

FAR NORTH EXPRESS



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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

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Cover Photo: A nearly empty 158703 near Kintradwell bound for Inverness. On 9 September 2020

Photo: **Peter Moore**

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.

Electrifying MSPs

Is it too much to hope that we may at last be looking at a new era in the Scottish Government's view on rail? Until now, whilst some excellent improvements have been made elsewhere in Scotland, there has been only some acknowledgement that there is a serious shortfall in the rail provision in the Highlands - especially the intercity routes.

In Parliament on 31 August the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, gave a statement about the new power sharing agreement between the SNP and the Scottish Green Party. This is not a coalition and therefore disagreements on issues between the parties can be talked about. It is clear that the Green Party does not support either of the two massive road improvement projects, the dualling of the A9 and the A96, at a probable cost of around £10,000m. It looks as though they may be partly successful in bringing about a reduction in the scope of the A96 project but not the A9 dualling which the SNP is still insisting must be done.

After the First Minister's statement there was the opportunity for questions from MSPs. The exchange which has brought us a feeling of cautious optimism is reported in full in Parliamentary Questions on page 18.

The FM's last paragraph refers to the *"inescapable fact that, if we are to meet the targets around reducing reliance on car use for all of the country and some parts of the country in particular, it will depend on developing the alternatives"*. This is the acknowledgement we seek that in areas of lower population more per head has to be spent on infrastructure. "Developing the alternatives" has to mean turning the lines that link Perth and Aberdeen to Inverness into real intercity railways, as provided elsewhere in Scotland. This means double track as well as electrification. And it needs to be done as a matter of urgency. The First Minister's comments may be just what's needed to

electrify those MSPs who regard rail as peripheral.

No Representative

Rail matters at Holyrood come under the scrutiny of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. Worryingly for the Highlands the closest representatives on the seven-strong committee are a North East Regional list member and an Aberdeen MSP. This means that there is no representative from the Highlands and Islands to supply knowledge of single track railways in the Highlands nor ferries on the West Coast of Scotland.

Back to Rail?

As early as June last year concern was being expressed in the railway media that the message "please don't use the trains, walk, cycle or even use your car" was coming from the top of the rail industry as it was realised that essential, socially distanced, key workers needed the space to get to work.

Unfortunately there has not been a matching campaign since the end of most restrictions to inform people that it is now a very low risk to travel on a train and to get back to remembering that we all have our part to play in combating climate change by minimising our use of all kinds of fuel.

In Scotland the situation is certainly not helped by the almost total absence of trains every Sunday for months as a result of industrial action.

No Input

Whether you are pro- or anti- Scottish Independence the fact that the Westminster Government chose not to involve Transport Scotland, or Holyrood politicians, in two major processes affecting rail provision in the UK, the Union Connectivity Review, and the Williams-Shapps Plan, is definitely food for thought.

Ian Budd

AGM UPDATE

A brief **AGM** will take place by Zoom on 1 October. Please email ian.budd@fofnl.org.uk to request a link. We have reluctantly decided to postpone the **2021 Conference** to next year's **AGM** on **17 June 2022**. The speakers and venue are unchanged at present, but please check the website nearer the time.

PANDORA PONDERERS THE FUTURE

The push to make us all drive electric cars, while being awfully good for the planet at first sight, has some pretty serious pitfalls along the way. The Good is clear to see - less pollution from carbon emissions (none at all if the electricity used to charge batteries is genuinely green); the Bad is rarely mentioned; the Difficult Questions even less so.

The Bad. Cars have wheels and wheel/road contact produces particulates. This will not change as the propulsion changes. At the moment a petrol family car can travel over 400 miles on a tank, and filling the tank takes less than 5 minutes (including paying). Electric cars have a much shorter range, and it is much more dependant on the speed driven than a petrol car. A recent newspaper article by a journalist who had driven from Land's End to John o' Groats suggested that 140 miles was good going at around 50 mph. Charging had been a nightmare, however.

There are three different plugs (for want of a better word) and you have to find a charging point that fits the plug on your car. How this lunacy was allowed to happen is anyone's guess. It is as though half the counties in England still had 2-pin plugs in houses. Doubtless two of the systems will go the way of Betamax - quickly, one hopes. As there are far fewer charging points than there are petrol pumps you often have to queue, but queuing for 5 minutes at a petrol pump is tolerable: queuing while the coulomb-guzzler in front of you does a slow charge taking 45 minutes isn't. All the evidence suggests that electric cars will catch on relatively fast in cities (which is where most people live, after all), but will be much less popular in rural areas where the distances driven are greater, and the provision of charging points likely to be less - a lot less.

If charging takes 20 minutes for say 150 miles while filling a tank with petrol takes 5 minutes for 400 miles it doesn't take more than a little multiplication to work out that, for the same number of miles driven, there will have to be around ten times as many charging points as there are petrol pumps. Pandora accepts that home-based charging (which can't be done with

petrol) may reduce this number, but if even three-quarters of all charging is done at home (a fraction which seems too high: think of all the car-owning households with no off-street parking) there will still need to be at least twice as much space in towns and cities devoted to car charging as there is already. Where will they be? And let us not forget that the manufacture of concrete is one of the most carbon-polluting everyday activities.

Pandora hasn't mentioned cost yet. An electric car, even with the government's grant, is likely to cost something like double a petrol car. True, its running costs will be a great deal less (but see below for a taste of things to come), but few families will be able to cough up £15,000 more up front to save a couple of thousand a year in running costs.

This does not exhaust the list of Bad things - the supply of rare elements needed to manufacture the batteries being perhaps the most likely to prove intractable. After all, we are going to have to stick an awful lot of batteries in trains one way or another, and the UK comprises only around 1% of the global population. If other developed countries adopt a similar drive away from fossil fuels (as they will, albeit at different rates) then the demand for these precious raw materials will push prices up a long way. Buy your electric car now, while it can still be got for under £50,000!

And now the unknown unknowns. In the last year before the pandemic Her Majesty's Treasury took in £28 billion (it was £21 billion last year) from the tax on fuel. This will fall pretty close to zero once petrol cars start to fall apart in about 15 years. At the moment charging your electric car attracts exactly as much tax as using the same amount of electricity to boil kettles or heat the house: none. Pandora does not expect this happy state to continue. No government, especially one faced with the whopping cost of COVID, would be so stupid. The skill will be in finding a way of taxing the electricity you put in your car at a rate sufficient to raise at least £28 billion without putting up the cost of boiling a kettle. Elections will be won or lost on achieving the right solution.

Looking really far ahead Pandora sees a massive

change in the way people and goods move around. City dwellers will fall into two classes: the better-off will buy an electric car and use it for shorter journeys; the less well-off will use public transport which, in consequence of the large numbers, will have to improve hugely. It will be electrically-driven whether along a road or on rails. People making longer journeys will for the most part rely on public transport as journeys will be much faster by electric train (or bus) than driving at 40 mph so that the charge

actually gets you there. Goods will be carried by electrically-hauled freight trains to local depots from which electric lorries (remember the old BR Scammells?) will deliver them to wherever they are needed.

Really *really* far ahead things are more troublesome as asphalt melts and rails buckle in the runaway heat, but at least we'll have done our best to avert such an outcome by getting rid of petrol cars. Happily Pandora won't be around to see it.

[www](#)

PANDORA LOOKS TO THE "NEW NORMAL"

The UK population today is a little over 68 million. In crude terms the average life expectancy is 81.5 years (males a bit less, females a bit more). What that means is that every day around 2300 people die, and much the same number are born. We have become accustomed to reading about the daily death figures from COVID - reaching 1000 for a couple of days in April 2020 and 1200 for a few days in January 2021. Against a background of a daily average of 2300 those were scary numbers, but they lasted less than a week all told. At the time of writing the daily COVID deaths are under 100, having been down to single figures for much of the late spring and early summer.

At some point, probably fairly soon in the UK where vaccination has reached most of the adult population, COVID deaths are going to be no more remarkable than deaths from the usual three big killers - dementia, heart disease, cancer - whose numbers are not the stuff of headlines. (For what it's worth dementia carries off around 290 people a day, but no eyebrow is

raised in consequence.)

Pandora's point is that fairly soon we, the public, are going to have to adjust to accepting that there is a new killer out there *to which we will have to become accustomed*, just as we are to dementia and all the other nasties awaiting us. Life, in short, will go on - as will death. COVID will probably carry off far fewer people annually than seasonal flu in an average year (some 13,000). And seasonal flu doesn't stop the trains being full. Social distancing will soon disappear, though the wearing of masks by those with a cold will become - as it always has been in Japan - *de rigeur*.

The railway will need to work hard to persuade the (non-)travelling public that they remain a lot more likely to die at home than they are in a train - maybe the industry needs to get an actuary or two to spread the word.



[www](#)

LNER STEPS BACK


LNER, perhaps reluctantly, has moved away from compulsory seat reservation.

On the LNER website it now states, "In order to provide customers with more comfortable journeys on LNER services and give confidence that trains will not be overcrowded, most seats on LNER services will require a reservation. The approach, called Seat Sure, will protect the flexibility of the walk-up railway as there will be a number of unreserved seats in Coach C for Standard and a number of seats in Coach M in First Class, or Coach E in First Class in a five-coach train. Customers without a reservation will be able to travel in these unreserved areas of the train."

Perhaps LNER underestimated the importance of the 'walk-up railway' when it planned to continue with compulsory reservations post-COVID as originally announced.

As a *RailUK Forums* member commented, "I'm a borderline rail traveller anyway (often too expensive). If this becomes standard practice I'll just do like others and use the car more."

SCOTLAND'S RAILWAY THE YEAR AHEAD



*Transform Scotland's rail spokesperson **Paul Tetlaw** discusses what developments we might see on Scotland's railways over the coming year.*

Government Transport Policies

The future development of the railway in Scotland will be shaped by government policies not only for the railway itself but across all transport modes. If we are to achieve a significant modal shift to a more sustainable transport system then government policies and spending priorities must be targeted to ensure that is the direction of travel. For it is undeniably the case that mass behaviour in transport use is fashioned by governments.

The need for change could not be clearer – be it tackling climate change, reducing congestion, improving local air quality or creating more active lifestyles. All demand a shift to a more sustainable transport system and the railway should be the backbone of a public transport network that connects all parts of Scotland.

Developing the Railway

Looking to the years ahead we need to consider a number of aspects that will shape the railway of the future in Scotland. It will be important to deliver on the decarbonisation commitments, introduce new and improved rolling stock, grow and develop the railway, reform ticketing and integrate the railway with the wider public transport network. These measures will ensure

that the railway is fit and ready for the significant modal shift to rail that will be required.

Structural Changes

Before looking in more detail at individual improvements it is important to also consider the possible impact of the Williams-Shapps Great British Railways White Paper on Scotland and the future structure of Scotland's railway. The Scottish Government has committed to run the railway directly from March 2022 and from then the current franchise operated by Abellio will be terminated. It does not appear that the White Paper will lead to the additional powers that the Scottish Government sought and so an 'Operator of Last Resort' is likely to run the railway on an interim basis. There are similarities to the situation with the LNER and Northern operations and the arrangement put in place in Wales but exactly what long term structure emerges for Scotland is currently unclear. We should however expect a smooth transition to this interim arrangement. The overall impact on Scotland of the new White Paper is unclear as while it states that devolved authorities in Scotland and Wales have a range of powers they will continue to exercise there are also many references to Great British Railways central control over branding, ticketing and timetable

setting and it is stated that there will be one web-site and app. How the Scottish Government and Transport Scotland will respond is as yet uncertain but any uncertainty must not be allowed to impact on the decarbonisation and modernisation programmes currently set out.

Rolling Stock Modernisation and Decarbonisation

In term of rolling stock all diesel trains are planned to be replaced by 2035 with individual fleets having different replacement dates:

- Inter-city 125 trains should be replaced by Battery Electric Multiple Units (BEMUs) by 2030.
- Class 156 units will be life-expired by 2025 and are likely to be replaced by cascaded 170s and 158s.
- Class 158s will themselves be life-expired in 2030
- Class 170s will be life-expired in 2035 and so are likely to be the longest surviving diesel trains.

In addition to replacement of the diesel fleet, Class 318/320 electric units are to be replaced by 2025/2030. All of the above fleet replacements mean that new trains must be procured and this needs to be planned to blend seamlessly with the infrastructure decarbonisation programme. While it is widely accepted that full electrification is the most efficient and cost-effective solution for most routes, hydrogen and battery trains are being studied for more rural routes and BEMUs are likely to be deployed on some routes as an interim measure towards full electrification.

However, when taking decisions on new trains and electrification it is important to bear in mind the operating cost of different train types. Recent figures given by ScotRail managing director Alex Hynes at an online event show the operating cost per vehicle mile as:

- New Electric Multiple Unit (EMU) £1.32
- New BEMU – £1.62
- New hydrogen train – £2.62

In addition, EMUs are more reliable, quicker and more likely to attract modal shift from the car. So there is a clear message here.

Electrification Programme

Decarbonisation of the railway by 2035 will require a large scale electrification programme as well as forms of alternative traction. Currently, in Control Period 6 (CP6) – to 2024 – the lines to East Kilbride and Barrhead are being electrified, the reopened line to Levenmouth is also to be electrified as well as the main line from Haymarket to Dalmeny. This will allow BEMUs to run to Levenmouth as an interim measure and it is also planned to partially electrify the Borders railway to allow BEMUs to run from Edinburgh to Tweedbank.

Future phases of electrification are to be developed during CP6 to coincide with the life-expiry of the current diesel fleet by 2035. This is said to include the Highland Main Line, Aberdeen to the Central Belt, Aberdeen to Inverness, Fife lines to Perth and Dundee, the Fife Circle, Dunfermline to Longannet and Alloa, the Glasgow and South Western Route to Carlisle and from Ayr to Girvan. This is an extensive programme and it will be important to make an early start and create a rolling programme that will allow skills and expertise to be developed and retained. This will ensure efficient delivery and greater experience will no doubt bring a lowering of unit costs.

The more rural routes to Kyle of Lochalsh, the Far North, the West Highlands and Stranraer are the ones proposed for alternative traction. Whilst this will achieve decarbonisation, it will not produce the same benefits as electrification and there may well be a case for reviewing this plan. Scotland benefits from significant quantities of electricity generated from hydro and other renewables and we should perhaps look to Switzerland where electrification of the rail network was achieved long ago.

New Routes and Stations

The next route to reopen will be the line to Levenmouth which will also feature a station at Cameron Bridge. It is welcome news that the route will be double tracked and electrified and provision for freight should also be included from the outset. Other stations scheduled to open in CP6 are at Dalcross, East Linton and Reston. The latter two are on the East Coast Main Line (ECML) where there are serious capacity constraints and there is a current

industry consultation on the timetable to be run from 2022 [Now 2023 - Ed]. This implies that the new station at Reston will be served by just four trains per day with no current information on services to be provided at East Linton. This is a wholly unacceptable situation and highlights the urgent need for infrastructure upgrades on this route to allow for local as well as long distance services and to improve journey times on this key Anglo-Scottish artery.

Other stations may open on the current freight only route from Alloa to Dunfermline and studies are underway into re-opening and electrification of this route for passenger services. This is linked to the development of train manufacturing facilities at Longannet but that apart this would be a very worthwhile addition to the passenger network in Central Scotland. A new station is also 'in development' for Winchburgh – an area with large scale housing development where the delivery of a new station is much delayed – the result of scaling back earlier enhancements.

Infrastructure Upgrades

The Transport Scotland website lists a large number of projects 'in development' in addition to those detailed above. To achieve the modal shift to public transport that is so clearly needed it is clear that infrastructure upgrades are required to provide more capacity on the network. In addition to the ECML south of the Central Belt the Highland Main Line to Inverness stands out as a route in desperate need of more capacity for passenger and freight services. This has been long promised but instead we have seen a shift of expenditure to the parallel A9 road. Unless equal investment is made in the railway the Scottish Government will not achieve its stated objectives of modal shift and 'making the train quicker than the car' between

Scotland's cities.

Ticketing, Marketing and Modal Integration

The final areas for consideration in the look ahead for Scotland's railway are ticketing and integration between modes. The choice of tickets needs to be easy to understand and seen as fair across Scotland for similar journeys on similar routes. Any remaining areas where split tickets are cheaper than through tickets should be eradicated and the practice of demand management through charging excess prices should be a thing of the past. No such practice exists on the road network where the car is the main competition with the train. It is widely acknowledged that one of the growth areas on the railway in the future will be leisure travel and tickets should be targeted to increase this market. Family and group tickets, rovers and tickets for circular journeys (out by one route return by another) should all be part of the marketing mix as well as inclusive tickets with other attractions. There is ample evidence throughout railway history of focussed marketing campaigns attracting new passengers – we would be wise to learn from that history.

Ticketing alone will not see Scotland compete with other countries, and integration with other modes should be introduced to offer complete public transport journeys where a through ticket and easy and convenient interchange between modes becomes the norm.

So we now look to Government and its agencies to deliver the necessary policies and spending priorities to develop and embed a truly sustainable transport system that not only addresses the challenges outlined but is seen as attractive and easy to use – and for the majority of the population becomes the transport of choice.

KEITH FARR

It is with sadness that FoFNL learned of the death at the end of last year of our member Keith Farr. Keith was well-known in railway circles for his regular contributions to *Railway Magazine*. He shared the writing of the longest running unbroken series of articles, *Practice and Performance*, with John Heaton. The series began in 1901 as *British Locomotive Practice and Performance*. In 2017/18 we published his article covering runs on the Far North Line in 1954 entitled *Inverness: 'Somewhere in the South'*. Keith is survived by his wife Amanda, his two children and three grandchildren.

ZET COMES TO CAITHNESS...?



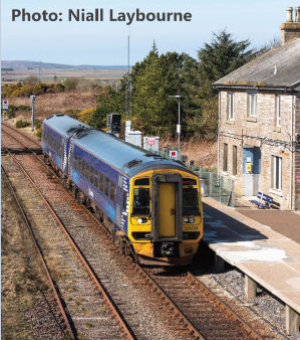
Decommissioned unit at Yoker in December 2020

Image courtesy Scottish Enterprise

The Zero Emissions Train is a concept being developed by Scottish Government, Scottish Enterprise and St Andrews University. They have engaged hydrogen specialist Arcola to convert a Class 314 EMU to hydrogen operation to run during COP26 at Bo'ness. There is a possibility that this train will then be trialled between Wick and Thurso without passengers. HITRANS is commissioning a piece of work to see how a fuel cell and associated equipment could fit in a 158 which could then be trialled in Caithness too.

Then what? Within a few years it's hoped that Invergordon will become a major hydrogen infrastructure centre. On a smaller scale - during the ZET trials, perhaps - green hydrogen will be produced by electrolysis at Georgemas (the electrolyser is currently - sorry - in use in preparation for the 314 demonstrator to be shown to COP26 delegates) using green electricity. Caithness abounds in wind farms, and there is a large one near Georgemas. The Pentland Firth is ideal for tidal generation, and the Orkney-Caithness area will be of major importance in the green generation future. Sticking some of it in trains makes sense. Putting up OLE doesn't. Thus hydrogen. Rarely has the simple combination of two protons and two electrons ticked so many boxes. Plans are afoot for a hydrogen hub at Georgemas, as well as rail maintenance facilities.

Photo: Niall Laybourne



ScotRail's 156 fleet which serves the West Highland Line will reach the end of its life by 2026, so a solution is needed there too. It's not too big a stretch of the imagination to see a future in which ScotRail's 2-car 158s come to Georgemas to have a third car (such things exist elsewhere and are likely to be capable of being cascaded) inserted, full of hydrogen kit. Then off some go to the WHL in time for 2026. A few go to serve Stranraer and we get the rest.

So many boxes! Cleaner trains, a reliable buyer for green hydrogen produced locally, work locally to convert 24 158s, happy campers all over the place.

Mike Lunan

CAN THE GREENS GREEN THE SNP ON TRANSPORT?



Photo: Sandy Colley

FoFNL Committee member **David Spaven** assesses the likelihood of the future of decent, environmentally friendly transport getting better. The article first appeared in the May 2021 edition of *Scottish Left Review*.

Transport is rarely a key factor in national elections in the UK. One has to go back to 1964 – when the Beeching programme of rail cuts was only just getting underway – to find a campaign in which transport was a major source of controversy. And so, the 2021 Scottish Parliament election was no exception, despite transport now being by far the biggest contributor to climate change of all sectors of Scotland’s economy. Not only is our car-centric culture fuelling climate change, air pollution, and the sedentary lifestyles (which contribute to obesity and diabetes epidemics) but the increase in car use over the post-war period has also been a key driver of inequality.

All five main parties flagged up transport problems and opportunities in their manifestos, but there were inconsistencies and omissions almost everywhere. Yes, all were in favour of more provision for ‘active travel’ – the over-used umbrella term which blurs some important differences between the needs of walking and cycling – but in less ‘cuddly’ areas, where hard choices are needed, there was a marked reluctance to make any commitments. Cutting back on road-building and introducing demand management (congestion charging etc) were virtually no-go areas – except in the case of the Greens.

But might the new parliamentary arithmetic lead

to delivery of some of the radical changes which are needed to move Scotland towards a fairer, safer and more sustainable transport system? The prospects are mixed.

The Greens can point to their holding the balance of power for the SNP resulting in a number of transport successes in the last parliament: increased investment in cycling and walking, creation of a Local Rail Development Fund, and free bus travel for under-22s. But none of these wins were in ‘difficult’ – and fundamental – areas, like switching investment from unsustainable trunk road building to the long-neglected rail routes north of the Central Belt. And without demand management – strongly supported by the Greens, but studiously avoided by the SNP – there is, as noted by the sustainable transport alliance Transform Scotland, ‘absolutely zero chance’ of hitting the SNP’s target of a 20% reduction in road traffic by 2030.

Strangely, the Green manifesto said nothing specific about rail electrification. The SNP was already committed to electrifying all the inter-city routes by 2035, but this will mean stop-gap provision of expensive ‘bi-mode’ trains after the diesel ‘High Speed Trains’ become life-expired in 2030. Might the Greens press for the latter date as a new target for electrification?

Bus users and pedestrians have long been the 'Cinderellas' of transport policy delivery. Yet, 28% of Scottish households do not have regular access to a car. In Edinburgh, it's 41%; and in Glasgow the figure is as high as 47% (and nearly a third of households, being distant from rail or subway, are entirely dependent on privatised and deregulated bus services).

Re-regulation of local bus services on the continental (and London) model – with franchised operations controlled by local authorities or their agencies – has to be at the heart of rebuilding the bus network post-Covid. But the Greens made no reference to re-regulation in their Holyrood manifesto, and the SNP – past beneficiaries of donations from the Stagecoach boss, Sir Brian Souter – have shown little appetite for upsetting that particular apple cart.

The framework for delivery of transport is crucial to change. Most transport is local or regional, but the regional councils (with their strategic transport and land use planning powers) were scrapped by the Tories in 1996, and the SNP's period in power has been characterised by emasculation of local authorities and centralisation of decision-making. Could the Greens win an enhancement of the powers and funding of the seven statutory Regional Transport Partnerships? These were established in 2005 to strengthen the planning and delivery of regional transport, but were later drastically reined in by the SNP such that they have spent much of their subsequent history desperately seeking European Union project funds to justify their ongoing existence.

Too often neglected is the importance of

reducing the need for physical transport. But improving digital connectivity was flagged up in the SNP manifesto and could link to longer-term land use planning to render motorised transport less necessary. And in the short term there is plenty of scope to create '20-minute neighbourhoods' through traffic reduction and re-allocation of street space to make walking and cycling easier, safer and more enjoyable.

Perhaps, the most symbolic example of the ongoing Scottish Government bias towards investment in unsustainable transport infrastructure is on the Perth-Inverness corridor. The Highland Main Line (HML) railway is still two-thirds single-track, but public funding is being devoted overwhelmingly to dualling the parallel A9 at a likely ultimate cost of £5,000 million. Yet 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. Funding of up to £450m was envisaged – but to date the rail investment has been just £59m, and a significant upgrade has been kicked into the long grass (yet again), to post-2025.

A pessimist would conclude, in the light of long experience, that politicians generally prefer to skim the surface when it comes to transport. They're unwilling to face up to some hard choices between, on the one hand, consumerism and individual mobility, and on the other hand, equity and the wider public good. But, for an optimist, the Greens engineering a substantial switch of A9 funding to the HML would signify that a fundamental change of transport policy direction was taking shape, at long last.



PREMIER INN ARRIVES IN THURSO

Thurso now has an 85 bedroom Premier Inn. It is near the station, in Ormlie Road - ideal for rail travellers, and saves having to drag their luggage down the hill and back up again when heading to the train! It opened in July and provides 35 permanent jobs.

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE ROAD

As readers will be aware, FoFNL has been repeating over and over again that the Scottish Government's promise to complete the dualling of the A9 and A96 is no longer sustainable, especially as it is in direct conflict with the Government's own policy of modal shift to rail.

We were therefore encouraged to see the publication on 10 August of Transform Scotland's detailed analysis of the Government's road building programme - *Roads to Ruin*. The publication of this 53-page document exposes the fault lines in the current situation where those who support such spending are in direct conflict with those who don't.



Clearly rattled by its contents, The Highland Council issued a press release less than a week later quoting several individuals in an instruction to the Scottish Government not to cancel the projects.

Interestingly one of the quoted comments didn't actually mention roads at all: 'Dr Tim Allison, NHS Highland's Director of Public Health, said: "Increased connectivity across Highland is extremely important and the development of transport links will bring many benefits to the area. It is vital that we develop sustainable transport links, including active travel and public transport, to enable quicker and safer travel between Highland and the rest of Scotland."

Since dualling roads which are already there clearly makes no new connections, this statement seems far more appropriate to rail. In any case it would be surprising to find a health expert extolling the virtues of increased road building.

Elsewhere in the press release we find: 'Professor Todd Walker, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of the University of the Highlands and Islands said: "Our communities need a sustainable transport network which balances environmental, economic and social needs and the future development of our regional economy relies on that. We also require that network to allow our staff and students travel to and from local campuses, across our operating area and further afield.'" No mention of roads here either, just a "sustainable

transport network"; anyway we couldn't agree more, but dualling the A9 and A96 is not the answer.

The press release also quoted a surprising conclusion from Cllr Trish Robertson, "Trains can be unreliable in the winter months, and our rail infrastructure is limited, so over reliance on this form of transport would be an impossible and irresponsible proposition. We need to build our connectivity, not hamper it." We hesitate to point out the obvious about roads in winter but there's far more chance of a safe journey through snow by rail. The best way for The Highland Council to tackle the limitations of the present rail infrastructure would be for it to put its voice firmly behind getting the railway routes up to intercity standard as quickly as possible.

On 17 August the *Press & Journal* picked up the story, quoting the press release in full. FoFNL contacted the paper suggesting that to balance the arguments presented by The Highland Council we would like to make some comments too. On 19 August they published an article headed "*Extraordinary intervention: Rail campaigner questions backing for A9 and A96 dualling.*" In this we were given an opportunity to put the case: "The issue they address is how best to spend around £10,000 million on transport in the Highlands. By far the best way to achieve the economic recovery, prosperity and green future mentioned in the press release is to provide high-capacity, electrified, intercity railways from Inverness to the south and to Aberdeen. Until this is completed there can be no significant modal shift because the capacity of these mostly single-track railways is woefully inadequate."

Ian Budd

GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

THE WILLIAMS-SHAPPS PLAN FOR RAIL : BACK TO THE FUTURE?

The Rail Reform Group's Response

The Rail Reform Group is a network of rail professionals each with a lifetime of experience in the railway industry, at senior levels. It is completely independent and receives no external funding. www.railreformgroup.org.uk. Reprinted with permission.

This is a long and interesting article, well worth reading because it is fundamental to the future.

Summary

After such a long time in gestation the Williams Report, now re-named to indicate the clearly considerable Government (DfT) involvement, has been published. The major change is that it appears to recognise that the railway is a complete system and needs to be managed as such, reversing the Treasury imposed fragmentation of the 1993 Privatisation. However the detail is sadly disappointing as it fails to follow through, retaining a commercially-slimmed private sector involvement in train operating, but one where there now appears to be little value in the continued fraction in the system delivery. There is no analysis of the problems that resulted in the establishment of the original Williams report. There is scant reference, let alone, analysis, of the other key issues that need to be addressed, such as decarbonisation (electrification) and infrastructure development (e.g. Northern Powerhouse, Midlands Engine) or of why Great Western electrification costs rose out of control.

Conversely there are numerous references to railway industry failings, such as poor accessibility, uncomfortable modern trains, lack of cycle space, May 2018 but with no recognition or acceptance that the DfT were, as a minimum, party to these issues and in some cases specified the outcomes. So much for accountability.

The demise of the franchise is over-stated as the new 'National Rail Contracts' are merely franchises with the revenue risk stripped out. The same issues as currently exist, including delay attribution which is detailed as an example of how contractual the railways have become,

will continue across the wheel/rail divide, which has been perpetrated for no obvious reason and with no justification.

The change to an overt 'Great British Railways' brand covering both the English passenger railway and the Great Britain-wide network will add complexity, confusion and reduce accountability in the railways run by devolved administrations, each of which has their own strong identity.

The report is supportive of community-rail partnerships and it is hoped they will get further funding to develop their work. However, expecting them to bid on their own for 'micro-franchises' could be over-optimistic unless resources are made available to assist them.

Fares simplification has been on the agenda for nearly ten years with the ticket type name change taking place in 2013, but no further progress, because it is an extremely complex issue. But apart from more flexible ticketing to reflect part-week working, which has been available with some operators, there are no new proposals.

Centralised control of timetables and fares lacks any link to local markets which are key to growing rail business, yet whilst reference is made to the five current regions (one of which is Scotland and run quite differently) there is no indication that the regions will be the key specifiers and drivers.

It appears, as so often is the case, that the 'single guiding mind' translates into a highly centralised operation, much like the railway of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. This will suit rail freight which is clearly seeing much needed recognition of its value, although that will need to be translated into action if decarbonisation of

freight movement is to happen.

In the end it has some laudable ideas with some totally unjustified complications. It is lacking in crucial detail, which given how long it has been under development, is disappointing – but perhaps not surprising.

Analysis of the Report

The Government standard process for investment is based on appraisal with a clearly prescribed process which requires the background to be explained, the problems identified, objectives set and then options developed to deliver the objectives, and thus solve the problems. This report does not follow that format. It does suggest some problems: franchises failing, lack of bidders and competition for franchises with a move to direct awards, the May 2018 timetable problems and the changes in potential use post-Covid, in particular a big drop in commuting and a consequential loss of passenger revenue.

It specifically draws out delay attribution and the 'Blame culture', leading on to an observation that the system is too complex. It cites weak oversight and lack of accountability resulting in decisions that did not consider the network as a whole and failed to respond and look after passengers with a loss of trust in the management.

Williams' (presumably pre-Covid) work found that the railways were not getting the basics right – running trains on time, making it easy to buy a ticket and making rail more accessible and inclusive.

The final problem is one of loss of income because of Covid, in part induced by the ministerial panic to frighten passengers off public transport during 2020.

From this jumble of ideas ten 'outcomes' are conjured:

1. Modern passenger experience
2. Retail revolution
3. New way of working with the private sector
4. Economic recovery and financially sustainable railways
5. Greater control for local people and places
6. Cleaner, greener railways

7. New offer for freight
8. Increased speed of delivery and efficient enhancements
9. Skilled innovative workforce
10. Simpler industry structure

Of this list it seems that some (1, 2, 4, 6, 7) are outcomes, but that the others (3, 5, 8, 9, 10) are facilitators to deliver on the outcomes and are changes to the processes underlying the operation of the rail industry. There is then a short section (Chapter 2) setting out the long term commitment to the railway, including 'levelling up'. But then with Chapter 3 it pitches straight into the solutions – 'Integrating the railway' but observes that McNulty had highlighted the lack of whole-system thinking ten years ago, so the problem, at last, is defined as lack of accountability coupled with out of control costs and franchising no longer working.

However the report fails to address, and does not appear to understand, that this is an England issue, with the DfT acting in its capacity as responsible for railways in England. Railways in Scotland Wales and Merseyside are already operating as much more integrated units with very clear accountability both within the railway industry and politically. So the new public body – Great British Railways (GBR) is basically 'Great English Railways'. Much of the rest of the discussion is confused because this is not made clear.

GBR is presented as a single entity which will run the whole network, shades of the Railway Executive of the 1950s. There is however one clear statement – that 'the railways to be run as a public service with the financial discipline of a modern business'.

However the 'single guiding mind' and 'leader' implies all this is focussed onto one individual and that this is a centralised organisation. There are references to budgets being 'pushed down to regional and even local levels' which does little to allay the fears of centralised control of everything including timetables and fares.

The longer term financial planning which came with privatisation is to be retained, recognising that the old public sector British Rail was severely hampered by the 'stop-start funding' implicit in the public sector..

Common sense has re-emerged with the retention of not only the double arrow, but also the Rail Alphabet typeface which is universally recognised as one of the most readable – which is after all what it is all about. In effect this is dismissing the ‘froth’ of private sector involvement in the railways – short term, ‘have to be different’ image. It is tacit recognition that British Rail had got it right.

The move to one, on-going brand – including on-trains – is following London buses and ScotRail, and is to be welcomed, as long as it is done sensitively and well.

There is a strong emphasis on GBR being a new organisation, not just an expanded Network Rail, with an expectation of staff being recruited from other parts of railway and externally. The latter is of some concern as the record of external appointments has been mixed and there still seems to be a lack of understanding that, for whole system thinking, managers need whole system experience.

There is a clear remit developing with “its primary focus serving the interests of passenger, freight customers and taxpayers and growing rail usage”. That is not one, but four objectives, which are likely to be in opposition with each other and is little different to the current confused and contradictory duties laid on ORR by the 1993 Railways Act. That this will require ‘strong measures and structures’ to prevent it cutting services instead of cutting inefficiency shows it is at least recognised. But this could have been, and in theory has been, the case with ORR oversight of Network Rail for the whole of privatisation and does not suggest great hope of success. Moreover it implies quite intrusive oversight by UK Government. This is reinforced by statements that “ministers will take key funding decision” and have “strong levers to set direction.”

This is then countered by offering local involvement and control but implies that the same template will operate over the five Network Rail regions, of which one is Scotland, where financial responsibility lies entirely with the Scottish Government, who have, as far as the legislation permits, adopted a vertically integrated approach. It does offer the possibility of a Northern Region in the future, but only after “Northern Powerhouse Rail (NPR) transforms

travel between the major cities across the Pennines” whereas the need is now to cost effectively develop and deliver NPR. It then offers “greater control over local ticketing and services” having previously stated that fares will be set, and services planned by GBR. Local input into fares is unlikely to resolve many of the issues with long distance fares and rebooking that are seen as key problems with the existing fares.

Devolved administrations are unlikely to be reassured by this short section, especially as the requirement to support the one GBR website and app implies a loss of local branding. The two need to be able to co-exist as national (UK) and national (Scotland and Wales) and regional (London and MerseyRail) operations, especially as for most users of these networks it is the integrity of their local travel network that is important. The impact on Scotland and Wales is clearly not considered in this report as these new arrangements are to be ‘explored’ with Transport Scotland and Transport for Wales. Certainly in Scotland there is a risk that the current well integrated structure will be replaced by a confusing model based on that as yet untried model being developed for England. There is support for the Community Rail concept and potentially, hidden in the words, for micro-franchising of local routes.

The retention of HS2 Ltd as a free-standing organisation is understandable, but the retention of East West Rail is perverse. If this is an acceptable model for a railway which will interact with three NR Regions then it is perverse not to agree to the Scottish Government’s desire to take full ownership of the Scottish Region enabling it to pursue the same broad agenda as is being applied to railways in England.

New track access rules are proposed, but there are no details, because they have not been considered. The devil is in the detail in railways, and this is a prime example. The implication of this section is that the Train Operators will continue to hold access rights, even if timetables are decided by GBR. None of this will encourage the development of new Open Access operation, leaving the specification of the train service to GBR.

Much is made of replacing franchising and the

new Passenger Service Contracts. Reference is made to continental regional and local services and London Overground, but the concessions proposed are on a completely different scale and in long distance operations will be in direct competition with other modes which are operated commercially.

What is not stated is the benefits that private sector operation brings. They will not bring imagination to the customer offer as it will all be specified by GBR, so it will only be in the delivery, which will require a whole new monitoring organisation and a whole new set of penalty/performance figures with the commercial risk being played out in that regime. Train operators are going to have punctuality and performance targets. Across every boundary there will need to be rules – which will need to be legally binding, and penalty based for non-compliance. So the much quoted delay attribution process will still need to be replicated in some form.

Revenue incentives are to be built into the new contracts, which is not the same as now, but will only be effective if the new operators are able to influence ridership and revenue, which with GBR in charge of timetables and fares along with possibly more local organisations suggests little room to make a difference.

The implications are that there could be a lot more operators with differing levels of activity, but there is no reference to staffing and resourcing – so the impact of the timetable on resourcing is not mentioned nor is the on-going problem of differing conditions for staff in different operators and the thorny issue of industrial disputes – where franchising has actually given staff greater power and has driven up wage levels and costs. Nothing in these proposals addresses this issue.

By implication the train operators will still be leasing rolling stock, which brings another interface, especially with an ageing diesel fleet that will largely need replacement in the next 15 years.

The expectation is a larger number of bidders, which implies organisations with less experience of rail, which in the past has not proved to be a great success. However the possibilities for truly local operations are raised, but with no indication how the barriers to entry are to be

reduced or resolved. These include such critical issues as being licensed as a railway operator and holding a Railway Safety Case.

There are exciting offers about a retailing revolution, but all of this has been possible for some time but government has not been prepared to push it forward. That GBR is responsible for ticketing and retailing does not make clear who will be retailing tickets at stations – GBR staff of train operator staff?

It is not clear how the GBR website and app will interface with local integrated travel offers and retailing. One-team working will be important and runs with the 'GBR' theme as well as reducing costs.

The fares changes are all promises that have been made in the past – easy to say, fiendishly difficult to deliver, especially as there is an implicit control on fares increases. If it had been easy we would be a lot further ahead now.

The section on bikes is a quiet reversal of government policy which reduced space on the IEPs! And the observation about the dire quality of modern trains fails to note that this was a direct result of central government policy and specification. So whilst it is good to see reversals in policy the blame has been laid off onto the railway. Even more interesting and welcome is the reduction in 'annoying and repetitious recorded announcements' which have been introduced for a reason, but it is not clear how that reason now disappears.

Whilst there is a strong claim that the new train operators will bring innovation, as they are no longer taking revenue risks, it is not clear how they will justify investments, and there is no evidence presented where this has happened elsewhere. A side example of investment in longer platforms being wasted by the operator deciding to run more but shorter trains illustrates the difficulties in the future – as presumably GBR would specify the longer trains and also the capacity required – so directly impacting on the resources that the train operator will have to provide. It does not seem a very stable business model.

Whilst there are a lot of fine words about innovation and doing the right thing for passengers, this is not likely to happen without the right incentives as any costs will be

rigorously controlled by the Train Operators and these nice ideas usually have a cost, which is not now going to be offset by any potential revenue or brand benefits.

There are more positive words about electrification, but the risk is that relying on GBR will just push more delay into the process, although the removal of payments to train operators during planned disruption while helping reduce costs, risks increasing the number of line blockages.

There are positives in the proposals, with a more competitive approach to procurement, more joined up thinking on R&D where money has been spread about with little obvious policy direction, and importantly a move to cross-sector training and workforce.

But there are some underlying concerns. There is no indication that there is any marketing behind this. The railway brand will become GBR. GBR will control much of the product (timetable), but not the other part – the trains – unless they specify them in some detail in the new contracts, the fares and some, unclear, aspects of retailing. However nothing is said of

marketing and there is no clue to how the long distance routes are going to be specified and managed.

But GBR will only be the brand in England, with the dominant brands in the devolved railways remaining, which gives a clue to the wider politics driving the report. This is at best a link back to the early days of BR sectorisation where the businesses set the specification and did the wider marketing, but the regions operated the services. That was quickly superseded by the full sectorisation, despite all parties being part of British Rail who would manage to deliver the corporate good, as specified by government.

So how do the private sector operators fit in, without creating a new industry of contracts, monitoring and compliance? The Plan fails to deliver on proper vertical integration and leaves a lot of the worst aspects of the rail/wheel split in place, but for no benefit at all.

In the end it is full of fine words, but lacking in crucial detail, which, given how long it has been under development, is surprising.

[www](#) **The Rail Reform Group - 24 May 2021**

TRAVELLING ON THE FAR NORTH LINE

Whilst replying in the August issue of the CLT magazine *Focus*, to an earlier correspondent, Eric Stuart CMILT (Chartered Member of the Institute of Logistics and Transportation [UK]) referenced this from the 1960s about travel on the Far North Line. The mention of the travelling ticket inspector (TTI) knowing virtually every passenger shows that at least one thing hasn't changed!

'(A) survey on the 6.40am from Inverness to the north in about 1962... gives a fascinating insight into what had probably held good over decades. The train consisted of nine vehicles... Two out of the four vans were brakes, one of which was used by the guard as a working or road van, from which he could pick up and drop off parcels and so on along the way and do his "admin". There was a lot of mail to be put off. The load with the guard included two calves, four boxes of day-old chicks, a stubborn goat (who refused to leave the train) and a sheepdog pup, the last presumably on its way to its first place of employment. The guard was thus kept very busy. Passenger accommodation was a Brake Second and a Composite for Wick and the same for Thurso, plus a... Restaurant Car... which at that time was transferred to the southbound working at Kinbrace .. There was a TTI and the... survey included a report of some of the conversations between him and the numerous "regulars" breakfasting in the Restaurant Car.

The TTI seemed to know virtually every passenger, they him, and he was an intermediary between them and other people in the area! The TTI would be available for basic revenue protection, but I suspect he was also there to assist the busy guard, take note of the request stops where passengers wished to alight (to advise the loco crew of same) and collect any fares as necessary. But this was a line where staff had to work well together. The surveyor of this trip commented that the railway revenue from the non-passenger complement far outweighed that from the human cargo!

The [full letter about Driver Only Operation](#) is worth reading.

[www](#)

PARLIAMENTARY QUESTIONS

This section begins with a landmark answer from the First Minister. After her statement about the agreement, Emma Roddick MSP asked the specific question which exercises FoFNL and other rail campaign groups. The FM's answer was unequivocal and homes in on the major difference between the Highlands & Islands and most of the rest of Scotland.

Scottish Government Agreement with Scottish Green Party

First Minister's Statement followed by Questions - 31 August 2021

Emma Roddick (Highlands and Islands) (SNP):

There is a lot to look forward to in the new agreement, particularly in terms of addressing the climate emergency that we all face and in securing a more sustainable future for Scotland. However, it is understandable that many people outwith the central belt and city centres are eagerly waiting to hear how a greater focus on active travel and public transport can benefit them. As a region that is currently widely dependent on car travel, can the Highlands and Islands expect improvements in rail infrastructure, perhaps including doubling the Highland main line and the Inverness to Aberdeen line and improvements to the far north and west Highland lines, as a result of the deal?

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon:

That is a fair question, and the answer to it has to be yes. We have to develop public transport and active travel options across the Highlands and Islands, not only as much as in the rest of the country but more so, given the geographical challenges and the over reliance—for understandable reasons—on car use.

As members will be aware, rail improvements are being considered as part of the STPR2 process. The Rail Decarbonisation Action Plan, which was published last year, is aligned to that. For example, the action plan commits to developing potential options to serve the West Highland Line by hydrogen or battery trains, as well as considering the partial or full electrification of the Highland Main Line. Those are longer-term projects that will contribute to our commitment to decarbonise passenger services by 2035.

At the core of the question is the inescapable fact that, if we are to meet the targets around reducing reliance on car use for all of the country and some parts of the country in particular, it will depend on developing the alternatives. There is a seriousness of intent to do that around the Highlands and Islands.

Question S6W-00264: Liam Kerr, North East Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.
Answered: 7 June 2021

To ask the Scottish Government, further to the First Minister's statement on 26 May 2021, how public ownership of ScotRail will contribute to the decarbonisation of Scotland's railways.

Graeme Dey, Minister for Transport:

The Scottish Government's Rail Decarbonisation Action Plan, published in July 2020, sets out how domestic passenger services in Scotland will be decarbonised by 2035.

Public control of ScotRail will facilitate the integration of rolling stock and train service plans with infrastructure works and thus improve the efficient whole system delivery of the Rail Decarbonisation Action Plan.

Question S6W-00546: Graham Simpson, Central Scotland, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, answered: 16 June 2021

To ask the Scottish Government whether Transport Scotland's growth target for rail freight will be

achieved by 2024.

Graeme Dey:

Network Rail is on track to meet our innovative growth target for rail freight. Despite the health pandemic, rail freight demand has held up well and 216 new freight trains ran on the network in Scotland in the past 12 months. Supported by Scottish Government and third party investment more new freight services in Scotland are planned in the next 18 months, in addition to new cross border express logistics services. Modal shift to rail will play a key part in decarbonising the overall transport network to meet our ambitious climate change targets.

Question S6W-00852: Liam Kerr, answered: 1 July 2021

To ask the Scottish Government whether it will provide an update on progress with its hydrogen train project, and what the expected completion date is.

Graeme Dey:

The Zero Emission Train (ZET) project is currently on target to run during COP26 in November at Bo'ness. It is managed by world-leading hydrogen-technology company Arcola Energy and the £3.5 million project will fully test Hydrogen powered traction options, which will be required where electrification is not appropriate.

Rail Industry partners are working to test the integration of alternative traction power supply equipment within a live train environment through this Hydrogen Accelerator initiative overseen by St Andrews University. As a result, issues associated with creating, approving and then enabling a hydrogen-fuelled train will be addressed as well as growing the local supply chain for future decarbonisation fleet requirements in Scotland.

Question S6W-00322: Richard Leonard, Central Scotland, Scottish Labour, answered: 16 June 2021

To ask the Scottish Government whether Abellio ScotRail requires ministerial permission to agree a rest-day working enhancement for ticket examiner and conductor grades.

Graeme Dey:

The Scottish Government has already spent around £1bn to support Scottish rail services – including an increase of more than £400m over normal rail support payments for ScotRail. As well as maintaining essential railway services this funding has secured full railway staff employment throughout the pandemic period.

Abellio ScotRail is authorised to negotiate increases in pay from within the available railway Emergency Measures Agreement funding where the cost of these increases can be fully covered by mutually agreed efficiencies negotiated through the existing collective bargaining arrangements.

SUNDAY STRIKES

The long-running dispute between the RMT and ScotRail has meant that there have been very few trains running on Sundays in Scotland for several months. We contacted ScotRail and the RMT to try and understand the reasons for this.

ScotRail told us that due to a training backlog caused by the pandemic it is now short of drivers and needs them to volunteer for rest day working to cover the shortfall. An extra payment is in place as an incentive until the backlog is cleared later this year. A similar arrangement had been in place until May 2019 for conductors and some other grades, all of whom are RMT members. ScotRail said the RMT sees this as an inequality issue.

The RMT said, "We are seeking parity with ScotRail drivers [who] have had their rest day working enhanced agreement extended three times. Our members' agreement was terminated."

WHEN WILL THE SUN SHINE ON THE HIGHLAND MAIN LINE?

The 2008 Priority speed up still has a long, long way to go; the track record is desperately disappointing and we are all on tenterhooks to hear how much longer it will take under the 2021 [or will it be 2022] iteration? Enhancements to achieve Inverness to Edinburgh journeys in an under 3 hours average and the capacity to run extra freight trains under the declared climate emergency are not there.

All those Parliamentary Answers over the years that the HML upgrades would likely include reinstating passing loops at Ballinluig and near Newtonmore came to nothing when the CP5 budget for HML enhancements was cut from £125M to £57M and thus limited to spending solely on useful enhancements to the existing loops at Aviemore and Pitlochry. The latter is still not long enough to cross two freight trains which is where Ballinluig would really help.

July's Office of Rail and Road annual report on Network Rail (p 109) reports a "Rescheduling which caused delay of track circuit renewals between Blair Atholl and Dalwhinnie." Meanwhile the dualling of the A9 powers ahead with opening of the £96M 6 miles (9.5km) Luncarty to Pass of Birnam section. Both First Ministers have said that "railways must at least compete with roads." The reality is that the Highland Main Line is falling further and further behind and is way short of reaching its potential or playing its proper part in the climate challenge.

The HML and the Aberdeen to Inverness (A2I) lines are vital to the Far North Line, being its rail access routes through Inverness. All three lines are restricted in capacity by long sections of single track. There are indications that the long sought passing loop around Lentrán on the FNL is being designed for construction in the next two/few? years. A short loop at the future Dalcross Airport Station has also been designed to ease the 15 mile Inverness to Nairn single track constraint.

We are really concerned that there is no word yet of

the Orton passing loop on the 18 mile Keith to Elgin section of the A2I line, or of the two loops mentioned above on the HML's two longest single line sections of 13 miles each. Eventual provision will make it so much easier to operate these lines punctually with capacity for the rail freight upsurge and the speedier hourly frequency promised in 2008.

Process and Procedure developed over the last few years has introduced a veto on enhancements until the hurdle below has been cleared. Now they require exhaustion of *"the ability to derive maximum utility from the existing network through whole industry measures that can make the best use of existing railway assets, fully exploiting timetable/service-based opportunities and rolling stock options."*

This has seen it now proving extremely difficult to draw up acceptable timetables from May 2022 for both the HML and the A2I without decelerations. I believe it is now obvious that the threshold has been passed and the extra loop capacity was urgently required "yesterday".

The 2021/22 Programme for Government statement to Parliament was rescheduled for a week later than 31 August thus missing our Press Date. Will it contain anything about planning rail works for the HML? Or was all that is to be said in Nicola Sturgeon's reply to new MSP Emma Roddick's concerned question that day (see p18)? They were warm words, but no dates yet (after 12 years) for firm progress. The change of Ministerial tack in 2011 on this major No. 3 priority transport project has lost us ten years with the line no longer fit for modern use nor ready for its due climate-change-busting role.

When will the sun shine again on the Highland Main Line?

Richard Ardern

"Heading photo The Summer Solstice", courtesy of Julie Hindlay and Highland Main Line CRP

WWW

CUSTOMER-UNFRIENDLY

| Letter to RAIL magazine by Committee Member Mike Lunan

Sir:- The great majority of passengers will agree that LNER's compulsory seat reservation policy is not only customer-unfriendly, but also likely to damage their bottom line (as evidenced by the letters in RAIL 934). However no-one seems to have noticed that LNER's new 2022 timetable [now postponed to 2023 - Ed] – under consultation – is pretty customer-unfriendly as well, particularly to those who use its longest service – the Inverness to London *Highland Chieftain*. Unlike our cousins in Aberdeen we receive but one service a day. The proposed timetable increases an already 8-hour journey by no less than 16 minutes UP (and a mere 7 minutes DOWN). Extra stops are included, all of them unlikely to be required by passengers starting from Inverness. It looks very much as though the extra stations south of Berwick are there to satisfy some box-ticking exercise at the cost of an extra 16 minutes for the company's premier service. And all this is announced in promotional material full of "faster journey" words. Not up here it ain't.

Yours – Mike Lunan

NEWTON VINDICATED

| **Roger Ford**, *Industry and Technology Editor*, Modern Railways, has had a section in the magazine for many years covering everything to do with rolling stock and traction. When the DfT announced that it was curtailing main line electrification in favour of bi-mode diesel/electric units he was quick to point out the scientific flaw in their plan. At a recent webinar about the 2022 LNER timetable the company was asked about the fact that their Azuma Bi-modes are slower on the HML than the HSTs they replaced - the reply was that electrification of the Highland Main Line couldn't come soon enough! This is an excerpt from his February 2020 column.

This last item is bit of self-indulgent fun, finally signing off my long campaign to counter DfT's claim that distributed traction would give the Intercity Express Train in diesel mode magical powers, allowing it to outperform the more powerful IC125s it was replacing.

When Class 800 bi-modes were ordered for services north of Edinburgh I queried their performance over the northern climbs. I was reassured that distributed traction would offset the power disadvantage compared with IC125.

This clearly contravened the laws of physics. My brother the Prof even ran a model which demonstrated that, while the IEP zipped away because of its weird DfT specified acceleration curve, once the initial sprint ran out of power the IC125 caught up and disappeared into the distance.

But who believes in abstruse calculations? However, eventually, LNER's December 2019 timetable meant that we were able to test the validity of Newtonian physics by comparing a nine car Class 800 against IC125 performance over the southbound climb from Inverness to Slochd Summit. I am indebted to my chum David Shirres for the details.

The climb starts at Tomatin, which the Class 800 passed at 70.3 mile/h. After 3.5 miles at a gradient of 1:60, the speed at the summit was down to 55.3 mile/h. This compares with 65 mile/h for a 2+9 IC125.

Which is as expected, since the IC125 has a power to weight ratio of around 10 hp/tonne compared with 8.6 hp/tonne for a nine car Class 800 with its engines derated for reliability.

Just to emphasis the point that power to weight is the determinant, ScotRail's Inter7City shortened IC125s touch the 75 mile/h line speed limit before braking for the 50mile/h restriction after the summit.

Does it matter that 2 min are lost on the climb to Slochd summit so early in the journey? Not really.

But this real-life comparison is a reminder that when it comes to traction performance the cold numbers, not wishful thinking, should rule.



WICK WORKS

The track at Wick Station has long been prone to flooding due to poor drainage. Oil and diesel from trains has also been seeping into the ground causing contamination issues.

Network Rail completed a project, as planned, on 8 July, to mitigate these problems. The £650,000 investment involved the creation of a new drainage route incorporating a 53,000 litre Kingspan interceptor tank to filter out the contaminants, allowing clean water to drain into the river via a new outfall.

The work had to be carefully done to avoid damage to the nearby playing fields and trees. On completion of the drainage work a new, and much better, public footpath was laid.

The works were carried out on Network Rail's behalf by specialist railway contractors QTS and Westlin.



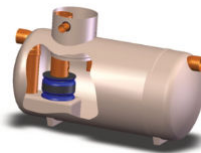
[Left and Above] The area before work commenced, the lying contaminated water revealing the extent of the problem.



[Right] The drained area showing the new safe trackside walking route for railway staff. Uneven ground is notorious for causing accidents.



[Left] Reinforced UTX (Under Track Crossing) drainage pipes pass beneath the track. The blue cover is for access to a catchpit, used to collect silt and debris in a sump. Fifteen new catchpits were installed.



Kingspan interceptor tank



[Right] Safe access provided to a groundframe used for controlling points in the yard.

Photos: Network Rail

KILDONAN CROSSING REPLACEMENT



The 05:20 Carlisle Kingmoor to Georgemas Junction nuclear flask train at Kildonan on 13 July 2021 with 66301 at the front and 66302 at the rear.

Work has begun on replacing the level crossing here, which is currently an Open Crossing requiring all trains to stop before crossing the road. The new equipment will be an ABCL (Automatic [full] Barrier Crossing, Locally Monitored), allowing trains to pass at permitted line speed if no passengers are using the station. A Network Rail spokesperson explained, "When the Level Crossing Renewals Plan for Control Period 6 (2019 – 2024) was created several years ago it was assumed that the new bridge at Delny would have been built by now and the crossing closed. As the level crossing equipment at Delny is still relatively new the intention was to 'lift and shift' the kit to Kildonan so that the remaining life (circa 30 years) of those assets could be harvested. Unfortunately the bridge at Delny did not make the progress expected so the crossing installation at Kildonan will be built from scratch with new materials."

The temporary office accommodation seen in this picture is to provide facilities for the works delivery staff because of the remoteness of the location.

Photo: **Mike Wedgewood** (See Book Review, P27)

THE PERILS OF BAD HANDWRITING

Juniper Bank bridge in Thurso was accidentally renamed, probably very many years ago when someone was given the job of digitising a handwritten list. The incorrect title is now lodged in the Network Rail database, and possibly other places too. Would it really be feasible to correct all this? Anyway, 'Jumberbank' will continue to provide entertainment for passers by!

Picture: *John O'Groat Journal*



FIRST OF A KIND

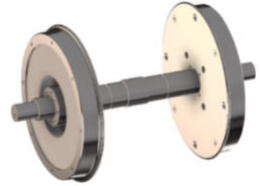
At the beginning of July, UK Transport Secretary Grant Shapps announced the thirty winners of the 2021 *First of a Kind* (FOAK) competition, run by Innovate UK for the DfT. They will share a £9m prize fund.

Two of the successful companies are Scottish: Lenz Labs and Whereverly Ltd.

LENZ LABS

Lenz Labs is a new company formed by a group of five post-graduates brought together by the SpaceX Hyperloop Pod competition. In their words the Hyperloop concept "alerted us to the potential impact our technology could have in solving problems that have remained stagnant

in existing industries for decades". This led to the design of the Traction Hub, the project which gained them the FOAK award. "The Traction Hub is a novel, retrofitted braking technology that delivers a 9% increase in applied braking force and 30% decrease in stopping distances. With the Traction Hub, drivers can have confidence in an all-weather braking system that operates in tandem with precision sensors to deliver insights on the behaviour of the wheel-rail interface."



Whereverly has a mission it describes as "Making journeys memorable. Embrace local culture through music, song and stories, whilst discovering the greatest experiences and hidden gems." Currently all its products are road-based but the winning entry was a mobile phone/tablet app aimed at travellers on the Highland Main Line. The app has a mix of music, songs and stories from local artists and musicians.

FAST PACE?

Network Rail is currently transitioning to a new project governance system – Projects Accelerated in a Controlled Environment (PACE) – which is intended to replace Governance for Railway Investment Projects (GRIP) with more streamlined processes to enable current and future projects to deliver passenger benefits more quickly with greater value for taxpayers.

SCOTRAIL MAY 2022 TIMETABLE

ScotRail has embarked on an extensive public consultation about its plans for a suitable timetable for May 2022 as travel patterns begin to establish themselves after the pandemic. Stakeholders, including FoFNL, were invited to participate in a pre-public session to give the operator a chance to explain the rationale behind the changes. Sunday services are outwith the consultation.

Kyle Line services will be unaffected and the Far North is planned to lose only the late night Friday/Saturday train*. Four trains per day is regarded by ScotRail as the minimum required for 'lifeline' routes.

Some services will be decelerated on the HML and Inverness-Aberdeen routes and Inverness to Central Belt trains will be rerouted through Stirling. This will become the interchange point, rather than Perth. [See article on P20]

Now that the draft timetables are available to the public on the ScotRail website it is clear that much detailed work still needs to be done on connections at Inverness, especially for passengers transferring to the FNL.

The ScotRail view on this is pragmatic. Firstly other operators, such as LNER are also working on new timetables so there is a limit on the value of doing detailed work before such interfaces are

known. Secondly, the input from stakeholders and members of the public will influence the detail in any case.

FoFNL can't overstate the importance of good connections; traveller's needs don't conveniently fit operational routes and the Transport Scotland viewpoint of regarding travel to be in 'corridors', which aren't always confined to services, is crucial in timetable design.

Media coverage of this exercise has been predictably disappointing. With few exceptions a dramatic headline is preferred to an analytical article. ScotRail is hoping that many will provide feedback after reading the detailed analysis section and the specific timetables which can be found at <https://www.scotrail.co.uk/fit-for-the-future>

A ScotRail official issued this plea:

"Please ask your members to bring some intellectual challenge to the debate!"

FoFNL will provide an official response but in the meantime we have already pointed out these northbound problems:

08:23 ex ABD arr INV **10:41** - INV-WCK dep **10:41** [previous service **07:18** ex ABD, arr INV **09:37** (65 min earlier start, 64 min wait at INV).]

11:55 ex ABD arr INV **14:11** - INV-WCK dep **14:00** [previous service **10:10** ex ABD, arr INV **12:26** (105 mins earlier start, 94 mins wait at INV).]

10:33 ex EDB arr INV **14:15** - INV-WCK dep **14:00** [previous service **09:35** ex EDB, arr INV **13:26** (58 mins earlier start, 34 mins wait at INV).]

*ScotRail is especially interested to hear views about the withdrawal of the FSO late-night services.

[www](http://www.scotrail.co.uk)

SECOND SUNDAY SERVICE

This is not a news item!! However, ScotRail officials are keen that we should not lose sight of the aspiration to change the FNL Sunday service to two trains per day when this becomes possible. Post-pandemic the emphasis is shifting towards leisure travel.

HIGHLAND RAILCARD

With passengers returning to rail, now that Covid restrictions have been reduced, it is worth mentioning the Highland Railcard again.

This entitles residents in specific postcode areas to save 50% on fares on the selected routes - the Far North Line, The Kyle Line and the West Highland - and for up to two children to travel for a flat rate of £2. The £15 cost of the card will soon be recouped, especially for families.

The ScotRail website has full details:

<https://www.scotrail.co.uk/tickets/railcards/highland-railcard>

[www](http://www.scotrail.co.uk)

ScotRail
SOUTH & NORTH

HIGHLAND RAILCARD

The Railcard available to Highland Residents can save you 50% on selected routes. Plus when you use it, kids can travel for a flat rate of only £2 return each.

ScotRail.co.uk/highlandrailcard

WHICH ROUTES CAN I TRAVEL ON?

The Highland Railcard is available on the following routes:
Kilbeg/Port Willaman/Oban to and from Glasgow
Wick/Thurso to and from Inverness
Kyle of Lochalsh to and from Inverness

Thurso
Wick
Inverness
Port Willaman
Glasgow
Oban
Kyle of Lochalsh
Hallaig

ScotRail



RED WHEEL DAY



On Sunday 8 August we were privileged to have H.R.H. The Prince Charles, Duke of Rothesay unveil a Red Wheel marking the 150th Anniversary of the opening of the "Duke of Sutherland's Railway". The wheel was sponsored by FoFNL and supplied by the National Transport Trust.

The wording on the wheel is "The Duke of Sutherland's Railway. To boost the local economy, the 3rd Duke planned and financed the railway from Golspie to Helmsdale. Opened 16th May 1871."

The Prince was 'piped in' by Fraser Roach, and welcomed to Dunrobin Castle Station by the local ex-Sutherland Lord Lieutenant Dr Monica Main.

The platform party included The Earl of Sutherland; FoFNL President, Jamie Stone MP and members Daniel Brittain-Catlin, who

A million questions! Daniel Brittain-Catlin shows Prince Charles round the railway exhibits.



organised the event; Ian Budd; Richard Ardern; Anne-Mary Paterson, well known author of books on railway subjects; and Frank Roach, Partnership Manager at HITRANS. Also present were Scott Morrison, Managing Director, Dunrobin Castle; Darius Astell, Transport Scotland project sponsor for the Far North Line; Alan Ross, Network Rail Director Engineering and Asset Management, who gave a speech

inviting the Prince to unveil the wheel; Fiona Campbell, ScotRail Regional Customer Operations Manager North; John Cameron CBE, a Vice President of the national Transport Trust (and owner of *Union of South Africa* and *The Great Marquess*, two famous steam locomotives); and Iain Crisp, head gardener at Dunrobin Castle.

The Prince was shown around the museum in the station by Daniel (described as Honorary Station Master) and was genuinely fascinated by the items he saw. Evidently he "asked a million



Richard Ardern and Ian Budd talking railways with the Prince.

questions!" He said that it took him right back to his childhood and that one of his happiest railway memories was being given breakfast on the Royal Train as it headed on its final leg from Aberdeen to Ballater for Balmoral. He also said, "They should never have closed that line!"

The Prince was evidently enjoying himself, and made a point of speaking to everyone on the platform, including the extra guests who were not in the greeting lines. Once the Prince had left to visit the gardens of Dunrobin Castle the day was rounded off perfectly by a buffet lunch in Golspie.



Prince Charles offering Alan Ross from Network Rail encouragement for providing interesting station buildings at Dalcross, Reston and East Linton.

[All photos: John Baikie]

Ian Budd

www

BOOK REVIEW

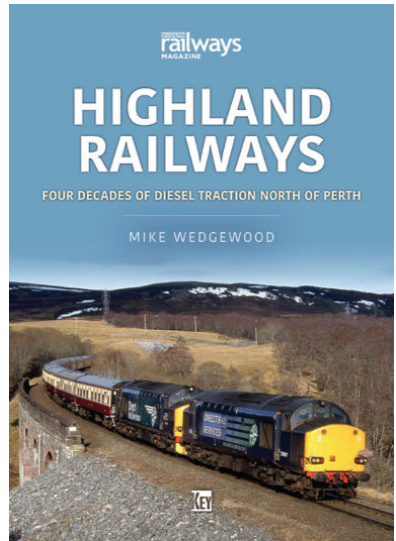
Highland Railways - Four Decades of Diesel Traction North of Perth Mike Wedgewood, Key Publishing 2021

Volume 19 of *Britain's Railways* series. Softback, 96 pp. £15.99 ISBN 978-1-913870-94-2

On the face of it this book by FoFNL member Mike Wedgewood is aimed at traction enthusiasts. There is such a variety of locomotives and trains in these pages that I'm sure they won't be disappointed. However, this is far more than a series of rolling stock photos.

The volume is divided into three parts by route: the Highland Main Line, Inverness to Kyle, which covers the southern part of the FNL, and The Far North Line from Dingwall northwards. Altogether there are more than 70 photos of the Far North Line. This is an excellent survey of the scenery and the seasons, as well as the trains and the stations, and is therefore recommended to all our readers.

Most of the 180+ photos have never been published before and were taken by Mike or his enthusiast colleague Eddie Parker. There is only a page or two of introductory text for each section, but every photo has an informative, and often amusing, caption. That makes this an ideal book for dipping into for a few minutes at a time. It also reminds the reader of what a wonderfully varied railway the Far North Line is - and how much we've all missed travelling by rail during the pandemic.



Ian Budd

www

CARBISDALE CASTLE SOLD?



This aerial view of the castle - courtesy of Strutt & Parker, the sales agent - shows how it overlooks Sutherland from across the River Oykel. The railway is clearly visible crossing the river on the bridge from which our logo is derived!

Few passengers on the Far North Line would believe that the imposing castle they see between Culrain and Invershin is nearly 50 years younger than the railway line on which they are travelling. Nor might they know of its interesting history.

Carbisdale Castle, in the Scottish Baronial style was built for Mary, Dowager Duchess of Sutherland, the second wife of the 3rd Duke. As the widow of a cavalry officer who was an estate employee she was considered highly unsuitable by the family who were even more incensed when he died leaving her the Sutherland millions.

During acrimonious legal proceedings to reclaim their fortune the Duchess destroyed relevant papers and as a result spent six months in Holloway Prison.

A settlement was eventually agreed which included the provision of a suitable residence for her, but outside the County of Sutherland. Hence the siting of Carbisdale Castle, south of the River Oykel in the adjacent county - but overlooking Sutherland towards which its clock tower bore a blank face. The castle, built in a variety of styles to belie its age but basically the fashionable Scottish Baronial of its time, was built between 1905 and 1917 but Mary was never to see its completion. She died in 1912.

It was purchased in 1933 by Theodore Salvesen, a Scot of Norwegian extraction and owner of the Scottish shipping company Christian Salvesen. On his death the castle passed to his son Harold and it provided a safe haven for the Royal Family of Norway during WWII.

Harold Salvesen gave the castle and its contents to the Scottish Youth Hostels Association and in 1945 it became Scotland's grandest youth hostel. Needing multi-million pound repairs it was closed in 2011 after 66 years, and placed on sale in 2014. A developer had plans for a 5-star hotel with a swimming pool and spa, and a significant amount of money was spent on refurbishment, but the partly restored castle has now come onto the market again and is currently (Aug 2021) "Under Offer" @ £1.5 million, a figure which would buy a reasonable "4-bed detached" where some of us live.

A consequence of the hostel's closure was a significant reduction in the number of passengers using Culrain Station. From 1722 in 2010 the number had fallen to 312 by 2019-20.

Frank Faulkner

Editor's Footnote: The Duchess was a scandalous figure, and rumour has it that she was the inspiration for both Oscar Wilde's Mrs Arbuthnot in *A Woman of No Importance* and the wicked stepmother in the 1950 Disney version of *Cinderella*.

CORPORATE VANDALISM



With the privatisation of the railways, by 1997 British Rail (BRB) was left with residual responsibilities, one of which was the maintenance of disused rail structures such as bridges. A company named BRB (Residuary) Limited [BRBR] was formed to manage these. In 2001 this was incorporated into the Strategic Rail Authority which itself was abolished in 2005 when BRBR was handed over to the Department for Transport. In 2013 this part of BRBR's operations was transferred to the Highways Agency Historical Railways Estate. The Highways Agency was replaced by Highways England (HE), [soon to be renamed National Highways] which now, slightly bizarrely is also responsible for disused railway structures in Scotland.

Earlier this year Highways England became front page news when it chose to 'stabilise' the Great Musgrave railway overbridge between Appleby and Kirkby Stephen in England by infilling it with hundreds of tons of concrete - not the cheapest option. The work has blocked the old railway line for walkers, cyclists and possible reopening as a railway.

The outrage caused is summed up by a comment from Institute of Civil Engineers Fellow, Judith Sykes, who described it as "shocking" adding that it is a "sad reflection" on the state of the industry. Other civil engineers publicly expressed shame in their profession.

The UK Government stepped in on 30 July telling HE to suspend 69 other infilling contracts, meanwhile the local council has told HE that it must apply for retrospective planning permission for the infilling, and if this is not granted it will have to return the bridge to its original condition.

Looking at the pictures it is hard to understand how anyone thought such corporate vandalism was a good idea.

Ian Budd



Pictures: HRE Group

NORWAY IN THE NEWS



Photo: OnRail

Norwegian railways are in the news again. These three excerpts from Today's Railways Europe magazine [reprinted with permission] discuss some recent developments.

The Nordlandsbanen (Nordland Line) from Trondheim to Bodø feels like the equivalent of the Far North Line in some ways (although it's more than two and a half times as long) so it is gratifying to see how it, and the North of Norway, features in the minds of Norwegian politicians. Narvik is currently the terminus of a different line which is mostly in Sweden, having only one station in Norway. Tromsø has no rail connection yet, Bodø to Tromsø would be around 300km in total.

Symbolic vote for rail in the far north - TRE June 2021

In a surprising development, the campaign to extend the Nordlandsbanen towards Narvik and Tromsø received a huge boost when an alliance of left and centre parties in the Storting (Norwegian Parliament) assembled a majority to approve a resolution to bring forward planning for new railways in the far north.

The transport minister criticised the motion, claiming it will divert funds from more deserving projects and calling it irrelevant as no funds were committed. However, the resolution is highly symbolic for showing the strength of feeling over the project and the need to invest meaningfully in transport infrastructure in the far north. There may also be significance in that national elections for the Storting take place this autumn and the parties are vying to win votes in the far north.

Meanwhile things are moving on the freight front too - with the help of a new freight operating company, OnRail. The Raumabanen (Rauma Line) branch which terminates south of Trondheim at Åndalsnes and joins the main Oslo-Trondheim line at Dombås has seen the start of a new service.



This is the thought-provoking tagline on the OnRail website: "Onrail is a Norwegian railway company running the freight train between Oslo and Åndalsnes. This train replaces 10,000 lorries a year."

Freight returns to the Raumabanen - TRE June 2021

On the night of 25 April the first intermodal freight service operated by Onrail departed from Åndalsnes for Alnabru yard in Oslo, hauled on the non-electrified Raumabanen by leased Nordic Re-Finance (ex DSB [Danish State Railways]) diesel TMe 1509. Traction on the electrified Dovrebanen is provided by hired ex-SJ [one of the Swedish Government-owned railway companies] Class Rc4 locos.

The train carried containers from a wide range of Norwegian businesses. Previously freight operations had been rendered unviable by the threat of landslips on the Mannen mountain near Åndalsnes, which has led to extensive line closures. The long-anticipated slip occurred in late 2019, meaning the threat of further disruption has receded, but neither CargoNet nor Green Cargo were willing to restart the services they previously abandoned. OnRail has therefore filled the gap, with support from infrastructure manager Bane NOR. Onrail plans to run five train pairs a week.

Strong start for Raumabanen freight - TRE July 2021

The freight service on the Dombås-Åndalsnes Raumabanen revived by new freight operator OnRail

founded by train driver Henning Aandal (TREU 304) has achieved remarkable success within weeks of startup on 25 April, with an average of eight of the 12 wagons loaded. On 10 May the train was full and sold out. Aandal attributes this to listening to customers and negotiating good paths with infrastructure manager Bane NOR for overnight departures in both directions, that are more convenient for shippers.

The previous services provided by CargoNet and Green Cargo had daytime departures southbound, which often ran less than 50% loaded. OnRail is ready to launch a second daily service if it can attract southbound fish traffic and is in talks with suppliers with the aim of taking more traffic off the average 500 daily lorry loads heading south. A mixture of former Danish diesels have been use on the train, with borrowed Class MZ locos standing in for the Nordic Re-finance-owned Class TMe while they are being repainted.



Channel 5's series, *World's Most Scenic Railway Journeys* reached the end of the Far North Line on Tuesday 25 May. The production team travelled north on the 10:41 service and headed back on the 16:00. In John Yellowlees' photo Matt Currington and Mantas Jankus flank ScotRail conductor Neil MacQueen before boarding the train.

The programme will be narrated by Bill Nighy and, in order to try and avoid the 'howlers' that beset an earlier episode about the Highland Main Line, FoFNL sent the Channel 5 researcher a list of place names liable to cause him pronunciation problems.

LONE LOCOS OR NEARLY

[Left] 66302 passing Balloch,
Inverness-shire on 20 April 2021



[Right] 66726 *Sheffield Wednesday*
on a light engine movement to
Aviemore on 10 August 2020



[Left] 60103, *Flying Scotsman*
heading south from Inverness with
a support coach on 17 May 2019



[Right] 43143 and 43164 heading
south on 9 March 2021, having
delivered one coach to Inverness
some days earlier



[Left] 73971 heading south alone
on 22 March 2021



ALL PICTURES BY
SANDY COLLEY