

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

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Cover photo:

Heading South - unrefurbished 158871 leading 158734 out of Inverness on the 10:45 to Edinburgh on 25 August 2016 - an example of a service that should have first class seating being worked by standard class only units. Photo: **Sandy Colley**

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 £15.00 (£12.00 if you pay by Standing Order).

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

Cato the Elder, convinced of the threat to Rome, ended every speech in the Senate with the words *Delenda est Carthago* (Carthage must be destroyed). Since focus groups were yet to be invented in ancient Rome we have no way of knowing whether his banging on about it actually helped to destroy Carthage, but you can be sure that his spin doctors claimed it was so.

Up here the threat of Carthage is not great, but other mighty powers have risen to take its place. The cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, soon to be linked by two more electric railways, will continue to suck in resources, much as London has, and will also continue to do. The method of allocating limited resources will always be tilted towards the Benthamite precept of *the greatest good for the greatest number*. In other words - more bums on seats. (Up here our bums are fewer in number, although the ever-growing length of time during which they are parked on seats surely requires a greater degree of comfort.) This will always militate against spending where fewer will feel the benefit. This is why our campaign to get the Lentrán Loop has been rather noisier, and less gentlemanly, that might otherwise be the case.

Network Rail's *Scotland Route Study* plans for it on its long list of things to do. What we must now do is persuade those who will get it on the short list - Scottish Ministers, advised by officials at Transport Scotland - that even though fewer folk (and all of them a couple of hundred miles away) will benefit it is still worth the comparatively small cost of building it. Many of you have written to your MSPs urging on them the importance of the Lentrán Loop; many MSPs have in turn written to Humza Yousaf, the Rail Minister, or to Fergus Ewing, the Cabinet Secretary whose brief includes connectivity (and thus infrastructure like new bits of railway). Fergus is the Inverness MSP, which cannot altogether be a bad thing. At least *he's* not 200 miles away.

As I have already announced, I shall be demitting office as Convener at the AGM next year; you will therefore have to endure only two more *HEADCODES* in which I conclude by saying (albeit not in Latin) ...

THE LENTRAN LOOP MUST BE BUILT

Mike Lunan

FOFNL ANNUAL CONFERENCE, TAIN 17 JUNE 2016

Following the AGM the Conference featured presentations from Anthony Smith, Chief Executive of passenger watchdog Transport Focus; Ian Prosser, Chief Inspector of Railways and David Lister (Safety Director of Abellio, standing in for Phil Verster at short notice). Around 50 Members and guests heard about Transport Focus's work, and their distilling the views of thousands of passengers into a clear set of priorities for action to improve things. Our needs of the FNL differ vastly from those of commuters into large cities, but the railway has to satisfy all its passengers: Transport Focus does what it says on the tin - bringing focus to concentrate the minds of railway bosses.

The one area where all can agree is that safety on the GB railway is at a high level - higher than that of any other EU state. Ian Prosser said that the whole industry should take pride in this, but cautioned against complacency. The dispute about who opens and closes the doors on new trains was not about safety, as a good proportion of Scotland's trains have operated safely this way for many years.

We heard from Abellio about future plans for Inverness and these were also addressed by Frank Roach. Despite a late start (something wonky about the catering trolley?) there was enough time for several members to ask questions, the answers to which were often illuminating.

The Convener had a bit of a rant at Abellio for the dire late-running and cancellation statistics on the FNL. There is much in this issue of *FNE* about how this might - no, must - be eliminated. By the time of the 2017 AGM and Conference in June the Scottish Government's spending plans for the railway from 2019 will be imminent. We are living in interesting times.

Mike Lunan

EDITORIAL

A recent conversation set off a train of thought: how do others see FoFNL?

Are we 'railway enthusiasts'? I think not. Some members may be, but that is not why they signed up.

We have all joined FoFNL because we know that having a railway between Thurso/Wick and Inverness is essential and we all want it to be the best railway possible. A campaign group is vital for the Far North Line, to promote its virtues and fight for its improvement. FoFNL is able to reach into the community and represent its views on the subject.

Perhaps the hardest part is to get the message across to politicians who hold the future well-being of the line in their hands but who have many other pressing matters, mostly nearer their homes and voters, which fill their minds.

I enjoy thinking up new ways to illustrate the current difficulties and would like the said politicians to consider how they would feel if their daily (car) journey included a wait of up to 50 minutes at road works every day. This is the reality for those who travel the Far North Line due to the combination of the longest section of single-track railway in the UK and all the reliability and staffing problems which beset Abellio ScotRail on this line.

A recent article in *The Herald* raises the simple difference between the writer's excellent experience travelling on the newly reopened Borders Railway and his shock when making a journey from Oban to Glasgow.

Of the Borders Railway he says "Equipped with a wealth of information about the destinations on this 31-mile trip, both from the dedicated route website and an excellent guide pack you appreciate their history, culture and tourism offerings."

Then on to Oban, "you're looking forward to the spectacular journey...rampant lineside vegetation means much of that scenery is shrouded from view...the noisy carriages rattle along at a sedate speed...why does it take over three hours in this day and age to cover 101 miles by train?" "What is it with our public transport system and government's inability to view railways as powerful agents of economic growth and sustainability, and invest accordingly?"

He concludes, "The visible success of the new Borders Railway demonstrates yet again the consistent adage that investing in modern train services produces viable economic benefit. Do we really have to tolerate second-class services on Scotland's world-class scenic rail routes?"

Pretty sure that if he'd travelled on the Far North Line his comments would have been the same.

Ian Budd

FoFNL wishes to mark the passing of The Reverend Alistair Roy, who died on August 16th. He campaigned for improved rail services to Caithness for many years during his ministry in Wick and served on the FoFNL committee for two years.

WORST EVER FAR NORTH PUNCTUALITY?

ScotRail's latest 'Performance Update' statistics show a reasonable Public Performance Measure for 24 Jul - 20 Aug 2016 of 89.0% (Target - 92.2%) but when you scroll down to 'Annual On Time Arrival at Destination' and look at Wick, it is currently running at a shocking **25.9%**.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

INDUCEMENT

Members who were at the AGM in Tain will know that it was decided to amend the subscription structure. In 2016 a large number of members failed to pay (for a variety of reasons, some of them good), necessitating a series of chasing letters. In order to make a recurrence less likely there will, from January 2017, be an inducement for Members to pay by Standing Order. The basic annual subscription was increased to £15, but those who pay by SO need pay only £12 - the existing rate.

When we started the process of seeing who needed a fresh SO Mandate it was discovered that the Byzantine subscription structure meant that no fewer than eight different amounts were being received by SO each year, so the opportunity to do some tidying up seems too good to miss. After some thought it was decided that sending a fresh Mandate to *all* Members was the most efficient way of eliminating the rogue amounts, and a form is enclosed with this copy of *Far North Express*.

STANDING ORDER MANDATE

Even if you are already paying the correct amount I would ask - no, beg - you to complete this form and return it, not to your bank, but to the Membership Secretary. This is so that he can add your membership number as a reference, enabling much swifter checking of payments. This may seem an awful hassle, but once it's done it should mean that a series of begging letters is no longer needed. **Please do this by 31 October** so that there is adequate time for numbers to be added, and Mandates sent on to Members' banks. In fact, why not do it now?

The Concession rate was dropped some time ago. The Household rate (2 members at the same address, receiving only one copy of *FNE*) is fairly pointless, and it's easier if the membership is quietly changed to the principal householder at the rate of £15 (or £12 if paid by SO). We appear to have very few such memberships.

CORPORATE RATE

The Corporate rate for Community Councils and other bodies remains at £17. While there is no reduction for paying by SO it would be helpful if those bodies would complete a Mandate, thereby assisting the Membership Secretary greatly. One or two such bodies seem to have got away with paying only £12, but for the avoidance of doubt it ought to be £17. No retrospective back-payment will be sought however.

As many Members add something to their annual subscription, for which FoFNL is grateful (and thanks to those who do), the Mandate allows for a sum to be added if desired.

DO IT NOW!

This may seem a sledge-hammer approach, but successive attempts to prevent double SO payments from some Members have failed, despite the clear instruction that the new SO replaces the old one. Maybe banks don't read as carefully as they should. Other time-consuming problems have also arisen, so a thorough clean sweep is the only practical answer. It will take you three minutes, and cost you a second class stamp. If you didn't do it two paragraphs ago, *please* do it now (and save yourself £3 into the bargain).

Mike Lunan

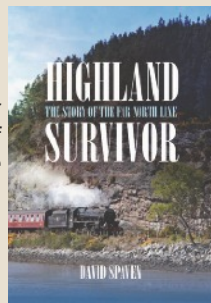
Highland Survivor - The Story of the Far North Line

This is a timely reminder that **David Spaven's** new book about the Far North Line is being launched on 21st September. Hard to imagine that any of our readers wouldn't want to get their hands on a copy straight away, especially if they have recently read David's book, *Waverley Route: the Battle for the Borders Railway*

Price: £16.99

Published by **Kessock Books**

[2026 - out of print, but available on [our website](#)]



FOFNL EMAIL CHATTER

FoFNL committee (and ex-committee) members are in constant touch by email, sharing information about what's going on on the line. This particular exchange is worth repeating as it pretty much sums up our *raison d'être*.

Richard Ardern "*Helmsdale delays and skipping Thurso*" Friday 12th August:

I happen to have noticed that this week Thurso has been missed at least 6 times.

The 10:38 was 20 min late by Helmsdale [HMS] on

Monday 8

Tuesday 9

Friday 12 August.

Each day it was held at HMS for a further 50 minutes [*waiting for a southbound train to traverse the overlong single-track section - **THE KINBRACE LOOP MUST BE BUILT** - Ed*] and skipped Thurso arriving Wick after 15:40.

Personal needs breaks were taken and the 16:00 return service left at 16:30.

Thurso was again skipped.

I wonder if there are any regular Caithness passengers still prepared to stick with this train? Probably some have no other option?

The deterioration in timekeeping is a poor show.

Malcolm Wood "*re:Helmsdale delays and skipping Thurso*" Saturday 13th August:

I too had been noticing all this.

Of course, the last train of the day to Wick is nearly always subject to knock-on delays. However, it hardly ever seems to get a mention, so I'll mention it now.

You don't need to be Caithnessian to be wondering whether you can stick to using the Far North Line.

Despite the new ("more robust") timetable allowing 1 hour 33 minutes for it to travel from Inverness to Ardgay, the 18:28 seemingly never gets to Ardgay by 20:01. So far this week, for example, it has been 12L, 6L, 13L, 22L, and 9L in arriving at its terminus.

I was on it myself on Wednesday (the sole person to alight at Ardgay) and enjoyed a 14-minute cigarette break in the evening sunshine at Invergordon. It was a blessed relief, actually, as the combined effects of the air-conditioning wailing out a very unfocused C# and the coarsely percussive rattling of loose perspex panels somewhere in the luggage racks had been distracting me from reading an excellent account of the life of Erik Satie in the AOÛT edition of "Le Monde diplomatique". Ironically, the wee break had cheered me up and what's more, the trolley, bless it, had arrived at the front of the train and I then enjoyed a very passable cup of tea (despite the semi-skimmed sterilized milk) and a bit of gluten-free Dundee Slice (hand-baked at Loch Ness). (BRING BACK the moist Cherry Genoa!).

Oh I also had an altercation at the barriers after arriving at Inverness on Wednesday, (5L) at 17:06. There were three long queues to get out, none of them moving, so I went to the extra-wide one, which nobody was waiting to use. My ticket was rejected 3 times. Not one of the gates with the queues was opening. I realised that an official was standing at the other side, seemingly ignoring all this, so I halloooed him. He just looked. So I allowed him to witness my ticket just zapping straight through without the gates opening and the gentleman next to me did the same at his gate. So the official then came closer, as if he thought that by staring at it, it wouldn't DARE not work. Eventually he did something which opened the gate. He asked to see the ticket of the elderly gentleman in front of me and said "well, that didn't work because it's your receipt". He did acknowledge that mine *was* a ticket and SHOULD have worked.

FOFNL RESPONSE TO HITRANS REGIONAL TRANSPORT STRATEGY REFRESH

1 Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL) was formed in 1994 to support the railway line from Inverness to Wick and Thurso, and now has almost 200 members. FoFNL supports the Scottish Government's policy of encouraging travellers to use public transport rather than private cars, so as to reduce traffic on overcrowded roads, to help conserve fuel resources, and to reduce the amount of pollution. We represent the views and aspirations of users (both passengers and freight consigners) of the Far North Line (FNL) and other lines out of Inverness, to service providers, government (local and national), Transport Scotland and other stakeholders.

2 We are grateful for the opportunity to comment on this Document. With the preliminary planning for CP6 well under way, with the HLOS and SOFA documents expected in the next several months it is appropriate to focus on more local aspects of transport provision. We will confine ourselves to railway matters except where there are general points to be made.

3 In 3.4.5 statistics for passenger growth are given. We endorse the comment that some small stations show widely different totals from year to year - some up, some down - and recommend that no weight is placed on changes where the annual footfall is below a certain number. This is because very low figures are unreliable and prone to under-reporting. It is notable that passenger increases are much lower on the more distant parts of the FNL - ie. those beyond reasonable commuting distance to Inverness. We believe that this is solely due to the egregious increase in journey times in the last 15 years. We will return to this point.

4 5.8 addresses the issues affecting tourism, specifically (in 5.8.1) saying that "[visitors expect that] the quality of public transport will be at least as good as is available elsewhere". This is not altogether clear. Does it mean *as good as it is on inter-city trains*? Or that trains should be *as good as private cars*? The demands of visitors, as distinct from local users, are likely to include better provision for the safe stowage of luggage, preferably within sight; better provision for bikes; better window alignment so that the view may be enjoyed from *all* seats. ScotRail passes some of these tests, but fails, and fails badly, on others.

The refurbishment of Inverness-based Class 158 DMUs around 10 years ago brought seats into alignment with windows, and we are glad that the current refurbishment programme appears to be extending this to all Class 158s. However the franchisee has been caught between two irreconcilable demands: that a second wheelchair space be provided, and that the Inverness refurbishment of providing 4 bike spaces be maintained. The disability requirements are enshrined in law, so necessarily trump the requirements of cyclists, to the severe disadvantage of the latter. The solution surely is to satisfy both demands by removing a number of seats - no more than 4 to 6. The occasions when a 158 is full and standing cannot be very many; are the occasions when a third or fourth bike is turned away (a family of sought-after tourists) counted? Indeed, are the occasions when a second wheel-chair is loaded counted?

5 FoFNL welcomes the franchise commitment to provide a "tourist train" and we look forward to the full implementation with on-board staff to provide a full tourist experience.

6 5.9.5 is disingenuous in stating that average journey times between Inverness and Wick had increased by 6 minutes between 2007-08 and 2015-16. While this is true what is not stated is that journey times on that route had greatly increased between 2000 and 2007-08. The average increase in end-to-end journey times on the FNL since 2000 is a shocking 32 minutes. On any other railway route in Great Britain this would be wholly unacceptable, and would merit vigorous questioning of the industry by Ministers. It is tolerated here because Caithness and Sutherland passengers are a captive market, relatively few in number. Scottish Ministers, through Transport Scotland, not unreasonably direct funding where the greatest numbers will benefit. However those parts of the transport network with fewer users must not *always* be denied funding. Minor roads carry far fewer vehicles than Motorways, but still require occasional improvement beyond routine maintenance. So it is with the railway.

7 5.9.7 suggests that frequencies have a negative impact. We refute this in the case of

the FNL. End-to-end frequencies have increased in recent years, thanks in part to pressure exerted by FoFNL, and the weekday (including Saturday) timetable is now as good as the infrastructure can support. We believe that a second Sunday service, leaving Wick in the morning and returning shortly after arrival at Inverness, would be well-used. The Invernet services have also increased in recent years and are now catering for a good flow of commuters from Easter Ross and the Inner Moray Firth area.

8 5.10.3 mentions the lack of pre-06:00 access to the HML as an impediment to bringing freight into Inverness. We ask what would be needed to eliminate this lack: main railway lines seem to be open during the night elsewhere. Is it a matter of staffing, or is the signalling infrastructure itself causing the restriction?

9 5.10.4 glosses over the major problem which will be posed in the next 20 years by the need to extract timber from remote parts of the Highlands. The issue is well known to HITRANS, as are the solutions being investigated: we think this ought to be set out in the Document. Rail has an important part to play as many of the roads, being laid on peat, cannot carry the likely number of lorries without sustaining severe damage. One of these, the A9 in Caithness, is a Trunk Road carrying all the traffic south from the county. It will be unable to cope with the timber lorries at the volume and frequency envisaged. There will need to be significant investment, running to tens of millions of pounds, either on the railway or on the roads. HITRANS must give guidance as to where, and how, the money should be allocated. Roads or the railway?

10 7 (on p.32) has a pretty map of "Lifeline Transport" which shows railway lines. What a pity that the text accompanying it fails to mention rail alongside "road, ferry or air".

11 We endorse the remarks made in 7.5. It would be good if some force were added to the concerns of "some stakeholders" in 7.5.3. The heading is, after all, "Lifeline" and the point about lifelines is that they are relied upon, sometimes in emergencies. It is not good enough that the lifeline road - the A9 - and the lifeline railways - the FNL and the HML - can be closed other than in the most unforeseen circumstances. Failure to maintain embankments, to prevent flooding or to monitor trees, is deplorable anywhere, but intolerable on a lifeline route. This lifeline-ness is the only occasion when routes with lower passenger numbers can truly trump the needs of

routes in more populous areas. If a line between Edinburgh and Glasgow is disrupted - as is currently happening with the closure of Glasgow Queen Street High Level - there are three other routes. Lifelines are not like that, and investment should be made to ensure that interruptions and long delays are a thing of the past. This applies with equal force to road and rail.

12 8.3, in commenting on the age of transport assets, ignores the age of rolling stock. The 40-year-old Class 43 which will be refurbished to provide the Inter-City ScotRail fleet from 2019 will push up the average age of Scottish rolling stock by a noticeable amount. FoFNL looks forward to their introduction and expects them to be popular with passengers and to deliver an improved passenger experience, not least in comfort and on-board facilities. The ex-BR Class 15X fleet which will continue to provide services on the FNL (and other routes within the HITRANS area) are not suitable for 4-hour journeys, for which they were never designed. Even if a magic wand were cast over any likely refurbishments they would not provide a pleasing passenger experience, especially when compared with a car. FoFNL believes that these two situations - a politically embarrassing increase in the average age of Scotland's trains, and the Class 158s - can be solved at a stroke. The new Northern franchise in England will be ordering new-build DMUs - a thing which the industry believed would never happen again - and it would make good commercial sense for *all* franchisees in GB to consider whether bolting some more DMUs onto this order might not be a wise investment. The door to more DMUs seems to be open at present, having been firmly shut as recently as last year; it will not remain open for ever. Naturally different franchises would have different operational requirements for a new-build DMU, but the basic engineering would not alter. Interior fitments can be tailor-made to cater for specific needs. HITRANS should lend its weight to this kind of thinking, not least by having a new section 8.3.4 about rolling stock.

13 As this is a "refresh" exercise it would be instructive to compare what was set out in earlier documents of this kind with the outcomes which have been achieved. It is 17 years since the then Scottish Executive "supported the development of [RTPs]". What has happened in these 17 years, what were the aspirations, what has been achieved, what still needs to be done?

Mike Lunan - FoFNL Convener; 18 May 2016

I have studied this carefully where it refers to, or impinges on, the Far North Line (FNL) and its principal connection to the Central Belt - the Highland Main Line (HML), and cursorily elsewhere. It is a solid piece of work. However a serious limitation is that it relies exclusively on Abellio's figures (used in its successful franchise bid) for Rural Market forecasts (including the FNL) (p137). It is impossible to know how robust these figures are, or will turn out to be over the period to the end of Control Period 10 (CP10) in 2044. Indeed it is hard to see how they can be tested as time goes on. This seems an inherent weakness, given that a great deal of detailed analytical work is based on these untested, and therefore unreliable, foundations.

On p19 strategic objectives are set out. They are "Enabling economic growth" (with four sub-headings); "Reducing carbon and the transport sector's impact of the environment" (with two sub-headings); "Improving the quality of life for communities and individuals" (with five sub-headings); "Improving affordability and value for money for funders and customers" (with two sub-headings). While the sub-headings include reference to more capacity, better connectivity, reducing risk - all worthy - there is no mention anywhere of improved reliability. This is worrying, as it ignores the constant finding from all Transport Focus' (and its predecessors') research that the top requirement, by a long way, of passengers is that the timetable is delivered as promised: that trains arrive when they are due and reach their destination on time. That this is ignored by the infrastructure provider's 25 Year Plan is to be regretted.

The SRS turns to the FNL on p53. It says "The rail network north of Inverness serves a rural market ... a commuter market into Inverness and a freight market to Georgemas. It provides 'lifeline' services to rural communities, consequently connectivity *and resilience* are key (emphasis added). ... Current infrastructure, and associated capacity, could not facilitate [the 2043 Conditional Outputs] and a *substantial upgrade of track and signalling infrastructure would be required* (emphasis added)." While the time during which these changes might be made extends to 2044 (the SRS seems to use 2043 and the end of CP10 in 2044 equally) it is

at least worth noting that NR acknowledges that "substantial" work needs to be done on the FNL.

Four "interventions" (a curious word to use in the context of what in lay terms are improvements) are set out.

- "Inverness to Dingwall - additional *loop* to provide greater flexibility to pass trains (emphasis added)." This is our old friend the Lentrans Loop, and there is great rejoicing at its inclusion.
- "Dingwall to Invergordon - additional *track* to provide greater flexibility to pass trains (emphasis added)." What inference should be drawn from the use of *loop* and *track*? Is the doubling suggested north of Dingwall to be usefully longer?
- "Re-signalling from Inverness to Dingwall - to replace the existing radio-based system with a conventional signalling system arrangement." (The disparaging "lights on sticks" used by, among others, a former Secretary of State, is pleasingly absent from NR's thinking: colour light signalling still has its fans, clearly. This writer is among their number.)
- "Georgemas Chord - to ... facilitate a direct service to Thurso."

In the justification for these we find the encouraging words "These interventions could also improve the resilience and performance of the network". The indicative cost is shown (p83) to be £30m to £75m. It notes that Bunchrew Level Crossing "is due for renewal during CP6" (2019 to 2024), and that this "could align with introducing conventional signalling and higher linespeeds". Given the statement (on p07) that a strategic objective is to "[take] advantage of planned renewals to ensure that the enhancements that are required deliver maximum value for money" it seems likely that this signalling enhancement would tick enough boxes to be planned firmly into CP6. Putting a loop - or even a few kilometres of track - in the Lentrans area will be less expensive (given that points and signalling will be required) if this work is done at the same time. Despite this the signalling is not programmed until CP7 (p194), yet the extra track between Dingwall and

Invergordon (where there would seem to be no other "planned renewals") is in CP6 (p194). While any doubling is to be welcomed, this does seem to be the wrong way round.

Once the Edinburgh-Glasgow Improvement Plan (EGIP) is completed in a few years (when the lines to Stirling, Alloa and Dunblane are electrified) it is believed to be Transport Scotland's policy to continue electrification in other parts of Scotland. The original policy (to electrify 100 single-track kilometres (stk) a year for the foreseeable future) appears to have been scaled back to a vaguer intention to do more electrification, but without the specific annual stk target. The SRS suggests (various pages) that electrification to Aberdeen via Perth and Dundee will happen before electrification from Perth to Inverness, and that electrification of the East Coast Main Line from Edinburgh through Fife to Dundee will happen even later. This is not the place to argue for a different set of priorities, but even the earliest of these is not earmarked for completion until CP8 (by 2034). It would seem that one of three things will happen. Either the refurbished High Speed Trains (HSTs) which will be introduced on the Inter-City routes from 2018/9 will run until 2034, when they will be around 60 years old, or different diesel stock will replace them, or electrification will be carried out more quickly. Furthermore the document does not appear to see things from the Train Operator's point of view. Once the Aberdeen and Inverness routes from the Central Belt are electrified it will be a train diagrammer's nightmare if the closing part of the Inter-City network (Inverness - Aberdeen) remains diesel-hauled. Yet on p86 the SRS pours cold water on the idea of electrifying this vital connection until after 2043. While HSTs provide the Inter-

City services, as they will do in a few years, diagrams will be constructed for maximum use of the stock, and units will traverse all parts of the network as shown on p97.

The underlying Conditional Outputs governing the projected requirements by 2043 are set out in the Appendix, and those concerning the FNL are on p147. There are two: RC01 (Inverness - Wick/Thurso: 1 opportunity to travel every other hour) and RC2 (Inverness - Invergordon: 1 to 2 opportunities to travel per hour). These are described as "origin to destination" so it is clear that trains in the other direction would necessarily occur at the same frequency. Assuming the day to run from 07:00 until (last departure) 19:00 this means 6 or 7 Caithness trains a day each way - a significant increase which would be utterly impossible without redoubling far beyond that set out in SRS. A loop at Kinbrace in what is currently the longest stretch of single track on the entire GB network would be a bare minimum, but even this is nowhere mentioned. It is clear that RC1 and the SRS are completely incompatible, at least within the 2043 timescale: which will give way? Who sets RC1 - Scottish Ministers (ie Transport Scotland (TS)) or Network Rail?

Much work has gone into the SRS, and Scottish Ministers, advised by TS, will decide which enhancements they wish to see - and pay for - in CP6. They will issue their High Level Output Specification (HLOS) in June 2017 (p08). Passengers have therefore only a few months in which to influence the decision. The ball is now in the politicians' court, and writing to your MSPs - all 8 of them - may show that you care.

Do it now!

Transport Focus National Rail Passenger Study, Spring 2016

It would be interesting to see how these national figures compare with feelings on the FNL...

Overall	83%	Value for Money	72%
Cleanliness	81%	Overall Station Environment	85%
Frequency	59%	How Well Company Dealt With Delays	42%
Punctuality/Reliability	86%		
Sample size 128-136, varies with questions			

VERSTER VISIT

Frank Roach, with his HTRANS hat on, invited Phil Verster, Managing Director of the Abellio ScotRail/Network Rail Alliance, to the Far North.

From L. to R. Phil Verster, Mike Lunan and Frank Roach with train conductor.



He met some of the Committee in Inverness on the evening of 27 July and travelled north on the 10:38 the following day. By great good fortune this train was a mere 8 minutes late when I joined it at Altnabreac, having used the 13:06 from Thurso to get there. What a boon is the Network Rail "Live Departures" website, for without it and its disclosure that the 10:38 was indeed running that day I might have had to spend another 4 hours there. Delightful though it be, its attractions pall quite quickly, especially in midge weather.

Phil and I discussed various things in the 25 minutes before we arrived at Thurso. I reminded him that some of the actions he agreed following last year's Station Survey were still incomplete, and he welcomed the reminder. These are principally the painting of safety white lines at most of the stations, and the installation of tactile edging at Tain. This is needed because of the

opening of Platform 1864 - location of the AGM this year (and very fine it is, too - eat there when you are next in the area) - and the added risk of those who have dined too well being unaware of the drop onto the line. I also pressed on him our view of the Scotland Route Study (printed elsewhere in *FNE*) and the great importance we attach to the Lentrans Loop. He agreed that there needed to be some doubling between Inverness and Muir of Ord (as the Study sets out), but that the decision lay with the politicians.

On arrival at Thurso I was able to point out the paucity of convenient parking and - a continuing irritation to one member - the odd EXIT signage which directs the unwary to a locked door 50 yards away. The arrow pointing up was photographed, and it is to be hoped that it is replaced by one pointing left. We are promised a Customer Information Screen at Thurso (and at Wick), so these might be enjoyed soon.

It's clear that Abellio are well aware of the needs of the FNL, articulated here and elsewhere by FoFNL, and the warmth with which we exchanged thoughts bodes well for seeing improvements when funds become available. The Alliance's job is doing the work when it's programmed: ours is making sure that it gets programmed in the 2019-24 Control Period.

Mike Lunan



Forsnard Station - "wet bed", July 2016. Phil Verster acknowledges that this was listed in the 2015 Station Survey and needs to be fixed.

LEVEL CROSSINGS - 9

SOME ODDS AND ENDS



From top:

1. First sight
2. Instruction for pedestrian
3. Instruction for driver
4. Reminder



Regular readers anxious for information about what's happening in the LX world should remember the words of Paul Daniels - not a lot. The last episode of this continuing saga appeared in *FNE 61* as long ago as January 2014. It spoke of the plans to bring the vast number of LX pieces of legislation into one spanking new Act of Parliament (as recommended in a Joint Report by the two Law Commissions), and expressed the hope that all would be done and dusted by the end of 2015. Well, it didn't happen. Although I was assured at the highest level within ORR that they and the DfT were both strongly in favour of swift action it would appear that cold feet among officials has caused a delay. I have no light to shed upon when we might see action, and having a new Secretary of State probably doesn't help. I will continue to irritate by continuing to ask.

The Scotland Route Study, mentioned elsewhere in *FNE 68*, sets out plans (not set in concrete, but at least on the drawing board) containing the following sentence: *Bunchrew level crossing is due for renewal during CP6, which could align with introducing conventional signalling and higher linespeeds.* (CP6 starts on 1 April 2019). Other than that the words "level crossing" appear infrequently. A few more appear for possible closure in CP6, including Raigmore at a suggested cost of at least £30 million, but nothing on the FNL until CP7 (2024-29) when there will (= might) be "selective closure between Inverness and Dingwall". Breath should not be held.

While little is happening on the ground, vehicles continue to cross the railway line. Some "user worked crossings" (the farm ones where lawful access is not public) have had a mechanism installed so that

the gates shut automatically after the vehicle has crossed. Before this the user had to:

- 1) open the nearer gate
- 2) cross the line
- 3) open the other gate
- 4) cross the line
- 5) drive across
- 6) cross the line to close the first gate
- 7) cross the line
- 8) close the second gate - five crossings in all.

This is clearly a much higher risk than would be the case with an automated mechanism. As the sign at Borrobol shows, the driver presses one button to open both gates. After driving across, another button is pressed to close both gates - a reduction in risk of around 80%. Clearly this reduction comes at a cost, and it will be interesting to see whether there is widespread installation in other parts of the country.

The pictures also show the disconcerting array of safety notices at the very quiet, and privately-used, crossing. Is it *really* necessary to have so many warnings and instructions? Too much information usually leads to a wholesale ignoring of *all* of it, as we all know from the bombardment of otiose guff constantly broadcast on any train. ScotRail aren't too bad when compared with the cross-border operators, but most of us switch off unconsciously.

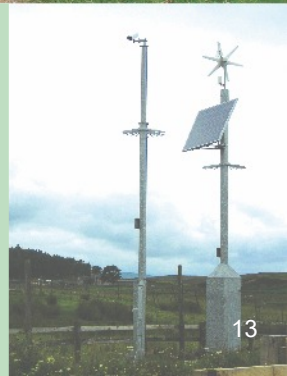
Mike Lunan

Contents



From top:

- 1 Coming from the other side
- 2 In use!
- 3 This keeps the gate open
- 4 The necessary kit



UPDATES

FAR NORTH LINE

DOLDRUMS

What a pickle! The "Really Useful" all year scenic railway which is the Far North Line is still in the doldrums and still, unfortunately, haemorrhaging passengers. Bad publicity grows wings and perceptions will take a while to turn round. After much soul searching and/or for pragmatic reasons, passengers (even our own members) may be using other means of transport. This is also happening south from Inverness as Club 55 is no longer available and advance fares have all been eagerly snapped up.

The class 158s have been experiencing radiator problems across the whole fleet, and other failures even on the refurbished units have led to stock shortages. The on-time train arrivals percentage for Wick was 28.5% in the July period, yet Kyle did much better at 54.9%.

SHORTCOMINGS

Patronage is generated by a mixture of convenience, reliability and affordability. The fares structure north of Inverness is generally user friendly. Convenience is more mixed. Infrastructure shortcomings prevent trains such as a desirable 4pm northwards or an 8am Inverness-Dingwall commuter from being run. It is absolutely vital that the extra loops between Inverness and Muir of Ord, north of Dingwall and at Kinbrace are chosen by Government for funding and installation early in Control Period 6 (2019-2024).

LOCALLY BASED

These will make a big difference to reliability also. We have argued for some time that controlling the line from Glasgow has many shortcomings and that it would be helpful if a "Control" were re-established in the Highlands.

HIGHLAND MAIN LINE

Question: What is slower than a tortoise?

Answer: Nothing that we know of - except, perhaps, the Highland Main Line upgrade?

CONCERNS

The Office of Road and Rail, in its **Network Rail Monitor Scotland, 18 October 2015 until 31 March 2016** comments "We continue to have

The present situation suggests that a strengthened, locally-based, and very senior, management team is now essential to develop bold strategies to win back passengers, win new business and to care for all, whether regular commuters, hospital patients, tourists or whatever. The friendly conductors and trolley attendants do a great job with the passengers, but the right trains and the right infrastructure need to be in place to make it all work more smoothly.

SILVER LINING

The hoped for silver lining is that the current crisis will accelerate the improvements necessary to improve the speed, capacity and resilience of the line such that passenger numbers resume their annual growth figures of recent years. Even better would be to see a much improved timetable made possible which produces a step change in passenger numbers, and new infrastructure at Kinbrace and elsewhere to facilitate freight growth in timber and groceries etc.

RENAISSANCE

It would be really good if there could be such a spectacular and sustained renaissance that a new edition of David Spaven's forthcoming book on the line is needed within five years. That is the challenge for the Scottish Government, Transport Scotland and the ScotRail Alliance!

Train Masquerades

Q: When is your train on time but for other passengers who started out on that train, not on time?

A: When it is the 19:28 from Ardgay to Inverness running in the path of the late running 16:00 from Wick to Inverness and assuming the latter's identity.

concerns regarding the ability of the project to complete within the Control Period [5] as development work remains slow. We expect...assurance that the regulated milestone of March 2019 can still be achieved".

Passengers and freight operators are also very seriously concerned about this, having heard so many promised dates for publication of the GRIP

3 "option selection" report. The latest suggestion on the grapevine of December 2016 has now replaced April 2016. Some previous ministerial promises in response to the questions below:

PQ S4W-14359 from Murdo Fraser on 25 April 2013:

"Network Rail is expected to deliver a report on proposals for phase 2 by summer 2013".

PQ S4W-15454 from David Stewart on 12 June 2013:

"Network Rail is expected to deliver a report on the options for phase 2 later this year".

PQ S4W-16838 from John Finnie on 18 September 2013:

"Network Rail...is expected to deliver a pre-feasibility report on options later this year."

PQ S4W-21239 from Mary Scanlon on 2 June 2014:

"Network Rail are currently working on timetable development for phase 2 of the Highland Main Line improvements project which will help to determine the infrastructure improvements necessary...They are expected to deliver the GRIP 3 Option Selection Report by summer 2014".

SINGLE TRACK

It is a very complicated project, made more so in particular by having to cope with an already busy predominantly single track line, and having to find fast paths south of Perth to and from Edinburgh and Glasgow. The latter has been made easier in a way as the whole timetable south of Perth is being recast for December 2018 to suit the new electric services which will come as far north as Dunblane. I understand it should be possible to incorporate much faster limited stop Highland services south of Perth into this. The change of franchise, and choice of future rolling stock by the new franchisee, has had to be incorporated and this has slowed down the process. It is almost two years since these new parameters were announced. Why has it taken so, so long?

The answer will be that it has to be got right. That is self evident. Even so, the lengthy delay is in danger of storing up more problems for the future. Public finances continue to get tighter, although there is a predilection towards infrastructure projects. Worryingly, phase 2 appears to include very little new track doubling

thus leaving this all to phase 3.

VISION

The ORR allocation of money to HML phase 2 for CP5 (2014-2019) was provisional because NR had not yet decided the options. Incredibly we are now half way through CP5 and we still don't know! From memory, I think some £250M was suggested. It looks as though ScotRail Alliance is talking now of only £121M, or half the sum allowed. This is not something to celebrate especially if the meaningful capacity and speed improvements are not completed before the A9T dualling (scheduled for 2025) or, even worse, the railway improvements and 2 hour 45 minute journey times slip in to CP7.

Has the vision been lost? Network Rail's Scotland Route Study (SRS), published in July, is suggesting electrification of the HML, not by the Government aspiration of 2030, but slipping back to CP10 (2039-2044)! Surely the forthcoming HSTs cannot go on until then as 65 year old pensioners? Bimodes have yet to prove themselves on the Highland gradients, so are we talking of a new diesel train for Inverness and Aberdeen?

DIRECT LINE

Talking of vision, there still remains Transform Scotland's idea to build a direct line from Edinburgh to Perth which would take 30 minutes off the journey time to Perth and thus to Inverness also. That would be a big step in making rail more competitive with road journeys. The first stage from Inverkeithing to Halbeath is in the SRS. The full route won't come in time but could be useful to Virgin Trains East Coast if their IEP bimodes are going to be around ten minutes slower on the hills than the existing HSTs. Gauging work for the IEPs has now started along the line.

The single track south of Perth on the current circuitous route through Newburgh to Edinburgh is a severe handicap to trains such as the 10:45 Inverness to Edinburgh. When this runs more than 20 minutes late it tends to be terminated at Perth because there is no passing loop between there and Ladybank. Passengers are put on the next service which makes them an hour late. This train is popular with passengers travelling south of the border and their connections at Edinburgh are lost. The idea of reviving the former Clansman service which formerly

occupied that Inverness to Perth path and ran down the West Coast Main Line to Birmingham and beyond should be considered.

NIGHTMARE

The lesson that single track lines are a nightmare to operate is still not being learned. The new Borders Railway has provided plenty of evidence

of that in its first year. Please will Transport Scotland reflect and listen to the blunt and sensible message from the Scottish Chambers of Commerce that single track main lines between Scotland's cities are "unacceptable" in the 21st century? The Scottish economy and the Highlands deserve the fully modernised railway promised in the 2008 strategy.

INVERNESS - ABERDEEN LINE

PROGRESS

Progress on phase 1 of the line enhancement is evident at Forres and also at Elgin where the new footbridge and the lifts are now open. The walkway at the top of the steps is rather flexible and a bit disconcerting until you get used to it. It is presumably composed of a rather thin piece of metal with asphalt on top. The station has been entered for national award.

At Forres, the whole site for the new station, new loop and through lines has been cleared of vegetation and levelled. Heaps of material are now being created for the access to the new road bridge which will replace the level crossing. 400 tonnes of stone are required for the bridge.

INFORMATION EVENTS

Network Rail's PR Officer, Stacey Lynch, has been doing good work in community liaison locally. She has arranged a monthly information event for the public to visit the Forres project office on the first Thursday of every month between 3 and 7pm starting on 1 September. The green BAM compound can be reached by going over the level crossing and following the road round to the left.

At the Aberdeen end, passengers have been consulted on the least disruptive way of closing the railway for short periods while essential double tracking work is carried out throughout 2018. The proposed park and ride car park at Kintore is likely to be used at times of disruption. At Forres there is only likely to be a maximum of three weekend closures.

REVIEW

The Office of Road and Rail's *Network Rail Monitor for Scotland 18 October 2015 to 31 March 2016* reveals that the new project estimate is significantly above the cap of £191M set by the ORR. A review is currently being carried out to try and resolve the problem caused by additional sections of current track

and embankments having been found to be likely to need renewal.

TIMETABLE

A new timetable is being worked on for December 2018 which will give extra trains between Inverness and Elgin such that the timetable is approximately hourly during the main part of the day. Some High Speed Trains from Edinburgh to Aberdeen will be extended through to Inverness.

PERFORMANCE

Performance continues, as ever, to be constrained by the inadequacies of the almost totally single track line. Consider the plight of passengers on the 12 noon Aberdeen to Inverness on Tuesday 16 August. The train was 25 minutes late starting because of a train set failure. When it got to Keith Loop it was held for a further 20 minutes to wait for the on-time eastbound service which it should have passed at Elgin. Passengers for Keith were almost within sight of their station but unable to alight because the other train was in this very long single track section. How frustrating is that? Our arrival in Inverness was 45 minutes late. When trains run late the constricted line is unforgiving and anything but passenger friendly.

DYNAMIC LOOP

There is a pressing need for this weakest link to be provided with a long dynamic loop somewhere along its length, possibly from Orton westwards towards Elgin. There is also a pressing need for double track reinstatement at the Inverness end to break up the second longest single section. Passengers on the 13:38 from Aberdeen have to wait 13 minutes at Nairn to access this section.

CONSIDERABLE SCOPE

British Rail's Aberdeen-Inverness Line Discussion Paper of 1994 concluded "*There is considerable scope to upgrade the Aberdeen-*

Inverness line in terms of capacity, reliability and speed at relatively modest cost provided that the work is linked with signalling renewal. Certainly the upgrading would cost far less than a major improvement of the A96".

The job is not done until the line is reliable with an end to end journey time of less than two hours and sufficient capacity for more freight too. That would really "lift the spirits".

INVERNESS STATION UPGRADE

A notice appeared on the public contracts website www.publiccontractsscotland.gov.uk from Abellio ScotRail Ltd on 2 August. This sought a partner to tender for the Redevelopment of Inverness Raulway (sic) Station. The brief is to involve *"Taking existing GRIP 3 design proposals as Lead design to GRIP 5 including: a new station front elevation, new access and egress layouts to other station entry points, internal refurbishment, external refurbishment and streetscape improvements".*

Invitations to tender are expected to be sent out on 7 September with the contract to be awarded around 26 September.

The project is a big one costing several million pounds to improve the concourse, all three entrances to the station including Station Square with possibly expanded retail opportunities. Details are sketchy at present, but more detail is promised for the end of the year when the public will hopefully be consulted. It is so important to get it right.

Ideally, the station needs more space all round. The ticket barriers have led to overcrowding of the concourse at times, Safe access by pedestrians, cyclists, and by taxi, bus and car passengers is poor. The north platforms are hampered by being seriously curved and rather short.

It is worrying to hear some local politicians favouring removing the taxis from Station Square and Academy Street and putting them at the Debenham's side of the site. This

roadway is already seriously inadequate for the replacement buses which cannot turn and for all the cars and minibuses which legitimately bring and collect rail passengers. Where will the taxis go and how will safe passenger access to both side entrances be secured?



Is more retail space required? It is already strange that the WH Smith bookstall has changed into more of a coffee shop than a bookstall in competition with the existing "Cafexpress" cafeteria. How does this affect the viability of the on-train catering?

Maybe there is scope for expansion in the direction of the bus station, building a shared airport style warm waiting room and ticket desks and relocating the tourist information office on to the site. That would create a convenient transport "hub" for the main interchange of the Highlands. Safe and easy access for all is crucial to this project.

Watch the media for the proposals and your chance to comment.

All updates - Richard Ardern

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Question S5W-00611: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered: 21/06/2016

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will review the Scottish transport appraisal guidance (STAG) process in light of the claim in issue 68 of the Far North Express of it being biased against small rural schemes.

Humza Yousaf: Scottish transport appraisal guidance is routinely reviewed and developed in line with best practice and emerging relevant research evidence. There is no evidence that the guidance is biased against small rural schemes and it is important that all proposals have a demonstrable business case before Scottish Government investment is made.

Question S5W-00620: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered: 21/06/2016

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the greater number of passengers than anticipated on the Borders Railway line, what Transport Scotland is doing to adjust its passenger forecasting formula.

Humza Yousaf: There will always be an element of uncertainty present with forecasting, particularly considering the unique nature of the borders railway, which is the longest stretch of new railway line to be built in the UK in the last 100 years.

The forecasting methodology used for the borders railway was in line with industry practice and incorporates evidence gathered in the borders region. Transport Scotland keeps forecasting methodology under constant review to ensure best practice and we will draw on evidence, including evidence from the borders railway, to inform future appraisals.

Question S5W-00619: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered: 21/06/2016

To ask the Scottish Government what the (a) most recent and (b) forecast passenger numbers are on the Borders Railway at (i) Edinburgh Waverley, (ii) Newcraighall, (iii) Shawfair, (iv) Eskbank, (v) Newtongrange, (vi) Gorebridge, (vii) Stow, (viii) Galashiels and (ix) Tweedbank station.

Humza Yousaf: The most recent and forecast passenger numbers by station for the first six months of operation on borders railway are as follows:

Borders Railway six months in - Single trips

Stations	Forecast single trips for first six months of operation	ScotRail actual single trips for first six months of operation	
Tweedbank	18,978	183,918	
Galashiels	20,567	104,593	
Stow	5,129	24,365	
Gorebridge	79,014	39,400	
Newtongrange	46,449	50,480	
Eskbank	114,568	65,672	
Shawfair	54,298	9,398	
Brunstane/Newcraighall	865	11,344	
Edinburgh Waverley	228,156	205,203	
Totals	568,023	694,373	Up 22%

Motion S5M-00437: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, Date Lodged: 13/06/2016

Capacity on the Highland Main Line North of Perth

That the Parliament shares the concern of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport that there

appears to be little or no intention to increase the capacity on the Highland Main Line north of Perth; believes that the modest investment for faster entry and exit from passing loops is welcome but insufficient to lift capacity, and calls on the Scottish Government to make the dualling of the Highland Main Line north of Perth a priority to promote modal shift of goods, which, it understands, produces 87% less CO2 emissions than the equivalent road journey, and people from road to rail.

Supported by: Alison Johnstone, Andy Wightman, Alex Rowley, Ross Greer, John Mason, Patrick Harvie, Elaine Smith

Question S5W-00754: Rhoda Grant, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Labour, answered 21-06-2016

To ask the Scottish Government how many times in each of the past 12 months services on the Far North Line have not stopped at (a) Beaully and (b) Conon Bridge station because they were subject to delay, broken down by the reason for the delay.

Humza Yousaf: In each of the past 12 months services on the Far North Line have not stopped at (a) Beaully and (b) Conon Bridge station, because they were subject to delay, for the following reasons:

Month	Reported Cause	Beaully	Conon Bridge
Jun-15	Cause not reported	8	6
	Conductor issues	2	2
	Level crossing failure		2
Jul-15	Other mechanical issue	2	2
	Cause not reported	2	2
	Diesel traction failure	2	2
Aug-15	Telephone failure	2	
	Cause not reported	2	2
Sep-15	Diesel loco failure (so reported)	2	2
	Fire external to railway infrastructure	2	2
Nov-15	Adhesion issues	2	2
	Cause not reported	8	6
	Diesel traction failure	2	2
	Door fault	2	2
	Driver issues	2	2
Dec-26	Level crossing failure	2	2
	Token equipment failure		2
	Cause not reported	4	4
	Driver issues	2	2
Jan-26	Diesel traction failure	2	2
	Telecom equipment failure	2	2
Feb-26	Diesel traction failure	2	2
	Telecom equipment failure	4	4
Apr-26	High winds (so reported)	2	2
	Other mechanical issues	4	4
May-26	Diesel traction failure	2	2
	External object encroaching onto infrastructure	2	2
	Telecom equipment failure	6	6
12-MONTH TOTAL		74	72

Mike Lunan, FoFNL Convener: *Whichever way you read this it's a pretty shocking indictment of a system when so many different things go wrong, and so many of the same things keep on going wrong.*

Question S5W-00610: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, Answered 17-06-2016

To ask the Scottish Government what discussions it has had with Network Rail regarding the reason for the potential benefits of a loop at Kinbrace not being mentioned in the Scotland Route Study.

Humza Yousaf: Network Rail have closed their consultation on the Scotland Route Study, and are expected to publish their final version in July. The Scottish Government has not had any specific discussions with Network Rail regarding the inclusion or otherwise of a loop at Kinbrace. If Kinbrace is identified as requiring a loop in the future, and has a sufficient business case, the fact that there is no specific reference in the Scotland Route Study does not preclude it being considered as part of any future investment programme.

Question S5W-00614: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, answered: 21/06/2016

To ask the Scottish Government what the implication for timber extraction in the area might be of not having a railway loop at Kinbrace.

Humza Yousaf: The Scottish Government is aware of the Branchliner project led by The Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership regarding timber extraction in the area around Kinbrace and the options detailed in its recent report which include the passive provision of a future loop at Kinbrace. This work is subject to a number of factors such as detailed appraisal, agreement from all parties, proven early stage viability and funding.

Question S5W-00902: John Finnie, Highlands and Islands, Scottish Green Party, Answered 05-07-2016

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will press Network Rail to place a dummy entry loop at Kinbrace in the software rewrite for the current radio electronic token block (RETB) signalling renewal.

Humza Yousaf: Transport Scotland is supportive of the on-going collaborative working involving the private sector, rail industry and local authorities in exploring the feasibility of establishing a rail freight facility at Kinbrace to transport timber from Sutherland to its onward markets.

If a business case and funding is identified Network Rail will work with the scheme promoters to find the most cost effective and safe option to deliver this facility. Network Rail have advised that a dummy entry loop is not part of the design, nor is one likely to be required, for any potential rail freight facility to operate effectively at this location.

CAITHNESS ARCHIVE CENTRE

Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archive building will be completed in the autumn of 2016. This will become home to the archives of the entire UK civil nuclear industry as well as the historical archives of the county of Caithness. The new archive is designed to hold an estimated 20 kilometres of records in ideal environmental conditions for generations to come.

The records of the nuclear industry date back over 70 years and include plans, drawings, photographs, film, microfiche and documents. These have previously been held at various sites across the UK including Dounreay in Caithness, Harwell in Oxfordshire, Trawsfynydd in Snowdonia, and Sellafield in Cumbria. Starting in 2016 all nuclear records requiring long-term preservation will be relocated to the Wick archive where they will be processed, digitised, stored and where possible made available to industry and the public. The relocation will take several years to complete.

By way of contrast, the archives of Caithness date from the 16th century and have previously been looked after at the Caithness Archive Centre, a service provided by High Life Highland on behalf of the Highland Council. These historic collections will also be transferred to the NDA Archive, where they will continue to be made available to members of the public for family and local history research.

The Archive will provide 20 new jobs in Wick and provide archive training opportunities in future.



Artist's Impression

‘Vital’ that rail loop is included in budget plan

GROUP TO WRITE TO TRANSPORT MINISTER

By Gordon Calder g.calder@nosn.co.uk

SCOTTISH Government ministers are to be pressed on the need for a key improvement to the Caithness/Inverness rail line.

Members of Friends of the Far North Line (FoFNL) are to write to Scottish transport minister Humza Yousaf and infrastructure minister Fergus Ewing calling for the urgent need to install a loop on the rail track at Lentrán just outside Inverness to improve journey times and to prevent train delays.

FoFNL convener Mike Lunan said: "It is vitally

important we persuade ministers over the next three to four months to get this project on Network Rail's spending plan for 2019-2024."

This article by Gordon Calder appeared in the *John O’Groat Journal* on 1st July 2016

important we persuade ministers over the next three to four months to get this project on Network Rail's spending plan for 2019-2024."

"If it is not, then another five years will pass before the opportunity comes again. It is on the Network Rail shopping list but we have to try and make sure it is on the short list."

He said the cost of the project - estimated to be several million pounds - pales into insignificance compared to the £400 million cost of electrifying the line between Edinburgh and Glasgow.

Mr Lunan said the service on the far north line is awful and claimed people are fed up "being at the tail of the donkey" and want something done about it.

He thinks there is an extremely good chance to get the Lentrán loop under Way by April 2019 but feels pressure must be applied on Scottish Government ministers who will make the decision.

Said Mr Lunan: "Network Rail's spending plan for years 2019 to 2024 is in preparation. As part of this process Scottish ministers, advised by Transport Scotland, will set out which projects they are willing to finance over that period.

Network Rail, in its Scotland Route Study, last year identified many projects, and ministers will have to winnow these to produce an affordable list."

Mr Lunan believes the Lentrán Loop will lead to badly needed improvements in the service on the far north line.

He said: "The timekeeping has been dire for many months. Only around 50 per cent of trains arrived within five minutes of their timetabled arrival time in the week beginning June 6."

"Several were over an hour late and at least 14 failed to call at Thurso. Having a few miles of double track here will do a great deal to prevent a late-running train from having a knock-on delaying effect on other trains."

"Indeed, if a delay occurs in the morning it can cause the timetable to become more and more delayed for the rest of the day, often resulting in the missed calls at Thurso. These delays disrupt passengers by causing them to miss hospital appointments, onward connections and meetings of all kinds."

"They also militate against commuting to work or training as passengers can't be certain of arriving on time."

Mr Lunan stressed the importance of the project at the recent FoFNL annual general meeting in Tain. It was attended by Anthony Smith, chief executive of the Transport Focus rail watchdog; Ian Prosser, who heads the HM Rail Inspectorate; and David Lister, of the Abellio ScotRail Alliance.

Other key schemes which have been identified by FoFNL are a chord at Georgemas junction and improved signalling between Inverness and Dingwall.

Highlanders condemned to live in a rail timewarp,

writes Alastair Dalton

Faced with the prospect of working for a couple of days from our Inverness office rather than my normal Glasgow base, I looked at whether commuting by rail was an option. Those of us living in the Central Belt have an expectation of frequent and fast trains, which I use for virtually all my work travel. Even in the relatively sparsely-populated Borders, trains on the new line to Tweedbank now operate for nearly 19 hours a day - among the longest in Scotland. But could I reach Inverness for a day's work by rail from a station just 25 miles away? From Garve, the handiest for where I was staying, there's one train just before 8am, and after that, unbelievably, the next is not till almost 2pm. Not surprising then that Inverness feels like Highland Carmageddon when I visit.

It made me realise what a two-tier rail service we have in Scotland. Greater Glasgow benefits from the biggest network outside London, and many other main population centres will see fleets of brand new or refurbished ScotRail trains over the next few years. Cross-Border travellers will fare even better, with Virgin Trains East Coast introducing faster-accelerating Azuma trains, and the Caledonian Sleeper is bringing in new carriages with en suite showers and double beds. Even the Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness lines are to be upgraded.

The weary Highland commuter must read all this and weep - although, to be fair, ScotRail has also refurbished their trains. However, I'm told that passengers' biggest gripe isn't the infrequency of trains - they adapt, or drive nearer Inverness where trains run more often. There are in fact more trains running in the northern Highlands now than for decades, if not ever.

Instead, it's the unreliability of the service that really irritates, especially when the next train is an hour - or many more - away. You might think that with so few trains on the lines from Inverness north to Wick and Thurso, and west to Kyle of Lochalsh, they'd have a free run. But no. Both are largely single track, with few loops - the equivalent of passing places on single-track roads. A 24-mile section between Helmsdale and Forsinard in Sutherland is the longest such stretch in Britain, meaning only one train an hour can use it. Even the introduction of a "slower" timetable has failed to improve things, and trains now take half an hour longer than they did a decade ago.

This letter by FoFNL's Richard Ardern was published in *The Scotsman* on 11th July

Railway managers should tour network and see real problems passengers face.

Congratulations to Alastair Dalton for his perceptive account of the need to invest in the congested single track railway system north of Inverness (*Inside Track*, 8 July). Experiencing first hand the issues affecting different parts of the country is essential to obtain a fully rounded picture.

Might ScotRail Alliance and Transport Scotland officials from Glasgow also be encouraged to do the same please? Then we would have no more promises of rail replacement buses to offroad stations such as Corrou and Altnabreac, and perhaps more urgency in fully modernising the Highland Main Line (HML) to Inverness, which was promised as a priority nearly eight years ago in the Strategic Transport Projects Review.

We are now nearly halfway through the CPS funding period and the work to be done before it ends in March 2019 has still not been announced. Both the HML and Inverness to Aberdeen lines need double-tracking to properly cope with demand from passenger and freight traffic. The regulatory Office of Rail and Road has recently expressed serious concerns about lack of progress with both lines.

Working from Inverness for a few days might be an eye-opener. Maybe managers and officials should go back to Glasgow the long way round, via Aberdeen, to experience also the shortcomings of the only existing diversionary route? As Mr Dalton says, "It made me realise what a two-tier railway service we have in Scotland"

R J ARDERN, Inverness

Over the past month, just 29 per cent of trains reached Wick on time. That's woeful compared to the performance of other long-distance, rural lines. In the same period, 81 per cent of trains arrived in Mallaig on time, 71 per cent in Stranraer and 67 per cent in Oban. This has led to one of the main evening services north from Inverness being cancelled many times because, I understand, the train due to operate it is so late in arriving. This has left commuters more than an hour to wait for the next one, and I hear some have ditched the train to join the car-driving hordes.

Campaigners say a few extra miles of double track would make all the difference and not cost the earth.

There's now a chance it could happen. Network Rail has such plans on its next improvements wish list, from which ministers will choose. And who has just been appointed as cabinet secretary with overall responsibility for transport? Inverness MSP Fergus Ewing.

There might just be hope.

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RAILWAY SERVICE ON THE WRONG TRACK

The substandard far north rail service is "a positive discouragement" to passengers and tourists, according to a Caithness Highland councillor.

Matthew Reiss, who represents Landward Caithness, hit out after fellow councillor and former north MSP Jamie Stone described the unreliability of the train service between Caithness and Inverness as "entirely unacceptable."

Mr Stone called for transport minister Humza Yousaf to come to the Highlands and see how bad the service has become.

The councillors expressed their views at a meeting of Highland Council's planning, development and infrastructure committee in Inverness this week.

Mr Stone said many people living in the north could make full use of the trains but as it becomes more unreliable, fewer people are willing to use it.

"This decrease in confidence is extremely corrosive, not least because the decrease in users could ultimately threaten the viability of the service itself," he said.

Mr Stone made a plea for the transport minister, whose remit includes rail, to visit the area.

"He must be made to come up here and experience for himself the problems we face

due to slow running, delayed journeys, or even cancelled rail services," the Tain and Easter Ross councillor said.

Mr Reiss, the transport committee vice-chairman, supported that argument and claimed the substandard rail service is counter-productive to commuters.

"That was why I drove down to Inverness today and, furthermore, it is a positive discouragement to far north tourism," he said.

Responding to Mr Stone's suggestion, Ranaid Robertson - partnership director of Highlands and Islands Strategic Transport Partnership (HITRANS) - said he "warmly embraced" the notion of the minister being called to account.

As reported last month, a number of improvements to the far north line have been included in a Network Rail document - but it could take until 2043 to get them done.

The timescale was described as alarming by Mike Lunan, convener of pressure group Friends of the Far North Line.

While encouraged to see the improvements listed, he is unhappy at the time it might take to deliver them.

Mr Lunan stressed the work is needed now and not over the next 27 years.

The letter below was published on 20th August. FoFNL's Richard Ardern followed it up a few days later. It is vital for FoFNL that these arguments appear in the Central Belt press as this is where so many of the MSPs who effectively control what is done for the railway actually live. It is far too easy for residents in parts of Scotland far away from the Far North to be oblivious to the extreme problems that exist on the railway here.

The infrastructure in the north is disgraceful

A few days ago my husband and I travelled by train from Thurso to Inverness and found ourselves about an hour late arriving in Inverness. We missed our connection to Glasgow, which would have brought us in about midnight.

The staff put us in a taxi to Glasgow at an apparent cost to ScotRail of about £340.

We heard from the driver that he had done a couple of similar long trips from Inverness in the previous 10 days.

During our stay in Bettyhill we visited many local tourist spots and found them very busy with visitors attracted by the publicity of the North Coast 500 initiative which highlights the beauty of the scenery along the North Coast. While there were many cars and motor homes on the roads, some tourists, like us, had travelled by train to Thurso or Wick.

For some time, I have been conscious of the many complaints of poor infrastructure from those who try to work or sustain small businesses in these remote areas. I have never before witnessed the scale of it, including the poor internet access, which must be very difficult for those trying to develop small businesses reliant upon tourism.

I must confess to being absolutely horrified that people living north of Inverness have to struggle with single track roads and poor internet access ("islands at back of queue for online upgrade", The Herald, August 18). Train travellers have to make do with single track infrastructure and very old rolling stock.

Clearly those hunting and shooting parties who head up north in their top of the range 4x4s are little affected by this.

Politicians should be explaining to us why this disgraceful state of affairs continues and what the plans are to modernise.

Maggie Chetty,
Glasgow.

The crumbling north

Thank you to Maggie Chetty for describing so vividly some of the problems in the north of which she and many others further south are unaware. Her last paragraph is a call to politicians to explain what will be done to help the area to catch up with Scottish norms.

It takes someone from the big city to express the shame she feels that Highland infrastructure is so bad in parts. Those of us in the north who advocate improvement very often feel we are not listened to.

Think of it like ignoring Glasgow's motto and pursuing economic policies which help Edinburgh to flourish but not Glasgow. There would be plenty of voters at the doors of Transport Scotland or the Parliament to demand swift action and they would be heeded.

The Highlands is a huge area and a long way from the offices of the political and public servants. It is not so easy to block doorways that are over a hundred miles away to seek action.

Consider the huge amount of revenue which goes to the Exchequer in London from the whisky industry in the Highlands. Only a fraction of that could seriously improve the railway lines through Elgin and Inverness to make the recent "Lifting the Spirit" trial a reality and run whisky trains to the south as well as improving journeys for passengers like Mrs Chetty.

Yes, some money is going in to dualling the A9 and the A96, but in comparison only a fraction of this is slowly going in to rail enhancements on the same corridors. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce has said "single track railways between Scotland's cities are unacceptable".

Do the politicians agree and will they tell us that they will repair this neglect within the next ten years? Will they also give Perth back its direct rail route to Edinburgh and thus cut 30 minutes off the travel time please?

R J Ardern
Inverness

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir,

At the FoFNL AGM David Lister, ScotRail's Safety & Sustainability Director, gave a preview of the Scenic Trains which were promised for the Far North Line. He said ScotRail was always interested in listening to the passenger voice; however time was tight for comments at the meeting and so I took him at his word and dropped my feedback to him after the meeting. There were two points about Scenic Trains on the Far North Line which concerned me.

1. The first was raised at the meeting but the ensuing discussion was not reassuring: on a train promoted as being scenic the fundamental problem of failing to align seats with windows persists. Certainly in the picture shown in the presentation the window strut ran right through the middle of the field of view between two facing seats - a disappointment and surely a handicap to making the most of the eponymous scenery from the seats of this Scenic Train. Is there really nothing that can be done to improve the window-seat alignment?

2. I had travelled to the meeting on the southbound train from Helmsdale. On board were 4 bikes and a bike 'add-on' for a small child to ride behind a parent. It was yet another group returning from John O'Groats having completed the 'End-to-End'. In the summer season the demand for cycle spaces on this route is often heavy. However David's comments about the new rolling stock seemed to imply adoption of a 'one size fits all routes' policy and trains with more limited cycle space, maybe for only two cycles, adequate for other routes, were going to be used on the Far North Line. If so, this would be a regrettable retrograde step - this is a topic previously raised in the May issue of Far North Express.

These comments were dispatched immediately after the meeting in mid-June, but, as the weeks turn to months, no reply yet came there.

Yours faithfully,

Michael Willmot
Helmsdale Station

Interesting quotes from Anthony Smith, CEO of the Rail Passengers Council in a speech to the 2004 ACORP conference:

- "trains fit for purpose for the route on which they operate"
- "sufficient capacity for luggage..."
- "space for safe storage of cycles on tourist routes"

NOW THERE'S A THOUGHT...

Seen at
Georgemas
Junction, by
FoFNL member
Rob James, on 7th
August 2016.

That bridge will
have to be raised
for a start...



RAIL FREIGHT - PLANNING AHEAD

DAVID SPAVEN, SCOTTISH REPRESENTATIVE, RAIL FREIGHT GROUP, WRITING IN THE SCOTSMAN 2ND JUNE 2016

As the representative body for users and suppliers of rail freight throughout Britain, the Rail Freight Group (RFG) was pleased to have the opportunity to comment on Network Rail's (NR) recent draft Scotland Route Study, setting out the options for upgrading the network over the next 25 and more years.

The capacity and capability of the network will be key determinants of rail freight's success in contributing to important policy objectives, such as: supporting economic growth and resilience, and greater choice for industry; meeting Scotland's challenging climate change targets; and reducing the heavy trunk road maintenance burden imposed by the biggest lorries.

Scotland's economy has distinctive characteristics, not least being more export-led than England's, and it is vital that freight demand forecasts for the rail network should reflect such differences. The planned re-organisation of NR across Britain to focus on revised regions should not lose sight of the critical importance of facilitating the cross-regional pattern of key Anglo-Scottish freight flows, such as the movement of Deep Sea containers on intermodal trains from Coatbridge Freightliner Terminal to major ports such as Felixstowe, Liverpool, and Tilbury.

Rail also has an important role to play for shorter-distance movements. Currently there are a number of significant freight flows wholly within Scotland, such as: cement from Dunbar to Aberdeen, Inverness and Uddingston; intermodal (primarily supermarket) traffic from Grangemouth/Mossend to Aberdeen/Inverness; oil from Grangemouth to Fort William, Lairg, Kilmarnock and Prestwick and waste from Edinburgh to Dunbar.

If rail freight in Scotland is to fully realise its potential, a big opportunity is in the timber market, and rail potential is likely to be concentrated on rural routes such as the North Highland and West Highland lines, and the Ayr-Stranraer line. In making assumptions

66103 heading north from Muir of Ord on 13 May 2016 - Sandy Colley



about future demand for freight "paths", Network Rail needs to factor in such specifics. An important opportunity for rail lies in the movement of spirits from north of Scotland distilleries to Central Scotland maturation plants. Any significant rail penetration of this market will have a disproportionate impact on the Aberdeen-Inverness, Aberdeen-Central Scotland and Inverness-Central Scotland routes.

The needs of new and existing rail customers relate not just to price and service, but also to the ability to accommodate loads which road haulage can handle routinely, but which may face constraints on the rail network.

Key gaps in the electrified network need to be infilled as soon as possible, in order to optimise rail's day-to-day offer to the market, and also to provide resilience in the face of extreme weather events which will inevitably disrupt the East Coast Main Line and West Coast Main Line in the future. In that regard, electrification of the Edinburgh South Suburban Line – avoiding the busy Haymarket and Waverley stations – should be regarded as a high priority. There are plenty of other areas where Network Rail – with funding from Scottish Government – can support an expanding role for rail freight. Crucially, it needs to provide robust assurance to key stakeholders that the primary passenger aim of the new ScotRail Alliance (with Network Rail) will not lead to a marginalisation of the needs of rail freight.

BADAG IN THE NEWS

Northern Times - 12th August 2016

Brora action group gets stuck in for transformation of railway station

LAST Friday members and friends of the Brora and District Action Group (BaDAG) carried out the transformation of a previously weedy and overgrown area of the northbound platform at Brora railway station.



With a generous donation of three very large sacks of decorative ballast from Abellio ScotRail, the group worked hard all afternoon. Andrew Bridges, a member of the BaDAG Station Working Group said: "It was a wonderful afternoon with a great sense of community spirit as the regular group of volunteers were joined by head teacher at Brora Primary School, Dawn McKenzie, and local Highland councillor Deirdre Mackay.

"Although it was hard work shifting three tonnes of rocks, when we had finished we were all totally amazed at the transformation which had been achieved.

"This is hopefully just the start of some changes that both locals and visitors using the station will notice with more improvements planned for the future."

Abellio ScotRail recognises BaDAG as station adopters and is supporting them through the provision of a small budget for planting and landscaping improvements.

If you are interested in helping with the work, please get in touch via BaDAG's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/BroraBaDAG/>, or direct with Andrew Bridges at friendsofbrorastation@aol.co.uk

SWISS RULES

I have just spent a week or so in expensive but wildly beautiful Graubunden in eastern Switzerland. Everything so beautifully and carefully constructed with neither the fear of the new nor the inept mimicry of the old that is so embarrassing in Britain.

The Swiss are reputed, and often mocked, for being a nation of rule-lovers, yet the rules that they do indeed sometimes surprisingly zealously observe seem far better rooted in common sense than many equivalents here.

All over the extraordinary mountain network of the Rhaetischer Bahn, there are hardly any footbridges to cross the line(s). At the busier stations there are tunnel connections; more difficult to build than bridges, no doubt, but a great deal easier to negotiate for those with more limited mobility than the much greater vertical rise required to pass over rather than under the trains.

Everywhere else, on stations nonetheless much busier than the FNL, passengers simply cross the tracks on smooth walkways to reach the other side. They do so having taken note, by looking, of the absence of life-threatening trains approaching. Similarly remote road crossings rely on the intelligence of the driver to avoid collisions with trains. This is the sort of system that works perfectly well throughout the UK on thousands of road junctions. It is known as 'Give Way'.

Why road/rail crossings should be subject to such draconian additional controls as slowing the train to walking pace and elaborate and expensive barriers in remote areas I cannot understand. It is a curiously British obsession with safety that insists on this grossly uneven application of safety measures, the overall effect of which is to make rail travel slower and more expensive than the far more dangerous and destructive road alternative.

Switzerland is widely regarded as having the world's best public transport system. One could argue that case, but there is no doubt there are many simple and sensible differences the adoption of which could surely help on the FNL. When I think of struggling with a wheelchair up and over a high, ugly and expensive new footbridge as the price to be swallowed in the reopening of small FNL stations, I can't help thinking we could learn from the Swiss.

Yours from traffic clogged, slow, overpriced, unreliable bus-afflicted Bristol,

Sam Kendon.

This was received from FoFNL member Sam Kendon.

Some of his comments are timely for this issue of FNE - Sam is well aware that his views are not part of FoFNL policy!



NO “DAY RETURNS” FROM CULBOKIE

BACKGROUND

A little known fact of the area is that a railway was planned between Cromarty and Dingwall that would have resulted in a station being provided for Culbokie. The proposed location of the station would have been that well-known spot frequented by many dog-walkers who exit and enter the Oakwood from the lane leading down to Findon Mains.

On Thursday 1st February 1894 the long-awaited and planned-for railway line from Muir of Ord to Fortrose was opened for traffic and everyone on the Black Isle began to appreciate the usefulness of that line. Journey times to and from Inverness were reduced, there was no need for the reliance on ferries to cross the Moray Firth and there were possibilities for businesses and tourism. The residents of Cromarty having long been thwarted in their attempts to have the Muir of Ord to Fortrose line extended along with businesses on the north side began to watch developments and began to make use of the facilities. Companies such as James Dingwall, Culbokie starting to ship in coal to the various stations for further movement across the Black Isle. Here locals recognised that given the poor condition of the roads and the need to use the ferry at Alcaig the movement of materials, livestock and people would be greatly improved by having their own Line which would allow standards to improve.

The passing of the Light Railway Act of 1896 by Parliament opened up a significant number of proposals for railway schemes throughout the Country due to the reduced standards required for materials, design and operation which meant that the cost per mile of construction and operation were significantly reduced.

THE START

Construction for the Cromarty to Dingwall Light Railway commenced in 1896 but powers for the construction were only granted in Parliament by Provisional Order in August 1902. The *Scottish Highlander* for 23 January 1896 reported on an enthusiastic meeting held in the Victoria Hall, Cromarty.

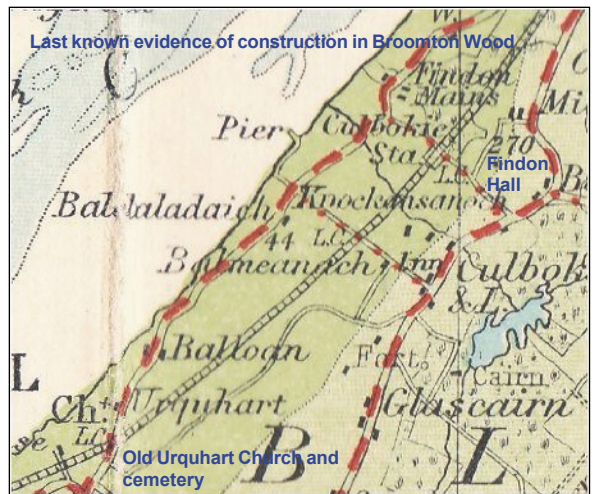
Construction commenced in Cromarty with earthworks, landscaping, forestry, fencing and bridges preceding the laying of track all of which was assisted by a locomotive that had been transported behind two traction engines from Muir of Ord station. Many materials would have been brought in by ferries to the local jetties.

Major discussions took place in the early days as to where the line would join the Highland Main Line. The original intention was to go to Dingwall via a bridge from Alcaig over the River Conon, but this was deemed to be an expensive luxury and the line was designed to run through to Conon.

Culbokie station was to be one of four, each provided with a short siding and loading bank, passenger facility and Station Agent's house, the others being at Alcaig, Drumcudden and Newhall.

The official Engineers' Drawings do not show the location of the stations, a practice that was common in those days so it would be intriguing to discover where the map-makers found their information. However, it would have seemed a more obvious position for the station would have been at the level crossing to be situated on the Balmeanach linking the centre of the village with the Quarry and the jetty.

The start of World War 1 brought construction to a halt and all materials, both laid and in stock, were removed and sent away to support the war effort. Not only would this hamper the opportunity to progress the Line but the demands made on the local population to help build local military installations such as those on the Sutors meant that the Engineers were hard pushed to attract suitable remaining manpower.



However, not all materials were officially removed. Sleepers unloaded and abandoned at the quayside at Findon gradually found their way to the various crofts in the area.

THE END

By the end of the War the situation had changed dramatically both in terms of finance required due to rising costs and the availability of materials so that construction failed to recommence. Also by this time roads had been improved resulting in better bus services and more delivery lorries, (some possibly war-surplus), which were much more flexible in making deliveries. By 1926 it was recognised that there was no future for the Line and the Company was wound up and a final dividend paid to subscribers.

PHYSICAL EVIDENCE

In the immediate vicinity of Culbokie there is no known recorded physical evidence but cross-referencing older OS and Bartholomew's maps with the landscape, especially forest/wood boundaries and field dividing fence lines it is possible to locate the alignment. The aforementioned Oakwood is a case in point with its boundary with its neighbouring field being the proposed track bed.



Because of the contours of the landscape it isn't until you reach beyond Broomton Wood heading east that by looking down the field you can identify the alignment as being along the fence line dividing the field.

A very useful source of information is the book written by Eric Malcolm in which he claims that an iron fence post by the side of the road leading to Toberchurn was the most westerly evidence of the railway. However a chance discovery in Broomton Wood of four metal fence posts marking the position of an ungated level crossing is now the closest to Culbokie of physical evidence.

Perhaps a word of explanation is needed here. The railway was to be constructed and operated as a Light Railway which meant that conditions need not be as stringent as a normal railway regarding the materials used, the speed of the locomotive, the signalling etc. and whilst it wasn't necessary to fence off the line, in this case it was planned for. However for farm tracks that crossed the railway, as in the case of Broomton wood, there was no need for gates to shut the road on the approach of a train, so therefore only fence posts were required to support the fence wires. Having reached Broomton Wood and with war about to break out, the forward planning would have recognised that the ravine of the Findon Burn at Findon Cottage was going to be a major project and further preparation was not proceeded with.

The Bartholomew map of 1932 shows the alignment of the track and the proposed stations but by 1934 the same issue of map had had the track removed. The latest OS Explorer map of the Black Isle shows no signs of "line of old railway" whereas previous editions and versions would have done so.

"*The Cromarty & Dingwall Light Railway*" by Eric Malcolm, A Cromarty Courthouse Publication

"*The Highland Railway*" H.A.Vallance Pan Books, David & Charles Series.

"*The Black Isle Railway*" Jack Kernanhan, The Highland Railway Society

Original Engineering Drawings

Bartholomew map of 1932

Memories of local residents shared with Alasdair Cameron, Wellhouse.

This article was written by Roger Piercy, long-time Editor of FNE, for the website of the Culbokie Community Trust. Culbokie is a village near the edge of the peninsula known as the Black Isle, about one mile from the A9 and twelve miles north of Inverness. The Trust was formed to help guide the development of the village and it was felt that a history of the Community would be of interest to a greatly enlarged population. Eventually a simple leaflet will be created to guide readers to the website where the various Chapters are available. The on-line access was seen to be beneficial to give the ability to make rapid changes as new or revised material becomes available. The chapters can be accessed on the 'History of Culbokie' website. The article therefore concentrates on the railway as it would have passed through Culbokie on its way from Conon on the Far North Line to a terminus at Cromarty.

A RAILMAN REMEMBERS

2 - LEARNING THE ROPES

And so it was I found myself rolling in to Fearn Station at stupid o'clock on a freezing February morning. Accompanying me was Dick, an amiable middle-aged clerk who was normally based ten miles down the line in Invergordon. He didn't seem to mind being yanked out of his comfortable office and stuck out at a remote station to show a young loon the ropes. I had a sneaking suspicion he was as glad to be out of the vicinity of the Area Manager as I was.

Dick's remit was to get me up to speed with ticket selling, train meeting, parcel receiving and weekly accounting. Oh, and the potato traffic.

My training started as soon as we walked in to the ticket office and he pointed to an electric fire.

"That's an electric fire. It has to stay on all the time. Don't ever turn it off."

Prominently displayed on the wall was the Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act 1963, which stated; "Where ... the work done in a room ... does not involve severe physical effort, a temperature of less than 16 degrees Celsius shall not be deemed ... to be a reasonable temperature." That battered convector heater was the only source of heat in the entire station; if it had gone off, it's quite possible the room would never have got back to 16 degrees. As instructed, it remained switched on for the whole of my tenure and I, for my part, ensured that I never did anything in the ticket office involving severe physical effort.

My starting grade was 'railman' and the pay was £21 a week. Dick explained that the salary scale for a position like Fearn required the incumbent to be the next grade up, a 'leading railman'. But not to worry, after a three month probationary period I would automatically become a leading railman and my wages would increase to £23 a week. Dick thought the management were being a bit stingy not starting me as a leading railman, seeing as I was going to be doing the same work and all. But I was still ambivalent about how long I was going to be at Fearn, so I wasn't that bothered.

Continuing Mark Nolan's reminiscences of his time working at Fearn station

I was, however, still in a state of mild shock about having been given the keys to the station so casually. Being a rail enthusiast at heart, I was well aware of the economic and social significance of British Railways. I couldn't believe that a once proud organisation, to which generations of workers had aspired and respected, was being forced into a situation of having to hand over a complete railway station to the charge of such an inexperienced and, for all they knew, unsuitable person. A part of the Highlands' main infrastructure was being run by a nineteen year old hippie! Even then, I realised I was a symbol of its decline.



Opened in 1864, Fearn Station lies among fields, a good couple of miles from the village from which it takes its name. The substantial stone building has a two storey central section with matching wings each side, and an awning out to the platform. Originally Fearn had a second platform and a loop for trains to pass, which necessitated serious stuff like signals and a signal box. It also needed a full complement of qualified staff to run it; station master, clerk, porter and signaller. All that had been decommissioned by 1974, to be replaced by me.

However there was still a goods yard with two sidings and a loading platform, which gives a clue as to why the anachronism of Fearn Station had survived so long, unlike its three neighbouring stations. Delny, Kildary and Nigg had all closed in the early 1960s, before Beeching had even lifted an eyebrow in their direction. The reason Fearn was still there was nothing to do with passengers and everything to do with seed potatoes. Which was ironic, as it was the tatties that were to cause me a few problems later on.

ALTNABREAC

There was plenty to be nervous about.

My main concern - would they remember to stop the train at the station? I was waiting by the doors and holding my bike against the swaying as we made our approach to Altnabreac, one of the least used stations in Scotland. This is a request stop meaning that the train will only halt if a passenger has specifically asked to get off. I had shown my ticket to the guard and she wrote on a piece of paper, but that was hours ago. Would she forget?

It would be so simple for the driver to speed past the station. This was normal. Stopping at Altnabreac was not normal. For the last 30 minutes we had trundled by a string of stations

"In those days the station sported a passing loop, a water tank and a signal box in which I spent many happy hours with our neighbour the signalman. We had a stationmaster, a porter and as I recall more than a few permanent way maintenance staff. One of their tasks was to patrol the railway with a sledge hammer to replace any of the missing wooden keys that were inserted between the chair and the rail."
Jim Dunnnett, former Altnabreac resident.

- Kildonan, Kinbrace, Forsinard - where nobody got on or off.

Another thing to be nervous about was the isolation of this place. Altnabreac is one of very few stations in the country where you can be guaranteed to be the only person using it that day, or even that week. There is no main road to the station and no village nearby, so there is really no reason to come here. If the weather turns nasty there is no shelter. If I got hungry there is nowhere to buy a snack. If something broke on my bike there would be nobody to help.

The nervousness collided with excitement to make my heart tumble – this is what adventure feels like. The desire to feel like this is what drew me to this place. When I discover a new place to visit I become completely fixated. I cannot stop dreaming about what it is like to be there. The only way to tackle the obsession is to go there. That's how it was for me when I found out about Altnabreac.

Colin Baird's ambition is to see all of Scotland by bicycle. He has kindly given permission to reproduce one of his blogs, many of which feature the Far North Line. Colin says "The line is my favourite in Scotland because of the scenery and access it gives to superb cycling opportunities." www.cyclingscot.co.uk

Months ago I had scanned a map of Scotland looking for remote roads to take my bike on. About 100 miles north of Inverness I found the perfect place. It was a road with no designation, a nothing road plonked in a world of peatland



and wetland. Only a train station and one other place were marked on the map - Dalnawillan Lodge. I discovered that this was a closed Victorian-era shooting and fishing lodge. I pictured myself being the only human for miles and perhaps having a poke around the abandoned lodge.

I stepped off the train directly into a swarm of midges. I waved my hands to disperse them, but they were too numerous. I had wished for a calmer introduction to Altnabreac to relish the isolation of the station, but I would have to be quick to avoid being buzzed and bitten to distraction. On the platform there is an information panel about walking routes that warns "to take precautions similar to hill walks." The panel was severely infiltrated by condensation, so it was difficult to read: "it is suggested that you ...up to date map, suitable clothing, packed lunch, a mobile phone and... word with someone about your...estimated time of return."

The most prominent landmark is a stone water tower that would have quenched the thirst of steam locomotives. The cottage on the platform is a private residence. The wooden passenger shelter looks like a garden shed and displays a plaque bestowing a Bronze Tidy Station Standard. Who was making the effort of the journey to drop enough litter to deny a gold award?

Another sign stated the obvious: "There are no ticket issuing facilities at this station," followed

and this can put many people off visiting this part of Scotland, but for solitude it is hard to beat. The only sound was the buzzing of insects and it prompted me to keep pedalling to escape the pursuing midges

A little further on there is a substantial stone house. It was in good condition and a peek through a window revealed rooms totally empty apart from a lonely electric heater. The preoccupied bees, the daisies and wildflowers around the house made me picture long summer days spent writing and relaxing at a holiday home in the middle of nowhere.

Then the road wiggles along the shores of a small and uninspiring loch, brought to life by the sudden and unexpected appearance of a Victorian concoction of tower, turrets, gables, chimney pots and striking zigzag patterned roof tiles. This was once the Loch Dhu Hotel, a hunting lodge built in 1895, now a private home. Until the 1970s you could get off the train in the foulest of weather and trudge two miles through the brown and barren moorland and be sure of a

single malt, roaring fireplace and tips about what to shoot in the morning.

As I left Loch Dhu I felt the need to revise my



Altnabreac Station

by a pointless request to "retain your ticket until you leave your destination station, as spot checks are in operation on this route." I found it hard to believe that ticket inspectors would ever be sent to Altnabreac.

The dusty gravel track out of the station passes a former school. It closed in 1986 and ended a useful purpose for the station - children had taken the train to lessons. There is a sign at the building that is the best parody of town twinning I have ever seen - "*Altnabreac DC, twinned with Washington DC.*"

At the bottom of the track there is a junction where I turned right and paused to take in the moody surroundings. It was flat with an expanse of pine trees, boggy grass and a low lying grey sky. Not exactly material for next year's tourist brochure cover shot. Caithness may have a reputation for such dull landscapes



previous remarks about Caithness monotony. There were hills on the horizon. A long stretch of straight road leading to wavy hills and peaks

with another loch at the bottom of a long downhill expanse of moorland grass.



Dalnawillan Lodge

I could not go fast on the road because it was bumpy with lots of chunky stones and potholes. More like gouges. Some had substantial puddles that could be miniature lochs. It looked like someone with a temper tantrum had taken a hatchet to sections of the path. It was fun riding it.

Dalnawillan Lodge was now before me. This is the place I had hoped to explore, but the ground floor is boarded up. I could see a toilet cistern through a first floor window and that was about all. The chimneys no longer smoked, the bay windows no longer provided views during breakfast and the bedrooms no longer had snug beds for weekend guests.

There is a door open into a vestibule where sheep were sheltering. The rainfall seemed to begin on cue the minute I arrived. I had also disturbed the dogs in the kennels at the adjacent farm. Their barking was all the more accentuated and terrifying because it was the only noise. I had grown accustomed to the previous total silence, so that any sounds were a shock and appeared even louder. I felt vulnerable and wanted to get out of there.

I could still hear the dogs barking even after I could no longer see the farm. A little further and the silence returned. I found an abandoned cottage, sitting all alone in an ocean of bog. I was determined that this would make up for my 34

disappointment at not being able to see inside the lodge and I snuck in. I found a flagstone floor, fireplace and timber panelling. I wondered who had last stayed here and what conversations had taken place by the crackling and glowing fire.

The sky was a complete mishmash. There were low lying grey and black clouds, some with streaks of rainfall spilling out of them. There were a few pink clouds and even white ones. There were patches of blue sky with tinges of sun - oases of summer among the storm.

I crossed a causeway where the River Thurso empties into Loch More. Is that a beach? I could not believe my eyes! I was at an inland loch among a sparse landscape and it had a stretch of white sand. On the horizon there are hills that rise and fall like waves with a couple of ragged peaks thrown in. My feet crunching on the sand almost drowned out the only other sound - the trickle from the water. What appear to be black rocks on the beach is actually peat which was soft and bouncy when I stood on it. I loved this spot and wished I had more time to just sit here. On a warm and sunny day this could easily be that cover shot for the tourist brochure.

Back in the saddle and a few minutes pedalling brought me out of the wilderness. I hit tarmac. A proper road.

I felt sad that it was over. I wanted the adventure to last longer. I had loved being nowhere and seeing no other human for several hours. The wildness of the landscape had astonished me and intimidated me. I always felt aware of the risk coming to a place like this and having to rely on myself if anything went wrong, but this made it all the more exciting. Knowing that it is just me and the bicycle that can assure a safe path to food and shelter is a thrill that you rarely experience in normal life. Altnabreac is the place that I will come back to if I ever need to completely escape routine and get a bit of a buzz.

FORSINARD LOOKOUT TOWER

The new Forsinard Lookout Tower was opened to the public in June 2016, along with a new 600m boardwalk. The tower was commissioned by The Peatlands Partnership which includes The RSPB, Scottish Natural Heritage, The Forestry Commission (Scotland) and Highland Council and built as part of the Flows to the Future Project. It provides spectacular elevated views across the Dubh Lochan peat bogs pools from where you may be lucky enough to see skylark, meadow pipit, golden plover and possibly greenshank. Being in a Dark Sky area it is also an ideal place for star gazing.

Much thought went into the design of the tower in terms of its impact on the landscape. The timber and steel structure has been constructed using locally sourced larch and Caithness stone. It is supported by 4m deep hollow piles, the use of which avoided extensive disruption to the peat. The construction materials were delivered by helicopter to minimise damage caused by large machines on the delicate bog surface.

Although the tower is part of the RSPB Forsinard Flows Reserve it is not so much a bird-watching tower as a place to view the whole environment.

The Tower is on the Dubh Lochan Trail which takes about 45 min to complete, starting from the Forsinard Visitor Centre in the old station building. Accommodation and refreshment is also available nearby at the Station Cottage Bed and Breakfast and Tea Rooms.





Far North and Beyond

A selection of photos by **John Yellowlees**.

Top left: the impressive collection of awards on display at Helmsdale Station

Right: Wagons and crane preserved in the Scapa Flow Visitor Centre & Museum at Lyness on Hoy, Orkney. The wartime naval base closed in 1957.

We intend to include further information on the various railways that existed on Orkney in a future article in *Far North Express*

