Far North Express

FoFNL

The Friends of the Far North Line

Issue 85
February 2022

The Magazine of the Friends of the Far North Line

For news and views about rail in the North of Scotland

Cairdean Na Loine Tuath

£3.00

Contents

www.fofnl.org.uk/fne/cps/fne85.html is a companion page with some web links and larger versions of pictures found in this issue. This sign on a page denotes available material: *www*

FoFNL Office Bearers

Articles in *Far North Express* are attributed, except for 'news' items, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the committee.

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Far North Express is published in January, May and September

Cover Photo: Northbound service (158705) nearing Kildonan on 11 January 2022. A view which sums up the unique beauty of the Far North Line.

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.

Headcode

The Strategic Transport Projects Review 2, Phase 2, Draft, was released for consultation on 20 January.

Once ratified this will be the final document in this extraordinarily long process. The frustration for rail campaigners in the Highlands is that what needs to be done has been very obvious for many years.

The shortcomings of the Highland rail provision can be identified with a cursory glance at what currently exists. North of Perth on the trunk route to Inverness we have single track most of the way, with a few passing places. Between Inverness and Aberdeen, another intercity route, we still have mostly single track, with limited passing places. North of Inverness the Far North Line is single track throughout with very few passing places and an extremely slow journey which takes almost twice as long by rail as it does by road.

These facts cannot be altered by any amount of detailed analysis. The Scottish Government's policy is for modal shift to rail and rapid decarbonisation. The only possible conclusion therefore is to electrify as much as possible, as quickly as possible, to double-track the intercity routes, and to provide enough passing places on the remaining single-track routes.

The Far North Line, which is already receiving some very useful enhancements, will need more passing loops if freight is to be added as planned. The discrepancy between road and rail journey times will also need to be addressed if car users are to be persuaded to become rail passengers. Decisions taken in the 1980s to upgrade the road north of Inverness, but not the railway, reflect the view at the time that rail was probably in terminal decline. Fortunately that view is long gone.

The operational problems on these routes have been obvious since construction in the 19th Century. The Highland Railway could not afford to build the necessary infrastructure because there wouldn't have been enough profit for investors. Society has become enlightened enough in the intervening years to understand that railway systems do not make a profit: they are an essential shared facility, paid for out of taxation.

Had the necessary work been started three years ago when the STPR2 process was begun much would have been achieved. Instead we now have stacks of publications and far less time.

The imminent release of the draft STPR2 Phase 2 document prompted me to revisit the Phase 1 report, which came out a year ago. The sheer quantity of words, Venn diagrams and tables to be found in its 96 pages is crushing. In contrast, *Rail For All*, the Policy Briefing commissioned by the Scottish Green Party, lists the same background imperatives and also lists what needs to be built to address these imperatives - in 18 pages. To be fair, the latter is only concerned with rail.

Of more concern is the difference between plans in STPR from 2008 and what has actually happened. There are some timescale quotes in Richard Ardern's article on p15. Were this level of slippage to be repeated for Highland railways projects in STPR2, we wouldn't expect to see shovels in the ground until 2036.

It has taken three years to produce a 'refresh' for the original STPR. Imagine what we would have thought if we'd been told then that fourteen years later the planned HML improvements would still be at the 'study' stage.

Ian Budd

FoFNL AGM & Conference 2022

This will take place on Friday 17 June in Dingwall unless new Covid restrictions apply. Please consult our web page nearer the time for accurate information.

Stop Press - STPR2

This issue's *Headcode* was written on the morning of 20 January. In the afternoon, following a ministerial announcement, the draft document itself was published. We were also sent a 'STPR2 Consultation Poster 2022' which contained the revealing words, "The final STPR2 Report...will be the evidence base for future spending decisions on strategic transport investment by Scottish Ministers up to 2042 and inform the development of future transport investment delivery plans."

The evidence base. The stack of 'evidence' is truly massive with every conceivable statistic relevant to Scottish transport. However, in terms of plans for rail in the Highlands the document itself contains only the following - no plans, no specifics, just a suggestion that in each category enhancements would be a good idea.

Rural Rail Connectivity

Specifically, for H&I Region:

- Far North Line Capacity Improvements (South of Invergordon)

Inter-7-Cities Strategic Corridor Enhancements

Provision of enhancements on the Inter-7-Cities strategic rail network seeking to improve connectivity by reducing rail journey times on these corridors. Specifically, for H&I Region:

- Perth-Inverness and Aberdeen-Inverness rail corridor enhancements

Freight

Specifically, for H&I Region:

Central Belt - Inverness via Fife

- Increased train length, improved route availability (axle weight), better freight schedules and clearance for taller and wider wagons

Highland Main Line improvements

- Increased train length, improved route availability (axle weight), better freight schedules and clearance for taller and wider wagons, more passing places or "dynamic loops" to improve flexibility of service

Railway Freight Terminals and Facilities

- Improving the modal shift of freight from road to rail primarily for trunk haul movements (but not exclusively) through a network of rail freight terminals and facilities to include direct connections to manufacturing facilities and warehousing

Specifically, for H&I Region:

- Potential locations for further consideration could include Morayhill, Georgemas, and Altnabreac (Line Side) timber

There was also a sentence about decarbonisation (i.e. electrification):

STPR2 recommends the priorities for decarbonising key rail routes should align with the Rail Services Decarbonisation Action Plan and focus where appropriate on routes with the most potential to switch traffic from road to rail.

FoFNL now has a consultation form to fill in...

FoFNL AGM 2021

1 OCTOBER 2021 at 10:00

MINUTES OF AGM (Held by Zoom On Line)

SEDERUNT

Total 17 members - recorded separately.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Malcolm Wood, Simon Jeffreys, John Brandon, Frank Faulkner, Eleanor Hodges, Nicholas Hunter, Sue Worrall, Martin Murphy, Richard Morris, Janetta Christie.

1 Welcome

Ian Budd, Convener welcomed members to the AGM, which had been delayed due to COVID restrictions.

2 AGM Minutes

The last AGM minutes (2019 in Brora) had been distributed with the papers in 2020. No objections or amendments had been received.

3 Reports

Convener's, Membership Secretary's and Treasurer's reports had been circulated to members in advance of the meeting. No questions were received.

CONVENER'S REPORT

Ian Budd outlined his report **[see p6]**

TREASURER'S REPORT

The year showed a surplus of £3139.01. The Accounts for the calendar year 2020 were approved. Mr Roland St. Clere Smithe was appointed Independent Examiner of the Accounts.

Proposer: Mike Lunan, *Seconder:* Iain MacDonald

4 Elections

The following Officers and members of the Executive Committee were elected

• Ian Budd - *Convener*

Proposer: David Spaven, *Seconder:* David Start

• Ian Budd - *Editor*

Proposer: Richard Ardern, *Seconder:* Rhoda Grant

• Neil Wallace - *Secretary*

Proposer: Ian Budd, *Seconder:* Rhoda Grant

• David Start - *Treasurer*

Proposer: Mike Lunan, *Seconder:* Richard Ardern

• Angus Stewart - *Membership Secretary*

Proposer: Ian Budd, *Seconder:* Iain MacDonald

• Iain MacDonald

Proposer: Richard Ardern, *Seconder:* David Start

• Mike Lunan

Proposer: David Start, *Seconder:* David Spaven

• Richard Ardern

Proposer: Mike Lunan, *Seconder:* David Spaven

• Malcolm Wood

Proposer: Richard Ardern, *Seconder:* Annette Parrot

• David Spaven

Proposer: Ian Budd, *Seconder:* Richard Ardern

The following Vice Presidents were confirmed:

• Rhoda Grant MSP

• Maree Todd MSP

5 AOB

The following topics were raised by members:

- use of funds in account to create an annual award to commemorate Bob Barnes Watts; possible scope to encourage student research into alternative technology for train motive power - ideas to be invited *[see companion web page]* *www*
- concern that some ticket offices could be closed or downgraded according to current media reports, noting that technology didn't always work and an older cohort of passengers may be particularly affected
- suggestion that FNL marketing could be improved to give greater awareness of

round trips, particularly from south of the border.

- ScotRail's ongoing timetable consultation illustrated lack of fast paths to the north causing additional connection problems with FNL - continue to actively campaign for doubling of single track sections of Highland Main Line and on line from Aberdeen to Inverness.
- Possible re-opening of Evanton station – awaiting technical study by HITRANS, options may include relocation of the station closer to the village and/or closer to new housing developments on the west side.
- Planned signalling improvements on FNL may alleviate the need for trains to be held back at Evanton or Fodderty whilst awaiting points to clear at Dingwall.
- The Convener, Ian Budd drew attention to the proposed date for the postponed 2020 Conference in Dingwall - **17th June 2022**.
- Ian Budd also asked that the FoFNL Committee be made aware of anyone interested in standing for the committee in future.

The meeting closed at 10:40.

2021 Convener's Report

It seems a long time since the last AGM, in Brora in 2019. Even then we were in a kind of suspended animation, waiting for the implementation of the Far North Line Review Team's recommendations, and then the pandemic arrived signalling the end of face-to-face meetings.

An unexpected benefit of this has been the large number of online webinars and conferences that have taken place, enabling us to keep up to date with the rapid progress of moves to implement the Scottish Government's rail decarbonisation strategy.

As you will have seen in the September issue of *Far North Express*, the trial hydrogen train, converted from a redundant Electric Multiple Unit, is expected to run some trials between Thurso and Wick (without passengers). A Class 158 conversion, using an additional middle carriage to house the hydrogen equipment and some extra passengers, is likely to follow.

2020 saw the first timber train trial, which proved to be a great success in showing what can and should be done to make proper use of the FNL's freight capability. In 2021 there was also an inter-modal demonstration at Georgemas Junction using the equipment available at the station. Freight is a difficult matter for the Far North Line but the whole subject is being looked at in many quarters as the need to get as much freight onto rail as possible is addressed. There are some interesting developments using converted multiple units which could well prove effective on our line. In the end the transporting of freight in the least wasteful and least polluting way means that long distance journeys must be done by rail with a network of battery operated delivery vehicles for road distribution over the shortest possible distances. This will mean much investment in freight transfer facilities as well as major increases in route capacity.

FoFNL has been adding our voice regularly to the debate about rail provision in the Highlands but it sometimes feels like trying to turn a large ship onto a different course - the decades-old belief that ever-increasing road traffic must be provided for is difficult to overturn. We now have a situation where the Scottish Government's policy of modal shift is at odds with its current plans for dualling the A9 and A96.

Meanwhile we are still waiting for detail about future plans for rail in the *Strategic Transport Projects Review 2* (STPR2). The Far North Line is only mentioned under the heading "Groupings Taken Forward to Appraisal" - "Grouping Name: Highland and Far North Rail Improvements; Grouping Description: Options to improve capacity, frequency and reliability of train services, such as, train lengthening and line speed improvements." More detail is expected in Phase 2 of the Review, due out later this year.

Once we see what is planned we can look for specific projects we would like to see included.

Let's hope that our much postponed 2020 Conference in Dingwall finally takes place on **17 June 2022**.

Contents

Request Stop Rollout

The first installation of an important element of the Far North Line enhancements specified by the FNL Review Team took place at Scotscalder Station in December. "Request to Stop", an original concept by HITRANS and the first of its kind in the UK, was developed by Comms Design and is being installed and integrated into the RETB system by Telent, the principal contractor. Final testing will be complete early this year, with all eight FNL request stops working by the summer.

The system enables passengers wishing to board the train to warn the driver in advance instead of having to wave the train down from the platform. The advantage for the railway is that in the event of there being no requests to stop, the train can proceed at full linespeed. Until now all trains have had to slow right down.

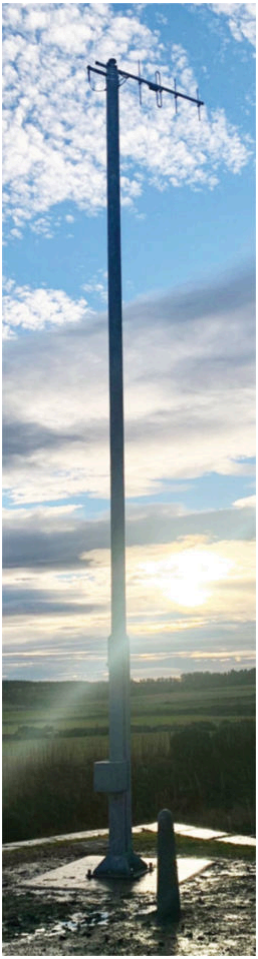

Kiosk installation at Scotscalder

As well as the kiosk, which will stand on the station platform, a transmitter/receiver aerial is needed to link in to the RETB signalling system.

The kiosks are part of a broader package of improvements to the line's radio signalling, worth approximately £5 million.

The remaining seven request stops on the Far North Line are Altnabreac, Kinbrace, Kildonan, Dunrobin Castle, Rogart, Inversnin and Culrain.

Ian Budd



Pandora

is at sea, somewhere west of Shetland

Pandora - who continues to drive a car - has been wondering about what might be needed to persuade him, and 2.5 million other owners (2018 figures), to alter their habits. He drives three quarters of a mile to Tesco and three quarters of a mile back because he can't carry four shopping bags that far. When he is too decrepit to drive he will use a local taxi (probably more polluting because it will use diesel, and idle for ages while he laboriously climbs aboard with his shopping). He lives 3 minutes from the station, and using the train to go to Inverness means that he has almost 4 hours free from the tyranny of the rest of the world seeking to email him. Wifi connection isn't as good as ScotRail would have you think. The 4 hours back are equally restful, and cost-wise it beats driving hands down. But if Pandora is accompanied on his peregrinations the train soon loses its appeal on cost grounds. Add in a grandchild or two and - despite their strong eco-credentials they are not keen to pay their rail fare - the car is, in their parlance, a no-brainer.

Four wheels bad, two (or 16 if it's a 2-car 158) wheels good then. Until it's time to pay.

These grandchildren are pleased that the waters west of Shetland are not to see drilling for oil in the Cambo field. Pandora asks them what fuel they intend to put in their cars while they are still permitted to have them, or to put into their beloved 158. Pandora is looked at in a pitying way. And where will this petrol or diesel fuel come from? Far away across the seas, it would seem. Nearby oil bad, far-flung oil good then. Pandora is shocked to find nimbyism among the grandchildren.

Grandchildren, confident that the terminally old have been seen off, relax. Pandora, whose O-level chemistry is a long way back, but not wholly forgotten, asks them what oil is used for. It turns out that they are ill-informed, for they don't know that, as well as nasty nasty petrol and even nastier diesel (boo!) the refining process produces all kinds of stuff they didn't know they were going to have to do without.

Plastics (boo! - but don't they use a credit card, or wrap unused food till tomorrow?), toothpaste, contact lenses, skis, golf balls, crayons (there will be great-grandchildren one day), glasses, chewing gum (those great-grandchildren again), all kinds of pharmaceutical things (doubtless including devices to limit the number of great-grandchildren), boring stuff like tar and bitumen - for if we are to cycle everywhere or drive nice electric cars we shall still require the potholes to be filled in ... but the grandchildren have fallen asleep. Pandora had forgotten to tell them the most important thing of all.

Without the petrochemical industry there are no mobile phones. Pandora remembered that every cloud has a silver lining.

Letter to the Editor

FNE 84 and costs of the A9 and Highland Main Line 2019-20 upgrade.

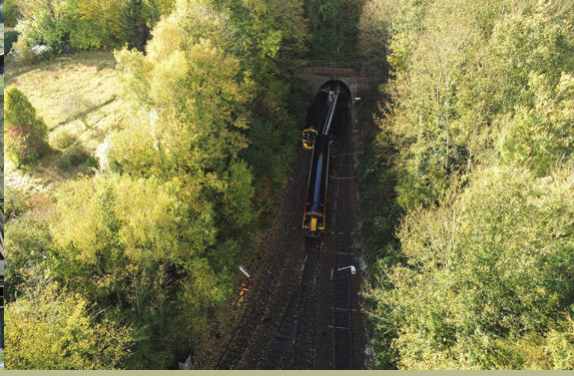
Sir:-

As one who served an apprenticeship as an auditor 50 years ago, I was trained to ask awkward questions.

Cannot quite reconcile in my mind 6 miles of A9 upgrade, including land purchase, at £96 million, with a few hundred yards of loop lengthening at Aviemore and Pitlochry, and associated signalling at £57 million. Can we see a bill of quantities?

Did the marketing department who put out the press release place the decimal point in the wrong place and the actual cost was £5.7 million?

Les Turner (FoFNL member)



Leaves Above the Line

For 180 years the railway has been on the wrong end of "I-was-here-first" thinking. Highways (though carrying nothing moving faster than a galloping horse) demanded that any railway crossing them did so by means of a bridge, or by a level crossing girt about with restrictions. Farmers demanded that their livestock be protected by the erection of fences (maintained in perpetuity by the railway, even though flocks might be absent from the neighbouring fields). Landowners demanded that lengthy detours took the noxious vapours far from their demesne. The railway has learned to live with these irritations, though the cost has often been immense.

Now, however, the Fates have dealt the "I-was-here-first" card into the railway's hand. Will the railway play it well, or will the "it's-different-this-time" card trump it?

With the demise of steam - and the consequent routine burning of lineside vegetation - trees have grown all along the railway. Photographs of the site of the recent collision of two trains in Salisbury show that, while the area is thickly wooded now, it was entirely grassed 40 years ago. Thus it is clear that all those trees - trees whose leaves caused the collision - have taken root and grown within 40 years. The railway, we should remember, was there first. Grass grew. There were occasional fires. Leaf-fall was non-existent.

The two recent storms caused trees to fall, blocking lines all over the country. Some brought down the overhead wiring. The railway was there first, and so was most of the knitting. Some of the trees were on railway land, and there is no excuse for their presence. But at least the railway can deal with its own nuisance, cut down the offenders and arrange for more trees to be planted somewhere else, well away from the railway. Should not the railway play the "I-was-here-first" card and require - just as *it* was required to do 180 years ago - the owners of these dangerous new trees to fell them - all of them, all of them on whomever's land which lie within say 150 feet of the fence? And if not, why not? Should not the railway seek full compensation from the owner of a tree which falls onto railway land? And if not, why not? After all, we were here first.

Mike Lunan

The pictures above of the Salisbury Tunnel Junction cutting taken in 1970 and 2021 respectively show just how great a task Network Rail faces, even to remove the danger from trees on railway land. The fact that there are so many instances of trees on neighbouring land, within leaf-dropping distance of the track, makes the job infinitely harder.

An article in a recent magazine contained interviews with drivers about their experiences of losing adhesion. The seriousness of this probably hasn't reached public conscience - how many people would realise that a train can slide for half a mile with no possible control from the driver who is glued to his seat as if on a horrendous thrill-ride?

Undoubtedly tree owners will be most unlikely to remove their trees voluntarily - citing expense, noise or loss of privacy - legislation may be needed, and if not, why not?

Parliamentary Questions

Question S6W-03993: Richard Leonard, Scottish Labour Party, Central Scotland, answered 15 November 2021

To ask the Scottish Government whether the budget for Scottish rail infrastructure renewals and enhancements for Control Period 6 has been reduced, and, if so, by how much.

Graeme Dey, Minister for Transport:

There has been no reduction in Control Period 6 budget for rail infrastructure renewals and enhancements activities in Scotland.

Question S6W-04748: Graham Simpson, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, Central Scotland, answered 16 December 2021

To ask the Scottish Government what plans it has to purchase any additional rolling stock for the ScotRail fleet.

Graeme Dey:

ScotRail Trains Limited will be responsible for operating services from 31 March 2022 and it is currently finalising plans for its future fleet requirements, including the new emission free vehicles needed to deliver the Scottish Government's Rail Decarbonisation Action Plan.

Question S6W-04747: Graham Simpson, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, Central Scotland, answered 16 December 2021

To ask the Scottish Government what the age is of ScotRail's (a) newest and (b) oldest rolling stock, and what the average age is of ScotRail's rolling stock.

Graeme Dey:

ScotRail's (a) newest rolling stock are the seventy class 385 trains which were introduced in 2018-19 and (b) oldest rolling stock are the twenty-five Inter-city High Speed Trains which were introduced from the late 1970s and extensively re-engineered and refurbished in 2017-2020.

The Scottish Government recognises the sustainability advantages of re-engineering older rail vehicle structures, when appropriate, thus avoiding the energy expended in the production of new rail vehicles.

The Office of Rail and Road (ORR) figures from 2020-21 calculates that the average age of the 350 trains in the ScotRail fleet is 21.69 years.

Meanwhile in Germany...

At the end of November 2021 the German Government committed to a 'Rapid Capacity Expansion' to enhance railway infrastructure, investing '**considerably more in rail than in road**'. Plans include:

- **doubling** of passenger traffic by 2030
- **75%** of the network to be electrified by 2030
- introducing **a national regular interval timetable** as a matter of priority
- **increasing** rail's share of freight by nearly **32%**
- **increasing road tolls** on heavy lorries to align them more closely to CO_2 emissions
- **mandating all proposals** for new commercial and industrial development to examine the potential for incorporating a rail connection

ScotRail - New Structure

From 1 April 2022 the Abellio franchise will be terminated and the Scottish Government will own and operate ScotRail.

The new structure will be:

- **Scottish Rail Holdings**, the public body owned by the Scottish Government which will own and oversee ScotRail Trains, whilst having no involvement in the day to day operation of the business
- **ScotRail Trains**, the operators
- **Scotland's Railway**, the 'alliance' of ScotRail Trains, Network Rail and around 150 organisations and suppliers, representing the whole of Scotland's rail industry

The **Chief Executive Officer** for Scottish Rail Holdings, is **Chris Gibb**, who will also chair the board of ScotRail Trains. Mr Gibb has had a 40 year career in railways. He started in British Rail, and in the 80s and 90s held various managerial and organisational roles including being based in Glasgow and Ayr. After rail privatisation he became Managing Director of Wales & Borders Trains, then Chief Operating Officer of Virgin Trains and latterly a Non Executive Director of Network Rail. He has also been involved in projects such as the Channel Tunnel and HS2.

The **Chief Operating Officer** of ScotRail Trains will be **Joanne Maguire**, who will report to Alex Hynes. She is currently Vice Principal – Resources at the University of the West of Scotland and was previously Executive Director for HR at the university. She has also held senior leadership roles at City of Glasgow College, as well as in the manufacturing and retail sectors.

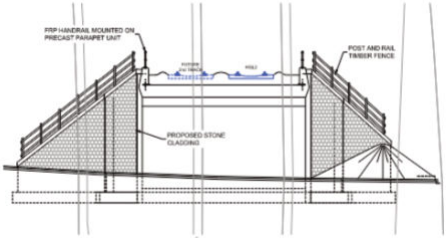
Alex Hynes will continue to be employed by Network Rail as **Managing Director** of Scotland's Railway.

The current ScotRail executive and operational staff will be transferred to ScotRail Trains.

HML - New Structure

The Highland Main Line was closed for three days in November to allow for the demolition of the Lynebeg bridge on the B9154 and its replacement by a concrete structure. This was necessary as part of the advance works for the A9 dualling between Tomatin and Moy. The main structure of the new bridge was constructed on nearby land and moved into position once complete.

FoFNL has been making the point for a long time that any work done to the HML, including electrification, must be done to allow for future doubling of this intercity spine route to Inverness and beyond. We were delighted to have it confirmed that the new bridge is indeed designed for double track and we appreciate Transport Scotland's foresight.



See this issue's companion web page for a link to a time-lapse video of the process.

www

Personalised Pocket Timetables

In response to a FoFNL enquiry about the removal of connection times to/from the originating stations on adjacent routes, ScotRail suggested that we direct travellers to an excellent feature on the National Rail Enquiries website. It's called *Pocket Timetables* and it will produce a custom timetable which you can read, or download as a .pdf file, containing journey information in four hour slots for outward and return journeys on the day(s) of your choice. It is even more useful than the information which ScotRail has dropped from its timetables, since it works for journeys between any UK stations.

The page can be found at https://ojp.nationalrail.co.uk/service/pockettimetable/search

Now that ScotRail does not produce timetables showing connections (and has no plans to do so) it is difficult to plan a journey involving a change. For example, Tain to Elgin involves two timetables and this facility makes it really easy, showing the change required, the times at Inverness and the journey duration.

ScotRail has informed us that the Swiss Railways website offers an even better service, with full-day timetables being given. These can also be printed or saved. This is the Swiss Railways page:

https://www.sbb.ch/en/timetable/online-timetable/pdf-timetables/personal-pocket-timetable/download.html

WWW

Personal timetable.

valid from 17.01.2022 to 14.05.2022

SBB CFF FFS

→ Tain (GB) - Elgin

Dep	Journey		Arr	Change	Dep	Journey		Arr	Dur.	Servicedays
6.59	R		8.12	Inverness	9.01	IC	R	9.45	2.46	Mo - Sa
9.23	R	R	10.36	Inverness	11.02	IC	R	11.41	2.18	Mo - Sa
10.55	R		12.08	Inverness	12.34	IC	R	13.13	2.18	Su
11.10	R	R	12.26	Inverness	12.44	IC	R	13.25	2.15	Mo - Sa
14.08	R		15.17	Inverness	15.33	IC	R	16.10	2.02	Su
15.05	R	R	16.16	Inverness	17.07	IC	R	17.47	2.42	Su
15.46	R	R	17.06	Inverness	17.14	IC	R	17.54	2.08	Mo - Sa
19.07	R	R	20.12	Inverness	20.40	IC	R	21.21	2.14	Mo - Fr
19.07	R	R	20.10	Inverness	20.40	IC	R	21.21	2.14	Sa
19.47	R		20.58	Inverness	21.33	IC	R	22.13	2.26	Mo - Sa

→ Elgin - Tain (GB)

Dep	Journey		Arr	Change	Dep	Journey		Arr	Dur.	Servicedays
9.50	IC	R	10.36	Inverness	10.41	R	R	11.48	1.58	Mo - Sa
11.27	IC	R	12.08	Inverness	12.53	R		14.03	2.36	Su
12.38	IC		13.19	Inverness	14.00	R	R	15.13	2.35	Mo - Sa
15.19	IC	R	16.03	Inverness	17.12	R		18.23	3.04	Mo - Sa
16.59	IC	R	17.41	Inverness	17.54	R	R	19.07	2.08	Su
17.05	IC	R	17.48	Inverness	18.32	R	R	19.46	2.41	Mo - Sa
19.30	IC	R	20.11	Inverness	21.08	R		22.18	2.48	Su
19.47	IC	R	20.28	Inverness	21.06	R		22.16	2.29	Mo - Sa

legend

R = Place reservation possible

Letters to The Scotsman

These two letters, from Richard Ardern of the FoFNL Committee and Dr Ann Glen, eminent railway author, are on the perennial subject of the severe shortcomings of the Highland Main Line. This matter has to be aired over, and over, and over again until the Scottish Government recognises that it has so far almost completely failed to address the problem. Modal shift requires investment shift too.

OFF THE RAILS

18 Dec 2021

Alastair Dalton asks: "What has happened to three-hour HS2 Scotland-London trips?" (*Perspective*, 17 December). In the Highlands we keep asking: "What has happened to the three-hour Inverness to Edinburgh rail passenger journey time?" This was promised as an average by December 2012 by First Minister Alex Salmond after the Cabinet meeting in Inverness on 5 August 2008. In December 2008 the Highland Main Line (HML) was to be third priority in the *Strategic Transport Projects Review* (STPR). The Queensferry crossing and the EGIP rail improvements (which were first and second priorities) have been delivered, but the HML remains crippled by long lengths of single track which limit capacity and cause knock-on delays.

The May 2022 timetable consultation suggests a few more minutes will need adding, increasing the average to 3 hours, 37 minutes, with an average speed of only around 50mph. The new STPR2 is to be published shortly. The word "Strategic" in its title should surely result in priority capacity improvements for this overcrowded line serving a huge swathe of Scotland, especially given the Climate Emergency objective to carry freight more sustainably, which means using rail or sea.

R J Ardern
Inverness

SPINE CHILLING

21 Dec 2021

The letter from R J Ardern about the Highland Main Line (HML) is to the point (18 December). For a strategic "spine" route through hilly country it has been a conspicuous poor relation compared with main road investment. This began in the 1970s with a major realignment of the A9 and now dualling of lengthy stretches is proceeding at a cost of £8 billion.

When is the HML going to get some serious investment in these "carbon neutral" days? Good connectivity between Scotland's cities depends on faster times, which could be attained with the use of dynamic loops. However, it is worth noting that when the Highland Railway Company constructed the "Aviemore Deviation" in the 1890s – this would take the new line over Slochd Summit to Inverness – all the structures on it were and constructed with a view to the eventual doubling of the track. Those who travel the route continue to wait for this to happen.

Will electrification solve the problems and tie in with Net Zero? Some hope, when neither solar (mist and short day) nor wind is generating any power of consequence during the high pressure presence on 19-20 December.

(Dr) I A Glen
Airdrie

A Rail Strategy for the North

What should the word STRATEGIC imply? Surely not a crawl for 14 years while world climate suffers.

Alex Salmond's '*Declaration of Inverness*' in August 2008 promised much but only a fraction has been delivered. This despite the two lines to Inverness being declared third and fourth priority in Scotland in the *Strategic Transport Projects Review* (STPR) in December 2008.

Passenger train journey times between Edinburgh and Inverness were to be cut by 35 minutes with an hourly frequency, and there was to be a fastest time of 2 hours 45 minutes with an average time of 3 hours. All by December 2012.

STPR gave a timescale: "for potential implementation during Control Period 4 (2009-2014)" and mentioned that "a commitment to Phase 1 was made in a Scottish Government statement on the 5th of August 2008."

Similarly, STPR promised Aberdeen to Inverness (A2I) journey times to be cut by 20 minutes to 2 hours with an hourly frequency also "for potential implementation during Control Period 4 (2009-2014)".

Stewart Nicol, CEO of Inverness Chamber of Commerce, has witnessed this over the last 13 years and fought for the Scottish Government to keep its promise. His most recent comment is reproduced on the next page. As he says, "meaningful enhancement" for the HML appears to be stalled with "nothing substantive now planned" in contrast to welcome investment elsewhere in Scotland and England.

The progress promised by the last STPR in December 2008 for implementation within less than a decade has now receded to mere "aspiration" and another "target" of electrification of both lines by 2035 and 2045 respectively seems so far away as to be potentially another mere aspiration so far ahead that the present administration needn't worry about delivering it.

What will the tortuous and long overdue STPR2 eventually bring this year? If the word STRATEGIC really does mean what it says, the railway lines from Edinburgh and Aberdeen to Inverness should be comprehensively overhauled to make them *really* fit for purpose. This has become even more urgent to respond to the climate emergency (CE). The lines could have been ready now to cope with that but will instead have to play catch-up – and fast.

The CE requires decarbonisation and the transfer of much freight and passenger business from road to rail. We have known this for years but both Scottish and UK governments have been reluctant to act to make this happen.

DB Cargo UK [a rail freight company] has launched a campaign *"Everyone knows it: freight belongs on rail"* (see p25) to help the governments achieve their targets of zero carbon emissions. They are asking the UK government to set out legally binding targets to decarbonise rail freight, and ensure investment is made to make rail infrastructure fit for the digital age to allow both freight and passenger trains to run more efficiently.

It is good to see approval given recently for major work to shorten journey times between Aberdeen and the Central Belt by 20 minutes and provide more capacity for freight. Surprisingly, the two long enforced closures of that line at Carmont south of Stonehaven have not seen any public discussion of urgent capacity improvements to the A2I line to act as a diversionary route for both Aberdeen or Inverness if either the Stonehaven or Aviemore routes should get blocked.

Railfreight should now be an even bigger driver in getting the HML and A2I lines fit for purpose. This means getting rid of the long single-track sections of 18 miles between Keith and Elgin and the two of 13 miles each on the HML. Benefits will then accrue to the Far North and Kyle lines too.

Where is the strategic thinking? Why is it taking so long?

Richard Ardern

Pitiful Capability of the Highland Main Line

In the December 2021 issue of Executive, *the magazine of Inverness Chamber of Commerce,* ***Stewart Nicol****, Chief Executive, considers the Highland Main Line in the light of discussions arising from the scrapping of the East Midlands Parkway to Leeds section of HS2.*

I was intent on doing something along the usual seasonal theme for this comment piece as we approach another Festive Season and the start of a fresh New Year. All that changed with the UK Government's U-turn on HS2, the high speed rail link between London and the North of England, a couple of weeks ago, scrapping part of the proposed route of this major infrastructure project. I'll leave the politicians in our midst to answer the blunt question I heard asked in the press melee that ensued, 'Prime Minister, is this decision a train wreck, after last week's car crash.....?'

This decision was swiftly followed by significant comment and debate, which may well have passed us by in the Highlands? However, I was impacted by some of the comment and also struck by the rail journey times that were still being discussed, even with the withdrawal of this eye-watering investment in HS2. Understandably, there were, 'expectations of high speed services....transforming the grim infrastructure that has long failed to link northern mill towns to the modern world. Past plans have now been revised and costs cut'. In terms of our rail connectivity between the Highland Capital Inverness and the Central Belt, the Highland Main Line (HML), we more than know all about that!

The 'rail industry', contributing to this discussion, are realistically contemplating rail journey times between the Central Belt and London of only three hours, which is to be welcomed and would undoubtedly transform travel patterns within the UK. All of this, for me, absolutely emphasises just how pitiful is the capability of, and the services that operate on, the HML.

Our situation in the Highlands is made all the worse by the progress we are seeing elsewhere in Scotland. The £70m investment in the Levenmouth rail link, with construction due to start next year, will undoubtedly transform the economic and social prospects of this area of Fife. The success of the Borders rail link, which opened some six years ago, has been outstanding by any measure, and demonstrates why a modern railway matters to aspiring rural communities and the businesses based in them. It is no surprise to anyone watching this space that there is a significant head of steam (pun absolutely intended!) building for the extension of this route from Tweedbank to the West Coast Main Line near Carlisle.

In addition to seeing other communities and businesses being transformed by the creation or upgrading of their rail infrastructure, we read of the introduction of TransPennine Express' space age looking Nova 1 train, which will be making its debut this week on their route between the north west of England and Scotland. From December 12th there will be a reintroduction of a two hourly service from Manchester to Glasgow, which when combined with the existing Manchester to Edinburgh services, provides an hourly service from the north west of England to Carlisle and Scotland. An hourly service to the Central Belt, from a city that's ⅓ more distant than Inverness and with journey times that are shorter than we have to endure on the HML.

In stark contrast to all of this welcome and appropriate investment, nothing meaningful is being done on the HML, nor is anything substantive planned. It would appear that our wholly appropriate aspirations for the HML are languishing in a somewhat overgrown and decrepit siding somewhere south of the Highland Capital.

New Bus Strategy Needed

One of the frustrations of looking for improvements in public transport from a railway, specifically Far North Line, perspective, is that bus services are hard to 'catch'. Because of deregulation there is no obligation on the part of bus operators to do anything other than run buses on the routes most likely to make money. Timetables and routes, and indeed complete services, can appear and disappear almost at the whim of the bus companies. This is the exact opposite of what the public needs, especially those members of the public who currently drive but who might be persuaded to use public transport. The system here does not work for the travelling public so perhaps we do need to look elsewhere to see how things can be done.

This article, which appeared in the 2021/2 issue of the Scottish Association for Public Transport (SAPT) magazine covers the subject in depth with some interesting examples from Switzerland of how it could all be handled so much better.

Buses provide the majority of public transport journeys. But passenger numbers are falling as car use continues to climb. The Scottish Government has set a 2030 target to cut car journeys by 20%. To reach this target, a new approach to active travel and public transport is needed.

Failings in the current transport framework should be analysed to devise a better strategy. A July 2021 report, "Public Transport, Private Profit", looks at the decline of the UK bus industry since deregulation in 1985. Promises of more passengers attracted by competitive services have proved illusory. Scottish bus journeys plummeted from 644 million in 1986 to 366 million in 2019 (a fall of 43% in 33 years), continuing the downward trend of previous years.

The 1985 UK Transport Act did succeed in cutting taxpayer subsidy for buses. But in 2019/20 the Scottish bus industry received £326M taxpayer payments through Bus Services Operators Grant (BSOG) (£53M), concessionary scheme (£215M), and local authority support (£57M).

The report observes that there is no minimum level of service that residents are entitled to. Most bus services in Scotland are operated on a commercial basis. BSOG funding from Transport Scotland is paid per bus mile so is mostly paid to profitable Central Belt routes including Citylink routes, most of which are well-served by ScotRail. Loss making buses depend for survival on subsidy from cash-strapped local authorities. As a result, rural bus routes continue to decline.

This contrasts with, for example, Switzerland where the constitution guarantees a reasonable level of road or rail transport for all communities. Public transport usage (bus+tram) in Switzerland rose by 38% between 2000 and 2019. Rail use rose by 72%. Most urban transport is provided by Verkehrverbunde where bus, train and tram operators co-operate to provide an integrated public transport network of connecting services with a unified fares system. Rural communities are linked to the integrated national rail and bus system which attracts a much higher level of use by residents

This is an interchange! Lynx Station in Orlando, Florida
Photo: Ian Budd

and tourists than Scotland's disparate bus operators. Swiss bus and train operators are a mix of franchised private and local authority organisations and the state-owned Swiss Railways. *The important thing is that they all work together to provide a successful nationwide bus and rail network.*

From April 2022 ScotRail will become a state-controlled company. This is an opportunity to integrate public transport based on the successful Swiss system. To achieve this bus service organisation and funding also need to be revised. Our recommendations are:

Urban: Bus, rail, tram and subway services to be co-ordinated in each travel-to-work area to improve connectivity. A unified fares system to be introduced. City transport authorities to oversee these urban networks, though municipal ownership would not be necessary.

Rural: Settlements of over 1000 inhabitants to get at least 4 bus or train services per day. Demand responsive transport (DRT) to link smaller communities into the network

Funds: Bus service operators grant to be replaced by a Bus Integration Grant to support integrated bus services specified by local transport authorities. ScotRail train service reorganisation and rail efficiency improvements should make an integrated rail and bus network more affordable.

The Scottish Government needs a new integrated transport strategy to grow bus and rail use.

All rural towns should have guaranteed integrated bus or train services. Better co-ordinated transport is critical to achieving government targets for reducing car use. Smaller communities can be served by Demand Responsive Transport (DRT)

Thurso Flagstone Tramway


National Museums Scotland Collection

It's always interesting to find 'other' railways in the area of the Far North Line. In 1878 the Caithness Flagstone Quarrying Co entered into an agreement with Sir Tollemache Sinclair to build a tramway from their flagstone quarry at Weydale to Thurso East.

In the event a dispute between the company and Sir Tollemache seems to have prevented the construction of the final section of the tramway which would have extended through the policies of Thurso Castle. It therefore ended at Mount Pleasant where this photo was taken around 1900. At this time around 1000 quarriers were employed by various flagstone companies and in 1902 35,000 tons of flags were exported. Caithness flags appear all over the world, including Australia, New Zealand and South America.

The Weydale tramway used conventional steel rails and horse traction - the horses rode down on special wagons along with the flags and then hauled the empty train back up to the quarry.

Ian Budd

The New HITRANS App for Mobility as a Service

The Scottish Region *of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) welcomed Ranald Robertson, Director of HITRANS, to give a talk on 7 October 2021.*

The subject of MaaS follows on well from the piece on p16 in this issue, entitled New Bus Strategy Needed.

Travel ought to be a pleasure in a region with the scenic splendours of the Scottish Highlands and Islands, and unique possibilities such as landing on the beach at Barra, taking the steam-hauled Jacobite across the Harry Potter viaduct or catching a ferry to a small island like Raasay ensure that the joy of the journey becomes an experience in itself.

Traditional products such as the Freedom of Scotland Travelpass have long facilitated the bringing together of journeys by different modes. More recently strong advocacy from the Mobility as a Service Scotland group persuaded the Scottish Government to set up a development fund so that Scotland might showcase achievement in this developing field, and HITRANS was successful in its bid to the first round which has given rise to the GoHi app - a reinvention of this joy in modern form.

HITRANS requirements for a Maas platform started with integrated journey-planning, but then stretched much further. Using smartphones or desktop devices, there should be an ability to book and pay for multiple modes - bikeshare, bus, Demand Responsive Transport (DRT), ferry, train, car rental, taxi and air. By enabling this to be done in a single online transaction, integrated ticketing should take the hassle out of joining up the separate legs, and a hybrid model should work also for business travellers, matching the straightforwardness of just jumping into their company car and offering a really sustainable alternative to company car use.

For its first phase the project focus of Go-Hi has brought together several starting-points, including developing the MaaS platform, integrating together Moray's Dial M DRT booking and payment, Inverness's Public eBike dock system, Car Clubs, bus, rail and air. Dial M for Moray has been developed from a book-in-advance facility into a just-in-time booking interface that does not abstract from fixed links but instead feeds into them, including to rail at Keith Station. Ebike was launched on 1 October with Bewegen Technology (a Canadian provider already active in the Forth Valley and Sestran area) awarded to deliver this facility in Inverness.

Launched on 21 June this year, the project has already achieved over 900 unique downloads. The user is faced with a choice of ways to find their best travel options including using nearby modes, the offer of a full range of multimodal options or being put in touch directly with individual operators. Bus coverage started with Stagecoach, but now independent operators are being onboarded with new options such as DRT and a renewed need to learn local requirements. Geography is a challenge, but the app must remove barriers by offering decent choices on a single platform which includes harnessing "last mile" modes for the convenience of business travellers. The imminent inclusion of Northlink will include the new dimensions of booking a cabin or access to the Magnus Lounge. To support tourism in the Highlands the app can also be used to find hotels, restaurants and other useful facilities including ATMs.

Now funding has been awarded for a second phase that will embrace a rural and island focus for DRT booking and payment, public ebike and folding bike dock systems, electric and extended car clubs, with rewards to incentivise regular users, ehubs, ITSO (smart ticketing) integration

and marketing and promotional activities. Public ebike and folding bike provision will see the number of bike docks expand from three to nine in the next twelve months, with Bromptons making their debut at Inverness's Eastgate Centre, Elgin Station and Oban Interchange and ebikes to include provision of accessible ones for people with mobility difficulties. Electric vehicles will be rolled out to car clubs, and ITSO alignment will allow travel perks and options such as parents topping up ebike provision. The University of the Highlands and Islands campus at Inverness has a bridge across the Highland Main Line that may be accessed only by people using sustainable travel modes and HITRANS will trial Connected and Autonomous (Driverless) bus operations across this link in 2022.

HITRANS has assembled a strong team that includes specialists including FOD Mobility Group whose Mobilleo solution powers GO-HI, Proxismart, Arcadis, IBI Group and Skedgo, with the University of Leeds providing monitoring and evaluation leadership. This ensures that it is not just the application of technology which is being delivered. The pandemic brought challenges of timetable instability, while CalMac has faced well-publicised difficulties with its fleet and ScotRail has been beset by Sunday strikes. The GoHi team has had to take these in its stride as it seeks a level of resilience planning that persuades businesses to move all their travel planning onto the app (which one large business is about to do). Fares available in the platform are drawn from a range of sources offering real convenience rather than majoring on the lowest cost available. Much like a supermarket with all services available there might be lower cost suppliers elsewhere. All of these aspects will require continuous improvement if GoHi is to outlast its two-year trial period and secure a permanent legacy measured in a modal shift to sustainable travel options.

Caithness History

www

At the northeastern end of the Far North Line is Wick. Anyone interested in Caithness history should investigate two facilities to be found there. At Wick airport is **Nucleus: The Nuclear and Caithness Archives**. Nucleus, which opened in February 2017, is open to the public for research, and there is an exhibition area at the front of the wonderfully iconic building. As well as housing the nuclear archives, Nucleus also holds the Caithness archives, a huge collection of documents, maps and pictures.

The Nucleus website hosts fascinating online exhibitions. Currently you can view *ATOMIC HOUSING: Thurso Transformed* and *ATOMIC RECREATION: The Dounreay Social Clubs.*

These extensive exhibitions study the social impact on Thurso of the Dounreay Nuclear Reactor which was begun in 1954.

If you are looking for a more conventional museum there is much to see at the highly recommended **Wick Heritage Centre**, run on a voluntary basis by the Wick Society. The Museum is located in the heart of the Thomas Telford designed Pulteneytown, in Bank Row. The "somewhat rambling building" houses a number of rooms and an "Aladdin's Cave" of exhibits. A visit to the website gives a tempting view of what's on offer, as well as hosting its own interesting material.

Scapa Flow Museum Expands

The Scapa Flow Museum at Lyness on Hoy, has been greatly extended and rebuilt to show its wartime exhibits in a far better environment and to give museum staff a comfortable facility in which to work.

Museum Custodian, Jude Callister, "It's got a big gallery that's environmentally controlled. We've got improved visitor facilities, the new café, foyer, toilets, gift shop, the things that people look for and expect when they come into a museum."

The museum opened in 1990 using the Royal Navy pumphouse, built in 1937, to display exhibits. Major work was needed on the building and the decision was taken to use this opportunity to add an extension in keeping with the original structure. Orkney Island Council's Capital Projects Team has been working closely with contractors Orkney Builders to create a structure which sits well within this bunded wartime landscape. Public opening is expected in the Summer of 2022.

www

Pop-up Stalls at Wick and Thurso

The stall at Wick Station

As part of Suicide Prevention Week Listening Ear Caithness volunteers set up stalls at Thurso and Wick stations on 10 September 2021, World Suicide Prevention Day.

Local campaign group No More Lost Souls was also present at the Wick event. Stalls were also set up at Inverness and Nairn stations and on-board conversation cafés were held on trains running between Inverness and Elgin, allowing travellers to speak about any issues that might be causing them distress.

The project was a collaboration between Mikeysline, ScotRail, Railway Mission, British Transport Police, Samaritans, Listening Ear in Caithness, and James Support Group in Cromarty.

The stalls reflected the sad fact that suicide rates in the Highlands are the highest in Scotland. The organisers were very keen to help people realise that it's 'OK not to be OK' and to make clear that help is always available.

www

First HST on FNL?

31 October 2021 saw the 'tribute' *Blue Pullman* HST set arriving at Muir of Ord on its way to Kyle of Lochalsh. Was this the first visit of an Inter-City 125 set to the Far North Line?

The *Blue Pullman* units' concept was new to the UK on their introduction in 1960, being the first trains with a fixed formation and a single-cab locomotive at each end, designed to form an integrated, streamlined, unit. In a sense they were the inspiration for the HSTs.

Five units were built, two operating from Manchester Central to St Pancras and three for the Western Region [inset] covering Paddington to Birmingham, Bristol or Swansea. All units were withdrawn in 1973.

Main photo: **Sandy Colley**

Disaster Averted

In the 1950s the Flow Country narrowly escaped what would now be regarded as an extreme ecological disaster. The area, which is currently in the process of achieving World Heritage Site status, would have been severely damaged with the loss of irreplaceable plant and wildlife, not to mention its important role as a carbon sink.

The plan was to extract around 600m tons of peat in Scotland for burning in power stations. Seventy years ago, in December 1951, an experimental 500hp peat-burning gas turbine engine was unveiled at John Brown & Co's Clydebank works. In June 1953 it was announced that Braehour, near Scotscalder, had been chosen as the location for the first peat-burning power station. By 1954 huge peat-extraction machines were being delivered by rail and construction of the power station was under way. A narrow gauge railway was built to transfer the peat to the power station. Operational tests finally began in August 1959. The experiment was fortunately unsuccessful and the scheme was abandoned in 1960.

Altnabreac Achievement

Long-awaited good news reached FoFNL at the end of 2021. The Highland Council showed its commitment to modal shift by granting planning permission on 10 December to Caledonia Forest Land Investment Ltd for the construction of a trackside loading facility on the north side of the railway adjacent to Altnabreac Station. The forestry from which the timber will originate is on the same side.

Timber will be transferred to the location by specialist low ground pressure haulage vehicles where it will be stacked. The train of dedicated timber wagons will stop on the railway, without the need for construction of a siding, as loading times will be arranged to avoid disruption to passenger services. The timber will then be transferred directly to the train.

The facility will be operated on a trial basis initially with up to three trains per week, the first 25 trainloads moving 9000 tonnes of timber and replacing 400 lorry trips. This is well aligned with the Scottish Government's policy of modal shift away from roads.

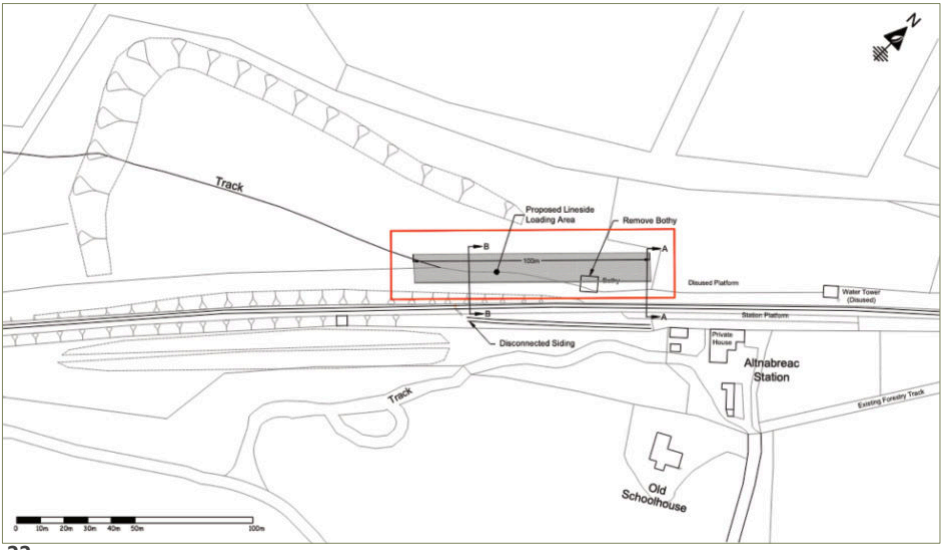
The technical aspects of this project were trialled in 2020 when Transport Scotland funded a number of trips from Georgemas Junction to Inverness using wagons normally used for carrying North Sea pipes. The trial was operated by Victa Railfreight, and the new service from Altnabreac will be provided by that company.

Funding for the project is provided by Transport Scotland's Rail Freight Fund, Freight Facilities Grant and Mode Shift Revenue Support Grant. HITRANS has been the facilitator throughout.

If this venture proves successful it would be a model for other similar projects across Scotland. The amount of timber which could be moved from the Altnabreac site over the next decade is expected to be around 1 million tonnes.

WWW

Ian Budd



Electric locomotive 90039 owned by DB Cargo was named *The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport* by Bill Reeve, Director of Rail at Transport Scotland, at the conference on 9 November. [Andy Falconer, via Railway Correspondence & Travel Society]

low carbon logistics
Pulling together for net zero.

The Low Carbon Logistics *conference at the beginning of November, held in the Peter D. Stirling Mossend Railhead, near Bellshill, was the first conference attended by FoFNL since March 2020. It was wonderful to be back in a live environment where you could wander round and chat. It was a superbly organised event and I think we all came away feeling filled with optimism - it wasn't just plans for the future we were hearing - it was things that are already happening. This description of the conference was written by Phil Smart, Assistant Policy Manager, Rail Freight Group, and first published in* The Scotsman.

Only time will judge whether COP26 was a success. To many it achieved real progress, to others not enough, and to some it was all 'blah, blah, blah'. Whatever camp you are in, one thing is for sure, all eyes were on Scotland and the hospitality industry had much to cheer about after the Covid lockdowns.

I was delighted to represent the Rail Freight Group at the Low Carbon Logistics event held at Mossend. This was a great opportunity to showcase the latest innovations in the rail freight sector and was well attended by freight operating companies, customers, suppliers, and stakeholders from across the railway and political spectrum.

Transport Minister Graeme Day MSP opened the event by describing how getting more freight on rail was both a political and personal priority, stressing the need to reduce congestion as well as carbon in serving the economy.

Alex Hynes, Managing Director for Scotland's Railway, reminded us that, besides being environmentally benign, the railway is also a climate change victim, and we owe it to those who lost their lives in the Stonehaven derailment to redouble our efforts to make the railway more resilient as well as climate friendly. He reminded us that most of the electrification undertaken in the UK in recent times had been in Scotland, but that there was more to do and that to keep costs down it was important to run electrification as a production line and not as individual projects.

There was an inspiring presentation from Highland Spring, in partnership with the Russell Group and WSP, to transport bottled water by rail from a new terminal at Blackford. This alone saves 3,200t of CO2 and will remove 8,000 lorry movements a year from the local village, good news for them and for the haulage firm

struggling to find drivers!

Perhaps the most innovative talk was from Tarmac who in partnership with Furrer and Frey are trialing a 'First of A Kind' project to install demountable overhead electrification into one of their terminals allowing electric trains right into the loading area. One possible site is Dunbar but it will only be a matter of time before this technology is widely adopted. Other notable achievements are the 40 per cent fuel savings using double length 'Jumbo' trains and the use of Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil as alternative fuel.

Bill Reeve, Director of Rail, Transport Scotland, reminded delegates that 80 per cent of HGV emissions in Scotland were along the M74 corridor and this was driving Transport Scotland's thinking around rail freight. He hoped to be making announcements soon about electrification of the route from Glasgow to Carlisle, via Dumfries, and about moving more timber by rail in future. The conclusion from many speakers was that road and rail need to work as partners in future provided there were sufficient terminals available.

The Scottish Engineering Cluster Builder led the second day. I presented on *Decarbonising the Railway* including opportunities for smaller enterprises to supply sustainable installations at depots and terminals. Scottish engineering can build on its proud railway history if we inspire more people to take up engineering. Dr. Susan Scurlock from the Primary Engineer project showed us what is being done in primary schools to promote STEM subjects and to encourage our children to become future problem solvers. Most of all, this must appeal to girls as well as boys and Heather Waugh gave an inspiring account of her life as Scotland's only female freight train driver and how other women had inspired her along the way.

Mossend was certainly the place to be if you want to celebrate real action and achievement and not just future promises.

Taking Up the Slack

Writing in The Scotsman *shortly before the Mossend conference Phil Smart picked up the theme of transferring freight to rail in the context of the current shortage of HGV drivers - a great opportunity to show what rail can, and should, do.*

There is much speculation as to what the "new normal" might look like after Covid. The one constant however is that we will still need feeding and watering, housing, educating, entertaining, clothing, treating when we get ill, and consuming everyday products. All these require reliable supply chains of food, drink, building materials, clothes, shoes, medicines, and other items. Yet, long after pandemic panic buying has ceased, gaps are once again appearing on supermarket shelves, and this is blamed on a shortage of lorry drivers.

The driver shortage is not an easy fix and trouble has been brewing for a long time. Lorry driving is no longer the glamorous occupation it once was, as margins have been squeezed. Fewer youngsters are joining the industry and the so-called 'tramp' turns of duty, where a driver can be away from their family for a week, are a real turn-off for potential new recruits.

The average age of drivers is increasing as the industry has struggled to replace its workforce as they retire. It is true that the pandemic has not helped the training of what new recruits there are, with long waiting lists for tests, but industry sources say that even an accelerated training programme will be insufficient to manage a crisis that looks set to continue for several years.

Various sticking plasters have covered this shortage in the past. The recession that followed the 2008 financial crash offered some respite by slowing demand in the economy. As things picked up again, so EU free movement laws allowed drivers to be recruited from elsewhere in Europe. Now that the UK has left the single market, this supply has dried up. A perfectly foreseeable consequence of 'Brexit', which nothing was done to address.

Not surprisingly, rail freight operators are receiving fresh enquiries from potential consignees, anxious to secure new ways of

fulfilling customer demand. New flows are coming to rail, and this will continue, as pressure builds to find zero-carbon supply chain solutions.

However, we need to increase capacity on the rail network to keep pace with this new demand. Both the East and West coast main lines from Scotland are already electrified, but as we run more freight trains (some up to 2,000t), so we need a matching increase in power supply.

As freight shares the same lines as passenger services, so we need more passing places, long enough for the faster passenger train to overtake, without stopping the freight train in a siding.

We also need to provide and upgrade diversionary routes and it is pleasing to note the intention to electrify and gauge clear the line from Glasgow to Carlisle via Dumfries. If an unforeseen incident or maintenance work results in the closure of the West Coast Main Line for a week or more, we cannot ask a ship to wait in a port, or someone to manage without urgent medical supplies.

As supply chains become more rail dependent, we will no longer have the option of sending by road. As one operator put it recently, "where am I going to put my hands on a thousand lorries and drivers in future? I can't put my hands on ten today!"

Phil Smart, Assistant Policy Manager, Rail Freight Group

Freight Belongs on Rail

Or as DB Cargo succinctly puts it on its website - *"Everyone knows it: freight belongs on rail."*

DB Cargo

There follows a simple request:

To encourage more companies to switch from road to rail, we are asking the Government to:

- Set out in primary legislation a legally-binding target for future modal growth, thus driving greater collaboration and innovation (as we have seen with decarbonisation).
- Work with the rail industry to incentivise businesses to switch their goods from road to rail.
- Establish an efficient logistics sector which has hubs and terminals in the right places, with strong rail connectivity to help avoid a road-led recovery.
- Commit to investing in the infrastructure required to decarbonise rail freight including a long-term programme of electrifying the railways.
- Ensure that the future industry structure supports rail freight growth and unlock continued third-party investment that will allow rail freight operators to deliver greater long-term economic and environmental benefits.
- Make the best use of capacity on the network, using a benefits-led assessment that considers the relative value of different capacity choices and which maximises the opportunities for getting more freight on each train.
- Upgrade Britain's infrastructure to make it fit for the digital age, which can allow both freight and passenger trains to run more efficiently.

DB Cargo is talking to the UK Government but naturally we would direct this even more strongly to the Scottish Government which is already on board with electrification but not with capacity.

Clean and Green

Rail freight is ready to battle climate change

***Ian Brown**, Railfuture Policy Director and former rail freight manager, looks at the prospects for freight on rail following COP26 with the creation of Great British Railways.*

The UK government published its *Environmental Benefits of Rail Freight* in June. It was part of the government's *Rail Environment Policy Statement*, setting the scene to give Great British Railways a statutory duty to promote rail freight. Environmental sustainability will be a key component of an imminent 30-year plan for the railway.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, published in May, advocated a long-term plan to transform the railways. A comprehensive environmental plan, expected next year, will establish rail as the backbone of a cleaner future transport system. Setting the "direction of travel" policy for the whole railway, including freight, is crucial. The listed priorities are:

- Remove all diesel-only trains from the network by 2040
- Commitment to a sustainable, deliverable (but not quantified) programme of electrification that delivers a higher performing net zero railway
- Air quality targets: Net zero greenhouse gases from trains by 2050
- Air quality improvement plans for all stations identified as having poor air quality.
- Zero waste to landfill by 2025, with increasingly challenging recycling targets to be set across all parts of the railway
- Targets for renewable energy generation and use at stations

Modal transfer from road to rail (passengers and freight) is exceptionally effective in achieving overall net zero objectives for transport. We need a total transport policy in which achieving these objectives for rail is a subset of the overall initiative. This is particularly important for rail freight. A freight train hauled by a two-stroke diesel locomotive is far better than a convoy of road vehicles in achieving emission reductions, but it is not net zero. A freight train hauled by an electric locomotive is net zero, if the source of power generation is net zero. Carrying no freight at all on a diesel railway quickly achieves the narrow rail objective of net zero, but does not contribute to an overall transport objective. This is not the answer.

Electrification will take time, particularly if there are no targets, nor the establishment of a rolling programme of electrification deploying competent teams, learning with experience. The policy statement recognised that decarbonising rail freight is a challenge. The risk though is that nothing much will happen. However, short infill electrification schemes are recognised as delivering quick benefits, to enable rail freight operators to switch to electric traction.

A national freight coordination scheme will be set up with, in due course, a freight growth target. We therefore need a policy that encourages modal shift to rail, followed by a rolling programme of investment in electrification to achieve net zero for the rail freight operation. The government followed up the policy statement by issuing in October its Net Zero Strategy for the UK, which is not specifically rail related but which focuses on unlocking investment in clean and green industries.

What needs to happen to encourage the transfer of freight on to railways?

The economics of freight on rail depend on its value to the environment being recognised. Pricing must enable a shift to rail and be stable so hauliers can invest with confidence in freight facilities. The recent sudden electricity price rise, up to a 100% increase, has forced Freightliner to move from electric to diesel haulage as it has to be competitive to survive. Coinciding with COP26, this was not a good look. Open-access has been an outstanding success for rail freight. The rail freight operators have risen to the challenge, investing in equipment and flexible working.

The Williams-Shapps plan maintains a fully open-access railway with no state subsidised operator, unlike many other railways in continental Europe. The rail freight industry must be able to plan for the long term, and be able to rely on stable, realistic access charges which reflect the value to the country of using rail. Rail freight can no longer be treated as some form of marginal activity where the passenger operators grudgingly accept freight on the network.

Capacity for freight

Rail freight has increasingly become a long-distance operation, a far cry from local trips from pits to power stations. This applies to intermodal freight and also to bulk freight such as aggregates from the Peak District to just about everywhere on the rail network. It is essential therefore that the network has the latent capacity to allow new freight flows to be introduced.

A major benefit of HS2 is to unleash capacity for more freight trains on the West Coast main line, the UK's most important freight corridor. This is good, but not enough in itself to facilitate a major shift to rail. There are other areas where capacity needs to be provided and safeguarded for rail freight, both on the rail network and at terminals.

Ian Brown

Contents

This is the first section of a longer article published in the December 2021 issue of *Railwatch*, the members' magazine of Railfuture, to which FoFNL belongs. Please bear in mind that this is addressed to the UK Government, we are fortunate in Scotland that electrification is being taken much more seriously. The article can be read in full on page 12 of www.railwatch.org.uk/backtrack.php?mag=rwm&issue=170

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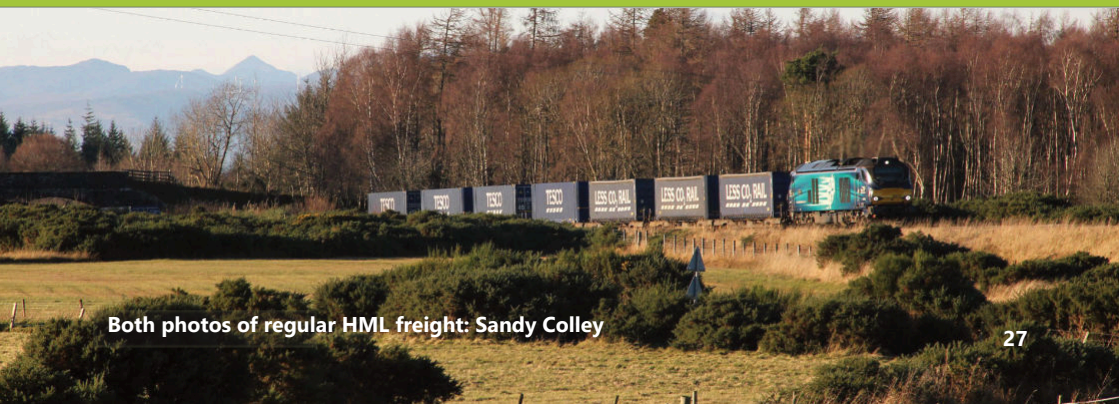


Both photos of regular HML freight: Sandy Colley

RAIL FREIGHT FLOURISHES AS PASSENGER OPERATORS STRIVE TO EVOLVE

This article first appeared on the website of consultants Cogitamus in October 2021. ***Chris Stokes*** *has had a 40 year career in the rail industry including working for British Rail as Resources and Planning Director for InterCity, then Deputy Director at Network SouthEast.*

The current serious shortage of HGV drivers is good news for rail freight companies, who now have potential customers beating a path to their door.

Aggregate volumes are at record levels, helped both by the HGV driver shortfall and major construction projects, including HS2. Movements of maritime containers are also strong; if I want to move a box from, say, Felixstowe to Birmingham, my choice is now more strongly tilted in favour of rail, although at the same time shipping lines and ports are facing big challenges, with shipping rates going through the roof and container shortages and port congestion both causing major problems. The modern "just in time" global economy is showing some cracks at present, from a shortage of chips for the car industry, sky high energy prices and the recent concerns about availability of CO2 for the food industry.

Rail already has a good share of maritime container movements, so the biggest opportunity is likely to be in domestic movements of consumer goods, building on the current base of supermarket distribution flows, primarily between Daventry and Scotland. In the short term, rail also inevitably has constraints, with long lead times for training additional drivers and procuring new locomotives and rolling stock.

There are network capacity and terminal constraints too. Despite recent upgrades, movements from Felixstowe are now realistically close to the current practical limit. The port is at the end of a single track, non-electrified branch line, and during the daytime freight shares the route with an hourly, lightly loaded passenger service; train paths from Felixstowe to Yorkshire and the Midlands are also limited by pinch points in the Ely area. Inland terminal capacity has been significantly increased in recent years, with further new terminals and expansion of existing locations in the pipeline, but there is inevitably a lead time, and many planning applications are vigorously opposed locally.

Rail freight has over-riding environmental advantages, with a carbon footprint around a quarter of the CO2 emissions per tonne mile of road haulage. De-carbonising heavy goods vehicles looks at best problematic – the leading solution suggested so far seems to be to install overhead electric catenary on the slow lanes of motorways, although many people are deeply sceptical about this idea. So the future for rail looks bright, and I'm sure freight companies are considering driver recruitment, together with new locomotives and rolling stock. I would expect future locomotive orders to be electric, with diesel/battery capability for "last mile" operation, similar to the ten locomotives already on order for Rail Operations Group, further improving rail's environmental performance.

The joker in the pack is the potential for electric multiple unit operation at passenger train speeds for high value, small consignments,

feeding into city centre terminals for final distribution by electric road vehicles. This could be a significant new market, which is expected to be trialled in the near future.

After many years of systemic decline, strongly related to the long term contraction of heavy industry and the demise of coal-fired electricity generation, the future now looks much brighter. Profitability in the short term is almost certainly improving too, both because of higher volumes and firmer prices.

A potential, early "big win" for the shadow Great British Railways would be the creation of a more rational, integrated passenger timetable. Except for a handful of open access trains, all on the East Coast Main Line, the entire passenger network can now be specified on a more consistent basis, providing a coherent network of services, almost all on a regular interval pattern, planned to deliver good connections where these are important, and designed to maximise passenger numbers, hence the economic benefits of the network – giving both passengers and the taxpayer their best bang for their buck.

Sadly, there is as yet no sign that this opportunity is being grasped. This probably reflects that timetable specification is still in the hands of individual train operating companies who are largely making decisions in isolation. Three examples:

- LNER still seems intent on making a "dash for growth", and has pretty much restored pre-pandemic levels of service, including the 05:40 Edinburgh – Kings Cross "*Flying Scotsman*", only calling at Newcastle and clearly aimed at a business market which is now permanently much diminished. Over and above this, LNER sought to introduce a step-change in capacity in May next year, although for a number of reasons, not least the strongly negative reaction from consultees to the resulting overall pattern of service north of York, this has now been kicked into the long grass. Consultees were not presented with a single, clear picture of the full service pattern. The proposals seem to have been largely dictated by pre-existing access rights – but these are, or ought to be, irrelevant except for open access operators and freight.
- South Western Railway is consulting on a timetable which reduces peak service levels in line with post-pandemic forecasts that peak passenger numbers will drop by 40% compared with previous levels. This looks eminently sensible – but SWR also propose to cut off peak services on a number of routes; for example, frequency at the inner suburban stations at Mortlake and North Sheen is shown to reduce to only two trains an hour. This is surely unacceptable for a metro service, particularly now the industry must have an absolute focus on off-peak, leisure business.
- Similarly, ScotRail is consulting on reducing off-peak frequency on its flagship Edinburgh – Glasgow service from four to two trains an hour, yet maintaining peak frequencies, which are the main cost driver.

It would of course be ludicrous to plan everything from GBR's headquarters, and absolutely unacceptable to the devolved administrations. But some high level principles would be sensible:

- Reduce peak capacity in line with anticipated post-pandemic demand, maintaining a margin of spare capacity if demand recovers more strongly than expected.
- In general, maintain off-peak frequencies – this is where there is potential growth, and the evidence of the past twenty years is that off peak frequency does drive demand.
- Develop timetables collaboratively, involving all major operators using the route, with the aim of delivering the best overall service pattern.

There is a potential virtuous circle for the passenger railway lurking in the present fog: high all day demand but much flatter peaks is an opportunity for improved profitability – and avoids the need for enormously expensive infrastructure enhancements to increase capacity for two hours a day.

Chris Stokes

User Errors

Confusion - lack of awareness and understanding - leading to misuse and danger:

User worked level crossings (UWCs) including footpath crossings are types causing significant risk on the rail network. Some individual crossings may be little used and/or have low risk, but collectively the number of such crossings has led to a series of accidents.

In response to four RAIB recommendations and one urgent safety notice, Network Rail has initiated a process of signage improvements. These changes will improve user awareness and therefore safety.

Existing signs (typical examples)

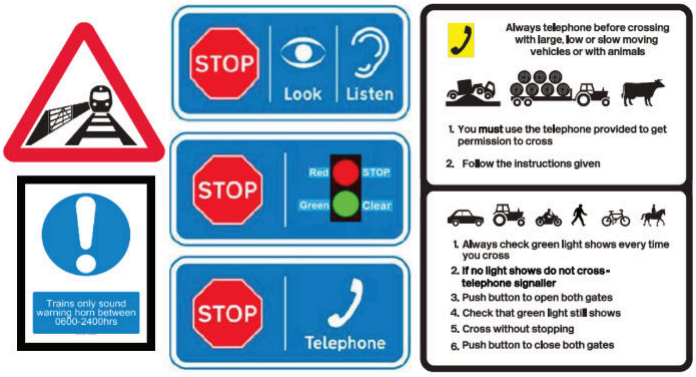
Passive crossings generally have no warning of a train's approach other than by the train driver, who may use the train horn. The onus is on the level crossing user to determine if it is safe to cross or not. Signage to 'Stop , Look and Listen' may be reinforced where appropriate with a requirement for certain users to 'Stop' and phone the signalman before proceeding. These signs are considered 'too wordy' to be fully effective.

Miniature Stop Lights (MSLs) are being added to more user worked crossings as an overlay system, which can be now fitted for less than a quarter of the cost of full integration with the signalling system.

These provide warning of a train's approach to the user, who still has to open and close gates on both sides according to the instructions displayed - crossing and re-crossing on foot, adding to the risk exposure. Power Operated Gate Openers (POGOs) options where fitted enable the total number of traverses to be reduced from five to one.

Existing MSL systems are being upgraded. For an example of work in progress at Foulis (which doesn't have POGOs) compare these photos taken in 2011 and 2022:

Next, let's look at three FNL crossings in Inverness where train speeds are low but numbers of users are high - hundreds of people per week may cross at each. All three crossings are on designated 'Core Paths' to which the public have access at all times.



Proposed pictogram-based signs (examples based on research and trials)

There is a very diverse range of users of these crossings. Many of those are unfamiliar with how to use these types of level crossing safely and may be distracted by mobile devices; also there are tourists and others who may not have English as their first language.

[*Header photo*] Clachnaharry no 1 UWC

[*Left*] Improvements at South Kessock - new surfacing and general upgrade (2022)

[*Right*] Improvements at Clachnaharry no 2 - blue sign has now been removed (2021)

Bearing in mind that users represent all ages and capabilities - along with dogs, pushchairs, cycles and also canoes on a portage avoiding other hazards - these examples help to reinforce the case for clearer and more consistent pictogram-based signage to help users understand what is happening and what is expected of them.

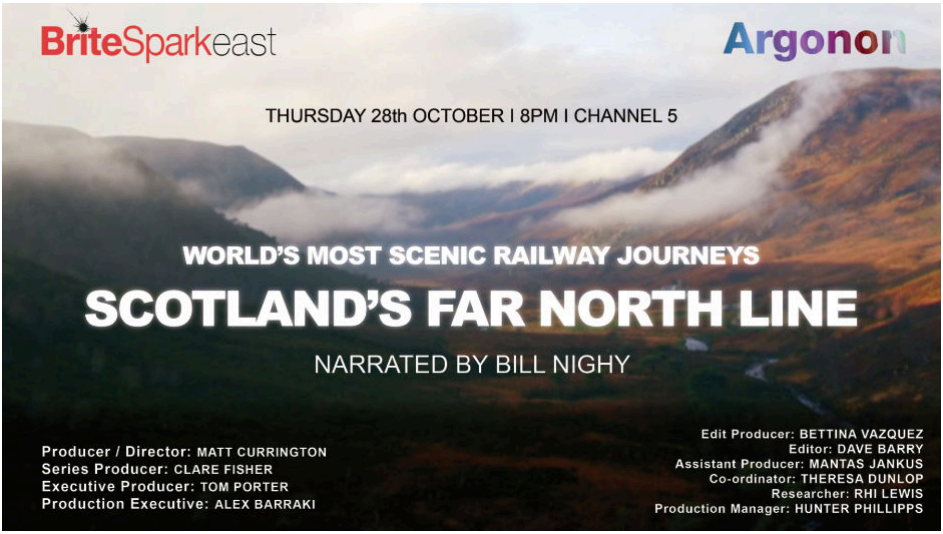
I have taken part in positive ongoing discussions with Network Rail on this subject, and would welcome any further comments and observations from those familiar with UWCs and footpath crossings on the Far North Line.

Neil Wallace, FoFNL Secretary

Channel 5 Success

We're delighted to report that the Far North Line episode of Channel 5's *World's Most Scenic Railway Journeys* was a joy to watch and showed the line at its best. The drone photography was spectacular and the stories of local interest fascinating.

FoFNL had a part to play in the successful production as we were able to advise on many of the pronunciation pitfalls which bedevil programs narrated and produced by people from outwith the area. One or two slipped through but didn't spoil the programme, which elicited many very favourable comments.



Request For Information

We've had a request from the Friends of the West Highland Line for any information anyone might have about a company called **McCreath, Taylor and Co. Ltd**. which was based in Antrim. They had a branch office/depot at Muir of Ord in the 1950s and also operated at Lentran station on the Far North Line.

The company imported tar and bitumen from Ireland into Ardrossan and it was transported by rail in Scotland. They also had a fleet of road tankers.

If you do have any knowledge of this company please email ian.budd@fofnl.org.uk. *www*

Station Usage Figures

These are the annual figures published by the Office of Rail and Road published on 16 December 2021. The figures may only be of academic interest due to the effect of Covid lockdowns and travel advisories, and are published here for the sake of completeness.

	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	One Year Change	Two Year Change
Wick	17890	16664	3442	-79.34%	-80.76%
Thurso	39974	39702	6474	-83.69%	-83.80%
Georgemas Junction	1576	1570	234	-85.10%	-85.15%
Scotscalder	238	232	18	-92.24%	-92.44%
Altnabreac	408	232	46	-80.17%	-88.73%
Forsinard	2530	2866	160	-94.42%	-93.68%
Kinbrace	510	456	44	-90.35%	-91.37%
Kildonan	168	214	16	-92.52%	-90.48%
Helmsdale	5044	5086	564	-88.91%	-88.82%
Brora	6992	6354	648	-89.80%	-90.73%
Dunrobin Castle	1224	1240	114	-90.81%	-90.69%
Golspie	6150	5586	576	-89.69%	-90.63%
Rogart	1574	1656	150	-90.94%	-90.47%
Lairg	6016	6264	742	-88.15%	-87.67%
Invershin	284	216	50	-76.85%	-82.39%
Culrain	280	312	42	-86.54%	-85.00%
Ardgay	6998	6408	624	-90.26%	-91.08%
Tain	29384	28036	3522	-87.44%	-88.01%
Fearn	4304	4182	850	-79.67%	-80.25%
Invergordon	28806	27826	3134	-88.74%	-89.12%
Alness	30426	27050	3220	-88.10%	-89.42%
Dingwall	81408	80154	9864	-87.69%	-87.88%
Conon Bridge	17530	18022	2598	-85.58%	-85.18%
Muir Of Ord	67554	70850	13556	-80.87%	-79.93%
Beauly	48270	46510	14918	-67.93%	-69.09%
Inverness	1243338	1214648	231894	-80.91%	-81.35%
Total (excluding Inverness)	405538	397688	65606	-83.50%	-83.82%

A Railway Too Far

I have always been intrigued by the former railway line between Wick and Lybster. Pre-war maps of Caithness suggest a branch line to nowhere or a forlorn attempt to defy geography by finding a direct route south from Wick to Helmsdale and on to Inverness.

The line was, however, promoted during the last years of the 19th century based on both local passenger and freight potential. The catchment area from Wick to Dunbeath had a population of around 8,500, far higher than today, and it was envisaged that locals would not only travel into Wick but would "feed" the main line south to Inverness, Edinburgh and even England! Sheep, cattle and fish would be carried for the crofter/fishermen and the new line would stimulate further production and increase prices.

The project was helped by the new Light Railways Act of 1896, which allowed a reduced specification and capital cost, government grant, and local subscription - mainly by Caithness County Council and the Duke of Portland. The line opened on 1st July 1903 and operated for only 41 years, closing on 1st April 1944. Throughout most of its existence there were three trains per day, with intermediate stations at Thrumster, Ulbster, Mid Clyth and Occumster.

Late 20th century Ordnance Survey maps still showed significant stretches of the 13 mile trackbed and, on a glorious September day in 1999, I caught the local bus from Wick to Lybster with the intention of walking the line northwards. As the sole passenger I had plenty of time to explain my plans to the driver who quite clearly thought I was barking mad and cast severe doubt on my ability to follow the route. Nevertheless, he bid me good luck when I alighted at Lybster, albeit with a mischievous chuckle.

To be fair, he had a point. The local golf club was easily recognisable as Lybster station and, at first, there were good stretches of decent walking. However, as the walk progressed, there were numerous fences and gates to cross and enforced detours due to overgrowth (mainly gorse) and waterlogging. In some places the line had given way completely to agricultural reclamation. As I surveyed a stretch of line beside a cottage at Occumster a man flung open the back door and demanded to know what I was doing skulking around his house. A degree of diplomacy was required to get me off the hook!

By taking the precaution of seeking permission before crossing land, I met several friendly farmers and local people. An elderly gentleman at West Clyth confirmed why the line failed to survive. The internal combustion engine was already making its mark in the 1920s and 1930s with lorries, for example, able to carry fish directly from Lybster harbour to the Wick fish curers without the double handling at the two railway stations. And, as a result of falling freight rates after the end of the First World War, coasters became competitive for bulk loads and coal for Lybster, for example, started to arrive by sea. For passengers the train times were not always suitable and, in any case, houses were so scattered along and inland from the coastline that many folk were still faced with a lengthy walk home from the remote stations. The first attempts at organised bus services in the early 1920s were soon being reflected in reducing passenger numbers on the trains. One factor which did benefit the line was Wick's decision to close all its licensed premises from May 1921 which led to "specials" to Lybster for thirsty Wickers on Saturday evenings. The main beneficiaries were the watering holes of the Portland Arms, the Commercial and the Bayview (run by the famous Maggie Donn), all of which still operate today. Unfortunately, one evening's

additional income was of marginal benefit to the railway but evidently the return journeys to Wick after the bars closed at 9 pm were entertaining! The LMS did try to improve matters in 1936 by opening three intermediate wooden-constructed halts with hand-operated request signals at Welsh's Crossing (between Thrumster and Ulbster), Roster Road (between Mid Clyth and Occumster) and Parkside (between Occumster and Lybster) - but to no avail.

At Overton my path was blocked by an English crofter from Stafford who had survived 12 years in Caithness and it took me fully 30 minutes to persuade him to allow me to cross the trackbed on his land. Further north at Ulbster I met two Historic Scotland maintenance workers on lunch break completely oblivious to the railway history on which their van was parked. The platform at Ulbster remains clearly and, at this point, there is the option to explore the wonderful Whaligoe Steps cut out of the cliffs in the mid-18th century to allow the fish wives to carry their baskets of herring or white fish up from the landing point below. Reputedly made up of 365 steps, I have only counted 330, but that may be down to my poor arithmetic! Nonetheless they are well worth a visit. They were featured by Billy Connolly on his "World Tour of Scotland" and he was so impressed that he returned later on a private visit with his wife Pamela Stephenson.

It was on to Thrumster where the station building (and clock mounting) survive adjacent to the main road. It has since been renovated. It was near here that I fell in with a group of light-hearted farmers who deliberately did not warn me about the electric fence ahead, much to their amusement when I climbed over it! They offered a theory that the engine which operated on the line originated in India and was nicknamed the "coffee pot". I formed the impression that they were talking from a position of rather dubious knowledge. They did, however, tell a great tale of the Lybster guard who, on a winter's day, spotted a brown hare in a snow-covered field from the passing train. Having collected his gun from home for the return journey, he instructed the driver to stop the train immediately on hearing a gunshot. The driver duly obliged and passengers were afforded the sight of the guard running through the snow to collect his prize. No penalties for unscheduled stops in those days!

From Thrumster the walking became increasingly difficult and eventually impossible, but after seven hours, I arrived back in Wick. It had been a splendid trek through beautiful coastal countryside. The thought occurred that the old line could be developed for recreational purposes. And, with that thought, I headed for a well-earned pint in the famous Mackays Hotel.

David Fasken

Footnote: since undertaking that walk I have returned several times to Caithness. Mackays Hotel is very handy for the railway station and, on a couple of occasions, I have taken the first train to Altnabreac and walked over the Flow Country via Glutt Lodge to Braemore and Dunbeath. Intending to catch the bus back to Wick, on both occasions I was offered a lift by car, the first time by a lady who overheard me enquiring about bus times in Dunbeath Post Office; and the second time by two lads who had just come off Morven and were heading home to Thurso but routed via Wick to drop me off at the hotel door. This is a walk I recommend using the Far North Line, but I cannot guarantee the lift home at the Dunbeath end.

This article first appeared in the Summer 2001 edition of the *Keith & Dufftown Express* and some of the supporting information originates from Iain Sutherland's excellent publication *The Wick and Lybster Light Railway*.

Birth of Dalcross Station

Photos: top and middle - Sandy Colley, bottom - Network Rail

Sleepers for station loop

October 2021

December 2021