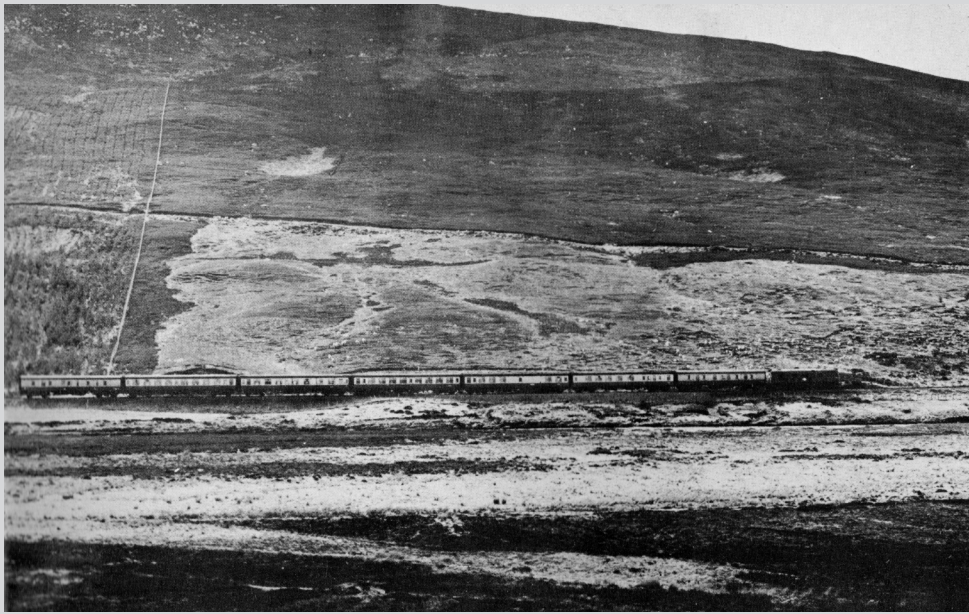
"Sheep farms are paying well on the Sutherland Estates. The number of Cheviots is now about 15,000. More



ground will be laid off for the same mode of husbandry, without decreasing the population."

Turning away from Helmsdale into the hills by the Strath of Kildonan, the railway traverses some of the classic country of the Clearances.

The distance from here to Wick along the coast is about 35 miles, but the distance by rail is 60 miles by the inland route it takes to the Sutherland border and across the breadth of Caithness to come in from the west.



**Into the hills** north of Helmsdale the train is climbing along the western wall of the Strath of Kildonan. This strath is historic for more than the Clearances, for it was the scene of a goldrush, with strikes being made in the Kildonan and Suisgill Burn and in burns at Kinbrace, farther up the line.

The Kildonan Burn site where the big rush began is marked today by a signpost 'Baile-an-Oir,' — City of Gold, and in 1869 it cost £1 per month to stake a 40 square foot claim. Excisemen

were there to ensure that one tenth of any find went to the Crown.

Helmsdale became a boom town, with 500 miners hard at work and getting enough gold to pay them the equivalent of 50 pence a day. The Duke of Sutherland organised a dinner for them and Robert Gilchrist, who had sparked off the strike, was allowed to carve the joint. Gilchrist had prospected in Australia and knew something about gold.

But the goodwill of the Duke did not last. The sheep farmers, sportsmen and gamekeepers prevented the miners from extending their explorations and winter saw the end of the rush.

But £11,000 worth of gold was panned, according to the official Excise statistics. It is to be hoped that there was a lot more which the Crown never heard about.

---

**The top photograph** shows the train on the section of line leading to Kinbrace, with the Ben Griam range on the left. Bottom shows Kinbrace Station, with the River Helmsdale beyond. From here a road goes off across the moors to Strath Naver, where some of the most inhuman of the Clearances took place.

The first hint of it came in 1818, when a crofter paying his rent was told to tell his neighbours that the rent for the half-year ending in May 1819 would not be demanded as it was determined to lay the districts of Strath Naver and Upper Kildonan under sheep.

Then came summonses, delivered to over 1000 houses. Just over 60 years before the coming of the railway a parish of over 2000 people was uprooted and their homes burned. Now that the people had gone the main benefit of the railway would be to the Sutherland Estate.

Kildonan and Kinbrace stations were built to serve shooting lodges, as were the private platforms of Salzraggie and Borrobol, now closed.

The scattered houses of Kinbrace could be said to be the metropolis of this watershed, with about 20 employed on the estate and a two teacher school beside the railway station. Children travel from Strath Halladale to the school here.

The stations at Kildonan and Kinbrace are unstaffed.



**Until Forsinard Station** the line up the Strath of Kildonan has been following the windings of the single-track road towards Strath Halladale and Melvich. A standard gauge light railway was planned to continue on due north to the sea at Portskerra but although authorisation was granted in 1898 and materials were delivered to Forsinard to make a start, nothing was built in the end.

Forsinard is where the main line breaks away north-east, climbing in four miles to leave the Duke of Sutherland's territory and enter Caithness in roadless country at 708 feet above sea level.



Joseph Mitchell had surveyed this route for the Duke. But that gentleman, suspicious by nature and careful of his money, wasn't satisfied that Mitchell was being economical enough. He engaged English surveyors to find a better way, at which Mitchell sent in his account for £5550.

He didn't get it. The Duke refused to pay more than £4000, despite Mitchell's line proving to be the best and cheapest to build. Murdoch Paterson, Mitchell's old partner, engineered the line at a cost of £5077 per mile, over £1400 per mile less than the English estimate.

Of the Duke, Mitchell wrote:

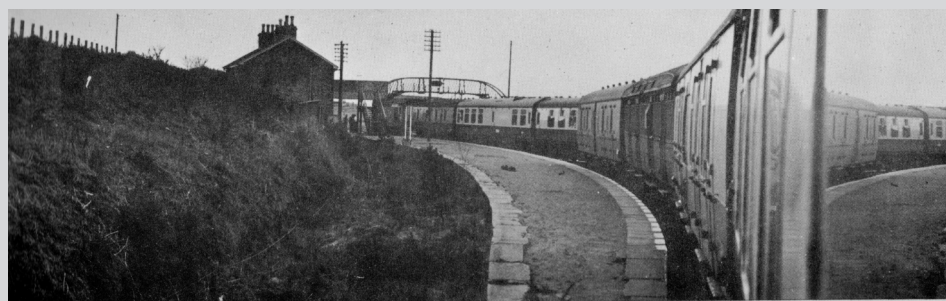
"He was handsome and in the prime of life. His landed territory was of greater extent than that of any other nobleman in Great Britain.

"Notwithstanding his immense possessions he is rigidly economical..."

**The top photograph** shows Georgemas, the most northerly junction in Britain and 45¾ miles from Helmsdale. This is where the Wick portion is detached, to go off east in the direction of the reflections, rightward to reach its terminus in another 14¾ miles. Thurso lies 6¾ miles north westwards.

**The lower photograph** shows the characteristic view of dun moorland on the traverse from the County March to Altnabreac, notorious in severe winters for snow blockage, though little trouble has been experienced on that score since the severe winters of 1955 and 1963.

At the time of writing the line between Thurso and Helmsdale had a total workforce of 50, including surfacemen, a big reduction from 1963 when the Helmsdale Motive Power Depot employed 70 and the stations along the line were fully manned.



Despite the invaluable service of the northern line in two wars, carrying millions of Servicemen and untold thousands of tons of material for the Naval Base at Scapa Flow, the Beeching Axe and the numerous rail closures thereafter have created a feeling of insecurity on the Wick/Thurso line.

The new thinking of the Government appears to back the railways for their convenience rather than their profit.

On that score the Highland Line should survive.



**Thurso Station** is 717 rail miles from London and the train seen in this photograph is timed to connect with the Orkney boat. The first passenger train to run on this final section ran on July 28, 1974. This book has been produced to mark the centenary of that occasion. Readers may wonder why the line went inland from Helmsdale and across largely uninhabited country to reach Thurso when the populations who stood to benefit most lived on the coast. The problem in striking up the coast from Helmsdale was the Ord of Caithness, where the mountains dropping steeply end in sea-cliffs. Joseph

Mitchell did not think the Ord practicable, nor did the English engineers who followed him.

It was a bit too much to expect that anyone alive today would have memories of the arrival of the first train. Next best, however, was the recollection of my friend Robert Stephen of Reay. He told me:

"My grand-uncle was there on the great day. And he used to laugh when he recalled the reaction of a startled woman when she saw the puffing monster squealing to a halt, breaths of smoke belching from it, and dripping with water on the belly, where escaping steam was condensing. 'They're working that poor beast ower sair. Look how it's blowing and sweating!' she exclaimed angrily. My uncle was sure she thought it was a living animal, not just a man-made thing."

---

**The top panorama** is a general impression of Thurso from the west and to the right of the houses of the town is the last stretch of land traversed by the railway.

**The bottom photograph** shows the Caithness landscape between Wick and Thurso, farming country with fields sometimes fenced with sandstone slabs to provide some wind break in an exposed countryside of few trees.

Before surveying the railway line from Inverness through Ross-shire into Sutherland and finally to Wick and Thurso, Joseph Mitchell had maintained the Caithness roads for 22 years. As to the advantages of the road network, greatly extended from 1830, he records:

"...the agricultural improvements which they were the means of promoting, and the enormous increase of fishings all round the coast combined, have suddenly brought a degree of wealth and prosperity to this otherwise bleak and sterile county..."

Mitchell also regarded the Caithness peasantry highly, considering them "superior to any other in Scotland for intellect and physical development, and the comeliness of the women."

Mitchell was in Wick in 1852 when James Loch, factor of the Sutherland Estate was canvassing for the Election. As Loch walked round behind him went four men carrying a half-burned croft, others followed baa-ing like sheep.

Three years later, in Sutherland, Mitchell was constantly stopped and told: 'Did you hear the news? Loch's dead.'





**Thurso is a stone-built town** of broad streets and good layout on the River Thurso at a point where it flows into Thurso Bay. On the clear day when this photograph was taken the dark tip of the Old Man of Hoy stuck out like the butt end of a cigar above the pink cliffs of Rora Head in Orkney.

The population of Thurso has mushroomed from 3500 to around 10,000, following the building of the Dounreay nuclear establishment along the coast. Dounreay is now being allowed to run down as an employer of labour and hopes are now being pinned on Scrabster as an oil terminal.

Wick has parallel economic problems to Thurso, with industry running down and a need for something big and new like oil-related developments.

Thurso grew because of Dounreay. Wick owes its growth to the British Fisheries Society, with the building of the harbour in 1808 and the development of the herring fishing industry, with Dutch curers teaching the skills.

The advantage of the railway line in getting the fish to the southern markets created a demand for an extension down the coast from Wick. With the help of £25,000 from the Treasury, 13¾ miles of light railway were constructed to the busy little fishing port of Lybster.

The line was opened in the summer of 1903. It closed in the spring of 1944.

## FACTS AND FIGURES

### STATIONS AND MILEAGES

Inverness	0	Golspie	84½
Dingwall	18¾	Brora	90½
Alness	28½	Helmsdale	101¼
Invergordon	31½	Kildonan	110¾
Fearn	40¾	Kinbrace	118¼
Tain	44¼	Forsinard	125¾
Bonar Bridge	57¾	Altnabreac	134
Culrain	61	Scotscaider	143
Invershin	61½	Georgemas Junction	147¼
Lairg	67	Wick Terminus	161¼
Rogart Halt	77	Thurso Terminus	153¾

Inverness to Dingwall:	June 1862
Dingwall to Invergordon:	March 1863
Invergordon to Tain (Meikle Ferry):	June 1864
Tain (Meikle Ferry) to Bonar Bridge:	October 1864
Bonar Bridge to Golspie:	April 1868
Golspie to Helmsdale:	June 1871
Helmsdale to Wick/Thurso:	July 1874