

FAR NORTH EXPRESS

Issue 68

May 2016



Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

The campaign group for rail north
of Inverness,

Lobbying for improved services
for the local users, tourists and
freight customers



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Cover photo:

DRS 37218 leads 37607 on the *Easter Chieftain Tour*, Inverness to Wick via Thurso across Conon Bridge on the 5th April 2015. Photo: **Jamie Squibbs**

FOFNL MEMBERSHIP FORM

For an organisation such as ours, membership is vital both in terms of numbers, therefore influence, and to finance lobbying activities. If you would like to join The Friends of the Far North Line please download, print out and complete the application form from our website: www.fofnl.org.uk/membership/memform.pdf

If you prefer, you can phone our Membership Secretary on +44 (0)1334 475311. Annual membership is only £12.00 (£10.00 for concessions).

If you can think of anyone else who might be interested please mention FoFNL to them and encourage them to join!

ELECTION FEVER

Election fever is in the air as I write these words, although "fever" is perhaps a slight overstatement. The general shape of the next Scottish Government is clear, and it will be pursuing the same transport policies as the present one: the faces may change a bit, but the facts won't. Less clear is the European Referendum, and this is not the place to express wonder at the degree to which Westminster-based politicians are capable of under-estimating the intelligence of the voters. For the time being it is safest to assume that nothing will change.

PROMISES

We are a year into the new Scottish franchises, and in ordinary circumstances it would be proper to see how well the various promises made to passengers have been delivered. However these are not ordinary circumstances for either Abellio ScotRail or Caledonian Sleeper. In both cases a very large part of the promise was new rolling stock, and by the nature of things new rolling stock takes a few years to be delivered. What does a new franchise-holder do to keep everyone happy during those few years? The simple answer, of course, is do the day job better than the last lot. Passengers notice that kind of thing. It's true that they also notice new staff uniforms and differently-painted trains, but these are soon forgotten if the delivery of service is poor. How have Abellio and CS done at the day (or night) job?

SLEEPERS

It's easier to deal with the Sleeper - fewer trains are run and a greater proportion of their passengers are likely to be familiar with the service. CS are moving towards the introduction of Class 73 locomotives - a welcome improvement but one which has not been without its challenges. Once they are bedded down and teething problems sorted out they should - no, will - be more reliable than the locomotives they replace. The new

passenger accommodation is at the mock-up stage and input to design improvements is being given. Our initial reaction to the proposed designs has been generally favourable. The existing rolling stock is tired, but is well-kept and passengers are tolerant if they know Christmas is just round the corner.

CROWDED OUT

Abellio has a different nut to crack: its services are far more varied and thus the number and diversity of problems is much greater. As often happens on the GB-wide railway there seems to be much more focus on the BIG schemes near the BIG cities: one has only to look at London's Crossrail (not yet completed) and the hungry panting optimism of those (some of them really quite sensible) urging Crossrail2 to see that anyone seeking better services in, say, Cornwall is likely to have an uphill struggle. Up here the scheme to electrify the main route between Edinburgh and Glasgow (EGIP) is well under way, and Queen Street is being massively improved. Scottish Ministers are keen to have some High Speed work done while the chaps with shovels are busy in the south of England. With all this going on, and new - I use the word with a degree of licence - inter-city rolling stock promised for a few years' time it's hard to see what is being done today for passengers elsewhere in Scotland. FoFNL has made detailed responses to various consultations, but reality kicks in when the grand BIG city schemes are seen to crowd out the small, not-very-exciting things costing only a few million pounds (chicken-feed compared with Crossrail or EGIP) which can't be justified by the small passenger numbers. On that logic most country roads should be closed (it saves on maintenance, old boy) because not very many cars use them. The remoter parts of Scotland need infrastructure improvements, and doing a bit of necessary (and welcome) doubling on the HML doesn't cut the mustard for folk in Caithness. We need action from Network Rail in CP6 (starting in April 2019) and we need to see plans for the action right now.

COLOURFUL

Welcome to the first issue of Far North Express in its new, more colourful guise. This is a good point to mention that FNE is published three times a year: in January, May and September. We carry a lot of articles about the Far North Line and the routes that feed in from the south. By their nature, and the purpose of FoFNL, they are very substantial. We are always on the lookout for other interesting items - the only criterion is that they are in some way relevant to the line but they don't have to be directly rail-related.

One matter covered in this issue is the subject of bikes on trains - not something that FoFNL is actively campaigning about, but the cause of significant public relations problems for Abellio in Scotland. FoFNL's main focus however is performance on the FNL.

DREADFUL

In the weeks leading up to publication your committee was very active in studying performance of the line and there was much thought about how best to show that day-to-day running is still in a dreadful state. We considered screenshots from the ScotRail website which would graphically show how a whole day's running can be ruined by a single fault on a train, or a missing crew member. However, we decided that any regular reader of this magazine will already know that the current infrastructure prevents recovery to normal running when something goes wrong, which it does most days.

DOUBLING

My privilege as editor, in my eyrie near the EGIP electrification base in Bishopbriggs, is to contemplate the meaning of Far North Line life. The absolute major requirement for the FNL is the reinstatement of the six miles of double track between Clunes and Clachnaharry (a stretch shared with the route

to Kyle of Lochalsh). Wondering what this might cost I found an item in FNE Jan 2007 mentioning a combined figure for doubling and some resignalling to be £15m (from "Highland Rail Room for Growth", a 2006 report by Scott Wilson). Although at any given moment an amount of, perhaps, £20m seems very large, in the long term the amount of money spent on the FNL may not have been very high. Last November Network Rail found, and replaced, lengths of rail dated 1908, which must have supported Lord Kitchener on his last railway journey!

REVEALING

Border Telegraph reported on 4 April that during a presentation in Galashiels organised by the Chartered Institution of Highways and Transportation a question was asked about the drastic reduction from 16 to 9½ miles of the double-track provision on the reopened Borders Railway. The reply from a Network Rail project manager was very revealing. He said that the cost of being fined for late or cancelled trains was considerably less than the cost of double tracking the line. Referring to the likelihood of a breakdown, he added: "That's going to happen twice a year maybe, I'll take the flak for it when it does."

POLITICS

The FNL is a single-track road with (very few) passing places. Imagine the outcry were one to suggest reducing the A9 between Inverness and Thurso from single-carriageway to single-track to reduce maintenance costs.

Somehow the message from the Far North needs to get into the minds of enough politicians. If one were cynical one might imagine their minds to be preoccupied with things that win or lose votes. Of course, that can't really be the case - although suppose the Edinburgh-Glasgow main line were to perform in a similar fashion to the FNL...

Ian Budd

YOUR COMMITTEE

Each year at the AGM Members elect office-bearers and committee members, but you don't ever get an explanation of what they – we – actually do. Some positions are pretty self-explanatory (Treasurer, Membership Secretary) but others have a more nebulous set of responsibilities. This article sets out to give job specs so that possible future committee members know what they are in for (or avoiding, as the case might be).

CONVENER

Chairs meetings, sets the general direction of how FoFNL deals with the industry. Ideal if Convener has some useful connections (political, industry, knowledge of location of bodies). In practice writes most of FoFNL's Responses (with input from others) to industry consultations.

SECRETARY

Takes Minutes, monitors actions arising from "I'll do that" at committee. Handles external communications other than those with the industry (eg. enquiries arising from website, premises booking etc).

TREASURER

Keeps accounts, monitors (and in the last analysis can veto) expenditure.

MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

Maintains accurate list of addresses, monitors subscriptions, liaising with Treasurer. Prepares address labels for FNE distribution to members, and complimentarys.

NEWSLETTER EDITOR

Commissions articles for FNE, prepares text, arranges for photographs, arranges for printing. Also maintains website, adding articles, reports etc. as they become available.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

These two (or more, if co-opted) assist with the general running of the Friends. One puts FNE into envelopes, sticks on the address labels and stamps, and posts them (*in fact this is currently done by Iain, ex-member of committee and his sister*). He also hand delivers some local ones (eg. Inverness Station). From time to time – eg. Station Survey – it's all hands to the pumps. Some bring a particular expertise to the committee's deliberations – either from a retired railwayman perspective, or from a consultant's one. In the past a regular commuter has served a very useful function as the daily eyes and ears of the ordinary passenger - informed, but not expert.

Richard Ardern, a very long-serving Committee Member and Office-Bearer, has indicated he will not be seeking election to the Committee in June, so there will be at least one vacancy. Committee members will be approaching one or two FoFNL Members whom we think might have something to offer, but it's entirely possible that we have overlooked YOU and that YOU would like to contribute. If YOU are a commuter, even an infrequent one, then YOU are just the chap. Or chapess. **Do not hang back!**



Mike Lunan - Convener

On the subject of running things, was it Mark Twain who said, "All commercial shortcomings are caused by poor management in the final analysis. Except meteorites."?

FAR NORTH LINE UPDATE

GOOD NEWS

There is good news this time as you will see elsewhere in our submission concerning Network Rail (NR)'s draft Scotland Route Study.

Proposals to resignal between Inverness and Dingwall replacing RETB with a conventional system and to install an additional loop are listed in the mix to be put forward for funding. Also included is the long awaited Georgemas chord to give direct access to Thurso (page 74).

Further suggestions are made around the likely remodelling of Inverness Station layout, upgrading the FNL to Route Availability 8 (RA8) for freight trains, creating a turnback or refuge siding at Dingwall and closure of level crossings (unspecified) between Inverness and Dingwall. NR will do further work on all of these issues prior to publication of the final version in July.

We need to stress that there is no guarantee yet that any of these will be given the money to proceed, but hopefully some things will be done to substantially improve the slow and congested Inverness to Dingwall section to the advantage of both the Far North and Kyle lines. There is no reference to the additional passing loop needed at Kinbrace (or thereabouts) to divide up the longest single track section (LSTS) in Britain between Helmsdale and Forsinard.

The campaign to have the Lentrans Long Loop partly funded in the Inverness City and Region Deal does not seem to have found favour with Highland Council. We are most grateful to those MSPs and Councillors who supported us on this. It seemed to fit the bill admirably as the benefits would have been felt over a wide area of the north and west and not just by those in Inverness.

RECENT PERFORMANCE AND PUNCTUALITY

You will see elsewhere that further information about last year's delays has been revealed through parliamentary questioning, but reply S4W-29975 of 8 March to Rhoda Grant MSP has not been easy to interpret from the spreadsheet format of the answer.* It certainly provides the evidence that there is a serious problem with long delays occurring at Helmsdale northbound when there is late running and one train has to wait to access the LSTS. The problem was explained in

greater detail in our last issue. We are now collecting the evidence.

	Minutes Late at Helmsdale				
	21 - 30	31 - 40	41 - 50	51+	Total
Apr 15	3	0	2	1	6
May 15	3	0	0	1	4
Jun 15	2	1	0	2	5
Jul 15	3	0	1	1	5
Aug 15	0	0	1	0	1
Sep 15	2	0	1	0	3
Oct 15	2	1	5	1	9
Nov 15	0	1	1	2	4
Dec 15	2	0	0	0	2
Jan 16	1	1	0	1	3
Total	18	4	11	9	42

Abellio ScotRail's unattributed Performance Update posters have been appearing monthly on stations since last May. These measure what percentage of actual arrivals at destinations were no more than 59 seconds late. On the FNL figures are given for Ardgay, Dingwall, Invergordon, Tain and Wick. Ardgay has only one terminator and Wick four on weekdays.

Kyle and Inverness have been included for comparative purposes. Inverness figures will include services from all lines. Wick's score declined from 35.0% last June to 29.6% in January and February improving to 31.1% in April. It is very low, though not as low as Balloch and Milngavie in April.

	%	Best	Worst	Ave.	Spread
ARD	71.7	46.8	63.3	24.9	
WCK	35.0	29.6	32.2	5.4	
KYL	66.2	54.5	60.9	11.7	
INV	60.2	57.7	59.4	2.5	

The performance of the 17:12 from Inverness to Ardgay has been steadily improving from 46.8% last June to 65.4% in April. This service is important as it daily carries many of the line's regular commuters.

[ScotRail is buying new Hitachi electric trains. Japanese reliability is such that if a train is delayed for more than five minutes, passengers are issued with a delay certificate to give to their employers. Might we get to that utopia on the FNL once the 158s are retired?]

Overall, apart from Wick, there has appeared to be some improvement in timekeeping and reliability, but the service is still far from satisfactory for passengers. Wick suffers from being at the end of a very long and difficult to operate line. It is likely that the LSTS problem delays at Helmsdale is exacerbating the problem, this is more evidence that the Kinbrace Loop is so desperately needed as the table of major delays at Helmsdale (averaging 4 per month) shows:

In recent weeks punctuality seems to have deteriorated with a larger number of train faults. The refurbished 158s fresh from the works have not been immune from this. A new disability compliant toilet and a second wheelchair table and companion seat are the main changes together with the removal of First Class. This second wheelchair table can be made down into a bike rack, but the disability legislation means that these third and fourth bike spaces can no

longer be reserved, a big blow to families wishing to travel together.

FINGERS CROSSED

We are waiting with fingers crossed to see if the timber industries are going to get together and endorse HITRANS' "Branchliner" project to take timber out from the Flow Country by rail from Kinbrace. A huge volume over many years is on offer and the possibility of including a passing loop in the project is a golden opportunity to improve punctuality and capacity on the line.

The RETB signalling system is still being upgraded with no date yet for completion. The Caithness Courier on 4 May published many pictures of the Great Britain 9 land cruise train from London via Penzance which was steam hauled from Inverness to Thurso with a diesel on the other end on Sunday 1 May...it is a long time since Thurso has seen a 10 coach train. A regular locomotive-hauled service may be possible in the future under plans proposed by Orkney Councillor James Stockan, Chairman of HITRANS. Once the Caledonian sleeper gets its new carriages in 2018, this idea would see some of the current vehicles used to provide a sleeper service between Caithness and Edinburgh. A dream perhaps, or an exciting prospect?

Richard Ardern

* S4W-29975: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour: Date Lodged: 18/02/2016

To ask the Scottish Government on what days since April 2015 rail services to Wick have been subject to delay at Helmsdale, broken down by length of delay.

CAITHNESS - EDINBURGH SLEEPER?

HITRANS chairman James Stockan has been in discussion with Serco Caledonian Sleeper managing director Peter Strachan about the possibility of establishing a Caithness to Edinburgh sleeper service.

He cites the combined population of Caithness and Orkney of 50,000 people and the 250,000 passengers who cross the Pentland Firth annually, along with the possibility of some freight carriage, as having the potential to create a business case for the idea. The seven-hour service would enable Caithness residents to conduct a day's business in the central belt or vice-versa.

FoFNL convener Mike Lunan said the introduction of a sleeper service would be welcome news.

"We are aware Caledonian Sleeper are keen on opening up different routes," he said. "There are people who want to travel from Caithness to Edinburgh and London and a proposed service would prove very popular.

"If you're travelling in a train overnight, you don't mind how slowly it is going.

"This is a positive service which people would want to bring in. It might not be full every night, but it is something which I think a lot of people would want to use."

FoFNL's Richard Ardern pointed out that the Transport Scotland rail freight strategy mentions a quick study that is to be done of the prospects for carrying parcels again by passenger train.

"An eventual sleeper train could have scope in guards van space or, even better, the possibility of attaching a parcels vehicle(s) on the rear."

SCOTLAND ROUTE STUDY

FoFNL RESPONSE

1 Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL), established in 1994, has over 150 members, including several Community Councils, and supports the railway line from Inverness to Thurso and Wick. This line is dependent on, and integrated with, feeder rail services from Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness and (in the absence of other rail user groups) FoFNL does considerable work in support of these lines also.

2 We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Scotland Route Study (SRS); we hope our Response will help the decision-makers in Transport Scotland (TS) to advise Scottish Ministers that relatively small-scale enhancements in rural areas should not be overlooked merely because the populations served are small and dispersed.

3 We have commented before, most recently in our Response to the Scotland Route Utilisation Study a few years ago, that the STAG process seems to us to have an inbuilt bias against small rural schemes. We said then that

"It is widely believed that the STAG process, although useful, contains within it an insidious weighting against rural schemes where the number of passengers benefiting is relatively low. This is not the place to argue for a re-evaluation of the underlying mechanism of STAG - although such a thing would be entirely proper after over a decade of use - but there is a danger because of it that small schemes continually fail to reach even the preliminary stage of proper evaluation."

4 We are not aware that such an appraisal has taken place: surely it is entirely proper that systemic processes which are routinely used to inform policy decisions are revisited periodically. We believe that a revision is overdue, and should be carried out swiftly. Our belief is reinforced by the recent news that passenger numbers on the Borders Line greatly exceed those predicted by the use of a formula. The formula clearly gave the wrong answers about passenger numbers, as was the case with other re-openings in Scotland in the last decade.

5 We are greatly encouraged that a scheme for which FoFNL has been pressing for many years has at last appeared in the SRS (p74). This is what we have called the Lentrán Loop. Whether it is physically at Lentrán is not important: what is important is that the scheme to provide an "additional loop [between Inverness and Dingwall] to provide greater flexibility to pass trains" is at last in Network Rail's list of possible things to do.

6 The argument in favour of having a section of double track somewhere between the Clachnaharry Swing Bridge and Beauly Station has been made many times - the principal reason being one of ameliorating late-running, and preventing late running early in the day from affecting all subsequent services (either by delay or even cancellation). A loop would also allow the possibility of more paths. There is latent demand for tourist trains and an increase in freight traffic is in prospect as timber extraction increases. It is disappointing that a possible loop at Kinbrace (in a 31-minute stretch of single track) is not mentioned. We understand that attempts to develop timber extraction at Kinbrace are ongoing, requiring the construction of a siding: the opportunity to turn this into a loop should not pass unexamined (or even unbuilt).

7 The Prioritisation Assessment attached to this (and other projects on the FNL) is "funder aspiration". We would strongly add to this "user aspiration", and we shall devote as much energy as possible to ensuring that the Lentrans Loop is delivered during Control Period 6 (CP6) between 1 April 2019 and 31 March 2024.

8 It is wise at this point to comment on the other schemes (p74) for Far North Enhancement. We endorse the plan to construct a chord at Georgemas Junction allowing trains from Inverness to reach Thurso without reversing.

9 We applaud the plan to improve signalling between Inverness and Dingwall. We are aware that there is an aspiration to install ERTMS on the Highland Main Line, and a suggestion has been made that extending this as far as Dingwall (at marginal extra cost) would seem sensible. However ERTMS is still a long way off, and a more immediate solution to the delays involved in using RETB, certainly as far as Dingwall where the Kyle Line diverges, would seem overdue. Many have sneered at the "lights on sticks" approach to signalling, but despite this modern colour-light signalling still forms the basis of the vast majority of signalling application on the network. We call for the installation of appropriate colour-light signalling to be carried out in CP6, certainly as far as Dingwall, and preferably as far north as possible (Tain would seem a reasonable target).

10 Money being not an infinitely available resource we would assist TS in prioritising the enhancements set out (to support outputs suggested by 2043). We believe they should be:

1	Lentrans Loop, during CP6	logically these should be done together
2	Dingwall signalling, during CP6	
3	Kinbrace siding and loop, during CP6	
4	Georgemas chord, planning during CP6, installation in CP7	

11 The "operational acceptance improvements" (on p72, to which we make further reference below) to allow swifter passage of trains at passing points on the Highland Main Line (HML) should also be the norm at passing points on the FNL and elsewhere where signalling is by RETB.

12 We now turn to the wider picture beyond Inverness. Good, reliable connections to and from the FNL at Inverness are vital - both to Aberdeen and along the HML to Perth and beyond. A great deal of money is being spent on upgrading the A9 and A96 and unless rail is to be the poor relation - for freight as well as for passengers - spending will also be necessary on lines east and south of Inverness.

13 First, the Inverness - Aberdeen corridor (A21). Page 116 presents marketing study findings which present the second highest growth predictions in the whole of Scotland - 261% by the end of CP7 and over 400% by 2043. Yet there is little by way of concrete proposals to facilitate this. No scheme between Inverurie and Inverness is mentioned in Appendix 6, although the dynamic loop at Dalcross is mentioned on p73. It is to be hoped that all the work planned in CP5 on A21 is indeed completed by 2019. As A21 will by then be part of the Inter-City Scottish network operated by refurbished Class 43 High-Speed Trains (HSTs) it seems strange that a continuing programme of minor enhancements (loops, linespeed improvements) is not fleshed out in Appendix 6 to enable this much-improved rolling stock to deliver a better, and more reliable passenger experience.

The Train Operator will doubtless diagram HSTs to deliver services continuing south from Aberdeen and Inverness, and delays brought about on the A2I section by extensive single-track working will tend to export delays much further south, and vice versa. Detailed work should be planned in CP6 to build on the welcome, if overdue, work being carried out in CP5.

14 Much work has been detailed for CP5, but the "missing links" between these are absent from plans for CP6: surely this is wrong. While smaller-scale infill enhancements may not confer individual benefits the whole point of doing infill work is to unlock the full potential (in linespeeds, or robustness of delivery) of the work planned for CP5. As CP6 is starting the HSTs will be running between Inverness and Aberdeen. Their potential benefits for passengers will be severely limited if the infrastructure still has extended single-track working. The aim should be to have the whole of A2I doubled by the end of CP6.

15 The Highland Main Line from Inverness to Perth, and thence to Glasgow and Edinburgh, is detailed on page 72. Most of the work planned is south of Perth - we applaud the plans to improve the situation at Ladybank, and between there and Hilton Junction. In many instances a late-running train from Inverness to Edinburgh is terminated at Perth because of the long single line. Trains to the nation's capital should not be subject to this indignity. We also support the proposed Greenhill Junction flyover and proposals to speed up the approaches to Perth Station from both north and south. The "operational acceptance improvements" to allow swifter passage of trains at passing points on the HML are to be welcomed as an interim measure prior to double tracking.

16 The benefit of HSTs will be limited if long single-track sections remain. As with the doubling of the parallel A9 the entire HML from Perth to Inverness should be doubled, with major work starting during the final year of CP5. The scale is greater than that of doubling A2I, and the terrain is often much harder, so our realistic target would be to see substantial work done during CP6 and CP7 with completion by say 2026.

17 The rolling policy of electrification once the wider EGIP scheme has been delivered is not mentioned in detail. Routes from Perth to Inverness and to Dundee and Aberdeen, as well as the part of the ECML south of Dundee, are clearly among the next routes to be considered. We believe that greater speed (and thus shorter journey times) are to be had from electrifying the HML than from the ECML north of the Forth Bridge (where the curvature of the line limits the speeds achievable). Electric haulage over Drumochter and Slochd could shave a considerable amount off the anticipated HST timings. We are disappointed that there is no mention of detailed post-EGIP electrification in this document.

THE CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF LOGISTICS AND TRANSPORT RESPONSE: SECTION 3, FREIGHT

3.11. The Institute is very concerned by the fact that there appears to be no intention to increase capacity on the Highland Main Line north of Perth, other than limited investment in faster entry/exit from passing loops, welcome as this is. With the proposed dualling of the A9 this is short-sighted indeed - for freight, electrification is unlikely to provide the answer and more paths, plus W10/12 gauge clearance, are the urgent priorities. This also applies to the Perth - Aberdeen route, where capacity and gauge enhancement to W10/12 are key

requirements. It is helpful that capacity and gauge enhancement are consistent with electrification, which offers recognised benefits for passenger services.

3.12. In the Inverness area, the Institute supports the provision of loops or the installation of double tracking at Dalcross, where there is also an opportunity to reinstate a railfreight connection into the Norbord mill at this location, which should be evaluated as a priority project. This plant, which previously incorporated a railway siding, is one of the biggest road freight generators in the Highlands and holds considerable potential for rail, with both inbound logs and outbound finished product(s). This would support the operation and utilisation of the intermodal railfreight terminal at Inverness, and would allow for the development of traffic currently handled as 'return load' material by freight trains operating to/from Inverness with FMCG (fast moving consumer goods) traffic. A similar comment applies to the sister plant at Plean/Cowie near Stirling, where a rail connection is regarded as an important objective.

BOOK REVIEW

Disconnected! Broken links in Britain's rail policy

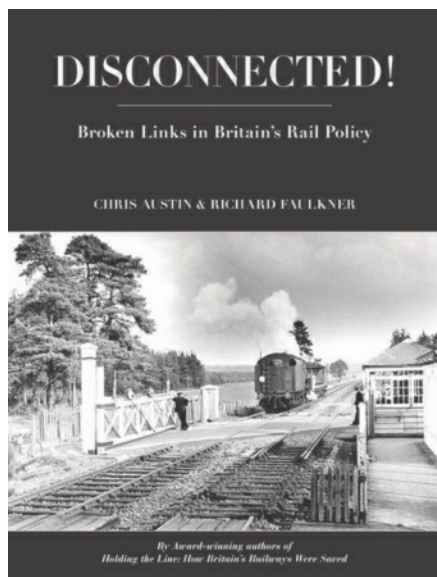
By Chris Austin and Richard Faulkner. Oxford Publishing Company, 2015. 160 pp hardback. ISBN 978-0-86093-664-0. £25. Printed in Bulgaria!

This book is a sequel to the same authors' outstanding 2012 book *Holding the Line: how Britain's railways were saved* which we reviewed in issue 59 (April 2013). The two are essential reading for those who wish to understand how we ended up with the network we have today and why there is no longer a railway to the Borough (sic) of St Andrews.

The story concludes with the authors' assessment of which lines would be most valuable today and are capable of reinstatement - some 530 miles or an additional 5% on today. The Waverley line from Galashiels to Carlisle is in this category but surprisingly not the direct Edinburgh to Perth via Kinross route (which, as they say, would be so valuable as the quickest route to the Highlands), nor the Strathmore Route through Forfar to provide an alternative route to Aberdeen. [The Dock Street, Dundee total blockage happened after the book had been written, but the authors were certainly provided beforehand with Transform Scotland's Inter-City Express proposals for the Kinross route]. Happily, the St Andrews and Leven branches are on their list but Aberdeen to Fraserburgh is seen as "more difficult or impractical".

Particularly interesting is the leaking of the story of how civil servants were secretly trying to produce a case to drastically shrink the railway network against the spirit of Barbara Castle's pro-rail policies in 1970. Perth to Inverness and Aberdeen to Inverness were slated for closure. The lessons of history show that it is impossible to forecast the long-term future with any degree of accuracy and that options (track beds) should be kept open. Today, railways are seen as part of the solution to the intractable problems of road congestion, airport capacity, pollution and economic development. There has been a seismic shift in thinking since the Beeching era and the authors opine that more damage was done by the 1965 Trunk Routes report than by the Reshaping report of 1963..

Richard Ardern



PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Both our Vice-President, Rhoda Grant and John Finnie have continued to ask rail-related questions to the Scottish Government in January and February.

S4W-29164: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour:

To ask the Scottish Government on how many of the 309 weekdays between 15 December 2014 and 12 December 2015 rail services on the Far North Line achieved 100% reliability.

Derek Mackay: Of the 309 weekdays between 15 December 2014 and 12 December 2015, 100 percent reliability (that is, no full cancellations, part-cancellations, or incidents where a train failed to stop where it should have stopped) was achieved on 216 days.

S4W-29462: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour:

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the answer to question S4W-29164 by Derek Mackay on 20 January 2016, how many times over the same period did services achieve 100% punctuality.

Derek Mackay: Of the 309 weekdays between 15 December 2014 and 12 December 2015, 100 percent punctuality of the 18 or 19 trains per day run (that is, within 4 minutes 59 seconds of the booked time), was achieved on 49 days.

S4W-29962: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent:

To ask the Scottish Government whether the introduction of high-speed trains to run on ScotRail inter-city routes is on schedule.

Derek Mackay: ScotRail are on target to introduce these iconic trains into service commencing summer 2018 and will shortly announce its plans to fully refurbish this fleet.

S4W-29963: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent:

To ask the Scottish Government whether the proposed average 10-minute reduction in journey times for train services between the central belt and Inverness by March 2019 is on schedule and when it will announce full details of what services will be in place.

Derek Mackay: Phase two of the Highland Main Line Improvement project is on schedule to deliver, by March 2019, journey time improvements averaging around 10 minutes, an hourly service between Perth and Inverness, extended to either Glasgow or Edinburgh, and increased opportunities for freight. Full details of the services will be published in late autumn 2018 as part of the December 2018 ScotRail timetable.

S4W-29964: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent:

To ask the Scottish Government what technical challenges would need to be overcome to introduce more double track on the Highland Main Line and which viaducts would require major work to accommodate this.

Derek Mackay: There are a number of engineering, constructability, access and environmental challenges which Network Rail would have to address to introduce more double track on the Highland Main Line. There are a total of 312 structures, including underbridges, overbridges and viaducts.

S4W-29965: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Independent:

To ask the Scottish Government whether it expects Great Western Railway to release high-speed trains to Abellio to run on ScotRail inter-city routes in 2017-18.

Derek Mackay: The high-speed trains are owned by Angel Trains and they have a contractual agreement to lease them to Abellio ScotRail from autumn 2017 onwards. These trains are currently operated by First Great Western whose leases expire in late 2017 to early 2018 with Angel Trains.

SERCO CLASS 73S TRAVEL NORTH

Class 73 locomotives started arriving in Inverness on 15th February 2016 performing their new duties of hauling Serco Sleeper trains. The locomotives were built between 1962-7, originally for use on the third-rail electric lines to the south of

London. As built they also contained a 600 horsepower English Electric diesel engine for use in non-electrified yards. The Class 73/9s, hired from GB Railfreight, have a much more powerful 1600 horsepower MTU engine and have been completely rebuilt with a life-expectancy of 25 years.

Photo: Mike Gill

73 966 is seen working from the Brush works at Loughborough to Craigentiny in Edinburgh on 6th October 2015.

As the locomotives will spend each day in Inverness, between duties, FoFNL wonders whether they could be dragooned into providing a daytime shuttle between Beaulie and Conon Bridge!



Contents

Photo - Sandy Colley

HIGHLAND MAIN LINE UPDATE

MODERNISE

The wait continues. There is no announcement yet of the CP5 stage of enhancements to the Highland Main Line (HML) and improvements to passenger and freight services by 2019. The longer the delay, the shorter the time scale for all that has to be done to modernise the line so that it can effectively compete with the new situation once the A9 is dualled by 2025. We do not want a situation where the deadline to complete a modern fit-for-purpose railway is missed and the project extended over yet more phases.

We do have some clues as to what is in mind. The draft Scotland Route Study suggests that the loops at Aviemore and Pitlochry are to be extended to allow simultaneous arrivals in opposite directions and become the regular crossing places for the hourly passenger trains. But what about freight? Are there to be no long crossing loops such as at Ballinluig or elsewhere or no double tracking of uphill sections?

CONTRAST

The Scottish Chambers of Commerce has called the continued existence of single track railways between Scotland's cities "unacceptable". It is certainly a contrast with the discussions that

have been going on about bringing HS2 to Scotland. Surely it would be appropriate to complete a highish speed route as far as Perth along the Kinross corridor which would reduce the Edinburgh to Perth and Inverness timings by 30 minutes on what can currently be achieved? HS2 through trains could then run further north. A feasibility study of this direct link was included in the Conservative Party manifesto for the 2016 Scottish Parliament elections.

BUSINESS

The Chambers of Commerce have been instrumental in calling for business arrivals in all cities by, or soon after 09:00. Inverness is currently not reached until 10:27. Hopefully, the new EGIP timetable (incorporating the two extra HML trains each way by 2018/9) will already have factored in departures from Inverness, Edinburgh and Glasgow at around 6 am to achieve this.

Plugging the 11:45 departure gap from Inverness would offer a safety net when the 06:18 from Wick is delayed and passengers miss the tight connection with the 10:45. Northbound, providing a 15:35 back from Edinburgh would be particularly useful, getting many people home in time for their evening meal.

Richard Ardern

DELIVERING THE GOODS

Scotland's rail freight strategy. Transport Scotland March 2016.

www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/transport-scotland/TS-Rail-Freight-Strategy-A4-AW3.pdf

A document long on cultivating attitudes and discussions and short on specific investment needs. *Branchliner*, (the HTRANS proposal for transporting timber from Georgemas and Kinbrace on the FNL) as an idea, is applauded and the HML is mentioned in passing but no explicit reference is made to the need for doubling and electrification of the line.

The document states that the Scottish Government, having already published research on the overall value of rail to Scotland's economy will commission the Scotland Freight Joint Board to produce a study which will review market potential at both a Scotland-wide and more localised geographical level; this will in turn inform the rail industry advice to the Scottish Government; this advice, due in September 2016, will be explicit on how rail freight needs have been fully considered in the rail investment priorities beyond 2019.

"Areas of focus in the advice should include...opportunities for enhanced rail freight services on the Highland Main Line, and exploiting the full potential of electrification of the Edinburgh Suburban line and upgrades to related infrastructure, including Millerhill."

DUAL TRACKS!

SCOTTISH CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE STRONG PLEA TO GOVERNMENT

Scottish Chambers of Commerce press release

19 April 2016

A CONNECTED ECONOMY IS A SUCCESSFUL ECONOMY

BUSINESS
ASK 2

Eliminate single track
sections of railway
between Scotland's
cities

Scottish Chambers of Commerce (SCC)'s Sustaining Growth, Supporting Business campaign sets out the key priorities for Scotland's businesses over the next five years. It forms the foundation of SCC's engagement with the next Scottish Government and the calls to action will

help Scotland's businesses to compete and deliver growth in our economy.

A connected economy is a successful economy and Scotland requires better connectivity internationally, between our cities and across our city region and rural areas. Whilst transport connectivity remains vital, fast and effective digital connectivity is now an essential prerequisite for economic growth.

Liz Cameron, Chief Executive of Scottish Chambers of Commerce, said:

"Connectivity has driven rapid economic development and growth since the time of the industrial revolution. Canals, railways, roads and air travel have all played crucial roles in Scotland's economic success and as our economy evolves in a global market, we will increasingly look towards digital connectivity at the essential currency of the 21st century."

"Scotland has a target of achieving 95% availability of superfast broadband by 2018. We must go beyond this and aim for 100% coverage. Not only that, but the broadband speeds that businesses and residential customers actually experience must be world leading and reliable. Our goal must be to deliver an always connected Scottish economy, with universal and seamless superfast and mobile broadband coverage right across Scotland. This will break down barriers to trade and ensure that visitors to Scotland experience a truly world class digital experience."

"We must also look to deliver transport improvements within Scotland by creating dual track railways between all of Scotland's cities and investing in a planned programme of road maintenance to ensure that the deterioration in our road network is reversed."



Scotland's northern cities need to be better connected and single track sections of the railways linking Inverness, Aberdeen and the Central Belt are unacceptable in the 21st century.

From *Freight Industry Times*

quarterly multi-modal freight newspaper, April 2016

Responding to the publication of research by the Centre for Sustainable Road Freight (CSRF) recommending the introduction of larger, heavier lorries to reduce CO2 emissions from road freight, the Campaign for Better Transport has issued its own report which challenges a number of the CSRF's findings.

Campaign for Better Transport commissioned an independent researcher to examine the report's findings and found that:

- The report's conclusion that bigger trucks could significantly reduce road freight's emissions by increasing payloads and reducing the number of empty lorries on the roads relies on old, flawed research when there is in fact no evidence that larger or heavier lorries reduce emissions
- The report underestimates by 50 per cent the potential to transfer freight to rail, which is hugely significant as rail freight produces 87 per cent less CO2 emissions than the equivalent road journey
- The report failed to look at how the increased cost to society of bigger heavier trucks would be met, currently only 30 per cent of the costs that heavy goods vehicles impose on society are met by the industry
- The report highlights the benefits of urban consolidation centres, but fails to recognise the benefits of rail connecting these centres so that long distance freight could be transferred directly from rail to last mile low emissions road vehicles

Philippa Edmunds, Freight on Rail manager at Campaign for Better Transport, said: "Reducing emissions from freight transport is key to addressing the UK's climate change targets, so it is extremely disappointing that this research advocates even bigger, heavier lorries which emit more carbon dioxide and impose even greater costs on the taxpayer.

"In order to reduce emissions from freight we need to get lorries off the road and start moving more freight by rail. We should also learn from the continent where distance-based charging systems and restrictions on what type of roads lorries can use have helped to reduce emissions significantly."

Campaign for Better Transport has written to the Climate Change Committee, which commissioned the research, to outline its concerns.



John o' Groat Journal and Caithness Courier 29th March 2016

Efforts are being made to increase the use of the multimillion-pound railhead at Georgemas.

That was the assurance given to Dounreay Stakeholder Group (DSG) after a plea from member Tor Justad, who would like to see more freight being transported by rail. Such a move, he believes, would help safeguard the route and boost the local economy.

Mr Justad wants more companies to use the facility and pointed out that talks were being held with supermarkets to deliver goods to Caithness by train.

Tesco has been identified as a potential user while talks have been held with the Co-operative Group. Other possible freight opportunities include biomass, construction materials, wood, renewables and whisky.

It was also suggested the UK's civil nuclear archive records could be transported by rail to the purpose-built facility being built in Wick.

"Has there been any progress in that regard?" asked Mr Justad at the latest DSG meeting in Thurso.

Nigel Lowe, the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority's head of programme, said the archive option is being investigated but stressed it is early days.

Other options are being explored with Direct Rail Services and Mr Lowe said the facility would be made available to commercial companies.

Mr Justad wondered if a drawback may be that priority would be given to the movement of nuclear material which is the facility's primary objective.

That would be the case said Mr Lowe but he did not see that as a problem and felt a solution could be found.

Mr Justad, chairman of Highlands Against Nuclear Transport, lamented the time these contracts take. "It is about a year ago talks were being held to look at the greater use of the facility at Georgemas and little progress seems to have been made," he said.

The railhead facility at Georgemas Junction was opened in July 2012



Mr Lowe acknowledged these discussions take time but stressed options are being explored.

The facility was built to facilitate rail shipments of intermediate radioactive flasks containing breeder fuel from Dounreay to Sellafield in Cumbria.

Mr Justad said rail has many advantages over road and every effort should be made to promote the benefits of the railhead.

At 13 metres high and with a capacity to carry 110 tonnes, the Georgemas railhead is the largest in the UK specifically built to service the nuclear industry.

Ninety rail consignments of breeder fuel from DFR at Dounreay will be made to Sellafield by 2019 with a further 35 shipments of so-called "exotic" fuel due to take place between 2019 and 2021.

[The NDA archive is due to open this autumn.]

37667 and 37607 on a northbound flask wagon working, waiting for the road at Inverness. 26th April 2016. Photo: Sandy Colley

INVERNESS - ABERDEEN UPDATE

Detailed design work is continuing on the Aberdeen to Inverness (A2I) improvements. The most advanced construction is the new Elgin footbridge and lifts. The Aberdeen-end starter and Elgin yard access semaphore signals have been replaced by colour lights.

A public information event was held at Inverness Airport on 21 April with plans for the new station, car park and bus stop on display prior to submission of the planning application. There was quite a lot of coverage in the press, most recently a letter in *The Press & Journal* from the Airport Manager saying that there definitely will be a bus service from the station to the terminal. No details of frequency were given.

It has been suggested to Network Rail that the third [centre] track through Inverurie should be reinstated. This would be particularly useful when diversions of the sleeper and freights from the HML are in force. It would allow these non-stop trains to overtake when both platforms are in use by service trains, whether terminators or through services.

As mentioned last time, it is essential that more capacity is provided sooner than ever at the Inverness end (double track) and in the middle (dynamic loop between Elgin and Keith). This would put an end to many of the service delays caused by late running which would be likely to increase as more trains are added to this single track line with insufficient passing loops.



New footbridge, lifts and colour light signals for Elgin.
6th March 2016.

STORM DAMAGE ON WEST COAST MAIN LINE

Lamington Viaduct was severely weakened and left close to falling into the River Clyde by flood damage caused by Storm Frank on New Year's Eve. Its second pier was left on the brink of failure when floodwater scoured out much of its foundations. The incident also damaged the second pier's steel bearings (which support the bridge-deck and track above the pier), a non-load-bearing section of the viaduct's third pier and the structure's north abutment. Engineers installed new steel bearings on the viaduct's damaged second pier and constructed a new concrete plinth on the top of the pier to support them.

The line reopened on 22nd February after an intensive seven-week engineering project to save the structure from collapse

Phil Verster, Managing Director of the ScotRail Alliance, said, *"This project has been a hugely challenging one, involving working out in the Clyde through the worst of January's storms in a race against time to save the structure. Our engineers have faced atrocious conditions throughout this project and I am really proud of their hard work and their absolute commitment to getting the line open again. I really do want to thank customers for their patience, and our industry partners for the close cooperation shown over the last two months. By working together we have been able to help limit disruption for passengers by providing diversionary routes for many of the affected services."*



TRANSPORT POLICY

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT ACCUSED OF "IDLING" ON TRANSPORT POLICY

The Herald Friday 22 January 2016

OFFICIAL publicity and rail improvements aimed at encouraging motorists to leave their cars behind are 'going nowhere' after the number of people using public transport in Scotland over the past decade actually fell, according to campaigners.

New figures have revealed a six per cent decline in those numbers since 2006 while road traffic has risen by two per cent in that period, despite a government transport policy aimed at getting passengers onto trains and buses.

The failure to get people to engage with greener modes of transport was blamed for damaging the environment by Friends of the Earth Scotland, while sustainable transport group Transform Scotland lamented a "decade wasted".

Transport Minister Derek Mackay, meanwhile, yesterday announced that a full review of Scotland's national transport strategy should take place during the next Scottish Parliament.

He made the comments as he launched a "refresh" of the 2006 national transport strategy, which took stock of the Scottish Government's performance so far.

The Government has spent £15 billion on transport since 2007, with investment in key infrastructure such as the new Forth crossing and the railways.

Rail passengers have increased by 29 per cent, but a drop in the number of bus journeys means that overall passenger numbers on public transport were down.

Cycle traffic has increased by 30 per cent, but only accounts for 3 per cent of journeys, while 68 per cent of commuting is by car - 1 per cent more than ten years ago.

The number of people walking to work has fallen by 1 per cent to 13 per cent, despite high-profile efforts to get people to be more active.

Friends of the Earth Scotland Director Dr Richard Dixon said that the figures were disappointing and called for a radical change in direction.

He said: "These disappointing figures show that the Scottish Government is idling on the transport changes the country needs. Our current transport policies are killing people and trashing the climate.

"There are more cars on the road, more miles being driven and a higher proportion of journeys to work being made by car. Put simply, we're going in the wrong direction.

"The majority of our air pollution is coming from traffic, leading to the public health crisis whereby 2000 lives are lost each year. A quarter of all our climate emissions is coming from our transport system, a figure that has remained largely unchanged in the last decade while other sectors have reduced emissions."

Colin Howden, Director of Transform Scotland and a member of the stakeholder group which advised on the new strategy, criticised Ministers for prioritising road-building over investment in public transport networks.

He said, "It is tragic that there has been absolutely no progress over the past decade in moving people from cars on to public transport."

"Whether one wants to tackle congestion, improve connectivity, or cut emissions, the evidence in this new strategy highlights a wasted decade in improving Scotland's transport."

"A further review of transport strategy after May's elections would serve little purpose. What is instead required is a fundamental review of the Scottish Government's spending priorities."

A Scottish Government spokesman said that real enhancements had been made to public transport provision across Scotland, borne out in the overall positive outlook presented by the National Transport Strategy refresh.

He added: "Through challenging economic times we have continued to invest heavily in infrastructure and real progress has been made in terms of our key strategic outcomes of improved journey times and connectivity, reduced emissions and improved quality, accessibility and affordability of public transport."

EFFECTIVE REPRESENTATION FOR RAIL PASSENGERS:

A LOSS OF FOCUS?

PUBLIC SCRUTINY

Have you heard of Transport Focus and where would you expect to find it? No? At the Motorway Services perhaps?

Same question. Passenger Focus? At the airport perhaps?

The Rail Passengers Committee for Scotland? No? Perhaps that is because it was dissolved eleven years ago, but at least you would know who it was meant to represent.

This it did by holding at least three public meetings per year at different venues all round Scotland and holding the rail industry to account over its treatment of passengers. It did it very well too but, sadly, its last meeting was in Dingwall in May 2005.

We haven't had a meeting like that since, until the HITRANS-organised Points North conference also in Dingwall in March 2015. A whole ten years without effective public scrutiny of rail services at our local Highland level.

The RPCS with its Convener, four office staff and 15 representative members from throughout Scotland did some very good work such as station surveys of Dundee and Kirkcaldy and its excellent 2001/2 publication *An alternative strategy for Scottish Inter-City Rail Services* with its suggestions for express and stopping trains on the Highland Main Line.

FALSE ECONOMY

Sadly the Scottish Government has not stepped in and created even a streamlined replacement body. Consumer protection and representation are seen as a low priority by both governments, and more and more money-saving mergers are being made. In the case of rail, Passenger Focus was established with offices in London and

Manchester only and with one board member and a manager for Scotland. Since then it has been asked to take on buses and highways in England and consequently changed its name to Transport Focus (TF). Its Scottish manager is now required to work in England and Wales for part of the week. His is a virtually impossible task.

When the RPC structure was dismantled by Alastair Darling, *The Times* editorial on 12 February 2005 said "**Customer Disservice: scrapping rail watchdogs is an insult to passengers.** It will deprive passengers of a level of regional representation they have enjoyed since 1947...and its cost to democracy, broadly defined, is little short of scandalous. Network Rail intends spending £22 billion before 2009. The RPC 'reform' will save at most £3 million. It is a false economy".

The Scotsman heading on 14 April was "**London group replaces Scots' rail watchdog**" This, "at the same time as control of the rail network is being transferred north of the Border". In February 2006 the Editor of *Railstaff* newspaper was saying "the winding up of the regional RPCs is a major scandal. Railway companies want to know their market. The RPCs were valuable indeed".

NATIONAL BODY

Where are we now, some ten years on? We have a national body being periodically asked to extend its reach into other diverse areas of the boiling cauldron known as "Transport" and to do it without commensurate funding increases. It would be an ideal subject for a new Gilbert and Sullivan opera.

Some things it does, "it does [them] very well".

POINTS TO PONDER

- 1) Would RPCS have discussed with Transport Scotland whether the STAG appraisal matrix is really fit for purpose to score and prioritise rural rail improvements?
- 2) For many years now passengers have been requesting fit-for-purpose trains for both Scottish inter-city and longer rural routes. Might RPCS have sought new builds for the FNL, West Highland Lines etc designed in conjunction with the needs of other long rural lines such as Settle-Carlisle?
- 3) What is TF's vision for the successful rural railway?

TF continues with the twice-yearly Rail Passenger Survey of passengers' views. You may have had a form for this handed to you at the ticket barrier or on a train. The survey is a snapshot of one journey on one day, but nonetheless statistically valid (though see panel below) and the Train Operating Companies (TOCs) use it as a benchmark for progress.

TF holds a Board Meeting in Scotland once every two years and publishes much of its research on its website. You can keep up to date through its monthly bulletins and via the Chief Executive's blog. It regularly comments on passengers' attitudes to fares and TOCs' success in coping with disruption. Compensation and repayment schemes is another live issue, but I don't think

TF is consulted so much on new train design these days. That is disappointing. We passengers have to sit in these trains for the next forty years!

Perhaps the issue which is potentially of most importance to all passengers is TF's role in resolving complaints between passengers and TOCs. Even though we find TF a bit remote, we wouldn't wish to be without that!

Anthony Smith, the Chief Executive, is speaking at our annual conference in Tain on 17 June. It will be a good opportunity for us to learn more about TF and its work and relevance to us, and for him to get to know us and gain an up-to-date picture of our line and its prospects and problems.

Richard Ardern

CHALK AND CHEESE

Two journeys on consecutive days

I remember sitting next to a couple from the West Midlands on the Kyle train on the day that Conon Bridge station was opened. They were full of praise for the spruced up train and gave the railway a glowing report on the Rail Passenger Survey form which they had just been given. I met them the next day on the Wick train en route for two nights in Caithness. They were really angry. It was an unrefurbished Haymarket unit and the dust and dirt on the seats was so bad, the lady was loathe to sit down and would certainly not rest her head on the headrest. She said that she wished she had that form back again so that she could say what she thought of this railway journey.

THE ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION OF RAIL IN SCOTLAND

Report by Oxera [economic consultants] for TS and Rail Delivery Group.

March 2016

www.fofnl.org.uk/docs/reports/The-economic-contribution-of-rail-in-Scotland-March-2016.pdf

This statistical exercise attempts to quantify the economic contribution of rail to the Scottish economy. Part of this involves coming up with theoretical scenarios of partial reduction in, or total removal of rail provision. The authors clearly explain that there are too many variables in play to produce accurate figures from this but do conclude that "the railway in Scotland provides significant benefits to users and non-users in excess of the subsidy to the rail sector."

In a section headed "Wider economic impacts" Oxera states that these "arise when there is a change in the transport network, and accrue to people and businesses beyond the users and providers of the network. These effects enable higher long-term economic output and growth, and can be interpreted as the medium- to long-term spillover benefits of the rail sector to other industries, and to the overall performance of the economy."

"We estimate a range of wider economic impacts of the rail sector using established transport economics techniques. These benefits take the form of increased clustering of businesses, reduced congestion on the road network and increased output. Oxera estimates that these are worth between £64m and £652m to the Scottish economy."

BIKES ON TRAINS

During March and April there was a flurry of letters in response to articles in both *The Herald* and *The Scotsman* about the reduction by Abellio ScotRail in the provision of cycle spaces on trains. The irony of the Dutch parentage of the current franchise holder is not lost on the various writers. There are two totally separate issues, as Abellio is at pains to point out: commuting and touring. It is the worsening of the, already difficult, provision for cyclists which has most exercised critics.

This is specifically the decision to fix the number of bookable bike spaces on refurbished Class 158 units at two. This particularly impacts the Far North Line which, until recently, has had the fairly exclusive use of units refurbished in 2007 for the FNL, which had four spaces to reflect their work on this line. On the West Highland Line the situation is worse with the forthcoming replacement of Class 156 units, each having six spaces, with 158s. Abellio, in its defence, suggests (albeit rather strangely) that as it will be lengthening trains and running a more frequent service it is increasing bike provision. This may be true in terms of the daily total of bike spaces provided but a four coach train of two Class 158s will still only have four spaces compared to each two-coach Class 156 which had six. Anyway, the daily total is no consolation to a family that is no longer able to travel together.

On heavily used lines it is clearly difficult to balance the significant space taken up by a bike against room for passengers but on rural and scenic routes this is less likely to be an issue.

Abellio is clearly at risk of shooting itself in the foot, alienating cyclists by pointing out how pro-bike it is, when people may no longer be able to book their bikes onto the train of their choice.

Ian Budd

***The Herald* carried a letter on 7th April written by Dave du Feu of the Spokes Cycle Campaign:**

Several readers have blamed Abellio for the proposed worsening of bike carriage spaces and conditions on the West Highland and Central Scotland lines (Letters, March 30, April 1 & 2).

However, the problem in fact originated with the Scottish Government and its agency, Transport Scotland, in its Franchise Agreement (FA) with Abellio, and their preceding Invitation to Tender (ITT) – and it could now be solved by Transport Scotland.

The ITT and FA contain much that is good for cycle/rail integration, but, crucially, and as Spokes pointed out to the Government several times, it was half-hearted on bike carriage. Transport Scotland appears fixated on maximising fixed seating, regardless of the flexibility needed to

I asked two FoFNL members for their views/experiences. This from Katherine Wren who lives nowhere near the FNL :

- I agree with the general idea of flexible luggage space for prams/bike/skis/large luggage items.
- Best use of bike space was on the old-style sprinters (Class 156) - hung vertically from hooks. Allows 6 bikes in a small stowage space.
- Hire bikes are a good option and may mean that fewer people need to take their bike on the train thus freeing up more bike spaces, but it is not always possible or desirable to use a hire bike.
- In my own case, if I'm working in Glasgow on a Sunday morning there is no train available to get to work by 10am from where I live. I have to ride over twenty miles to Croy on my own bike and then transport it on the train into Glasgow and home again.
- If I'm racing I need to transport my own bike. If I'm touring I need to transport own bike to/from start/finish. There seems to be an assumption that I could do that by car, but I don't have, or want, a car.
- I agree with the point made in the correspondence about families not being able to travel together, especially when trains are more than an hour apart. Cycle tourism is a big part of the economy and being pushed heavily by VisitScotland, not just Land's End-John o' Groats and the new North Coast 500 route.
- If a bike is booked on a train, this must be honoured as onward travel may depend on it.
- You need to be able to book your bike online. It's no good booking an inflexible ticket only to find later that you can't take your bike - you end up throwing money away!

off-peak, for commuting and for leisure and tourism.

The ITT and FA merely requested a minimum of two bike spaces per train – regardless of current bike storage or of length of train. Thus, in proposing to cut bookable bike spaces from six to two on the West Highland tourist routes, or downgrade the type of Edinburgh-Glasgow bike storage (despite longer trains) Abellio is merely following the criteria in the FA.

Transport Scotland has the power to specify that current bike capacity should be maintained, and could do that now if it so wished, as it has to approve all new train configurations. We do understand that they have moved a little way, following your coverage and continuing pressure from the tourism industry, and are investigating at least a partial amelioration of the West Highland proposals. Ideally, Spokes would like to see a flexible space in every carriage, as is common in Europe, allowing more people to travel with bikes, prams and bulky luggage, particularly off-peak, and giving a bit more peak-hour standing space in crowded trains.



Finally, we cannot let Abellio off the hook completely, since its website, on taking over the franchise, promised "improved off-peak cycle capacity on trains" and, for the scenic trains such as West Highlands, "more luggage, cycle and ski storage" - promises clearly not being kept if the present proposals go through unamended.

These are the experiences of Mary Langridge, another FoFNL member:

- First used the FNL with a cycle in 1968 - return Orkney to London. Recall paying half-fare for the cycle up to a price limit. Economical on a long or short journey. No problem with trains - guard's van.
- From 1977 bikes carried free. Only recall one occasion (late 1980s) when we couldn't board a train with our cycles in the days of guards' vans. There were five of us travelling from Pitlochry to Inverness. Luckily fitted onto a later train.
- Lucky the £3 cycle booking fee coincided with having teenage children. A favourite trip when they were younger had been cycling to Nairn with a picnic in the woods at Cawdor on the way then taking the train home. The fare for passengers (with railcard and Railrider Tickets) was less than £10. Suddenly an extra £16 had to be found. I once calculated we had 'saved' about £100 as a family over 6 months by not enjoying rides like this. (Likewise not using trains from Inverness to Carrbridge then from Nairn to Inverness with a cycle ride over Dava Moor saved us £32). Multiply that by other individuals and families to see how much British Rail lost.
- Since guards' vans have disappeared the number of cyclists has increased, particularly over the last 10 years.
- We have lost spontaneity. If the weather turns out to be nice we can no longer make a last-minute decision to cycle somewhere because the lack of a cycle space could scupper our plans.
- On occasions when going to Edinburgh and beyond we have had to travel on separate trains because of lack of sufficient cycle spaces. That's not a major problem when trains are frequent but it is in the Highlands and entertaining children is easier with two parents than one.
- We used a tandem with the children for a spell. We could take it on the guards' vans. That is no longer possible, with the exception of sleepers, unless I am mistaken. Tandems are very useful with young children not yet dependable in traffic. Today Rann trailers and equivalents are frequently used. I'm not sure how they stand with train storage. Family members are future independent rail users.
- Trains help cyclists; especially the retired with frequent opportunities to spend days out and also young families who buy multiple tickets. Retired cyclists with plenty of opportunity to cycle could spend large amounts annually on rail travel.
- Using public transport means you can start and end a journey at different point.

NEW FAR NORTH LINE HISTORY

Those who have read David Spaven's books "Waverley Route - The Battle for the Borders Railway" and "The Railway Atlas of Scotland : Two Hundred Years of History in Maps", both published last year, will be delighted to know that Mr Spaven has another book due to be published in September. This time he turns his attention to the Far North Line. The new book, almost certainly entitled "*Highland Survivor: the story of the Far North Line*" is dedicated to his father Frank who was pivotal in saving not just the Far North Line but all the main lines north of Perth. Frank Spaven was the Vice-President of FoFNL from its inception in 1994. Many of the photos in the book are from the Frank Spaven collection and have never been published before.

This is the book description to be used on the back cover:

'The 168-mile Far North Line, from Inverness to Wick and Thurso, is one of Britain's most

remarkable rail survivors. Completed under the auspices of the renowned Duke of Sutherland in 1874, it played a major strategic role in Britain's World War 1 effort, but faced extinction in 1963 when Dr Richard Beeching published his infamous report *The Reshaping of British Railways*.

'Forty-three years ago, David Spaven began on the Far North Line what would be a working life spent in and around the rail industry. In *Highland Survivor* he relates for the first time the fascinating story of Britain's longest rural railway: its origins, heyday, stunning escape from the Beeching Axe, and subsequent chequered history. Using a wide range of newly-unearthed public and private archive sources, eye witness accounts and anecdotes from railway staff – supported by a unique collection of previously unpublished photographs and maps – he reveals the inside story of the successful 1963-64 campaign against closure, by far the biggest rail reprieve of the Beeching era.'

JOHN THURSO TO CHAIR VISITSCOTLAND

FoFNL was delighted by the following announcement from the Scottish Government on 7th March:

Tourism Minister Fergus Ewing today announced the appointment of John Thurso as the new Chair of the Board of VisitScotland.

Mr Ewing said:

"I am delighted to welcome John Thurso as the new Chair of VisitScotland and wish him well in his new post. Scottish tourism goes from strength to strength and I'm sure VisitScotland will benefit hugely from John's experience and expertise in the industry to grow and develop Scotland's visitor economy."

John Thurso said of his appointment:

"Scotland is an iconic national brand with a world class tourist offering and VisitScotland does a great job promoting both. I look forward to joining the team where I hope the skills I have learnt in my hospitality career combined with my career in public service will make a useful contribution."



John Thurso on FoFNL visit to Altnabreac, 2015

FRANCHISE RULES

Both SNP and Labour wish to change the franchise rules in Scotland to allow public sector bodies to bid to operate ScotRail. Abellio is a subsidiary of Dutch State Railways.

The SNP Policy Officer wrote:

"Early in the next Parliament, we will take steps to ensure that a public sector operator is able to bid for a future rail contract and that there is a public sector body able to do so. We will use our new powers to enable this to happen."

A RAILMAN REMEMBERS

1 - STUMBLING UPON A JOB

*This is the first of a series of reminiscences by Evanton resident **Mark Nolan**. The articles were originally intended for FNE but ended up on the author's blog instead!*

It was 1973 and I was fresh out of school, floating around the Highlands with two A levels, five university rejections and absolutely no idea what I was going to do. I was dossing with some remarkably tolerant friends, playing with a local dance band and enjoying the novelty (which still hasn't quite worn off) of not having to attend school or stress over exams.

After a few months someone told me I was supposed to register for a national insurance number. This was news to me, and I wondered why no-one had ever mentioned it before. So I duly presented myself at what was still known as the Employment Exchange, before it was brutally renamed 'Job Centre'.

"Apparently I need a national insurance number." The clerk was young, keen and helpful. "Do you want to sign on for unemployment benefit?" he said. "Not particularly" I replied. "Do you want a job then?" "No, not really." "Well, you're supposed to do one or the other..."

Then he made an inspired choice. "How would you like to work for the railways?" My response was involuntary; "Gosh I'd never thought of that, I love trains!"

At the time, Ross-shire was in the grip of an oil frenzy. People were earning unprecedented wages, building oil production platforms for Highlands Fabricators at Nigg. Every local who wanted work was employed, and the demand for manpower was so great that men were being shipped in from all over the UK. The traditional labour force was decimated, to the extent that farm workers, shop assistants, milkmen and postmen were in short supply. Not surprising when they could earn four times as much at Nigg.

Half an hour later I was in the Area Manager's office at Invergordon station having my first job interview. It was authority versus feckless youth and we took an instant dislike to each other. The vacancy involved working alone at Fearn Station, selling tickets and dealing with parcels. The hours were 7am till 3pm but I could use the 7.15 train to get to Fearn. "I suppose I could manage that" I muttered.

I could tell he really didn't want to give me the job. If it hadn't been for the labour shortage I'd never have got through the door. "How do I know you'll even turn up?" he said as he shoved the keys across the desk. "Who else are you going to get?" I replied as I picked them up.



Fearn station, 67007 on the northbound Laing oil tank train, 6 November 2015
Photo: Sandy Colley

WHAT IF...?

WHAT IF COCK O' THE NORTH RULED OVER CULLODEN...VIADUCT?

The Editor of *Steam Railway* magazine penned a short review of a new book "*Cock o' the North: Gresley's Bold Experiment*" * in issue no 446 dated 9 October 2015.

Unfortunately he got a major fact wrong. We are told that "the story of the ill-fated 2-8-2s designed [in 1933] for the steeply graded Edinburgh-Inverness route remains an enigma". It certainly does! They were actually designed for the Edinburgh to Aberdeen route, as it says in the book, and the A1 Locomotive Trust which built *Tornado* from scratch between 1990 and 2008 is now building a new P2. *Tornado* has already been to Inverness twice and to Dunrobin and Brora once, so we may eventually see the new P2 which has already been named "*Prince of Wales*".



What other appropriately named steam engines might we see in the north in our pipe dreams? *Cawdor Castle* on the Inverness to Aberdeen line; *Duchess of Atholl* and *Wolf of Badenoch* [an unlikely couple] on the Highland Main Line; *The Lovat Scouts* and even, perhaps controversially, *Duke of Sutherland* and *Duchess of Sutherland* on the Far North Line?

Wolf of Badenoch and *Cock o' the North* were both built as P2s and rebuilt in 1943 with a 4-6-2 wheel arrangement. Once the new *Patriot* class locomotive is built, all the above classes could be seen again in the north with a temporary change of identity to carry the local name and number.

Readers can no doubt think of other candidates for this honour.

* *Peter Tuffrey, Fonthill Media (Stroud). 144pp. ISBN 978-1-78155-436-4. £25.*

Highland Chieftain



A1 60103 Tornado on "The Seaforth Highlander" on 21 June 2015 approaching Evanton - Sandy Colley

PROPERTIES FOR SALE

LOTH STATION

Loth Station house between Helmsdale and Brora is up for sale. Mr Chamberlain, the owner, has been there since 1994 having found it to be for sale by chance when walking. He renovated the property and used the waiting room as a railway memorabilia shop.

In an article in The Scotsman Mr Chamberlain said, “You see these places and fall in love with them. I never wanted to leave. It’s got a lot of atmosphere. It’s been wonderful. In the early days it was quite draughty and cold but it’s never been miserable.

“It’s very peaceful. We get deer here from time to time. There’s the beach on the other side. I’ve only ever been cut off once by snow, and that was for about a week.”

He added: “You get a feeling for the trains coming - the sound changes. They come by eight times a day. People jump because they are going quite fast. They go at 50 or 60 mph and they do go quite close to the window.”



CARBISDALE CASTLE

Carbisdale Castle, near Culrain and Invershin on the FNL is for sale at a price of £900,000. The castle was used as a youth hostel from 1945 until closure in 2011, which resulted in a noticeable loss to FNL traffic.

The castle dates back to 1905 when it was the last castle to be built in Scotland. It was built for Mary Caroline, Duchess of Sutherland, following the death of her husband George Sutherland-Leveson-Gower, the 3rd Duke of Sutherland. However, his family had disapproved of the Duke's marriage and after his death they contested his will.

Following a lengthy legal battle, they agreed to give the Duchess a substantial amount of money to build the castle – providing it was outside their lands. However, the Duchess had the last laugh as the castle was built on a hill where it could be seen from across a huge part of the



family’s estate, including the railway line. Subsequently, whenever the 4th Duke’s private train passed the castle the carriage blinds would be pulled down. The Duchess also had the clock face on their side of the clock tower omitted as she did not want to “give them the time of day”. It became known as “The Castle of Spite”.

The B-listed castle of 40,000 square feet, including 40 bedrooms, also comes with its own loch and library. It was originally put up for sale in 2014 for £1.2million because it needed substantial repairs. A buyer had planned to

invest £6.5million to transform the historic site into a luxury hotel, but the sale fell through. 27

Top and bottom: Far North Scenery - *Easter Chieftain Tour*, Inverness to Wick via Thurso on 5th April 2015 with DRS 37218 leading 37607.

Dunrobin



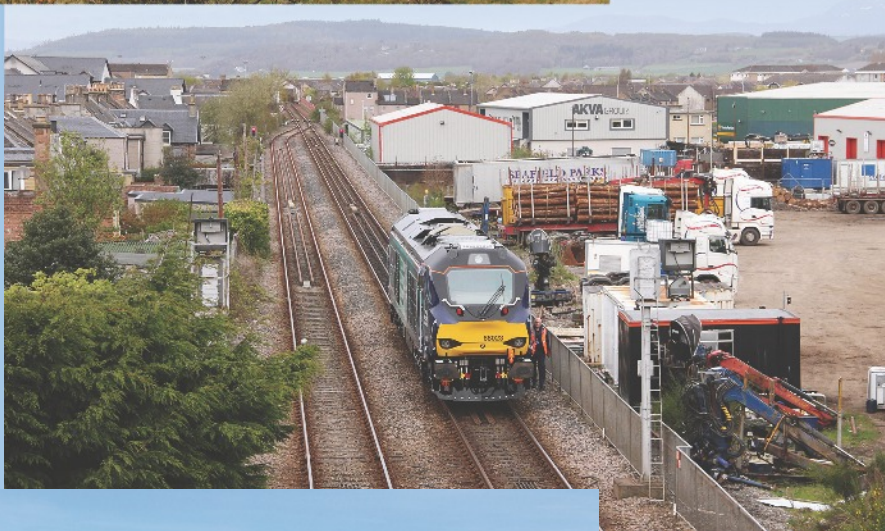
Photo: **Jamie Squibbs**

FNE 68 - Class 68!

68023
"Achilles" just onto the FNL waiting to go for refuelling.

7th May 2016.

Photo: **Sandy Colley**



Kildonan



Photo: **Jamie Squibbs**