

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



Issue 83
May 2021

Georgemas Container Demonstration



THE MAGAZINE OF THE FRIENDS OF THE FAR NORTH LINE

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

£3.00

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Cover Photo: Inter-modal demonstration train heading north on 21 April. Headed by 66302, the container was unloaded from the Megafret wagon at Georgemas.

The train is seen climbing away from the Helmsdale River, just north of Borrobol and west of Kinbrace Hill.

Photo: **Niall Laybourne**

IMPORTANT NOTE TO OUR MEMBERS

Our Treasurer, David Start, has requested that we make sure to fill in the 'reference' box on **all** bank transactions. The ideal format would be **full name + membership number**.

If we don't do it ourselves the bank generates a reference, and data protection legislation prevents the bank from being allowed to inform David to which name the reference is attached. This can cause confusion when two or more members share a surname.

News came on 17 March that from March 2022 the Scottish Government will operate ScotRail services directly. It will set up an arm's length company to run the trains. SG's long-term aim is for the remaining part of rail provision, i.e. NR to be devolved. One can imagine that at that point a nationalised ScotRail would resemble the old BR. As long as it really is arm's length it should work very well. In Scotland we have the huge advantage of the Railway Directorate of Transport Scotland having shown since its inception that it fully understands railway needs. The history of meddling and micro-managing from DfT that has been the burden of the English and Welsh railway system has not been seen here. We do not have ludicrous short-term decisions such as scrapping electrification in favour of building less efficient bi-mode trains, at a time when diesel traction was clearly about to be replaced.

It is to be hoped that the Scottish Government will take this opportunity to get a real grip on the 'railway infrastructure deficit' that is so obvious away from the Central Belt. It is already agreed that the best way to build back after Covid is to invest in infrastructure. The need to transfer freight to rail wherever possible makes double-tracking the Highland intercity routes an imperative. This will be expensive in the short term but will provide the public transport system that we need, to give proper facilities to the whole of the country for business and leisure travel.

Once we settle in to the post-pandemic world it will become clearer if, and by how much, commuting needs have changed. It seems likely that many companies will opt for a mix of working-from-home and office-based work for individuals. This, along with flexitime arrangements already in place, may take some of the peak hours pressure from public transport and allow better use of the infrastructure and rolling stock.

The government needs to understand that attractive public transport provision has to be made before people will begin to leave their

cars at home. Home working may also make big changes in where people choose to live. If you are only required to be in a city two or three days a week you may well opt for somewhere quite far away, as long as there is fast and reliable transport available. It is quite possible that, given the right infrastructure and service pattern, the Far North Line and the towns and villages en route may be beneficiaries of this.

Disappointing

Transform Scotland held a series of pre-election Zoom meetings from the end of March, featuring transport spokesmen from the five major Scottish political parties, chaired by Alastair Dalton from *The Scotsman*.

The final event gave an opportunity to hear from Michael Matheson, the Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity.

The format was that each politician was given five minutes to present their thoughts and policies and then they were open to questions. Their answers were responded to by a panel of experts - including Paul Tetlaw for rail.

In response to questions about the dualling of the A9 and A96 it was quite surreal to hear a group of transport campaigners being informed that roads are essential to the economy of each area. It would be astonishing if that were news to anyone present.

The questions were *not* about building new roads, they were about the fact that the parallel railways are mostly single track and therefore sub-standard for intercity routes.

Mr Matheson stated that the government is not going to commit to dualling the Highland Main Line. He did however say, "The days of big road development projects are coming to an end."

This really needs to change soon - perhaps once the new government is in place it will feel able to do what is needed, like cancelling unnecessary road-widening schemes, without worrying about its election chances.

Ian Budd

RAIL FOR ALL

The Scottish Green Party's *Rail for All* report, which we referred to in a STOP PRESS in the January issue of *FNE*, has had an excellent response from railway experts. The report was commissioned for the Scottish Greens by John Finnie MSP, who is also one of our Vice-presidents.

The authors of the report are both well-known to FoFNL. David Spaven, much respected railway history author, freight expert and FoFNL Committee member needs no introduction. David Prescott is also an *FNE* contributor and describes himself as "a career railwayman who has spent twenty five years working in Scotland, with ScotRail and subsequently Transport Scotland, and someone who has been involved in community railways and also wider community issues".

We've been given permission to reprint this article which appeared in issue 924, the 10 February edition, of the UK publication *RAIL*. Although lengthy, it is worth reproducing in full as it argues in some detail why this is the kind of vision that it is imperative the Scottish Government adopts.

SCOTTISH GREENS "GO FORTH" WITH BOLD VISION FOR RAIL NORTH OF THE BORDER

For the first time in recent history, a national party has set out a detailed strategic plan for the railways. GARETH DENNIS interrogates the Scottish Greens' "Rail for All" report.

[www](#)

The COVID crisis in the UK has shown how important it is to have a plan, but this isn't news to those of us wanting to see improvements in the rail industry. Pretty much every problem the railways in Britain are facing now results from the lack of any attempt by government to create a long-term plan.

This is for all sorts of reasons, but a lack of interest in detailed policy at the party level is certainly a contributing factor. Indeed, at least in recent memory, not a single national party has published their plan for what the railways should look like (physically, not just organisationally) in the future.

Well, with the recent publication of the Scottish Green Party's *Rail for All* report, this is no longer true, and I hope this sets in motion a little more interest from the major parties in setting out practical change for the railway industry rather than repeating slogans without substance ("reverse Beeching" and "nationalise it" being common offenders).

On picking up the report, it didn't take much of a scan to realise that, contrary to my expectations, it was both a bold and technically literate document that I couldn't really find much to gripe about.

Before pressing on with my summary, it is worth

setting out some key points about Scottish politics.

Firstly, despite what a lot of people south of the Scottish border might think, rail investment isn't at the top of the transport agenda in Holyrood. The Scottish National Party has pressed ahead with its largely pro-road agenda since it took control of the Scottish Parliament in 2007. The Perth to Inverness corridor is a good example of this bias, with barely tens of millions having been spent on the Highland Main Line despite a continued commitment to the £3bn A9 dualling (with hundreds of millions having been already spent).

Secondly, an arguably more democratic voting system in Scotland means that multiple parties get involved in top-level decision making (and get a greater slice of funding for these functions). This has the side-effect of providing more opportunities to do policy development, and in the case of the Scottish Greens, this meant looking at tackling Scotland's largest source of greenhouse gas emissions: transport.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that the Scottish Greens are an entirely separate political party from the Green Party of England and Wales (GPEW) who operate south of the border. Unlike the GPEW, the Scottish Greens have experience in supporting government decision making at a

national level.

The Scottish Greens have grasped the opportunity to fill the gap left by the other parties, and in doing so they have also shown up the GPEW's explicitly anti-rail stance (embodied by their opposition to High Speed 2). In fact, the document is written in places as if in direct response to the GPEW's confused messaging (they also allegedly support a north-south high speed link).

Here's the opening paragraph: "Whilst many European countries have built high-speed lines and long-distance connections that criss-cross the continent and provide an affordable, comfortable and low-carbon option for commuting, business and leisure travel, Scotland and Britain as a whole has systematically under-invested in the rail network in favour of roads." A more precise jab to the eye of the GPEW I could not have penned myself.

The *Rail for All* report is broken into eleven themes: creating the delivery infrastructure, inter-city services, regional services, rural routes and rolling stock, commuter and urban connectivity, new stations, reopening freight lines for passengers, shifting rail onto freight, electrification, costings, and COVID.

The first is on overarching governance and, on this matter, I think they've got it spot on.

This has been split into four streams, with the first aiming to streamline decision-making and undo the bias towards road projects in the Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG

— functioning in a similar manner to WebTAG for the UK government). STAG exists alongside Network Rail's GRIP process, as well as government's internal business case process, and these all duplicate and get in the way of each other. The Greens also propose pushing the process towards more rolling programmes of

work chasing a single objective (such as electrification) to speed its process through these governance frameworks.

Next, they propose creating a single state railway owner and operator. Operationally, this is a no-brainer for a largely captive network like Scotland's where there aren't a multitude of competing operators, and would also bring track owner and train operator together (a trend that we shall see playing out south of the border over the next few years, too).

The final governance proposals are key: create a strategy, take party politics out of it, and establish a dedicated government team to deliver it. As with the rest of the report, there is a lot for others to heed here.

Anyway, on to the headline-grabbing bit: namely the new connection between Edinburgh and Kirkcaldy under the Firth of Forth, including a Leith underground station. The whole thing, including two nine-mile single bore tunnels, is expected to cost up to £6bn.



This is a really good idea. Think about it: currently the western approaches into Edinburgh are completely clogged, as are the north and south ends of the Forth Bridge. The Bridge itself (marvellous as it may be) represents a blocker on speed and capacity, as does the Fife coast. The cost of resolving these, or bypassing them with

shorter interventions, would run into the billions. So why not use a new tunnel to bypass the western approaches into Waverley to reduce long-distance journey times north of Edinburgh and build capacity into Fife?

It is also an eminently achievable idea: we've dug tunnels under the Forth for centuries. We've even dug tunnels from one shore to the other. Leith is as good a place as any to build/launch tunnel boring machines, being port-served and with plenty of brownfield land to make use of. The station will be complex, but well understood geology under the Forth means that the tunnelling doesn't have to be.

A new tunnel isn't an excuse to abandon or delay upgrades to the existing lines: as with HS2, this would allow the remaining network to run more frequent suburban and commuter services. It is a bold plan, but I like bold plans that make operational sense.

| Upgrade | Short-Term (2020-2027) | Medium-Term (2027-2034) | Long-Term (2034-2040) | Total |
|--|------------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|--------------|
| New stations | 500 | | | 500 |
| New routes | 500 | 2000 | 500 | 3000 |
| Route upgrades | 500 | 2500 | 1000 | 4000 |
| Cross-border route upgrades ¹ | 500 | 1000 | 2000 | 3500 |
| Electrification | 1000 | 1500 | | 2500 |
| TramTrain | | 1000 | 500 | 1500 |
| Forth Tunnel | | 2000 | 3000 | 5000 |
| Tay Bridge | | | 1000 | 1000 |
| Freight upgrades | 200 | 320 | 120 | 640 |
| Total | 3200 | 10320 | 8120 | 21640 |

All costs in Emillions

The other intercity interventions are all sensible enough and add up to be no less substantial than the new tunnel — in all cases the authors show their understanding of the subject matter by regularly pointing out that segregating high speed services results in direct improvements to local services, and for a network the shape of Scotland's, these effects are felt nation-wide.

The next section is on regional services, and the report again shows how it is based on a solid understanding of the interaction between the different types of rail services, and indeed between infrastructure and operations.

The same goes for the sections on rural routes, rolling stock procurement and some sensible proposals for tram-train in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee (though Glasgow deserves a more substantial capacity uplift than tram-train can provide, in my eyes).

One of my favourite parts of the report, which shows the pragmatism and technical understanding that went into it, is the Greens' plan to "reopen" lines — they don't propose to. Instead, they state a method for determining need — towns with a population greater than 5000 should have a station — and leave the solution open-ended.

Freight and electrification get sections of their own: acceleration of the uptake of both is proposed. Whilst being supportive of current electrification goals, the report calls for more ambition (which matches with what other sustainable transport advocates are saying in relation to the rate of decarbonisation). The proposals all fit with the wider vision and governance framework detailed earlier, and I don't think there's anything contentious or contradictory within them.

Which brings us to the final sections. Costs are pulled out and tabulated, and despite the ambition of the Greens' shopping list, the *Rail for All* plan totals £21bn for delivery by 2040. That averages at £1.1bn a year, which is peanuts to put it bluntly. For scale, Scotland's capital transport budget for

2020–21 was £2.1bn.

Perhaps most pleasingly, and unlike so much literature in circulation just now, the Scottish Greens have the foresight to be absolutely clear that rail must be a cornerstone in our recovery from COVID. They not only point out the pressing need for modal shift to rail to tackle climate change, but also the number of skilled, stable jobs that railway investment can create, particularly when delivered against a robust long-term strategy.

It might not be perfect, but until the other parties catch up, I think we should congratulate John Finnie MSP and his team for getting their heads around the needs of the rail industry and setting out their plan more effectively than anyone else. Let's see if it gets noticed.

The Scottish Budget, announced in February, contained the following rail-related promises. Pandora has added the numbered annotations.

In 2020-21 we will:

- publish an action plan to decarbonise Scotland's railways by 2035, focusing on electrification¹, supported by development and testing of alternative technologies including procurement² of battery electric trains and development³ of hydrogen powered trains;
- continue to press the UK Government for full devolution of powers over both track and train so we can run Scotland's railways in a way which best meets Scotland's needs;
- enhance the passenger experience with the completion of Glasgow's Queen Street station, creating a 21st-century space with longer platforms and greener⁴, faster trains;
- develop⁵ infrastructure improvements on key routes including Aberdeen to Inverness, the Highland Main Line, the Far North Line and the West Highland Line;
- progress schemes such as Levenmouth and Aberdeen to Central belt, bringing even more rail improvements to passengers communities and businesses;
- continue developing future projects for the period 2019 to 2024 and beyond;
- continue the introduction of 26 refurbished High Speed Trains to operate on inter-city routes, with 40 per cent more seats on those routes;
- support redevelopments planned for Aberdeen, Inverness⁵ and Stirling stations and the delivery of new stations at Kintore, Dalcross, Reston and East Linton;
- encourage⁷ freight modal shift to rail through our work with businesses and the logistics industry.

¹ If Scotland's railway is genuinely to decarbonise by 2035 the entire network not currently electrified will have *either* to be

electrified in the next 15 years (presumably Dunblane to Inverness, to Aberdeen, to Dundee and thence to Perth and to Edinburgh; also Perth to Ladybank and the Fife Circle) *or* to be served by other renewable motive power. This leaves large questions about the long so-called tourist routes.

² Note that battery-powered trains are to be *procured* ...

³ ... whereas hydrogen-powered trains are merely to be *developed*.

⁴ What is meant here? All trains from Glasgow Queen Street (except those on the West Highland Line and the short local route to Anniesland) are already electric. Is some greener form of electricity generation envisaged? The unspoken word is surely nuclear, for - certainly in England - wholesale extension of electrified traction will necessitate at least one new nuclear power station.

⁵ Does *develop* (in 2020/21) imply that upon such development building will follow? And in what time-scale?


⁶ What is meant by *support*? Inverness Station (and its wider footprint) development is surely already designed. What support will be required from the Scottish Government? Compulsory buying-out of the hotel car parking contract?

⁷ How much more than *encouragement* should the Scottish government provide? Surely in a Budget there is scope for some kind of financial inducement to switch from road to rail (or penalty for failing to do so).

Pandora hopes that once the new Parliament resumes Transport Scotland will be free to publish details of what work - physical work out on the railway - will be undertaken in each of the three remaining years of Control Period 6 (Pandora writes on Day 738, with little sign of where he might usefully go - when permitted to do so - to take photographs of orange-clad railway workers beavering away at the Scottish Government's action plan).



RAIL FREIGHT REFLECTIONS



Highland Spring's Blackford rail terminal under construction in 2020. 17 years from concept to completion in 2021!

This article first appeared in the Rail Freight Group magazine in December 2020

When you've spent your working life in and around the rail freight industry, it can be hard to stand back and see the bigger picture. But nine months after retiring as RFG's Scottish Rep, I thought it was time to put pen to paper, highlighting some key case studies (and I've been involved in most of them, in one way or another) which illustrate the achievements and failures of the past couple of decades — as well as the opportunities for the future.

Looking at the industry as a whole, the outstanding success has surely been the development of domestic intermodal — pioneered by logistics companies such as John G Russell, Stobart and WH Malcolm, who had the strategic perspective to build a new rail market which has matured to the point where freight trains are seen as the natural mode of long-distance trunk haulage for the main players in the retail sector. And the now twice-daily container train from Grangemouth and Mossend to Teesport shows how rail can compete effectively over shorter distances in the European market.

Of course, intermodal has long been a rail strength, going back to Dr Beeching's 'liner train' vision in 1963 — today's legacy being Freightliner's key role in moving Scottish exports from Coatbridge to Deep Sea ports in England. But Freightliner suffered grievously from draconian speed restrictions imposed by Railtrack for many months after the Hatfield rail crash in 2000 — and Coatbridge has never fully recovered from the loss of business to sea feeders from Grangemouth and Greenock. And the limitations of the Scottish Government's Freight Facilities Grant scheme mean that the

terminal still soldiers on with 1960s-vintage cranes.

The industry was also found wanting in the wasted opportunity *par excellence* of the post-privatisation years in Scotland: the failure to rail-connect the massive forest industry complex at Steven's Croft, just north of Lockerbie. The complex was deliberately sited between the then A74 and the West Coast Main Line so that a rail private siding could handle a significant proportion of raw materials and finished products. But the three big companies on site — having set up the Lockerbie Railfreight Company to develop a terminal — never found a champion within the rail industry. In essence the Railtrack and Strategic Rail Authority attitude was that 'freight trains will get in the way of the shiny new Pendolinos'. After three years of trying very hard to develop a rail option, the Steven's Croft companies became disillusioned, and in 2002 opted to stick with road haulage for 100% of their needs. And so it remains, with the area earmarked for rail now built over.

Fortunately, some companies who see the potential for rail have incredible patience, as well as long-term vision — none more so than Highland Spring. By the time that their new terminal at Blackford opens for business in 2021, it will be 17 years since the rail concept was first explored in a consultancy study. Not many businesses will be that patient.

In some cases, politics plays a very big part, as shown by the Highland Main Line (HML) from Perth to Inverness, two thirds of which is still single-track. Back in 2008 the Scottish Government's *Strategic Transport Projects Review*

identified upgrading the HML as the third-top priority among 29 road and rail schemes across Scotland. Investment of between £200m and £450m was envisaged — designed to benefit



Passing through Pitlochry, the shortest crossing loop on the HML — too short even for this 20 container train.

both passenger and freight traffic. Twelve years later, work was completed on a drastically scaled-down programme, with £65m spent on modifications to two crossing loops, solely to enable the operation of an hourly- frequency passenger service, with no benefit to rail freight. The daily Mossend-Inverness intermodal train for Tesco / Stobart continues to be limited to just 20 containers due to the short length of crossing loops, yet the Class 66 could haul 28 containers — a 40% increase in productivity.

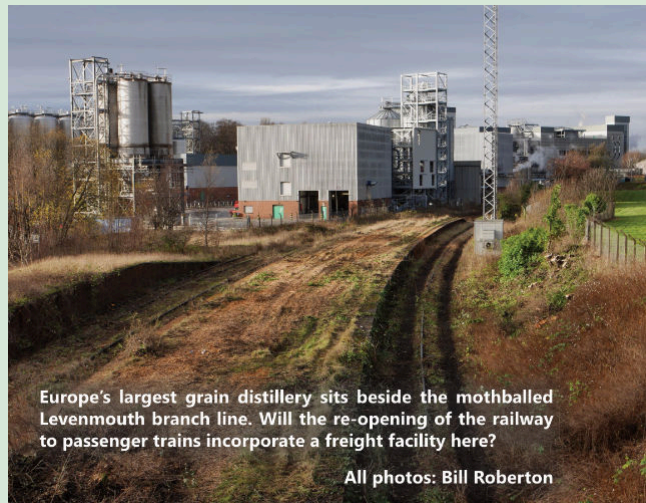
Meantime, dualling of the parallel A9 road continues (at an originally forecast cost in 2010 of £3,000 million — and who knows how much now), last month prompting an alliance of transport and environment charities to express ‘deep concern’ about the Scottish Government’s draft Infrastructure Investment Plan, which ‘fails to prioritise investment in low-carbon, sustainable transport. Instead, it continues with the same old set of high-carbon roads projects that has made transport the single largest source of emissions in Scotland.’

To finish on a brighter note, there can be no doubt that a welcome wind of change has blown through the rail freight sector in Scotland following the appointment of Bill Reeve as Director of

Rail at Transport Scotland some years ago. Network Rail now has a freight growth target, and as a result much work has gone into developing new rail markets. But theoretical potential has to be turned into traffic on the ground. A key yardstick will be whether or not the Levenmouth passenger rail re-opening scheme incorporates a freight dimension, serving two massive Diageo plants: the largest grain distillery in Europe at Cameron Bridge, and the nearby Leven bottling plant. Open these up to rail, and then — with some support from Transport Scotland — the wider internal Scottish market for spirits movements can be steadily unlocked, including a significant share of the 50,000 long-distance whisky lorry trips annually on the A9.

So — despite past failures — there has been much to praise, and the future holds some great opportunities for rail. But the industry needs to communicate its strengths and its successes better. Encouragingly, Network Rail went on the front foot publicity-wise during lockdown, highlighting rail freight’s resilience (in contrast to the severe impact on the passenger rail business). Rail freight can deliver — and perhaps now will be accorded the higher priority it deserves for the substantial benefits it provides for the economy, climate change, road congestion, road damage and road safety.

David Spaven
Principal of Deltix Transport Consulting



Europe’s largest grain distillery sits beside the mothballed Levenmouth branch line. Will the re-opening of the railway to passenger trains incorporate a freight facility here?

All photos: Bill Robertson

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

Portfolio Question Time 21 January 2021

Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity - Sustainable Transport (Investment)

Question S50-04929: Patrick Harvie, Glasgow, Scottish Green Party

To ask the Scottish Government how it plans to redirect investment from unsustainable modes of transport and into modes that are considered more sustainable, including rail infrastructure.

Michael Matheson, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity: We are investing more than £1 billion in bus priority and active travel infrastructure. We provide more than £1 billion every year to support public transport provision and, over the course of the pandemic, we have committed £692 million of additional support.

Since 2007, we have invested more than £9 billion in rail infrastructure, and we continue to invest record levels in this Control Period, including funding to support our commitment to decarbonise the network by 2035. Decisions on future transport investment will be made through the second *Strategic Transport Projects Review* and will prioritise investment in line with the sustainable investment hierarchy.

Patrick Harvie: *The cabinet secretary might have seen the "Rail For All" report, which the Scottish Greens published recently. Among many other recommendations, the report calls for a streamlining of the Scottish transport appraisal guidance—STAG—process, which is extremely complex, time consuming and costly, and which places a barrier to rail development. Does the cabinet secretary agree that the process needs to be shortened and aligned with the overarching aim of rapidly delivering low-carbon transport infrastructure, and that the change should begin immediately?*

Michael Matheson: I am aware of the report to which Mr Harvie refers, which makes a number of interesting suggestions that will be taken into account as we make decisions through STPR2. In our national transport strategy, which was published just last year, we set out a clear commitment to review the STAG process. I am conscious that there are some issues relating to the length of time that it takes and the costs that are associated with it. For that reason, we have already committed to carrying out a review over the next couple of years.

Mr Harvie will recognise that it is extremely important that, before we undertake any major transport investment, we have an assurance that it will deliver the intentions behind the scheme. That is why the STAG system is important. However, I recognise the need to reform it, which is why we have committed to doing so.

Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity - Edinburgh to Perth Railway (Upgrade)

Question S50-04935: Liz Smith, Mid Scotland and Fife, Conservative

To ask the Scottish Government when the Edinburgh to Perth railway line will be upgraded.

Michael Matheson: Record levels of investment continue to be made on the rail network in the current Control Period, including to the routes linking Edinburgh to Perth. Improvements include electrification from Edinburgh to Dunblane, the new Blackford freight terminal and the new high-quality Inter7City service.

Scottish ministers are committed to ensuring that the railway meets future growth needs for passengers and freight. For example, work to implement the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan includes consideration of electrification options for the routes to Perth.

Liz Smith: *I thank the cabinet secretary for that answer, but he knows that, in relation to the green recovery and addressing climate change, the Scottish Government's own experts have advised that infrastructure development and greener transport are essential. He also knows that the timescale for a journey between Perth and Edinburgh is exactly the same as it was 100 years ago. What priority is the Government placing on the upgrade? What is the exact timescale for any improvements that will be made?*

Michael Matheson: The member should be aware that we are investing record amounts into our railway during Control Period 6, and that we are the first part of the United Kingdom to commit to decarbonising our rail network by 2035. That will involve significant investment not only in electrification but in new zero-carbon-emitting rolling stock. All that investment is a significant recognition of the importance that rail has in helping to achieve our climate change objectives.

Regarding the line between Perth and Edinburgh, as I mentioned we have already electrified the line to Dunblane, and we are considering the potential for further electrification, which delivers faster services and increases capacity on the route network. Alongside that, we are looking at improving the existing signalling system and the timetable; again, that would help to improve journey times between Edinburgh and Perth.

Parliamentary Record Correction

FoFNL wrote to Michael Matheson in November to request that two incorrect answers given by him in March and April 2020 be corrected in the record. On 2 March we received a gracious letter from Mr Matheson confirming that the requested changes had been made, concluding with "In closing, may I thank you for bringing this matter to my attention and for the continuing and much appreciated support of the FoFNL to Scotland's Railway."

We believe that an accurate record is vital as parliamentary answers may well be referred to in future discussions.

The changes made are as follows:

S5W-27450

The Scottish Government has invested £57 million on major projects on the Highland Mainline over the last 5 years to improve services and performance along the length of the route. This investment has also delivered a ten minute journey time saving between Inverness and the Central Belt.

Answer changed to:

The Scottish Government has invested £57 million on major projects on the Highland Mainline over the last 5 years. This investment will contribute to our aspiration of a ten minute average journey time reduction between Inverness and the Central Belt.

S5W- 28045

The 10 minute journey time improvement on the Highland Mainline was calculated to be achieved through a combination of track enhancement and the delivery and introduction into service of all 26 refurbished High Speed Trains (HSTs).

Answer changed to:

Our aspiration is for an average 10 minute journey time improvement on the Highland Mainline delivered through a combination of track enhancement, operational improvements and the delivery and introduction into service of all 26 refurbished High Speed Trains (HSTs).

RETIRING VPS

Two of our three Vice Presidents are leaving us, as they did not stand for re-election to the Scottish Parliament.

We are very grateful to **Gail Ross** and **John Finnie** for their work in promoting the development of rail in Scotland.

Gail and John were both members of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee which considers and reports on transport matters as

part of its brief.

John has been in the news in rail circles this year for being the moving force behind the extremely impressive **Rail For All** report he commissioned on behalf of the Scottish Green Party. He was always a welcome presence on the Cross-Party Group on Rail in Holyrood.

We wish them all the best for the future.

Ian Budd

HOW DID THEY DO?

How far have we moved forward on improving the railways in the north in the past fourteen years? [www](#)

Reaching the end of this parliamentary session has given us the idea of an “End of Term Report”, in fact this is an “End of Three Terms Report”.

The Scottish Parliament Election on 6 May 2021 has focused our minds on the future condition of the railways in the north of Scotland and the progress that has been made since 2007. That is a convenient starting date as it was the first election held after Transport Scotland took responsibility for the railways in Scotland.

In March 2007 we produced a special issue (no 40) of our magazine with four pages solely outlining railway enhancements for Scottish Parliament candidates to consider. We said:

“Will you agree to work across party lines to hammer out a plan for Scotland’s railways to 2035? If not, why do you think your party has wisdom not shared by others?” And..

“Commitment means action, engineers at work, test trains on the track, contracts signed and progress reports delivered”.

In early April this year FoFNL sent an eight-page illustrated pamphlet, *Vote For Rail!* to all constituency candidates, and the relevant list candidates, of the five main parties, seeking explicit support for rail in the next parliamentary session. We received responses from 3.4% of the candidates. Although these were very positive it demonstrates the uphill struggle we have if we're to persuade politicians to take the issue seriously.

Although we are the Friends of the Far North Line, our passenger and freight traffic is inextricably linked to the fortunes of the two intercity lines that reach Inverness. This survey of the promises and failures of the last 14 years is in chronological order and covers all three lines at various points.

Scottish Government 2007-2011; 2011-2016; 2016-2021

Far North Line

2005 - major slowdown to services, 22 mins added to the Wick-Inverness journey time to around 4 hours 20 minutes, an average of just 40mph. An instruction from the Office of Rail Regulation to Network Rail (NR) on 8 July 2005 that NR must maintain routes to the published capability level at April 2001 did not lead to any action on restoring the 2001 end to end journey timings.]

2008 - Ian Coucher, then CEO of Network Rail, said at the FoFNL AGM in Inverness Town House on 30 June 2008, “We must find and exploit real opportunities to reduce journey times”.

2011 – FoFNL’s response to NR’s 2nd generation Rail Utilisation Strategy (RUS2) suggested installation of colour light signalling and motorised points (including at Lenran) between Inverness and Dingwall North.

2016 - FoFNL’s response to the July 2016 publication of the NR Scotland Route Study repeated the suggestion.

2016 - rail consultant, Tony Glazebrook, compiled a comprehensive report on the needs of the FNL. Fergus Ewing MSP therefore established the Far North Line Review Team, on which FoFNL was represented, to decide what work should be carried out.

2019 – Final Report on the FNLRT deliberations was published.

2020 – work begins on some improvements.

2021 – final plans for the “Lenran Loop” expected in the summer.

Highland Main Line

2007 - The incoming SNP government promised in its manifesto to speed up the Highland Main Line

journey time from Inverness to Edinburgh by 45 minutes.

2008 - In his August speech in Inverness Town House, Alex Salmond promised that 35 minutes would be taken off the schedule by **2011/12**. This was incorporated in the *Strategic Transport Projects Review*, published in December, as Priority 3 (after the Queensferry Crossing and EGIP).

2009 – in June the Transport Scotland board was offered an initial **£90m** from the Regulatory Asset Base (RAB) for the major HML upgrade. [The RAB was the UK Government's loan scheme for Network Rail which was later discontinued when NR's funds were centralised in the UK Treasury]. The board asked for a **deferral for a year**, as the project parameters were not sufficiently advanced.

2011 – SNP manifesto didn't mention HML upgrades.

2011 – in this election year the completion date was extended to **2025**. The Infrastructure Investment Plan allocated no money until the financial periods **2015/19** and **2020/25** when the estimated total cost of **£250m-£600m** would be shared. The planned work was to include additional passing loops and increases in line speeds.

2014 – NR's much delayed GRIP3 report on enhancement options was published. Budget for "Phase 2" **reduced to £120m**.

2015 - expected release of Transport Scotland's electrification strategy in February. In correspondence with Transport Scotland Inverness MSP Fergus Ewing supported our suggestion that electrifying the HML before Central Belt-Aberdeen would give more impressive journey time savings by "flattening" the steep gradients on the line.

2016 - The Scottish Chambers of Commerce HQ in Edinburgh made "The elimination of single track sections of railways between Scotland's cities" second only to broadband speeds in their election wish list priorities. They said, "Single track sections of the railways linking Inverness, Aberdeen and the Central Belt are unacceptable in the 21st century".

2019 – two improved loops and associated signalling improvements completed at a cost of **£57m**. This descope had more than halved the 2014 budget.

2021 – the full fleet of faster Inter7City trains now in service (two years late) but no plans known for future infrastructure improvements.

Inverness to Aberdeen

2008 - The *Strategic Transport Projects Review* stated that Priority 4 was to upgrade this line to facilitate an end to end journey time of 2 hours with a service every hour. It was the then Transport Minister's aspiration that this would be completed by 2016.

2011 – in this election year the completion date was extended to **2030**.

2014 – major funding announced for station and signalling improvements and some doubling, as stated in **2008**. However, only Phase 1 to be completed by **2019**.

2020 – Phase 1 completed.

2021 – no announcement about Phase 2 commencement, which was also to have been completed by 2016 and would have included the urgently needed dynamic loop near Orton on the 18 mile long single track section between Elgin and Keith.

What is clear from this survey is that promises and plans tend to disappear. This must be due to the diversion of funds away from railways, along with the suffocating weight of process and the swamping of progress by the production of labyrinthine 'reviews'.

The government never explicitly announces descope and/or extending planned completion dates. Keeping track of what is done, as opposed to what is said, is left to those who keep records and read such things as 'Budget Statements'.

There have been some very positive achievements in the last 14 years. The FNL Review Team was a fine example of how work needed can be identified, agreed upon and done. Many improvements

have already been made, including making the level crossings safer; repairing and replacing animal fencing; improvements to the RETB protocol; and the installation of Customer Information Screens.

Phase 1 of the work promised on the Inverness-Aberdeen line is excellent but Inverness to Dalcross redoubling has not been achieved and the recently approved planning application for a two platform station at Inverness Airport (Dalcross) shows just a short station loop rather than a 1½ mile redoubling extension to the Norbord wood processing plant.

The small amount of work done on the HML is useful, but even it falls short of what is required for freight trains to cross other trains.

Generally the reluctance to invest in the promised line improvements has left us in the north of Scotland with the two intercity lines which are largely single track with no spare capacity. Recent long closures of the line south from Aberdeen "have shown the severe limitations of single track railways" for diversionary purposes..

HITRANS has run several trials for new freight services on all three lines, for timber and whisky related cargoes in particular - trains are the most sustainable, least polluting remedies for the declared Climate Emergency. Its imperative is modal shift to rail for both passengers and freight. It's important that much more freight be directed onto rail, particularly for longer distances, such as to and from Aberdeen, Inverness and Georgemas. We are in a parlous state when money for putting freight back on single track railway lines cannot be found even in a climate emergency!

Roads are financed differently. Hauliers and their clients do not pay for the costs of road deterioration although it is a major problem. The A9 is pitted in many places south of Inverness but also particularly north of Cromarty bridge and on the northbound carriageway south of Tore. Presumably this is caused by the road surface not having been designed for the present volume of traffic or for the axle weights that are now allowed. Another reason to invest in more rail freight capacity.

From the perspective of rail in the Highlands a major change is needed in the way potential value is identified. Transport Scotland's STAG appraisal tool and similar models in England have been found wanting for causing growth to gravitate towards the already favoured populated urban areas, London being the prime example and, in Scotland, the Glasgow-Edinburgh conurbation. The UK Treasury is now said to be looking for a more rigorous and egalitarian model.

Another parsimonious idea with good intentions is the strategy of focusing on the impossible, by making 100% use of the existing network wherever possible before agreeing to infrastructure enhancement. This has proved unhelpful to the Highland lines and puts an unworkable strain on single-track railways where lost time cannot be regained and the effects mushroom very quickly.

The Scottish Government must take a nationwide view of rail provision and ensure that there is enough capacity, and there are alternative routes, for the system to work effectively at all times. This will mean investing in new projects, such as the Forth Tunnel, proposed in *Rail For All*, and the electrification and redoubling of the route to England via Kilmarnock.

The brochure for the post Cabinet meeting with the public in 2008 had a picture of Inverness's Greig Street Bridge with the caption "*Scotland Performs for Inverness and the Highlands*". Underneath we were told "*The Government has launched Scotland Performs, a tool that measures progress towards the over-arching Purpose (sic) of creating a more successful country, with opportunities for all to flourish, through increasing sustainable economic growth.*"

Whatever happened to this? Did it sink without trace?

Dare we hope that the 2016-2021 government and its successor is reviving this idea by making Inverness a true Transport Hub of the Highlands? It has recently announced the purchase of land for the long sought-after Integrated Transport Centre in Inverness city centre, combining the railway and bus stations. Maybe the tourist office too?

Fast and efficient rail services for passengers (including tourists) and freight are what is needed for a sustainable future. Let's have no more delay: Please just do it!

NEWS ROUND-UP

HOLYROOD ELECTION 2021

As part of our campaigning for better rail provision in the Highlands we sent a printed copy of our pamphlet entitled *Vote Rail!* [www.fofnl.org.uk/archives/FoFNL-Election-Booklet-2021-Digital.pdf] to all the constituency and list candidates of the five main parties. We asked all 409 candidates to let us know that they understood the need to put rail at the forefront of their transport thoughts. We had 14 positive replies: LibDem, 5; Conservative, 4; SNP, 4 and Labour, 1 - surprisingly none from Green candidates - perhaps they thought it went without saying!

DALCROSS STATION

The Highland Council gave permission for the construction of the new station at Dalcross on 27 April.

FNL UPDATE

We understand from Transport Scotland that detailed negotiations between TS and Network Rail are progressing and a decision on all the remaining work arising from the Review Team recommendations, including the Lentrax Loop and token-operated points is expected in the summer.

DALWHINNIE DERAILMENT

On 10 April a five-car test InterCity train became partially derailed near Dalwhinnie Station on the Highland Main Line, when a set of points changed while the train was passing over it. The rear bogie of the last carriage and the rear power car left the rails and caused damage to the train, the track and the signalling system. The train, which was testing platform stepping distances, was travelling at around 33 mph and had no passengers. The five crew members on board were uninjured. The line was closed for five days and travel for passengers and freight was seriously disrupted due to the alternative route via Aberdeen being largely single-track. A Rail Accident Investigation Branch (RAIB) investigation into this potentially very serious incident is now under way.

GEORGEMAS INTER-MODAL DEMONSTRATION

[www](http://www.fofnl.org.uk)

An inter-modal freight demonstration took place at Georgemas on 22 April. The purpose was to show how the nuclear waste siding could be used to transfer containers from rail to road. The siding is short and the use of slings from the fixed overhead crane is required. This means that the train needs to move in between each operation and the siding length limits trains to eight containers.

If there were to be enough traffic in the future to justify the purchase of a reach stacker, the much longer Network Rail sidings which were used for last summer's timber trial would be more suitable.

Good news is that this summer may see another timber trial, but using high-capacity bespoke timber wagons.



FOFNL RED WHEEL

John Yellowlees, ScotRail Honorary Rail Ambassador and long-time member of FoFNL, suggested that we might wish to fund a Red Wheel plaque at Dunrobin Castle Station to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of the opening of the section from Golspie to Helmsdale on 16 May. We happily agreed to this but we do not know, as we go to press, when the unveiling will take place.

John has provided some background information about the history of the Transport Trust and the plaques as well as the *Duke of Sutherland's Railway*.

[www](http://www.transporttrust.org.uk)

The Transport Trust was first proposed in 1963 by a Mr R E Wilsdon, who was concerned that records, drawings and photographs from those times of rapid change should be preserved for posterity. He had received support from the British Railways Board, London Transport and others, but there was of course no digital dimension in those days.



The Trust diversified from archiving into skills development, with awards for young preservationists as well as for lifetime achievement, offering loans funded by its benefactors at very low rates of return. Its profile has been maintained by successive patrons the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Michael of Kent and currently the Princess Royal. Now relaunched as the National Transport Trust, its 2020 awards recognised a broad cross-section of transport heritage. Perhaps less successful as yet have been efforts to speak for the heritage community in dealings with organisations like the National Heritage Lottery Fund, but it is hoped that a new manifesto will help achieve improved working

with corporate and affiliated organisations.

Inspired by the English Heritage programme of blue plaques, the Trust's Red Wheels have been rolled out over the last dozen years to denote sites of transport heritage, and work in conjunction with back-up material on its website to inform, educate and enthuse visitors about turning-points in our nation's transport history, so as to help preserve them for the enjoyment of future generations and perhaps inspire youngsters to consider a career in transport or engineering. With over one hundred Red Wheels in place south of the border, Scotland has come late to the game. The first one here was unveiled at Paisley Canal Station in August 2019 to celebrate a site of multiple canal and railway significance. Two days later it was joined by Glenfinnan, and later that year by Wemyss Bay, an ultimate in transport interchange.

Notwithstanding the pandemic, two more were unveiled in socially-distanced fashion during 2020 by Fife farmer and locomotive-owner John Cameron, the Trust's vice-president. These were for Scotland's first railway opened in 1722 at Cockenzie, and the world's first roll-on roll-off ferry in 1850 at Burntisland. Other wheels already delivered for unveiling this year are for the UK's only hand-operated turntable ferry, the *Glenachulish* operating between Glenelg and Kylesha; Orkney's wartime Churchill Barriers built to keep enemy submarines out of Scapa Flow which now provide a road link between its southern islands; the Alloa Waggonway whose route is etched into the townscape; Madelvic, Britain's first car factory in Granton, Edinburgh which for a short time made early electric vehicles; the Leamington Lift Bridge on the Union Canal in central Edinburgh, and Anderson's Piano, the rockfall detection system of tripwires dating from 1882 in the Pass of Brander, for

which funding has come from the Friends of the West Highland Lines.

What commends the Duke of Sutherland's Railway between Golspie and Helmsdale to the National Transport Trust is that it was the longest stretch of railway anywhere in Britain to have been planned, financed and opened by one individual. Unique among British stations in having been in the ownership of one family throughout its entire existence, the Duke's own station at Dunrobin Castle provides the perfect setting for this Red Wheel funded by the Friends of the Far North Line, and a full account of its significance is on the NTT database: www.nationaltransporttrust.org.uk/heritage-sites/heritage-detail/dunrobin-castle-station.

John Yellowlees



National Transport Trust vice-president John Cameron with '1722 Waggonway Heritage Group' chair Ed Bethune in front of the new plaque and a replica wagon. [Photo: John Yellowlees]

RONNIE MUNRO - CLASSIC RAILWAYMAN

Many in the railway industry in Scotland will have been sad to hear of the passing of **Ronnie Munro** who was latterly Inverness Station Manager and retired in 1994.

He started his career at Tillynaught and was Station Master at Knockando at one time.

David Spaven, who knew Ronnie well and says he can still recollect his accent, mentioned him in his book, *Highland Survivor*:

"Following the successful [peat train] trials [on the Far North Line, in 1987 and 88], with both trains loaded directly from the lineside – the first during the night, and the second in daylight on a Sunday – we developed plans for a weekly train from Scotsalder, making marginal use of otherwise idle locomotives for Sunday loading, and back-loading otherwise empty coal containers from Inverness. Integral to the success of unusual workings such as these was a 'can do' attitude among BR staff and managers, epitomised by the ScotRail Manager at Inverness, Ronnie Munro: a classic railwayman who would get things done, provided you didn't ask too many questions about how he did it..."

Jim Summers, who was Regional Operations Manager, British Rail Scottish Region until his retirement said this:

"Ronnie was a great servant of the railway and its customers. He would use his ingenuity and experience to make things happen, sometimes before Glasgow HQ realised they had. With Ronnie the place was in good hands."

Nigel Wunsch, until 2015 Network Rail's Head of Strategy & Planning, Scotland, commented "He was always very helpful to me when I was a young Traffic Manager in Elgin and later in Inverness (I followed him into that role when he became relief Manager."

Ian Budd

THE OPENING OF THE DUKE OF SUTHERLAND'S RAILWAY

– as recorded by the contemporary press



Extract from the *John O'Groat Journal*,
22nd September 1870

This year we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the full opening of the Duke of Sutherland's railway and its connection with the rest of the national network which took place on 16th May 1871 – a partial opening had occurred in September 1870. This section of the Far North Line ran through the Duke's estate between Golspie and Helmsdale. The Line is unique in being the only one of such a length financed by a single individual.

The 3rd Duke (1828 – 1892) was passionate about the latest technologies, especially railways. In his younger days he elected to work for a season in the railway works at Wolverton¹ where he gained a good grounding in practical engineering.

So it was, when the inaugural train ran between Dunrobin and West Helmsdale on 17th September 1870, the Duke was the engine driver. The *Glasgow Daily Herald* of 21st September describes the arrival at West Helmsdale shown in the photo: **The Duke's new engine was a sight in itself, being most artistically and beautifully decorated with flowers and evergreens besides being itself a masterpiece of engineering skill.** His

OPENING OF THE SUTHERLAND RAILWAY TO HELMSDALE BY THE PRINCE AND PRINCESS CHRISTIAN.

MEMORIAL TREES PLANTED BY THEIR ROYAL
HIGHNESSES.

An event of no ordinary importance and interest took place at Helmsdale on Saturday last. On Thursday it was made known that his Grace the Duke of Sutherland, accompanied by the Prince and Princess Christian, were to inaugurate the opening of the Sutherland Extension Railway for goods traffic from Dunrobin to Helmsdale, by bringing an engine and carriage attached over the line to a temporary station a small distance to the west of the village, pending the completion of the embankments leading into it. It was also intimated that the Prince and Princess were to plant a tree each in the close neighbourhood of the permanent station in commemoration of their visit.

Grace, who is a first rate engineer, was at his post on the engine and seated beside him was the Princess² and the Duchess.

In the September 2020 edition of *FNE* Daniel Brittain-Catlin wrote a short piece to mark the 150th anniversary of this event.

In recognition of the 3rd Duke's contribution to the railway network, he and his descendants

enjoyed the right to attach their private saloon to London-bound trains up to railway nationalisation in 1948 and the privilege of a private platform at Dunrobin until 1965.

A task which was not completed in time for this partial opening was the connection to the existing Sutherlandshire railway at Golspie. The local press gives a glimpse of the difficulties of transporting the Duke's locomotive by road over the two miles between Golspie and Dunrobin in the week before. The task took 12 hours and was achieved only by the good fortune of a Thomson road steamer traction engine, travelling up to 'pavement quarries' at Spittal in Caithness. The Duke persuaded the quarry owner, to 'lend' it to pull the wagon carrying the engine up the incline towards Dunrobin. Even so, the manoeuvre also required well over 50 men with ropes including the shirt-sleeved Duke, his son, and Prince Arthur who was staying at Dunrobin with his older sister Princess Christian.

What had been achieved to allow this opening ceremony? The Sutherland line from Bonar Bridge to Golspie had opened in April 1868. The first sod of the Duke's line had been cut on 16th February 1869 at Clynmilton, near Brora. It was a considerable feat to complete the whole 17 mile line including four stations, 19 bridges, fences and stone walls in just over two years. So confident was the Duke of the railway's progress over his estate that construction work progressed for more than a year before the Duke of Sutherland's Railway Act, legalising the works, was passed on 20th June 1870.

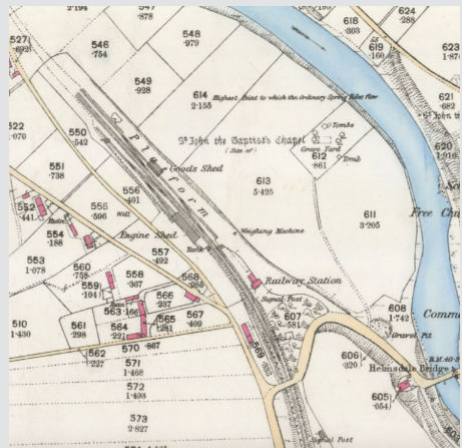
What follows is a flavour of the specification in the Act referencing local properties: **the construction will terminate at or near Helmsdale in the parish of Kildonan and county of Sutherland at or near a point fifty yards or thereabouts southeast of Bual Cottage, occupied by Alexander Bannerman, and in a field or allotment of land at West Helmsdale, occupied by Robert Mackay, situated between the Helmsdale river and the public road leading from Helmsdale to Marril.** What is less clear is how well local crofters were compensated for loss of land and amenities.

The isolated line opened for regular traffic, both passenger and freight on 1st November 1870.

Ten days after this start of regular services, *The Inverness Courier* stated that an application was being made to lay a bill before parliament for the final push to Wick and Thurso and . . . to incorporate a company - the Sutherland & Caithness Railway Company. Relevant to this account is the add-on to the Duke's Railway that this Bill included: **A Branch Railway commencing by a junction with the railway first above mentioned at or near Helmsdale station . . . and terminating at or near the seaward extremity of the harbour of Helmsdale . . .**

There were similarly phrased applications for branch railways from the Wick terminus to the new harbour³ of Pultneytown now in the course of construction . . . ; and from the Thurso terminus to Scrabster harbour

Of course none of these harbour branches were constructed but it is interesting to reflect, if they had been, how they might have affected the fortunes of these ports.



The Ordnance Survey mapped Helmsdale in 1871 just capturing the arrival of the Duke's railway 'in a field'.

On Tuesday 16th May 1871 the full opening of the Duke's line, with its connection to the railway network at Golspie and the completion of the last cutting through a hard granite ridge just south of the present Helmsdale station, was marked with a grand banquet – or three to be exact!

The scene on the day is described in *The Inverness Courier* 19th May 1871:

Tuesday last was a gala day at Golspie and

Helmsdale in honour of the final completion and opening for through traffic of the Duke of Sutherland's Railway. The chief event of the proceedings was the luncheon to the Duke of Sutherland at Helmsdale . . . Early in the day crowds of people were conveyed to the point of attraction by train by coach and all manner of wheeled conveyances. The morning broke inauspiciously. A keen north east wind brought occasional sharp showers of hail, but now and again there were bright glimpses of sunshine.

Banquet One

From the *John O'Groat Journal* of 18th May:

The major event of the opening ceremony was a banquet, starting at 1.30 pm, in the new engine shed at Helmsdale. The decorations were made under the superintendence of Mr Mitchell, head gardener at Dunrobin . . . from rafters and pillars numerous flags were hung bearing either the Duke's arms or inscriptions suitable to the proceedings of the day such as 'Long Live the Duke,' 'Success to the Railway' . . . Covers were laid for 200 but scarcely as many as that number were present:

A speaker at the banquet after the Duke was Captain Tyler^d the railway inspector for the line. As reported he started his speech by saying: that in attending to his official duties he always liked to combine business with pleasure and when he came north he always experienced greater pleasure than in any other part of the country first and not least

there was the noble Duke's hospitality so noted south as well as north . . . Today such hospitality might be considered inappropriate for an impartial inspector; it may have influenced the praiseworthy report he produced for the Duke's line.

The **second banquet** was for those who had worked on the construction of the line: The workmen employed online were in the afternoon entertained to dinner at Golspie at the Duke's expense. On his return from Helmsdale his Grace visited the dining Hall and made a short speech to the men. His reception was of the most enthusiastic description . . . There were about 400 present who appeared to enjoy themselves exceedingly.

Sadly no photos have emerged of this band of 'mainly Sutherlandshire men'. At the banquet there was regret expressed that the workforce was being disbanded. The work on the Sutherland & Caithness railway did not start immediately; the photo below believed to be of those navvies – possibly some of the same men who work on the Duke's line – is thought to have been taken around 1874 at Helmsdale when the line north was opened.

The **third 'banquet'** was for Helmsdale children, but this was not paid for by the Duke:

The children attending the two schools in the village [Helmsdale] to the number of about 320^b were in the evening entertained to a sumptuous repast in the engine room. The expense was born by the number of gentlemen in the village. The proceedings



Dating evidence from the locomotive: Identified as No 40 (Keith), a Medium Goods locomotive built in 1864 and here in its original form. Rebuilt in 1885. The number of men standing on the wagons suggests these were construction navvies and not just a maintenance gang.

appeared to be vastly enjoyed by the young folks.

And to end this article, an excerpt from the account of the Duke's speech at the first banquet recalling how the railways had changed forever the expectations of the long distance traveller: a journey overland from the South was a serious undertaking and it may be remembered that the late Duke of Sutherland [formal reference to the 3rd Duke's

father] was wont to refer to the times when he started on his northward route from Trentham [Stoke-on-Trent] with his four black horses and a coachman with a wig and used to be a fortnight or three weeks in performing the journey to Dunrobin, a distance which can now be comfortably traversed in less than 24 hours⁶.

Michael Willmot

¹ Wolverton Works run by the London and Birmingham Railway Company, at the midpoint of their 112-mile route.

² Princess Helena: Helena Augusta Victoria was the third daughter and fifth child of Queen Victoria. Victoria's choice of husband for Helena was Prince Christian of Schleswig-Holstein.

³ The harbour and Pultneytown development (like Helmsdale constructed as a settlement for displaced crofters following the Clearances) was built to Thomas Telford's design in the early years of the nineteenth century. By 1862 over 1100 boats were fishing out of Wick and in the following year the foundation stone of a much larger harbour. 'the new harbour' was laid. The harbour was half built when, in 1873, a storm caused so much damage that the project was then abandoned.

⁴ Sir Henry Whatley Tyler (1827 – 1908) was a pioneering British engineer and politician, who contributed to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and whose collections helped found the South Kensington Science Museum. His interests were mainly in railways, where he served as Inspector of Railways and a railway company director but also in water and iron working. He served as a Conservative MP between 1880 and 1892

⁵ The current population of Helmsdale is 850 of whom around 100 are children under 16

⁶ Today a departure from Stoke at 10:11 will get you to Golspie at 20:42, a 10½ hour journey

RAILY MAIL*

It has been brought to our attention that on the 3rd March the *Daily Mail* found a small space to describe our line, and our southern neighbour, rather well.

After you've winced at the headline, **GREAT SCOT! THESE RAILWAYS ARE BONNIE** you can enjoy these excerpts:

Remote possibility: Conquer Britain's Far North Line

There's nothing remotely like this outside Norway. It just goes from Inverness to the top, finishing in Thurso or Wick, on and on through majestic landscape — bleak moors, dramatic lochs, herons, cormorants, seals, pretty villages and lonely halts until you can stand on the coast and look at Orkney, watching the chilly waters of the North Sea fighting the great waves of the Atlantic. You have conquered Britain's most northerly railway. Fabulous.

Summit Special: Sensational views on the Highland Main Line

Just spectacular as it goes from Glasgow or Edinburgh straight up the middle to Inverness. Despite its name, the line creeps through the dramatic Pass of Killiecrankie on a single track, but elsewhere it soars on two magnificent mighty viaducts. It swoops past looming mountains, climbs Britain's highest rail summit and rushes across grassy plains past famous distilleries. Splendid way to spend an afternoon.

*We can do terrible headlines too.

CANADIAN HYDROGEN POWER



Our northern neighbours across the Atlantic have been thinking seriously about adopting hydrogen to power trains for a number of years. Recent months have seen both encouragement and setback for its use.

GO Transit

Metrolinx is an agency of the Government of Ontario which co-ordinates public transport in the Greater Toronto area, including GO Transit rail services. It has ambitious plans to convert the rail service from peak-hours-only to all-day, which involve quadrupling the train miles run. As in Scotland, the requirement is to replace diesel traction.

In 2017 the former Ontario Liberal government initiated a Hydrail Feasibility Study to evaluate hydrogen fuel cells (HFC) as the on-train power source to "electrify" the 281 mile network.

From the outset Metrolinx senior management were wary of the idea. Phil Verster, the ScotRail Alliance's previous Managing Director, who became President & Chief Executive Officer of Metrolinx shortly after the establishment of the feasibility study, warned at the time that the technology was too new and untested to be advisable for such a large project. The study reported in March 2018 that it was perfectly feasible to use HFC-powered vehicles. However, the long-term cost is thought to be similar to using conventional overhead line electrification (OHLE); the benefit: cost ratio (BCR) for Hydrail was between 2.65 and 3.01 whereas OHLE had a ratio of 3.07. The overall 'life-cycle' of both systems was considered to be similar.

Toronto's Hydrail scheme has now been dropped after four years and \$7m expenditure and the system will be electrified with OHLE.

Canadian Pacific

Canadian Pacific has announced a Hydrogen Locomotive Program. Using an existing diesel-electric freight locomotive it will replace the diesel engine and alternator with HFCs and battery technology to drive the locomotive's electric traction motors. Some of the electricity generated is used directly and some is diverted to charge a power-conditioning battery that provides surge power for standing starts and gradients.

CP will use Ballard Power Systems' (BLDP) modules which will provide a total of 1.2 megawatts (MW) of electricity to power the locomotive.

CP's President and CEO, Keith Creel, said, "With this purchase from Ballard, a leader in the hydrogen fuel cell industry, CP further demonstrates its commitment to developing the next generation of locomotive – one that produces zero emissions. How we power our trains matters to our customers, employees, shareholders and to the communities that we operate in. This technology holds the possibility of eliminating emissions from freight train operations, which already represent the most efficient method of moving goods over land."

Ian Budd

COUL LINKS AGAIN

At the end of January the *Press & Journal* contained news that another proposal to build a golf course on Coul Links near Dornoch has come to light.

The previous plan by three American businessmen, although approved by The Highland Council, was refused permission by the Scottish Government in February 2020, largely in response to environmental concerns.

The new group, called Communities For Coul (C4C) is also planning an application for an 18-hole course. If this is approved the owner of Coul Farm is planning to build a £20m "eco-hotel" to complement the course.

With the rapidly increasing importance of railways in efforts to slow down climate change and generally reduce profligate energy consumption, it is possible that a decision will be taken in the future to build a Dornoch 'cut-off'. This would include a railway bridge over the Dornoch Firth and use the former Dornoch Light Railway route which runs through the course along the western boundary of the Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) shown in red on the map of the previous plan. This map is taken from the Scottish Government Assessment Report of 2018.



It is important that The Highland Council *ensures* that the railway route is reserved. There is no reason why a railway shouldn't run through a golf course, but passive provision would have to be incorporated in the course design as a condition of approval.

Ian Budd

DELNY BRIDGE AIDS EVANTON CASE

The replacement of Delny level crossing by a bridge, as announced by Network Rail last September, has now become a certainty after planning consent was given on 26 January. Highland Council's North Planning Applications Committee supported the plan unanimously. To allay local fears about excessive noise the design of the bridge and its approaches incorporate bends and restricted visibility. This will result in traffic slowing down to around 30 mph although the road itself is de-restricted. There will also be a weight limit of 7.5 tonnes to avoid disturbance to residents of nearby Barbaraville.

The only remaining legal matter is the issuing of a Stopping-up Order by the Scottish Government to allow the level crossing to be closed and the railway fenced off. This is not in doubt.

The level crossing replacement will allow trains to pass through at full linespeed. The time thus saved may strengthen the argument to reopen Evanton Station. Housing development there will see the local population increase significantly in the near future, possibly exceeding Beauly and Conon Bridge, both of which had successful station reopenings. It was announced in April that HIRANS has received a £5,000 grant to pay for a feasibility study, expected to be completed during summer 2021.

The other by-product of closing the level crossing is that Network Rail's objection to the building of 100 houses in the area will be resolved. NR had been concerned that the development would cause additional traffic to use the level crossing.

Ian Budd

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CHANGE AT INVERNESS

Chief Executive of Inverness Chamber of Commerce, Stewart Nicol, reflects on the welcome changes taking place in the city, and the transport and communication improvements which are needed to complete the picture.

The Coronavirus Pandemic has undoubtedly impacted all aspects of our business, community, family and individual lives in unbelievable ways that we will all have to work through personally and together. It is absolutely appropriate that we respond to it as the biggest health emergency that all of us will face and that we pause to remember and reflect on those who have been most affected. The impact of the measures we have had to endure, while creating an opportunity for business, have greatly accelerated long-standing trends we have been grappling with, no more so than are facing the city of Inverness.

As I reflect on the many challenges, I am also quite clear that we have an almost unique opportunity to shape what we want our city to be for generations to come. I'm utterly convinced that we need to be ambitious and forward looking when it comes to our built environment. Our city centre has changed and will continue to do so and that transition will require vision, collaboration and strong leadership. But, our built environment has to be more than just how we construct and use the buildings and space in our city centre. It has to include how we are connected physically and digitally to the rest of Scotland, the UK and globally. Our built environment will help shape how we are viewed by locals and visitors, both national and international. It will also, to a significant effect, determine what we become famous for.

There are significant projects currently underway in the city and recent award-winning examples of what can be achieved as we shift the balance of how we use our city space. The Inverness Castle project and Victorian Market redevelopment are two excellent examples of

how we can modernise and fundamentally change some of our built heritage. Appropriately transforming both buildings will create an exciting and innovative space which will allow us to showcase our city and region. It will allow us to connect with our heritage and culture while providing a platform on which to set out our fabulous food, drink and artistic offerings. What better a way for visitors to experience our city, which is unique in the Highlands as the start and finish of the world-renowned, NC500.

We are undoubtedly transitioning into a new place as we see a welcome increase in city centre residential dwellings. A number of recent developments are nearing completion, as new opportunities commence. The award-winning Raining's Stairs development is, to my mind, a stunning exemplar of what can be done to transform a complex and difficult space into appropriate and much-needed accommodation. The bar has been set to an appropriate level. Current residential projects in Union Street and Academy Street are proving that we can get the balance of residential and retail right. The fact that city-centre retail space is challenging, is clear to all. Addressing that requires innovation and bold decisions which will facilitate such space being used to ensure business, arts, culture and food & drink are attracted to and embedded into our city centre.

Having appropriate transport and digital connectivity are also vital, if we are to attract visitors and vital investment to our region. Much has still to be done in both of these most basic of areas. We're still not seeing appropriate progress with the road infrastructure around our city and region. While progress on the new rail station for Inverness Airport is welcome, necessary upgrades for our rail network on the

Highland Main Line and other routes are still on the distant horizon. Perhaps the Scottish Government's ambitious 'Decarbonisation Agenda' will give us the quality of offering, service frequency and journey speed that will finally lift our rail experience out of the past?

One of the final pieces in our city's built

environment is to establish an appropriate transport hub which connects our city to the region and world. The prospects are tantalising and, with an allied transformation of our rail station we can, I believe, create a built environment in which we can all have pride.

Stewart Nicol

There is an air of anticipation in Inverness about the imminent development of the integrated transport hub in the centre of the city.

In February the group of major stakeholders, whose task is the realisation of the new hub, met formally for the first time. It is led by HITRANS and Transport Scotland and will oversee the project. The group, which includes Abellio ScotRail, Network Rail and Highland Council, has agreed terms of reference.

Reactions to the first meeting were very positive; Frank Roach, Partnership Manager of HITRANS said, "This is a unique opportunity to redesign the city centre around an integrated public transport hub which will help us move towards Scotland's 2045 net zero target." Highlands and Islands MSP David Stewart commented, "As anyone living, working or coming regularly to Inverness will tell you, this investment has been badly-needed for many years."

NEW SCOTRAIL

Colin Howden, Director of Transform Scotland, commenting on the Ministerial announcement that ScotRail will move to state ownership in spring 2022:

The right-wing tabloids frothed that this meant we were 'back to the 1970s' while trade unions and various left-leaning NGOs reacted as if Scotland's railways will now move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. Frankly, we can't get as agitated about this as many others choose to do. The fact is that we'll have the same infrastructure, the same stations, the same rolling stock, the same staff, the same labour relations, and, very probably, most or all of the same management. Whether it be owned by capitalists or communists, it is difficult to see transformative change on the Scottish railway until there is transformative investment in the aged infrastructure (of the like that Scottish Ministers are instead making to the trunk road network), and it is difficult to see that

transformative investment come about while the cost base of the railway remains so prohibitively high. Will state ownership change this? Perhaps. But also remember that it was private capital that led to the construction and development of Britain's railways in the C19th and early C20th, and the UK state that ran down British Rail in the latter part of the C20th, so who knows how this will play out. Certainly, Ministers will have no-one to blame but themselves if and when expectations are not met, and here they have made a rod for their own backs. But Ministers will also now have to deal directly with the same rail unions who have chosen to pursue strike action during a global health pandemic which has led to the decimation of rail patronage. All this said, state ownership of the railways remains an undeniably popular move. And we certainly won't be shy of setting out our own expectations of what government must do to make this 'new ScotRail' work.

ACCIDENTAL ALLEGORY

One of my wryest memories of the loco-hauled era on the Highland Main Line is observing, in the late 1980s, diesel locomotive 47 635 *Jimmy Milne* (named after the former General Secretary of the Scottish TUC) rescuing the failed 47 991 *Confederation of British Industry* at Inverness station. The 'worker' survived into preservation at the Epping & Ongar Railway, but 'the boss' succumbed to the breaker's torch at Booth's of Rotherham in 2013.

David Spaven

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DRIFTBUSTERS!

Niall Laybourne, FoFNL member and one of our regular photographic contributors, walked in February to a position near County March Summit, the highest point on the Far North Line at 216m. His 18km round trip netted a series of wonderful pictures including these two. Some more are available on the magazine companion page, www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne83.html as well as some interesting information about the Independent Snow Ploughs' history.

On this occasion the drifts were so deep that the usual 'line proving run' by a locomotive fitted with a plough was not possible. This was the first visit to this area by Independent Snow Ploughs (ISPs) since 2010.

Niall comments: The photos were taken on Wednesday 17 February from around milepost 129¾ on the Caithness side of County March Summit. This was following five days of FNL closure, and many of the drifts blocking the

Class 37 on its solo line-clearing runs earlier in the week, had disappeared.

Whilst trying to clear the line by itself, 37419 couldn't get further north than Forsinard on the Saturday, due to frozen/blocked points; got stuck in drifts on a second run that night between Kinbrace and Forsinard; another impassable drift at Lairg on the Sunday night/ Monday morning made it clear that a solo locomotive wasn't sufficient to tackle the remaining drifts so the ISP was summoned.

By the time the ISPs arrived the temperature had risen and snow was melting, and fortuitously I had found the longest drift they hit that day - it was around 400m long, and at least 2m deep in places.

In the top picture the train has just passed the board marking County March Summit. There was a sizeable drift at the summit itself, and the

[www](http://www.fofnl.org.uk)



train is seen descending after that (averaging 1-in-60 for the first few kms), passing the old snow fences, and hitting another shallow drift.

From the summit to well beyond Altnabreac (and almost Scotsalder), the line here is continuously-welded rail, hence the 80mph speed limit sign for multiple units, which you can see embedded in the snow.

The lower picture shows the plough hitting the big drift, with Ben Griam Beg seen in the background.

Seeing these photos triggered some memories from **Iain MacDonald**, the retired signalman on the FoFNL Committee.

I was rostered to be Pilotman* on a Sunday from Invergordon to Lairg because a lot of the signal wires had come down with the weight of snow.

The line-proving engines arrived, two class 37s and the driver was Mad Max, (just call him MM, he's deceased, but I don't want to identify him for the sake of any of his relatives). Things were not too bad as far as Tain but he was sure hitting the drifts and we only had the nose ploughs. Well, after Tain we were hitting really big drifts and the secondman and myself were exchanging glances because MM was living up to his name, I was standing between the two seats and I was sure the windscreens would be

in on top of us.

As far as I understand the nose plough, the centre part is not bolted on but hangs on brackets, so there was the danger of it coming off and derailing us.

**In the event of the signalling system not working it was the lot of one of the signalmen to travel in the cab, acting as a 'human token' guaranteeing by his presence that this was the only train on the same stretch.*

On another occasion snow caused the signalling equipment to fail from Invergordon to Dingwall, so I set up Pilotman working, much to the annoyance of the Traffic Inspector who later in the day declared there would be h*** to pay and he was having nothing to do with it! Well, as everything was done by the book all was well, and I remember the last trip was around 01:30 when I took the Snow Blower with the Traction Inspector on board through to Dingwall. A very uncomfortable vehicle, I don't know if any other signaller was ever Pilotman on board the Snow Blower. My car was at Dingwall and travelling back to Invergordon there were places you could hardly see the road it was drifting so bad, and I remember thinking to myself, *why am I doing this?*

It's disappointing to remember that in those days we were the last to stop running because of the weather, we are now the first.

Contents



Job done! Left to right: Direct Rail Services driver Jon Bird, un-named DRS fitter, Network Rail Mobile Operations Manager, Alex Campbell and ScotRail Driver Team Manager, Lorraine Green.

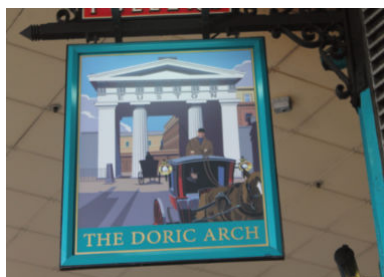
Photographer - unknown DRS fitter. Photo: DRS

TO SCOTLAND IN THE 1950s

*This letter, which appeared in the January 2008 edition of **Steam Days** magazine, recalls another era of train travel - though not so far back that it's beyond the memory of older readers!*

Reprinted with permission.

Sir: The article in the September edition of your magazine on Inverness by Jim Gordon reminded me of my summer holidays in the 1950s. From 1952 on, my parents and I travelled to Caithness in Scotland from our Berkshire home every year to visit my grandparents. After travelling up to Paddington and crossing by underground to Euston Square we walked across the road and went in by the Doric Arch to the booking-hall. We travelled mid-week to get a cheaper fare. By the late 1950s a return fare from Euston to Thurso (mid-week) was £13. 17s. 6d. After getting the tickets we travelled through the big glazed doors into Euston's Great Hall. This was before it was disgracefully pulled down. One of the things I remember about the Great Hall was the model engines each side of the doors. One year there was a transport exhibition on the first floor which I visited.



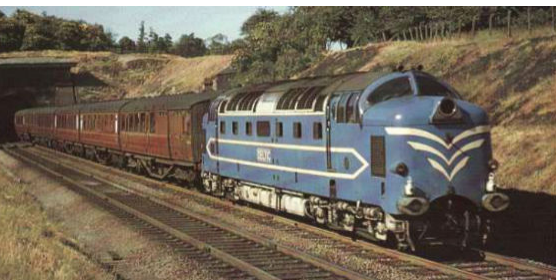
Pub sign reminder of the Doric Arch

After taking an evening meal in the restaurant just off the Great Hall we walked to the platform to catch the 'Royal Highlander' which was due to leave at 7.15pm. As we had been at Euston since 5.45pm we could always get an early seat. I think the first leg of the journey was usually hauled by an LMS 'Duchess' Pacific, but the engine I remember most was in 1958 — the prototype 'Deltic' which took us to Crewe. Travelling through the night as a young teenager seemed a very great adventure. The station names as we passed seemed like far-away places in an atlas.

After the great climb over Shap we would reach Carlisle where we would stop for quite some time. My father would go onto the platform here to get steaming mugs of tea from the tea trolley much to my mother's alarm as she would swear the train would leave without him. The abiding sound at this station was the tap, tap, of the wheel-tapper, and then, after around 35 miles, we would climb Beattock. The next stop would be a signal against us at Motherwell, then it was on through the night to Perth, arriving in the early light at 6.00am. From Perth in the daylight came the spectacular scenery of the Highlands, with the climbs over Druimuachdar and Slochd. As the line changed to single track the pace became slower, and we had to wait at some stations for an up train to pass.

At Aviemore we stopped a little longer, leaning out of the window to feed the seagulls. One year when the track had been washed away just south of Inverness we travelled via Boat-of-Garten and Nairn, but usually we took the more direct route. We would arrive in Inverness at 9.00am with a 2-hour wait for our train to Thurso.

The journey to Thurso was a step back in time with stops at every station and longer ones at some to allow a train to pass. At these times, after the initial bustle of passengers and parcels, the place would go quiet and we joked that the engine had gone off the boil. As the morning became afternoon we would go to the buffet-car for tea with scones & jam. Finally our train arrived at Georgemas Junction where the train split in half, and we steamed off in our half of the train to Thurso.



The return journey, two weeks later, while

impressive, never seemed quite as exciting. I did the journey from Inverness to Thurso a few years ago, and boy, have things changed. Inverness station was full of waiting passengers, but the train was out of action due to a broken radio. The 3-car set which had just arrived from Aberdeen replaced what had been a 6-car one, so I had to fight for a seat which was cramped and uncomfortable. Two of the toilets were blocked and there was no refreshment trolley. Bring back the good old days! The romance of those 1950s journeys can never to be repeated. Jim Gordon's story of Inverness shed and its workings brought it all back.

Stewart McLeod, Kirkwall, Orkney

BOOK REVIEW

Scottish Highland Railways David Tucker. Crowood Press 2021

ISBN 978 1 78500 792 7. 160pp. £19.99

Scottish Highland Railways sets off with an ambitious aim, to cover the history, geography and present state of the railways north of the Central Belt.

There is a varied selection of photographs from past and present; many of them illustrate more than just stations and trains, giving the reader a stronger impression of what the area covered actually looks like. The excellent opening section explains how the book covers Scottish Highland railways with abbreviations, terminology, history and geography.

However, a reader with prior knowledge of the subject will soon come across surprising 'facts' which will have them rapidly flicking through the other books on their shelves and consulting the internet for confirmation.

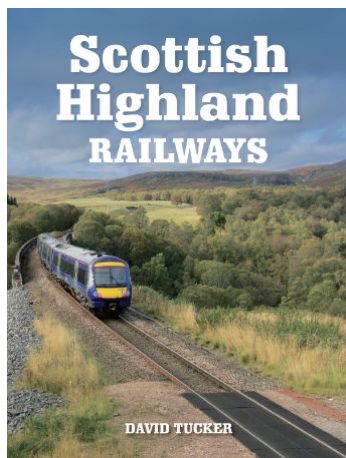
Many of the mistakes are slight, such as the author becoming confused about journey times on the Far North Line, "*The journey totals three hours fifteen minutes from Inverness to Wick*" - but later - "*Just under three hours, thirty minutes since leaving Inverness, Far North trains pause for four minutes at Georgemas...*"

Some of the errors are extraordinary, such as the statement that a dual rail/road bridge was considered for the Kessock Bridge design but was dismissed because of high winds and the prevailing ethos of 'car is king', whereas actually such a proposal would have had the railway somehow climb high enough on leaving Inverness to cross the Beaully Firth so that shipping could pass beneath, and then continue north with many miles of brand new railway on the Black Isle.

We are also told in another chapter that, "*Until 2018, passengers for Inverness had to change at Dyce, the suburban station that serves Aberdeen Airport, but the change of trains and the ten-minute wait have been eliminated, taking nearly half an hour off the original journey time, bringing it down to around two and a quarter hours.*" Indeed, during the blockade in 2018 while the line from Aberdeen as far as Dyce was being doubled, passengers did have to change at Dyce, but it was between the replacement bus service and the train!

Anyone tempted to purchase this book would be advised to wait for a second edition. We have already alerted the publisher to a few of the errors. I would far rather have been recommending this promising book, but I'm left with the impression that the author sometimes wrote from memory and simply didn't have time to complete his research.

Ian Budd



ELECTRIFYING SCENIC RAILWAYS

This article by FoFNL and FoWHL member Graham Atkins raises the question about electrifying scenic railways. Although it highlights the WHL it is equally relevant to the FNL. A quick glance at the railways of other countries famous for their scenic routes shows that they do not have this country's qualms about spoiling the scenery. In a large landscape the catenary and its poles are dwarfed into insignificance. This quote from Railbookers website says it all:

"In 1916, the Swiss Federal Railways decided that electrification of its rail network would use the high-tension single-phase alternating current system that is still used on all routes today. Most of the electricity for the rail network comes from clean hydro-power, making Switzerland's rail network one of the most energy-efficient in the world."

Reducing carbon emissions and supporting the case for electrification of the West Highland Lines

Last November I took part in an online LNER Stakeholders' Seminar.

One of the presentations was from Mr Frazer Henderson, Head of Rail Policy at Transport Scotland. Mr Henderson outlined proposals in their *Rail Decarbonisation Plan*, published during the summer, and it was clear that rail electrification across the core of the ScotRail network was their prime solution to reducing carbon emissions from Scotland's railways.

This is of course welcome, given the already proven improvements that electrification can bring with much faster acceleration and deceleration; far greater tractive adhesion especially over steep gradients than diesel traction; and a vast reduction in carbon emissions.

However, I was surprised when Mr Henderson specifically reported that their plans did not include the electrification of the West Highland Line, while planning to go ahead with the electrification of the Highland Main Line. The reasons given were on the grounds of cost and perceived detrimental effect on the outstanding scenery through the need for the installation of catenary wires and posts.

No further detail was provided about this decision and there was no opportunity to pursue this further in the Q & A session at the end..

National Parks and Special area of Conservation

Certainly, the lower part of the West Highland

Lines from Glen Douglas to County March Summit north of Tyndrum lies within the Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park. This, as with others in the UK, have been awarded the highest level of designation awarded to a national scenic area which also includes specific and scientifically diverse, rare or important environmental habitats, and worthy of the highest protection in law.

In addition, Rannoch Moor, while not within the National Park, is also protected as a Special Area of Conservation. This is linked to its special significance as a complex mix of blanket bog, transition mires and quaking bogs with associated flora and fauna.

A ready electric supply...let's use what we've got!

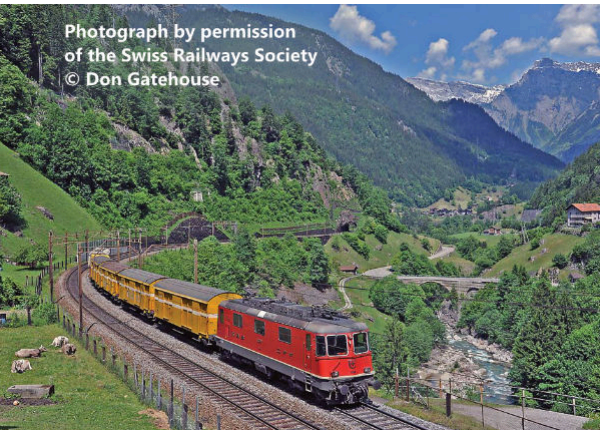
At the same time, The West Highland Lines also pass through an extremely mountainous landscape which has a significant concentration of Hydro Electric generating stations, some of these are situated close to the railway i.e. Inveruglas built as part of the Loch Sloy Scheme commissioned in 1950, Awe and Ben Cruachan commissioned in 1965, Bridge of Gaur as a part of the Tummel-Garry Scheme commissioned between 1928-1958 and the River Morar near Mallaig in 1948. Additionally, the former British Aluminium/Alcan smelter and Blackwater Reservoir at Kinlochleven built between 1905-9 continues to contribute to the public electricity supply, despite its aluminium smelter closing in June 2000.

These generating stations, while also helping to power the Central Belt of Scotland also provide domestic electricity to the local West Highland communities including streetlights and road

signs. So, why could they not also help power an electrified West Highland Railway?

A blot on the landscape?

All the generating stations are linked by high voltage transmission power lines supported by large supporting pylons which march stridently across the landscape through Glen Falloch and Glen Dochart within the National Park, but also through Glen Spean and across Rannoch Moor. I would contend that, while useful, these are a much bigger blot on the West Highland landscape and far more intrusive than lineside catenary posts and wires contouring the railway at a much lower level and in a more discreet manner.



Electric traction is far more efficient than diesel and less limiting than hydrogen or battery propulsion. It offers fast and responsive acceleration and deceleration and a much easier ability to work against gravity when moving up steep gradients, with easier access for driver handling and speed control.

Surely these attributes are exactly suitable to railway operation in mountainous environments where clear benefits as taken advantage of by Swiss, Austrian and Norwegian operators? For example, the electrified mainline from Bergen to Oslo traverses the high mountain plateau of the Hardangervidda in central southern Norway - while also passing through the largest area within the country to be a designated national park.

On the West Highland journey, times could be

reduced, despite the limited opportunities for track realignment to increase running speeds, and perhaps would make West Highland trains a far more attractive alternative to the much faster competing services to Glasgow provided by Scottish Citylink and of course be a huge draw for tourists.

Why electrify the Highland Main Line and not the West Highland Lines?

In contrast, Transport Scotland has announced that the Highland Main Line is to be electrified because of the clear benefits this will bring. It also runs through a highly scenic area – The Cairngorms National Park - from Killiecrankie to north of Carrbridge. And between Dalwhinnie across the pass of Druimuachdar to just north of Bruar, the railway competes with ‘Super Pylons’. These highly controversial power transmission lines run for 220km from Beauly to Denny bringing hydro-electric power from the northwest Highlands to the Central Belt - the largest and highest electricity pylons in the UK.

The Highland Main Line is also competing with the immense and hugely expensive upgrade and dualling project for the A9 and the significant large-scale earthworks and land take to widen this road to dual carriageway, a large part of which is wholly within the Cairngorms National Park! How does this fit in with Transport Scotland’s drive to reduce carbon emissions?

Support for the electrification of the West Highland Line

I would contend that despite the investment costs to electrify the West Highland lines, the environmental and significant journey time improvements gained would be a powerful vitamin injection for our West Highland citizens and economy - like the transformational effect that the introduction of Hydro-electric power brought to its citizens during the mid-twentieth century. I think this merits a proper wider debate....what are your thoughts?

Graham Atkins

Retired Public Officer/Public Transport Coordinator

Edinburgh

TRAINS FOR TOURISTS

A presentation to the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) by international rail expert **Keith Fenwick** confirmed that the Swiss do passenger trains best, with dedicated tourist trains that pamper their customers like The Glacier Express and The Golden Pass sharing tracks with comfortable modern ones providing public transport for everyday travellers.

In Britain we are more used to tourists being expected to support service-trains whose functional appearance makes them seem unassuming compared with the scenery that they explore, with catering if any on hand from nothing better than a trolley. Some dedicated operators provide notable exceptions, but the top-of-the-range *Royal Scotsman* is beyond the price range of all but a few visitors to these shores. Tourist destinations elsewhere in the world offer an experience that lies somewhere in

Bespoke private train operations could cream off the tourist trade, says Keith Fenwick

between. Public transport users in sparsely-populated New Zealand outwith the two biggest cities long ago forsook trains for coaches and planes, but enough tourists board the *Tranz Alpine* route in the South Island to have justified investment in attractive new rolling-stock. Australia is a mixture, with quality long-distance trains out of Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane for

bound for intermediate places and tourists curious to see the country at ground level, but recent economies in catering may have diminished its appeal, while stumps of some closed routes offer tourist-only products. Canada's two transcontinental routes are sharply differentiated, *The Canadian* purveying faded glory in 1950s carriages with a variety of overnight accommodation, while *The Rocky Mountaineer* is a modern glass-roofed tourist train with quality catering, off-train excursions and all overnight stays in hotels. Mexico has only one surviving long-distance route, through the Copper Canyon, where a daily local train shares the track with another offering ex-US dome cars for tourists.

For most inhabitants of these countries, long-distance rail is an unfamiliar experience which must be packaged to enter their comfort zone - in the way that before the pandemic cruise-operators had succeeded in repackaging sea travel. Marketing thus becomes key, and between the lockdowns last year in Britain there were two notable developments — *The Staycation Express* offering journey opportunities



New Staycation Express stock - Rail Charter Services

both locals and visitors, while *The Indian Pacific* and *The Ghan* which cross the continent once-weekly offer high-end accommodation and off-train experiences but no longer convey economy carriages.

Post-war investment in long-distance North American rail soon gave way to desertion by travellers attracted by the speed of flying, the economy of Greyhound coaches and the convenience of the freeway. Away from the intercity routes of the north-east, Amtrak provides a basic network focused on Chicago to serve people with an aversion to air travel, locals

for tourists in upmarket carriages on the scenic Settle & Carlisle line, and the launch by Locomotive Services Limited of two luxury trains for hire, including the Blue Pullman recreation of an iconic 1960s design - while the steam-hauled Jacobite went from strength to strength, offering a twice-daily service for up to half of the year. With a summer of holidaying at home in prospect, further development of these ideas is in prospect. But if bespoke private operations are going to cream off the tourists, will it be left to the likes of Community Rail Partnerships to promote the service trains on which visitors and public transport users have hitherto coexisted?

SARAH BOYACK TALKS TO CILT

On 23 November 2020 the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) was privileged to hear from Sarah Boyack MSP who was Scotland's transport minister at the dawn of devolution.

A town planner by profession with both local authority and academic experience, her interest is at the strategic end of the planning spectrum, focusing on ensuring that housing has the right linkages into transport networks.

In 1997 Scottish Office minister Malcolm Chisholm appointed her to the National Transport Forum, and on being elected to the first Holyrood Parliament she found herself alongside party leader Donald Dewar as Minister for Planning, Transport and the Environment.

Sarah had no deputy minister or special adviser, so she worked with civil servants, who were very talented but with an inheritance of mainly road-oriented projects. The new Government had a host of aspirations also for rail and bus, but the civil servants were clear that she was going to need additional funding. So along came consideration of road-tolling, congestion-charging and workplace-parking levies, all provided for in the first Transport Act. A visit to Norway revealed that tolls there were to raise money, not to tackle congestion and discourage car travel as had been her aim, and in the face of Opposition cries about highway robbery she was forced to retreat from tolling which had evoked a newspaper headline "On your Boyack" - while congestion-charging would be rejected by the voters of Edinburgh in a Council referendum.

With hindsight she had been trying to do too much too soon, and the clear lesson was that, especially in transport, you have to take the voters with you, with better alternatives and affordable choices available first. Major investment for rail was given the green light, and she created a bus priority fund and promoted free travel for over 60s. Local authorities could apply for funds to encourage walking and cycling. Priorities for the first budget were buses, ferries, potholes and key roads, and her Lib Dem coalition partners were supportive. The transport budget had overall doubled by the time she left the post.

Through the next two decades Sarah's views of transport were to be from an environmental

perspective. In that time there has been a reduction in the cost of motoring and a substantial increase in bus and rail fares, with bus use well down as journey-times suffered from increasing congestion. Climate change has now grown into a full-blown Climate Emergency where there will have to be a focus on transport. Edinburgh has serious air quality issues which its City Mobility Plan seeks to address - and even in the pandemic the City Bypass and the M8 are jammed with cars.

Action is needed globally now since the effects are visible everywhere, and the impact is disproportionately on lower-income groups. The Stonehaven derailment and repeated closures of the Rest and Be Thankful show the need to retrofit our infrastructure.

CoVid 19 has prompted heavy support to public transport networks in offsetting the loss of income, and there will be a need to make better arrangements taking account of people's new found taste for working from home.

Scotland's response will have to include accelerated action against climate change in anticipation of COP 26 while recognising the need to keep public transport going. The enthusiasm in lockdown for cycling has continued into the autumn, but to sustain this there will need to be dedicated cycle-routes and spaces. Cycling will also fare better if there are improved links into public transport, and for now it might be easier to keep on their bikes people who gave up on public transport because of the pandemic.

Transport's share will have to be fought for since everywhere there will be competition for investment, with the NHS alone requiring vast sums for its recovery. Winning people back to public transport will require political commitment. The Scottish Government should not just *fund* ScotRail, but own it. Strong funding support and improvements in affordability and connectivity are vital so that buses and trains may join with walking and cycling in the fight against climate change.



BEN ALDER - NEW BUILD PROJECT

Ben Alder arrives at Aberdeen Joint Station with the 9.8am train from Inverness on 4th August, 1911. Photo: Ken Nunn

Historically, Scotland is no stranger to acts of treachery and villainy; but for the railway enthusiast we need only cast our eyes back to 1967 to witness one of the greatest inflicted on the Heritage industry – when 54398 *Ben Alder* was scrapped. Before exploring the how and why of such treachery, it is important for us to run through the timeline of *Ben Alder* to provide context.

Built to a Peter Drummond design by Dübs & Co of Glasgow in 1898 for the Highland Railway Company, *Ben Alder* was issued locomotive number 2 as the second built of the new *Ben* class. All the *Ben* class were named after Munros within the Highland Railway's territory. The locomotives were considered "small" 4-4-0 passenger steam locomotives, with one unusual feature – they were inside-cylindered.

Peter Drummond was the younger (and somewhat less renowned) brother of Dugald Drummond – he of Caledonian Railway's St Rollox works fame. When Peter Drummond became Chief Engineer at the Highland Railway's Lochgorm works, he took all that he had learned from his brother and put this into practice in creating the *Ben* class.

Between 1898 and 1906, some 20 of these *Ben* class locomotives were made by Dübs & Co, the Highland Railway themselves at their Lochgorm

works in Inverness, and by the North British Locomotive Company in Glasgow. A final six "big" *Bens* were built by North British between 1908 and 1909. These locomotives had a larger boiler and significantly larger heating and firebox surface areas.

Move forward 30 years to the post grouping era and *Ben Alder* is now under the stewardship of the LMS Railway which is using the old Caledonian Railway infrastructure as their maintenance hub. Standardisation is the buzzword of the day, with a heavy drive to ensure locomotives are standard throughout the new network. As mentioned previously, Peter keenly followed the design teachings of his brother Dugald, and thus the *Ben* class locomotives easily fitted into the programme of maintenance and upkeep.

And now we come to the nail in the "how" coffin. One of the maintenance programme's decisions was to replace the boilers on any Highland Railway *Ben* locomotive with a Caledonian boiler when renewal was needed. And as such, *Ben Alder* received a new Caledonian boiler to enable her to run well into the British Railways era until eventual withdrawal in 1953.

British Railways acknowledged the need for any engine with perceived historical importance to be saved, and as such the list now known as the



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“National Collection” was drawn up. Ben Alder was initially included on the list and a variety of storage locations were used to house her throughout the years between 1953 and 1967, essentially hoping to “hide” her from upper management in order to allow a private group to form and purchase her. It was at her final storage location at Boat of Garten that the “why” took place. *Ben Alder* was not to be preserved after all. Why? She possessed a non-original boiler of course!

As with all tragic occurrences, mere days after British Rail management sent her to the scrap yard a wealthy enthusiast came forward to purchase her, but it was too late, and the final example of the Ben class was already gone. Feeling that this act by British Rail exemplified their lack of compassion for heritage railways in general; when New Build Locomotive Scotland was created it was essentially a no-brainer that *Ben Alder* would be the locomotive of choice for resurrecting.

The NBLs group is mainly comprised of volunteers from both SRPS and Fife Heritage Railway in Leven. The first task undertaken was of course a feasibility study. With the firm belief that there is nothing that *cannot* be made, we only had to look to the building of *Tornado* (the first “new” standard gauge steam locomotive to be built back in 2008) to boost confidence in the project. The main point of the feasibility study was to investigate whether a full set of technical drawings could be sourced for the *Ben* class locomotive.

Again, thanks to the Drummond brothers and their use of common design we have sourced more than half the original *Ben* drawings and can make use of drawings from a variety of other

sources including the Caledonian Railway, North British, and even London & South Western Railway. To that end we have established a relationship with the Swanage Railway to enable our engineering team to have access to both the LSWR T9 and M7 drawings.

The biggest challenge to a project as ambitious as this is of course financial. Our business plan estimates a figure of £1.5m to deliver a new *Ben Alder*. In 2019 we officially announced our intentions and launched the project. With favourable responses from enthusiasts and the railway press alike we went into November 2019 full of confidence, and a successful exhibition stand at the SRPS steam gala garnered further funds and positive attention.

We gained charitable status to push further into 2020 and then of course Covid-19 placed the whole world on hold. We cannot deny that this has affected all our plans, so we adjusted our goals towards a slower income and a heavier engineering direction. This allowed us to maintain our momentum and our fantastic engineering team has produced drawings and patterns and cast our first items - the cylinder lubrication pots. Work also started on initial design work for the bogie frames as well as other smaller items.

In late 2020, we were made aware of another group in Leicestershire having produced a bogie wheel pattern and cast their first wheel. Keen to progress our project while sharing knowledge, we got in touch with them, and we now have agreement to use the pattern to produce our own wheels. Thus, the “Sponsor a Spoke” appeal was launched, and we are currently halfway to raising the funds required to cast these. The estimated figure is £7000, and we are asking anyone with an interest in Scottish railway heritage to consider donating to our fundraising efforts.

The project is expected to take 10-15 years to complete, and once running it is the intention of the group to be based at one of Scotland’s heritage lines and visit other lines within the UK.

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[See www.fofnl.org.uk/fne83.php for more pictures]

NIGHT WORKS



Three fine views of Inverness Traction Maintenance Depot taken on 3/4 September 2020 by train driver Jordan Kearney

